The discourse of death and the ‘politics of dead bodies’ have become key issues in the humanities during the past few decades. Questions of whether it is justifiable to disinter human remains and examine them for scientific purposes have caused intense controversies, as has the problem of putting them to political use. Tensions arise between the expectations of the living and the rights of the dead, for whom, as it is often assumed, the body no longer matters. The distinction between the corpse as ‘thing’ and as ‘person’ is well known, but even speaking of the personality of the dead body in the context of its inviolability (law) and memory (doing honor to the dead person) involves the ubiquitous ‘politics of heritage’.

In his New Science (1744) Giambattista Vico identified three main institutions that form the basis of human civilization: religion, matrimony, and the burial of the dead. Strict observance of these rites prevents people from falling back into the animal condition (New Science, §333). Robert Harrison declares himself an admirer and heir to Vico’s theory. Care for the dead and belief in the necrocratic character of humanity underlie his new book, which discusses selected aspects of the ties between the living and the dead as manifested in Western culture in past and present times.

The Dominion of the Dead promotes a ‘necrocratic fundamentalism’ which assumes that the living are inheritors and debtors of the dead. Because
it is the dead who legitimate our existence, the survival of humankind
depends on protecting them in the sense of both taking care of their remains
and cultivating their memory. As Harrison says in the preface to his book,
‘humanity is not a species (Homo sapiens is a species); it is a way of being
mortal and relating to the dead. To be human means above all to bury’ (xi).
He goes on to remind us, quoting Vico, that the word humanitas is derived
from humando ‘burying’ (New Science, §12).

A rich and multidimensional study, The Dominion of the Dead can be
viewed in multiple ways: as an important contribution to the reflection on
what it means to be human, what is human and what is not; as a contribution
to thanatological studies; as a voice in the ongoing discussion about the
cultural heritage of humanity; or, last but not least, as an attempt to remedy
the postmodern identity crisis. Like Harrison’s previous book, Forests: The
Shadows of Civilisation (1992), an important work which has been translated
into several languages, The Dominion of the Dead is written from the stand-
point of a literary philosopher who combines outstanding poetic intelligence
with erudition – manifested in his Vichian and Heideggerian interpretations
of poetry and prose fiction (Homer, Dante, Rilke, Conrad, and others).

As a cultural critic and theoretician of history, I do not deal here with the
penetrating analyses of literary works that form the bulk of Harrison’s work.
Rather, I try to reconstruct its theoretical foundations and point out themes
bearing on contemporary debates in the humanities. Those themes, I believe,
align Harrison’s study with a recent trend toward contesting the so-called
‘regime of the new humanities’. The manifestations of this trend include dis-
regard for approaches focusing on race, class, and gender; a growing interest
in materiality and things rather than in narrative, text, or language; the
increasing popularity of Martin Heidegger, observable not only in literary
studies but also in the work of archaeologists and anthropologists drawing
on the same aspects of his thought as literary scholars do (e.g. the attempt to
‘materialize’ Being); and finally, ‘paincentrism’ and the related themes of
memory, mourning, and melancholia, and the lament as a paradigm of
aesthetic pleasure.

The Dominion of the Dead is a brave and important book. It is important
because of its methodological assumptions, which the author does not explic-
titely state, and its innovative interpretations; it is brave because it opposes
the tendencies prevailing in today’s humanities.

In the preface Harrison defines his main focus of interest as ‘the humic
foundations of our life worlds’, explaining that ‘A humic foundation is one
whose contents have been buried so that they may be reclaimed by the future.
The humic holds in its conserving element the unfinished story of what has
come to pass’ (x). Burial not only means laying the body in the grave but, in
a broader sense, relates to preserving, protecting, and cultivating the past.
However, contrary to the book’s strong title and the author’s claims that he has written ‘a study about the modes of being of the dead’ (90) and that he is mainly interested in ‘the nature and modes of the indwelling of the dead in the worlds of the living’ (x), *The Dominion of the Dead* treats not so much of the dead and their world as of human relationships and their fragility as well as loss. Harrison becomes a writer of mourning, the author of a book marked by an effort to work through a loss, which is not the loss of a particular person or persons, but of an idea. His topic relates to his perception that the place the dead occupy in our memory has shrunk and that we are breaking our bond with them.

The book is driven by fear of losing touch with the dead as well as the sense of generational responsibility for them (32). Actually, the text is permeated by a feeling of guilt toward the dead, which the author tries to transmit to his reader. The book also expresses a certain ideology of ending. ‘It may be’ – writes Harrison – ‘that what we are witnessing today is the end not only of the Neolithic era but of the human epoch as such – the end, that is, of a mode of being on the earth that rests on humic foundations’ (34). The book seems to be a kind of manifesto based on the maxim ‘Take care of the remains and memory of your predecessors’ because they determine your fate and the fate of those yet unborn. Deprived of the legacy of our ancestors, we are all bastards, says Harrison (x). The author often claims to speak on behalf of a group, using the first person plural (we, us). ‘We’ means those who are civilized and have been baptized (55) but who more and more often forget their duties to the dead, thereby condemning humanity to a return to a barbarian state. Harrison embarks on the mission of reanimating the voices of the dead by reading and listening to their words contained in books, houses, and monuments (153).

The author divides his study into nine chapters in which he plays the role of guide indicating the places where the dead manifest their presence. Harrison successfully explains the process of the ‘thanatomorphosis’ of the dead into *l’objet funéraire*. The reader can observe how aestheticization tames the otherness of the dead person and deprives it of the aura of the ‘uncanny’.

In Chapter One, ‘The Earth and Its Dead’, Harrison talks about the earth as the site of disintegration of the remains of the dead. In his discussion of Joseph Conrad’s novels he speaks of the erosive and inscriptive power of the earth, focusing on the phenomenon of the sea, which both receives the dead and becomes the site of their disappearance, and also erases every sign of them. ‘There are no gravestones on the sea’, says Harrison (12). Chapter Two, ‘Hic Jacet’, is concerned with the foundational power of the grave. In accordance with the book’s thesis about ‘the humic foundations of our life worlds’, the grave is for Harrison the most important mark of human presence and mortality. Following Heidegger, Harrison asks such questions as ‘What is a
place?’ and ‘How is it established?’ His reading of Wallace Stevens, A. R. Ammons, Fustel de Coulanges, and Walt Whitman leads Harrison to conclude that ‘place’ is not natural but is created by human beings. The place is a space marked by human presence (18) and by the time of human finitude, which intervenes in the cycles of the eternal rebirth of nature (19). In this context the main problem of present times is escape from death and destruction of the places inhabited by the dead.

In Chapter Three, ‘What is a House?’ Harrison discusses the topos of the house as the space where the living and the dead dwell together. To answer the question posed in the title, Harrison refers to the poet (Rainer Maria Rilke) and writer (Henry David Thoreau), since it is from them, he believes, that we can learn the most. Poets feel at ease among ghosts and shades and often feign to have had contact with them (51). Citing an ancient tradition, Harrison reminds us that ‘being at home’ used to mean being in the place where holy fire was burning, in and through which the dead were present among the living (38). He goes on to observe that the dead do not dwell in our houses in the same way as, for example, a mouse does, since the mouse’s existence is not humic. The indwelling of the dead (their dwelling in the earth, in memory, in books, in our hearts or prayers) defines human interiority. Thus, as Harrison says, ‘The domestic interior is thus in some fundamental sense mortuary, inhabited not only by the dead but also by the unborn in their projective potentiality’ (40). Harrison goes on to define the house in the following way: ‘A house is a place of insideness in the openness of nature where the dead, through the care of the living, perpetuate their afterlives and promote the interests of the unborn’ (40).

Chapters Four, ‘The Voice of Grief’, and Eight, ‘The Name of the Dead’, deal with the process of mourning and commemorating the dead. The author writes about the animating power of the voice and examines the vocalization of grief, especially in the genre of the lament. Following Ernesto De Martino’s analysis of ritual laments, Harrison discusses Greek mourning rites as described by Homer and others. He suggests that the first articulation of the human voice was probably through grief (62). The unsatisfiable desire to reunite what has been separated by death is the primordial reason for our search for meaning. The primary function of the ritual lament is not to do honor to death but, as Harrison argues, to master grief by transforming it from a potentially destructive impulse into an objective symbolization. This happens through the publicization and depersonalization of grief (57, 66). Through grief we learn to proclaim death to the world. The lament, Harrison says, is the common language of human beings, who are by nature veterans of mourning (54).

Chapter Five, entitled ‘The Origin of Our Basic Words’, is an attempt to combine Heidegger’s philosophy with Vico’s philology and serves as an introduction to Chapter Six (‘Choosing your Ancestor’), which is one of the
most interesting and inspiring sections of the book. Harrison expresses here his essential objection to *Being and Time* which is that Heidegger develops an ontology of death rather than of the dead and fails to demonstrate that *Dasein* is related to death through its relation with the dead (90). It is an extremely important point, which I will discuss below in more detail.

The title of Chapter Seven, ‘Hic Non Est’, is the Vulgate quotation referring to the empty tomb left by the risen Christ. Harrison’s interesting discussion of the tomb as evidence of what it does not contain (i.e. Christ’s body) is a continuation of his argument in Chapter Two (‘Hic Jacet’). The ‘full tomb’ which signifies the presence of the remains and is marked on the surface with a tombstone is the opposite of the ‘empty tomb’ (109–10). In his argument, Harrison draws on Heidegger and on Walter Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, addressing the problem of repetition, which he conceives as ‘a mode of relating to the dead’ and ‘retrieving their legacies from our existential and historical futures’ (118). This chapter also examines the change in the form and function of mourning effected by Christianity, Christian commemoration of the dead, and Christianity’s transformation of natural lament into ritual commemorative celebration. Referring to St Paul, Harrison says that the dead come before us; they will rise first; therefore, it is not the dead but the sins of the living that should be grieved over. Belief in the afterlife, as Harrison observes in the course of his reading of Pater, transforms the earth and animates its dead matter (the remains of the dead). When such belief bestows a new life on the dead in their posthumous existence, ‘the earth as a whole receives a new blessing’ (123).

The public expression of grief is discussed by the author by reference to the case of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. This is – along with the Lincoln Memorial – one of the most often visited monuments in the USA and is, in Harrison’s opinion, ‘one of the most humic, hence human, of monuments’ (125). A long list of names of fallen soldiers chiseled in the black granite wall works both to particularize the general and to generalize the particular through the names of individuals arranged chronologically according to the date of death. Such a monument, in accordance with its public purpose, ought to reflect the transformation of death into value (dying in the name of freedom, honor, democracy, patriotism) and constitute a formal objectification of grief, to use the phrase Harrison borrows from Croce. Harrison claims, however, that because honoring those killed in Vietnam is an ambivalent issue, the memorial does not express mourning but signifies absolution. The Vietnam War itself, because of its aim, cannot grant such an absolution to its victims; thus the rules of transforming death into value are different. In the case of the Vietnam War, we cannot speak of dying for an idea, which would legitimate collective death, hence each soldier must receive an individual absolution through a separate mention of his or her name (141).
The final chapter, ‘The Afterlife of the Image’, begins with the question ‘To whom does the dead body belong?’ We claim the right to decide about our body after death, which means that we assume that it is our property and, just like property, can be disposed of. Harrison points out that the answer to this question depends on individual beliefs about the relation between subjectivity and the corpse. Again drawing on Heidegger, he deals with the obligation of the living to the remains of the dead. As he observes, ‘Dasein does not die until its remains are disposed of’ (143). This sense of obligation fuels the determination of families searching for the bodies of their missing relatives in order to perform funeral rites (Antigone, Priam in the *Iliad*) and/or to find justice in the case of political crime (the problem of the desaparecidos, e.g. in Argentina). The ambivalent and ‘uncanny’ status of the absent body is an interesting theme of this section of the book. The purpose of the funeral is not to unite the body with the person, but to ritually separate the living from the dead, or, more precisely, as Harrison argues, to separate their image, how they appeared to the living, from the corpse (147). The image of the dead must first find a place in the imagination of the living so that the living can separate themselves from it. The image is thus crucial; its release determines the difference between the living and the unliving, since ‘to be mortal means to be the place of this imaginary afterlife’ (149). The transformation of natural death into human death effects the birth of the dead person in the afterworld (as soul, image, voice, mask, etc.). Harrison emphasizes the interdependence of the living and the dead throughout his book, which ends with the words, ‘The dead are our guardians of humanity. We give them a future so that they may give us a past. We help them live on so that they may help us go forward’ (158).

While the book lacks a concluding chapter, the main argument is supplemented with extensive notes in the form of digressional fragments, often polemical against the main text, rather than numbered endnotes, and a rich bibliography.

The main thesis of the book can be recapitulated in the following way: as Vico argued, one token of civilization and of being human is a culture’s treatment of its dead (their bodies and their memory). ‘Where the dead are simply dead’ – says Harrison – ‘the living are in some sense already dead as well’ (123). Lack of interest in the dead and lack of care for them marks the decline of culture and humanity, reflecting a lack of consideration for the living and the breakdown of interpersonal, generational, and family ties. These are alarming processes which point to the deterioration of humankind. This is why one of the basic human obligations is the obligation to the corpse (143). Such concerns situate *The Dominion of the Dead* among works driven by the ‘ethics of care’. The concept of care is the book’s interpretive key, while its background is memory understood not only as remembering but primarily
as caring. It is, however, a rather strange ethics, which could be termed narcissistic. The reader of Harrison’s book—and of other books of this kind—may be led to think that Harrison’s interest in the dead and his feeling of guilt toward them are ways of neutralizing contemporary problems, especially those of the unliving, who, although physically present, exist in inhumane conditions which turn them into beasts. One could therefore ask a more general question: ‘Is the interest in the dead which marks contemporary humanities not a way of dealing with the sense of guilt toward the living?’ Or perhaps: ‘Is the interest in the dead an expression of insecurity in the situation of weakened faith in the afterlife?’ When the thanatotic sphere of culture loses its religious dimension, does it not acquire political significance?

Harrison does not foreground his methodological assumptions. He only makes an enigmatic remark in the preface about the book’s limitations of which he is ‘all too aware’ (xii). His approach could be termed ‘the methodology of defects’ in that he deliberately emphasizes and exaggerates what contemporary humanities regard as ‘misconceptions’, that is, politically incorrect ways of thinking. As a result the book becomes a provocative invitation to a debate about the benefits and harms of traditional humanities in the contemporary multicultural world. For a reader versed in the politically correct scholarship produced by ‘new humanities’, whose investigations center around race, class, and gender, The Dominion of the Dead will be fraught with ‘orthodox horrors’. There is no denying that Harrison’s book is humanistic, anthropocentric, and Eurocentric, essentialist and Christian. It is an openly Vichian book ‘about literature and religion’; a book which expresses the author’s anxieties about the future of humankind and resists current intellectual fashions. However, even those readers who do not share Harrison’s views can admire his sincerity.4

Because of its obvious ‘centrism’ and universalism, it is easy to criticize The Dominion of the Dead from the vantage-point of the ‘new humanities’. Suffice it to mention that the book’s fundamental category of the dead suggests that the dead are treated as a homogenic group, without taking into account the cultural, racial, sexual, or class differences among them. Do not funeral and memorial rites reflect social inequality? Harrison fails to address this issue. The ‘politics of heritage’, whose concerns Harrison shares, is related to the struggle for justice and the desire to express grief over loss, which remains an open wound and involves the interests of a variety of groups and communities. Another feature of the book is its anthropocentrism. Harrison’s interpretations can be accepted only if we agree with his Vichian assumption that the burial of the dead is an exclusively human custom (xi), a thesis which does not take into account findings about, for example, the life of elephants, which also take care of the remains of animals from their herd.

The main thesis of the book is that ‘humans bury not simply to achieve closure and effect a separation from the dead but also and above all to
humanize the ground on which they build their worlds and found their histories' (xi). Harrison believes that the earth can fall victim both to the forces of erosion and to those of inscription. The human individual should resist those natural forces of erosion (e.g. the sea absorbing ruins which stand on a cliff), which obliterate not only traces of human presence, but also traces of the obliteration of traces (e.g. the sea absorbing bodies of sailors whose death cannot be marked with a tombstone) (16). The idea of humanizing the earth, marking it with bodies and gravestones, is another manifestation of the author’s deep anthropocentrism. It seems that for Harrison this process realizes the command in Genesis that human beings should populate the earth (with the living and the dead) and subdue it.

The belief in the priority of the dead over the living stems from the Christian faith in the resurrection, which conceives of the dead as coming before us. This is why the main topos of Harrison’s book is the grave as the sign of human mortality. Of special importance is the topos of the ‘empty grave’, which, according to the Pauline creed, is ‘the evidence of things not seen’ (Hebrews 11:1).

The importance of Harrison’s study lies precisely in this strategic resistance against ‘the new’, particularly in his anthropocentrism, humanism, and Christian (or rather, Catholic) world-view. As Karl Popper said, ‘To resist a new fashion needs perhaps as much courage as was needed to bring it about’.5

Another merit of the book is the author’s ability to create voids. The silences, understatements, lacunae and lacks are intentional. Harrison adopts the ‘strategy of a-void-ance’: he refrains from giving precise answers to questions, thus creating empty spaces in his narrative and inviting the reader to pursue his or her own interpretations. That is why the book lacks a concluding chapter which would recapitulate and systematize Harrison’s fascinating investigations of the singular status of the dead but this is an intention of the author who intends to ‘open rather than close the horizon of speculations. The result is a book that only the reader can finish writing’ (xii).

Harrison’s considerations may suggest that the future of our thinking depends on how successfully representatives of different disciplines reformulate their attitude to the material traces of the past. The return to ontological questions about the material status of things, which can be termed ‘the return of the thing’, or the return to materiality as an antidote to the long-lasting fascination with language, narrative, or text, seem to signal another turn in the humanities – albeit given the multiparadigmatic structure of contemporary humanities it is questionable whether we can still talk of any ‘turns’.

Harrison seeks to combine Vico and Heidegger, attempting to synthesize philology and ontology (77). In fact Vico is used strategically to extend Heidegger’s thought. Thus, Harrison transforms Heidegger’s ontology of death into an ‘ontology of the dead’. Following in Vico’s footsteps, he argues
that the concept of death cannot provide the basis for thinking about the reality of the dead, but that thinking should proceed in the opposite direction, from the consideration of the dead to the concept of death (90–1). Vico says that ‘The order of ideas must proceed from the order of institutions’. Harrison suggests that ‘The idea of death must proceed from the dead. Indeed, it must proceed from the corpse. For the corpse is one of the most primordial of human institutions’ (92).

In his context, Harrison’s most interesting thesis is his polemical translation of Heidegger’s idea of ‘being-toward-death’ into ‘being-toward-the-dead’ (97). Thus, to restate the question ‘What is a dead body?’ and address ‘being-toward-the-dead’ can be seen as an attempt to transform Heidegger’s ontology of death into an ontology of the dead body. As I noted above, it is a highly interesting proposition; unfortunately, it is not fully developed by Harrison, who tries to go beyond Heidegger’s thought but ultimately always returns to his dogma. Thus, while Harrison is interested in the coexistence of the living and the dead, he continues to see it in terms proposed by Heidegger, who says that the deceased is characterized by ‘no-longer-being-in-the-world’ (which precludes coexistence with the living since they belong to a different world) but still exists as ‘the mere objective presence of a corporal thing’, that is, as something lifeless, not in the sense of inanimate matter but of being deprived of life. Therefore, in Heidegger – just as in Harrison – care for the deceased does not concern the dead body as organic matter (which seems a promising departure point of Chapter One of Harrison’s book) but means care for the completion of his/her existence. This implies that in spite of death, a being still has a kind of deficiency understood as lack and debt, which the dead must pay up by being useful to the living. We can thus speak of a symbiosis between the living and the dead: the dead need the living to prolong their existence and preserve their remains, to help them become what they are not (eschatological thinking); the living need the dead to legitimate their existence. Accordingly, people’s being involves both ‘being-in-the-world’ and ‘not-being-in-the-world’, the latter realized by the Christian vision of ‘the afterworld’.

Still, some fragments of Harrison’s book directly refer to the ontology of the dead body. He writes, for example, that ‘the idea of death must proceed . . . from the corpse’ (92). Interestingly, the dead body is conceived as dynamic: ‘For all its grave stillness there is nothing more dynamic than a corpse. It is the event of passage taking place before our eyes. This phenomenon of passage . . . makes of the unalive body a relational “thing”’ (93). Thus, we can think of the corpse in terms of relations rather than oppositions (dead body vs. live body). We must be aware of the importance of relations which indicate the ambivalent status of the corpse, which both is and is-not (like the desaparecidos’ bodies); which is and is not a thing; is and is not passive, etc. Thinking in terms of oppositions proves ineffectual as it reduces the
complexity of the corpse’s ambivalence and precludes the discovery of equally ambivalent relations.

It is worth noting the ongoing change indicated by some topics Harrison addresses (focus on materiality, especially the materiality of the dead body). Is it not true that, as archaeologist Bjørnar Olsen observes, the humanities have neglected things and material culture, focusing primarily on people and the way they use things? Things, including dead bodies, have become important insofar as they are a result of certain cultural or social processes. Material culture is treated as symbol, metaphor, or text, and thus dematerialized. Yet Harrison’s book does not defend the thing (the dead body) even as it engages this problem. The author is concerned with being-for (that is, the being of the dead in the world of the living described, of course, from the viewpoint of the living) rather than being-toward (the being of the living whose existence is permeated by the dead). It is not a symmetrical relation, even though it might seem so. The dead are made to exist for the living and provide justification for their existence; the living refer to their predecessors as a sort of ‘historical manure’ which legitimates power and helps create social bonds as well as history. In this respect, Harrison adopts the strategy of ‘colonization’, or conquering unknown and exotic territories – in this case, the dominion of the dead – in order to subdue, control, and exploit them for the sake of the ‘empire of the living’. Significantly enough, the word ‘dominion’ is itself a legal term implying political issues, and yet Harrison’s book does not address the problem of the ‘politics of the dead’ or ‘politics of death’.

Like every ‘other’, the dead can be approached in two ways: we can either see their otherness as pathology and try to normalize them by making them similar to the living, or we can treat them as a certain ‘culture’ (or cultures). Harrison’s book exemplifies the former tendency. The dead are spoken of in terms of the living: they have dominion, they are a family, we should cultivate their memory. Such treatment of the dead is ultimately infantilizing, since they are presented as being in need of care, like children. Caregiving – to risk repeating the obvious – presupposes a certain hierarchy: the person who receives care is considered weaker; the caregiver claims to be in charge. In fact, care means control, and care for the dead is no exception. Like most scholars interested in similar problems, Harrison approaches the dead from a pragmatic point of view. The dead are important insofar as they serve the living (36) and can be utilized by the living, either as a source of inspiration (Laura in Petrarch’s sonnets), or as the corpus delicti (trials concerning homicide), or, last but not least, as objects of the work of mourning (families desperately trying to recover the bodies of missing relatives so as to be able to conduct proper burial).8

Interestingly enough, whereas Harrison is critical of the interpretive methods of the ‘new humanities’, he both presupposes a notion of otherness
remarkably similar to that of Derrida and, at the same time, uses a strategy of familiarization, which obscures otherness. He does his best to make us feel safe and comfortable in the presence of the dead, to convince us of the symbiotic relationship between the dead and the living and their mutual interdependence. It is worth asking, however, whether the dead really are our property. Does the relation between the living and the dead have to be governed by the economics of exchange and the rhetoric of debt?

Translated by Magdalena Zapędowska

NOTES

1 Harrison (1988, 1992, 1994) is the Rosina Pierotti Professor in Italian Literature at Stanford University.
2 See two works representing the so-called Heideggerian archaeology: Gosden (1994) and Thomas (1996). See also Weiner (2001).
3 The term ‘new humanities’ or ‘anti-humanistic humanities’ is used as the opposite of ‘orthodox humanities’. The term itself seems unfortunate and misleading, since the target of its critique is precisely humanism with its Eurocentrism, anthropocentrism, phallogocentrism, and belief in the possibility of creating a perfect homo humanus as opposed to the homo barbarus. ‘New humanities’ include such disciplines as cultural studies, postcolonial studies, women’s studies, gender studies, and queer studies.
4 Williams (2002).
5 Popper (1970: 52).
7 Olsen (2003).
8 This pragmatic approach is confirmed by the archaeologist Mike Parker Pearson, who argues that ‘dealing with the dead, recent and ancient, inevitably must serve the living’ (1999: 192).

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