Necrodialogues and Media

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Communicating with the Dead in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

Edited by
Elena Fabietti and Zoë Ghyselinck

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We dedicate this book to to Jonas, Hektor, Lukas, and Irma.

Elena Fabietti and Zoë Ghyselinck

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Introduction

Necrodialogues and Media is an edited volume gathering a variety of investigations into the ways in which, starting in the twentieth century and until today, the living attempt, fail, or succeed at communicating with the dead through imaginary, ritualized, or technically sophisticated practices. Contributors from a range of disciplinary perspectives reflect on the ways in which the attempt to contact the dead and to decipher their messages constitutes one of the most important ways of giving meaning and value to the inevitable and potentially mysterious event of death. Practices and methods of communicating with the dead involve a variety of communicative acts (verbal, visual, aural, haptic, or ecstatic) that strongly interact with the meanings and values ascribed to death and life within belief systems, social groups, and cultural contexts. It is at this intersection that the case studies of this volume are located. The chapters in this book approach the phenomenon of communicating with the dead as a cultural, historical, and media theoretical construct, without taking a stance on the ontological reality of such communication. Instead, they focus on the narrative, ritual, and technological practices that shape these interactions in different contexts in order to describe and interpret them as cultural objects.

The desire to communicate with the dead has taken many forms and has had a varied life in different literary and cultural traditions, where its themes and narrative structures have been reinterpreted and adapted in different contexts. In the eleventh book of Homer's *Odyssey*, the Greek hero Odysseus travels to the Underworld to encounter the souls of the dead. The main reason for this venture is the search for guidance during his difficult journey home. In talking with the dead, Odysseus aims to gain insight into his future and to learn from the dead how to overcome the challenges that await him as he attempts to return home to Ithaca. The *nekyia*, as this literary passage is called,[1] implies a ritual background that puts great emphasis on the means by which the line of communication to the Underworld is opened. Odysseus himself tells how he sailed to the land of the Cimmerians, to the entrance of Hades, following the advice of the sorceress Circe. There he digs a well and offers sacrifices to all the dead, "first with milk and honey, thereafter with sweet wine, and in the third place with water" (Hom. *Od.* XI, 27–28). To the seer Tiresias, whom he wishes to consult, he offers a black ram

1 See Rohde (1895); Matijević (2015, 101–122); Gazis (2018). In antiquity, the eleventh book of Homer's *Odyssey* was already called *nekyia*.

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(32–33), and with "vows and prayers" (34) he offers sheep, whose blood attracts the dead. Only through these specific communicative practices and the use of particular objects or mediators, the shades of the dead grant Odysseus the chance to talk to them.

A few years ago, we started a conversation on the historically variable, astoundingly disparate, technical and narrative ways in which human beings have tried, as long as the historical record goes, to establish contact with the dead. This reflection was prompted by our respective research in literary fields differently connected to the realities of death, loss, and mourning and their different places in individual and social life, but it then grew in directions that an exclusive focus on literature could only have found limited answers to. So the idea of an interdisciplinary approach to these questions was born, which could be fulfilled only by opening the discussion to scholars who have been thinking about them from their specific methodological and epistemological angles.

For two decades, scholarly research has shown a growing interest in old and new rituals and mourning practices intertwined with communicative acts and medial practices of communicating with the dead in different cultural spaces around the world. Mediumism, divination, trance, possession, and cults of the dead continue to be practiced and represented in contemporary societies, in churches, on television, on the internet as well as in private and domestic settings. The interdisciplinary opening of the question of communicating with the dead in this volume is guided by an awareness of the continuities across traditional, religious, ritualized settings and the literary imagination, which operates parallel to and in exchange with the technological innovations informing the modification or reinvention of rituals and communication opportunities with the dead as they constantly reshape the medial landscape of the living.

At the starting point of our investigation, we could not have anticipated how quickly and profoundly the world would be invested, with the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, by a new proximity with death that for many months would dramatically change or altogether hinder many of the ritualized mourning practices we have long been accustomed to, by preventing physical contact with the dying and the bodies of the departed. While the recent historical horizon of this juncture looms in the background of this volume, the specific stakes of the pandemic are not explored here. This globally harrowing experience, however, has turned our reflections into an even stronger need to tether our investigation to a historically primed and disciplinarily broad approach to our initial question, one that would take stock of symbolic but also material and medial aspects involved in communicative relationships with the dead.

Our aim in this volume is to offer a significantly diversified sample of the ways technical and medial possibilities intercept the needs and desires, the fears

and hopes entailed in opening the channel between the living and the dead. Tappings, writing hands, mirrors, telegraphic machines, radios, telephones, found objects, vibrant matter, possessed bodies, ritual connections: the communicative efforts expounded in the cases of this book call for the specific understanding of the medial conditions of each contact, but also point towards a communicative urgency and pervasiveness that is reinstated in endless material and discursive configurations.

Although the last years have seen a global expansion of digital communication also in relation to mourning practices (Huberman 2017; Moreman and Lewis 2014; Savin-Baden and Mason-Robbie 2020; Recuber 2023), in this volume the digital is not methodically foregrounded, but certainly hovers in the reflections that guide the volume, directing its open questions towards future research.

Necrodialogues

The timeframe of this volume encompasses the twentieth century from its beginnings and the twenty-first century until the present day. Behind our chronological frame are specific cultural-historical reasons that make the end of the nineteenth century a time of intensified contact with the dead, especially thanks to the transatlantic Spiritualist wave. The possibilities of communication opened up by Spiritualism through this transatlantic wave are far from being the only ones explored in the context of communicating with the dead. Our focus consequently is not exclusively informed by an understanding of communication with the dead as it takes shape within the Spiritualist séance, but rather includes literary restagings and imaginative acts of speech, radiophonic and filmic renderings of encounters with the dead, the revamping of older, traditional genres, the ritualized or private enactment of a yearning for an exchange with the departed. Speaking to the dead is as much a sacred as a profane business, as much an institutionalized and codified process as a personal, idiosyncratic, and secretly kept act. Often, however, communication with the dead is confined to being a liminal activity, frequently even forbidden in religious institutional settings, and certainly marginalized in intellectually sanctioned ones. In the first part of the volume, a variety of case studies already attests to this oscillation between private and public sphere, and the negotiation of imaginary and symbolic spheres to allow for this communication.

In the second part of the volume, we open up the field of contemporary practices located in the twenty-first century to an even stronger interdisciplinary approach. Communicating with the dead in contemporary societies can only mean

an array of differentiated beliefs and practices that hinge on media representations and technical possibilities that are changing by the day. The case studies of the second part reflect continuity alongside innovation – a dialectic that remains significant for defining communication between the living and the dead. The variety of case studies, historical moments, and disciplinary angles taken up by each chapter represents for us an invaluable resource to interrogate from multiple facets phenomena of communication with the dead. In each case study, a specific angle is set by a specific discipline (such as media studies, history of religion, literary studies, and anthropology), each lending their conceptual vocabulary and methodological insights into distinct settings. This results in a choral approach to the questions posed by communication with the dead, allowing for a comprehensive investigation of this cultural sphere.

In organizing this variety, we rely on a conceptual grid that allows the authors and will allow the readers to navigate the vast array of phenomena at hand while maintaining a course. In proposing the notion of "necrodialogues" to describe this broad display of communicative events and settings, we intended to break up the boundaries of disciplinary expectations as well as the history of literary genres, merging the codified forms of speech assigned to the dead with ever-changing attempts at seeking out contact between the world of the living and that of the dead. With the aim of making available different cultural practices of communication, in this book we are interested in the summoning of the deceased through various, time-sensitive, and evolving media techniques as well as in the interpretation and use of the messages sent and exchanged, shaped by cultural imagination and connection to traditions.

As literary scholars interested in the interdisciplinary intersections of practices of communication, we are particularly aware of the literary traditions underpinning historically transforming forms of contact between the living and the dead, rooted in ancient ritual and literary traditions as a variety of communicative instances between the living and the deceased, and retrievable in reports and stories of necromancy in ancient Near-Eastern, Egyptian, and European literature that go back to more than 2000 BCE, such as the already-mentioned *nekyia* and various journeys into the Underworld known as *katábasis* (plural: *katabáseis*, from the Greek "katabainein," which means "to go down" [Bernabé 2015, 17, 19]). The living strive to initiate contact with the dead for various purposes as well as to decode messages from them, undertaking transformative, risky enterprises, often proper journeys, either figurative or concrete, leading to the territory of the dead, or facilitating, through no less perilous practices, the appearances of the dead amid the living. Besides the example of Odysseus, the exploits of Gilgamesh, Orpheus, Hercules, and Aeneas all provide tales of descent into the Underworld aimed at encountering and speaking to the dead. Dante Alighieri's medieval *katá-*

basis supplied European literature with a highly organized journey plan into the Christian Otherworld, one that would keep shaping the katabatic genre from then on. The conditions for the descent are as disparate as the reasons for it. For example, while Gilgamesh and Orpheus make the journey primarily for reasons of loss, grief, and mourning, Heracles and Aeneas enter the realm of the dead to fulfil a mission, consult ancestors while being chased by predictions, all while also reconnecting to the repertoires of traditional knowledge. Dante similarly undertakes the journey as a spiritual and moral mission of personal rebirth (in his narrative, he has lost his way through a "dark wood," or *selva oscura*), while indeed pursuing the ambition of a clear reorganization of traditional knowledge. Such discursive traditions have shaped the intermittent, yet continuous communicative possibilities explored by literary, religious, and otherwise ritual or personal ways of finding, intercepting, and communicating with the dead.

Until today, conversations between the living and the dead keep on informing and guiding literary and cultural narratives. Much attention has been paid to the interpretation of the narrative motif of *katábasis* and *nekyia* in psychoanalysis, especially in the works of Freud and Jung (Gardner et al. 2022). Contemporary scholarship has demonstrated how katabatic and necromantic communication has informed twentieth-century literature and culture, thereby tracing the continuities of cultural memory (Falconer 2005; Fletcher 2019; Scherer and Falconer 2021). Within memory studies, historical and cognitive approaches have explored the functioning of memory, with particular intensity for the early modern period (Pieters 2005; Bolzoni 2023). Parallel to this, memory studies have engaged with the politics of remembering and forgetting. The political dimension of communication with the dead is connected to functions that the Underworld and afterlife fulfil, across public and private life, as artistic resources as well as repositories of identity and personal experience, producing complex interactions with fictional and cultural processes of remembering and commemoration (Erll and Rigney 2009; Ruin 2018).

By proposing the coinage of necrodialogues we are also signaling the relevance of a particular textual tradition successfully established in antiquity by Lucian's *nekrikoì diálogoi* (Dialogues of the Dead, second century), later successfully reproduced in subsequent moments of European literature until the present (Baumbach 2002). In this richly documented and highly codified form, the dead – often chosen exemplarily for their unique recognizability within classical cultural memory – engage in instructive, edifying, or revelatory conversations with each other, while the living (traditionally under the disguise of the author) record and thereby broadcast these dialogues. This operation can be intentional and programmatic or accidental, for example if the dead are heard speaking *d'outre tombe*, as in Dostoevsky's novella *Bobok* from 1873, in which a drunken, mediocre

writer eavesdrops on them in a graveyard. The ancient satirical-critical genre of dialogues with the dead experienced a major revival during the Enlightenment – bolstered by the possibilities of serial journal publication – in the works of Bernard Le Bouyer de Fontenelle (*Nouveaux dialogues des morts*, 1683), François de Fénelon (*Dialogues des morts*, 1692–1696), and David Fassmann (*Gespräche in dem Reiche derer Todten*, 1718–1740).[2] Along the lines of this tradition, literary authors until now have been refurbishing the format of such a theatrical, dialogic, and potentially irreverent literary genre, expanding its narrative and medial potential to a variety of literary settings. Some of the most famous literary examples in the twentieth-century of the restaging of the Lucian format range from Fritz Mauthner's *Totengespräche* (1906), Edgar Lee Masters's lyrical reinvention at the site of graves of the dead, *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), Jean-Paul Sartre's theatrical staging of a claustrophobic and talkative Otherworld, *Huis Clos* (1943), Arno Schmidt's critical-satirical necrodialogues (e.g., *Dichtergespräche im Elysium* [1940/1941]), to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's philosophical and intellectual *Dialoge zwischen Unsterblichen, Lebendigen und Toten* (1999).

Both forms of the traditional genres of katabatic journey on the one hand, and dialogues with the dead on the other, have informed our notion of necrodialogues. These forms have historically produced a multiplicity of hybrid forms that for example display both conversations between the living and the dead and among the dead. As early as the fifth century BCE, for example, Aristophanes's comedy *Frogs* provided a satirical critique of the religious and literary-historical tradition of the descent into the Underworld, paving the way for Lucian's later satirical dialogues. In the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht's radio play, *Das Verhör des Lukullus* (1939), staged, through the *katábasis* of a fictional Roman general, socio-critical conversations among the dead regarding the misuse of mass media by right-wing parties (Ghyselinck 2021). In our coinage necrodialogues, we aim to cover the ends of the spectrum, thereby overcoming rigid distinctions supplied by genre definitions, showing instead their productive intertwining, especially as the not strictly literary forms of necrodialogues investigated in this volume exceed in any case the regulatory structures of literary codes, even while often interacting with them.

While our approach in this volume is interdisciplinary, moving across the boundaries of the imaginary, the ritual, and the religious, it is undeniable that the religious and spiritual dimensions occupy a privileged position, perhaps the most productive one, for the configuration of the communication with the dead. This

2 On Fassmann's dialogues, see Dreyfürst (2014), and on the German Enlightenment tradition of dialogues of the dead see Suitner (2016).

explains why our chronological point of departure is the aftermath of Spiritualism: that is the transatlantic success of a new practice of communication with the dead established by the famous Fox sisters in Hydesville, New York, as early as 1848 (Natale 2016). The ensuing rise in spirituality and proximity with the dead spread expansively in the culture of fin-de-siècle Europe and beyond, intersecting with research strands and scientific developments of the time, ultimately leading to that part craze, part cultural revival in society at large and also among a multitude of artists and intellectuals, including figures like Wassily Kandinsky, William Butler Yeats, and Rainer Maria Rilke among others (Bauduin and Johnsson 2018; Pytlik 2005; Fabietti 2024), that goes under the maximalist but effective definition of "occulture" (Partridge 2005). For a long time, a consideration of Occultism in relation to modernity has been obstructed by the secularization narrative spread and supported by sociological theories and diagnostics.[3] In the last decades, however, Spiritualism and Occultism have increasingly become the subject of a branch of academic studies as a result of a sustained revision of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century sociological accounts of modernity based on the assumption of a decline of religion in the form of a general disenchantment of the world. Several scholars have recently claimed that secularization is not an index for the decrease of enchantment; on the contrary, "Secularization seems to amplify enchantment," as Josephson-Storm put it provocatively (Josephson-Storm 2017, 17, 32). Perhaps less paradoxically, cultural historian Christopher Partridge has attributed the expansion of "alternative spiritual lifeworlds" to secularization itself, claiming that "in that pluralism, the privatization of belief, and the decline of religious monopolies have created a context within which they can thrive" (Partridge 2016, 316). Similarly, the cultural context of the rise of parapsychology in the late twentieth century, coinciding with the flourishing of New Age philosophies and their holistic approach to spirituality (Hanegraaff 1996), has certainly facilitated, intensified, but also transformed the possibilities and forms of contemporary communication with the dead. New Age movements, through their syncretic integration of ancient wisdom, Eastern philosophies, and esoteric traditions, have fostered a belief in the interconnectedness and the potential for direct communication with spiritual entities, which has added new layers to the Spiritualist assumptions of the previous century, emphasizing personal transformation, self-discovery, and spiritual growth. If mediumship experienced a resurgence in popularity, its social form had been transformed: spiritual gatherings and psychic fairs became platforms for individuals to seek guidance, closure, or communica-

3 As pointed out in Asprem (2014); Bauduin and Johnsson (2018, 5).

tion with deceased loved ones through skilled mediums, and often through the revival of Spiritualist automatic writing (Kalvig 2016).

At the same time that the narrative of secularization has been unsettled and made unusable to the understanding of a crucial set of modern and contemporary cultural manifestations, the study of religion has been, in its turn, deeply affected by a media turn. This shift has put an end to the prevailing idea that religion and spirituality are incompatible with technology and progress. As Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber have argued, "there are reasons to suspect that religion was never fully taken out of reason, secularization, mechanization, technization, mediatization, virtualization, and so on" (de Vries and Weber 2001, 28). Under the influence of a growing attention to contemporary world religions in relation to the development of mass media, religious practices of modernity have been shown to hinge increasingly on what has been called "the technologization of religion" and "the religiosity of technology" (Stolow 2013, 4). In cultural anthropology, scholarly fieldwork on trance media practices in several different cultures has shown how technical media are in fact integrated into established media practices, for example during burial rituals at the intersection of public ritual and the private sphere (Zillinger 2013; Dreschke and Zillinger 2014). If these religious dimensions and medial elements are constitutively interlaced, communication with the dead poses an even stronger case in point, since its purpose and scope are to open up and make accessible a channel that may make the invisible, the absent, and the vanished available.

Necrodialogues and Media

In describing necrodialogues we have emphasized the long-standing and continuous presence of a variously codified tradition that includes forms of communication located in ritual as well as in literary settings. Crucially, however, these codified forms are constantly open to change and transformation through the establishment of new media and new practices. A main focus of the book is therefore the material and medial means through which contact with the dead is continually imagined, be it in the literary imagination or in broader cultural domains.

Our notion of "media" includes both technical and personal media (Hahn and Schüttpelz 2009; Schüttpelz 2025), using a productive heuristic distinction that remains open to the intertwined forms of agency at play in communicative practices across different media. In both discursive strains of necrodialogues, the crossing of ontological boundaries is made possible by mediatory acts conducted by

human mediators using all kinds of technologies and objects, while also understanding, speaking, and translating (more or less successfully) the language of the dead and making it meaningful to the living. Often, but not exclusively, mediators find themselves or bring themselves into altered states of consciousness, such as trance, intoxication, or hypnosis. Relying on their assumed or performed hermeneutic capabilities, these mediators, often figures of a transitory, liminal nature, produce the knowledge of the dead at the intersection between expectations, desires, and authority. Typically, *katabáseis* are enabled by (divine) third parties or mediatory agents thanks to the use of a tangled web of objects, technology, and skills. As we have seen above, Odysseus is able to enter the Underworld (without actually descending) by sacrificing a black ram. Traditionally, the technical apparatus provided by the ritualized necromancy of the day can also be bypassed, and the mediation can also rely simply on the socially sanctioned skilled nature of the mediator. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, it is the figure of Horatio, Hamlet's friend and fellow student, who is called upon for help to address the ghost of Hamlet's father appearing at the city ramparts. The guards seem in fact convinced that Horatio has the necessary skills to talk to the dead because he studies at the university: "Thou art a scholar, speak to it, Horatio" (1.1.43). Mediators use their bodies, their knowledge, their technical skills to transmit messages from the dead. Mediums, acting as intermediaries between the living and the spirit realm, employ various techniques to enter altered states that enhance their receptivity to spiritual messages – more or less spectacular, but always radically transformative. Typically through trance, mediums allow a spirit entity to temporarily take control of their faculties. During trance, mediums may exhibit changes in voice, mannerisms, or even physical appearance, channeling messages purportedly from the spirit world, reflecting the belief that accessing different levels of consciousness is essential for communicating with the dead. Altered states of consciousness within Spiritualist mediumship are not limited to trance alone, but may include practices such as meditation, deep relaxation, or rhythmic chanting conducive to spirit communication (Matthiesen 2007; Hahn 2023; Schüttpelz 2025).

Whereas the need and desire to connect with the dead obviously transcends historical epochs, in this book we selected a timeframe that allows for a better focus on modern and contemporary forms of necrodialogues informed by cultural-religious configurations, at the same time suggesting that necrodialogues gain prominence during junctures marked by significant changes or shifts in media history, as individuals and societies adjust to possibilities and limitations in the processes of mediation, and specifically those in the timeframe we have undertaken to explore. As already mentioned, characteristic of the rise of modern Spiritualism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century is its close connection to the rise of modern (mass) media and the technological development of new

communication devices, such as the telegraph, photography, radio, and telephone, but also the entertainment industry at large (Natale 2016, 6–8). This connection in its turn has laid the foundations of our modern and contemporary thinking and vocabulary of communication, as Peters explained in his inquiry into the history of the idea of communication, *Speaking into the Air*. Communication is for Peters "a registry of modern longings" and the rapid expansion of communication technology since the nineteenth century discloses a utopian desire for perfect communication, free from misunderstandings (Peters 1999, 95, 100).

In a similar vein, the late twentieth-century resurgence of interest in parapsychology and New Age spirituality fostered innovative practices in communication with the spirits of the dead (Kalvig 2016, 30). While generally viewed with skepticism by the mainstream scientific community, parapsychologists sought in fact to apply rigorous scientific methods to explore extrasensory perception, telekinesis, and other paranormal phenomena, such as Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP), the purported phenomenon of capturing unexplained voices or sounds on electronic recording devices, often during paranormal investigations or in spaces associated with spiritual activity (von Sydow 2024). Controlled experiments, laboratory studies, and statistical analyzes aimed to explore the existence of telepathic communication and contact with the spirit world. Advancements in technology, particularly in the fields of psychology and neuroscience, provided parapsychologists with new tools to investigate and measure psychic phenomena.

Yet the history of media and communication with the dead is not just one of progressive enhancement and sophistication through technical possibilities. As we will also see repeatedly in this volume, it is not unusual for this communication to be hampered while trying to establish contact with the Otherworld within the channel of an outdated medium. Conversely, it often happens to successfully slip through the archaeological traces of obsolete routes. In Paul Auster's last novel, *Baumgartner*, an aging academic who had lost his wife to an accident nine years earlier opens a telephone line with what appears to be the voice of his wife's consciousness trapped in the formless Otherworld in which consciousness is allowed to keep existing as long as there is a living being communicating with it – as the ghost of Anna explains on the first phone call: "as long as he is alive and still able to think about her, her consciousness will continue to be awakened and reawakened by his thoughts" (Auster 2023, 62). The telephone line accessed by this character appears not to have been dismantled by the technological obsolescence of the cabled telephone in question. If the telephone as a device provides, with its medial configuration of an intrinsic permanent absence, a "hermeneutics of mourning" (Ronell 1989), as a more general rule, new technical media do not just replace older ones in the purported communication. On the contrary, and apparently counterintuitively, old media keep holding space for that communication, a space that

once carved out seems resistant to disappearing, or that exists in an ontological dimension evading that of ordinary reality. In other words, the dead seem not that interested in employing the latest gadget, as much as their need for finding a communication line may seem their absolute priority. While this order of things allows the staging of what is often an inexorable failure for the living to implement communication, reflecting the metaphysical uncertainty surrounding the destiny of the dead with the instability of media, this tendency to avail themselves of outdated technical media also corresponds, in the necrodialogues, to the persistence and tenacity of codified traditions in shaping the communicational setting between the living and the dead. When trying to establish contact with the dead, the older option may seem the best suited, providing a comfortable lineup of previous attempts at an intrinsically risky enterprise.

The contributions gathered in this volume explore necrodialogues as a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon, encompassing various media, literary genres, and cultural contexts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The various chapters collectively contribute to a broader understanding of how communication with the deceased is shaped by historical narratives, while at the same time crossing temporal and cultural boundaries, thereby allowing for a deepening and expansion of temporal and personal dimensions in the world of the living. As they delve into various cultural and linguistic contexts, our contributors emphasize the shared human endeavor to connect with the dead through a variety of modes of communication – a verbal or otherwise symbolic exchange produced through a broad spectrum of technological as well as metaphysical representations.

The first section of the volume presents necrodialogues conducted or staged through the medium of literature. Here a crucial intertwining takes place between the medial form of literature and the media staged within the literary representation. This double mediality, which pertains to literature as a representational medium, is intensified in the case of necrodialogues, where on the one hand the dead and the living trying to communicate are those whose stories are told in the text, and on the other the narrating voices vicariously prolong the agency of the departed by passing on their messages through the medium of writing.

In the first essay of the section, entitled “When Spirits Write: Mediumism as Writing Practice in the Work of W.B. Yeats,” Elena Fabietti explores this peculiar mediality offered by literary writing in the case of the modernist writer W.B. Yeats. This chapter looks closely at the years-long practice of contacting the dead and interrogating them to which Yeats and his wife George, both devoted occultists, dedicated themselves, documented through the notebooks of those séances and later elaborated in cosmological essays by Yeats. The necrodialogues

ensuing from this practice become the setting of a writing scene of a complex yet elusive literary project. The mediumistic practice, culturally codified (for example through the implementation of a female medium and of automatic writing) opens up fundamental questions about creative and authorial agency in relation to the use of the speech of the dead to produce literature, but also to assist, guide, and cure the living and their relationships (in this case, a couple and their specific relational issues). While resting on the cultural premises of Spiritualism, with its syncretic metaphysical (but also scientific) aspirations, the Yeatses' case sheds light more broadly on the authority lent to the dead by the living in assigning meaning to life within literary discourse and beyond. By emphasizing the bodily mediation implemented by George Yeats as a conscious performance allowing for creative choices as well as interpersonal negotiations, the chapter aims at showing the active and vital role played by the dead at the crossroads between creative and personal life.

In the second chapter of the section, "Long Live the Medium: Transgressing the Boundaries of Authorship in Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*," Zoë Ghyselinck discusses the notion of authorship in French artist Jean Cocteau's reinterpretations of the Orpheus myth, focusing on his adaptations for stage and screen. Drawing upon the literary representation as well as the transition between literary media, Ghyselinck explores the means and conditions through which Cocteau's Orphée communicates with the dead, as it is his artistic practice, not his wife, which is "dead." The essay focuses on the mediating agents (both personal mediums and technical media) involved in the author's resuscitation of his art. Connecting the discussion to occultist (Spiritualist) and scientific discourse of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture, the necrodialogues embedded in Orphée's *katábasis* are read as mediumistic attempts at contact with the Otherworld, attesting to the belief that new media allow contact with the dead, even if this largely fails. The explored distribution of authorship unravels mediating agents who navigate a delicate balance between representing higher authorities, engaging in boundary-crossing activities, and taking (or refusing) responsibility for their actions. Ghyselinck suggests that as the process of artistic resuscitation unfolds across different media adaptations, Cocteau's artistic transition from drama to cinema can be viewed as a meta-medial aspect of the authorial transgression represented in the literary texts.

The prominence of the literary medium and its potentials in communicating with the dead is displayed from a different perspective in the chapter of Nicholas De Sutter, titled "In limine leti: Necrodialogues and Liminality in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Neo-Latin Literature." The chapter delves into the exploration of the Latin language's status and use in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. By focusing on the recurrent theme of liminality in modern Neo-Latin literature,

often expressed through necrodialogues, the essay interrogates the cultural and collective (although intellectually and socially selective) ways in which tradition is appropriated and reenacted. The text discusses how Neo-Latin literature, despite the decline of Latin in its use as a literary and scholarly language, is being actively revived through the "Latinitas viva" movement, for example through the literary medium of Latin magazines and the resurgent genre of poetry contests. De Sutter explores how Neo-Latin writers navigated this transitional state, often reflecting on contemporary issues of technology through a classical lens, and discusses Latin literature's engagement with contemporary phenomena related to the communication with the dead, such as Spiritualism and mediumistic practices, thereby emphasizing the intertwining of the medium's liminal position with cultural concerns of transition and conservation of tradition.

In "Contact Failures: Metaphysical Fantasies in German-Language Post-War Radio Plays," Luisa Drews analyzes a broad corpus of texts from German literature that after the Second World War engaged with the medium of the radio (in the format of radio plays) and its possibilities. The chapter seeks to establish a connection between the radio play productions from the late 1940s to the early 1960s and the coeval interest in metaphysical forms of communication. In the pieces she investigates in her chapter, the dead or their placeholders (which are described through the figures of the absent and the numinous) attempt to get in touch with the living but fail, in most cases, at initiating a dialogue. The central experience staged by many of the radio plays analyzed in the essay is that of the "acousmatic sound," the uncertain and unretrievable source of which spurs the metaphysical interrogation underlying the various narratives, and which generates specific acoustic reactions in the listeners too. A unique necrodialogic situation ensues from the acousmatic situation staged by these radio plays: one that makes the literary acoustic medium an essential way for the listeners to engage reflectively with an otherworldly dimension and with the medial possibilities of sound transmission.

In his contribution "The Necrodialogue as a Modelling System in the Work of Arno Schmidt (1914–1979)," Ralf Simon discusses the generic code of the necrodialogue through a media-theoretical lens. Drawing upon a threefold concept of mediality to define the role of an unstable medium, he argues that the necrodialogue enables the transmission of otherwise impossible conversations through media, especially texts; establishes an intermediate state between life and death as a precarious moment of mediation; and suggests an oscillation between narrative and "sujetless" states, in which the mediality of the genre becomes questionable. Simon sees the generic code of the necrodialogue incorporated in the entire œuvre of the German author Arno Schmidt. In an extensive overview of several of Schmidt's works, Simon delves into the structural aspects of necrodialogues

across various levels of transformation in Schmidt's work. This spans formal genre structures, the transformation into radio essays, connections with journeys into the afterlife narratives, repeated interconnections with the same generic model, and the compenetration of ontological levels, ultimately turning the entire textual reality into a necrodialogue. Simon contextualizes Schmidt's literary endeavors in the post-1945 period, emphasizing his unique approach to addressing the aftermath of German fascism. Schmidt's blend of sharp realism and interior monologue techniques, influenced by major metaphysical concepts like Gnosticism and Schopenhauer's philosophy of negativity, challenges a hermeneutics of vivification and sets him apart in German post-war literature.

In the last chapter of this section, "Mediatic Muses, Sacrifices, and Survivors: Klaus Theweleit's Pattern of Male Art Production," Michael Lorper analyzes the critical work of Klaus Theweleit, who dedicated significant studies to the iconographical and rhetorical description of art production and male authorship, primarily throughout Modernist arts. The figure of the female medium, more often the sacrificial victim of Orphic creation, constitutes the centerpiece of Theweleit's critical account of Western artistic agency. Lorper reconstructs the cultural discourse that shapes this interpretative pattern of Modernist arts in the context of Feminist theory and media studies. While strongly invested in a discursive political deconstruction of the figure of female sacrifice in its sublimated use within Western art, Lorper asserts that Theweleit, following a thread of thought retrieved in Elias Canetti's work, proposes an alternatively affirmative, less deadly relationship to the figure of dead mediators for art production, outlining a dialogical relationship intrinsic to art that can eschew sacrificial victims.

The second section of the volume investigates a diverse array of cultural practices grounded in contemporary societies. The disciplinary approaches range here from religious studies to public health to cultural anthropology and gender studies.

In her essay "Familiarized Necrodialogues through the Lens of Nordic Culture," Anne Kalvig presents ethnographic research on Nordic European culture under the general coordinates of the contemporary understanding of Spiritualism and mediumism in religious as well as secular contexts, especially in the case of revivals of a mythological Norse and Viking past. Kalvig shows how this revival of tradition plays out as a way to imbue personal life with amplified meaning, resulting into a beneficial, intimate, and comforting communication, which she defines as "familiarized necrodialogues" to convey the accessible, integrated aspects entailed by this array of different practices, with a focus on family, relationships, and healing. Based in the specific metaphysical and cultural landscape of New Age, the particular ontology explored and implemented by the necrodialogues

she reflects on is one defined by "horizontal" relations and agency, pointing to an expansive dimension of life including the living, the dead, and nature.

In her chapter "A Message from Babe: Necrodialogues in Pregnancy Loss," Claudia Mattalucci offers an anthropological reading of the contemporary culture of infant mourning (in the specific case of perinatal loss) and some of the communicative practices it entails. Focusing on the field research conducted by the author among families in Italy, the chapters explores how couples who experienced pregnancy loss enter into dialogue with their dead children by writing letters and messages to their little dead, which they keep in their home, leave on their child's grave, or post on social media as ways to stay connected, cultivate memory, and convene their presence. Communication does not flow in only one direction, as many parents learn to detect signs of their dead children: a found object, a butterfly, the shape of a cloud, or a squirrel are taken as messages that allow them to maintain a connection with the little dead, who are thereby enabled to continue their journey among the living. The communication ensuing in these necrodialogues therefore not only transforms the mourning of the parents into a vital and life-oriented communication, but opens up and maintains other modes of existence for miscarried, stillborn, and dead children.

In his essay titled "Hearing Spirits: The Work and Technique of Controlled Clairaudience," Adam J. Powell examines aspects of labor entailed in contemporary mediumship, especially in its (prevalent) forms of clairaudience (hearing spiritual communications). Powell demonstrates how contemporary mediumship reflects societal values of efficiency, labor, and the incessant drive for control. He therefore relies on the concept of technology, as explained by the French philosopher Jacques Ellul, who distinguishes between technology as material innovation and technique as the integration of the machine into society, emphasizing its totalizing search for the best absolute means. Interviewed mediums describe their work as a constant discipline and a duty, often feeling the need to manage the relentless influx of spirit voices. The essay connects this phenomenon to Spiritualism's historical evolution, from early divination practices to the internalization of the spirit communication process, and argues that this transformation in mediumship aligns with the broader cultural shift towards prolonging labor and efficiency in the era of 24/7 work engagement, suggesting that late-capitalist technique has influenced the way we seek and interact with the transcendent.

In her chapter "When the Victims Speak: Necrodialogues in Selva Almada's *Dead Girls*," Eva Van Hoey discusses Almada's chronicle *Dead Girls* (2020), exploring its use of necrodialogues to address gender violence in rural Argentina during the 1980s and throughout the present. Van Hoey examines the interplay of the specific genre of the chronicle and the representation, within them, of esoteric practices, especially necrodialogues, where the narrator herself communicates

with the deceased through a personal medium who receives messages from the dead girls. The inclusion of spectral elements in contemporary Latin American chronicles like *Dead Girls* is analyzed further in relation to Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology and Avery Gordon's notion of social violence. Ultimately, Van Hoey reads the chronicles as an alternative discourse that counters the normalization of gender violence and emphasizes the agency and humanity of the victims, while challenging both the dominant narratives perpetuated by society and the sensationalist discourse of mainstream media. The spectral presence of the victims serves as an agent in the fight against gender violence, ensuring their voices can influence and transform the present and future.

The necrodialogues of this volume, as culturally diverse and discursively specific as they are, all show how engaging with the dead generates affirmative relations that can be creative on the artistic, personal, or collective level. The case studies of this book display the often-reviving effect played by communicating with the dead in different domains of cultural life, dwelling in an ontological dimension describable as "being with the dead" (Ruin 2018). Rather than haunting the living, throughout necrodialogues the dead appear as their vitally necessary interlocutors. Our aim has been to show a historical variety of forms while tracing the continuity of a fundamental need and of cultural traditions in inventing, reshaping, and maintaining a relationship to the dead. Through the interdisciplinary journey undertaken in this book, a shared appreciation for some of the diverse ways in which individuals, across the globe, continuously and vitally engage in the practice of communicating with the departed shall emerge.

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1 Literary Necrodialogues between Tradition and Innovation

Elena Fabietti

When Spirits Write: Mediumism as Writing Practice in the Work of W.B. Yeats

Where got I that truth?
Out of a medium's mouth. Out of nothing it came,
Out of the forest loam,
Out of dark night where lay
The crowns of Nineveh.
W.B. Yeats, *Fragments*, 1928[1]

1 Introduction

In 1917, William Butler Yeats, prominent Irish Modernist poet and dramatist, together with his newly married wife George Hyde-Lees, started to chart and transcribe messages from the world of spirits, later re-elaborating the results of these sessions in creative work. Two decades after the events, he described what happened as follows:

> On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. "No," was the answer, "we have come to give you metaphors for poetry." (AVB, 7)

This account opened the 1937 second edition of Yeats's complex esoteric cosmology *A Vision*, published for the first time twelve years before, in 1925. This book was the result of a years-long revision of the automatic script produced in the sessions Yeats mentions in the passage, and more generally the result of a protracted engagement with spiritual questions and Spiritualist activity, conducted committedly and consistently alongside his creative poetical work.

Readers of Yeats, whether skeptically put off by the poet's engagement with Occultism or genuinely fascinated by what this interest could possibly have

1 Yeats (CW1, 218). The poem was published for the first time in 1931. From now on, I am using abbreviations for Yeats's works. See "Works by W.B. Yeats with Abbreviations" at the end of the chapter.

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meant for his literary work, have been trying to imagine and question the degree of authenticity, staged performance, and belief implied in this practice, either to ultimately dismiss it or to find its paths into his creative work.[2] A fundamental discomfort still shapes the attempts at understanding this crucial, pervasive interest at the core of Yeats's personal and creative life – a dismay having to do with assumptions about subjectivity, authorship, agency on the one hand, and general conceptions of secular modernity on the other.[3] While I will occasionally return to the issue of these cultural resistances in the course of the chapter, my main focus is on the "writing scene" that took place for some years in the setting of an intimate collaboration between W.B. Yeats and his wife George Yeats (who changed her name to Georgie after marrying the poet).[4]

Why was Yeats listening to the spirits of the dead, or better, to his wife's transcriptions of their messages? Who were the spirits Yeats was listening to, and to what extent did they shape the dialogic practice established by the couple? What are the consequences of such a dialogue with spirits and transcription of their messages on the level of authorship, agency, and poetics? In order to answer these questions I will refer throughout this chapter to the context of Spiritualist beliefs and Occultist culture in general that informed the conception of the automatic script first, and of *A Vision* later. I will however mostly focus on the posthumously published automatic script to describe the dialogic practice enacted by the couple, which I claim represents a distinct form of necrodialogues, partly representative of Spiritualist mediumship and partly unique in its unfolding. Inevitably, I will occasionally refer to the published versions of *A Vision*, where much of the contents that emerged during the script were elaborated into a metaphysical system that, as intricate as it is, can help explain many of the assumptions under-

2 Neil Mann has described some of these various reactions: "Critics have generally shown a degree of relief when they have felt able to discern Yeats distancing himself from *A Vision* and some have found *A Vision* to be a form of deliberate irony. Some readers find the whole affair of the automatic script and attendant phenomena ludicrous and more than a little embarrassing" (2019, 27). For a methodological discussion of the opportunity of questions concerning the actual beliefs of the Yeatses, Margaret Harper indicates a theoretical shift to the questioning of academic "discomfort" with the dimension of belief (2006, 39). The editors of the automatic script themselves have been facing harsh criticism for not taking a clearer position towards the matter. For their response to this kind of unacquitted academic criticism, see Frieling, Harper, Sprayberry (1999, 22–23).

3 For an overview of the narrative of secularized modernity, its criticism, and the proposal of an alternative narrative, see Owen (2004) and Josephson-Storm (2017).

4 I am using here with a certain flexibility the notion that Rüdiger Campe has elaborated in a complex aesthetical reflection in Campe (1991; 2021). On the name change from George to Georgie see M. Harper (2006, 123). In this chapter, I consistently use the name George.

lying the practice of the automatic script itself. *A Vision*, a "metaphysical description of human life and the nature of reality, framed in terms of esoteric geometry" (Mann 2019, 5), in both subsequent versions from 1925 and 1937, remains for readers and literary interpreters a barely accessible text, certainly due to its occult and therefore strategically secretive content.[5] What Yeats wrote to his editor at MacMillan in 1934, however, leaves no doubt as to the importance of the occultist research and practice preparing *A Vision*: "I want it to be taken as a part of my work as a whole, not as an eccentricity" (CLX, 6019). Yeats invested an important part of his life in the preparatory work as well as the re-elaboration of *A Vision*, and he saw it not just as a compendium of what he had studied, but as an original metaphysics in its own right, a way of ordering the chaos of the world and its interpretations, ultimately a secure foundation for his own beliefs and creativity. To Edmund Dulac, the friend who drew the woodcut images for *A Vision*, Yeats wrote in 1924 that "I do not know what my book will be to others – nothing perhaps. To me it means a last act of defense against the chaos of the world; & I hope for ten years to write out of my renewed security" (CLX, 4525). These hints to the entanglement of the metaphysical and the existential dimensions, the cosmic and the personal, map the background and horizon of the automatic script.

My approach in what follows will intentionally not be that of tracing correspondences between the automatic script and the two different versions of *A Vision*, nor of tracing the flow of symbolism from the script to the literary work – a philological enterprise that exceeds the present scope and has been already pursued to some extent.[6] More generally, in Yeats the borders between ritual investment in magical practices and literary production are porous, as Johannsen has poignantly pointed out: "the question of whether fiction inspired practice or vice versa is, with Yeats, no longer relevant, because in his approach, poetic and ritual effects are of the same nature" (Johannsen 2021, 189). I instead try to bridge the discursively heterogeneous textual and contextual spaces to emphasize the praxeological aspect of a creative communication with the dead. By pinning this practice to the cultural background of Spiritualism, I try to understand the specific form of necrodialogues enabled by the automatic writing scene. Comparing the Yeatses' specific case with similar practices at the heart of Modernism, for example Surrealist automatic writing, the distinct features of the Yeatses' necrodia-

5 On *A Vision* as "practically unreadable" see M. Harper (2006, 31). The consequent distrust towards the difficulties posed by this work are exemplified by Adams (1995), who tries to read it "just" as a literary work: "The occult in it is subordinate to the book's literary purpose" (4).

6 Many hints at the flow of images, symbols, and doctrines into the poetic work of Yeats are in M. Harper (2006, Ch. 3). The editions of the *Vision Papers* and of both versions of *A Vision* contain rich philological commentaries showing cross references.

logues become visible. Finally, to propose a tentative interpretation of the Yeatses' practice, I profit from hints from cultural-anthropological investigations of spirit possession in order to show how the dead function, throughout the automatic writing, as source of authority and legitimization of beliefs and art at the same time, but also as distributive projections of agency enabling the negotiation of meanings within an intimate, erotic, and creative relationship. My aim is here to retrieve a cultural and literary interpretation of the practice of communicating with the dead that, set up as a creative writing scene, is also vital for the affective scene of life, showing a culturally coded mode of "being with the dead" (Ruin 2018) bridging art practice and private existence.

2 Yeats's Ghosts

William Butler Yeats, protagonist of Irish Modernism in the first decades of the twentieth century, was a convinced and committed Occultist. Member of the Theosophical Society from 1887, and from 1890 of one of the most prominent sects of the esoteric scene of his time, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, he explored with inquisitiveness and a certain amount of skepticism the multifaceted landscape of European Occultism at the dawn of the century.[7]

Reception of Yeats's poetry in the first part of twentieth century has traditionally struggled with acknowledging the place of Occultism in the life and work of this author; exemplary of this difficulty is W.H. Auden's comment about the "nonsense" of Yeats's occultist interests and themes, echoed by T.S. Eliot's similar skepticism.[8] More recent scholarship has however taken Yeats's commitment to Oc-

7 On Yeats's engagement with Theosophy and the Hermetic Order Golden Dawn see the introductory overview in Mann (2019, especially 40–44). For more details on Yeats and Theosophy see Monteith (2008). For a detailed account on Yeats and the Hermetic Order see G.M. Harper (1974). The Order was founded by William Robert Woodman, William Wynn Westcott, and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers in 1887.

8 Auden (1950, 345). See M. Harper (2006, 31) and Surette (1993, 6–7). On Eliot's ambiguous relation to Yeats, see Donoghue (2010). In the second half of the century, even Harold Bloom still distanced himself from "this" part of Yeats's production (Bloom 1970).

cultism more seriously, beginning with an intellectual shift that began in the 1970s, and today it is no longer debatable that ties to Occultism intrinsically define not just Yeats's biography but also his literary production.[9]

Yeats conceived of his engagement with Occultism as a quest, and a serious one at that.[10] In a letter to John O'Leary from July 1892, he wrote: "The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write [. . .] I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance – the revolt of the soul against the intellect – now beginning in the world" (CLX, 303). In tune with the hopes of an entire culture intent on realigning human existence to the spiritual dimensions disclosed by a supposed original wisdom, regrettably long lost, and with the technical attempts to establish this alignment, Yeats was indefatigable in his learning – a trait that will clearly appear in the harping inquiries he led during the automatic writing sessions, but that has also left other tangible, material traces.

George Mills Harper has enumerated the factual evidence of Yeats's engagement with Occultism by listing the objects contained in his library (Harper 1975, 4). In addition to these paraphernalia and proofs of occultist activity, the pages of the automatic script produced by the Yeatses represent however the most tangible trace of Yeats's engagement with occult practices, attesting to the time and effort invested by the Yeatses in pursuing matters of spiritual nature through a writing that carries the material marks of its scene.

Yeats had met George in 1911 through Ezra Pound and his soon-to-be wife Dorothy Shakespear.[11] Already in the first years of their acquaintance they had found a common ground on those themes and trends of occultism that were current in their social circles as well. George was, at least since 1909, well-read in classic texts of contemporary occultist literature, having already read early on

9 The beginning of this switch happened thanks to the groundbreaking work of George Mills Harper, who in 1974 published the monography *Yeats and the Golden Dawn*, and in 1975 edited a volume providing an overview of Yeats's engagement with Occultism: *Yeats and the Occult*. As to the recognition, in literary scholarship, that Occultism is a relevant component of Yeats's work and of that of a number of Modernist authors, see for example Surette (1993, 10), defining "the strategy of scholarly avoidance" as at that point "obsolete." Surette at several points addresses polemically the pervasive scholarly "fear of the occult" (12). Far from completely extinguished, this fear can also be described and dealt with as Margaret Harper has suggested: "a comfort zone of intellectual life has been disturbed [. . .] The discomfort interests me, for it raises the issue of what is being added or removed in the process of making a discussion 'academic'" (M. Harper 2006, 39).

10 See also Keane (2021), emphasizing the profile of Yeats as a "seeker."

11 On the details of their meeting within social circles and personal acquaintances see Saddlemyer (2002, 41).

Lombroso's account of Spiritualism as well as texts by William James (Saddlemyer 2002, 43). Later, she had enriched her occultist library with works ranging from the Corpus Hermeticum, to Early Modern magic, to contemporary literature on Theosophy and Spiritualism. In addition, she had built an exceptional expertise in astrology and was able to cast complex horoscopes (Saddlemyer 2002, 63). In 1914 George had asked Yeats, a senior member of the Order, to sponsor her to enter the Hermetic Order of The Golden Dawn, an affiliation she took extremely seriously.[12] In 1917 they married: he was fifty-two and she was twenty-five years old. According to Yeats's recollection quoted at the beginning of this chapter, a few days after their marriage, George had begun to receive messages from the spirit world and to transmit them to Yeats. Given the background of their encounter, this start into automatic writing is far from surprising and was prepared through years of complicit and common interests. George Yeats was not only well-versed in Occultist practices, in fact better-read than her husband, but she knew well his fondness and eagerness to receive occult truths.

In 1917, when the Yeatses started their own automatic writing practice, which unfolded in unique ways, what they did was not at all exceptional for the time. The upsurge of Spiritualism in Europe after 1848 had opened up the stage for a wave of different practices of communication with the spirit world that included automatic writing. As soon as the spirits were contacted in a séance, their messages had to be transmitted, be it with sounds, through the mouth of the medium, through her hand, or further acoustic and visual phenomena (from rapping to levitations to ectoplasmic apparitions – the proper "materializations" of mediumship).[13] Both W.B. Yeats and George Yeats had been intensively exposed to Spiritualist practices before starting their own sittings: they knew and had studied records of mediumistic séances, and they had attended several too. As a member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) from 1913 to 1928, Yeats was very familiar with the testing performed by the Society as its main attempt to prove scientifically the authenticity of the alleged spiritualist phenomena.[14] Familiar with the SPR's Proceedings and the work of some of the society's founding members, such

12 In the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Yeats's name was DEDI (Daemon est Deus Inversus – a quotation from Blavatsky's book *The Secret Doctrine*); George's name was the metasecretive *nemo sciat,* which she possibly took not just from the Bible but also from Swedenborg's writings (Saddlemyer 2002, 67; M. Harper 2002; 2018). On the details of the sponsorship see Saddlemyer (2002, 65).

13 For a historical overview on Spiritualism's phenomena (with a focus on England) see Oppenheim (1985). The infamous German doctor Schrenck-Notzing dedicated a book to phenomena of materialization (1914), reporting his often-crude testing of the authenticity of ectoplasmic apparitions from the body of the medium Ève Carrère.

14 On the defining function of trial for mediumship, see Voss (2020).

as F.W.H. Myers and William Stainton Moses, Yeats had been attending séances of many kinds long before meeting George (G.M. Harper 1992, 1). It is especially Myers who left the strongest trace on the couple, as a decisive figure for the establishment of Spiritualist automatism, as we will see later in this chapter.[15] Especially formative for Yeats in terms of acquiring a sense for mediumship and automatic writing was the encounter with the medium Elizabeth Radcliffe in 1912, whom he had met through Eva Fowler and Olivia Shakespear.[16] During 1912 and 1913 Yeats studied the automatic writing of Radcliffe (and corresponded with her), devoting great speculative energies to the phenomenon of mediumship.[17] His resulting judgement is contained in a posthumously published text from 1913 entitled "Preliminary Examination," which attests to an insatiably inquisitive attention towards mediumship, and to some of the circulating hypotheses that Yeats could rely upon, including topics which had been treated by experimental psychology since the 1880s: unconscious mind (Richet, Bergson, Janet) and telepathy (Myers).[18] For Yeats, the latter concepts proved unsatisfactory, however, when confronted with facts such as the mastering of foreign and ancient languages by mediums who allegedly did not study them, as was the case of the American medium Etta Wriedt, whose séances at the so-called "Julia's circle" Yeats attended (G.M. Harper 1975, 149).[19] In the "Preliminary Examination," having gone through different options, Yeats concluded: "I shall accept the spiritistic hypothesis [theory] as mine" (Yeats 1913 in G.M. Harper 1975, 155). Yeats's experiences with automatic writing did not stop there: between 1913 and 1914 he carried on a correspondence with two women, Miss Locke and Lady Lyttleton, who alleg-

15 F.W.H. Myers (1843–1901), a Cambridge classicist, co-founded the SPR. He collected his theories and results in the co-authored *Phantasms of the Living* (1886) and the posthumously published *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903). He had a great influence on both Yeatses (see G.M. Harper 1987, xi; and G.M. Harper 1992, 1); on Myers's own case of collaborative automatic writing, see London (1999, 182). William Stainton Moses, minister of the established church and spiritualist, practiced automatic writing and wrote about it in books the Yeatses knew: *Spirit Teachings* and *Spirit Identity*. On Moses, see Oppenheim (1985, 77–80).

16 Eva Fowler was a wealthy American who hosted writers interested in the occult at her home in London, and was close to Ezra Pound (Saddlemyer 2002, 29). Olivia Shakespear was a writer, lover, and friend of Yeats. She was the mother of Dorothy, mentioned above, who became the wife of Ezra Pound. It was through her and the Pounds that Yeats met George Lee-Hydes.

17 For a detailed reconstruction of the encounter and interactions with Radcliffe, see Saddlemyer (2002, 48–49).

18 Especially Myers (1884).

19 The famous séances were organized by William T. Stead and the medium Edith K. Harper, receiving messages from an alleged Julia Ames, leading to the dedication of a special room in 1909 for communicating with the spirit world in Stead's home, at Cambridge House, the so-called "Julia's Bureau" (see G.M. Harper 1992, 2, 6).

edly received messages for him (G.M. Harper 1992, 7).[20] Yeats, who was also an active member of the London fraternity called the Ghost Club, for which he delivered addresses from 1911 to 1932, reportedly declared on his last address (that is, years after his intense experiments with his wife had taken place) that during his Spiritualist activity "he was being instructed by a group of beings on the other side" who "communicate knowledge to him in compartments" (M. Harper 2006, 240–241). When looking back at his Spiritualist engagement, Yeats stressed the transmission of knowledge that the practice had enabled as its most substantial goal and gain: Yeats's ghosts were meant to instruct him, guide him, educate him.

3 Automatic Dialogues

I would like to turn now to the more concrete aspects of the sittings established by the Yeatses to approximate a praxeological interpretation of them. Relying on the information provided by Yeats, on a day of October 1917 at the Ashdown Forest Hotel (where the couple was spending their honeymoon), his wife started receiving messages from the spirit world, which she promptly transcribed on paper, first as precipitous notes, then increasingly according to a structured manner. The automatic script went on intensively for three years, taking place wherever they went, from 20 October 1917 to 28 March 1920, for a total of 450 sessions and 3,600 pages (thirty-six notebooks), followed by 270 pages of recordings of "sleeps" for the period 1920–1924.[21] In the years after, the practice of automatic writing remained as a sporadic but nonetheless fixed presence in their lives, especially reoccurring whenever they needed to make difficult decisions (M. Harper 2006, 5).

The procedure of the automatic writing is not completely clear, and it can only be speculated how much it resembled a Spiritualist séance; it seems, for example, that the sittings did not occur in darkness, which would set this practice apart from more common variants of mediumship.[22] What is tangibly attested in the automatic script is the rhythm of the interrogation and its graphic flow,

20 Yeats's fascination with the possibility of communicating with the spirit world finds an anecdotical paroxysm in his excitement with trying a talking machine in 1917: the "metallic medium," hosted in the house of David Wilson, delivering automated answers to questions asked, mechanizing human mediumship in ways that show its understanding, too: an opening up the channels towards what was assumed as the metaphysical realm of spirits. See G.M. Harper (1992, 9).

21 See G.M. Harper (1992, 10–11); G.M. Harper (1987, x); M. Harper (2006, 221). See also Frieling, Harper, and Sprayberry (1999, 19). On the sleeps see also Mann (2016, 147).

22 See G.M. Harper (1987, xiii).

which developed over time.[23] In the "Introduction" to the second version of *A Vision*, a text that he had in a previous form already published in 1929 as "A Packet for Ezra Pound," Yeats explained: "Except at the start of a new topic, when they would speak or write a dozen sentences unquestioned, I had always to question, and every question to rise out of a previous answer and to deal with their chosen topic" (AVB, 10–11). The automatic script records an increasingly dialogic pattern of communication, in which the questioner was W.B. Yeats and the answers, channeled through George, allegedly attributed to "a complicated array of presences or essences" (M. Harper 2006, 7). Gradually, the automatic script organizes itself as a separate list of questions and one of answers. The nature of the questions is sometimes metaphysical and doctrinal in register, sometimes addressing the personal, often in a continuous stream.[24] The procedure of the sittings changed, as mentioned, in 1920, when George started speaking in her sleep, bypassing writing, overtaken then by her husband; with the change of format, probably due to George's exhaustion during the automatic writing sessions, the impact of these sittings on the couple's life also shifted: the messages from the sleeps lost some of their doctrinal register to become more of an "experiment in living" (M. Harper 2006, 328).[25]

Communication during the sessions involved Yeats's work in substantial ways, and was a recurrent theme of the questioning. The collaborative creative setting of writing that characterized these sittings also implied a movement in the other direction: George was very familiar with Yeats's work and could easily connect its elements to the material of the sittings. Yeats asked questions about his work in progress, and the communicators provided answers: judgements, suggestions, images that Yeats took up and reused in his poems.[26] Yeats's most famous poem, "The Second Coming," for example, borrows its central images from the automatic script and George's moving hand jotting down the pattern of the gyre (M. Harper 2006, 212). The interaction between the raw automatic script, the re-elaborated material of *A Vision* (in both of its versions) and Yeats's poetry is however not straightforward but rather sinuous; for Neil Mann the automatic script

23 On the rhythm of questions and answers, George Harper has defined their rhythm as "reminiscent of the Socratic and Wildean dialogue" (G.M. Harper 1997, 41).

24 See G.M. Harper (1992, 13) and London (1999, 181).

25 On the dates see M. Harper (2006, 8). Margaret Harper argues that the shift from automatic writing to sleeps amounted to a shift "from catechism to daily journal or personal essay" (M. Harper 2006, 328).

26 For a more extensive discussion of the way these visionary materials flowed into the poetic work of Yeats, see M. Harper (2006, 183–237). On the symbols of Yeats's poetry see also M. Harper (2018).

shows not "views that Yeats held but views that he was exposed to, like reading or conversation"; even more crucially, Mann claims that Yeats "probably accepted arguments from the instructors that he would not have entertained from other sources, and he felt unable to change what he had been given, at least without approval" (Mann 2019, 27). That is, the material of the Script presented itself as authentic, thanks to the specific setting from which it emerged, forcing its truth onto the other outlets of Yeats's writing. As in the poem cited in the epigraph to this chapter, Yeats was seeking a truth that could best be transmitted through a medium's mouth.

4 Who Is Speaking, Who Is Writing?

But who was speaking, first through George's hand and later through her mouth, in her sleep? The otherworldly speakers coming through were understood as spirits, part of a complex metaphysical system later reorganized in *A Vision*. The Yeatses relied on an elaborated doctrine of reincarnation that conceived of life as preceded and followed by *interlife*, in a continuous cycle of reincarnations that left space and time for the spirit to purify itself in various degrees of disincarnation; the spirit proceeded, after death and before a new reincarnation, through the passionate body to the celestial body:

> At death the man passes into what seems to him afterwards a state of darkness and sleep; [. . .] during the darkness he is surrounded by his kindred, present in their simulacrae, or in their Spirits when they are between lives, the more recent dead the more visible [. . .] (AVA, 183)

This idea blended Spiritualist metaphysics and Helena Blavatsky's theosophical concept of a revelation descending from disembodied masters (as Yeats himself declared in "A Packet for Ezra Pound").[27] In tune with the mainstays of Spiritualist metaphysics, in *A Vision* the various degrees of interlife existence constitute a complex dimension of invisibility that is coextensive with that of the living and is therefore permeable to it (an otherworld that is accessible from this world).[28] The

27 In Blavatsky's case, instructions were provided by the discarnate souls of Koot Hoomi and Master Morya: see Surette (1993, 26, 35) and Owen (2004, 32–33).

28 On the representation of the Spiritualist world of spirits, see Pytlik (2005, 48–52). A crucial formulation of the metaphysics of German Spiritualism is in Carl du Prel, who speaks of a "transcendental subject" crossing the borders between this world and the otherworld, conceived as concomitant dimensions: "das Jenseits ist das anders angeschaute Diesseits. Die einem Wesen bewußten Beziehungen zur Natur bilden sein Diesseits; die ihm unbekannten anderer Wesen,

metaphysical status of spirits in the afterlife was elaborated with some differences between the first version of *A Vision*, where the dedicated chapter was entitled "The Gates of Pluto," and the second version, where the latter, highly revised, was newly titled "The Souls in Judgement."[29] In fact, few lines before the last passage quoted, with an anticipatory claim that challenges the linearity of exposition (as is the case in general in *A Vision*), Yeats wrote:

> I do not think of death as separation from body but from the exclusive association with one body for in no experience possible to the human spirit, as it is known to me, does the human spirit cease to use directly or through the Record the senses of living men. (AVA, 183)

In these lines, the merging of the dimensions of the dead and the living is made possible by the existence of a "record": a repository of spiritual experience where death and life converge, and spiritual experience is sensually mediated. In a manuscript note to *A Vision*, the nature of this record is defined further:

> My Instructors say that though our memory is abstract there is a *record* where the concrete images of all events remain for ever. These events are as firmly set in the record before they happen as after it and can therefore be prophesied even in their minute detail [. . .][30]

The record evoked by the instructors is very close to the theosophical notion of the Akashic record, a favorite theme among Occultists at the time. In different variants, understood as cosmic memory or externalized consciousness, it also emerges in William James and Henri Bergson, both authors familiar to the Yeatses.[31] This idea endowed a special enthrallment to Yeats, who will later on resort to the notion of *anima mundi*. Yeats had already conceived of a similar idea in his 1901 essay "Magic," where he speaks of "one great memory, the memory of Nature herself" (E&I, 28). In the prose text of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, published in 1917, shortly before the start of the automatic writing practice, showing the

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sowie die ihm unbewußten seiner selbst bilden das Jenseits" ("the Otherworld is this world seen otherwise. The relations to Nature that a being is conscious of make up this side; the relations to other beings he does not know or to his unconscious part make up the Otherworld"; my trans.; in Du Prel 1893, 21).

29 On the changes and differences between the two chapters, see Mann (2019, 250–253).

30 NLI MS 36,272/12. Quoted in Mann (2019, 181).

31 Bergson, who was the brother of Mina Bergson, that is Moina Mathers, had delivered a speech in 1913 for the Society of Psychical Research, which was actively used by Yeats for his "Preliminary Investigation" already quoted above (Saddlemyer 2002, 51, 128). Bergson in general engaged with the idea of an external consciousness since 1896 in *Matter and Memory* and expanded it in 1907 in *Creative Evolution*. On Bergson and his relation to Occultist ideas, see Ó Maoilearca (2022, 63–75). On William James, see below in this essay.

urgency of certain themes but not yet the paths the investigation would soon take up, Yeats writes:

> Our animal spirits or vehicles are but as it were a condensation of the vehicle of Anima Mundi, and give substance to its images in the faint materialisation of our common thought, or more grossly when a ghost is our visitor. (CW5, 85)[32]

Anima mundi is described as a porous space of images between life and death, "vehicle," medium of representations. A bit later in the essay he provides an even more vivid image of it: "I think of Anima Mundi as a great pool or garden where [a series of related images] moves through its allotted growth like a great water plant or fragrantly branches in the air" (88). With the evocation, in the passage above, of a ghostly visit, *anima mundi* seems to be the main medium through which communication with the spirit world happens; at the same time, it is the main repository of poetic images, thereby joining communication with the dead and poetic work through the invisible materiality of its pervasive texture.

This notion is partly overlayed with two distinct epistemic complexes that are both crucial to Modernist poetics: the idea of a repository of myth and the idea of the liminal space of dream. I'll briefly indicate the respective intersections with the notion of *anima mundi* to let the specificity of the notion surface even further.

It has been claimed that in Modernist literature "myths represent a record of contact between mortals and the *au delà*," showing a direct link to the occultist practices of the Modernists themselves (Surette 1993, 7). Yeats had a peculiarly strong notion of myth. Myth for him had to be believed, its own quality calling for an involvement that surpassed the grip of the rational by means of the sensual:

> Some will ask if I believe what I have written and I will not know how to answer because we all mean different things by that word "belief." Who will understand if I say that I must and should believe it because it is a myth? When we hear a sound argument we give assent, withdraw it and give it again as the argument shifts, but a myth has something sensuous and concrete about it like a house or a person that stirs belief because it stirs affection.[33]

The medium of *anima mundi* grows together with history, and it allows the present to increasingly feed off the symbolical and mythical richness of the past.

As far as sleep is concerned (which was, through the study of hypnosis, at the center of the psychological research culminating in automatism), Yeats consis-

32 Yeats translated the Latin title in a letter to Lady Gregory as: "Through the friendly silences of the moon" (28 June [1917], NLI Ms. 18,735; cit. in CW5 607, f. 1).

33 NLIMS36, 272/25/2. Quoted in Mann (2019, 48).

tently places a strong emphasis on the dream world as a contact area. In the first version of *A Vision*, for example, he writes: "In our dreams we communicate with the dead in their *Waking State*, and these dreams never come to an end though they are only known to us while we sleep" (AVA, 246). In the second version, however, the waking state becomes the "return" and what the dead do is defined as "dreaming back": "It is from the *Dreaming Back* of the dead, though not from that of persons associated with our past, that we get the imagery of ordinary sleep" (AVB, 229). In other words, through sleep states (which are repeated in a different but analogous form in the automatic writing sessions) the living can access that liminal world where spirits dwell, and where the collectivity of spirits intercepts the individuality of the living producing always new combinations of images, which will ultimately enrich *anima mundi*. A functional reciprocity between the dead and the living results from this liminal metaphysics, one in which "the dead [. . .] cannot originate except through the living" (CW5, 92). Yeats had been searching for a metaphysical foundation of the communicative reality of mediumship for a long time. In 1911, in the Remarks to the Ghost Club, he had asked: "Why this mixture of reality, of messages that seem to come precisely as they say they do from the dead, with messages that but express the thoughts of the living?"[34]

As a visually defined, or even visionary notion, both mythological repository and dream repository, *anima mundi* seems to grant the continuing interaction between the living and the dead. What results from this visionary ontology is a creative form of "being with the dead" (Ruin 2018), where the dead are evoked by the living and where the living are experiencing, feeling, and acting through *anima mundi* in an affective connection with the dead:

> The dead living in their memories are, I am persuaded, the source of all that we call instinct, and it is their love and their desire, all unknowing, that make us drive beyond our reason, or in defiance of our interest it may be. (CW5, 96)

Instincts and desires are mediated for the living by the imprints left on *anima mundi* by the innumerable spirits that have lived and continue through that imprint to exercise a specific form of imaginal life. Later in the essay *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, which though it is seen as a "prelude" to the work for *A Vision* (Mann 2019, 59), also exudes a distinctive poetic line of thinking, Yeats refers to the images of *anima mundi* as "drunk with that sweetness" (CW5, 104), emphasizing yet again the affective engagement that defines the ontological set-up of this porous space between living and dead. This liminal space is also that of the symbolic production of art. Already in the 1901 essay "Magic," Yeats was describing

34 BL Add. MS 52264. Quoted in M. Harper (2006, 22).

the Great Memory as a space accessible through symbols, and even reported some attempts at producing symbols to mediums in order to open up the cosmic repository of images. Scattered through the early essay from 1901 is the attempt at placing poetic activity in alignment with the symbolic activity of visionaries and mediums. The aesthetic consequences of such an understanding of the symbolic activity of poetry are potentially disrupting for narratives of Modernist creative subjectivity. When "The Second Coming," published in 1919, states the emergence of a "vast image" – the allegorical beast – "out of *Spiritus Mundi,*" a crucial poetological statement is at stake, remapping poetical inspiration and imaginative production on the cosmic urgency of images imposing themselves out of the repository.

While through the idea of a repository that mediates between the living and the dead the definition of the spiritual world seems to dilate to an ever-growing, potentially ungraspable scale, the spirits talking through and to the Yeatses, conceived of as "controls" or subordinate "guides," carried very precise names, phantastic or pseudo-historical identities, while retaining a strongly "domestic" quality (M. Harper 2006, 315): Thomas of Dorlowicz, Eurectha, Ameritus, Dionertes, Carmichael, Fish, Apple, Leaf, to mention only some of them. To this lot is to be added a group of so-called "frustrators," agents of intermittent disturbance of the messages transmitted to the medium.[35] Occasionally, other types of spirits would appear, such as Anne Hyde, a seventeenth-century ancestor of George. The variety of these apparitions indicates the layered complexity of the spirit world, populated by the spirits of the dead at different stages of their otherworldly transformations. It remains partly unclear why those identities in particular had been chosen among infinite others and what their more precise connection should be to the Yeatses; in this regard it is important to understand that in Spiritualism in general (and in the case of the Yeatses to an even higher degree) the specific apparitions were often not guided by a need of intimate communication with the private, known, and familiar dead, but by the urgency of a symbolic and often cryptic communication from elected spirits carrying a compelling, universal truth. The very denomination of these spirits as "instructors" indicates their function in transmitting learned contents. Whether controls, guides, frustrators, or daimons, what these instructors did, in the general scheme of Yeats's production, was to inform and guide in the understanding of the metaphysical system later

35 A common feature of Spiritualist automatic writing at large (M. Harper 2006, 319).

outlined in *A Vision*.[36] Their personalities and functions were distinct, their identities fictional, legendary, and sacred at the same time.

The automatic Script registers several dialogic attempts at describing the spirit world after earthly death:

Oxford 6pm Jan 31 1918

1. Will you make a statement?
   Will you ask questions
2. Describe separation of the spirit at death
   Can you give me relative questions on that subject
3. What is the state of spirit immediately after separation from body. For instance does it see the old objects still.
   It remains with the body for some days – then it sees as though in the body
4. Is it quite alone?
   Yes it hears & sees but is alone & isolated
5. Yet in many death bed visions people see those they have loved as if coming for them?
   Yes but during the watching over the body they are alone – they are received at the moment of death & then left alone
6. Why are they left alone?
   To meditate
7. Who receives them?
   Friends kindred spirits guides
8. Is there a period of unconsciousness?
   There is a period of unconsciousness *at the moment of death*
9. What takes place during unconsciousness?
   The soul is rapt away by the guides & angels to a momentary vision of future life – then as consciousness returns it returns to its own life
10. You mean its future life in next world
    Its ultimate life
11. at end of all the cycles
    Yes
    (YVP1, 312–313)

36 The functions of their distinct roles are quite uncertain. Daimons are distinct spiritual agents in the Script, their status wrapped in "fundamental uncertainty" (M. Harper 2006, 301). Neil Mann asks, regarding the controls, whether they are "fictions, temporary creations, or independent intermediaries between their *Daimons* and themselves" (Mann 2016, 142).

In Yeats's ceaseless interrogation of the spiritual and occult dimension, not the possibility of these dimensions is questioned but their more precise structure and functioning. Throughout the Script the interlocutors entertain dialogues about the metaphysical nature of the spirits such as the one quoted above; they seem however more often concerned with the question of mediumship, as in the following exchange:

16. Do messages from other world come through this phase or 15.
    That I could not say with enough certainty – There seem to be others but I think myself all come from one or 15.
17. Could you define what you mean by "there seem to be others"
    I mean the newly dead seem to be able to communicate but I think myself it is through spirits at number one except when it is through a medium in trance which is wrong
18. Why is that wrong?
    Because it obsesses the communicating spirit
19. [NRQ]
    Yes
20. You mean spirit is obsessed by communicating through human being but not when through spirit at 1.
    To be exact yes but all mediumship that attracts spirits is wrong.
21. Can you define mediumship that attracts?
    All mediumship which aims at obtaining contact with newly dead is wrong because it disturbs & obsesses the spirit This is very important But if the spirit wishes to contact with some special individual he can always do it in some way or another without going to a medium – they hate mediums they dont know.
    (YVP1, 227)

George's lines from the automatic Script seem to construct distinctions within mediumship that on the one hand elect the channeling of spirits as the highest form of mediumship as opposed to the evocation of specific spirits, and on the other keep the authenticity of the couple's practice safe from the danger (at least as perceived by the medium) of seeking out other mediums external to the couple. The Script is crowded with inquisitive dialogues about the technical workings of mediumship:

34. Conscious mind working unconsciously? Give example?
    often we leave medium to write answers quite independently of us from conscious mind or subliminal – no medium can tell difference – we only do it when messages can be written correctly without us but there are hundreds of cases

35. You understand process no better than we do! You can only affirm the fact! You wont admit subliminal but you will have to before the philosophy is through – You must accept the actual automaticity as a mechanical nervous mechanism set in motion by a spirit.
36. Then I must accept thought as an unconscious mechanical process?
No automatic writing only – thought is not mechanical
37. Define further
I said two forms of automatic script – one spirit thought – two mediums subliminal – mechanism set in motion by spirits
(YVP1, 238)

5 The Writing Scene

Having stressed the Yeatses' familiarity with mediumship, the peculiar setting of their séances seems quite remarkable; for example, the absence of a proper *trance* was something that two well-versed occultists could not pretend not to notice. It is true that George Yeats in particular, who always refused publicity, did not want to be known as a medium of the kind that were under constant scrutiny and tested and may therefore have tried to act differently (Saddlemyer 2002, 130). If these sittings were indeed automatic writing, but did not exactly look like a séance, and no actual trance was involved either, what were they? What kind of performance was taking place between an increasingly intimate couple?

Speculating about the psycho-physiological type of involvement opens up a range of possibilities and hypotheses that connect the Yeatses' writing practice to similar practices from the same time period. Several hypotheses on the nature of the sittings are possible and have been advanced: "subconscious direction, cross-dreaming, extrasensory perception, subliminal consciousness, split subjectivity, telepathy, clairvoyance, channelling, psychic transcription [. . .]" (Saddlemyer 2002, 133). Whichever altered state of consciousness it was, it did reflect aspects of mediumship codified by the cultural milieu. Automatic writing produced in mediumism was never understood as purely automatic: "For even those who wrote in the fullest state of trance understood themselves (and were understood by experts) to perform something more than merely passive agency" (London 1999, 192).[37]

Around the turn of the century, automatic writing found application in a broad range of scientific and artistic interests, and at their intersection. In the 1880s, thanks especially to figures such as Pierre Janet and Frederic Myers, "psy-

37 On the fictional purity of automatism, see also London (1999, 195).

chological automatism" became a fertile field of studies (Crabtree 2003, 52). Myers, whom William James held in high esteem, published extensively on automatism on journals in the 1880s, and coined the term "telepathy" for one of the possible explanations of automatism together with "unconscious cerebration," clairvoyance, and extra-human intelligence of spirits (Crabtree 2003, 61). While Myers was theorizing a multiplicity of levels of consciousness able to explain the phenomenon of automatism, in France Pierre Janet, who was familiar with Myers's work and even collaborated with him (Crabtree 2003, 65), published his dissertation in 1889 as *L'Automatisme Psychologique*, focusing on hypnotism and elaborating a theory of unconscious acts. Psychological automatism started to feed the practical and creative imagination of literary writers. Gertrude Stein, before moving to Paris and becoming a celebrated Modernist writer, started experimenting already in the 1890s with automatic writing in the context of psychological research at Harvard. Stein intended to test whether and how writing could be a reflex of an unconscious activity, the output of mental processes that could be activated and made go on; her assumption was that writing could demonstrate something like the existence of a human motor (Will 2001, 169). The most well-known form of Modernist automatic writing, that of Breton's Surrealism, partly overlapping chronologically with the automatic writing of the Yeatses, began in fact a bit later. Breton, who had read Janet (Bauduin 2015, 4), started experimenting with automatic writing in 1919, yielding to the work, co-written with Philippe Soupault and published in 1920, *Les Champs magnetiques*. Breton developed then in 1922 the technique of "sommeils," sleeping séances where automatic writing was also taking place among a circle of "sleepers" (Hilke 2002, 63). The centrality of automatic writing for the development of the Surrealist program is affirmed retrospectively as the experimental automatic phase came to an end in the *Manifeste* of 1924, where Surrealism itself is defined as "psychic automatism in its pure state" (Bauduin 2015, 1). It has been shown how the automatism that Breton applies to the artistic practice actually draws from automatic writing practices studied in psychiatry – a field Breton had been educated in and was well aware of (Bauduin 2014, 31).[38] One powerful difference between Breton's automatic writing and the kind performed by the Yeatses sets these two practices apart: Breton declared not to believe in a metaphysical sphere from which the messages would stem and be intercepted by the mediums; for him, the dead were not speaking to the living, as he put it straightforwardly in his "Entrée des médiums," where he

38 On the precise, although still debated, influences on Breton by Alfred Maury, Charles Richet, Pierre Janet, F.W.H. Myers, and Sigmund Freud (whom Breton even met in 1921), see Hilke (2002, especially 88–118).

declared: "En ce qui me concerne je me refuse formellement à admettre qu'une communication quelconque existe entre les vivants et les morts" (Breton 1922).[39] But the sharp distance between a world with spirits and one without does not cancel the common ground in which these practices developed historically, that is, within experimental psychology, whose agents happened to often be part of Spiritualist research too.[40] All these different historical variations of automatic writing, spanning impersonal automatism and highly individualized gestures (Bergengruen 2009, 84) and hinging on different conceptions of physical and psychical reality, convey adjacent, albeit different, agendas of writing and creative expression.

The way the Yeatses themselves went into the sittings and kept them going, relying on their revelations and dialogic results to build a metaphysical system and carry images and symbols to the literary work proper, can be best described through a notion that Yeats himself employs in several places in his writings when describing or explaining to his readers Spiritualist phenomena: the notion of "dramatization." Through this amenable literary concept, which might also have been an attempt at domesticating the occult dimensions of his work for his literary public, Yeats is able to divert the skeptical concern about the "truth" of the manifestations towards their performative significance. In a discarded note for the 1937 version of *A Vision* on mediumistic phenomena, he writes:

> All ghosts controls, communicators, materialisations, poltergeists, apparitions, instructors, are personnifications [*sic*], dramatisations of what would otherwise remain unknown (AVB, 281, Appendix 2)

The function of dramatization ascribed to spirit phenomena is further confirmed and defined in a preface to the 1937 Scribner edition of his plays:

> At most séances there is somebody who finds symbol where his neighbour finds fact [. . .] I consider it certain that every voice that speaks [. . .] is first of all a secondary personality or dramatisation created by, in, or through the medium [. . .] Because mediumship is dramatisation, even honest mediums cheat at times either deliberately or because some part of the body has freed itself from the control of the waking will, and almost always truth and lies are mixed together. (CW2, 719–20)[41]

The passage, which with some calculated bending could even be made to show how Yeats possibly understood mediumism ultimately as an extravagant symbolic

39 Breton seems to follow closely the results of the psychologist Richet's research on automatism: see Hilke (2002, 100). On Breton's "intellectual" occultism, see Bauduin (2014, 27).

40 Myers and Richet are cases in point.

41 Quoted in Mann (2019, 32).

apparatus, indicates Yeats's awareness of the complexity of what took place at the Yeatses' sittings: a manifold mediation of the supernatural through the performance of the medium. Yeats was aware of the active, creative role played by the medium, but even more, he knew that mediumship is always also dramatization, and this did not necessarily render it inauthentic. Margaret Harper has accordingly compared this setting to performance art, as "the system was both planned and improvised, both conscious and unconscious, the production of two people who knew exactly what they were doing and at the same time were engaged in radical experimentation" (2006, 216). In other words, it was a drama of two for a public of two that fostered the curiosity and complicity of the couple while tentatively advancing a distribution of agency within the relationship.

Throughout the automatic Script it is evident how the practice of automatic writing becomes a field for negotiating George's wishes and boundaries in the relationship towards her husband. Through the Script, Yeats was feeding his spiritual and metaphysical curiosity at the same time that he was tuning in George's wishes and questions. The Script itself attests to these subtle negotiations of happiness, both creative and erotic. For example, the spirit of Thomas guides the automatic Script, written in mirror writing: "The more you keep this medium emotionally and intellectually happy the more will script be possible now [. . .]" (YVP2, 119). Later, the spirit of Ameritus explains: "What is important is that both the desire of the medium and her desire for your desire should be satisfied" (YVP2, 486); complementary to these indications guiding erotic strategies in the couple are the warnings about the medium's exhaustion: "Used up-nothing else-intellectually tired [. . .]" (YVP2, 499) – indications picked up by the next spirit appearing, who then commands: "For half an hour and then stop for half an hour & go on for half an hour" and so on with further directions. Looking at the sittings from the angle of a couple relationship might invite an interpretation of those events as a more or less negligible mise en scène, perhaps just "a form a private conversation set down on paper" (Mann 2019, 38), or perhaps a conscious fooling each other through external plots to dampen the effect of problematic, more direct communication. While interpreters such as Brenda Maddox have leaned towards trivializing the contents of this veiled exchange, emphasizing for example its sexual implications as crucial, and defining the script accordingly as a "ghostly marriage therapy" (Maddox 1999, 73), the stakes of the communication between the two can be seen in a more meaningfully intricate and nuanced way, as Margaret Harper has proposed. Circumventing traditional expectations of authorship arising with a *poeta laureatus* like Yeats, Harper has defined *A Vision* as a product of the collaborative writing of the couple, a setting where "sexual politics" also

inevitably took place (M. Harper 2006, 252).[42] Looking at these negotiating dynamics implies turning around the question about the authenticity of the scene when analyzed in relation to the Spiritualist culture of mediumship.

So, when the question is asked whether the spirits speaking through George Yeats were not, after all, just "a provisionary existence like the characters of a play or novel" (Mann 2019, 34), the answer should deflect the urge for proof of authenticity towards a more complex understanding of this practice, suspended between the metaphysical reality it hinged on and a performative act. The theory of mediumship has indeed underscored the "muddle" that contains and enables the act of mediating between heterogeneous dimensions: "A medium as the middle, the mediator, the agent is always in an area of in-between, it is neither one nor the other, or it is both at the same time: a medium is always in a muddle" (Voss 2020, 9). Conceptualized by Yeats through the notion of dramatization, this liminal state becomes a vital condition for the couple, both for creative work and for a dialogic relationship exempt from the concerns of the just trivially domestic.

Taking for granted that something did happen, in the Yeatses' sittings, that involved the psychical and physical state of the medium and of the other participant, it might be useful to approach this scene from a different angle. Through the mediation of Yeats's wife and her body (through the channel of her writing hand first, and of her voice next), the authority of the dead is at least partly appointed to the medium, on the one hand enabling a redistribution of power within the heteronormative couple, as scholarship vigilant for gender dynamics has already shown, on the other assigning emphasis to the embodiment of the spiritual element in art, in ways that find resonance in Yeats's "thinking of the body" more generally.[43]

42 It is noteworthy in this regard that George Yeats tried actively to cancel her own role in the mythography of Yeats (M. Harper 2006, 10–11). This, fitting more into a pattern of self-cancellation, implying also the destruction of her artwork (Saddlemyer 2002, 32–33), confirms gendered roles within collaborative relationships (London 1999, 204–205). The fact that George was not just Yeats's medium, but his secretary and assistant further proves the highly gendered notion of authorship she and her husband relied on, while rendering it also extremely problematic (London 1999, 2016). On the sexual dimensions of the Script, often coded as its very geometric symbology, see M. Harper (2006, 271–275).

43 "The thinking of the body" is the title of a short prose work by Yeats in E&I, 292. In a recent study, Patrick Keane has devoted some attention to this focus on the bodily element in Yeats's aesthetics, which he has summarized as "Yeats's vacillation in engaging the spiritual, the pull between Body (or Heart) and Soul, between flesh and spirit" (Keane 2021, 11). Keane's aim is to show "the living poet's emphasis, especially as he aged, on the body" (16), a fact that corresponds at least in some part to the biographical emphasis on reviving a decaying sexual desire even through a surgery undergone in 1934 (the so-called "Steinach operation," 19). Following this

Focusing on the bodily involvement of the medium may help reorient our understanding of Spiritualist mediumship towards broader, culturally disseminated forms of bodily possession. These sittings resemble what anthropologist Mary Keller calls "the scene of possession" in their own right (Keller 2015, 66). According to Keller, the scene of possession transculturally provides the medial setting in which "the possessed body becomes a place of exchange where work, war, and play is accomplished, integrating past and present in a complex and powerful, though vulnerable, nexus: the body possessed by a spirit" (Keller 2015, 77). This means that the playfulness of a performance and the violence of conflict do not exclude each other within the scene of possession but are on the contrary constitutive elements of it. The set-up of the sittings of the Yeatses shows however, in this case too, another distinctive irregularity: the scene of possession of the automatic script lacks an audience. George refused her husband's attempts to procure one when he, overly excited about the results, proposed it. The scene of possession is usually performed under the gaze of a public, a slice or sample of community, a body of people invested by the power of observing and judging. The *séance à deux* of the Yeatses on the contrary has cancelled the audience, or perhaps reduced it to the contours of the couple: the Yeatses are performing in front of themselves. Nonetheless, George is performing possession by the spirits in front of her husband (that is, her audience) and the peculiarities of this sober mise en scène can indeed refer to the expectations of this singular public. As in a scene of possession, the negotiating factor is never merely performatively strategic: its powerful effects descend from a connection to dimensions that expand

track, the author shows, through the semantics of some poems, how they "reassert the wisdom of the body, putting in contention the provisionally opposing claims of the temporal and spiritual worlds, body and soul" (23). Furthermore, the author understands the Gnostic thought Yeats was familiar with as opposing the role of the body (26), and contests, albeit without further investigation, the approximate conclusion by Bloom among others, that Yeats was simply a Gnostic. I have pointed out similar tensions in the emphasis on the body coexisting with Gnostic ideas and tried to indicate a possible solution with regard to another author engaged with the Occult, Gustav Meyrink (Fabietti 2024). In Keane however, as conventionally in Yeats's reception, the ambivalences or contradictions of these opposed tendencies are resolved structurally by evoking the central notion of antithesis as an aesthetically and poetically productive one (e.g., Keane 2021, 51; "dialectical conflict between time and eternity, sexuality and spirituality, self and soul," 55). He can then conclude: "What Neoplatonists and Gnostics put asunder, body and spirit, Yeats unites. And yet, as we will see, Self's final act of self-redemption, magnificent but heretical, is as Gnostic as it is Nietzschean" (68); and "an overcoming of Christian and Neoplatonic dualism and defilement of the body by way of a heterodox, 'heretical' self-blessing at once Blakean, Nietzschean, and Gnostic" (77). A reference to the "wisdom of the body" in Yeats is also in M. Harper (2006, 253).

and deepen the boundaries of terrestrial life, mapping the personal onto the cosmic.

6 The Personal and the Cosmic

The automatic script kept by the Yeats is in part an astounding document of how a couple invested in occultist beliefs would engage actively with them to seek truths personal and cosmic. An example will illustrate this point:

[1918] Oxford [GY]5 [WBY] 5.5 pm. Jan 6 [Leaf and Fish] Thomas

5. Anything about my wife's health?
   No you will both be well if you do not [do] too much
6. How much script can we do safely?
   As much as medium likes – it does *not* tire her if other things do not
7. What kind of fatigue must she especially avoid?
   Mental
8. Sexually?
   That is part of mental fatigue – no only when otherwise tired
9. Why do souls at 15 need our help & what help?
   The 15th phase as fish told you are spirits incarnated in the world – their form of desire for help is the desire of man for the ideal (no) – it is only by this creation of an ideal *of which* they are the object or which is insatiable that they can sufficiently come near to man to get help – The nature of the help they desire is of a primary nature increasing an anti ideal – they cause it to be expressed primarily and that helps them in the achievement of their phase
   (YVP1, 209)

The passage displays the conversational pace that from personal concerns switches to metaphysical interrogation in the blink of an eye. The dialogic format enables through the rhythm of questions and answers such logical ellipses, reabsorbing them into a discursive continuum. In the space of intimacy created by sharing a spiritual connection to the Otherworld, the metaphysical and the ordinary are united, and as a result their concerns merge and resonate in one another. The script attests to the enmeshment of personal and cosmic that the communicative setting of necrodialogues in the context of Spiritualist mediumship seems to enable. The Spiritualist metaphysics shaped during the time of European *occulture* casts a cosmic map within which the personal acquires depth and vibra-

tion. As William James, occultist and psychologist whom Yeats had read early on, described:

> the world of our present consciousness is only one out of many worlds of consciousness that exist, and [. . .] those other worlds must contain experiences which have a meaning for our life also; and that although in the main their experiences and those of this world keep discrete, yet the two become continuous at certain points, and higher energies filter in. (James 1902, 509)

The Spiritualist communication set up through mediumship strove to prove and maintain that continuum that grants higher meaning to human life. The cultural context the Yeatses inhabited was characterized by "a wish to be like the angels – or with the dead" (Peters 1999, 183), a wish that pointed to a need to invest the precinct of a personal biography with intensified significance, fastening it to cosmic dimensions of being.[44] This communication, which perhaps, as Peters has claimed, "upped the longing for an escape from the morally intractable condition of plurality, that is, of life among other creatures whose perspectives are both hidden from us and never exactly our own" (Peters 1999, 108), might have also more simply reflected a fundamental need for the authentication of the singular, individual trail by means of mapping it onto a cosmic metaphysical plane. This operation might explain Yeats's consistent recourse to mediumship as a source of creativity beyond allegations of naivety, eccentricity, and the like. If symbols are transmitted by the spirits, they might introduce themselves with a more irresistible necessity onto literary work; if one's truth is stamped by the seal of the cosmic, it might enforce itself with a stronger degree of urgency. In the same way, if the intimacy of the private sitting is invested by a secret and occult purpose, that very intimacy may get reinforced in the structure of desire that brought it into being in the first place. If communication with the spirit world reinforces the exigency of creativity, it also acts upon the personal, following a circularity that binds private feelings and productive fervor. As the script comes through, Yeats experiences a revitalizing, intellectually and spiritually satisfying period. In a letter to Coole he expresses it this way: "for the first time I understand human life" (CLX 644); or again, in a letter to Lady Gregory from the time of the first experiments with automatic writing: "The strange thing was that within half an hour after writing of this message my rheumatic pains and my neuralgia and my fatigue had gone and I was very happy" (CLX 633). Mary Keller has argued that spirit possession "offers horizons of meaning and efficacious practices that can

44 On the comforting promises of Spiritualism at its dawn, see Owen (2004, 19). Owen emphasizes the strong presence of death, the allure of theatricality, and the general democratic potential of mediumship as reasons for its enormous success.

promote healing" (Keller 2015, 78); a similar healing effect is tangibly part of what Yeats declared to experience through the practice conducted with George, and may explain the prolonged presence of the mediumistic and automatic writing practice within their lives and art.

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(AVB) Yeats, W.B. *A Vision: The Revised 1937 Edition*. Ed. Margaret Mills Harper and Catherine E. Paul. New York: Macmillan 2015.

NLI MS Yeats's Papers at the National Library of Ireland.

(YVP1) *Yeats's* Vision *Papers*. Vol. 1. Ed. Steve L. Adams, Barbara J. Frieling, and Sandra L. Sprayberry. Gen. ed. George Mills Harper. London: Macmillan, 1992.

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Zoë Ghyselinck

Long Live the Medium: Transgressing the Boundaries of Authorship in Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*

1 Introduction

Echoing the Odyssean *nekyia* (Hom. *Od*. XI, 20–640) and lost versions of Heracles's *katábasis*, the two oldest surviving accounts of the Orpheus myth, Virgil's *Georgics* (IV, 315–558) and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (X, 1–85; XI, 1–84), recount how the Thracian singer and musician descends into the dark underworld[1] to retrieve his beloved wife Eurydice, who tragically died of a snakebite on their wedding day. Unlike Odysseus, Orpheus does not rely on sacrificial blood and oaths to address the dead (Hom. *Od*. XI, 25–36); instead, he employs his enchanting voice and masterful lyre-playing, evoking a moving song (Virg. *G*. IV, 471; Ovid. *Met*. X,16, 40).[2] From classical antiquity to the present day, the Thracian poet has captivated the imagination of numerous artists and writers, who have interpreted his song and journey as both magical and tragic.[3] Orpheus's *katábasis* is made possible by his

1 According to Virgil's *Georgics*, Orpheus descends to Taenarum, near Sparta: "Taenarias etiam fauces, alta ostia Ditis,/[. . .] ingressus" (IV, 467–469). In Ovid's account, Orpheus is also said to have ventured down to the Styx and the entrance to the underworld at Taenarum ("ad Styga Taenaria est ausus descendere porta," *Met*. X, 13). Odysseus, however, did not physically descend into the underworld, but installed himself at another entrance to the underworld that had been recommended to him by the sorceress Circe. He sailed across the Oceanus to the land of the Cimmerians, believed to be around Lake Avernus near Cumae in Campania. There, in Avernus, was said to be an ancient oracle of the dead, and because of its physical peculiarities, the lake was thought to be one of the entrances to Hades.

2 Virgil was the first to emphasize that the poet had lost Eurydice for the second time and could not fulfil the condition of not looking at her when he brought her back to life. Ovid, for his part, focuses on the final reconciliation of the lovers in the underworld after the sacrificial murder of the singer by Thracian women in a Bacchic frenzy (*sparagmos*). While Virgil seems too modest to render the powerful words of the mythical song, Ovid is the first to include Orpheus's sung plea to the gods of the underworld in direct speech (*Met*. X, 17–39). See Bernstock and Selz (1991, xvii); Fletcher (2019, 10); Solomon (2019, 112). References to the Latin texts are from the online edition of the Loeb Classical Library.

3 The attribution of "magical" powers to the song of Orpheus is particularly evident in the *Argonautica* of Apollonios of Rhodos and in Orphic texts attributed to religious, so-called Orphist beliefs and practices dating back to the sixth and fifth centuries BC. In the *Argonautica,* Orpheus appears as a spiritual guide, priest and magician (Apoll. Rhod. *Argon*. IV, 905–909; see also Jour-

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magical skills and lyre and has often been explained as an allegory of the transformative power of art to tame nature, bending even the highest authorities to its will.[4] Particularly from the twentieth century onwards, its reception history features the artist's encounter with the dead as a quest for creativity and artistic immortality (Fletcher 2019, xxv).[5] What remains constant in both lines of reception is the reputation of Orpheus's powerful and enchanting song, the echoes of which continue to reverberate (also throughout cultural history) despite the failure to recover his wife and his subsequent demise.[6]

Yet, what if Orpheus's song, invariably regarded as the magical conduit through which he communicates with and stirs the dead, fails to resonate, even before his descent into the underworld? What if the artist himself, Orpheus, is incapable of singing and playing the lyre? These are main features of the figure of Orpheus as interpreted by the versatile French artist, painter, and poet Jean Cocteau (1889–1963). Cocteau, a prominent figure in twentieth-century Continental art, devoted his life to an intense engagement with the ancient Thracian singer. At the heart of Cocteau's self-reflexive and egocentric artistic practice,[7] Orpheus assumes the role of the archetypal, though idiosyncratic, artist. His encounter with the world of the dead serves as a "unique symbol" representing Cocteau's perception of ideal artistic endeavor (Bernstock and Selz 1991, xv). The existential

dan [2008, 5–36]; Lozanova-Stancheva [2022, 21]). It should be noted that an older version of the Greek myth is said to have depicted a successful retreat, which later became the model for medieval adaptations. Since the Renaissance, however, the Roman versions of the double loss of Eurydice have come to dominate the literary reception of the Orpheus myth. See Bernstock and Selz (1991, xviii). See also Burnett et al. (2013, 211–227).

4 Recent scholarship has read the myth as "an incarnation of the dangers one faces when speaking before Superiors." The one with a request "must appropriately adjust his language to accommodate the circumstances of the particular situation so as to obtain his goals" (Pagàn 2004, 370).

5 Maurice Blanchot famously declared that the dismemberment and death of the poet was necessary "for the song" – the medium – to be able to resonate (1981, 101).

6 In Ovid, the couple is reunited *in the afterlife*. There, the poet can safely (*tuto*) look at his wife. "Umbra subit terras, et quae loca viderat ante,/cuncta recognoscit quaerensque per arva piorum/ invenit Eurydicen cupidisque amplectitur ulnis;/hic modo coniunctis spatiantur passibus ambo,/ nunc praecedentem sequitur, nunc praevius anteit/Eurydicenque suam iam tuto respicit Orpheus" (*Met.* XI, 61–66).

7 At the end of his book, *La Difficulté d'être* (1947), Cocteau adds the following self-ironic and socially critical remark in a footnote: "I know very well what will be said about this book. The author's preoccupation with himself is exasperating. Who is not thus preoccupied? The critics to begin with, who no longer judge objectively, but only in relation to themselves. A phenomenon in an age in league against the individual, who in consequence will only individualize himself further, in that spirit of contradiction that makes the world go round and particularly France" (Cocteau 2003, 168).

and artistic identification with the illustrious poet spurred Cocteau to create a series of adaptations (Hammerbeck 2016, 162),[8] notably including the play *Orphée* (1926) and the renowned Orphic film trilogy consisting of *Le sang d'un poète* (1930), *Orphée* (1950), and *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1959/60).

In keeping with the focus of this volume, I am interested in the ways in which Cocteau's modern Orpheus adaptations, in deviation from ancient and more traditional portrayals, alter the means and conditions through which the famous singer communicates with the dead. For reasons of coherence, the discussion will therefore focus on the eponymous adaptations, *Orphée*, in drama (1926) and its 1950 film counterpart. In accordance with the above-mentioned twentieth-century line of reception, the descent of Cocteau's Orpheus, here called Orphée, is not in the first place motivated by love for his wife. Central to his perilous venture is a rescue operation for his faltering (even no longer existent) artistic practice and products. Cocteau's Orphée is a writer and a poet, who remains inept and, as will be the object of the following discussion, must leave the "revival" of his artistic practice almost completely to others, that is to the dead. Given the premise of Orphée's existential and artistic crisis, communication with the dead and with his own past will prove to be indispensable to literary production, as only the dead appear to be able to repeatedly revitalize, even engender it. Or to put it otherwise: the artist must die several times in order for his art to come into being.

The surrealist aesthetics of these adaptations, Cocteau's imbrication and self-identification with the ancient figure of Orpheus, and his radical experimentation with the new medium of film have received much scholarly attention in the last three decades.[9] To date, it remains overlooked, however, how Cocteau's engagement with the figure of Orpheus, and, as I will touch upon, his overall artistic poetics, are profoundly indebted to Spiritualist thought and mediumistic practices involving experiments with technological and embodied communication with the dead. It has been demonstrated how Spiritualist mediumship and popular techniques such as automatic writing and trance speaking affected the cultural imagina-

8 Bernstock and Selz note that Cocteau identified with "the reputed initiator of homosexuality whose Christ-like resurrection from the dead was similar to his own post-opium returns to life and creativity" (1991, 165).

9 See Mastuda (1989); Mathur (1990); Bernstock and Selz (1991); Walker (2015); Sykora (2019). Although Cocteau openly sparred with the Surrealists, his fascination with death, dreams, the subconscious, and the blurring of reality and imagination has often been seen as exemplifying the Surrealist movement. See Hammerbeck (2016, 160–181); Wu (2016, 193–208).

tion in Europe since the late nineteenth century[10] and negotiated "cultural anxieties regarding literary authority, authenticity, inspiration, and the reliability of new communication technologies" (Sword 2002, 8). As I will show in the following, the commitment of both *Orphée* adaptations to Spiritualist writing practices exposes not only questions about the origins and mechanisms of art and literary writing, but also ethical considerations about authorial power and the limits of artistic *poiesis*. Both the play *Orphée* and its cinematographic counterpart lay bare complex underlying dynamics of what is commonly considered to be the magical and powerful song that makes possible the encounter and dialogue with the dead. Both texts unpack the conditions of Orphée's artistic productivity. Within a framework of mediumistic writing practices and (failed) attempts at communication, artistic productivity is distributed among a set of mediatory – mainly dead – agents, both in human(ized) and non-human form,[11] such as La Princesse (or the poet's personified Death),[12] her assistant Heurtebise, a horse, a mirror, and a car radio.[13] With a particular focus on Heurtebise, this essay offers a close reading of the dynamic interplay between these mediating agents, highlighting the limits and permissibility of their actions as well as the underlying mechanisms that make Orphée's descent and the literary practice within both adaptations possible in the first place.

The proposed innovative reading of both texts within the framework of mediumistic writing practices of communicating with the dead and considering the interplay of "magical" (occultist) and "technical" (scientific) epistemic dimensions aims to unpack notions of autonomous (and male) authorship.[14] This approach

10 For comprehensive and wide-ranging overviews of the multifaceted nature of a return of the dead, the ghost, in short, the spectral, in (popular) culture and literature, see Sword (2002); Pilar Blanco and Peeren (2013), and more recently Bauduin and Johnsson (2018).

11 On this double notion of media, see Hahn and Schüttpelz (2009).

12 Cocteau's identification of Orpheus with Narcissus was influenced by Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* that appeared in 1922 (Bernstock and Selz 1991, 165). The cultural-historical comparison between the quest for the love of death and the search for artistic inspiration is not new. Many of the famous journeys of underworld dwellers in literary history have been associated with the quest for creativity through the encounter with artistic ancestors and models. Dante, who is accompanied in the underworld by his great model Virgil ("Tu se' lo mio maestro, e il mio autore" Canto 1, v. 85), is the most famous example of this. See Gazis (2018); Ghyselinck (2021).

13 In this respect, Cocteau is certainly in tune with the zeitgeist, as modern representations of Orpheus either idealize the poet or emphasize his weaknesses and failures. See Bernstock and Selz (1991, xxiii).

14 Orphée seems to only be able to perform his *katábasis* with a little help, with a kind of cunning technicity, and with a touch of magic, to put it in another way. According to his contemporary and fellow playwright, Eugène Ionesco, Orphée's descent is a "too obvious" trick. See Hammerbeck (2016, 160).

shifts the origin of Orphée's literary writings from the poet's own (divine or authentic) self to a heteronomous network of interconnected mediatory agents. These agents will prove to navigate a delicate balance between representing higher authorities and engaging in boundary-crossing activities, while at the same time grappling with the decision to take responsibility for their individual actions. As the process of artistic resuscitation unfolds across the boundaries of the two medial adaptations, the essay positions Cocteau's artistic development from drama as an established literary form to new cinematic interpretations as a side aspect of this artistic transgression.

2 Balancing on the Edge: Challenging Authorship

Cocteau's cinematographic adaptation *Orphée* (1950) is a reworking of his play from 1926 with the same name. The two adaptations of the myth differ in terms of storyline, construction, and cast. Nevertheless, they open in a similar, self-reflexive way with a narrating instance that puts forward the ambiguity of literary authorship. The script of the play is preceded by a self-reflexive prologue uttered by the actor who will play the role of Orphée. This introductory text stages the actor's appearance before the closed theatre curtains just before the play is about to start and enacts the theatrical performance of the script as we read it. The actor asks the audience or reader, independent from the author and without him knowing it, to give the actors (or characters) credit, stay attentive until the end, and to wait "to express any objections to the way in which" the actors play the tragedy the author has imposed upon them (Cocteau 1967, 103).[15] The actor makes clear that he and his fellow actors must perform a "ticklish" play that takes place at high altitude without a net that could catch them if they fall. Consequently, the slightest distraction could be fatal. The prologue thus stages an actor who is exceeding the limits of his physical power (he states that he and the others will be performing life-threatening tricks), of his artistic authority (since he does

15 In its cultural-historical context, the play's prologue can also be read as an ironic anticipation (by Cocteau) of the criticism the play was likely to receive from (especially) Surrealist circles. In the years preceding the play, Cocteau had openly opposed Parisian avant-garde circles, especially André Breton and other representatives of Surrealism, and did not shy away from controversy. See Hammerbeck (2016, 162). The auctorial aspect has not disappeared from this passage, however, as the actor's intervention in the dramatic text is guided in and out by stage directions, again implying the hidden presence of an author or (higher) authority.

not stick to the script, stating explicitly that the prologue is *not* in the script),[16] and of the stage (which is behind the as yet unopened curtain). He does this in order to safeguard the safety and dignity of himself and his fellow actors, which he believes is being compromised by the author. Significantly, it is the actor playing Orphée who takes care of this warning. In the play, the character Orphée is not only a famous writer and poet, but as I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs, likewise acts as a medium interpreting occult messages from an unknown author(ity). Despite violating the limits of his artistic function, the actor representing Orphée does not wish to take responsibility for the provocative and life-threatening actions *during* the performance which are assigned to him by an author and director. The prologue of the play thus touches on the main question which I will deal with in both adaptations: the constant ambiguity between the question of whether one takes responsibility for and thus becomes the author of one's actions, or whether one behaves as a(n unconsciously acting) medium, performing (and transgressing) assignments of other authorities. The play features actors as interpreters of the author's script while constantly "balancing" between obedience and transgression.

Similarly, the opening scene of the film, in which we meet the protagonist Orphée in a "bar of poets" somewhere in a French provincial city, is commented on by an authorial voice(-over), being the voice of Cocteau himself. This narrating voice transfers the audience and spectators to the specific temporal and spatial setting in which the action of the film takes place: "Où se passe notre histoire? Et a quelle époque? C'est le privilège des légendes, d'être sans âge, comme il vous plaira." (Cocteau 1950, 2:40–2:45).[17] Again, the spectators are explicitly involved in the interpretation of the action. The narrating voice states that myth is timeless as well as spaceless and deployable at any given moment in time and in an unspecified place. Accordingly, the authorial voice suggests that the necrodialogue itself becomes a medium, everywhere and always applicable, a neutral channel or container to "shape" content: in this case, the quest for artistic practice. The bodiless voice, which regularly reappears throughout several scenes, not only represents the absent, dead, or unknown authorial authority who directs the film's action. It also mirrors the actor in the play who dares to question the authorial script. Cocteau's voice doubles that of the protagonist Orphée, who, like Cocteau and the mythical Orpheus, presents an artist in search of artistic creativity,

16 Indeed, the script of the play makes clear claims, not only about the action, but also about the stage setting and decor. According to the introductory "authorial" guidelines both are indispensable "parts of the text" (Cocteau 1967, 101), which the prologue clearly is not.

17 I am using the CNCA (Archives Françaises du Film) version, shot at the Franstudio by André Paulvé (Cocteau 1950).

i.e., himself as an artist. The fragmentation of the authorial voice in both adaptations not only prefigures Orpheus's mythical dismemberment (*sparagmos*) and attests to a pre-Barthian notion of the "Death of the Author" by assigning a decisive role to the medium (text or script) and to recipients in co-constructing the story (Bauduin and Johnsson 2018, 1–4). It also ties in with the heralded cultural-historical practice of mediumistic communication with the dead in Spiritualist circles of that time.

In her book, *Ghostwriting Modernism*, Helen Sword has demonstrated how many Spiritualist mediums in the late nineteenth-century setting claimed to be privileged agents while receiving messages from the dead in written form, "whether via automatic writing, through devices such as the planchette or the Ouija board," or via alphabetic knockings (Sword 2002, 8). This not only led to controversy and discomfort in the cultural field, as Spiritualist mediumship was seen as a self-empowering practice, taking place in the heart of cultural power centers, by (mostly, but not exclusively) women, and recoded typically female traits of passivity in relation to the productivity attributed to men (Sword 2002, 3). Spiritualist and mediumistic practices gave rise to a cultural craze of writers and artists who enthusiastically delved into the practice of automatic writing or drawing, a trend that extended well into the twentieth century (see the Introduction to this volume). Indebted to the Surrealist movement, "that sought to do away with the author, instead championing an 'authorless' text that has written itself" (Bauduin and Johnsson 2018, 1), Cocteau's creative and programmatic work undeniably reflects upon aspects of this cultural craze, although he is not commonly associated with Spiritualist or mediumistic tendencies.[18] In line with the paradigm shifts in psychiatry at the time, he explored the pre- and unconscious, which, as his writings reveal, do take on a socio-critical dimension. In his autobiographical work on life and art, *The Difficulty of Being* (*La Difficulté d'être,* 1947), Cocteau unmistakably uses a mediumistic vocabulary to describe the characteristics of artistic processes. He presents mythopoesis as an unconscious and deeply physical process (Wu 2016, 197), and explains that, as a creative individual, his goal is to minimize conscious influence on art-making processes by reducing his authorial power to that of a medium. Cocteau explains how this approach allows artworks to appear effortlessly and reach their true potential:

> The completed work does not release me quickly. It moves its chattels slowly. The wise thing then is a change of air and of room. The new material comes to me on my walks. Whatever happens I mustn't notice it. If I interfere, it doesn't come any more. One fine day the work demands my help. I give myself up to it in one fell swoop. My pauses are its own.

18 Significantly, in Bauduin's volume on occult Modernism Cocteau is not mentioned.

> If it falls asleep my pen skids. A soon as it wakes, it gives me a shake. It couldn't care less if I am asleep. Get up, it says, so that I can dictate. And it is not easy to follow. Its vocabulary is not of words (Cocteau 2013 [1947], 38–39).

Despite the passive surrender that the work-to-be seems to require of the artist, Cocteau is nevertheless a necessary agent or seemingly passive medium in interacting with the new material that overwhelms him. What interests me in particular is that Cocteau in the following paragraphs refers to the artistic process as an act of "expiration" rather than "inspiration," a process in which the work-to-be takes over command in creating itself with "the help" of Cocteau and his pen. He goes on to explain that once he attempts, enticed by the fluidity of his pen, to assert his own voice for once, despite the compelling force of dictation, he ultimately has to surrender: "I shall never be my own master. I am made for obedience" (Cocteau 2013 (1947), 40). Although Cocteau relates to the work of art in a relationship of passivity, both are mutually dependent, since the latter is also in need of the author (as a nevertheless awake, so not completely passive medium) to build its practice on.[19]

3 Heurtebise: Magic and Technology

In both *Orphée*-necrodialogues and throughout Cocteau's Orphic œuvre, the character Heurtebise- a novel addition to the myth- is central to the plot. Heurtebise has been described as Cocteau's muse, guardian angel, and as the reincarnation of the artist's prematurely deceased lover, the writer Raymond Radiguet,[20] for whom he wrote the poem "L'ange Heurtebise" in 1925 (Robillard 1990). In both necrodialogues, Heurtebise attempts, albeit unsuccessfully, to enact a neutral and incidental stance. Each time, however, he emerges as a masterful director (not to say: author) of Orphée's *katábasis* and encounter with the dead, as the following discussion aims to demonstrate.

19 Cocteau's account of the genesis of his artistic process is consistent with Surrealist notions of the subconscious as the driving force behind creative inspiration. This idea gained ground in the early twentieth century and can be traced back to experiments in mediumistic practices. "By means of psychic automatisms and trance states," the Surrealists attempted to "liberate creative imagination" (Lahelma 2018, 78).

20 The story goes that Cocteau was standing in an elevator when an angel spoke to him and revealed his name: it was the same as that of the elevator manufacturer Heurtebise. Cocteau wrote the poem "L'ange Heurtebise" in a seven-day intoxication – and against the background of his lifelong opium addiction. See Cocteau (1925); Williams (2008).

The opening of the play from 1926 depicts Orpheus and Eurydice as a quarrelling couple. While Orphée suffers from an existential lack of artistic inspiration, Eurydice feels ignored and desperately breaks a windowpane every day as a cry for attention. The (matrimonial) crisis appears to have resulted from Orphée's career transition from poet of the Gods towards new creative aspirations that reveal his profound attachment to "an unknown other world" (Cocteau 1967, 108).[21] In a room in the couple's house, that is compared with "a magician's parlor," where "one senses [. . .] the presence of occult forces" (100), Orphée interrogates the spirit world as a professional medium by means of taps representing letters of the alphabet. He deciphers occult messages from a horse dwelling in a stall next to his living room that appears to be able to transmit arcane secrets and divine poetry.[22] The horse sends a coded message in hoofbeats: M E R – which in French could refer to either thank you (merci) or shit (merde). Orphée interprets it as both thank you and tragically ironically as an abbreviation for "Madame Eurydice Reviendra Des Enfers," which he finds astonishing. Eurydice, in turn, doubts whether the public will admit "that poetry consists in just writing down words" (108).

Heurtebise turns up as glazier (112), pretending to come to repair the broken window each day, but in fact occupying a mediatory position in the marital conflict. Moreover, Heurtebise's daily arrival escalates the conflict, as the poet suspects his wife of intentionally breaking windows because she has an eye for Heurtebise. Orphée's jealous suspicion, though strange considering Eurydice's cry for *his* attention, turns out to be partially justified. From the moment the enraged Orphée leaves the stage, Heurtebise transforms from a neutral glazier, whom Eurydice characterizes as an "attentive" young man (111), into a suspicious messenger and a confidant of the artist's wife. In the following scene, Heurtebise has brought Orphée's wife "a lump of sugar" and "a self-addressed envelope" from a commissioner called Aglaonice, who can be held accountable. Both packages handed over by the messenger contain explicitly unnamed and therefore possibly suspicious content. Aglaonice is one of the poetesses and friends of Eurydice, who represent traditional and worldly artistic tendencies, which Orphée in his turn blatantly denounces. While Orphée is totally set on trying to interpret his horse's unclear utterings, Eurydice feels neglected and turns for help to Aglaonice and the other

21 In the following, the page numbers of this translation are given in brackets in the text.

22 In the film, Orpheus's occult horse is replaced by Heurtebise's Rolls Royce in which Orphée sets out to decipher enigmatic Morse code messages sent by the dead poet Cégeste via the car radio.

poetesses, whom Orphée condescendingly calls witches and Bacchantes.[23] Apparently, the lump of sugar Heurtebise has brought contains poison to kill the rival horse. Eurydice, in turn, has written Aglaonice a letter whose exact contents remain unknown. To avoid their fraud being caught by Orphée, Aglaonice has provided her with an ingenious plan to make sure the transfer of the letter remains unnoticed. The ensuing conversation between the glazier and Eurydice reveals the complexity and weight of Heurtebise's mediatory position:

> EURYDICE. [. . .] Do you have [. . .] it?
>
> HEURTEBISE. I have it.
>
> EURYDICE. What did she put it in?
>
> HEURTEBISE. A lump of sugar.
>
> EURYDICE. Was she in a good mood?
>
> HEURTEBISE. No mood at all. She simply said, "Here's the poison. Bring me back the letter."
>
> EURYDICE. She won't like what I wrote.
>
> HEURTEBISE. Then she said: "Just to make sure nobody knows, here's a self-addressed envelope, written in my own hand. All she'll have to do is insert the letter and seal it. No one will ever know she's written me."
>
> EURYDICE. No matter what Orphée thinks, Aglaonice can be very thoughtful. Was she alone?
>
> HEURTEBISE. There was a girl with her. Those were no people for you to run around with.
>
> EURYDICE. Of course, they weren't. But I still think Aglaonice is a very sweet person.
>
> HEURTEBISE. Don't trust those sweet persons and well-meaning men. Here's the sugar. (114)

The excerpt shows the clear transition from Heurtebise's initial position as a neutral messenger to a consultative confidant. This aligns with the observation in media studies that the concept of the medium in itself balances between positions of neutrality and instrumentality on the one hand and of active and powerful intervention and even cunning deception on the other – in short between what is

23 Eurydice, however, says in a tragically ironic way that all she needs is "one look" from her husband to stop her hanging around with those other poetesses (107).

traditionally seen as the distinction between mediumship and authorship (Voss 2014, 207). Heurtebise's initial use of direct speech quoting Aglaonice's words, which is also typographically indicated in the text of the play, obviously strengthens his neutral stance. His first answers are rather short, seemingly indifferent and even evasive. Heurtebise fails, however, to maintain his neutral attitude and falls prey to subjective value judgements about Aglaonice and her entourage, unable to hide his concern for Orphée's wife. Against Eurydice's emotional interpretation of the woman as a very sweet person, Heurtebise deprecatingly advises she must not "trust those sweet persons and well-meaning men." (114) Adding this subjective judgement, Heurtebise implicitly draws attention to his own doubtful position, as he himself behaves as a sweet and well-meaning man vis-à-vis Eurydice throughout the play.[24] In the film too, Heurtebise exhibits a veiled dominant attitude towards Orphée and Eurydice, who both seem to be dependent on his actions. Orpheus is in constant need of him, as a chauffeur, but also as a companion and source of support in his existential (and marital) crisis. In both versions, Eurydice regards Heurtebise as a friend and semi-therapist with whom to discuss her marital problems.

In its earliest iteration, Cocteau may have drawn inspiration for Heurtebise from a poem by the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), whom he admired and with whom he lived briefly in Paris between 1909–1910, at the Hôtel Biron (the current Maison Rodin) (Williams 2008, 34). This poem, titled "Orpheus. Eurydike. Hermes," was composed in 1904 and published in 1907. It was based on a sculpture currently housed in the Archaeological Museum in Naples.[25] The sculpture portrays the legendary return of Orpheus, who revives his wife Eurydice. An innovative element in the sculptural interpretation is the inclusion of the third figure, that of the god Hermes, walking behind, almost next to the woman. Rilke's poem reinterprets the sculpture, capturing the precise moment when Orpheus loses his wife for the second time: Orpheus turns back to look at her, and Hermes is (already or still) grasping her arm (Ghyselinck 2017, 536–537).[26] The versatile and multifaceted ancient Greek god Hermes, embodying the role of mes-

24 Shortly after his judgement, Heurtebise is described by Eurydice as "sweet" (115).

25 A letter to his wife and Rodin's pupil, Clara Westhoff, reveals that Rilke saw this copy in Rome, where it was exhibited at the Villa Albani at the time. See Raimond and Touzot (1995, 780).

26 An unpublished letter from Cocteau addressed to the French philologist Charles Dédeyan, renowned for his work on Rilke's engagement with French art and literature (*Rilke et la France*, 1961), provides evidence that Rilke probably came across an unpublished version of Cocteau's play shortly before his death. Rilke appears to have written a letter to the French artist, expressing his admiration for Cocteau's adaptation of the Orpheus myth. This exchange suggests that Rilke may have started working on a German translation of Cocteau's play. Rilke's untimely death in December 1926 left this endeavor, however, unfinished. See Raimond and Touzot (1995).

senger, god of merchants,[27] and of thieves (or cunning, known as Dolios), assumes the role of Psychopompos in this representation – a guide for souls towards death. Within Judeo-Christian imagery, Hermes evolves into the angelic figure, still bearing traces of the Greek word for messenger, "angelos."[28] Hermes is thus characterized as both a guiding and potentially deceptive agent of communication, holding various functions and identities. He is found at crossroads, in liminal zones, and within ambiguous and potentially transformative spaces.[29] In his book *Hermes the Thief* (1990), Norman O. Brown associates Hermes with the liminal nature of crossroads and the secular language of commerce. In ancient times, crossroads served as sites for exchanging goods, marked by the ambiguity and difference between gifts, barter trade, magic, and theft (Brown 1990, 39, 61). From a perspective encompassing literary and media studies, the messenger garners attention as the human predecessor to the traditional medium of communication, the letter. In her media-theoretical model, *Medium, Messenger, Transmission: An Approach to Media Philosophy*, Sibylle Krämer proposes that "the messenger is a person who fulfils his role by acting as if he is not a person" (2015, 86), projecting an impression of neutrality, impartiality, ignorance, and indifference.[30]

27 Eurydice tells Heurtebise in the play that she does not "like tradesmen with light fingers – or light feet" (118).

28 The concept of "angel," derived from the Christian tradition, has dominated thinking about communication throughout history. Angels, who have no fleshly bodies, are thought to transmit voice, image, and word across vast distances. Especially in modern discourse, angels "embody" the modern epitome of communication as well as doubts about the possibility of perfect communication (Peters 74–77).

29 See Kerényi (1976).

30 Greek tragedy has also generated debate about the figure of the messenger. The prevailing view is that a messenger in drama can hardly be regarded as a mere functionary and a neutral vehicle for dramatization. Throughout the twentieth century, messengers have primarily been explained as disengaged and non-individualized entities. They have often been seen as essential but undramatic components of tragic narratives. Their role is structural in cases of events that cannot be represented directly on stage – such as scenes involving crowds, warfare, miracles or representations of death. As a result, messengers have been presented as impartial and objective witnesses, acting as mediators for events that are impractical or ethically complex to portray firsthand. The characterization of messengers as conventional components within tragic dramas, providing an aura of transparency and conveying genuine information, helps to understand the relatively limited attention this role has received in academic research. As early as the mid-1980s, the eminent classical scholar Simon Goldhill expressed skepticism about the prevalent portrayal of messengers, pointing out that "critics and characters alike often treat the messenger in tragedy as if they bring forth a clear and definite account of events – albeit in somewhat heightened language" (Goldhill 1986, 6). Similarly, Irene de Jong, a prominent Dutch classicist, thoroughly reassessed the traditional view of the messenger. She argued that far from offering transparent accounts, the speeches of messengers are distinctly shaped by the individuals who deliver

Undeniably, the glazier Heurtebise in Cocteau's necrodialogues functions as a Hermes figure. Like the ancient Greek god, he turns up wearing sandals in the play (100). As has been shown, his neutrality and trustworthiness are openly put to the test. Moreover, he seems to embody both epistemic discourses of religion and technology, as he is not only the skilled glazier, but also the cunning magician. After the fight with Eurydice, Orpheus returns shortly and takes away the chair on which Heurtebise is standing, pretending to measure the window. In this way, he leaves the glazier suspended in mid-air, which completely shocks Eurydice, who claims that she did not dream and that she saw the trick with her own eyes. Heurtebise, who now appears to her as a trickster, plays dumb and blames the optical illusion, thus preparing on a meta-referential level Cocteau's later experiment with cinematographic illusion: "[It must have been (. . .)] the light reflected from the glass on my back to the window. Objects sometimes fool us that way" (117). As media scholar Jeremy Stolow reminds us, it has been to the credit of the anthropology-inspired work of Bruno Latour that "the 'illusory' universe of idol-worship, fetishism, and other acts of bearing witness to transcendent powers of miracle, magic, and fate" is closely aligned with the discourse of technoscience (Stolow 2013, 3). Technical constructions of reality, Stolow argues in the spirit of Latour, tend to erase their underlying construction in order to present themselves as things that have been discovered in some magical way, and not made. Eurydice does not seem to be helped by this inextricable interaction between the technical and the magical. Whereas she first considered Heurtebise to be her "soul mate" and accomplice, she declares that she has lost faith in him, since it has turned out that he is more "like the horse" (Cocteau 1967, 117), to which Orphée is drawn as a conduit of occult communication. In his hybrid role as a trickster, Heurtebise upends the conventional approach of mediation (in social contexts, as it has been introduced here first) and attempts at harmonization.

In addition, Heurtebise assumes the connection with death attributed to the god Hermes.[31] The envelope he delivers from Aglaonice, within which Eurydice

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them, each of whom possesses loyalties and judgements that become evident in their narratives (Jong 1991, 74). In James Barrett's study of stage(d) narratives (2002), the versatility of messengers has been given a new and comprehensive focus, challenging the prevailing interpretation that sees them as "detached from any particular point of view." Barrett revisits the idea of the messenger as a structural epic element within the tragic context, but asserts that the figure's authority derives from its biases, which are strategically employed to convey information.

31 Heurtebise's position as a messenger and harbinger of death becomes accentuated with the introduction of a second messenger later in the play, who once again heralds the arrival of Death. Coinciding precisely with the moment when Orpheus ventures into the underworld, a knock resounds at the door of the poet's dwelling. Heurtebise asks who it is: "le facteur [. . .] J'ai une lettre pour vous" ["the postman. I have a letter for you"], 130. This scene is reiterated just

places a letter for herself, appears to be tainted.[32] By moistening the seal before returning the envelope to Heurtebise, she inadvertently seals her own fate. Heurtebise's impartial stance in this scene once more comes under scrutiny: he appears displeased with her choice to leave and menacingly warns her that she will regret hurting him (118). Conversely, Heurtebise's emotions are visibly stirred, and he becomes anxious when the poison takes hold of her, frantically searching for an antidote. As Eurydice nears death, she transforms Heurtebise into a messenger of death once again, dispatching him to locate Orphée and bring him back to her. However, this time, the message he is entrusted to deliver to Orphée ("return in time") proves unsuccessful, despite Eurydice's explicit reliance on his magical capabilities ("if you can really do things [. . .] that let you sail through space," 120). As Heurtebise searches for Orpheus within the city, Death enters Eurydice's chamber. The ensuing scene, rich in symbolism, illustrates the passing of Orphée's wife and serves as a striking blend of ancient mythological, Judaeo-Christian imagery, interwoven with allusions to novel technological and electronic advancements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In a quasi-scientific tableau, the dynamic relationship between Heurtebise and La Princesse (Death) is further unveiled: Death arrives accompanied by two angelic companions, Azrael and Raphael, with the latter appearing to be a contemporary addition. Clad in surgical attire and carrying sizeable black cases, they proceed with a sequence that unfolds in a semi-scientific manner, artistically reinterpreting contemporary Spiritualist experiments with human mediums and technical devices. Initially, "merciful" Death, in the form of La Princesse, presents the poisoned sugar lump to the horse, leading to its demise (121). Subsequently, the trio assembles an unconventional piece of technological equipment – a seismographic electronic contraption – powering it with electricity to enable the blindfolded Death to make contact with Eurydice. Azrael explains to Raphael that the machine "operates through a neutral element which changes its position in space" (123):

> These machines enable her to touch things where she [i.e., Death] sees them. That eliminates mathematical calculations and saves us considerable time. (123; my addition)

prior to Orpheus's return. The repetition of this scene signifies a temporal halt, implying an alternative understanding, or perhaps a lack of time, in the realm beyond life.

32 Furthermore, the poisoned lump of sugar meant for the horse, brought by Heurtebise, is offered to the horse by Death herself in order to gratify one of her attendants (121).

Through the manipulation of time (one minute for Orphée and Heurtebise equals a complete hour for Death), and with the current at full throttle, the trio orchestrates the setup of a spool containing a white thread, wound and anchored within Eurydice's chamber. The opposing end of the thread is tethered to a metal box borne by Death. This entire sequence is executed with meticulous precision and mirrors the execution of medical surgery, or a ritualistic event accompanied by the rhythmic resonance of drumbeats. Yet, the mediated nature of this spectacle or enactment is emphasized, shattering the fourth wall: a momentary oversight from Raphael, who forgets a chronometer, compels Death to address the audience, requesting a watch. Following this subtly unobserved instance, she resumes her ritualistic act, winding the thread. At this juncture, the thread becomes taut. Death hurriedly enters Eurydice's room, and reemerges with a living dove, symbolizing the embodiment of Orphée's wife. Without doubt, the trio embodies the three Fates – Lachesis, Klotho, and Atropos – of Greek mythology, responsible for spinning, allotting, and severing the life thread of humankind. Similarly, Death delegates Raphael to sever Eurydice's thread, releasing the dove to soar "into space" (125). Simultaneously, ancient and nineteenth-century mediumistic trance practices intertwine within this scene, considering that Death has been consistently characterized as being in "a deep sleep or hypnotic trance" (125).[33] The otherworldly trio vanishes through the mirror they entered from, inadvertently leaving Death's rubber gloves behind on the table.

Orphée and Heurtebise arrive belatedly. Once more, it's Heurtebise who empowers Orphée to discern what remains obscured from him: by employing the technical medium of glass ("look through the glass on my back," 126), he allows Orphée to witness for himself (though his view is mediated – and thus possibly blurred – by the glass) the death of his wife. From this juncture onward, Heurtebise assumes the role of a guide and instructor, largely abandoning his prior skeptical demeanor. He guides the poet to don the rubber gloves that Death neglected to retrieve after the operation. He also divulges that Death will offer a reward for their return. While Heurtebise leads Orphée to the mirror as the passage to

33 In a more recent neuropsychological discourse, trance and hypnosis are seen as altered states of consciousness that encompass various "different experiences," including altered perceptions of the external world (e.g., hallucinations or synaesthesia) and of the body. It also includes altered thought processes concerning the perception of time and the interpretation of life and reality, often accompanied by intense emotions (Matthiesen 2007, 10). Historically, the term has often been associated with negative connotations by rationalist thinkers, who see non-rational, "other" levels of consciousness and experience as a regression to a primitive state and a symptom of (mental) illness. See Hahn (2023).

Death, the poet appears to hesitate. Heurtebise therefore reveals to him "the secret of secrets" (128) and assures him that "glass is [his] business" (129):

> Mirrors are doors. It's through them that Death moves back and forth into life. You're not to tell anyone. Besides, spend your life looking at yourself in a mirror, and you'll see Death at work like a swarm of bees storing up honey in a hive of glass. Good-bye. And good luck! (128)

In this way, Heurtebise cunningly reveals the mediating technology that attempts to create (the illusion of) immediacy. In both necrodialogues, mirrors are central technical media through which the transition from one world to another is completed. The descent into the other world is thus understood as a transformation through the narcissistic motif of the encounter with oneself or the search for identity.[34] Mirrors do not appear in the ancient versions of the Orpheus myth, but probably stem from Cocteau's fascination with the other famous mythical figure of Narcissus as well as from his reading of Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (1923, in particular, the poem titled "Spiegel" in Book 2.3), in which mirrors play a central role as symbol of knowledge, transition, and renewal. Orphée's psychopomp obviously has topographical and directional clues (Cocteau 1967, 129) about the limbo between the poet's house, his life, and the theatre stage on the one hand, and the realm of La Princesse on the other. At this point in the play, Heurtebise's agency remains circumscribed: he is neither permitted to accompany the poet on his passage through the mirror, nor able to describe the realm of Death.[35]

4 The Film: Crossing the Borders of the Play

The reference to glass, reflecting the creative potential of the artist Orphée to cross thresholds into invisible worlds, is one of the most important links to Cocteau's cinematographic adaptations, in which mirrors and the experimental use of them play a central role. The technical possibilities offered by the new medium of film further elaborate Cocteau's approach to the role of distributed authorship in artistic creation through the lens of mediumistic practices. In the preface to the

34 It might be evident that a distinct connection exists with Lacan's concepts regarding individuation and its correlation with the mirror. See, for a useful interpretation of this link, Hammerbeck (2016, 176–179).

35 As the operatic act or moment of Eurydice's death makes clear, death and the realm it inhabits are based on a different conception of time.

published text of his film *Le Testament d'Orphée,* Cocteau argues that cinema, particularly the silver screen, possesses a unique ability to immerse the viewer visually into realms that were previously accessible only in the realm of sleep and dreams. He draws a parallel between experiencing poetry through film and the hypothetical scenario of a fakir, who, by hypnotizing an entire auditorium, could induce his audience to witness a marvelous spectacle. Strikingly, Cocteau believes that the audience would be commanded to remember this experience even after they have "awakened" from their trance-like state (Cocteau 1970, 76).[36] More than in the play, a complex machinery of dead agents is brought to the forefront, as exemplified by Heurtebise, La Princesse, and the young poet Cégeste. Their mutually independent actions and intermediary transitions between the two ontological realms appear to establish the structural basis upon which Orphée's descent, the (also failed) attempts at communicating with the dead, and *poietical* abilities emerge. The film thus takes the question of the so-called neutrality and subordination of mediating agencies to the extreme, while explicitly exploring notions of order, authority, obedience, and disobedience. In the same vein, the pivotal technical medium of the mirror not only functions, as it usually does, as a reflective glass but transgresses its own boundaries by acting as a transparent membrane and, as has been argued, as a metaphor for the silver screen, enabling the spectator to see through the mirror from both front and back (Butler 2014, 195). Especially in the relationship between Heurtebise and his superior, La Princesse, with whom Orphée falls in love, tensions between (blind) performance and independent agency appear to culminate. Heurtebise has been upgraded in the 1950 film, since he no longer acts as a glazier, but as the driver of La Princesse's Rolls Royce. Moreover, he is able to enter the liminal zone between life and death, something he was unable to do in the play. The journey towards the underworld that Orphée undertakes is now spatially realized by a liminal "Zone." Dominated by a strong wind (which only Heurtebise does not have to resist[37]), the "Zone" is presented as a ruined, bombed-out city, littered with memories, which recalls the post-occupation period in which the film was conceived, and as a timeless space at the same time. The zone functions as an intertextual and intermedial archival space where former versions of the myth, not least Cocteau's own dramatic adaptation, reside and Orphée and Heurtebise exist among past versions of themselves. Here,

36 See Bancroft (1973, 76). For the structural affinity between early cinema and hypnosis, see Andriopoulos (2002). Cocteau's socially critical voice also seeps through here, as he is convinced that French audiences of his time no longer have this quality of total absorption, as they are too keen on their own "personality" (Cocteau 1970, 76).

37 The etymology of Heurtebise's name may be instructive here ("heurter la bise," meaning "to strike the wind," but also "to strike a kiss").

the driver Heurtebise meets the glazier and the film its stage predecessor. Similarly, but rather unconsciously, Orphée meets his double, his younger self, the handsome and very popular poet Cégeste in the opening scene in the French bar. There, a symbolic mirroring takes place when the two briefly meet in the doorway of the café, facing each other as if in a mirror (04:00–04:04). Thus, Orphée's encounter with the dead is symbolized by a return in time and framed by the frequent use of the cinematographic technique of reverse motion. This liminal space, the "Zone," thus testifies to Cocteau's artistic development and probes the ways in which the film reflects the possibilities while simultaneously transcending the limitations of the play. In the otherworldly archive, Heurtebise acts as a textual guide, creating links, connecting and separating characters and events. He is doubled in the mirror, suggesting both transparency and reflection, and both reveals and reflects death and the artist as well as challenging their powers at the same time.

Unlike the play, Cocteau's cinematographic adaptation stages a threefold descent, each time confronting the poet with the world of the dead in a different way. Again, this observation fits the mirror effect that, each time with small deviations, presupposes a deepening and an adjustment in the search for what it means to create artistically, namely to lose the sense of the (poet's divine) self (not his wife Eurydice) and to constantly metamorphose. The first time (ca. 09:00), Orphée descends rather unconsciously. After witnessing the death of the young poet, Cégeste, in the poets' café, La Princesse forces him to come with her and Heurtebise in the Rolls Royce. The four cross a railway, alluding to the river Styx, and arrive at an abandoned and ruined house, where Orphée is taken to the princess's room. The next morning, he wakes up in an open field, like Narcissus sleeping in front of a pool of water containing his own reflection. The moment constitutes the prelude to his narcissistic search in Death, initiated by the unconscious encounter with Death. His first descent leads to the erotic and emotional neglect of his wife and her subsequent death. As in the play, Orphée is driven by a similar occult aspiration consisting of (failed) necrodialogues. Instead of consulting a horse, Orphée tries desperately to decipher indistinct, Morse code-like messages from a male voice on a car radio, which he does not realize is that of the poet Cégeste – his younger self. As in the play, the death of Eurydice is conceived of as a task that has to be "completed" by La Princesse herself, this time assisted by Heurtebise and Cégeste. As Orphée's Death prepares for the final ritual, which is staged remarkably less spectacularly than in the theatre version, Heurtebise asks the Princess meaningfully whether "she has any orders" (47:42). His question could easily have been interpreted as meaning that she has specific orders for him. However, her reaction shows that he is referring to orders she should have received from a higher authority to carry out this task. The assump-

tion that there is another higher (unmediated) authority – ultimate Death – of which Heurtebise and La Princesse are "lower" officials or agents, is confirmed later in the film. Heurtebise's question reveals the painful observation that the Princess herself does not obey these "higher" orders. Conversely, she accuses Heurtebise of having taken the "initiative" of falling in love with Eurydice, which is not allowed according to the rules of the Otherworld.[38] Both appear to be torn between obeying higher orders and acting on their own responsibility. Eurydice's death is instrumental to Orphée's second – and this time conscious – descent. As in the play, this descent is initiated by Heurtebise's revelation of the secret of secrets. This time, however, Heurtebise accompanies him through the Zone.

In the Otherworld, the motif of disobeying the rules is once again put to the test. With Orphée as silent witness, the princess, Heurtebise, and Cégeste are brought before the court of the afterlife. The three judges[39] who are also agents of the supreme and unknown powers of death, interrogate and condemn them accordingly. Faced with the same question that Heurtebise had asked her earlier, namely whether she had "taken" Eurydice after having received orders, La Princesse admits that she "may have exceeded her authority without realizing it" (01:02:57–01:03:13). The unconscious dimension of her actions could be accounted for by her infatuation which in psychological paradigms of the time can be explained as a non-rational motive. By admitting her transgressive acts, she, and also Heurtebise after her, literally has to sign her own death warrant. To allow for another descent, both the play and the film once again instrumentalize Eurydice: she is allowed to return from the dead, which she succeeds in doing, but under an extreme condition that ignores the terms imposed by more traditional versions of the myth: Orphée must *never (or, rather, should he?)* look back at her again (and not, as in the mythic version, only during the retreat). Upon Eurydice's return from the underworld, both the play and the film continue to present Heurtebise as a mediator who makes the couple's coexistence possible by underscoring their necessary visual separation. Heurtebise therefore constantly ensures that Orphée does not turn around and look at his wife. In the end, Orphée, however, loses this impossible task – whether intentionally or forced by the mythical script remains unclear – and Eurydice dies for the second time. Thereupon, Orphée is killed in a quarrel with a frenzied crowd (see "maenades," Ovid, *Met.* XI, 22) that wants to accuse him of plagiarism and the death of the young poet Cégeste. Orphée shoots himself with the gun that Heurtebise gave him to protect himself. At

38 The intersection between conscious and unconscious action is evident here in the absurdity of this accusation.

39 For the mythical judges, Adamanthys, Aiakos, and Minos, see Ghyselinck (2021).

the end of the film, the Princess, assisted by her attendants Heurtebise and Cégeste, sends Orpheus back to the realm of the living by ending his life in the underworld. Having died four times, Orphée eventually becomes reborn and – ironically – gains immortality as a famous artist. Not in the afterlife, as in Ovid's version (*Met.* XI, 64–66), but in life the couple gets reunited.

The end of the play hints at a new artistic form, presumably of the film, and, alluding to mythical accounts, presents a decapitated Orphée as the head of an "unknown" artist (Cocteau 1967, 146), who explains that Heurtebise is actually named Jean Cocteau. This end thus completes the transition from medium to author and vice versa, condemning the author-medium as a "criminal" (149). The cinematographic absence of the *sparagmos* (the act of tearing apart), however, decapitates the script of ancient (authoritative) mythical versions whose famous result (eternal fame) it seems at first sight to produce. Orphée's return to life – and the immortality of the author – implies death *in* life, a bourgeois existence in which artistic expression no longer flourishes. This ending – essentially, the death of the author's death and thus Orphée's/Orpheus's final resurrection – implies that he is no longer able to create artistically, since he needs to expire and to die (continuously) to do so.

5 Mirroring Author and Medium

By exploring the connection between communication with the dead and Spiritualist and mediumistic writing practices in Cocteau's dramatic and cinematographic *Orphée* adaptations, this essay has navigated the notion of authorship as a mediumship dependent from (a seemingly infinite chain of) higher authorities whose commands and incantations it (un-)consciously interprets. Drawing upon parallels between Cocteau's creative Surrealist approach and the cultural-historical discourse of Spiritualist mediumship, particularly in the context of experiments with technological and embodied communication with the dead, Orphée's artistic process is read as a form of constant "expiration" rather than more traditional forms of inspiration. It has been shown that Orphée's artistic practice is distributed among narcissistic, constantly self-reflecting, and self-admiring agents as well as its Orphic *sparagmos* counterparts. Based on an interpretation of the author as a medium that interprets and disobeys conditions imposed by higher authorities, particularly older (dead) authors and mythical frameworks, authorship is negotiated as a transgression of the limitations of powers necessary to artistic production. Both mediatory agents, Heurtebise and La Princesse, not only reflect authorial agencies, but also take the lead in revising and transgressing the boundaries of mythical conditions and ditto points of reference. In

this way, Cocteau's necrodialogues challenge the conventional idea of the artist as an exceptional individual and gifted creator (or a "personality" in Cocteau's words [1970, 76]) and emphasize the collaborative and distributed, transgressive and hazardous nature of artistic writing and creating.

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Nicholas De Sutter

In limine leti: Necrodialogues and Liminality in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Neo-Latin Literature

1 Introduction. Latin Is Dead, Long Live Latin

In 1924, the award-winning Alsatian poet François Xavier Reuss (1842–1925), one of France's last Latin poets of international renown, submitted a composition titled *Excursio in Elysium* to a prestigious Latin poetry contest held in Amsterdam.[1] In this "trip to Elysium," the narrator has fallen asleep and finds himself in the Underworld, where he encounters the Roman poets Virgil (70 BC–19 BC) and Horace (65 BC–8 BC). The poets wind up in a discussion about the long history of Latin and its literature. When they finally arrive at the present day, Horace takes stock of Latin's fate since the French Revolution. Horace grieves for his native tongue: it was only after the French Revolution, he cries, that Latin was dealt a fatal blow. Since then, students are no longer taught Latin as a living language, but are simply immersed in the intricacies of its grammar. What is left of it is a "sad and stiff cadaver," a "bloodless skeleton." Yet there is a glimmer of hope, Horace confesses, as multiple efforts have been launched to breathe new life into Latin. The poet mentions the Latin magazines *Vox Urbis* (1898–1913) and *Alma Roma* (1914–1942), as well as the Latin poetry contest founded by the Dutchman Jacob Hendrik Hoeufft (1756–1843), the *Certamen Hoeufftianum*, the very competition to which Reuss submitted this poem.[2] When Virgil then literally starts trumpeting the praises of Hoeufft, the sound transforms into tolling church bells that rouse the narrator from his slumber.

The fate of Latin in the modern era as it is depicted by Reuss reflects the commonly accepted view in scholarship: having gone through a vibrant renaissance in the Early Modern era, Latin – often called "Neo-Latin" from the humanistic pe-

1 Haarlem, Noord-Hollands archief, Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam [from now on: HNHA], 64, 827, 28, v. 110–130 (attributed to Reuss in Van Binnebeke [2020, 264]). The poem was written after Reuss had published his two main poetry collections (1911; 1922). On Reuss as a Latin poet, see Tondini (1956).

2 For more on the discovery of the *Hoeufftianum* archives, see Fera et al. (2017).

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riod onwards – suffered a drastic decline as an actively used literary and scholarly language in the eighteenth century from which it never recovered. In the nineteenth century, the spread of nationalism and romanticism and the rise of "Altertumswissenschaft" as a scientific discipline, with its focus on the passive understanding and reading of ancient texts, further stifled the creative command of the classical tongue. Still, there were those who fought back, launching various counterinitiatives to promote Latin as a living language of both international communication and artistic expression. These initiatives are commonly classified under the header "Latinitas viva," a movement that gained more and more traction in the second half of the nineteenth century. Focal points of the "Living Latin" community were the many magazines entirely written in Latin and the plethora of contests in Latin verse and/or prose composition.[3] Some of these contests also took place in the context of school and university curricula, where verse composition retained a central place until well into the twentieth century. In British public schools and Oxbridge in particular, a vast array of prizes and official ceremonies continued to foster the active command of the ancient language. The most influential poetry contest not tied to any school or university was the annual *Hoeufftianum* competition mentioned above, organized in Amsterdam from 1845 to 1978. This competition gradually came to be considered the epicenter of the literary microcosm that was modern Latin literature.[4] In fact, such was the success of the Hoeufft contest that it sparked a revival of Latin poetry in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which has been drawing increasing scholarly attention in recent years.[5]

The history of Latin is one full of decline and rebirth. Given this constant pendulum between waxing and waning and the increasing stigma of being a *dead* and useless language, it is no wonder that modern Neo-Latin literature was so obsessed with issues of life and death, and particularly the zones in between. Some supporters of the "Latinitas viva" movement would turn this label on its head and claim that if anything, Latin was immortal rather than dead. This ubiquitous theme is perhaps best captured by the concept of "liminality," which encapsulates the modern Latin community's awareness of being in a state of transience, ever conscious of the loss of its previous status as a major literary and

3 On Latin journals, see Sacré (1994); Slednikov (2017); on competitions, see Gionta (2006).

4 On the *Hoeufftianum*, see Sacré (1993).

5 On this revival and Neo-Latin literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see IJsewijn [-Jacobs] (1961); Giustiniani (1979); Sacré and Tusiani (2006); Money (2014); Sacré (2014); Bertiau (2017); Bertiau and Sacré (2019). See also the surge in monographs on the history of Latin: Waquet (1999); Stroh (2007) (the title of the introduction is a nod to this book); Leonhardt (2011); Korenjak (2016).

cultural force, with the continuity of its tradition increasingly being called into question.

In this chapter, I aim to show that this concern with liminality in modern Neo-Latin literature – this nostalgic awareness of being poised "on the threshold of death" (*in limine leti*), as one poet put it[6] – regularly manifested itself in the form of necrodialogues. Just as Reuss did in his *Excursio in Elysium*, many nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers who kept the Latin tradition alive articulated their sentiments on the state of both the classical tradition and modern society at large through communication involving the dead. I also argue that this recurring use of the necrodialogue went hand in hand with a central aspect of modern Neo-Latin: the constant search to view contemporary society through the prism of classical antiquity. As Western society changed ever more rapidly from the nineteenth century onwards, these literary attempts to map modernity onto classical templates – ranging from classical didactic verse on electric appliances to the revival of ancient Romans in twentieth-century Europe – resulted in increasingly anachronistic juxtapositions of the contemporary and the ancient. The starker the contrast, the more the Neo-Latin tradition also manifested its own liminal state. Necrodialogues, in which the ancient dead were literally confronted with the modern world, were an ideal mode to achieve this.

This chapter therefore takes a closer look at the various forms and functions of literary interactions in Latin between the living and the dead during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not only shedding light on the frequent adaptation of traditional literary devices such as ghost apparitions, katabatic and anabatic journeys, and Lucianic dialogues of the dead, but also investigating Latin reflections on contemporary manifestations of otherworldly communication, as these practices seemed to prompt meditations on Neo-Latin's own liminal status. In doing so, I have divided the chapter into three parts: firstly, I show how Neo-Latin poets turned to necrodialogues in order to engage in critical self-reflection in relation to the changing state of classical scholarship and Latin as an active tongue itself. Secondly, and more broadly, I discuss how the same format was also used to explore the uncanniness of modern life through the lens of the classical tradition, particularly regarding technological progress and contemporary political events. Thirdly, I look at how Neo-Latin literary works engage with contemporary phenomena dealing explicitly with communication with the dead in a study of satirical epigrams that reflect on Spiritism.

6 With a nod to the Roman poet Lucretius (94 BC–55 BC; *De rerum natura* 2.960 and 6.1157; as well as punning on the legal phrase "in limine litis"), this was the title of a prize-winning poem by Florentine poet Ugo Enrico Paoli (1884–1963) commemorating the death of Giovanni Pascoli (1855–1912), who is generally considered to be the last major Neo-Latin poet.

2 Looking Backward and Inward. Self-Reflexive Necrodialogues on the State of Latin and Classical Scholarship

When Reuss has the spirits of Virgil and Horace discuss the history of Latin literature in the poem discussed above, the two Roman poets do so according to the metaphor of the metal ages, from their own "golden" age to the "iron" period of medieval decline, followed by a revival in the Italian Renaissance. With respect to Neo-Latin literature, Virgil's character subsequently launches into a catalogue of authors in a feat of metrical prowess, showcasing his ability to insert a series of proper names into hexameter lines. What is most interesting about this is the way in which the catalogue seamlessly flows from humanists such as Erasmus and Sannazaro to Latin authors from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries.[7] This strong emphasis on continuity and liminal awareness seems to be a constant in modern Latin literature. It need not come as a surprise, therefore, that contemporaries called the modern revival itself "Neo-Humanism," a badge that many of these "belated humanists" wore with pride (IJsewijn 1990, 138).[8]

This type of cataloguing became a recurring motif in Neo-Humanist poetry: in 1859, for instance, still during the early days of the Hoeufft contest, an anonymous submission from France titled *Carmen latinum apud Batavos redivivum* (Latin poetry reborn in Holland) did much the same.[9] After a Dantesque opening of the narrator wandering in a dark wood and entering the Underworld, the poem similarly takes stock of the history of Latin and smoothly transitions from a catalogue of classical and Renaissance authors (mainly from the Low Countries) to the nineteenth century. When the shade of Virgil laments the fate of Latin in the modern era, it is the spirit of Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) who optimistically urges him not to abandon hope, for none other than Hoeufft himself has ushered in a new renaissance.

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7 The modern Latinists referred to are the following: Egidio Forcellini (1688–1768); Giulio Cesare Cordara (1704–1785); Stefano Antonio Morcelli (1737–1822); Tommaso Vallauri (1805–1897); Pope Leo XIII (1810–1903); Diego Vitrioli; Pierre Esseiva (1823–1899); Mauro Ricci (1826–1900); Alessandro Volpini (1844–1903); Vincenzo Tarozzi (1849–1918); Giovanni Pascoli; Alfonso Casoli (1867–1923).

8 See Bartoli (1935) and IJsewijn[-Jacobs] (1961, 9–44). It is akin to, but not to be equated with, "Neo-Humanism" in the context of (especially German) classical education and scholarship in the early-nineteenth century (on this, see Bommel [2015]).

9 HNHA 64, 806, 3.

Given this focus on the continuity between Humanism and Neo-Humanism, it is interesting to note that one of the earliest texts in this corpus to turn to necrodialogues as a form of self-reflection explicitly establishes intertextual ties with a work from Italian Quattrocento Humanism. While the Italian Diego Vitrioli (1819–1898), whom we also find mentioned in Reuss's catalogue mentioned above, is best known as a Latin poet – he was the first ever to win the Hoeufft contest (1845) and is therefore often considered the father of Neo-Humanism – he also wrote literary dialogues in Latin. In the 1860s, he published a diptych of dialogues in prose titled *Asinus Pontanianus* (Pontano's ass), a throwback to Giovanni Pontano (1426–1503), the famous Neapolitan humanist who had been among the first to revive the Lucianic dialogue.[10] Vitrioli's necrodialogues hark back to two of Pontano's satirical dialogues: *Charon*, a dialogue of the dead set on the banks of the river Styx, and *Asinus*, which uses Apuleius's man-turned-donkey trope to satirize contemporary politics.[11] The latter even features Pontano himself as an interlocutor, which Vitrioli also imitates. Only now, the discussion takes place in the Underworld during the nineteenth century: the spirit of Pontano has gathered several fellow humanists and philologists from subsequent centuries. He has sent his donkey to the world of the living to report back on the fate of Latin and classical scholarship in modern Italy. Contrary to the slight optimism in the poems cited above, what follows in both dialogues is a scathing dissection of the moribund state, not just of the classical tradition, but of education in general, through the eyes of Pontano's donkey.[12] In an anecdote from the first dialogue, for instance, the donkey criticizes the divide between scholarship and education: while the former produces tons of monographs on antiquity, the latter indulges students with playful teaching methods, leaving them unable to even conjugate the simplest of verbs. The second dialogue continues in this stream of satirical pessimism. In the end, the interlocutors block their ears with wax in Homeric fashion and conclude in weary resignation that it is better to remain dead after all.

Similarly negative self-reflection can be found in another necrodialogue submitted to the Hoeufft contest titled *Colloquia Elysia* (Elysian conversations) by the

10 First published separately as Vitrioli (1865a) and (1865b); later combined in Vitrioli (1892). On Pontano and Lucian, see Marsh (1998, 129–143).

11 For a recent edition of Pontano's dialogues with facing translations, see Pontano (2012) (which includes *Charon*, "a milestone in the Quattrocento rediscovery and influence of [Lucian]" (Marsh 1998, 129) and Pontano (2020) (which includes *Asinus*).

12 The first dialogue, titled *De puerili institutione*, focuses on (secondary) education (Vitrioli 1865b), while the second (*De literis latinis*) takes a look at classical scholarship (Vitrioli 1865a). Criticism of grammarians, philology, and pedantry is also part and parcel of Pontano's dialogues (see Pontano 2012, xx–xxiv).

regular contestant Francesco Tranquillino Moltedo (1839–1919).[13] In the same vein as the poetry cited above, it is presented as a discussion among the spirits of classical authors (Virgil, Horace, Plato, Xenophon, Euclid, and Donatus). As in Vitrioli's dialogue, however, the ancient ghosts are not so much interested in the fate of literature as they are in contemporary classical education and scholarship, which they all agree are in complete shambles. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were essentially two models of classical scholarship: while many Italians continued in the humanist tradition and advocated a more intuitive and creative approach to the classical texts, the Germanophone model of Altertumswissenschaft proposed a more scientifically rigid approach. An obvious proponent of the traditional school, Moltedo laid the blame for the downfall of classics (as he saw it) wholly with the German tradition. By using the classical authors as human mediators, he launched such a vitriolic attack against German-language scholarship – e.g., ridiculing their commentaries overcrowded with realia – that the dwellers of the Underworld eventually decide to deny all Germans access to the Elysian Fields at the close of the poem:

> (Horatius:) [. . .] Festina iam inscribere portae:
> "NON HIC GERMANIS LOCUS" et desueta futuros
> Sceptra para in pueros, ferulam saevumque flagellum.
> Non studiis prisco et florescet honore Lycaeum?[14]
>
> [(Horace:) Hurry up and write on the door
> "GERMANS NOT WELCOME HERE," and prepare your timeworn rods,
> Your whips and cruel lashes with which to strike the boys who are about to come.
> Will the school not thrive with study and ancient honour?]

As mentioned above, another focal point of the Living Latin movement was the phenomenon of magazines written entirely in Latin. Reuss's poem, for instance, referred to the popular periodicals *Vox Urbis* and *Alma Roma*, putting them on a par with the *Hoefftianum* in terms of their renewing influence.[15] One of the first leading magazines of this kind, however short-lived, was *Alaudae* (Larks, 1889–1895), published by

13 The poem was actually submitted twice, once in 1910 and thoroughly reworked in 1918: HNHA 64, 819, 10 (originally titled *Unicuique suum. In sciolos recentiores*, i.e., "To each his own. Against modern dilettantes"); 64, 823, 30. Contrary to the rules of the competition, he had already published a version of the poem in 1882 with the title *Novi sapientes* [New wise men]; Moltedo 1882, 107–114).

14 HNHA 64, 823, 30, v. 116–119. The anti-German sentiment was even more emphatic in this reworked edition immediately following the end of the First World War.

15 On these periodicals, see Mir (1993); Jenniges (2007).

Karl Heinrich Ulrichs (1825–1895).[16] Ever vocal in his mission to revive Latin, Ulrichs wrote many articles on the state of modern Latin, one of which is a comical piece framed as a katabatic trip to the Underworld. In several instalments, a flock of the journal's titular larks fly down to Hades.[17] They have been sent to figure out what has happened to their fellow bird, Phoenix, a nod to the recently discontinued Latin journal by the same name, *Phoenix seu nuntius latinus internationalis* (1890–1892, Phoenix or the international Latin messenger). By bribing Charon with alcohol and cigarettes, the larks manage to cross into the Underworld, where they eventually find the phoenix lamenting its untimely demise. Warned that they should search for more funds and a wider readership lest the same fate befall them, the larks subsequently request an audience with the queen of Hades. Like the phoenix, Proserpine comically urges the birds of the Latin journal to look for more readers, even proposing some kind of pyramid scheme. The piece ends as a messenger runs in with a telegram attesting to the growing number of the magazine's subscriptions. Apparently, the Underworld was also attuned to its times and recently had telegraph poles installed across the river Styx, opening a direct line of communication with the world of the living, which the birds had witnessed themselves when Charon was ferrying them across.[18]

Scholarly journals, especially in the field of classical philology, also continued publishing contributions in Latin, including poetry, well into the twentieth century. One such journal is *Mnemosyne*, which was founded in the mid-nineteenth century and has remained a leading journal in classical philology to this day. It is in the context of *Mnemosyne* that we find a light-hearted instance of a necrodialogue in the form of occasional poetry.[19] In the poem in honor of the journal's fiftieth anniversary, the autobiographical narrator Jacobus Johannes Hartman (1851–1924) recites a letter addressed to the journal's editor Samuel Adrianus

16 Ulrichs (2004); Sacré (2014, 898).

17 The first instalment from February 1893 is titled *Iter Stygium* (Stygian journey) (Ulrichs 2004, 262–268); the second, dating from November 1893, *Pluto et Proserpina* (Ulrichs 2004, 313–317).

18 Ulrichs (2004, 264): "Tum nos traiecit. At quid hoc erat? Iam in profunda valle conspexeram, secundum semitam, perticas longa serie in solo defixas. Quae series nunc aquam quoque transiit. Coniunctae autem erant inter se filo ferreo dabantque clangorem sonorum et maestum. Quid erat? Ille: 'non est hoc, inquit, opus antiquum. Nuper demum eas constituere. Artificium novum; ineptiae.'" ["Then he ferried us across. But what was this? I had already seen a long row of poles planted in the soil along a pathway deep in the valley. Now that row was also spanning the river. The poles were joined by an iron wire and gave off a loud and gloomy noise. What was this? Charon told us: 'This is not some ancient construction,' he said. 'They have only recently installed it. Some silly newfangled contraption.'"].

19 Hartman (1907, 69–71): *Ruhnkenii epistola recitata in convivio quod Naberus Mnemosynes sodalibus mense Ianuario A. MDCCCCII obtulit*. See Hillen (1924, 74).

Naber (1828–1913) that has been sent from the Elysian Fields, relaying a conversation between prominent classical philologists that obviously boils down to the glorification of the journal and its current editor.

A fitting case with which to end this overview of introspective necrodialogues is Olindo Pasqualetti's (1916–1996) *Iacobus Henricus Hoeufft poeseos Latinae patronus* (Jacob Hendrik Hoeufft, patron of Latin poetry). The poem obtained an honorable mention in what would be the very last instalment of the Hoeufft competition in 1978. The dissolution of the contest due to a lack of funds is considered another, and perhaps final, blow to modern Latin, and signaled the definitive end of the Neo-Humanist revival, which had already been on the wane for some time. Pasqualetti's poem, the very last to be printed in the series of booklets issued by the Amsterdam Academy, is an apt swan song for Neo-Humanism.[20] Whereas texts such as the ones discussed above introduced classical or Renaissance authors commenting on modern developments and praising initiatives like Hoeufft's, Pasqualetti's interlocutors are now deceased Neo-Humanist poets themselves. In the Underworld, a group of eight *Hoeufftianum* gold medalists, from the very first laureate (Diego Vitrioli) to the very last (Teodoro Ciresola, 1899–1978), hear of the contest's dissolution.[21] Sounding the alarm, they turn to Hoeufft himself, whom they praise for having revitalized Latin, but also urge not to let it die once more. The founding father counters their pessimism and turns the question of life and death on its head: if anything, their endeavor has shown that Latin is and will remain immortal. Though there is a clear sense of closure, the spirit of Hoeufft consoles them with the idea that there will be other initiatives to rekindle the Latin Muse. The poem, and with it this entire chapter of modern Latin, ends as Hoeufft trails off into the distance, where he is embraced by Virgil and thanked for his invaluable contribution to Latin literature.

3 The Modern World through the Eyes of the Ancient Dead

Up to this point, the "descent downward" has also been a "descent inward": the necrodialogues discussed above were primarily instruments of scholarly or literary self-reflection, however pedantic or navel-gazing. Forever self-aware of its liminal state and increasingly marginal position, and fearful of falling perma-

20 Pasqualetti (1978); also included in Pasqualetti (1987, 224–227).

21 The group consists of Diego Vitrioli, Francesco Sofia Alessio (1873–1943), Giovanni Pascoli, Jacobus Johannes Hartman, Hermann Weller (1878–1956), Pietro Rosati (1834–1915), Fernando Maria Brignoli (1901–1970), and Teodoro Ciresola.

nently into oblivion, modern Latin was clearly obsessed with looking into the mirror, yet it could also look beyond itself, and would put discussions among or with the dead to other uses as well, ranging from commentaries on technology-centered modern society to discourses of mourning and remembrance in the wake of the world wars.

As mentioned above, a fundamental characteristic of modern Latin literature was its tendency to provoke direct confrontation between the ancient and the modern. The classical heritage had molded the imagination of Neo-Humanist authors and provided them with an infinite reservoir of associations, stories, and tropes with which they could engage with the contemporary world. The necrodialogue proved to be a particularly apt means for expressing these reflections on modernity through a classical lens, as it literally brought the two worlds together. Through the eyes of the ancient dead, it showed the contemporary world in all its uncanniness.

The first type of necrodialogues I will take a closer look at reflected on nineteenth- and twentieth-century society at large; the recent leaps and bounds in scientific and technological progress were a particularly favourite topic, beginning with the integration of steam technology and electricity in everyday life. The challenge was for the Latin author to seemingly effortlessly paint a picture of the most modern of contraptions or inventions in the fossilized language of Virgil and Cicero. Steam trains and boats sung in Latin didactic or panegyric verse, for example, can be found in all outlets available to the Latin poet, even among prize-winning *Hoeufftianum* compositions. Italian poet Alberto Salvagni, for instance, obtained an honourable mention with his *Vulcanus* (Vulcan) in the 1902 contest.[22] In it, he has the Muse Calliope revive Virgil among the living at the very start of the twentieth century. The Roman poet experiences a veritable "time shock" when he is confronted with a fuming, dragon-like monster that turns out to be a train. Salvagni then uses the rest of the dialogue to expound on steam technology in the didactic tradition.

Similar confrontations between the ancient dead and the modern, technology-centered world are widespread in Neo-Latin literature. Virgil was revived once more, for example, in Anacleto Trazzi's (1866–1940) *Virgilius redux seu de vita recentiore* (Virgil redux, or on modern life), a lengthy poem in four parts.[23] Two thousand years after his birth, the poet has returned from the dead to take stock of the progress the world has made. In the conversation between Trazzi and Virgil, the Roman poet launches into a lengthy and remarkably conservative

22 Salvagni (1902); De Sutter (2019, 52–54). His dates of birth and death are unknown to me.
23 Trazzi (1930); De Sutter (2019, 79–82).

tirade against modern society, which, he claims, is in a state of complete moral decay. Virgil rails against technology-induced laziness and bloodshed, urban life, Futurist art and jazz music.

Another, more humorous instance of this was Carlo Bianchini's (1847–1925) *Davi reditus ad inferos* (Davus's return to the Underworld), which won second place in the Hoeufft contest of 1921.[24] Like Pontano's donkey, Davus, a nondescript Roman slave, was allowed to briefly return to the living and has come back to report on his experience. Rather than focus on classical scholarship, however, Davus has taken in the modern world in all its aspects, and launches into a lengthy catalogue of recent inventions, from trains and airplanes to telephones and military machinery.

Dirk Sacré recently discussed this trope of dialogues blending the classical and the modern in authors such as Bianchini and Trazzi in relation to a newly discovered poem of the same genre, Antonio Faverzani's (1861–1922) *Cultor maiorus. Lusus* (Worshipper of the ancestors. A game), submitted to the Hoeufft contest in 1912.[25] What makes this poem particularly interesting is the fact that it ridicules the blind adoration of antiquity and the complementary estrangement from modernity that often lie at the heart of this type of text. In Faverzani's poem, an admirer of all things ancient encounters the ghost of an ancient Roman along the Via Appia. Contrary to what the reader might expect, the ghost is a "matter-of-fact and down-to-earth Roman" (Sacré 2017, 508) who tries to dispel the modern *laudator temporis acti*'s fairy-tale image of antiquity: there were no heroes, only regular people like him. The present with its wild technology is much more exciting than any idealized version of the past.

Moving from the early to the late twentieth century, when Neo-Humanism was already on the wane, we can still find a number of Latin necrodialogues that defamiliarize the highly technologized modern society of their day through the eyes of the ancient dead. A brief example of this is the 1987 poem *Ovidius redivivus de quinta nostra aetate* (Ovid reborn, on our fifth era) by German classical philologist Karl-Heinz Graf von Rothenburg (1934–2019). Playing with the metaphor of history as a sequence of metallic ages – just as Reuss had Horace periodize Latin literature – the spirit of Ovid appears to the poet and voices his concerns about modern capitalism. According to Ovid, mankind has reached a new, fifth era: after the ages of gold, silver, bronze, and iron, man has entered the age of . . . rust!

24 Bianchini (1921); De Sutter (2019, 71–75).
25 Sacré (2017).

Tempora sunt mihi de rubra robigine vestra.
Omnis enim res, quae vobis cito nunc generata est,
Sic generata est, ut propere cadat intereatque,
Atque ut sumendo quam plurima lucrificetur.
Nec retinere potest hic ulla ab origine formam
Res his temporibus [. . .][26]

[I believe that your time is the age of red rust.
For every object that you now create in haste
Has been made in such a way that it quickly breaks and decays,
All in the interest of making as much profit as possible.
Nowadays, no object can retain its original form . . .]

After attacking Western consumerism and throwaway society this way, the character of Ovid also points out that mankind has even entered the atomic age, or rather, the plutonic age. Punning on the verbal similarities between the radioactive element plutonium and Pluto, King of the Underworld, the spirit concludes his rant with a piece of advice: get rid of plutonium, or else all of mankind will visit Pluto much sooner than it would wish for.

A similar critique of civilization evoking Cold War scenarios pervades Geneviève Métais's (1929–2012) *Saeculorum transvectio narratio conficta* (The passing of the ages, a fictional story).[27] In this illustrated short story, which obtained an honourable mention in the 1975 *Certamen Capitolinum* in Rome, scientists in the USA have managed to resuscitate the body of a former Roman slave named Lucius. Told in the first person from Lucius's perspective, the lengthy tale follows the Roman as he tries to adjust to twentieth-century life. While the Russians and Americans enter into a tug of war about where the now famous Roman is going to live, they are relieved that he at least does not choose the other party but decides to live in Rome instead. In a typical, drawn-out series of often comical confrontations with modern technology and customs, Lucius gets a taste of life in the seventies – he even briefly joins a hippie commune – but still feels entirely estranged from the modern world. One could even say that, from a pessimistic point of view, Lucius's liminal sense of being stuck in some sort of no-man's-land is symbolic of what it feels like to be a member of the modern Latin community. In this gloomy spirit, the Roman eventually asks to return to his former slumber

26 Graf von Rothenburg (1987, 227).

27 Métais (1976); also discussed in Sacré (2017, 506–507). The recently discovered Hoeufft archives have revealed that Métais, one of the few women Neo-Latin authors, also competed in the contest. Based on its title, one of her submissions – *Elysia ecloga* (Elysian eclogue), which has unfortunately not been preserved and has not been published elsewhere – was probably also a necrodialogue (HNHA 64, 845, 7; attribution by Xavier van Binnebeke).

by means of cryonics – i.e., to be literally frozen into another, unconscious state of liminality – at the end of the story.

Dialogues in which the dead converse with one another also prove a fit instrument of political criticism. In the following, I therefore move from the more technology-centered texts and highlight a number of politically charged necrodialogues from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Latin literature, thereby focusing on the Italian context, where the Neo-Latin tradition was still strong. Much of the following material can also be read in light of the cult of *romanità* – the pervasive (ab)use of ancient Roman culture in modern Italian society. *Romanità* was famously celebrated under Mussolini as well as by a substantial number of Fascist Neo-Latin authors, but has roots that reach back into the nineteenth century.[28]

A case of nationalistic satire can be found in *Proteus alter* (A second Proteus) by Italian poet Moltedo (1839–1919), whose anti-German *Colloquia Elysia* I discussed earlier.[29] Written shortly after the death of Napoleon III (1808–1873), *Proteus alter* is a scathing attack on the French emperor from an Italian perspective. The relationship between Italy and France had been ambiguous during the Risorgimento period: although France's aid was vital in helping Italy cast off the Austrian yoke and achieve unification, Napoleon also antagonized many Italians by protecting the pope and his hold on Rome, thereby denying the new-born country its rightful capital until 1870. *Proteus alter* was Moltedo's way to get back at him. It opens with a character named "*Tertius*" ("The Third", i.e., Napoleon) trying to swim across the river Styx. He is stopped by the other shades – both the French and the Italian dead want to tear him to pieces – and brought before Pluto, who enlists the help of Caesar and Brutus, the personifications of Empire and Republic, respectively (Napoleon had come to power as a president, but soon reinstated his uncle's Empire). Both Romans excoriate the protean Napoleon, after which Pluto decides to punish the French ruler by forever isolating him on a small island in the middle of the river, in memory of Napoleon I's multiple exiles to an island.

When the young Italian nation wanted to establish a colonial presence in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, its attempt to invade Ethiopia ended in complete failure.[30] The Battle of Adwa in 1896, where the Italian forces were

28 On *romanità*, see, e.g., Argenio (2008, with abundant Selected Works).

29 Moltedo (1882, 115–119).

30 For examples of Neo-Latin necrodialogues in the context of British colonialism, see Myers (1863) and Wakely (1911). In the latter, the Greek historiographer Herodotus visits and comments on the state of Egypt under British rule; in the former, a discussion on a recent rebellion in India takes place on the Elysian Fields.

vastly outnumbered by the Ethiopian army, became a particularly symbolic defeat. That very year, Giacinto De Vecchi Pieralice (1842–1906) composed a proto-fascist epic three-part poem titled *Adua, Poiemation* (Adwa, a short poem) to commemorate the bloodbath, setting the scene against the backdrop of ancient history.[31] After a bloody description of the battle in the first part in the tradition of the *Aeneid*, the scene shifts to the Underworld, where we find the spirit of Hannibal, Rome's most dreaded enemy, subjected to perpetual torture. When the Ethiopian tells him of the recent events, he begs to be sent back to the living to revel in the spilt Italian blood. What follows is a macabre description of this representation of Italy's sacrifice – he literally tries to lick the blood off the African soil, though his bodiless condition no longer allows him to do so – interrupted by the apparition of Marcus Attilius Regulus, the Roman general who was famously tortured by the Carthaginians, representing the current abysmal Italian situation. The final part, however, proposes a brighter future (from the Italian, imperialistic perspective) as yet another Roman general, Publius Cornelius Scipio, the conqueror of Carthage, materializes from the afterlife and drives Hannibal back to Tartarus, where he is sucked into a sea of snakes, pitch, and fire.

A further group of necrodialogues written In Italy in the wake of the First World War engage even more blatantly with political issues of the day. In these necrodialogues, communication with the dead not only served as an instrument of political commentary, but also clearly interacted with contemporary discourses of national mourning and remembrance. Though criticism of the senseless slaughter of the war can be found all over – Bianchini's Davus mentioned above, for instance, also railed against modern weapons of mass destruction, while Virgil was brought back to life yet again to visit a military hospital in Giovanni Latini's *Somnium Virgilii* (Virgil's dream) – my focus here goes to one particular monument of mourning: the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Rome.[32] This type of memorial, containing the body of a single anonymous soldier who was to represent all fallen soldiers, mushroomed across Europe in the years following the Great War. In Rome, the body of an Italian soldier was buried with great pomp and circumstance at the foot of the Victor Emmanuel II Monument on 4 November 1921. This ceremony and public manifestation of grief and commemoration also sparked a surprisingly substantial body of Latin poetry, probably taking its cue from the tomb's minimalistic dedication in Latin: "IGNOTO MILITI" (To the Unknown Soldier).[33] The Hoeufft contest in particular was flooded with composi-

31 De Vecchi Pieralice (1896).

32 Latini (1924). See De Sutter (2019, 75–79).

33 For a more detailed overview, see De Sutter (2020a).

tions on the topic during the early 1920s. In many of these compositions, the monument served as a material channel for communication with the fallen dead: in Alessandro Zappata's (1860–1929) *Ante aram patriae* (Before the Altare della Patria) and Angelo Nardi's *Miles ignotus* (The Unknown Soldier), for instance, both narrators are walking the streets of Rome at night when they are accosted by the ghost of the Unknown Soldier jumping out of his tomb and subsequently telling them the story of his life and death in the trenches, but also warning them about Italy's ongoing political crisis.[34] In other cases, such as Quirino Ficari's (1881–1968) *Ab ara patriae militis ignoti vox* (The voice of the Unknown Solider from the Altare della Patria) or Domenico Spada's (1872–1949) *Miles ignotus*, the poems themselves established the line of communication by presenting the Soldier's testimony in the first person.[35]

The 1921 festivities occurred in the wake of an intense political, social, and economic crisis in Italy following the Great War, the so-called "Biennio Rosso." In the Latin poetry cited above, the ghost of the Unknown Soldier repeatedly urges the Italians to refrain from any more bloodshed. The crisis also inspired a particularly satirical necrodialogue by politician and epigraphist Domenico Tinozzi (1858–1953), with which I will conclude this overview. In 1919, Tinozzi published his *Minois iudicium* (Minos's judgement), an illustrated lampoon poem aimed at Italy's failing parliament, in which the members of parliament suddenly find themselves before Minos in the Underworld.[36] Tinozzi, who was a member of parliament himself, has some of the most prominent parliamentarians defend their politics before the infernal judge, which, in addition to the booklet's caricatural illustrations, allows him to expose his peers to ridicule for both their political ideologies and personalities. In the end, Minos decides to suspend his judgement altogether: it is for the Italian people to decide on their fate. He then shrouds them in complete darkness and leaves them to their own devices as they grope and try to find their way back to the world of the living.

4 *Sunt aliquid manes*. On Spirits and Spiritualists

Modern Neo-Latin literature not only instrumentalized the mode of the necrodialogue as a literary device to reflect on either its own liminal status or the modern world from which it seemed to grow increasingly estranged, but this fascination

34 HNHA 64, 826, 41, and 25.
35 Ficari (1922); HNHA 64, 828, 29.
36 Tinozzi (1919); De Sutter (2020b, 820–823).

for otherworldly communication also prompted it to engage with contemporary phenomena that laid claim to actual communication with the dead, such as mediumist practices and the rise of the Spiritist movement in the late nineteenth century. The figure of the medium-trickster and table-turner recurs with particular vehemence in this respect, mainly as the object of satirical ridicule. While Spiritualists were a common target of mockery in contemporary satire, this interest in the medium, who is by definition a liminal figure, bridging the world of the living and the dead, also lays bare the modern Latinist's sensitivities as discussed above. For the phenomenon of mediumism seems to have titillated the Latin poet, not so much on account of the idea itself, since transgressive communication between the living and the dead was also common in classical culture, but because it was a reminder of the poet's own liminal status and the increasing difficulty of keeping the Neo-Latin tradition alive in an ever-estranging world. Maybe, then, the popularity of these alleged charlatans who claimed to hold the key to communicating with the dead (and therefore with the past) irritated classical scholars in that they believed that they themselves were the *real* key to the past. If anyone could boast a true connection with ancient times and lay claim to engaging in an actual dialogue with our forebears, it must be classical philologists in the broadest sense of the word, not these newfangled mediums. This would hold even more true for the Latin poet, whose common persona as *vates* (prophet) implied an almost mystical bond with the past and an active role in continually keeping the classical tradition alive in the modern world. Let us therefore take a close look at these Neo-Latin texts reflecting on mediumistic practices.

The Hoeufft contest, firstly, received an anonymous submission dedicated to Spiritism in 1876 titled *Esse aliquid manes* (Spirits exist), clearly inspired by the first line of Propertius's *Elegy* 4.7.[37] Though the jury were initially intrigued by the topic, they remained somewhat underwhelmed by the poem's lack of invention. While the subject could have made for a great satire in the hands of a skilled poet, it does little more – though in mostly flawless Latin – than paint the scene of a séance table, mocking a money-hungry medium named Charicles and his gullible clientele. During the session, Charicles claims to have established contact with the deceased wife of one of his clients, assuring him that she is living in splendid bliss in the afterlife. At the close of the satire, the poet ironically ponders what harm there is in a little financial scam, when it can offer so much peace of mind.

The phenomenon of mediumism seems to have been most popular in Latin verse produced in Victorian Britain. As mentioned before, the tradition of Latin

37 HNHA 64, 809, 5, v. 44–52.

verse composition was still particularly strong in British public schools (e.g., Eton, Westminster, Harrow, Rugby, Winchester . . .) and the universities of Cambridge and Oxford, where compositions frequently exhibited a witty and classical take on contemporary topics. The famous tradition of "Tripos" verse at Cambridge, for example – where British university students composed and distributed pamphlets of witty poetry (mostly in Latin) on the occasion of their graduation ceremony – gave rise to several satirical poems on table-turning and Spiritualism.[38]

A particularly interesting series of compositions dealing with mediums in Victorian society can be found in Latin works published by Westminster School. A recurring exercise at Westminster was for students to compose epigrams inspired by a classical adage or verse and give it a witty, contemporary twist. The best poems would get printed and would be recited during a formal dinner at school. Several of these epigrams made a mockery of the occult and mediums by taking their cue from the Ovidian phrase "*medio tutissimus ibis*" ["you will go most safely by the middle course"].[39] Originally spoken by Phoebus to his son Phaeton – advising him to keep his sun-chariot on a steady course – these words were then taken out of context and used to satirize mediums (punning on Ovid's use of the word "medio") and the false sense of security that they offered to their gullible victims. In the following epigram from 1877, for example, a medium and his magician henchman are arrested by the police and safely locked up in prison for their chicanery:

> Stat magus arridens: "populus vult decipi inanis:
> Nec mora quin per me decipiatur" ait.
> "Nescio sed quid agam. *Medium* nostrum undique quaero,
> ambagum socium, participemque doli."
> Quem subito arripiens lictor conclamat, "eodem
> Cum *medio* medius carcere tutus erit!"[40]

38 See Hall (2009, 284 and 297), on the 1854 poem on table-turning and the 1878 composition partly dealing with such "follies of the time" as spiritualism, respectively. Interestingly, in light of the symbolism of the "metallic" ages mentioned several times throughout this chapter, the 1854 satirical poem by Herbert Wilson (1833–1866) ridicules the modern age as "the age of wood," in which people let themselves be fooled by wooden tables; see vv. 13–20: "Ultima iam venit stolidis mortalibus aetas,/lignea, et ingeniis lignum referentibus adsunt/numina de ligno veras reddentia voces./Sacra silent Delphis tripodis responsa loquacis,/nec Dodonaeae referunt oracula quercus;/quadrupedes nobis mensae, sectaeque securi/iam responsa dabunt quercus, tabulaeque politae./Dextraque nonnumquam laevo quatit omine mensam."

39 Ovid. *Met*. II, v. 137.

40 *Carmina et epigrammata* (1877, 8).

[The magician is standing with a grin on his face and says: "the idle crowd wants to be deceived,
So let them be deceived by me right this instant."
"Yet I do not know what to do. I am looking for my medium all over,
My fellow swindler and partner in crime."
Suddenly, a police officer grabs him and shouts: "together with this very
Medium, you will be safe in the middle of prison!"]

This seems to have been inspired by the case of Henry Slade (1835–1905), an infamous medium who had been sentenced to three months imprisonment for his fraudulent practices just the year before. In fact, there is another epigram from 1877 that explicitly shames Slade while manipulating the same Ovidian verse – *"Medium" non tutissimus ibit* ["This 'medium' will not go completely free"] – and even putting the medium on a par with Mercury himself, the divine guide of the dead.[41]

Other Spiritualist court cases crop up as well in Westminster verse. The brief 1868 epigram *Est quadam prodire tenus* (One can only go so far), for instance, deals with the Lyon v. Home case of 1866, in which the wealthy widow Jane Lyon successfully sued Scottish medium Daniel Douglas Home (1833–1886) for large sums of money he had allegedly extorted from her by means of his spiritual powers. Punning on her surname, the epigram draws the comparison with Isaac A. Van Ambergh (1808–1865), a famous American animal trainer nicknamed "The Lion King" for his work with big cats. Just as Ambergh confronted lions, so Home regularly visited Lyon: Ambergh knew that the lions had "spirit," while Home knew that he had "spirited away" large sums of money from Lyon![42]

Apart from competing to write amusing epigrams, the Westminster students would also annually perform a classical comedy in Latin, followed by a witty epilogue touching on current events. The epilogue following the 1889 production of Terence's *Andria* featured a Spiritualist named Mysis (she calls herself "*docta Sibylla*," after the ancient prophet), a character that seems to have been inspired by Madame Blavatsky (1831–1891), the controversial Occultist and Theosophy leader known for making objects appear out of thin air.[43] In the sketch, the characters of which have been plucked from Terentian Rome and dropped into Victorian society, the Spiritualist is ridiculed as a raving drunk who eventually runs off stage scared out of her wits when she mistakes a peeping Tom for an actual floating head.[44]

41 *Carmina et epigrammata* (1877, 10), later published (with minor adjustments) in Hodgson (1883, 106).

42 Mure et al. (1906, 296). The title is a reference to a verse from Horace (*Epist.* 1, letter 1, line 32).

43 On Blavatsky, see Meade (1980) and Cranston (1993).

44 Mure et al. (1906, 154–155).

During the scene, Mysis also comically called on Vertumnus, the Roman god who "turns" the seasons, in order to "turn" a table. This table-turning was a typical practice to communicate with the dead during a séance, and – at least in Neo-Latin verse – a form of trickery that often provoked ridicule. Another Westminster epigram from 1878 ironically praised table-turning for being such hard work on the part of the trickster.[45] Yet mockery was not always the order of the day. Unless it is to be read in an ironical sense, one Neo-Latin composition seems to express genuine admiration for the art of table-turning: German philologist Karl Friedrich August Nobbe's (1791–1878) elegy *Mensa loco mota manuum tactu* (A table moved by placing one's hands on it) from 1853. With classical tradition in the back of his mind, the modern Latin poet closes his elegy with a comparison between the medium and Orpheus: the Greek hero once moved the trees with his lyre, and now it seems that his spirit has returned through the medium, moving the wood in the table itself:

Quid? Vix credo oculis, nova vis effusa videtur
    E summis digitis, ligna salire iubens.
Orpheus ex Orco nobis rediisse videtur,
    Qui potuit quercus saepe movere lyra.
Sic saltant hodie mensae, quae stare solebant,
    Vix tactae nervis sponte per omne solum.
[. . .][46]

[What? I can hardly believe my eyes, some new power seems to have flowed
From his fingertips, commanding the wood to jump up.
Orpheus seems to have returned to us from the Underworld,
He who was able to move oaks with his lyre many times.
Thus, today, tables that used to stand still jump up from the floor
All on their own, barely touched with any strength.]

5 Conclusion

Labelling the final chapter of Neo-Latin literature "Latinitas viva" ("Living Latin") was a tell-tale sign of the community's concerns, as it speaks to the modern Latin author's persistence in keeping an age-old tradition alive despite being confronted with a rapidly changing world where there is increasingly little room for dead languages, let alone any active command of or literary composition in their

45 *Carmina et epigrammata* (1878, 9): "Rem acu tetigit. 'I can call Spirits from the Vasty Deep' etc.".
46 Nobbe (1854, 133–134).

fossilized forms. This contrast highlights the liminal state of Latin in the modern era: not quite dead but certainly not fully alive either. Regardless of whether the modern Latin writer was optimistic (e.g., Reuss) or pessimistic (e.g., Vitrioli) about this pervading sense of an uncertain continuity, it seems that they often looked to necrodialogues as a particularly apt instrument for voicing their feelings and opinions, especially since the confrontation with the dead – mainly, but not exclusively, the ancient dead: the Latin tradition could boast a much longer lifespan – also tied in neatly with the inherently Neo-Latin tendency to blend the classical and the contemporary. As I have argued above, the dead acted as mouthpieces for Neo-Latin authors to voice a vast array of views, ranging from rather pedantic concerns regarding the state of Latin itself to all kinds of reflections on nineteenth- and twentieth-century society and politics. Particularly recurring in the latter respect was the emphasis on modern technology as viewed through the eyes of the premodern dead – whether it be the installation of telegraph poles in the classical underworld or the direct confrontation of ancient characters like Davus or Lucius with catalogues of inventions and appliances – often resulting in playful hybridization and contrasting anachronisms. In the end, perhaps these characters can even be seen as "medium stand-ins" for the modern Latin author: some clearly felt like a Davus, content to sing of their modern surroundings in an ancient language and confident in its continuity, while others, like Lucius, would sooner opt for the eternal liminality of cryogenic sleep and await the day when Latin has been restored to its former glory. This struggle to negotiate its ancient roots and the increasing distance from antiquity can also explain, finally, why Neo-Latin poetry seemed so enthralled by contemporary phenomena of otherworldly communication such as mediumism: given both Neo-Latin's status as a moribund tradition and the role of classical scholarship as establishing a dialogue with the ancient past, the rise of Spiritist practices establishing "actual" contact with the dead clearly prompted members of this peculiar microcosm to self-reflect even more on their own liminal position in the modern world.

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Luisa Drews

Contact Failures: Metaphysical Fantasies in German-Language Post-War Radio Plays

1 Introduction

It has often been stated that mediatic self-reflection is a constant companion of the radio play. It is therefore more important to ask in what ways this media self-reflection changes than to be content with the mere fact of self-reflexivity. While the function of media self-reflexivity for the radio play of the 1920s and early 1930s has been seen primarily in its experimental character, which serves self-assurance,[1] the German-language radio play of the 1950s has not yet received sufficient attention in this regard. Only in recent years have there been increased research efforts examining the diversity of post-war radio plays[2] and in the process, the question of radio's relations to the divine and the numinous has also been raised (Rottschäfer 2022). Having already stimulated the imagination of radio makers and listeners in the early days of radio and having represented an invitation to metaphysical images,[3] the functioning of the radio medium is up for debate again after 1945. As this volume suggests, necrodialogues tend to emerge more strongly at moments in history when media shifts confront people more urgently with the phenomenon of mediation. According to that hypothesis, my contribution seeks to connect the changed conditions of radio play productions in the 1950s with the renewed interest in metaphysical forms of communication.

I claim that the attempts of the dead, the absent, and numinous to get in touch with people fail in most cases, despite employing a multitude of means. Using various examples from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, I will show that while radio plays stage the possibility of receiving voices from the beyond, the possibility of those receiving them to enter into dialogue with this beyond is extremely limited. For this reason, the messages received are always at risk of not being recognized in their meaning. I argue that the causes of this one-sidedness – or, to put it more strongly, the impossibility of a dialogue – lie in a multiplication and an increasing complexity of acousmatic situations bound to the history of

1 See for example Pross (2004); Steinfort (2007); Ottmann (2013).

2 See for example H.-U. Wagner (2005); Fetscher (2006a, 2006b); Kobayashi (2011); Kita (2019); and the "Hörspiel" issue of the magazine *treibhaus* published in 2022.

3 For example, invisible radio waves removed from sensory experience, and the one-sided receiver situation: see for example Schrage (2001).

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technology. In the first section, I highlight some moments in media history that privilege a relation between acoustic media, the realm of the dead and Spiritualistic phenomena. The second part aims at outlining the spectrum of sounds related to the dead and the otherworld on the basis of German-language radio plays from 1947 to 1961. In the third and fourth parts, I will focus more deeply on two lesser-known radio plays from the first half of the 1950s – Günter Eich's *Fis mit Obertönen* and Gottfried Benn's *Die Stimme hinter dem Vorhang* – to examine the relationship between acousmatic listening experiences and communication with the dead, the absent, and the numinous. On the one hand, this will involve tracing the sources of acousmatic listening experience on the level of the radio play plot and analyzing verbalized listening experiences of the radio play characters. On the other hand, it is important to distinguish between the listening perception of the radio play characters and that of the radio play listener. Last but not least, the attempts at contact depicted in the radio plays, which are threatened with failure or simply fail, will be located in terms of media history. In doing so, I will show that the dialogues pursued through acousmatic sounds negotiate contemporary problems of radio play aesthetics and the radio medium as well as metaphysical uncertainties of the post-war years.

2 Acoustic Media and the Invisible

Acoustic media have radically changed the ways of imagining and experiencing contact with the dead and the absent. From their onset, recording and broadcasting technologies have proven to be an environment in which speculation about communication between the world of the living and that of the dead could thrive. The recording and reproduction of sounds, as made possible by the gramophone around 1900, for example, allowed the capture of voices of people who were once there, but may not have been alive anymore at the time of playing and listening. Thinking of phonographic records (and photo albums), Friedrich Kittler (1999, 10) observed in his 1986 study *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* that the dead and ghosts, whose appearances once were bound to memories and dreams, became technically reproducible around 1900. "The realm of the dead," Kittler (1999, 13) continued, "is as extensive as the storage and transmission capabilities of a given culture."

Furthermore, acoustic media have given rise to the need for new forms of listening and new languages of describing what is heard. Gramophone technology, for example, allowed for intensive listening to what was recorded and for the discovery of phenomena that could not be easily categorized, such as sounds

of animal or human origin, music hidden beneath noise, spoken language hidden beneath noise or music. But this field also included Spiritualistic research of paranormal voices on tape or radio. In that sense, innovations in acoustic media technology opened ears to metaphysical phenomena. One example that has particularly interested media historians including Kittler is Friedrich Jürgenson's experiments from 1959. Jürgenson (1903–1987) was an Estonian painter, opera singer, and documentary filmmaker who became interested in transcommunication research. According to his own story, Jürgenson (1982, 17–19) wanted to record bird songs in the Swedish countryside, but afterwards, while listening to the tape, he discovered a Norwegian radio broadcast with chanting night birds that are not common in Sweden. At that point, he started to believe that his tape recorder not only functioned as a hypersensitive radio receiver but was also able to establish communication with supernatural phenomena, absent or even dead beings. While research today assumes that Jürgenson discovered the Electronic Voice Phenomenon (EVP), his experiments, which he demonstrated at meetings of voice researchers, sparked a great deal of interest among Western-European Spiritualists[4] and radio and television scholars from the 1960s to the 1980s.[5]

A central reason for this affinity to the supernatural felt by the contemporaries of technical media seems to be the separation between sound production and sound reception. The separation, I argue, created a void that was filled with different explanations and even metaphysical ideas. These can be traced, for example, in the radio discourse of the early 1920s. Responsible for endowing radio with transcendental capabilities was the notion of ether. In the radio debates of that time, the older notion of metaphysical ether, which in ancient Greek natural philosophy was understood to mean the bright, radiant air of the heavens that served as the abode of the gods, was reactivated and blended with the younger notion of physical ether established by Isaac Newton (Kümmel-Schnur 2008, 18–19). Researchers like Wolfgang Hagen and Katja Rothe have shown that the idea of ether as a unitary substance and carrier of waves of light, electromagnetism, and possibly also gravitation remained powerful even when the ether hypothesis could have been abandoned with the experimental proof of electromagnetic waves by Heinrich Hertz (1886) and Albert Einstein's theory of relativity (1905) (Hagen 2005, 73; Rothe 2006, 291; Rothe 2009, 47–56). The notion of ether was as present in radio amateurs' manuals and popular science radio magazines around 1924 as it was among electrical engineers and physicists and in some cases, its popularity continued into the 1940s. Ether provided a simple and attrac-

4 See for example Schäfer (1983).

5 See for example Kittler (1999, 13).

tive explanation in contrast to the abstract technology of the electromagnetic waves, and had the potential to popularize the device (Schrage 2001, 203; see also Meyer 2011).

But the radio seemed not only to maintain connections to higher spheres; its use also took place in connection with Spiritualistic events (Hagen 2002; Hahn 2013, 96). In the 1920s, an American scientist tried to transmit thoughts while standing silently in front of a radio microphone; in Milan, scientists placed people with different mental diseases in an area full of antennas connected to radio receivers and actually received sounds. The German radio magazine *Funk*, which reported on current developments in the field of radio, assisted its audience with reception-related problems, and separately emphasized the technical side of the medium with its offshoot *Der Funkbastler*. *Funk* covered the telepsychic experiments by the neurologist and psychiatrist Cazzamali, and indicated in the article that the following sounds could be heard: "Crunching, whistling, modulated and unmodulated sounds, often in the timbre of a stringed instrument, at times like bell tones and like distant voices" ("Sender Mensch" 1926, 34; my trans.). What is remarkable about the report of the journal *Funk* is that the skepticism of the editors, who were otherwise more interested in technical matters, was no obstacle to giving space to those who were convinced of the success of the Spiritistic series of experiments. Technology and metaphysics both had their place in the radio discourse of the 1920s.

However, the story of the relationship between acoustic media and the invisible did not end there. Recording and reproduction methods were increasingly joined by advanced manipulation techniques that fundamentally called into question the relationship of the audience to what was heard, thus potentially also providing new space for metaphysical speculation. The idea of listening to sounds whose sources were beyond the horizon of visibility and therefore uncertain and underdetermined became particularly important in the late 1940s and early 1950s, when a group of musicians around radio engineer Pierre Schaeffer became interested in concrete music and began manipulating phonograph needles while writing on records and cutting up and reassembling tapes. In his book *Traité des objets musicaux*, published in 1966, Schaeffer (2017, 64) noted a relationship between the acousmatic experience of sound and the omnipresence of modern forms of audio technology: "In former times the device was a curtain; today, the radio and sound reproduction systems, using all forms of electroacoustic transformations, place us, modern listeners to an invisible voice, once more under the conditions of a similar experiment." Schaeffer (and later his successors such as Michel Chion) was referring here to the Pythagorean veil – a philosophical method that involved Pythagoras's disciples, also known as *akousmatikoi*, "listeners" or "auditors," listening to their teacher through a veil or a curtain – and ar-

gued that modern audio technology could manufacture such acousmatic experience (Chion 1983, 19; Schaeffer 2017, 64–65).

This idea became even more important to radio plays in the 1950s than it had been in previous years. Since it was now possible not only to broadcast live from the studio or on location, but also to prepare broadcasts using tape, to broadcast with time delay, and to edit together broadcasts from various tape fragments of different origins, the listening objects became even more questionable. In 1966 Pierre Schaeffer coined the concept "sound object" for the object of acousmatic experience and defined this concept *ex negativo* as follows: "(a) The sound object is not the instrument that played [. . .] (b) The sound object is not the tape [. . .] (c) The same few centimeters of tape can contain a number of different sound objects [. . .] (d) But the sound object is not a state of mind" (Schaeffer 2017, 67–68). Radio play production in the 1950s became a regular venue for the use of pre-recorded tapes. Also, a mixture of words, music, noise, and silence was expected here, given the genre. For these reasons radio plays became a privileged medium for trying out various forms of "blind listening" and experimenting with enigmatic "sound objects" (Schaeffer 2017, 67).[6] The relationship between acousmatic sounds and the realm of the beyond shall be my concern in the following.

3 Tuning In: Sounds from the Otherworld

German-language radio plays of the post-war period have in various forms dealt with what is unknown and potentially threatening, especially in the form of an indistinct absence, sometimes of the dead or their spiritual embodiments in ghosts. Christian Sieg has referred to this interest of radio plays as an "'elective affinity' between radio and metaphysics" (Sieg 2017, 163; my trans.). But how can this affinity be explained in aesthetic terms? Klaus Große Kracht has attributed the "genre-specific potential of radio play" to the "acousmatic quality of voices" (Kracht 2017, 176; my trans.). To study necrodialogues in radio plays, then, how-

6 Although the post-war radio play brought with it a new quality of acousmatic experience in terms of media technology alone, there were of course a number of acousmatic traditions to which the occupation of the radio play could connect. Acousmatic sounds have played an important role from Judaeo-Christian religion (for example, the invisible voice of the Jewish God and in the Catholic confessional) to musical performance practices: in German *Dunkelkonzerte*, darkened auditoriums were used to produce quasi-religious effects and for the premiere of Richard Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde* (1865), an orchestra pit that was invisible to the audience had to be installed to represent Wagner's obsessive idea of a "mystical abyss" (Wagner 1873, 401–402, my trans.; see also Kane 2014, 6).

ever one-sided or unsuccessful, would seem to require a preoccupation with precarious yet powerful voices.

In Wolfgang Borchert's early radio play *Draußen vor der Tür* (1947), the returning soldier Beckmann is haunted by the voice of another. The Other is always there, laughing when Beckmann cries, making him nervous when he wants to sleep. After Beckmann, spurred on by the Other's attacks, faces his past and wants to restore order, he suddenly finds himself alone, abandoned even by the voice of the Other. Desperate, Beckmann, who sees death everywhere, shouts out to "the old man who calls himself God" (Borchert 1947, 01:18:11–01:18:37; my trans.), who does not answer either. In Ernst Schnabel's radio play *Der 29. Januar 1947*, broadcast the same year by the Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk (NWDR), a young man, whose girlfriend Irene had died in agony during the war, is haunted by her voice. At night, when his new girlfriend asks him how it all was back then and whether he sometimes still thinks of Irene, and he lies to her, he hears the voice of the dead girlfriend intervening in his new relationship. The voice accuses him of having forgotten her and asks him to confess his love to the new girlfriend. Since the man cannot overcome his feelings of guilt, his declaration of love seems implausible. In Borchert's and Schnabel's radio plays, the acousmatic voices belong to the dead; in the former, the voices represent the return of a conscience thought lost. In the latter, the dead reappear through voices mixing loss of a loved one with a bad conscience. In both cases, the radio plays' characters who have this acousmatic experience suffer because they feel powerless in the face of the voices they hear.

In the early 1950s, another paradigm seems to arise, in which death is announced by messengers. As a first example, I refer to Fred von Hoerschelmann's radio play *Ich höre Namen*, which was first broadcast in 1954 in a parallel production by Süddeutscher Rundfunk (SDR) and NWDR. In this radio play, we meet the unemployed paymaster Wiesinger, a lonely and noise-sensitive person, who has lost his wife and daughter during the war. One day, he hears completely foreign names, looks for their identities, and has to learn that these people will die shortly thereafter. Whereas Wiesinger tends to locate these voices within himself, he also considers it possible that they come from another world, even the Otherworld. However, he not only receives names, he also passes on those messages to those who bear the names. In this respect, Wiesinger's behavior differs both from the one-way communication of broadcasting and from the two-way communication of a conversation. Wiesinger acts as a transmitter of news, as someone who has heard something (on the radio, for example) and carries the news further. It remains unclear where these voices come from and whether they announce death in every case, because the last name Wiesinger hears in the radio play is his own one (see also Schäfer 2013, 254). In the end, Wiesinger has to live with

complete uncertainty. The confrontation with the possibility of their own death seems to trigger a process of development in all the characters, through which past experiences, e.g., from the war, are processed and reevaluated. But how to live on in the present with this knowledge remains an open question. "We're going on" are the last words in the radio play before spherical sounds composed by Winfried Zillig can be heard (Hoerschelmann 1954, 01:15:15–01:15:17; my trans.). A similar messenger of death turns up in the form of an ordinary man in Wolfgang Weyrauch's radio play, *Totentanz*, which was written and broadcast some years later, in 1961. Here, a passerby in a big city acts as the Grim Reaper's medium. He addresses people here and there, breathes into their faces, and names a date of which they do not understand the meaning: the day of their death. The messenger, unlike the voices in von Hoerschelmann's radio play, retains something reassuring: he offers a hand to the old, the sick, and the unfortunate.

Weyrauch and von Hoerschelmann deal with multiple levels of mediation in their radio plays. Wiesinger is a medium who has fleeting listening experiences in which he apparently receives knowledge about people's deaths. Neither can the origin of the acousmatic experience be determined, nor is Wiesinger able to plausibly convey his auditory experience. The radio play listener is the only one who witnesses this transmission of information. In Weyrauch's work, too, there is no direct contact with the realm of the dead. The wandering messenger who tells people their date of death makes it clear that he has no influence on the course of events. He confronts the dying as persons, but the crucial interaction is verbal (words) and tactile (breath). The radio play listener is alerted that something strange is going on here by the radio play music through an electronic sound composition,[7] fulfilling the conditions of the acousmatic and inviting to an intensive listening into the unknown.

While von Hoerschelmann's and Weyrauch's radio plays deal with voices that announce an imminent death, other post-war radio plays present audible acousmatic voices that are neither dead nor quite alive. Such sounds can for example be heard in Ingeborg Bachmann's radio play *Zikaden* (1955a). According to Plato's *Phaedrus* (1958, 39–40), cicadas are archaic human beings who misunderstood the pleasure of singing to the muses, forgot their human needs, and descended to a bodiless and memoryless existence. The music they played was no longer art or part of a philosophical way of life, but inhuman singing. The fact

7 The music was by Johannes Aschenbrenner, who composed the music for numerous well-known radio plays in the 1950s and also had experience with challenging composition commissions. For Joachim Barckhausen's radio play *Die Schlucht der Fledermäuse* (1959), for example, he translated the sounds of bats, inaudible to humans, into music.

that their singing was perceived as so agonizing and penetrating also has to do with their frequency spectrum, which, similar to mechanical sirens, allows overtones[8] – normally hard to hear in composite sounds – to be heard as isolated (Helmholtz 1863, 84, 100). Hans Werner Henze, who wrote the music for the play, achieved this effect through a dissonant music performed by a large orchestra and mixed choir. Interestingly, by merely listening to the music of this radio play, one cannot infer its mode of production: it takes a trained ear to be able to tell with certainty when a sound is coming from strings or from human voices. Strings and vocals create a peculiar auditory event that corresponds entirely to the liminal state of the cicadas, who once were human. This music was considered by Bachmann to be so integral to the radio play script that she allowed new productions only if they adopted Henze's composition, as she wrote in a letter to Cläre Schimmel (Bachmann 1955b). The cicada song pushes radio play listeners to the limits, but also the radio play characters, who cannot agree on whether what they hear is singing, music, or noise.

As the brief overview has shown, three paradigms of acousmatic necrodialogues can be discerned in the radio play of the post-war years: first, voices from the past or from the realm of the dead; second, voices proclaiming death for the future; and third, voices situated between all classifications (human/animal, music/noise, living/dead) and promising neither unequivocal death nor life, but rather giving expression to an intermediate state. In the following, I will focus on two radio plays in which the production of meaning is an even greater problem than in the previously mentioned radio plays. This is related, I will show, to the radical uncertainty about where these acousmatic sounds come from and what consequences they have (Eich's *Fis mit Obertönen*) as well as what the sounds refer to and what they represent at a certain moment in time (Benn's *Die Stimme hinter dem Vorhang*).

8 The theory of upper partials or overtones was, as Jonathan Sterne (2003, 64) mapped out, one of Helmholtz's most lasting contributions: "Any given sound is made up of a wide range of frequencies or vibration, potentially from the lowest to the highest ranges of human hearing. It contains a lower partial (now called a fundamental) and a series of harmonic overtones that determine its sonic and timbral character." With the help of a spherical resonator he had constructed, Helmholtz succeeded in selecting the individual overtones of a sound. He also used it to sharpen his hearing so that, after sufficient practice, one could audibly dissect a sound without device (Wolf 2018, 35).

4 Günter Eich's *Fis mit Obertönen* – Sounds without Verifiable Origin

Eich's radio play *Fis mit Obertönen*, broadcast 1951 by the SDR, explores the ways of dealing with and trying to explain a mysterious auditory event. The radio play begins with a scene in which a woman describes to her doctor auditory phenomena that prevent her from sleeping. It quickly becomes clear that these phenomena have nothing to do with an ear disease, or with hearing one's own blood circulation, or the external environment:

> PATIENT. For the life of me, I can't recall any similar occurrences.
>
> DOCTOR. It's a kind of noise, isn't it?
>
> PATIENT. Not at all. It's like a sound from an instrument, I couldn't tell you which one. It is an instrument that does not exist. But you could set the tone musically.
>
> DOCTOR. Wait, I have a piano in the next room. We can try it.
> *(he goes into the next room and strikes the small f sharp on the piano)*
> For example, is it this sound?
>
> PATIENT. That's the one. I mean – not exactly. The overtones are clearer than on the piano.
>
> DOCTOR. The small f sharp with overtones, then. It was no coincidence that I picked out the F sharp right away. You are the tenth patient to come to me with this condition. All of them hear this tone continuously, day and night, unchanged, always at the same volume. They no longer sleep, they have no appetite, they become nervous.
>
> PATIENT. Yes, Doctor. I . . .
>
> DOCTOR. Quiet!
>
> PATIENT. What is it?
>
> DOCTOR. I think I hear it now, too!
> (*Music, starting from small f sharp*.)
> (Eich 1951b, 00:02:06–00:03:30; my trans.; Eich 1951a, 2–3)

In this radio play, the question of the origin and meaning of sound becomes a problem for different forms of knowledge and disciplines, such as medicine, theology, mysticism, politics, and physics (Eich 1951b, 00:04:02–00:05:12; Eich 1951a, 3–4). For physicists, it is an unsolvable puzzle. They can neither determine the limit of audibility nor locate the source of the sound. The fact that even the hard of hearing and the deaf can clearly hear the F sharp remains in need of explana-

tion. The only thing that can be established beyond doubt is that the volume is always and everywhere – that is, in the whole of England and in parts of Ireland – 40 phons. In the absence of clear explanations, several rumors circulate about the sound object (Eich 1951b, 00:05:45–00:06:17; Eich 1951a, 5–6). Some believe in nuclear tests, many in a politically motivated attack of the East against the West (a hypothesis that seemed to resonate with West German fears in the context of a divided post-war Germany), some believe that it is a capitalist intimidation attempt by means of loudspeakers. Others again believe the sounds are signals coming from other worlds (the Moon, Mars, and Venus), or are caused by aurora borealis. Somebody even speculates that the sound could be the pause signal of a radio amateur. The most imaginative interpretation of the sound is given by church representatives in the radio play who identify it as a sign from God, a "doomsday trumpet" that is supposed to call for repentance and warn against further sins (Eich 1951b, 00:06:17–00:07:12; my trans.; Eich 1951a, 6–7). Many people begin to believe that the sound heralds their imminent death. Some try to intoxicate themselves with love and alcohol only to realize that their soul has already disappeared and their body is only a "shell" (Eich 1951b, 00:12:50–00:17:08; my trans.; Eich 1951a, 11–14). While the sound initially produces fear among the people, it seems that over time it becomes accepted.

While politicians discuss behind closed doors whether to drown out the F sharp with air raid sirens and how to get scientists to lie publicly in an attempt to prevent economic and political chaos, the majority of people are already assuming and preparing for a coming doomsday. Some flee by car to Scotland and by boat to France, hoping they will be safe there. Some try to sell their homes, others try to get a place on one of the coveted rescue ships, commissioned by the "Doomsday Society" as "replicas of Noah's Ark" and equipped with their own radio systems (Eich 1951b, 00:33:06–00:33:34; my trans.; Eich 1951a, 28). Interestingly, these preparations testify to the firm conviction that although the world will end, radio communications shall endure (I will come back to this observation).

Eventually, the sound disappears unexpectedly, or rather, most people no longer hear the sound. Science still has no explanation for the phenomenon that frightened people for three weeks. Many try to undo their disaster plans and go back to their lives. A preacher who had called for repentance in anticipation of the end of the world no longer has an audience. In this sense, he suffers the same fate as the acousmatic sound. Only a journalist is still interested in him as an agent of one of the theories that were circulating about the origin and the meaning of the sound:

PREACHER. The sound did not stop, sir.

> REPORTER. Pardon? Excuse me: do you still hear it?
>
> PREACHER. No, but the ears have become accustomed to it. A sound that is there constantly and unchanged is no longer perceived at last. The ears get used to it in the same way as man gets used to sin. [. . .] Nothing has changed. God's voice remains, even if we do not hear it.
>
> REPORTER. This is indeed an original view. (Eich 1951b, 00:54:25–00:54:57; my trans.; Eich 1951a, 45–46)

The quotation shows that the preacher, a medium of God, himself establishes the relationship with God's voice when he wants to explain the origin of the sound. Although the radio play does not clearly favor any explanation of the sound, it should not be underestimated that Eich leaves his listeners with this suggestion at the end. After a "final music in which the F sharp tone once again dominates," as Eich put it in the manuscript (Eich 1951a, 46; my trans.; Eich 1951b, 00:55:12–00:55:33), the radio play ends. The acousmatic sound audible to the radio play listeners could thus be understood as an immediate confirmation of what was said before: there are metaphysical certainties and divine presence, even if they seem to elude the sensory perception of the majority.

The origin of the sound is, as already mentioned, never understood. However, while most of the radio play characters assumed that now "everything is as before" (Eich 1951b, 00:48:51–00:48:53; my trans.; Eich 1951a, 41), Rose confides to her lover Henry that she "sometimes still" hears the sound: "But I think I hear it only for me" (Eich 1951b, 00:50:54–00:51:04; my trans.; Eich 1951a, 42). In this respect, Eich's radio play is an example of unsuccessful communication between the invisible realm where the mysterious sound originates (and which is associated with air, light, sky, divine power, electricity, and nuclear power) and the people who perceive it. The contact attempt distinguishes this play from later radio plays not only because it fails completely (people continue their former life although the message of the sound remains unclear), but also because the problem of hearing strange sounds is here a collective one and not just an issue for some individuals (as in Hoerschelmann's *Ich höre Namen* and Weyrauch's *Totentanz*) or for a segregated group (as in Bachmann's *Zikaden*). The acousmatic situation cannot be resolved within the radio play plot: even if acousmatic hearing seems to disappear for most of them and no longer plays a role in their lives, it remains mysterious. In contrast, however, radio play listeners still hear the F sharp even when the radio play characters think they are free from it. The idea of the F sharp with overtones forms the framework of Eich's radio play; the musical leitmotif – presumably realized through the pitch-shifted play of a woodwind and a string instrument (the archival material does not give any information about the

composer and the instruments) – is being played at the beginning and at the end (Eich 1951b, 00:00:08–00:00:50, 00:55:12–00:55:33), as well as the music connecting scenes (for example, Eich 1951b, 00:19:09–00:19:25; Eich 1951a, 16). The sound continues to produce meaning (or at least several suggestions for interpretation among the figures) throughout the play: its volume increases, for example, at the end of the scenes in which the characters describe their threatening listening experiences, and in the later, cheerful scene, where a light music conveys what the typescript calls a "liberated exhalation," as the characters believe that the terrible sound is no longer there (Eich 1951b, 00:44:54–00:45:40; Eich 1951a, 38; my trans.), the F sharp reappears together with an ominous, threatening music (Eich 1951b, 00:55:12–00:55:33).

The radio play thus challenges its audience to think about the extent to which the story has to do with their own lives, in other words, to what extent the sound is audible to them as well. What distinguishes the radio play, in my opinion, from a post-war radio play that merely thematizes existential uncertainties, the search for truth and transcendence, is the use of overtones, to which twofold significance can be ascribed. Since several religious practices around the world – from the chanting of Tibetan monks to the Roman Catholic Church's Gregorian chants – developed virtuosic overtone singing, one can assume that Eich wanted to strengthen the religious aspect when he additionally emphasized the overtones in the acousmatic sound. However, overtones also had a privileged position in the history of physical sound perception in the nineteenth century, namely the experiments of Hermann von Helmholtz, and were furthermore considered as acoustic phenomena radio broadcasting should not additionally promote. Accordingly, acousmatic sound with overtones would be a vehicle for communicating both metaphysical questions and perception problems of broadcasting.

In the following, I would like to use the question of how radio plays and their listeners relate to each other, for a reading of the radio play in terms of media history and media aesthetics. This approach seems to me productive for the following reasons: first, both the mysterious sound (as in the case of one character's suggestion to interpret the F sharp as the pause sign of a radio amateur) and its management within the radio play (as in the case of the ark equipped with radio reception) are associated with radio. Eich's *Hörspiel* thus seems to have created a self-reflexive reading of radio and radio play in acousmatic sound and its forms of perception. Accordingly, the way broadcasting was thought about at the time could be helpful in better understanding the function of the acousmatic sound. Second, Eich's radio play problematizes two crucial and highly debated elements of radio plays, music and noise, as writing on radio play poetics (Schwitzke 1963, 228) and studies in listener research show (Drews 2022, 98–100). This is surprising because music, and especially noise, are used sparingly in radio drama of the

time and should never draw too much attention to themselves. If Eich deviates from this pattern and instead makes the F sharp sound the central theme and means of design, one can suspect a media-aesthetic awareness.

Considering the contemporary discussions about the recording, broadcast, and reception of sounds, Eich's radio play stands out in several ways. One aspect is the information-theoretical one. The mathematical theory of communication that Shannon and Weaver formulated in the late 1940s (Shannon 1949a; Shannon 1949b; Shannon and Weaver 1998; see also Wiener 1948), which had also served as inspiration for several other radio plays, revolved around the disruption of the communication channel caused by noise. But the problem, in *Fis mit Obertönen*, is no longer noise, from which information can ideally be extracted, but a musically normalized phenomenon of enigmatic origin. Eich's radio play therefore distinguishes itself from earlier radio plays: while older radio plays accidentally presented noise as a consequence of poor recording and broadcasting techniques which led radio producers to opt for clear pronunciation and unambiguous acoustic signs to avoid any further disturbance of the communication, Eich's play employs unwanted and unpleasant sounds intentionally. *Fis mit Obertönen* thus favors the reading that, despite technical improvements in production, transmission and reception conditions (such as, for example, ultrashort waves implemented in German-speaking broadcasting in the first half of the 1950s), musical sound can still constitute a puzzle and a threat, even when it can be notated according to the conventions of music, i.e., with the help of the semitone scale and the five-line notation system.

Both the new possibilities of sound art and the developing radio play of the late 1930s and early 1940s were characterized by uncertainties that presented opportunities to think further about the means and procedures of audio production.[9] At the beginning of the 1950s, Heinz Schwitzke's work at the biggest West German radio station NWDR eliminated some of these uncertainties by establishing a radio play poetics that placed the main emphasis on the word and gave sound only a very limited scope. Schwitzke felt that music and noise were most effective in radio drama "when listeners thought they heard neither noise nor music at the end, or when they thought they heard noise and music even though nothing of the sort was used" (Schwitzke 1963, 228–229; my trans.). Schwitzke's fixation on the word is directly related to the radio play concept he espoused. In his view, derived from Eich's radio plays he vigorously promoted, the meaning of radio play after 1945 goes back to a closeness to theology and the word of God; he claimed that a link between radio play and Protestantism existed (Schwitzke 1961,

9 See Zinner (1946); Wiese (1947); Mehnert (1948); Giesz (1951); Kalow (1951).

53). According to this concept of "Christian dramaturgy" (Schwitzke 1974; my trans.), the radio play, in contrast to contemporary literature, was able to "communicate" (Schwitzke 1963, 368; my trans.) and to master theological challenges. Erwin Wickert, whose radio play concept of the "inner stage" was an equally important notion developed at the time, called for a very similar sparing use of noise as "key sound"[10] (Wickert 1954, 510; my trans.). As one of the most important authors of the NWDR, Günter Eich was definitely part of this radio play aesthetic, which sanctified the word and harbored reservations about sound and noise.[11] However, Eich did question the status of sounds in some of his radio plays. In *Fis mit Obertönen*, sound displays the epistemological function of making listeners think about the ways of sense-making of the world they live in, thereby encouraging them to better understand the ills and challenges of post-war West German society. Fear, death, and the end of the world, by being associated by the radio play characters with the sound coming from outside, may also represent the state of post-war and post-National Socialist society becoming audible in the radio play.

Another different listening scenario, namely a dulling of the ability to hear certain sounds, was the subject of a debate in listener research and psychology at that time. This debate, in which both radio play theorists and radio practitioners participated,[12] centered on so-called "continuous listening," a listening attitude understood as passive, which did not select but followed radio broadcasts indiscriminately, without critically reflecting and questioning what was heard. Audience research, which was intensively pursued in the post-war years, especially at NWDR, dealt with the relationship of listeners to radio broadcasts, not least against the background of National Socialist radio experience and listening habits, and asked how passive listeners (*Hörer*) could become active, critical listeners (*Zuhörer*). Between 1949 and 1950, the psychologist Gerhard Maletzke studied the role of radio in contributing to this "listening education" (1949, 25; my trans.; see also Maletzke 1950) and increasing listeners' involvement in what was broadcast. He examined in particular the factor of habit in the listening experience:

> Broadcasting captures attention insofar as it is new and unfamiliar as an acoustic phenomenon, or if it starts unexpectedly. In all cases, the attention-grabbing effect of this sound source will be greatest shortly after the acquisition of the receiving set and will then decline somewhat over time, perhaps more rapidly with frequent listening than with infrequent listening and always with personal differences. (Maletzke 1949, 16, my trans.)

10 In his text, Wickert uses the English term.

11 See Schwitzke's work on "theological challenges" from 1978 and his undated typescript on Eich's "theological phantasies," my trans.

12 See, for example, Fischer (1952); Fritz (1962); Maletzke (1978).

Referring to Gestalt theory's distinction between figure and ground (Rubin 1921), Maletzke was able to explain why "continuous listeners" were so fond of sound fade. Through this effect, the "already reduced"[13] number of overtones could be reduced even further, making the sound softer and more unobtrusive: "The fewer the overtones, the more pleasant the radio as background noise, underscoring, sound wallpaper, in other words, as background," Maletzke (1949, 17; my trans.) concluded. In the psychology of perception of the post-war period, overtones were thus regarded as signals demanding attention.

If applied to Eich's radio play *Fis mit Obertönen* and the function of the acousmatic sound, it can be stated that the disturbing, sudden sound represented an attempt to "startle the passive permanent listeners out of their sofa corner," as Eich had once put it, referring to another radio play he wrote entitled *Träume*, also broadcast as *Fis mit Obertönen* in Nordwestdeutscher Rundfunk ("Mörderische Angelegenheit" 1951, 32; my trans.).[14] In *Träume*, the narrator introduces the last "dream" of the radio play with the following words:

> The Greeks believed that the sun on its journey across the sky rubbed against its path and thus produced a sound that was incessant and eternally constant and therefore inaudible to our ear. How many such inaudible sounds live around us? One day they will be heard and fill our ear with horror. (Eich 1951c, 00:51:25–00:51:56; my trans.)

In both of Eich's radio plays, the problem of auditory perception plays a crucial role. The last dream in *Träume* is about the arrival of a terrible sound that even the radio cannot drown out (Eich 1951c, 00:51:56–01:07:50). The sound comes, we learn from the figures in the radio play, from termites that hollow out all objects from the inside. This idea echoes the radio play *Fis mit Obertönen*, where the bodies of people are described by Henry as soulless shells (Eich 1951b, 00:16:44–00:16:56; Eich 1951a, 14). In *Träume*, the characters become increasingly tired of the sound and finally die when a thunderstorm causes the house to collapse. Although *Fis mit Obertönen* seems to address a similar set of problems, it has not received comparable attention from researchers. Yet this radio play in particular provides interesting insights into the self-reflection of broadcasts and radio plays. The addition of overtones to the tantalizing sound can be understood as an ag-

13 Maletzke wrote his article at a time when FM broadcasting had not yet been introduced throughout West-German radio stations. The older AM technique worked for voice and some music, but missed the overtones of true high-fidelity sound. After FM broadcasting was introduced in the early 1950s, radio gained a previously unknown sound quality that captured not only the fundamentals but also the overtones of musical instruments and voices, which also contributed to the rediscovery of the possibilities of radio play in Germany.

14 See also the letter from Otto Heinz Jahn to Günter Eich 1951.

gressive affront to the reception habits of the "permanent listeners" who dislike and try to reduce overtones. The reactions of Eich's characters show precisely that confusion about the relation between sound object, individual listening impression, and source of sounds that Helmholtz, providing the basis for analyzing overtones, had addressed by focusing on frequencies, rather than specific local causes, and by emphasizing the aspects of sound synthesis and reproduction (see Sterne 2003, 65).

Nevertheless, the sound is not permanently perceived as a disturbance by the characters of Eich's radio play (in contrast to von Hoerschelmann's radio play *Ich höre Namen*, in which Wiesinger constantly listens attentively to the threatening messages). According to contemporary audience research, the listeners' changed attitude could be explained by the fact that the acousmatic sound, initially perceived as an audio signal communicating threat and a warning, becomes an inaudible background noise after three weeks. This reading would be consistent with Shannon's mathematical theory of communication, according to which permanently occurring disturbances in which no message can be detected are attributed to the communication channel. The fact that the decoding of the message is unsuccessful, and the establishment of contact must consequently be considered a failure, seems to be the central criticism of Eich's radio play. In the end, there is only room for hope on the part of the radio play audience: the continued sounding of the acousmatic sound can be understood as an appeal to the radio listeners to decode the message of the sound and to turn the failed establishment of contact into a successful dialogue.

5 Gottfried Benn's *Die Stimme hinter dem Vorhang* – Sounds from behind the Curtain

While Eich's radio play depicts a genuinely acousmatic listening experience that cannot be explained and eventually disappears for most, Benn's radio play *Die Stimme hinter dem Vorhang*, written in 1951, first broadcast in 1952 and newly produced in 1955 for the night program,[15] deals with the artificial production of

15 The radio play was first broadcast by Radio Bremen in 1952. Since no typescript of the 1952 broadcast has survived, I have decided to use the later production of Südwestfunk from 1955, which was again directed by Gert Westphal, as a basis for investigation. Both the sound recording (Benn 1955b) and the typescript (Benn 1955a) of this "Nachtstudio" production are available. The radio play also underwent numerous new productions until the end of the 1960s.

an acousmatic listening experience that does not work out as planned and instead resolves into absurdity. The radio play begins with a scene of a family reunion, with the eldest son instructing his father:

> ALFRED. Move behind your curtain, great father, it is better not to look at each other in the eye. There you can smoke your pipe or stroke your beard, also take a nap if you are bored, and personally I like to talk against a wall, it is the natural listener. If you want to make yourself heard, ring the bell. I have put two bells for you, differently tuned. The brighter one means (*he strikes the bright bell*): faster, not so much detail, the darker one (*he strikes the darker bell*): a little slower, more deepening. If you ring both, you want to say: You touch the cosmic, do not find home! (Benn 1955b, 00:01:25–00:02:15; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 1)

The father of the family is here relegated to invisibility, his ability to refer to his children's narratives and to intervene is reduced to exclusively acoustic interventions, whereby he is not allowed to use his voice (Ramm 2004, 94); behind the barrier of the curtain, two bells function as his vocal prostheses (Görner 2014, 166). The setting of the radio play has been understood by Friederike Ramm as a longing for a "great other," a "Deus absconditus" (Ramm 2004, 133; my trans.). Alfred's thematic framing of the interaction also seems to confirm this interpretation: "The program is, what does the producer say to his sons and daughters – nowadays. [. . .] If there is the sacred in everything, we must seek it. [. . .] If there are calls from distant worlds, we must strive to hear them" (Benn 1955b, 00:02:32–00:03:27; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 1–2). Alfred is concerned on the one hand with the values and knowledge the older generation bequeath to the younger, i.e., to what extent a dialogue between the old and the young is possible, and on the other hand with the question of whether and where the sacred can be found in this world. From the approach Alfred takes, the initial impression is that the evoked distant world might be accessible in concentrated listening. This hope is disappointed in the process of radio play.

In the first part, titled "Examples," the father seems at first to be listening attentively. However, he does not intervene by ringing the two bells, but with his voice, thus violating the rules of communication imposed upon him by his son. Towards the end of the first part, both bells actually ring, but without the father having intended to do it. As it happens, he had fallen asleep and dropped the bells, which is why his children could not establish a meaning for this acoustic sign (Benn 1955b, 00:19:12–00:19:25; Benn 1955a, 13–14). In the second part, "The Sunday Newspaper," the father makes repeated use of the acoustic signs assigned to him but continues to talk into the children's speeches. He comments and criticizes, becoming increasingly indignant in the face of the questions and assertions that the children formulate based on the reading of the newspaper. The argument culminates when the children want to know: "what is actually going on

with the Creator?" and "where is the sacred?" (Benn 1955b, 00:40:52–00:40:57, 00:43:35–00:43:38; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 28, 30). The father, who in the typescript of the radio play is now addressed in capital letters as "Great Father," forbids any reference to God: "Leave G . . . out of it. When you go through your rubber soles, then you see why he's not a cobbler yet" (Benn 1955b, 00:41:43–00:42:04; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 29). The children beg him for an answer, but he only gives them an incomprehensible saying: "Live in the dark, do what we can in the dark" (Benn 1955b, 00:44:47–00:55:02; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 31). Then he throws the bells over the curtain, which he considers "also just an intellectual farce," and disappears (Benn 1955b, 00:45:43–00:45:47; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 32). In the third part, titled "Melancholy and Neon Light," which takes place two months later, a choir has taken over the commentary function previously performed by the father. Alfred, the firstborn, states that there is no one to kneel before anymore. The fact that the father was a substitute for God becomes clear once more: "The old man has also abandoned us, the situation is bitter" (Benn 1955b, 00:54:32–00:54:38; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 37). The play ends with two questions and a riddle: "What else could we kneel to? At the most, before his strange word: 'To live in the dark, to do what we can in the dark.' But how is that to be interpreted?" (Benn 1955b, 00:54:48–00:55:10; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 37). The enigmatic instruction to live in the dark seems to refer to the title of the radio play, in which the voice from which spiritual authority and metaphysical assurance was hoped for is behind the curtain, i.e., not visible and presumably not accessible at all. With this loneliness and darkness, so the conclusion of the riddle suggests, the characters of the radio play must thus come to terms.

As the arrangement of the acousmatic situation in the three parts of the radio play has shown, the acousmatic experiment from which the children had hoped to gain divine intercession and guidance fails. Ramm (2004, 117) relates the impossibility of talking directly to the father to problems of artistic production as such. According to this reading, Benn's radio play enacts the "monological character of poetry" (Ramm 2004, 141; my trans.).[16] In contrast with this interpretation, I focus on the radio play's various allusions to broadcasting communication and add a media-historical reading to Ramm's poetological one. Such a reading has already been promoted by Kittler, who wrote in 1989 that Benn's radio play thematizes the conditions of radio play production. While Kittler (1989, 61; my trans.) was primarily concerned with the "separation of commands and data, control space and broadcasting space," I will emphasize the broadcasting context of the radio play

16 See also Ansel (2007) and Benn's statements on poetry in a radio interview from 1954 in Benn (2003, 288, 292).

and the expectation that were linked to this context. As the title indicates, the "voice behind the curtain" refers to more than the acousmatic situation within the radio play. It also alludes, although in a veiled way, to the broadcasts of the so-called *Nachtprogramme* and *Abendstudios*, which were created in West-German radio stations primarily between 1947 and 1949 on the model of the BBC Third Program (Boll 2004, 152). These night programs took place much later, in contrast to radio plays that hat fixed broadcast slots in the evening. The repeated recommendation to close one's eyes while listening to radio plays in order to be able to fully concentrate on what is being heard[17] was not necessary in the case of the night programs. They played in the dark anyway, at a marginal time of day, during which the few listeners who still tuned in were particularly interested in the program and tended not to be casual listeners. The night programs broadcast a sophisticated program that had an entertainment, educational, and socio-political mission addressed to a small intellectual elite: music and music criticism, radio plays, features, round-table discussions, stories, essays, and lectures. The late-evening slot had been chosen because it was a low-rating time, but it was also well suited to highlight the failure of the sense of sight associated with the medium, and to support contemplation after a hectic day at work. In this respect, the nighttime programs, that also became a space for innovation in radiophonic forms and new, electronic music, could well be seen as a secularized form of Sunday church services. It may be no coincidence that at Südwestdeutscher Rundfunk (SWF), where Benn's radio play was broadcast in 1955 in the night program, a very similar cultural program, *Die Aula*, had been running on Sunday mornings since 1947 (Boll 2004, 116–117). The existential importance of radio seems to have been recognized here very early on, even if the broadcasts subsequently took up a broadcasting slot that was less competitive with church services.

For Benn, too, radio had significance. The fact that he was interested in, engaged with, and worked with the medium of radio outside of his two radio plays can be proven in many ways. His biography shows that radio was an important instrument to regain a foothold in literature after the Second World War; between 1948 and 1956, he made fifty-two radio appearances (Hanna and Reents 2016, 18).[18] We also know that Benn regularly listened to the radio, albeit to different broadcasts than those in which he participated (Hanna and Reents 2016, 222, 256; Benn 2003, 308). But more importantly, he addressed the radio (as well as the press) in his poems, such as *Radio I* and *Radio II* (1953) (Benn 2006, 162–163) and

17 See for example Eckert (1938, 11).

18 Some radio interviews are published in Benn (2003, 217–349).

Impromptu (1954) (Benn 2009, 290), and in his radio play *Die Stimme hinter dem Vorhang*. This radio play stages, recognizably for both the radio play characters and for the radio play listeners, an acousmatic situation reminiscent of play-within-a-play scenarios of theatre plays, where meta-levels offer different perspectives on the story.[19] While the dramatic tradition offers many examples of play-within-a-play scenarios and a long-standing tradition has helped train the reception of these switches at the level of representation, radio plays that engage different levels of listening have typically led to confusion among listeners. Famously, in 1938, listeners of Orson Welles's radio play *The War of the Worlds* believed that Martians would actually land on Earth because they could not distinguish between the fictional radio report of the radio play and the actual radio program. The first German-language radio play, *Zauberei auf dem Sender* (1924) by Hans Flesch, caused similar irritation in the audience; some listeners believed they were earwitnesses to a disruption of the regular radio program, operated by radio amateurs. Benn's radio play admittedly no longer belongs to the radio age in which live disasters were broadcast,[20] but it nevertheless represents a listening event that is threatened by interference and whose representation eventually fails. The suggestion would be that there is a continuing or worsening problem with broadcasting and/or metaphysics that is addressed in Benn's radio play.

It is striking that the father-god does not simply disappear from the scene, i.e., within the diegesis itself, because the figure had not "appeared" before either, being hidden behind a curtain. It is unclear from the beginning who this figure is. The hopes and disappointed reactions of the children merely indicate who this figure was supposed to stand for – a role that he is not prepared to take on. This means that with the disappearance of the father's voice, the last individual feature left disappears, after the perception of his body had been already eliminated twice before (firstly, because radio broadcasting, as contemporary radio play aesthetics thought, cannot communicate bodies, but only voices, and secondly, because of the curtain). The radio play script lists the father among the characters only as "The voice." Banished behind the curtain, reduced to acoustic signs, Alfred makes him a medial substitute of a god who is absent from the beginning and of whom it is also not clear whether he (still) exists. In the course of the radio play, the suspicion that the proxy function refers to a blank space becomes more and more pressing. The substitutes change (first the father, then the chorus), but the basic problem, the longing of the children for a center of meaning and coherence, persists.

19 See also Ramm (2004, 130).

20 See more details on this in Rothe (2009).

The curtain, which in Benn's play seems to cover a void and to draw a boundary between this world and another, symbolically restoring something like divinity, has often been a subject of reflection in media and music theory, sometimes in explicit connection to Pythagoras, who famously acted in his teaching as an acousmatic voice from behind the curtain. Rudolf Arnheim wrote in the early 1930s, referring to atmospheric or background noise, that "the basic-sound of the scene is placed *behind* the principal curtain" (Arnheim 1936, 170). In Arnheim's materialistic concept of sound architecture, which is strongly shaped by Gestalt theory,[21] the main story and dialogues happen in the acoustic "foreground." In contrast, numerous radio plays of the 1920s and 1930s, but also as late as the 1940s and 1950s, opted for a more literal understanding of the deprivation of the visual and placed the whole action in the darkness, something that was increasingly criticized by radio play theorists as a misunderstanding of the medium.[22] Benn seems to share a certain skepticism about scenarios of impossible vision, although his approach to radio communication does not coincide with Schwitzke in every aspect. His radio play exposes the setting of the partial elimination of the sense of sight on the level of the radio play plot in a way that makes the whole transmission and reception process appear problematic. This becomes apparent, for example, when Alfred, after sending the father behind the curtain, says that he "personally likes to talk to a wall, because it is the natural listener" (Benn 1955b, 00:01:47–00:01:52; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 1). An impersonal wall as a listener is the exact opposite of the listener that broadcasting executives and radio play poetics had in mind, and it is remarkable how the transition is made here from a curtain permeable to voices and sounds to a wall.

But this is not the only example that makes it clear that the communication situation intended in the radio play does not work. Benn's play does not follow the traditional acousmatic set-up, as we find it in Eich's radio plays. The speech leader in *Die Stimme hinter dem Vorhang* perverts the acousmatic situation in two different ways. Let us remember that Schaeffer had determined the function of the Pythagorean curtain as follows: "If Pythagoras has his disciples listen to him through a curtain in this way, it is because he hopes they will hear and understand better both what he is and what he is saying" (Schaeffer 2017, 113). But just the opposite happens in the radio play. With Pythagoras, it was the disciples who were supposed to keep quiet while the master taught.[23] In Benn's play, the father-god is supposed to listen to the children's stories. He may direct their

21 See Verstegen (2005); VanCour (2010).

22 See for example Schwitzke (1963, 49, 165).

23 See also Schaeffer (2017, 64).

speeches to some extent with the help of the bells, but he cannot silence them. The "Dialog zur Zeit," as the subtitle of Benn's radio play broadcast in 1955 reads, thus has to do with exchange only in a very reduced form. The second way the play alters the acousmatic setting is by reversing a basic premise of acousmatic listening, as discussed in the course of radiophonic and musical experimentation (Schaeffer 2012, 47–48). "Pure listening" as a practice is, according to Schaeffer (2017, 66), based on the uncertainty that arises from not being able to identify the source of the sound. In Benn's radio play, however, we know from the beginning that the father character is responsible for the sounds behind the curtain. Both the radio play audience and the radio play characters are thus deprived of pure listening. What happens instead is that the father refuses to let his identity, his voice, fall silent and become something indeterminately metaphysical. The definition of acousmatic listening, developed on the basis of acoustic media and arts, here applies at most to the so-called "Examples" presented by different voices in the first part of the radio play. The origin of these voices cannot be located within the radio play: they do not have names and their relation to the children is unclear, they seem to be coming from anywhere, but, in contrast to Schaeffer's definition, we can identify them as human voices.

The father however, addressed as a substitute for God, destroys the altered acousmatic setting imposed on him and leaves the scene. In the crisis staged by the play, two problems emerge: first, communication through the medium of the radio is a one-sided, distanced form of communication, in which the co-expressivity of facial expressions, gestures, and speech is suspended; second, divine intercession and assistance become questionable simply because the subjects seeking a relationship with a transcendent dimension are not sure whether there is still a God or whether he is dead, as literature and philosophy of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have repeatedly suggested – from Nietzsche's theothanatology, to Sartre's *Les mouches* (1943), Beckett's *En attendant Godot* (1953), and Arthur Miller's *After the Fall* (1964). The impossibility of finding a way out of this metaphysical crisis is demonstrated both by the father's exaltation before leaving the scene and by the strange effect of the singing from the Sunday paper, which also cannot offer a suitable substitute for religiosity. Benn's poems *Radio I* and *Radio II* similarly describe the situation of being excluded from a meaningful life: "I don't see much nature, rarely come to lakes, | gardens only sporadically, with bars in front of them, | or allotment gardens, that's all, | I depend on surrogates: | Radio, newspaper, magazines" (Benn 2006, 162; my trans.). The impossibility of finding deeper meaning in the present is directly linked to modern media such as radio, because it alienates its audience from experiencing life even more. In the end, Benn exposes the discrepancy between the conception of educational radio programs and the religious deprivation of radio listeners: "nothing blesses

me, it is pure unblessing, | but these professors, | they teach without intermission, | they put everything they have into teaching" (Benn 2006, 163; my trans.).

Benn's two radio poems criticize contemporary West German cultural broadcasting for its inability to respond to the needs of people in post-war society and to answer the question of their place in the world. *Die Stimme hinter dem Vorhang* seems to resonate with this critical stance. However, the 1955's production of Benn's radio play was part of the same elitist cultural broadcasting he criticized, the *Nachtstudio* productions. The repeated references to the curtain and the elimination of the sense of sight, but above all the message "[l]iving in the dark, doing what we can in the dark" (Benn 1955b, 00:44:47–00:55:02; my trans.; Benn 1955a, 31) seem to mirror the reception situation of the listeners, who listened to the radio alone, at night, sometimes in the dim light of their homes to save electricity in those post-war years. I suggest here that Benn's critique in the radio play went even further. He considered the human condition in general and the situation after the two world wars in particular to be so complex, so "dark," that a hearing situation created through technical means, from which one hoped for divine guidance and the creation of meaning, had to appear artificial, hyperbolic, and even absurd. In the 1950s, Benn repeatedly emphasized that he considered modern technology to be "terribly overrated" (Benn 2003, 279; my trans.). Going into darkness or being deprived of sight does not guarantee that the trivialities of everyday life, such as the annoyed comments of one's father, will turn into anything sublime. In 1954, in conversation with Oskar Wessel, Benn said of his radio play:

> I don't want to glorify this work, but this voice speaks something that has haunted me all my life, a motif that has always been in my thoughts, this voice teaches as a final maxim and dodge: "Live in the dark, do what we can in the dark" – it is a serious voice, this is the Sermon on the Mount. The voice wants to say, leave your eternal chatter, your lamentation for something "higher," man is not a higher being, we are not the generation that strives from the darkness into the light. Where we are going, I frankly don't know, but what we achieved was to a large extent the arrogant, the hybrid, even the stupid – so some dismantling of this arrogance of ours seemed in place, a short stay in the dark, even in a hostile area, seemed appropriate to this voice. (Benn 2003, 310; my trans.)

Benn captured the disappointment resulting from this insight in the title of the third part of the radio play, "Melancholy and Neon Light." His radio play measured the contemporary possibilities and limits of the medium of broadcasting just as critically as the possibility of finding God and receiving an answer to one's own existential questions. Radio broadcasting, as Benn made clear, is not a model

for a two-way communication,[24] nor can it fulfil metaphysical needs to get in contact with something sacred. The fact that, for many in the post-war years, the radio set was the "center of the home" (Schildt 1999, 18; my trans.) should be taken seriously also as a symptom of a search for God, in which the radio is no more than the contemporary medium of a technical misunderstanding and an old hope for contact with a higher entity. While in Eich's plays there is still a residual hope that at least attentive listeners of the radio plays will hear the acousmatic sounds, reflect on their meaning, and arrive at a deeper insight into their lives and their situation, Benn completely demystifies the imagery of listening to the radio. His poems as well as his radio play demonstrate that on the radio, as in people's lives, there is nothing transcendental, but only conflict, fragmentation, and contradiction.

6 Fading Out: Failed Attempts at Contact

In Eich's and Benn's radio plays, there is not much hope for spiritual survival or even nourishment after the terror of two world wars. Eich's sounds are threatening and herald the imminent end of the world. From one day to the next, the characters' lives seem to be disrupted from the outside. It is precisely because the origin and meaning of sound remain misunderstood, that the sound can acquire such great power. In Benn's work, the characters, though already estranged from themselves, strive for transcendence they cannot achieve. They seek to gain knowledge and restore meaning through the realm of the audible until the player behind the curtain has had enough of this ridiculous spectacle. In Eich's radio play, contact is sought through the medium of music. The F sharp with overtones, however, fails to convey its message. In Benn's work, the characters are not unexpectedly confronted with fear-inducing sounds. The children themselves seek an approach to a divine instance by asking their father to communicate with them only through two bells. But this communication is also unsuccessful. With Eich, the radio play characters would have to start listening again; with Benn, they would have to permanently give up their obedience to authoritative voices. What radio plays by Bachmann, Borchert, Eich, Hoerschelmann, and Weyrauch have in

24 The discrepancy between a technical and political situation in which public broadcasting was not designed as a two-way model of communication and, despite everything, the hopes that broadcasting could also allow such forms of communications can, of course, already be seen in the 1920s and 1930s, for example in Bertolt Brecht's work. What is more interesting here is that the disappointed hope is taken up once again after 1945.

common is that acousmatic sounds are supposedly never meaningless. They always try to convey something even if their meaning cannot be deciphered. The listening experiences that are staged and thematized in the radio plays are fragile, difficult to convey, and ultimately beyond the listener's control. In most cases, they announce something unknown and are associated with threat, loss, death, and the Otherworld. If one follows the assumption that the listening experiences of the radio play characters resonate with contemporary debates about radio reception, it looks as if in West German radio after 1945, i.e., after the experiences with National Socialist propaganda radio, it was still uncertain whether acoustic media could restore an intimate connection to the meaning and purpose of individual and social life. Whereas in Eich's work, however, the acousmatic sounds are the problem, insofar as they represent a challenge that the characters are unable to meet, in Benn's radio play it is precisely the impossibility of maintaining the acousmatic situation, and thus the absence of sounds that could make contact possible. With Benn, listening situations are systematically profaned, so that acousmatic sounds no longer maintain a privileged relationship with metaphysical and otherworldly phenomena.

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Ralf Simon

The Necrodialogue as a Modelling System in the Work of Arno Schmidt (1914–1979)

1 The Genre Code of the Necrodialogue as an inverse Theory of the Medium

The genre code of the necrodialogue (Krapinger 2011; Jaumann 2007) is best analyzed through a media-theoretical lens. Prior to media studies, one of the literal meanings of 'medium' was the spiritistic (Hoffmann 2002, 108–121).[1] A medium is a person who can make contact with the other world, in particular with the dead, and who is able to communicate with it, primarily in the form of séances. The narrativization of this skill leads to the literary schema of the necrodialogue. The medium in the spiritistic sense is able to reverse the narrative direction of the necrodialogue, that is, communicating back from death to life, an act which would otherwise be confined to the literary space of the necrodialogue, in the echo chamber of a rather garrulous Hades. But the conversations themselves, which according to the rules of the fictional contract should remain enclosed in the space of death, can be indeed read by the living as texts. Thus, the external condition of mediation that grants the existence of the text, also becomes the content of communication. This paradox, taken up by the spiritistic medium, can alternate between immanence and medial framework, as it encompasses both: the inner sphere of conversations in the realm of the dead and the medial fact that the texts, which report on these communications, indeed exist. The possibility of representing this inside/outside paradox is ruled out on the content level due to the negotiations entailed in the genre of the necrodialogue; they must remain unobserved, just as, according to Luhmann (1995, 165–214 and 1997, 190–202), the medium is invisible in relation to the form. The fact that readers access the necrodialogues in text form cannot be known by those speaking within the fiction. The spiritistic medium, however, is able to cross this boundary by both going to the dead and returning, by controlling both the fictional contents and the negotiations required by the genre. They are mediums because they know how to master

1 The unusual word 'spiritistic' is used here as a translation of German 'spiritisch/Spiritismus'. It refers to the invocation of the deceased and spirits or ghosts (Geister). German 'Spiritismus' (Geisterbeschwörung) is, however, also often translated as 'Spiritualism'.

Note: This text was translated from German into English by Erin Bradshaw.

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this leap between two worlds, which should remain ontologically separate, in such a way that the medial character of the communication is also conveyed.

If we follow this characterization, then the recipient of a necrodialogue takes up the role of the spiritistic medium. Reading then means that the act of receiving information about an incommunicable content has become possible, because the recipient is in the same position as the spiritistic medium, he can communicate the entire communication apparatus – and therefore also its content. Ultimately, the ontological shift from the level of the world represented in the report of the medium to the level of the media implied by the act of reporting is the precondition of the necrodialogue as well as of the setting of the séance.

The genre of the necrodialogue, which has circulated as a proper genre in European literature at least since Lucian, either as a schema embedded in other forms, or as a wholly transformed structure, offers several interesting insights in the concept of the medium. First of all, as seen above, a structural analogy between the necrodialogue and a spiritistic séance leads to the identification of a third party and mediator, i.e., to the very notion of medium. Already with Lucian and then throughout the history of the genre, the question of the ontological status of the dead remained unresolved. In the realm of the dead, they are certainly recognizable by physical features, they have memories of their actions and possessions, and they show continuities with their former worldly characteristics. Yet at the same time they are primarily ghosts and specters, i.e., incorporeal beings. Christoph Martin Wieland (*Gespräche im Elysium*, 1780) tried to solve this contradiction by assuming that the realm of the dead is a kind of mountain of purgatory, in which a gradual purification takes place, at the end of which one becomes purely spirit. In this process, however, the necrodialogue takes place before purification, when the dead still possess many of the qualities of the living.[2] In Arno Schmidt's *Tina* (1956), the dead – who are only temporarily in Elysium – are even permitted to return to the upper world from time to time, which implies a change of state in their body, as they can of course survive without nourishment and digestion in Elysium. From these observations it can already be inferred that the experimental arrangement of this necrodialogue is based on the fact that the inhabitants of the realm of the dead are neither alive nor entirely dead, but something in between, in an intermediary state between life and death.

2 Wieland's *Gespräche im Elysium* (Wieland 1:14, 281–300) begin with the uncertain self-perception of the deceased ("yet I still feel that I am Diocles," 281). The Lucian who meets him explains to him his new condition: "You are in Elysium, but your senses are not yet completely purified" (282). The rest of the text carries out this purification process, not without emphasizing the precarious ontological status between life and death: "I disintegrate! I dissolve into vapour and dross" (283).

Necrodialogues, with their idiosyncratic structure, offer one more form of mediation between opposites. The narrative structure of necrodialogues often entails one or more of the following elements: the scene of the arrival in the realm of the dead; the negotiation of the price (the *obolus*) to be paid to Charon so that the Styx can be crossed on the barque of death; the actual arrival in Elysium; a sequence of conversations during which the newcomer is introduced to the new place and its rules. At times this conversation takes the form of a courtroom scene;[3] sometimes the final admission into Elysium is preceded by the requirement to drink from the river Lethe in order to forget earthly life. This narrative formula is however not obligatory, and many necrodialogues follow this basic pattern only loosely.[4] The reason is the peculiar eternal state in which the dead enter the Elysium, which deprives their otherworldly existence of structural narrativity. The necrodialogue thus approximates what Lotman (1981, 329–340) described as a state of "sujetlessness," announcing the end of narrativity. For Lotman, the sujetless text is the representation of a topographical order or the depiction of a world at peace with itself, such as in the case of maps or telephone books; the subject matter consists of an actor breaking through this world and crossing the border to another one, thereby generating plot. The realm of the dead, in which there are no longer any goods or possessions and in which the character development of the respective actor is also complete, bears the mark of sujetlessness. According to this reading, a second paradox takes place in the necrodialogue: that between eventful narration and sujetless *nunc stans*. Necrodialogues perhaps convey the absolute end of narrative, in as far as the narrative is virtually halted in the textual process and then dissolves. In terms of narrative theory, this is not a straightforward situation. According to Aristotle[5] and as later

3 Brecht's necrodialogue *Das Verhör des Lukullus* (Brecht 2017) takes over the whole narrative, focusing completely on the trial. In this respect, Brecht's text can be considered the most complete representation of the necrodialogue narrative (see Ghyselinck 2021).

4 Many of Lucian's necrodialogues aim for the philosophical proof that only Cynicism (in the antique sense of the word) prepares for death and is therefore the true philosophy (Niehues-Pröbsting 1988; on Lucian: 239–261). There are, however, some conversations that reveal the narrative pattern behind the conversational situation, such as Dialogue 4, in which Hermes and Charon haggle over the amount of the *obolus* (Lucian 2007, 94–95), or Dialogue 10, with the scene of the summons to the trial (Lucian 2007, 105–110).

5 Aristotle's *Poetics* defines the unity of action as follows: "A whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end. A beginning is that which itself does not necessarily follow something else, but after which something else naturally occurs or comes into being. An end, conversely, is that which itself naturally follows something else, necessarily or as a rule, while nothing else occurs after it. A middle is that which both itself follows something else and draws something else after it," *Poetik* 25 (Aristoteles 1982, 1450b).

reformulated by Claude Bremond,[6] a narrative is based on an initial opposition that comes to a conclusion after a number of intermediate steps. Beginning and end are related through a chain of middle passages, in a process of mediation. The necrodialogue, however, carrying what begins like a narrative onto a state no longer oriented towards an end, doesn't follow that pattern, but can be understood better as a middle ground where the opposition between narrative and sujetless state is set into an oscillating motion. Thematically, this translates sometimes in the problem of boredom,[7] which points however to a far more substantial structural problem. In the necrodialogue, the end of the narrative is reached as the indefinable middle passage between narration and sujetlessness is perpetuated as such, and the texts show some hesitation with regard to their structural unfolding. In the history of the genre it is not settled whether the necrodialogue counts as "literature" or whether it is not rather a philosophical genre (Niehues-Pröbsting 1988, 18, 30). In Lucian, the texts mostly aim at proving Cynicism as the best philosophy by showing how it stands the test against the ultimate yardstick, namely death. Literariness and fictionality thus become less relevant questions, and the narrative elements do not necessarily build a coherent fictional world. So the genre oscillates between fiction and philosophy.

Three forms of mediality can thus be observed. First, the necrodialogue offers the possibility of reporting conversations that would be impossible to transmit as such, through a medium – the text – which can leap over the boundary usually considered uncrossable (change of ontological levels). Second, the necrodialogue establishes an intermediate state between life and death, a precarious moment of

6 The French narrative theorist Claude Bremond (1972) coined the term "elementary triad" in order to gain an advantage over larger narrative schemes by being able to define the basic unit of the narrative in a structuralist way. The elementary triad consists of the coupling of beginning, middle, and end, each on different levels: macrostructurally, but also in the fine branches of shorter plot units. The narrative can thus be analyzed as a matryoshka of ever more elementary triads. It becomes clear in this theoretical concept that the grammar of narration fundamentally consists at all its levels of the relation between initial problem, mediation, and solution of the problem.

7 Boredom already appears as a motif in Lucian. Thus, Chiron has voluntarily gone to the Orcus out of boredom but has to learn that his problem still persists there (dialogue 26, Lucian 2007, 143). Wieland's *Lustreise ins Elysium* (Wieland 1/15, 74–110) presents a small-state philosophy in which the inhabitants of Elysium come together for a constitutive session of the state. There is no reason for this in the realm of the dead; the players engage in the game merely to pass the time, which in the context presupposes the state of being bored. In Schmidt's *Tina*, the experimental arrangement is that the dead poets remain in Elysium until they are no longer quoted in the upper world. The problem of an existence that has become boring over the centuries arises, making the final death wish urgent. Enzensberger's necrodialogue *Ohne uns* (Enzensberger 2004, 165–200) also draws a physiognomy of boredom with the two tired TV consumers.

mediation. Third, the necrodialogue places the distinction between narrative and sujetlessness into a third position, in which the mediality of the genre becomes questionable. These three medial notions are pre-technological, and as such are not proper notions used in media studies. These three paradoxical forms are, however, those to which the medial devices of necrodialogues always reconnect.

In Lucian the basic narrative scheme of arrival, journey by boat, second arrival, and conversation is complemented by the function played by fame – *fama* – opening up a double channel of communication: rumors about the life of a newcomer are recounted in order to later verify them directly.[8] In Wieland's work (*Lustreise ins Elysium*, 1787), an explicit media scene takes place: the placement of an actor in the realm of the dead is identified as the very process of reading: the reader of fictional worlds is displaced as a ghost into the past and starts a conversation with the spirits who reside there.[9] Continuous reading is de facto always a necrodialogue, and Wieland shows how the scene of necrodialogue is in fact a media scene. Goethe's parody of Wieland, *Götter, Helden und Wieland. Eine Farce* (1774), parodies Wieland while restaging the form of his necrodialogues once more. Here a journalist arrives in the realm of the dead (Goethe V, 5:182–184) and enables the channel of communication between the residents of Elysium and the summoned Wieland. It is thus no coincidence that in Arno Schmidt's *Tina* (1956) the entrance to the underworld is located precisely through a magazine kiosk built into an advertising pillar (1988, BA I/2, 170–171). In Hans Magnus Enzensberger's necrodialogue *Ohne uns* (1999), another media scene is explicitly played out. First the TV secures the characters' connection to the world, and then the news about a new cult is reported, without any further content (Enzensberger 2004, 175–200). Marshall McLuhan's classic "the medium is the message" is literally staged by Enzensberger. The name of the cult, which dominates the news channels and the urban infrastructure through its sheer mass and an unidentifiable chant, is "Wandler" – a name that alludes, in terms of religious phenomenology, to a process of transubstantiation [*Wandlung*], but in terms of media technology, to the transformation process through which a transducer converts energy

8 This observation can be made about many of Lucian's necrodialogues. In this respect, the necrodialogues are also always short character portraits that exist in the dialectic between public speech about a character on the one hand, and the direct dialogue situation on the other.

9 In *Lustreise ins Elysium* there is an insightful media-theoretical account of reading (Wieland 1/15, esp. 74–80). The text begins with a satirical polemic against the fashion of *magnetiseurs*. Their alleged ability to immediately initiate a transport into another world is countered by Wieland with his own art of transporting his soul across into past times. This art, however, consists in nothing other than the continuum of fiction created by insistent reading. The "quasi-body" (Wieland 1/15, 80) of the spiritistic realization is a "quite natural means" (Wieland I/15, 78) in Wieland's reading metempsychosis.

or information into other media formats. Thus, in Enzensberger's *Ohne uns* the scene of the necrodialogue becomes the self-reference for the media-theoretical concept of medium, where the pre-theoretical media concepts of the genre of the necrodialogue are translated into the age of electronic media and of mass technological reproduction. In a sense, Enzensberger's necrodialogue is itself a *Wandler*, as it reduces the code of the genre to its media-theoretical denominator.

2 Arno Schmidt: An Overview of his Work from the Perspective of the Necrodialogue

It can be argued that no other work by a major modern author is so deeply and extensively characterized by the structure of the necrodialogue as that of Arno Schmidt. At the very beginning of his literary production, a fantastic island (*Die Insel*, 1937, BA I/4, 185–236) and the otherworld (*Dichtergespräche im Elysium*, 1940, BA I/4, 239–301) announce the idea of a self-contained place and of the imagined dwelling of the dead as central, modelling themes in Arno Schmidt's entire work.[10] The text *Tina oder über die Unsterblichkeit* (Schmidt 1988, BA I/2, 167–187), published in 1956, and the dialogue *Goethe und Einer seiner Bewunderer* (Schmidt 1988, BA I/2, 191–220), published the following year, explicitly place themselves in the tradition of the necrodialogue,[11] the first imagining a visit by a living person to the underworld of the Elysium, and the second imagining Goethe ascending from the realm of the dead into post-war West Germany. Journeys to the underworld can be found in all of Schmidt's texts, sometimes in the form of one-sentence myths, but more often constructed as macronarratives. The significance of Schmidt's necrodialogues goes beyond the occurrence of formal elements of the genre, however, as the recurrence of general, defining structural features of the genre can be understood as a transformation of its genre code. A rather important part of Schmidt's work consists of radio essays in the form of dialogues

10 According to Lotman, a model-building system (or: secondary modelling system) means that literature uses the basis of primary linguistic signs as material to generate new meanings. "Model-building" means that literary texts do not simply represent arbitrary individual facts, but that this representation also claims to be generalizable: the text constructs a model of a world. See Lotman (1981, 22–27).

11 The theme of the necrodialogue has so far received little attention in the research on Arno Schmidt's work. There are a few studies on the two texts mentioned, but no attempt to analyze the literary genre of the necrodialogue as a model-forming system for Arno Schmidt's œuvre as a whole has been made. See the contributions by Polczyk (1989); Sudhoff (1989); Japp (1997); Menke (1997); Friedrich (2001); Grahl (2011) and Simon (2016a).

that he wrote in the 1950s in order to earn a living.[12] These are conceived as conversations about poets from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The form of these radio essays alludes to the necrodialogue: usually two speakers, bodiless radio voices, discuss through the almost immaterial medium of ether some forgotten writer who is called back to the present in a state between life and death and as a ghost voice, while a third voice cites or re-cites from his works. From the standpoint of the necrodialogue, Schmidt's radio essays can be read as spiritistic séances that bring back to life some forgotten literary history though a conversational setting with a medial structure resembling that of the necrodialogue. Through the chosen medium of the radio essay, the media structure of the genre code becomes performative reality. Moreover, the aim of these essays is the gesture of representation, in which the texts make space for a middle position between narration and sujetlessness. The radio dialogues thus follow the three main characteristics of the genre necrodialogue mentioned earlier.

Other texts by Schmidt present less obvious and more elaborate connections to the genre of the necrodialogue. By engaging with a structuralist approach that highlights generative patterns and progressions of texts within the code of the genre, I will dwell on some key elements in Schmidt's narrative inventory, such as those otherworldly journeys that remind us of the epic hero's journey to the world of the dead (*katábasis*) for the purpose of obtaining information about the future or for the purpose of breaking the mythical death spell (*nekyia*). *Pharos, oder von der Macht der Dichter* (1944/1975)[13] can be read this

12 In the Bargfeld edition (Dept. II), there are a total of 1,327 pages. The Radio essays are thus also a quantitatively significant part of Schmidt's work. It should be considered whether the translations could also be assigned to the theme of the necrodialogue. At least Schmidt's *Piporakemes* (Schmidt 1988, BA I/3, 399–421) makes it clear on the basis of the Faulkner translation that the process of translation has something to do with necromancy. Arno Schmidt translated a total of twenty-two works, including very extensive ones (Bulwer-Lytton); the Poe translations are only counted once here. Since *Zettel's Traum* is also to a large extent a translation theory, even Schmidt's main work would have to be included in this context.

13 Schmidt 1988, BA IV/3, 252–263. According to the interpretation I have considered (Simon 2016b), *Pharos* concerns a struggle whose object is the proper canon of reading. However, this is not simply a matter of reading, but of creating the world: what is seen and created is how it is read. The right choice of reading decides the view from the rotunda of the lighthouse, whose glass windows are painted so that the gaze only ever encounters one's own materialized imaginings, illuminated only a little by the light streaming in from outside. In the context of the necrodialogue, the lighthouse would be thought of as the literary space created by the memorial politics of the necrodialogue. The protagonist is thus stuck in his *nekyia*, as it were, and alternatively falls into the evasive movement of reading (necrodialogue). Seen in this light, the text, written in 1942–1943, programmatically launches Schmidt's second phase of work. On *Pharos*, see Simon (2016b) and Flemming (2016).

way, as well as *Leviathan* (1946–1949), in which this journey is shown as faltering in the process and coming to a halt. Both the tradition of the descent into the Underworld (*katábasis)* and of necromancy (*nekyia*) have a strong proximity to the basic narrative of the necrodialogue, especially when the epic hero does not succeed in returning. This is the case in *Pharos* and *Leviathan*, as well as in *Enthymesis* (1944–1946), where a fantasy of escape follows the ghost whose goal is to disappear from the world without a trace.

In *Caliban über Setebos* (1963), the protagonist's journey can be read as a passage to the afterlife: the bus fare as the *obolus*, the H (bus station) for Hades, the bus itself as the barque of death, the passengers as hunters (Eumenides/Erinyes), the village of *Schadewalde* as the world of shadows, the crossing of a "Stygian" stream as that of Styx, the appearance of the innkeeper O. Tulp as an anagrammatical hint at Pluto, a passing lorry with an "eternity=box" as an allusion to a coffin, and lastly, the appearance of the hound of hell. Already these clues, densely arranged in the first four pages (Schmidt 1988, BA I/3, 477–481) make it clear that the text can be read as a *katábasis*. In this work, the conversations taking place in the village are all shaped by a semantics of death, which simultaneously activates an extensive round of quotations including Rilke's Orpheus, who notoriously fails to free Eurydice from Hades – the same, though inverse, destiny of the protagonist here, who for good reasons prefers not to free his Eurydice but makes his own escape. The narrative content of this complex text, which can be deciphered only by understanding all its Shoah-signals,[14] consists only in the protagonist's perceptions and conversations in the underworld. In this sense, the travel pattern of *katábasis* and the necrodialogue here overlap, with a clear emphasis on the latter.

Another illuminating transformation of the genre code of the necrodialogue is Schmidt's novel *Gelehrtenrepublik* (1957). In a dystopian world following a nuclear catastrophe, the protagonist, Winer, undertakes a journey to an artificial island where the intellectual elite of humanity is said to have found refuge. In order to reach the island, Winer must first cross a contaminated wasteland and has to undertake a number of initiation tests, while encountering animal-human mutations in the so-called "hominid strip." Winer finds himself in a stage of human history close to that of the pre-Olympic gods, so that his adventures and conversations form a peculiar variant of necrodialogues. It is as if Elysium had a

14 The secret center of the Caliban text is an abandoned factory outside the village, which is reminiscent of concentration camp crematoria (Schmidt 1988, BA I/3, 492). From there springs a brook that babbles polyglot ("where the dead's=languages are laid down," Schmidt 1988, BA I/3, 511). The rescue by the Jewish salesman who specializes in condom vending machines in rural areas (Schmidt 1988, BA I/3, 514–518, 537) makes a bitter joke out of the Shoah signs.

section for archaic prehistory, where the mythological system that made necrodialogues possible concretely finds its prehistory. After crossing this wasteland, Winer arrives at a research station where he is once again subjected to examinations and initiation rites, arriving a second time and having to negotiate a passage to the realm of the dead once more. This time, the journey happens by boat, with clear allusions to the passage of the Styx (Schmidt 1988, BA I/2, 275–279). Accordingly, the republic of scholars he eventually reaches turns out to be another realm of the dead – the spiritistic variant, so to say, compared to the corporeal variant of the hominid strip. Through perverse scientific manipulations, people are here preserved in order to artificially prolong their lifespan, and brains of genius scientists are transplanted into young bodies. The difference between life and death is dissolved in these multiple crossings of boundaries. Schmidt directly implements one of the basic paradoxes of the necrodialogue by undermining the question of the meaning of life through a perverse biopolitical scenario. In the republic of scholars, a constant shift takes place between levels of ontology. The division of the text into the first half about the hominid strip and the second half about the republic of scholars allows the protagonist to explore the narrative pattern of the necrodialogue twice, with a clear focus on physicality in the first half and on spiritistic and intellectual aspects in the second half. By switching several times between life and death, between body and spirit, and by passing several times the initiations necessary for the passage to death, the question of the location of the points of departure and destination is radically subverted. Switching from one necrodialogue to the next,[15] the passage that is usually allowed only once – the transition from life to death – becomes serially possible,[16] with the result that the whole structure of the necrodialogue is deconstructed. As a literary genre, the necrodialogue does not usually display a systematic *mise en abyme*: death is a unique event that cannot be replicated again and again through a narrative technique of Chinese boxes. Schmidt, however, writes a text with a serial

15 For example: Winer enters the hominid strip (first otherworld), there he has a drug overdose (second otherworld), then he enters the space between hominid strip and his journey, where he discovers experiments with artificial live (third otherworld), then he arrives on the island (fourth otherworld), in which the Russian and the American areas have their own otherworlds. This serial structure can be repeated in micrological parts, for example in scenes of eating, where each meal is a passage to the dead.

16 A close reading reveals that the text knows more than just the two macronarrative afterlife journeys mentioned, including necrodialogues. The curious sequence with the mutant Psyche, for instance, who has been re-bred into an oral sex machine, is another afterlife journey (Schmidt 1988, BA I/2, 265–269), not unlike the two coitus scenes in the Scholars' Republic. Their East-West division establishes renewed passages with initiation rites and death spaces. The more closely one reads the text, the greater the number of otherworldly realms becomes.

structure that compels him to apply the genre narrative to itself, so that virtually every state in the text is one of life, which will eventually become one of death. Thereby the distinction between life and death and that between content (the content of the necrodialogue) and media representation (the text that communicates it) becomes blurred: here, each textual layer communicates with the previous one, so that the paradox of overlapping levels of ontology becomes the normal state of affairs in the republic of scholars. In this way, the *Gelehrtenrepublik* can be perhaps seen as the metaliterature of the necrodialogue genre.

This complex and subtle transformation of the necrodialogue into a series of ever more intense and self-reflective necrodialogues is perfected once more in the *Schule der Atheisten* (1969–1971, publ. 1972). In this mixture of novel, drama, und experimental prose (typical of Schmidt's later work) the world is once again in the aftermath of a nuclear catastrophe. The text begins in an enclave of the European continent that has been spared from nuclear contamination, even if the possibility of an uncontaminated stretch of land is questionable. This colony, where the culture of the Old World is now being preserved as a museum by the ruling powers, is probably already a realm of the dead. In this place, which paradoxically oscillates between life and death, between body and mind, and between lived content (a small area of life) and impossible framework (nuclear destruction), the ruling elites of the two remaining great powers, USA and China, manage to prevent an imminent war through peace negotiations. Kolderup, the protagonist of the text and the intellectual mastermind of the small enclave, acts as interpreter of the negotiations, superimposing ever new variations of his tall tale, convincing the politicians of the fact that they are all related to each other.[17] To lend credibility to this skillfully designed and constantly revised narrative, he undertakes a journey to a remote island to track down documentary evidence. This journey is one to a realm of the dead, but it starts from a place that is itself already a realm of the dead, and during the journey it is connected to further stories of travel. A group of dead people who want to live again travels to a deadly place that offers bizarre allegories of life in the form of an absurd phantasmagoria – a hypertrophy of the cultural moment of death. Death explains death, all

17 As is so often the case, especially in Schmidt's late work, the sheer referentiality of the plot is a problem: without hermeneutic syntheses of meaning, the plot cannot be reproduced. My reasoning is that Kolderup constructs the world in an ad hoc fashion according to his will and imagination in the sense of Schopenhauer. In other words, he simultaneously narratively invents and performs a genealogy adapted to the respective circumstances, so that the government representatives are integrated into an extended family and find access to each other. The essential vehicle of this narrative skill consists in the permanently renewed staging of the basic narrative of the necrodialogue.

communication is that between the dead, life is only a sham fight on death's way to itself. This theme resonates with Freud's theory of the death drive (*Todestrieb*),[18] which Arno Schmidt seems to have translated into a plot more expertly than anyone before him. The necrodialogue reflects upon itself through another necrodialogue. The genre code of the necrodialogue, which itself works according to a logic of transformation, where a necrodialogue switches to the next in a serial succession, becomes here the very object of the text. This series, which unfolds like Chinese boxes when observed from the outside, is a structure that is actually foreign to the genre code of the necrodialogue, but it certainly allows Schmidt's *Schule der Atheisten* to become a reflection on the form of speech of the dead.

The final and perhaps most extensive transformation of the necrodialogue is crystallized in a motif that links Schmidt's earlier work (*Dichtergespräche im Elysium*, 1940) with his last work. In the incomplete novel *Julia, oder die Gemälde* (1979), a young girl emerges from a historical painting and, as a two-dimensional being, technically a hologram, seduces the elderly protagonist. The impossible love story attempts to liberate love from the dictates of time and to lift it into the ideal sphere of pure aesthetic existence. Thus, the original plan for the plot, which has been left incomplete, was for Jhering to be absorbed into the painting with Julia. In *Abend mit Goldrand* (1975) this motif occurs again: the youthful Ann'Ev' and the old A&O discover not only their impossible love, but also that they have met before in other cycles of reincarnation, as they can infer from a pair of figures in Bosch's painting *Der Garten der Lüste*, in which Ann'Ev' recognizes her double (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/3, 96–97). Following this realization, the lovers agree to meet again in a hundred years, in the hope that their ages would then be better synchronized.[19] With regard to such cyclic notions of time, the boundaries between the necrodialogue and the present conversation of the lovers

18 In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud states (1955, 37) that "all instincts tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things." "It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained. On the contrary, it must be an old state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons, becomes inorganic once again, then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*' and, looking backwards, that *'inanimate things existed before living ones*'" (Freud 1955, 38).

19 ANN'Ev' (with fixed vacant eyes; She lets her feet simply hang free): "Rien ne finit, rien ne commence: We shall sleep for a long time – & All=this will remain."; (But): "In a hundred years: We shall walk here again; Ann'Ev' on your arm –";" (trans. John E. Woods 206). "ANN'EV' (mit starren abwesenden Augen; Sie läßt die Füße so hängen): "Rien ne finit, rien ne commence:

become blurred, as the past is always already the present, and states of death are bound up in cycles of life and vice versa.

Such a deconstruction of the course of time was already explored in Schmidt's early work *Dichtergesprächen im Elysium*:

> WIELAND: [. . .] As a poet, one wants above all to evoke the presentness of ideas [die Gegenwart der Vorstellungen] in the reader; this requires a certain amount of time. One can also establish degrees of presence through the form alone; the conversation has the most immediate effect, even with historical material; the next level is the diary, then the epistolary form, and only then does the continuous narrative follow at a great distance.
>
> POE: You are absolutely right; a very strange compenetration of times [Durchdringung der Zeiten] takes place, which one would have to examine psychologically. I think only of your Peregrinus Proteus, where three, actually four "senses of time" [Zeitgefühle] mix within the reader. First, the immediate present of the conversation with Lucian; second, the knowledge that Peregrinus is recounting his life – first form of the past; third, the awareness that this life took place again, 1,900 years ago – second past. In addition, the reader has the feeling of his own existence, the absolute present form; then the imaginative faculty [Bildkraft] of the soul, which also mixes several image areas into each other: own experiences, the attempts to create a vision according to the words of the poet; perhaps even memories of scientific reconstructions. (Schmidt 1988, BA 1/4, 282; trans. Erin Bradshaw)

In this quotation, "compenetration" is still conceived terms of narrative theory – as a plurality of narrative times and narrated time. Accordingly, in *Julia* the reintroduction of the notion of compenetration points to a complex theoretical notion in which the level of primary ontology[20] is penetrated thereby becoming permeable.[21] The theological term "perichoresis" (Stemmer 1983), referring to the Christian Trinitarian dogma, folds more temporal dimensions into the present world, opening up a space of interaction that has all the characteristics of the conversation with the dead, but in fact undermines the very distinction between life and death. In this sense, the following scene is marked as both spiritistic and mediatechnical (Schmidt conceived of an application of hologram technology), i.e., plain text of the genre code necrodialogue:

> KASTELLAN (slightly amused): "[. . .] ah, do you know what is meant by 'perichoresis'?"

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lange werden Wir schlafen – und dies Alles bleibt."; (Aber): "In hundert Jahren: werden Wir wieder hier gehen; die Ann'Ev' in Deinem Arm –";" (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/3, 283).

20 By "primary ontology" or "first level of ontology" I simply mean the pre-theoretical and everyday understanding or reality. The next level of ontology would be fictionality or construction. Schmidt's texts tend to destroy the primary ontology by giving substance and stability to the worlds of the second ontology.

21 At this point I take up reflections I developed in Simon (2013a), but there without reference to the necrodialogue.

> RAUCH (murmurs): "'Perhaps the deepest and darkest corner of the whole theological abyss,' as already GIBBON . . . Is related to Trinity debate." (John Damascenus; Cudworth."
>
> JHERING (slowly; also remembering): "Yes: as Father=Son=Holy Spirit are Three & yet at the same time One – like how according to FREUD Ego=Superego=Unconscious also form the personality. – But far beyond this (also more important) is the more general term, the 'compenetration' [Durchdringung]: if, for example, two very different worlds (let's say of other dimensions) 'touch' each other or penetrate [durchdringen] each other at one point – then this area of contact could represent a kind of 'crossing area' (à la 'crossings of wild animal paths'), which enabled the transition (at least the 'insight') from one world into the other one."; (the simplest illustration of what is meant is provided by the dream; where I walk along a Hamburg street, and, seamlessly, end up in Bargfeld fifty years later). (Schmidt 1988, BA 1/4, 125; trans. Erin Bradshaw)

The compenetration of different realities according to the model of the Trinity undermines the distinction between life and death and makes it possible for a two-dimensional girl to emerge from a historical painting, to get into conversation with a person from the supposed real world, and later want to abduct him into the painting. Seen as a conversation, the painting would be a necrodialogue, existing in an eternal aesthetic space. The permeability of this fictional space to interactions happening on the first level of ontology, however, means that for Schmidt, the fundamental atmosphere of the necrodialogue works as a modelling structure. Interestingly, the premise of this structure is far from new in the field of humanities. When paraphrasing texts of the past or reformulating their thoughts in humanities essays, we use the present tense; we treat the past and its content as present. In this sense, the humanities have always been a necrodialogue, a way of placing oneself in a space of timelessness. Schmidt addresses this theme in a *Vorspiel* (prelude) that introduced the first edition of his *Radio Essays* in 1958: "*A., B. and C. (swear together):* Tired of wandering through desolate deserts of letters, full of empty mental inventions, in the most presumptuous mists of words; weary of aesthetic sweeteners as well as grammatical waterers; I decided: *to treat everything that ever written, in love and hate, as always living! [immerfort mitlebend]*" (Schmidt 1988, BA II/2, 142; trans. Erin Bradshaw). This statement finds an intense echo in Schmidt's last text, *Julia*, through a cryptic remark: "Encounter with the figures [Gestalten] of my books" (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/4, 149; trans. Erin Bradshaw).

The point of this elaborate form of the necrodialogue is that the figures in Schmidt's books are, as actants, variants of the author's self. Arno Schmidt generates his literary inventory of characters as an analysis of himself, divided into unities of action springing from the underlying function of authorship. Since the early 1960s, Freud's theory of the instances of the mind (superego, ego, unconscious) has been used as a generative motor for literary characters, so that the interaction between the distinct psychic instances generates a plot on the level of

the text, while allowing the self-articulation of the function of authorship on the level of psychoanalytic analysis. Arno Schmidt conceives of himself as an author in terms of a conversation – a necrodialogue – with parts of his personality that he projects onto a literary present, letting them compenetrate each other – a rather bizarre *apokatastasis panton* (restoration of all things at the end of time) of himself. Perhaps this is the *ultima ratio* of the necrodialogue – a dissolution of the function of authorship and, consequently, of the primary level of ontology in favour of a literary space that, as fiction, should in fact be a second and derivative ontology, but takes instead the place of the first ontology.

It is striking that Arno Schmidt's late œuvre – i.e., his four extensive typescript texts *Schule der Atheisten*, *Zettel's Traum*, *Abend mit Goldrand*, *Julia* – are all conversations, with an only very rudimentary narrative direction. In this respect, Schmidt's last texts also employ another basic paradox of the necrodialogue, that of entering into an oscillating movement between narration and sujetlessness. Schmidt's literary development begins with the *Dichtergesprächen*, explores the conversational form in the radio essays, and returns to conversational texts again with the last typescripts. If one includes the inversion of the basic medial structure of the necrodialogue into the definition of necrodialogue, then it is clear that Arno Schmidt had actually been working with the basic model of the necrodialogue all along.

3 Negativity

Up until now I have suggested two ways of looking at the function of necrodialogues in Schmidt's work. First, I dealt with the media-theoretical formulation of the "necrodialogue" genre code through three definitions: necrodialogues cross the ontological boundary between the inner fictional space and the media conditions of the texts; necrodialogues transcend the status of the participants in the conversation, who are neither living nor entirely dead; necrodialogues possess a basic narrative that they mostly leave empty, becoming sujetless texts. These three determinations each establish the function of an unstable medium.

In the second section, I retrieved the structure of the necrodialogue on various levels of transformation in Schmidt's work as follows: first, a formal approach in the sense of genre structure of the necrodialogue; second, a media transformation of the necrodialogue into the radio essay; third, the connection of the necrodialogue with the narrative of the journeys into the afterlife (*katábasis*); fourth, a series of texts that consists of repeated interconnections with the same basic model of the necrodialogue; fifth, the complex construct of a compenetration of

the levels of ontology, through which the entire textual reality becomes a necrodialogue. This second section suggests that Arno Schmidt's entire œuvre is readable as a treatment of the literary model of the necrodialogue, whereby the three definitions of the genre formulated through my first approach remain crucial to the understanding of the form of the necrodialogue.

In the years following 1945, Arno Schmidt was certainly not the only author to create realms of the dead, journeys into the afterlife, and extensive allegorizations of the inanimate.[22] Not content with allegorizations delivered in a style situated between late expressionism and existentialism, he combined a sharp realism with techniques of the interior monologue, which, however, he dissolved into discontinuous shocks of awareness. The result is a mixture of tangible mimesis and avant-garde composition that is unique in post-war literature and is deepened by complex references to major metaphysical concepts. Of these, the first and foremost is Gnosticism, with Schopenhauer at the center – which are strong philosophies of negativity. Schmidt attempts to think of negativity as the primary interpretative outline and to implement it in literature.

Negativity is an obvious gesture after 1945, but following Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's thesis, the historical catastrophe of German fascism was in fact repressed rather than processed (Gumbrecht 2012). Arno Schmidt is one of the few authors to seriously address the question of how to continue writing after 1945. His early work, which stands in the paradigm of late Romantic aestheticism, is revoked in a radical gesture with the two texts *Pharos* and *Leviathan*. Instead of writing allegories of the worlds of the dead, as many contemporaries did, Schmidt works on the project of depicting the concrete world of life in such a way that it becomes legible as it is disintegrated by death. At stake is not just a dichotomy of life versus death or of this world versus the hereafter, but the grim proof that life itself has become questionable and is most appropriately thought of in terms of death. The fact that his entire œuvre can be understood as a permanent transformation of the necrodialogue genre is an effect of the turn to unreserved negativity that took place after *Pharos* and *Leviathan* around 1945. The obstinate presence of conversations with the dead in the work of Arno Schmidt can ultimately be explained through the concept of negativity, which poses a philosophical as well as a literary challenge.

Philosophically, negativity is always only secondarily conceivable, as a negation of preceding positions which came about through affirmation (Angehrn

22 See, among others, Hermann Broch: *Der Tod des Vergil* (1945); Hans Erich Nossack: *Nekyia* (1947); Hermann Kasack: *Die Stadt hinter dem Strom* (1947), and Hans Henny Jahnn: *Die Nacht aus Blei* (1956).

2014). While being conceived of as the actual motor of becoming and processing, as in Hegel,[23] it is still bound up in a presupposed "something" that must be present before it can be negated. Placing negativity in a primary position seems unpromising; the very formulation in this sentence ("position") throws light on the difficulty of being able to formulate negation at all without implicitly presupposing a positive gesture. Accordingly, attempts in the history of Western thought to think from the standpoint of negativity have remained marginal and unsuccessful. The claim that Arno Schmidt works on poetic negativity (instead of merely allegorizing it) is thus seriously confronted with the difficulty of conceiving it in the first place. According to an initial leitmotif in Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*, every work of art, however bleak it may be, is essentially affirmative by virtue of the fact that it must have wanted to exist, as opposed to not being. The work of art affirms its existence as such, it appears and is perceived (*aisthesis*), even if it then only has negative contents: "Thus they [the works] tend a priori, no matter how tragically they act, to affirmation" (Adorno 1981, 10). This moment of affirmation cannot be erased, and it communicates itself to the deeper constitutive structures of the artwork.

But how could negativity be conceptualized, if not as a moment derived from a comprehensive process based on positivity? One way negativity has been represented is that of Greek atomism,[24] i.e., a purely random play of atoms that, given an assumed infinite time, can lead to such an atomic constellation as that of our world[25] – an inherently contingent and temporally limited state without meaning, purpose, and guarantee of permanence. The implication of negativity consists here in the fact that any form that appears stable is ultimately only an ephemeral

23 In a significant passage from Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, the tremendous power of the negative is nevertheless transformed into positivity: "However, the accidental, separated from its surroundings, attains an isolated freedom and its own proper existence only in its being bound to other actualities and only as existing in their context; as such, it is the tremendous power of the negative; it is the energy of thinking, of the pure I. Death, if that is what we wish to call that non-actuality, is the most fearful thing of all, and to keep and hold fast to what is dead requires only the greatest force. Powerless beauty detests the understanding because the understanding expects of her what she cannot do. However, the life of spirit is not a life that is fearing death and austerely saving itself from ruin; rather, it bears death, calmly, and in death, it sustains itself. Spirit only wins its truth by finding its feet in its absolute disruption" (Hegel 2018, 20–21).

24 Lucretius (2016) is central in this context. See also E.A. Schmidt (2007) and Noller (2019).

25 Two variants of the basic model should be mentioned: on the one hand Borges's story *Die Bibliothek von Babel*, on the other hand the "Infinite Monkey Theorem," according to which a monkey that randomly presses keys on a typewriter standing in front of it will, given an assumed infinite amount of time, also have typed the letter combination that corresponds to Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.

variation in a greater chaos. Arno Schmidt reflects such a model in *Leviathan* in his adaptation of the expansion and contraction theory of the universe.

A second possible model of primary negativity is offered by Gnosticism, that ancient ideology whose radical negativism Christianity rejected. Gnosis sees the created world as doomed and remote from a completely withdrawn God who rejects any cosmological responsibility. This sharp dualism leaves space to a salvation that can be sought only through knowledge and insight (literally: *gnosis*). Arno Schmidt is probably the most intense literary Gnostic of the twentieth century,[26] his texts being full of allusions to the mytheme of gnosis. He quotes the aeon doctrine of gnosis at length in *Aus dem Leben eines Fauns* (Schmidt 1988, BA I/2, 330–332; Kuhn 1986, 106–111),[27] and *Abend mit Goldrand* is based on the Gnostic interpretation of Bosch's *Gartens der Lüste*.[28] Furthermore, the figure of Ann'Ev' refers to the rituals of the Mandaeans, a variation of Gnosticism.[29]

A third model of primary, extensive negativity is provided by the concept of traumatization, especially when trauma has anchored itself so deeply in the psychic reality that every psychic detail is shaped by it. Schmidt's texts suggest intense evidence of initial trauma, probably in the context of the Second World War,[30] which does not suggest a biographical thesis, but rather a thick literary configuration. Perhaps Schmidt's *Etymsprache* (etym-language)[31] can be reconstructed as a variant of the cryptonymic *Winkel-Wörter* in the sense of Abraham and Torok's cryptate theory (1979, esp. 38, 41), and perhaps the incidents of rape that play such an intense role in the work are a reflex response to collective trauma.[32] Schmidt's texts bear traits of a systematic concealment as well as a veiled presence of a primal scene of multiple rape – of the women as well as the

26 On gnosis in Schmidt, see Noering (1982). On gnosis in general, see Jonas (1934) and Markschies (2010).

27 Those entities that have performed an act of creation arbitrarily are subordinate actors in the divine aeons' inner play; they attempted creation without advice and without the help of God, and therefore were bound to fail.

28 It is Wilhelm Fraenger's interpretation of Bosch in which, famously, the thesis of Bosch's reference to gnosis was formulated. Schmidt used the first edition in 1947.

29 In Drower's (1937) account of the Gnostic sect of the Mandaeans, there is a description of several rituals cited in *Abend mit Goldrand*.

30 See the insightful speculations of Clausen (1992).

31 Schmidt uses an idiosyncratic etymology ("etyms"): a miswriting of words to show the unconscious intentions behind their official meanings.

32 Very speculative here would be to point out the rapes of the Red Army and the Allied troops in the last days of the Second World War. There is much circumstantial evidence in Schmidt's works that addresses this collective discourse, which was very important for the post-war period. Historical research on these events has only begun in the last decade. See, Eichhorn and Kuwert (2011) and Gebhardt (2015).

men in the prisoner-of-war camp. Such a present, though unidentifiable, traumatic event causes a comprehensive negation of life energies. In *Zettel's Traum*, Schmidt's major work, in which he presents his literary theory, the intertextual reference to the earlier work, *Dichtergesprächen* is established on the opening pages: „Thän there's ›Conversations in ELYSIUM‹; (that I had shaped My RD's after; those Lit=Hist=models, Dänglin', dialiegickly, b'fore Me early=on)." (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/1, 18; trans. John E. Woods) The readers find themselfs on a haunted field (Schauerfeld), where a dead poet is said to walk around as a ghost (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/1, 18). The tunnels of the Höfer potassium mine (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/1, 15) extend beneath the site, and their checkered history included "salvaged goods from various libraries and archives,"[33] but also armaments by the Nazis[34] – in combination – therefore, it is a place of death. The conversational quartet in *Zettel's Traum* is therefore placed, already from its outset, in the context of a necrodialogue. The precondition for this is the destruction of the early Elysium, and this is done literally. "Elysium" is permuted according to Schmidt's etym-language: (H)Elysium, illusion (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/1, 334), Hellysium (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/1, 625):

> »and ›ilium‹ is Latin for ›genitalia‹. By the way – ›ilium = Elysium‹: ELISABETT!; rite?!«. / (Sure. Because): » – now=finally, the anatomical=Greek, ›elytron‹ can make its appearance: THE VAGINA. Whereupon His enthusing about paradise (= Elysium) instantly reveals itself: the spirit of Eld (= elyt), lolling upon Elysowan pheelds.« (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/1, 628; trans. John E. Woods)

"Elysium" thus becomes an illusion, hell (hell: hellysium), a female sexual organ, a dirty joke ("elysäuisch"). These permutations are generated through phonetic shifts and by freely switching between different languages. According to Abraham and Torok, however, this is precisely what Freud's Wolfsmann produced: a trauma language whose cryptonymic *Winkel-Wörter* follow exactly these encoding methods, in places even identical to Schmidt's etyms (whole/hole: Schmidt 1988, BA IV/1, 30; Abraham and Torok 1979, 173). *Zettel's Traum* begins as a spiritistic séance that on the one hand refers implicitly to Schmidt's early necrodialogues, and on the other introduces a wild semiosis sharing all formal characteristics of a language of trauma. *Zettel's Traum* could thus be read as a large, trauma-encoded necrodialogue whose cryptic humor is fed by negativity.

33 "Höfer." Wikimedia Foundation. Accessed 11 January 2021. https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Höfer.

34 "Kaliwerk Mariaglück." Mineralienatlas – Fossilienatlas. Accessed 11 January 2021. https://www.mineralienatlas.de/lexikon/index.php/Deutschland/Niedersachsen/Celle%2CLandkreis/Höfer/KaliwerkMariaglück.

A fourth model of primary negativity has already been hinted at: Sigmund Freud's reflections on the death instinct, after the crucial intuition that life is, actually, only a circuitous route to death. The starting point for Freud is inorganic existence, which will also be the end point, life in between being just an exception, an odd digression. Here, too, positivity (as the process of life) is bracketed and subordinated to a primary, primordial negativity. If Arno Schmidt's texts carry out an inversion in which the conversation of the living is the conversation of the dead, then the poetological inversion figure of many of his narrative plot structures can certainly be linked to the narrative that Freud formulated, with the peculiar bracketing of the life instinct in the initial and final state of death. In *Abend mit Goldrand*, the curious scene at the beginning of the text of a nocturnal bath in a dark pond[35] seems to connect the immersion in water with a schematic representation of the psychic structure – its deepest level consists of inorganic existence: mineralization, stone, ice, crystal (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/3, 61). Among its multiple systems of meaning, the plot of *Abend mit Goldrand* presents itself as a confrontation between life's circumambulations and the death drive that underpins everything.

A fifth and last form of primary negativity explored by Schmidt can be identified in the intensely present scenario of post-atomic dystopia in Schmidt's work. *Schwarze Spiegel*, *Die Gelehrtenrepublik*, *Die Schule der Atheisten*, and *Kaff, auch Mare Crisium* are all works imagining the remnants of the world after the atomic bomb. In the 1950s and 1960s, the fear of a Third World War and the physical possibility that from one moment to the next the world could cease to be, were of course very tangible. In his book *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (1956), the philosopher Günther Anders made the paradoxical attempt to imagine the absolute end of humankind – paradoxical insofar as, following Hegel, the boundary one is trying to comprehend here has not yet been transcended from both sides. But according to philosophical modality theory, what is possible at the very edge of reality, is conceivable. The concrete simple extermination order, the famous push of the red button, can make it possible from one moment to the next for everything that exists to cease. The atomic bomb would put the world in the state in which, according to Greek atomism, it is already from the outset: a free play of unconnected atoms. By basing some of his texts on this dystopian scenario, Arno Schmidt follows another figuration of radical negativity.

35 *Abend mit Goldrand*, Picture 10: "Uh-húh, n what if y dissolve in the water now?; just rapidly melt away?; in some nameless process? – (til someone finds the language t catch up with you again) –: ?" (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/3, 61; trans. John E. Woods, 40).

If we take a brief overview of the five forms of negativity present in Arno Schmidt's work, it becomes clear why the literary genre of the necrodialogue is the model-forming system in his work. If negativity is conceived as radically primary, then the three paradoxes of the necrodialogue formulated at the beginning of my reflections must almost necessarily become the semantic nucleus of such a poetical articulation. In Schmidt's work, the uncovering of the psychic reality of the setting of necrodialogues becomes a permanent object of poetological awareness; in *Zettel's Traum*, the term metaliterature (Schmidt 1988, BA IV/1, 517) describes precisely this reflexivity. The necrodialogue is the literary model for the various levels of poetological transformation in which Arno Schmidt can formulate his poetics of negativity.

4 Hermeneutics, Necrology, Mourning, textual Memory

Schmidt's formulation "To treat everything ever written, with love and hate, as always living with us!" (see above; Schmidt 1988, BA II/2, 142) might give the impression of a thoroughly Romantic idealism striving to create an archive of iconic intellectual giants, perusable by anyone trying to evade the present world. But in the context of Schmidt's Gnostic framework, another interpretation seems to be more appropriate. The hermeneutic process, which is carried out through the radio conversations and completed in the work as a whole, establishes a space of compenetration whose clear goal is the self-dissolution of the concept of the author (and, in consequence, of his real ego; see below). The ascent through the aeons, in the Gnostic cosmology, always implies the self-dissolution of the always contingent personality. In gnosis, loss of ego and liberating knowledge therefore converge. My thesis is that in the course of his œuvre, Schmidt maps the poets and their works onto his own as pluralized ego parts, but he does not integrate them into his subjectivity, organizing them rather as a Gnostic stepladder. It is therefore not a question of an author's ego making himself comfortable with his intellectual ownership in order to retreat into a petty bourgeois hermitage. On the contrary, "Encounter with the figures of my books" (see above; Schmidt 1988, BA IV/4, 149) virtually transfers the inherently generative function of authorship into its own realizations. It is thus a deletion of primary ontology in favor of a secondary one, the aim of which is to completely undermine subjectivity's insistence on itself. Gnosis (cognition) consists in this self-sublimation, the vehicle of which is the necrodialogue.

With this figuration, Schmidt establishes a thought-provoking deconstruction of hermeneutic and memory-theoretical basic assumptions. For Hans-Georg Gadamer, the fundamental act of hermeneutics consists in a vivification, whereby the dead letter of the text becomes a living spirit through the act of interpretation, in which a present subjectivity pulls it in its own horizon of interpretation, achieving a revitalization of the otherwise dead text. What is laid down in the tomb of the text is revived through the hermeneutic conversation: these formulations do not sound spiritistic by chance, and they find echo in some prevalent metaphors in Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode.*[36] At the same time these formulations share essential features with the necrodialogue genre code, and – central in this context – they also share essential procedural sequences with what is described by Freud as *Trauerarbeit* – mourning work. Hermeneutics and *Trauerarbeit* thus converge. According to Freud,[37] *Trauerarbeit* consists for the mourner in bringing once more the beloved dead person to life, and in a thoroughly cannibalistic act, absorbing their positive qualities step by step into their own personality. *Trauerarbeit* is successfully completed when the dead person has been, in this sense, killed a second time. Only this symbolic death ends the process by which the qualities of the dead have passed into the substance of the living, who carries them on in loving commitment. According to Freud, *Trauerarbeit* can fail: if the mourner performs the reawakening but is unable to carry out the cannibalistic taking of the dead into their own psyche, the reawakened gains the ominous presence of a ghost which, in one melancholic syndrome, haunts the person into unending mourning.

The vital impulse of a second killing can however become impossible, for example in the case of children's deaths (Rickels 1989).[38] Also in the case of genocides, it becomes almost impossible for the survivor to successfully carry out the mourning work, as the large number of deaths can no longer be processed adequately. *Trauerarbeit* as an anthropological dispositive resembles a very close interpersonal dialogue in which a mourner processes a death. If this death is under- or over-qualified, the *Trauerarbeit* will fail.

36 According to Gadamer, the fusion of horizons (1975, 366) of interpreter and text is above all a convergence of oral hermeneutic conversation (365) and writing (367). Writing as self-alienation of thinking (368) must therefore be translated back into living conversation, into living participation. Therefore, according to Gadamer, understanding is not solely referred to by the "universal function of linguisticity" (382), but specifically to a mode of accomplishment of linguisticality that is essentially conversation, vivification, presentification, and occurrence (404).

37 See Freud's essay *Trauer und Melancholie* (1917) in: Freud: Studienausgabe 3, 194–212.

38 Friedrich Rückert's *Kindertotenlieder* have become famous in this context.

The necrodialogue undoubtedly follows the basic structure of *Trauerarbeit*. In the necrodialogue, the deceased are given new life, entering the virtual realm of literary fiction. The necromancy of the spiritistic séance and, in the background, archaic forms of communicating with the dead determine the conversational setting of the necrodialogue. Furthermore, the basic act of hermeneutics can also be compared to mourning. In a certain sense, literary studies are in themselves an elaborate necrology, reviving forgotten and dead texts through their exegetical powers (Simon 2005). Insofar as poetic texts in literary history are bound to the author's name, such vivification of cultural memory occurs primarily as the vivification of a particular function of authorship, which must almost necessarily be psychologized and personalized through this act. Above all, therefore, literary history traditionally consists of the history of authors and the achievements tied to their names.

The significance of Arno Schmidt's œuvre in this context consists in an entirely – until now – unrecognized, profound, and radical deconstruction of the connection between hermeneutics, mourning, literary-historical necrology, and cultural memory. Because Arno Schmidt's necrodialogues are based on a radical primary negativity, they do not lead to a hermeneutics of vivification. Arno Schmidt cannot in other words be included in the critical reproach, often levelled against hermeneutics, of merely justifying contemplative fruition with the purpose of maintaining tradition in the name of admiration. His literary gnosis can be read as a fundamental reversal of hermeneutics and the politics of memory associated with it. The fact that Schmidt establishes a canon other than the one established in German literary history is only a secondary aspect of this reversal. What is more crucial is that Schmidt is concerned with an art of death that enables a completely different kind of survival than that promised by hermeneutics. The main effort in Schmidt's literature is to switch sides, that is to go to the dead in order to use their insights towards a Gnostic process of salvation.

If one were to follow Arno Schmidt's distorted ontology, then one would have to seriously claim that he did not die on 3 June 1979. Even before that, he made the transition to that realm in which the difference between life and death does not matter. The inverse logics of the transformed patterns of the necrodialogue genre and the various forms of negativity explored in his work coalesce into a single basic structure: to use the means of literature to leave the earthly body, in a movement of escape,[39] rendering unrecognizable the place that may have been one's own and taking one's own literary world to the other side.

39 On the ontology of escape in Arno Schmidt, compare hints in an earlier essay (Simon 2013b). But the question of escape is still not understood.

An impressive implementation of this basic movement can be found relatively early in the work of Arno Schmidt. His novel *Das steinerne Herz* bears the irritating subtitle: *Historischer Roman aus dem Jahre 1954 nach Christi* (Historical novel from 1954 after Christ). One hardly notices it, but in fact the text systematically inverts this order. The personal constellation of 1954 is not the starting point for a reconstruction of the historical past, but the reverse: the events surrounding the Princess of Ahlden in the years 1694 to 1717 are the actual present, to which the action in 1954 constitutes the historical background. The contemporary present has no reality here; it always exists, if at all, in the past. The projective formula of the historical novel, to reconstruct a historical epoch from a politically interpreted present, is here reversed (Jauslin 1985). This "reversal of being" (*Seinsumkehr*) describes vividly how the necrodialogue plays out in Arno Schmidt's work, as that literary place chosen as the ontologically primary, so that the author, as a true spiritistic medium, instead of returning from that place, fully immerses into it, just as Jhering should have gone into the picture with Julia. This process can probably also be described as a deconstruction of hermeneutics achieved through a comprehensive engagement with the genre of necrodialogue. The connection between *Trauerarbeit*, literary history, and hermeneutics is transformed from a Gnostic perspective in such a way that the function of authorship or the hermeneutic subject simply dissolves into what can only be called fiction when seen from the outside.

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Michael Lorper

Mediatic Muses, Sacrifices, and Survivors: Klaus Theweleit's Pattern of Male Art Production

> A medium is a medium is a medium. As the sentence says, there is no difference between occult and technological media. Their truth is fatality, their field the unconscious.
> (Kittler 1990, 229)

1 Introduction: Muses and Media

In the first volume of *Book of Kings, Orpheus ~~and~~ Eurydice*,[1] published in 1988, the scholar of literary and cultural studies Klaus Theweleit develops a pattern of male art production through the allegory of Orpheus looking back at his wife and thereby losing her to the underworld.[2] In contrast to the common reading of the myth, Theweleit postulates that Orpheus turns back *on purpose* in order to ban the corporeal being of Eurydice and instead avail himself of her idealized version as a source and medium of inspiration. This essay will take a closer look at how, in developing his concept of male art production, Theweleit plays with the ambiguity of the "sacrificed" women as a *medium* in the sense of a technical communication device on the one hand, and in the sense of a source of metaphysical inspiration on the other. So, when the literary and media scholar Friedrich Kittler affirms the multivalent meaning of the word "medium" in the motto above, he anticipates an important notion of his friend Klaus Theweleit. This comes as no surprise as Kittler, who like Theweleit studied in Freiburg, provoked Theweleit's interest in media studies from 1977 onwards, which led to an intense intellectual exchange for over a decade (Theweleit and Hurka 2013, 53). The double meaning

1 German title: *Buch der Könige. Orpheus ~~und~~ Eurydike*. Given that only *Male Fantasies* (1987) and *Object-Choice* (1994) have been published in English translation, I will use my own translations of Theweleit's book titles for the sake of readability and consistency. The German titles of the texts are given in the footnotes when first mentioned in the text. Furthermore, the *Book of Kings* volumes will be abbreviated *BdK1* (*Orpheus ~~und~~ Eurydike*) and *BdK2x* (*Orpheus am Machtpol*), respectively, in the in-text citations.

2 Orpheus and Eurydice are not the only figures Theweleit uses to illustrate this pattern. Other figures that appear in the text and impersonate aspects and types of male artists are for instance: Napoleon, kings, Narcissus, Minotaur, centaurs, Apollo, Dionysus. The Eurydice paradigm includes among others: Pallas Athena, Echo, typewriting secretaries, female singing stars, etc.

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of the term "medium" outlined by Kittler will play an important role in the present discussion, which analyzes the concept of the otherworldly "mediatic woman"[3] in Theweleit's critique of male art production. Theweleit presents this idea as follows:

> So, it occurred to me, it is not out of pure love, but out of another passion, that Orpheus turns around on the stairs to look into the eyes of his wife. Possibly he does it to keep her down there in a function [. . .] . . . an important pole in the otherworld-storage [. . .] to which a wire had to be drawn, cables had to be laid in manifold types of artificial reanimation of the dead (with which the literatures, that much is a fact, teem) [. . .] cable to one of the main sources of knowledge, connection to worlds full of history, connection to emotional condensations of the dead needed to create artificial realities [. . .] wire to one of the main sources of so-called inspiration. (*BdK1* 105)[4]

As a consequence of the polysemy of the word "medium," two meanings of the sacrificed *mediatic woman* are merged here: "inspiration" and the "wire" to historical and emotional "storage" are juxtaposed for the sake of creating new "artificial realities." The questions I want to investigate are: what kind of communication happens according to this model? A *necrodialogue* between the artists and the women in the otherworld? What are the implications and consequences of this communication? Furthermore: where does Theweleit take the concepts of the women's sacrifice and the mediatic woman from and how does he morph them into a new form? The essay presents only a selection of these adoptions, as the elements of Theweleit's montage style of writing are far too diverse to be covered in one essay. First, I will look at the formulation and presentation of the concept of the mediatic woman in the *Book of Kings* series (first published in German in three volumes: 1988, 1994, 1994) before I trace the idea of the woman's sacrifice back to the first book by Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (first published 1977–1978), and to Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/ 1900* (first published 1985). The two final connections I will propose lead to Elias Canetti's and Marshall

3 I will use the adjective "mediatic" in this essay in order to hybridize the words "medial" and "mediumistic."

4 "So ist mir die Vermutung gekommen, es ist nicht aus reiner Liebe, sondern aus anderer Leidenschaft, daß Orpheus sich umwendet auf der Treppe, um in die Augen seines Weibs zu blicken. Möglicherweise tut er es, um sie dort unten zu halten in einer Funktion [. . .] . . . ein wichtiger Pol im Jenseits-Speicher [. . .] zu dem ein Draht zu ziehen wäre, Kabel zu legen in vielerlei Arten von artifizieller Totenwiederbelebung (von der die Literaturen, soviel ist Tatsache, nur so wimmeln) [. . .] Kabel zu einer der Hauptquellen des Wissens, Verbindung zu geschichtsträchtigen Welten, Verbindung zu Gefühlskomprimationen der Toten, die man zur Erzeugung künstlicher Wirklichkeiten braucht [. . .] Draht zu einer der Hauptquellen der sog. Inspiration" (Theweleit 1991 103–105).

McLuhan's writings. Canetti's somewhat contrasting concepts of the survivor and transformation inspire Theweleit to a differentiation between violent and reviving art (production), while Marshall McLuhan's idea of media as "extensions of the body" adds technological momentum to Theweleit's notion of cultural production and enables his ambiguous concept of the mediatic woman.

Before illuminating these connections, one must point out that by the late 1980s *Book of Kings* is far from the only book to have dealt with the idea of male writing inspired or enabled by the symbolic or factual sacrifice of women. These are objectified, made disposable for the "male gaze" (Mulvey 2009, first published 1975), and banned from the physical world. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000, first published 1979) discuss the depiction of women, oscillating between angels and monsters, and its impact on female writing. Silvia Bovenschen (1979) focuses on the cleavage between "real" women and ideological imaginations of women. Inge Stephan and Sigrid Weigel (1983) collect contributions about women's marginalization in literature and history. Elisabeth Bronfen (1987) writes about the literary motif of the female "Beautiful Dead Body,"[5] the liminal placedness of the female between the material and dematerialized world, and their images changing between "demonic" or "angelic." Friedrich Kittler emphasizes a different aspect when writing about "The Queen's Sacrifice" in *Discourse Networks 1800/ 1900*, according to which by 1900 the idealized version of the nature-bound motherly ideal of the woman has ceased to dominate the discursive system: thus, punning on Lacan, he states "~~La~~ femme n'éxiste pas" (Kittler 1990 345, 378).

2 Mediatic Woman: Eurydice in *Book of Kings*

In *Book of Kings*, the pattern of male art production via otherworld-connected women is introduced by recollecting the biographical situation of the German writer Gottfried Benn around 1945. Benn identifies himself allegorically with the figure of Orpheus when writing letters to his wife Herta and to his friend Friedrich Wilhelm Oelze in these years, completing a poem with the title "Orpheus's Death"[6] in 1946 (*BdK1*, 35, 52). Benn's wife Herta has committed suicide in a village called Neuhaus out of fear of being captured by the Red Army while Benn is in Berlin. This opens a biographical parallel to the Orpheus and Eurydice myth and appears to inspire Benn to write the poem. Therein, Orpheus laments his pain by

5 "Die schöne Leiche."
6 "Orpheus' Tod."

repeating the phrase: "How you leave me behind"[7] (*BdK1* 54–62) – the same pain that inspired him to sing – or, respectively, write the poem. The blame is hers, which reverses the fact that *he* left her behind in Hades. She stays in the idealized distance whereas Orpheus is stoned and killed by the Maenads – "bitches,"[8] as Benn terms them (*BdK1* 58). For Theweleit, the poem shows how Benn grants his artistic survival by narrating the death of his alter ego charged with guilt and by "*liquidating*" the "(hi)story of his wife's death" (*Bdk1* 67). And still, even though her body is caught in the underworld, she – or put more clearly: her image – serves as a source of inspiration for her artist-husband. Consequently, in Theweleit's variant of the ascent after the *katábasis*, Orpheus turns around and looks back to Eurydice not out of love, but *schemingly* – in order to sacrifice her for two interconnected reasons. The first is his own inspiration-causing pain and the second is a lasting connection to the Otherworld as an archive of history and realities:

> Orpheus, as the figure I am trying to narrate, is a Hades-experienced man who, in the guise of a lover, allows his wife, "Eurydice," to be sacrificed to the prospect or necessity of creating for himself a favourable position of production (even if it is an "exposed," "sorely afflicted" one) in the hard struggle to keep his own song as close as possible to the flow of changing realities, to stay close to new recording procedures, while remaining a figure in flux, figure between invisibility and emergence. "Eurydice" seems to be of special value in the construction as a mediatic bridge to otherworldly places, body bridge to Hades, body bridge to recording procedures. (*BdK1* 102–104)[9]

The violence in this procedure becomes visible in what Theweleit calls liquidation of history: In "Orpheus's Death," Benn veils the death of his wife and replaces it with a piece of art that gives the impression of being autonomous by omitting real historical and biographic violence, i.e., the death of Herta Benn (*BdK1* 67). With that, he hides the fact that the poem is based on the artist's underworld connection, which feeds it with historical reality. However, Herta's voice and history are muted, and with that her communication with the living aside from her wid-

7 "Wie du mich zurückläßt."

8 "Hündinnen."

9 "Orpheus als Figur, die ich zu erzählen versuche, ist ein Hadeserfahrener, der, im Gewand eines Liebhabers, zuläßt, daß seine Frau, 'Eurydike,' geopfert werde der Aussicht oder der Notwendigkeit, ihm selber eine günstige Produktionsposition zu schaffen (und sei es eine 'ausgesetzte,' 'leidgeprüfte') im harten Kampf, den eigenen Gesang so eng wie möglich am Fluß der wechselnden Realitäten zu halten, an neuen Aufzeichnungsverfahren zu bleiben und dabei selber eine Figur im Fluß, Figur zwischen Unsichtbarkeit und Hervortreten. 'Eurydike' scheint in der Konstruktion von besonderem Wert zu sein als eine mediale Brücke zu jenseitigen Orten, Körperbrücke zum Hades, Körperbrücke zu Aufzeichnungsverfahren."

ower. Put differently, the sacrifice of Herta Benn leads to Gottfried's apotheosis as the artist god Orpheus, by inspiring him with elements of a historical reality that he sublimates into "fine art."

Theweleit's method, between interpretation of a poem and biographical comment, also shows an important aspect of his understanding of the arts: He negates a strict dichotomy of realities and fictions. Placing himself in a postmodern tradition, he insinuates that such an "automatic separation"[10] (*BdK1* 704) is "aggressive" and normative inasmuch as it forbids certain ways of interacting with art. As a consequence, Theweleit tries to retrace the historical and (inter)personal background of the arts he is dealing with in long passages of reconstruction, deconstruction, and speculations about the artists, their professional and personal relations, political, artistic, and historical entanglements, and so forth. Thus, processes both intrinsic and extrinsic to the texts are equally treated as narratives, "artificial realities"[11] (*BdK1* 12) that transport information about interpersonal relations in different times and spaces. Theweleit correspondingly selects his material from multiple sources and out of various periods and fields, creating a multimedia montage of an almost manic associative force.

Benn only takes the first place in the modern Orpheus paradigm, one in a series of many "Kings."[12] While the main pattern stays the same, the individual case studies differ when it comes to the details, adding material to the paradigm. Two examples that are laid out in the book will clarify Theweleit's procedure: (1) Claudio Monteverdi writes an opera called *L'Orfeo* which premiered in 1607 on the occasion of the birthday of Francesco IV Gonzaga – Monteverdi's lord and employer. In the same year, his wife – the singer Claudia, formerly Cattaneo – dies, leaving him in a desolate emotional state. In contrast to the "classical" Ovid version, in Monteverdi the figure of Orpheus is not torn apart by the Maenads in the end, but is saved by Apollo. Theweleit connects this to the fact that Monteverdi was forced into his poorly paid duty by the duke out of financial hardship, while his wife and potential art production partner had been cut off from career opportunities at the court. In other words: Apollo impersonates Francesco IV who "saves" Claudio from the artistic and romantic relation with Claudia in order to assure his art production and connection to the "pole of power."[13] After the death

10 "automatische Trennung."

11 "künstlicher Wirklichkeiten."

12 For instance: Claudio Monteverdi, Hanns Eisler, Bertolt Brecht, Knut Hamsun, Dante Alighieri, Rainer Maria Rilke, Franz Kafka, Ezra Pound, Klaus Mann, Ernst Jünger, Elvis Presley, Andy Warhol, and Vladimir Nabokov.

13 The title of the second tome of *The Book of Kings* is *Orpheus at the Power Pole* (*Orpheus am Machtpol*, 1996).

of his wife, Monteverdi did not marry again, just as his Orpheus renounces all living women after Eurydice's death. He stays connected only to her, sending his songs down to Hades so she hears them and thus fulfils the function of a medium in Kittler's double sense: she is a "*recording medium of feelings*"[14] (*BdK1* 587) and the muse and target for Orpheus's laments and praises. Just as Orpheus dedicates himself exclusively to this new medium, Claudio henceforth "*only made music*"[15] (*BdK1* 587). This recounting of Monteverdi's story is framed within the transition process from medieval hegemony centered on Christian power structures and art motifs towards the culture of the Renaissance influenced by ancient Greek art and "so-called 'Humanism'"[16] (*BdK1* 548) and – most importantly – the arrival of the opera as a new medium. All in all, it "is about the construction of the new man and society, in which 'Orpheus' is the second of a *male couple*, formed by the prince and the chief of his court thinkers/artists/advisors"[17] (*BdK1* 550).

The roles of women within these dynamics become clearer later in the chapter when Theweleit points out that the occasions of the production of operas were mostly matrimonial festivities whose main purpose was to assure the power of the ruling dynasties – a reason that brings with it an extreme pressure of "producing" offspring. So, whereas the wife of the court artist is replaced by exclusively "*mediatic* connections" (*BdK1* 625) to female singers, the women of the ruling class are exploited in an even harsher and more direct way: they have to be sexually disposable – and lose their position if they don't bear children. Theweleit sums it up:

> The exploitation of women, the control over births, power, and media, is not only *in* the play, is not only part of the performed situation and part of the life situation of the performing artists, has its offshoots not only in the female singers / ruler relationship, it is also in the body of the bride – it is the core of the [festive] event itself (*BdK1* 692).[18]

(2) In the chapter following the Monteverdi case, Theweleit turns to Bertolt Brecht – or "Orpheus in the Real Socialism"[19] (*BdK1* 706): a scenic start, 24 August 1961, East Berlin, starring Hanns Eisler and Hans Bunge, who talk about a

14 "*Aufzeichnungsmedium von Gefühlen*."
15 "machte *nur noch Musik*."
16 "sog. 'Humanismus'."
17 "Es geht um den neuen Menschen- und Gesellschaftsbau, und 'Orpheus' ist darin der zweite eines *male couple*, gebildet aus dem Fürsten und dem Obersten seiner Hofdenker/-artisten/-berater."
18 "Die Frauenverwertung, die Kontrolle über Geburten, Macht und Medien, ist nicht nur *im* Stück, ist nicht nur Teil der aufgeführten Situation und Teil der Lebenssituation der ausführenden Artisten, hat seine Ableger nicht nur im Verhältnis Sängerinnen/Fürst, sie ist auch im Körper der Braut – sie ist der Kern des Ereignisses selber."
19 "Orpheus im realen Sozialismus."

ballet Bertolt Brecht apparently wanted to write in cooperation with Eisler. The title: "Orpheus und Eurydice" (*BdK1* 708). Theweleit highlights some details of Eisler's remarks on the planned but never realized project: first, Eisler points out the importance of music as a cultural medium, giving the examples of how Orpheus "made the stones leap" (*BdK1* 706) and how the walls of Jericho were torn down by music. Also, in the planned version of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth Orpheus was granted entrance to the Underworld by "a special pass"/"a special permission"[20] (*BdK1* 708) from the gods. His looking-back is in this case due to the fact that Eurydice asks for it and is sanctioned mainly because it is a transgression of the rule of progress. So, the half-dead woman basically effects her own ban by making a "slightly stupid"[21] (*BdK1* 710) request and thus fulfils the cliché of female naivety which results in her ultimate death. Theweleit links all of this to the frame of socialist Germany and its political agenda: the special entrance permission to Hades corresponds to the migration restrictions in the GDR and the leaping stones and the Jericho Wall are alluding to the newly built Berlin Wall. The "fall of the wall," however, was meant, as Theweleit comments, "only for the midnight talk about Orpheus"[22] (*BdK1* 708n), and therefore in sharp dissonance with the historical building of the Berlin Wall that took place at the same time – another case of liquidation of history.

In the center of the chapter on Brecht is a reading of the poem "After the Death of My Collaborator M.S."[23] from 1941, written after the death of his secretary and lover Margarete Steffin in Moscow. She had been suffering from tuberculosis for years and passed away while the writer was already on a train ride towards his US exile. Steffin was supposed to follow him after recovering. The poem does not explicitly call her Eurydice, but she bears the traits of the woman left behind. For instance, her transformation into a star in the sky, which leaves her in safe and inspiring distance just as Monteverdi's Eurydice who was transposed to the sky by Apollo. Theweleit comments:

> To sing admiringly of the woman's brilliance works best when the woman is a star (natural star, previously mediatic star) to which the man enters in relation as an art star. Not only the vampiric gazes of royal couples and other rulers – full of sucking-bliss – rest on the construction that entangles humans and stars; *our* gazes on the *work* of art are thereby alloyed with an s-gaze (let's say: to 50%).[24] (*BdK1* 715)

20 "einem Spezialausweis"/"eine Spezialerlaubnis."

21 "etwas blöden."

22 "nur für das Mitternachtsgespräch über Orpheus."

23 "Nach dem Tod meiner Mitarbeiterin M.S."

24 "Das Leuchten der Frau bewundernd zu besingen, geht am besten, wenn die Frau ein Stern ist (Naturstern, der vorher medialer Stern war), zu dem der Mann als Kunststern in Beziehung

The "s-gaze" is the gaze of the survivor, who – according to Elias Canetti – manages to outlive another person while drawing a certain satisfaction from it.[25] Through this expression, the central topic of the exertion of power through art production is emphasized. For Theweleit, however, it's important that it is transmitted also to the recipient, who gets directly involved in these relations through the process of reading. He mentions some more details that appear inappropriate to him in the context of this commemorative poem and thus strengthen his argument, like for instance labeling Moscow "the red city,"[26] calling Steffin "my little [teacher]" and depicting her as the one and "*only*" (*BdK1* 714), which she famously was not for Brecht. Most telling, he writes, is the "weak cough"[27] perceived by the speaker in the poem when looking at the stars, because it is not connected to her or "her body's indelible presence in the body of Brecht, but, strikingly, with the *nightly aspect of Orion*"[28] (*BdK1* 718). This element, according to him, is "brutal" because it diminishes her bodily presence to the degree of "astralizing" it.

Margarete Steffin is a "mediatic woman"[29] (*BdK1* 726) who plays an important role in Brecht's art production in at least two aspects: First, she is Brecht's typewriting assistant who organizes and co-writes various of his works, and secondly, she is the inspiring dead muse who is "processed" – that means sacrificed – *in the poem*. In the end she stays in the "Hades," "in *Lenin's Own Country*" (*BdK1* 724), while Brecht is on his way to the United States. What Theweleit criticizes in his complex analysis is that the poem has no reviving quality but marks Brecht as the one outliving Steffin, whose body is consumed by the art process: "I object (both as a kind of non-fascist, which I want to be, and as a poetry reader, which I am) to authors lowering sarcophagi[30] of women's corpses into me, to which they

tritt. Nicht nur die vampirischen Blicke von Fürstenpaaren und anderen Machthabern liegen voll Saugewonne auf der Mensch- und Sternverhakungskonstruktion; *unsere* Blicke auf das Kunst*werk* werden dadurch legiert mit einem Ü-Blick (sagen wir: zu 50%)."

25 For Theweleit's use of the term "survival" ["Überleben"] see this paper's section on "The Writer as Survivor." In *Book of Kings*, Theweleit often uses the abbreviation "s" ["Ü"] to refer to this term with its Canettian implications (*BdK1* 210, 302).

26 "die rote Stadt."

27 "schwaches Husten."

28 "der unauslöschlichen Gegenwart ihres Körpers im Körper Brechts, sondern eben dem *nächtlichen Anblick des Orions*."

29 "mediale Frau."

30 Theweleit also uses this motif in relation to poorly written poems by Benn which deal with his extramarital affairs: "Sarcophagi of poorly covered bodies" [Sarkophage schlecht bedeckter Leichen] (*BdK1* 153).

have given the guise of 'anti-fascist literature'" (*BdK1* 726).[31] In the case studies about Claudia Monteverdi, Margarete Steffin, and Herta Benn, Theweleit shows that real sexual relations between artist and muse can even catalyze the process of art production and do not necessarily hinder the "killing into art," as for example Kittler claims.[32]

3 The "Sacrifice of Women" and Female Double Bind: *Male Fantasies*

The concept of the sacrifice of women is not used for the first time by Theweleit in *Book of Kings*. In the first volume of *Male Fantasies*, he already writes about a "female sacrifice" (Theweleit 1987, 343, 344, 368–373), though placing the phenomenon in a broader context than that of art production. Theweleit analyzes there a multitude of literature written by soldiers and (proto)fascists in the interwar period and points towards reoccurring motifs that give indication of the authors' object relations and affectual constitution. After that, he updates some aspects of psychoanalytical theory on gender relations and object choice with the help of his findings and other post-Freudian theories (including those of Margarete Mahler, Michael Balint, Gilles Deleuze with Félix Guattari and Melanie Klein). Then, digging deeper into history, he provides a cultural-historical overview of the male-female power relations between the medieval and the twentieth century and of what he calls "Origins of the Anti-Female Armor" (Theweleit 1987, 300) of men, before he turns to an analysis of the "Maintenance of Lack in Relations between the Sexes" (363), building on historical as well as psychoanalytical insights.

His main argument about gender relations is that the power hierarchy between men and women is a persistent culturally constructed system that undergoes some variations and changes in the course of history while still consisting of "recurring themes" (Theweleit 1987, 363). The "perpetual renewal and exacerbation [of inequality between genders] has always been an important part of the work of the dominant group" (Theweleit 1987, 298): this is why Theweleit puts gender relations next to the class struggle in the center of a ruling system, thereby diverging from the Marxist orthodoxy that sees the class opposition as "principal contradiction." In the paragraph "Woman: Territory of Desire," Theweleit outlines

31 "Ich habe (sowohl als eine Art Unfaschist, der ich sein möchte, wie als Gedichtleser, der ich bin) etwas dagegen, daß Autoren Sarkophage mit Frauenleichen in mich senken, denen sie die Gestalt gegeben haben von 'antifaschistischer Literatur.'".

32 See the paragraph "La femme n'éxiste pas?" below.

a psychosocial model of gender-based power relations. Besides the male-female opposition, another one is identified *within* the group of women: the images of "high" women are the malleable targets of unfulfilled desire of a prelapsarian moment, while the "low" women are the ones who make the lack of the unfulfilled desire visible by their bodily presence and thus suffer the "reterritorializations"[33] – or, put differently, the restructuring of power relations in the physical world:

> The *fictive* body of woman has become an imaginary arena for fantasies of deterritorializations, while actual male-female relationships have continued to serve, and have been actively maintained, as focal points for the implementation of massive reterritorializations. Exotic women, and women of the ruling class, have provided the raw material for those fictions. Women belonging to the oppressed classes, by contrast, have provided the material for male fears. These latter women have been victims[/sacrifices],[34] rather than images; they have been persecuted, not exalted. (Theweleit 1987, 298–299)

The division into "high" and "low" women is a pattern detected by various feminist critics since the 1970s that serves to point at a problematic double bind in which the female is caught. While Theweleit uses the figures of the "white sister/nurse" and its flipside, the "red whore" (Theweleit 1987, 113), to describe the female images during the interwar period, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe a pattern of angelic women against monstrous women, who are impersonated, for instance, by Snow White and Lilith, respectively. The two authors claim as an effect the emergence of a "double bind in which the mutually dependent images of angel and monster" (Gilbert and Gubar 2000, 36) have trapped female authors. This double bind works as a factor that grants stability to ruling systems as it makes it impossible for women to live up to the expectancy of being "high-born" innocent angels, as they are simultaneously suppressed and "sacrificed" into lower domains by male power exertion. The term of the "sacrifice" works in two directions here: on the one hand women get lowered into a "life of feminine submission" (36) – on the other hand they are "'killed' into art" (17), which means elevated and fixed by a godlike male author to a version of the angel-like discarnate image. This double bind resonates and almost corresponds to the female binary pattern shown by Theweleit in *Male Fantasies*, which was published at the same time. Therein, in the chapter "A Form of Female Sacrifice," this process is perfectly illustrated through a book publicity

33 The concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization are taken from Deleuze and Guattari.

34 The German word that is used here is "Opfer" (Theweleit 2019, 366), which combines and associates the two meanings of "victim" and "sacrifice."

portrait that shows Marilyn Monroe crossed out with nail polish and accompanied by the text: "in her public image Marilyn is everything we're told we want to be; in her private life, she's everything we fear we probably are" (Theweleit 1987, 371). The "X" painted with nail polish can be read as a mark of (object) choice as much as a crossing-out – a paradox of absent presence, of flawed communication with the disembodied image, that appears when women are "written into art," when a fascist writer "lets women die or drop out of the picture" (Theweleit 1987, 34) in his works or when Orpheus sends Eurydice into the Hades in order to sing of her loss afterwards.

4 ~~La~~ femme n'éxiste pas?

Friedrich Kittler takes up the topic of the female sacrifice in his *Discourse Networks 1800/ 1900*, which was published in German in 1985. Kittler aims at displaying the shift from a discourse system[35] based on the idea of man as living spirit or logos and woman as nature, maintained throughout the philosophy and literature of the nineteenth century, towards a pattern in which this transcendental bipolar system dissolves: the philosophy of Nietzsche, in which the former discourse system disintegrates and is replaced by a new one, shows, according to Kittler, that language no more represents a thing in itself but refers to the nervous impulses or irritants caused by the material world (Kittler 1990, 187). The nervous impulse is moved – "metaphorized" – into an ideal image, then into sound. The consequence is a cutting off of the direct connection between language and nature, and a destabilization of the whole semiotic system. At the same time, the surge of new media like gramophone, radio, film, typewriter, fuels new social developments that are subsequent to the philosophical turning point.

The role of women within this framework is described in the chapter "The Queen's Sacrifice"[36] which Theweleit comments upon in *Orpheus ~~and~~ Eurydice* (1991, 81–98). In Kittler's chapter, however, it is not the bodily/monstrous/dangerous female that is sacrificed, but the uniform ideal female with its connection to nature and originality. From about 1900 onwards, this ideal is replaced by technical replicas that differ in one essential trait from the former imaginary ideal: they

35 The German title is "Aufschreibesysteme" (Kittler 2003) which could more directly be translated as "writing/recording system."

36 The German title "Damenopfer" has a broader sense. It too alludes at the context of chess given by Kittler in the beginning of the chapter; however, "Dame" in a more general sense would be best translated as "Lady."

are physical or embodied, and thus meet with the male desires in *reality* rather than only in the male fantasy. This creates a new kind of freedom for the many real women who become more independent from men and their imaginations, embracing new – and formerly exclusively male – occupations: "Empirical individual females, unburdened of the ideal, took on other roles" (Kittler 1990, 349). The consequences are, according to Kittler, an abolition of the rigid binary of male/female – thanks to the fact that machines "do away with polar sexual differences and its symbols" – and even "equal rights" (1990, 351). Kittler tries to develop this untenably optimistic claim by referring to the discourses of literature, university, as well as work and technology.

In a reading of Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future* (1886), Kittler emphasizes that the construction of a perfectly conversing automaton called "future Eve" serves as a substitute for an English lord's lover whose beauty is flawed "by the imbecility of everything she says" (Kittler 1990, 347). The automaton constructed by a fictionalized Thomas Edison is a copy of the *body* of its model but clears it from its "troublesome aspects" (Kittler 1990 347) as her mind[37] is replaced by "that of the Woman" (Kittler 1990, 347).[38] Thus, Kittler points out how the empirical reality of the female – women in plurality – rises as the flipside of a unified and optimized "*copy* of Nature" (Kittler 1990 347) in an android's shape: "The technological substitute perfects *and* liquidates all the characteristics attributed to the imaginary image of Woman by Poets and Thinkers [. . .]. In consequence, only women in plurality remain after Edison's experiment" (Kittler 1990, 348).

The "plural women" also become visible in the academic context of the "discourse network 1900": based on Lacan's idea "that psychoanalytic discourse exists as the transposition of hysterical discourse" (Kittler 1990 350), Kittler claims that by "lending an ear" to the narrations of "hysterical" women, Sigmund Freud opened the path to the social and academic representation of women's knowledge. Thus, in this narrative, Freud – dubiously staged by Kittler as a benevolent gatekeeper – clears the path for a female/feminist academic discourse which rises out of the discourse of hysteria. This goes hand in hand with the newly gained access of women to universities and with a diversification of women's roles and functions. From these, Kittler decides to highlight the function of women as secretaries, which follows from the fact that they quickly adapted to the new medium of the typewriter. The professionalization of women, be it in a psychoanalytic or academic field or in the office, brings with it a "desexualization [that] allows

37 "Geist." (Kittler 2003, 441).

38 "The Woman" written with a capital "W" represents the uniform idea of the female connected to nature and motherhood which is typical for the nineteenth century.

women to access writing" (Kittler 1990, 199). Women as secretaries and psychoanalysts thus have a function of listening and writing/recording that surmounts their role as idealized love objects. As for sexual desire, it is transposed into the spheres of media representation and arts (Kittler 1990, 357). What Theweleit adapts from Kittler here, is mainly the idea that women, who have been culturally trained to perceive and listen, are "closely connected to the most advanced recording systems" (*BdK1* 95) around 1900, as the cultural modus operandi shifts from male declaring to one of listening (*BdK1* 94–95). Theweleit and Kittler write that after 1900 it is the mediatic function of women that men fall in love with, and not their idealized, allegedly natural traits. So, when a writer falls in love with his secretary, it is actually the typewriter he desires (Kittler 1990, 357) – or as Theweleit puts it: the "love to the 'function typewriter'"[39] (*BdK1* 88). This is the "Queen's sacrifice" for Kittler: the ideal love is replaced by the attraction to a function. The male object-choice aims at the "mediatic woman" as Theweleit calls it later in *Orpheus ~~and~~ Eurydice*.[40] In Theweleit's retelling, however, it is not the ideal woman that is sacrificed, but the typist – on the one hand simply by exploitation, and on the other to transform her into art by making her an idea(l). Also, while for Kittler real sexual relations are displaced into media, for Theweleit there is a greater differentiation into different types of sexualities that operate on different levels, but at the same time, "production sexuality, the sexuality of physical contact, the sexuality of obsessions with the 'beloved object in the distance,' and so on" (Theweleit 1994, 25). This leads, according to Theweleit, to the polygamy found in the biographies of many writers as they choose different women for different "functions." The "killing into art" of the mediatic woman could thus be read as a problematic result of a shift or mixture of sexualities related to a single "love object": The mediatic woman is killed when transposed into the function of "beloved object in the distance." But what about the figure of the Orphean perpetrator of the sacrifice? In *Book of Kings*, Theweleit returns to the case of Gottfried Benn to tackle this question once more.

39 "Liebe zur 'Funktion Schreibmaschine'".

40 See the paragraph about Brecht/Steffin above. Plus, in his book *Object-Choice (All You Need is Love . . .)*, published in German in 1990, Theweleit includes a chapter called: "Object-choice: 'medial woman.' Object-choice according to the woman's technical advancement (Alma and Alfred Hitchcock)" (1994, 20–26). Therein, he sums up the notion of the technology-connected woman under an explicitly psychoanalytical aspect.

5 The Writer as Survivor

At the beginning of *Orpheus ~~and~~ Eurydice*, referring to Gottfried Benn's reaction to the death of his wife Hertha, Theweleit assigns him the attitude of a "survivor" in a distinctly negative meaning – a meaning that includes pleasure in view of the death of the other and the consequent rupture of connection:

> That in every survivor, to a certain extent, there is a killer – which Canetti so irrefutably states in *Crowds and Power* – Benn knows it; and he knows that the sensations of survival consist in still being there, while so many others lie among the dead. The shame to still be in possession of that wonderful voice, while the most beautiful body it used to reach is no longer there; shame that quietly intersperses itself with the thrill of still being alive.[41] (*BdK1* 42–43)

Theweleit here explicitly refers to a notion elaborated by Elias Canetti, which becomes part of the bedrock for the pattern of sacrificed women, inasmuch as it explains the Janus-faced figure of "the poet as a double of the ruler, pointing to the intricate involvement of both in the guilt of survival"[42] (Lüdemann 2008, 12). In what follows, I will address the translation of "survival" into the pattern of violent male art production. Theweleit, whose writing style and practice is consistently eclectic, selects this notion from Canetti's broader discussion of death and transformation within the social dynamics of crowds, and combines it with notions of transformation he draws from authors such as Ovid, Kafka, Deleuze/Guattari, and more. So, retracing how he establishes the figure of the writer as a survivor in the Canettian sense, it has to be considered how Theweleit transforms the adapted elements and adds new contexts and meanings to them.

In a section called "Surviving and Recording" (*BdK1* 204–217), Theweleit quotes from Canetti's work *Crowds and Power* (first published 1960). The beginning of the chapter "The Survivor" reads as follows:

> The moment of survival is the moment of power. Horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. The dead man lies on the ground while the survivor stands. It is as though there had been a fight and the one had struck down the other. In survival, each man is the enemy of every other, and all grief is insignificant measured against this elemental triumph. Whether the survivor is confronted by one dead man

41 "Daß in jedem Überlebenden ein Stück Töter steckt – was Canetti so unwiderleglich ausführt in Masse und Macht –, Benn weiß es; und weiß, daß die Sensationen des Überlebens darin bestehen, noch da zu sein, während so viele andere unter den Toten liegen. Scham, immer noch im Besitz dieser wunderbaren Stimme zu sein, während der schönste Körper, den sie zu erreichen pflegte, nicht mehr da ist; Scham, die sich leise mit dem thrill, selbst noch zu leben, durchsetzt."
42 "Er meint den Machthaber als Doppel des Dichters und den Dichter als Doppel des Machthabers und verweist damit auf die intrikate Verwicklung beider in die Schuld des Überlebens."

> or by many, the essence of the situation is that he feels unique. He sees himself standing there alone and exults in it; and when we speak of the power which this moment gives him, we should never forget that it derives from his sense of uniqueness and from nothing else. (Canetti 1981, 227)

The survivor is primarily marked by the fact that he *outlives* the dead and remains as the one singled out. With its inherent longing for uniqueness and grandeur, survival becomes an act of exertion of power, which reaches its extreme in the killing of another person – the "lowest form of survival" (Canetti 1981, 227). This close connection between mere surviving and killing – the two can be seen as two points in a continuum – has to be taken into account when reading Theweleit's narrations of "sacrifice." In a parallel structure, the sacrifice of women in art production doesn't necessarily mean a direct killing but can be understood as an outliving or even a use-and-discard that brings with it a certain pleasure or advantage for the artist and guarantees his living-on. As Theweleit puts it, there are "*more civil* forms of the liquidating survival"[43] (*BdK1* 205). In *Crowds and Power*, Canetti introduces two further, and intensified, variants of the survivor: the invulnerable *hero*, who killed several persons, and the *commander* who is responsible for a mass of soldiers and therefore develops a "passion," an "addiction" for surviving "heaps of dead" (Canetti 1981, 230) soldiers.[44] Theweleit takes that up already prior to the *Book of Kings* – in *Male Fantasies* – when he writes about the fascist man:

> It is not corpses that this man loves; he loves his own life. But he loves it—and this strikes me as Canetti's crowning insight – for its ability to survive. Corpses piled upon corpses reveal him as victor, a man who has successfully externalized that which is dead within him, who remains standing when all else is crumbling. (Theweleit 1987, 19)

Here, a psychological introspective dimension is added to Canetti's notion of survivor, as that "which is dead within him" is "the mass of the dead, the darkness within oneself" (Theweleit 1987, 20). Thus, the fascist man is dissociated from his emotions because of the "wall" he has built around himself, the "body armor"[45] (Theweleit 1987, 223) that he is unable to dissolve without violence, therefore projecting the suppressed to the outside, which leads him to murderous action.

43 "*zivilere* Formen des auslöschenden Überlebens."

44 For a more detailed discussion of survival, masses/crowds, and series, see Theweleit: "Canettis Masse-Begriff: Verschwinden der Masse? Masse & Serie" (1998).

45 He adapts the term "Körperpanzer" from the psychologist Wilhelm Reich (Theweleit 1987, 223) and connects it with the particular word "Panzer"/"armor" as used by the sociologist Norbert Elias, that he calls "a key word for Elias" (302).

Translating the act of survival/killing into the context of fascism – and later to art production, Theweleit carries out an important amendment with the addition of a gender perspective. The "darkness within" the fascist man is coded as female, like the murky Freudian "dark continent" (Theweleit 1987, 375; Freud 1955, 241). As he has no access to this meandering mix of emotions, blood, and sexual desire inside his body, he reacts with fear, repulsion, and aggression when the possibility of projection onto an "object" arises:

> They want to wade in blood; they want an intoxicant that will "cause both sight and hearing to fade away." They want a contact with the opposite sex – or perhaps simply access to sexuality itself – which cannot be named, a contact in which they can dissolve themselves while forcibly dissolving the other sex. (Theweleit 1987, 205)

The wading in blood illustrates the outliving of masses of others, a blood frenzy, an ecstasy that dissolves the limiting shell of the "body armor" and makes the soldier lose his "fear of being touched" (Canetti 1981, 15–16). This ego-dissolving ecstasy enables him to merge with his surroundings.

In *Orpheus ~~and~~ Eurydice*, the concept of survival is not applied to the fascist soldier but to a figure called Flavius Josephus, who undergoes a transformation from a Jewish military leader to a historiographer in the service of the Roman imperial power during the Jewish war against the Romans between AD 66 and 74: when Theweleit comments on a passage written by Canetti about Josephus, he establishes a means of translating the notion of the survivor from the historical into the literary discourse as for him Flavius is "survivor, killer, chronicler"[46] (*BdK1* 211) at once. According to Theweleit, by means of his treacherous historiography written from a position of power, he "consigns" the (Jewish) people into Hades, which serves as a growing and unconscious-like "storage system"[47] (*BdK1* 212) for the survived. In this critique of writing from the position of a survivor who sends the dead into the underworld, Theweleit creates a connection to the theme of the murderous frenzy in battle by addressing the growing masses of the dead and at the same time prepares a critique of artistic writing from the position of Orpheus, who sacrifices his wife for the good of his survival as an artist. Hence, the chronicler does not wade in blood like the fascist soldier, nor does he by any means "have ink in his veins; rather, his ink is mixed with blood, the blood of those sent ahead. He himself stands in full survival"[48] (*BdK1* 213). This process of historiography as "writing" humans into Hades echoes the process Theweleit describes as

46 "Überlebender, Töter, Chronist."

47 "Speichersystem."

48 "Keineswegs also hat der Schreiber Tinte in den Adern; eher ist seine Tinte gemischt mit Blut, dem Blut der Vorausgeschickten. Er selber steht im vollen Überleben."

that of the artist-Orpheus looking back down to fix Eurydice in her underworldly position. In both cases, the writer is *connected* to Hades and gifted with the inspirational pleasure of the survivor, but filters and veils the voices he is hearing in order to appropriate them and silence their marginalized emitters.

6 Writing as Transformation

Theweleit does not limit his considerations to the deadly side of writing that he also calls "history *consumption*" (*BdK1* 127). On several other occasions Theweleit discusses a desirable and non-violent form of writing that lets the dead speak and thus grants a communication between the living and the dead on equal terms. In a text on the history of the student movement of the 1970s, he writes about how revival works not by sending people ahead into the Otherworld but by bringing them back into an experiential presence:

> We have the possibility to raise the level of reality – not only of the present moment, but also of the past, by letting our senses, our empathy, our extended knowledge perceive features of it that escaped the eyes, ears, the nerves of the contemporaries of that time (and be those contemporaries: ourselves). This means in a nutshell that we do not merely "interpret" history, we really *transform* it.[49] (Theweleit 1990, 9)

This idea of transformation[50] echoes again Canetti's, who in the speech "The Vocation of the Poet"[51] styles the poet as the guardian of the universal human ability of transformations,[52] who has two main tasks: first, to effect the "conservation"[53] of the transformations – that is to say, the written and spoken "intellectual heri-

49 "Wir haben die Möglichkeit, nicht nur den jetzigen Moment, sondern auch die Vergangenheit realer zu machen, indem unsere Sinne, unsere Einfühlung, unsere erweiterten Kenntnisse Züge an ihr wahrnehmen, die den Augen, Ohren, den Nerven der damaligen Zeitgenossen (und seien diese Zeitgenossen: wir selbst) entgingen. Das heißt zugespitzt gesprochen, wir 'interpretieren' Geschichte nicht etwa bloß, wir *verwandeln* sie wirklich."

50 He also talks about "history *transformation*" [Geschichts*verwandlung*] (*BdK1* 127).

51 "Der Beruf des Dichters."

52 In *Crowds and Power*, there is a whole chapter on "Transformation" (337–384) that develops the term in more detail.

53 "Bewahrung."

tage"[54] of mankind – to "resurrect it towards our life"[55] (Canetti 1995, 278). Second, to *practice* transformations as a kind of subversive role model in a world of "performance and specialization [and] peaks" (Canetti 1995, 278)[56] – in other words: practice "empathy"[57] (Canetti 1995, 279) and thereby "keep open the accesses *between* the humans"[58] (Canetti 1995, 278). This focus on the *accesses*, the emotional connection between people, is emphasized as the main factor for a desirable cultural production. That puts the writer in the role of a mediator between people who enables communication by turning "into *everybody*"[59] (Canetti 1995, 279) and thus creates empathy. A writer who by means of his sensitive realism manages to revive "everything that surrounded him" and brings it from his life's past to the reader's present, "*here*, in this life" (Canetti 1981, 277) is, according to Canetti, Stendhal. His texts refrain from creating unified entities but allow "everything that [is] separate to remain separate" (Canetti 1981, 277). This is exactly what Theweleit means, when he – focusing on the text rather than the author – claims that writing should "raise the level of reality" of the past in the quote above. For Canetti and Theweleit, authors can manage to survive without killing off the others into ideal shades, if they provide vital and realist texts without subsuming the marginal under a unifying system. Thus, the past writers "offer themselves as food to the living; their immortality profits them. It is a reversal of sacrifice to the dead, which profits both dead and living. There is no more rancor between them, and the sting has been taken from survival" (Canetti 1981, 278).[60]

Both Canetti and Theweleit can be seen as embracing a "prelapsarian" notion of art – in Canetti in the sense of an unmediated realism which is coded as pre-

54 "geistiges Erbe"; Canetti mentions the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, the *Odyssey* by Homer, the *Gilgamesh* epic, and the myths passed on orally by Indigenous people (Canetti 1995, 277–278). The order of the four complexes implies a decrease of mediatedness (written to oral), an increase of age, and therefore of value and originality. For Canetti's idea of human originality and its implied primitivism, see Schüttpelz, "Elias Canettis Primitivismus" (2008).

55 "seine Auferstehung zu unserem Leben."

56 "In einer Welt, die auf Leistung und Spezialisierung angelegt ist, die nichts als Spitzen sieht [. . .]."

57 "Empathie."

58 "die Zugänge *zwischen* den Menschen offenhalten."

59 "zu *jedem* werden."

60 Consequently, also the process of reading becomes one of communication with the dead: "We do not think about it when we read, because we are drilled to initiate something like an automatic revival of the letters –: however, it is not only absent people, in most cases it is dead people with whom we communicate" (*BdK1* 100). [Wir denken nicht daran, wenn wir lesen, weil wir so etwas wie eine automatische Verlebendigung der Buchstaben in Gang zu setzen gedrillt sind –: aber es sind nicht nur Abwesende, in den meisten Fällen sind es Tote, mit denen wir kommunizieren].

modern and "primitive," in Theweleit in the sense that Orpheus's original way of singing makes everybody listen, (almost) revives Eurydice, and stills the pain and punishment of Tantalus; in other words, Orpheus's singing *prior* to the forced "lapsus" of Eurydice. This means that "originally" Orpheus's songs are reviving, connecting the this-world to the underworld; they are not secluding people into Hades but resuscitate the dead or even "eliminate death itself"[61] (*BdK1* 404):

> In other words: this "art" of a playing man has cables to the woman, to Hades, to the transformation medium lyre and to the state of the earth. These are its poles.
>
> This art awakens love, revives the dead, and civilizes the earth. It does it with the help of an expanding and numbing/infatuating gadget, which is able to establish a connection to the beyond in a remarkable way (through "sounds"), to reach the dead, to link the dead to the here.
>
> A medium reaches into the otherworld. The otherworld itself becomes part of this medium. The strings of the lyre are also cables to Hades, in them vibrates (from here on and forever) the ability of a reanimation of the dead.[62] (*BdK1* 405–406)

So, only from the moment the singer decides to turn around, he chooses to suspend the reviving bodily connection to his source of inspiration who then enters his art as a dead ideal, censoring the historical process of his art production and henceforth producing art on the basis of these acts of violence. This pacific version of Orpheus's music, by contrasting the art which is based on a sacrifice, makes the ambivalence of art production visible, the continuum between violent and reviving art. The terms "poles," "transformation medium," "gadget," "cables" in this quote all point at the direction of a technological understanding of the medium, that merges with the medium of the female source of inspiration. In the following section, this aspect is investigated as it is crucial for the understanding of Theweleit's concept of otherworld-connected art.

By listing the various "cables" Orpheus is connected with before his sacrifice of Eurydice in *Book of Kings*, Theweleit transposes the idea of a mental or spiritual otherworld connection – be it in the sense of enthusiastic art or remembering historiography – into a technological one: it links men and women, this-world

61 "den Tod selber abzuschaffen."

62 "Anders gesagt: diese ‚Kunst' eines spielenden Mannes hat Kabel zur Frau, zum Hades, zum Verwandlungsmedium Leier und zum Zustand, in dem die Erde sich befindet. Dies sind ihre Pole.

Diese Kunst erweckt Liebe, belebt Tote und zivilisiert die Erde. Sie tut es mit Hilfe eines ausweitenden und betäubenden/betörenden Geräts, das in der Lage ist, auf eine merkwürdige Weise (durch 'Klänge') eine Verbindung herzustellen zum Jenseits, die Toten zu erreichen, die Toten *anzuschließen* ans hier.

Ins Jenseits reicht ein Medium. Das Jenseits selbst wird *Teil* dieses Mediums. Die Saiten der Leier sind auch Kabel zum Hades, in ihnen schwingt (von hier ab und für immer) die Fähigkeit einer Totenbelebung."

and the Otherworld, artist and instrument, humans and wilderness (*BdK1* 404). This emphasis on the technological aspects casts light upon another link in Theweleit's pattern of art production: Marshall McLuhan's work – most of all *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964. McLuhan supplies the gadgets to expand the Canettian topics of survival and transformation and to make them apt for their use in times of mass media. His claim is that media are extensions of the human body: on the basis of the medical theory of homeostasis postulated by Walter Bradford Cannon[63] he argues that media are body functions projected to the outside of the human body as a reaction to stress and irritation (McLuhan 2003, 22–23, 63–64, 94–95, 332; Löffler 2017, 87–103). Every newly introduced technology according to McLuhan has an irritating and numbing effect on the central nervous system to which we can only react with the creation of new counterirritants or controlling mechanisms for technological development (McLuhan 2003, 65–66). If we miss out on controlling media, the tables turn and, according to McLuhan, we quite literally become their slaves – their "servomechanisms" (McLuhan 2003, 63). McLuhan insists that *every* medium is numbing, and their benefit or harm depends not only on *how* they are used but on their own "nature" (McLuhan 2003, 23). Theweleit, to the contrary, suggests that there is a deliberate free choice regarding the reaction to new media, whether failing to recognize them and being narcotized or embracing them in order to be extended: respectively, "as an *autoamputation* [. . .] or as an *expansion caused by irritating pressures*"[64] (*BdK1* 369). Whereas McLuhan's intention seems to be a minimization of the harms caused by new media, Theweleit is much more optimistic in this regard, as he translates the word "extension" into the cultural context of the ecstatic counterculture originating in the 1960s and gives it the distinctly positive connotation the "extension of senses" has. For Theweleit, the possibility of Dionysiac and direct extension of the body (= mind) by media exists.

But how about the female medium? If Eurydice is Orpheus's link, his "body bridge" (Theweleit 1991, 104)[65] to the Otherworld which in turn is a storage medium for history (Theweleit 2020, 387), is she then to be read as a technological extension of Orpheus's body? In *Orpheus ~~and~~ Euridice* he adapts the motif of numbing caused by new technologies in the chapters on Narcissus (*BdK1* 355–387) playing on what McLuhan writes in the chapter "Gadget Lover: Narcissus as Nar-

63 McLuhan refers to the concept of homeostasis via the works of Hans Selye and Adolphe Jonas on stress and "autoamputation."

64 "als eine *Selbstamputation* [. . .] oder als eine durch *Reizdruck hervorgerufene Ausweitung*."

65 "Körperbrücke."

cosis" of *Understanding Media*.[66] For Theweleit, Eurydice, just like Echo in Ovid's Narcissus-myth, can be read as mediatic extension of her male counterpart's body and as sacrificed woman who loses her bodily existence. Echo's body vanishes due to her lovesickness caused by the denial acted out by Narcissus. What remains of her are her bones (turned into stone) and her voice transformed into the sound that henceforth bears her name.[67] Just like Echo becomes the mere reverberation of Narcissus's voice, "the ear/soul of the dead Eurydice becomes a piece of recording medium"[68] (*BdK1* 587) – a replay medium for Narcissus. This means that the two women are forcedly transformed – one could even say killed – into media. Theweleit uses the different conceptual notions of transformation in Canetti (empathy) and McLuhan (body alteration),[69] to create his own hybrid of the two by emphasizing the aspect of relations and connections – interpersonal as well as intermedia and human-media. Along with Theweleit's strong focus on art production within its historical situatedness comes his interest in the connection of the present and the past, of the living and the dead, which becomes a central topic in *Book of Kings*:

> It is most of all dead persons, otherworldly persons, to whom contact is established by means of media. This is among the most essential aspects of Orphean production. Orpheus comes back from Hades as a living man; charged with the knowledge of the human mode of existence and fading; charged with the ability to transform his knowledge and perception into beauty (via art techniques); beauty that lasts (that is: it transcends into "truth").[70] (*BdK1* 100)

66 Also implied when talking about Narcissus are the theories of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan (*BdK1* 356–357), and the myth given by Ovid (*BdK1* 363–387) which functions as the basis as much for McLuhan's as for Theweleit's narration. The classic psychoanalytical understanding of Narcissism as excessive egocentrism, however, is not used (*BdK1* 366). Theweleit prefers to apply Canetti's concept of the survivor here and uses the expression "Nap-pole" ["Nap-Pol"] (*BdK1* 302; which alludes at the figure of the Canettian "commander," impersonated by Napoleon – see the paragraph on Canetti above).

67 "[. . .] vox tantum atque ossa supersunt/vox manet; ossa ferunt lapidis traxisse figuram/inde latet silvis nulloque in monte videtur,/omnibus auditur; sonus est, qui vivit in illa" (Ovid 2017, III, vv. 398–401).

68 "Daß aus dem Ohr/der Seele der toten Eurydice ein Stück Aufzeichnungsmedium wird [. . .]."

69 Even though their concepts of transformation differ, McLuhan and Canetti knew each other (Canetti 2018, 235–236) and McLuhan repeatedly refers to Canetti's *Crowds and Power* in *Understanding Media* (2003, 85, 119, 147, 182, 195).

70 "[Es] sind vor allem die Toten, Jenseitige, zu denen Kontakt über die Medien besteht. Es ist nicht die unwesentlichste Seite der orpheischen Produktion. Orpheus kommt als Lebender aus dem Hades zurück; beladen mit dem Wissen von menschlicher Daseins- und Vergehensweise; mit der Fähigkeit zur Verwandlung seines Wissens und seiner Wahrnehmung in Schönheit (durch Kunsttechniken); Schönheit, die dauert (also übergeht in 'Wahrheit')."

What is crucial then, is *how* the male artist transforms his "charge" – if he does so in a way that revives the aspects and persons of the past that tend to be forgotten or if he chooses killing survival as a modus operandi. In other words: if he establishes a communicative relation to the dead or if he prevents such a two-way necrodialogue.

7 A Reviving Connection between the Dead and the Living

After having reconstructed the different aspects on Theweleit's critique of male art production and its allegory – the artist's communication with the sacrificed mediatic women – one common aspect emerges as the most crucial. Kittler's focus on the rise of plural empiric women, Canetti's emphasis on the realist writer's ability of transformation into everyone, and McLuhan's idea of body alteration by media, is bundled by Theweleit into a desire for vitalizing, reviving, maybe even vitalistic cultural production based on the transgression of categorial borders which culminates in posing the question "whether that is possible: not to base the [art] productions on the human sacrifice"[71] (*BdK1* 107).

Theweleit's tentative answer is a kind of transhumanist model of art that connects the spheres of life and death, human and media, by establishing a communication that crosses these boundaries. First, he tries to introduce a model of male art production that works on collaboration and mutual extension rather than exploitative sacrifice by proposing an evenly matched "production sexuality" between mediatic woman and artist. One might criticize the fact that this answer hinges on a male-female binary opposition and heteronormative scenario. Furthermore, Theweleit's narrations of the "Kings" mostly present a plot in which women keep appearing as dead muses at worst, and contributors to, performers, or recorders of a piece of art authored by a male creator at best. I would argue, however, that it is more constructive to read this perspective as Theweleit's materialist and realist heritage, which allows him to criticize the power hierarchies based on his actual "material" – the socially and psychologically operative gender relations within the case studies he analyzes. Furthermore, this does not mean that his concept of collaborative cultural production does not apply to other gender constellations – quite to the contrary, it is intended to highlight the importance of universal non-violent connections. The second aspect of this connecting

71 "[. . .] ob das geht: die Produktionen nicht im Menschenopfer fundieren."

cultural production is a reviving of history that allows the marginalized agents of history to resurge to the present through a non-violent process of art and writing. The allegory of the sacrificial mediatic woman thereby serves as a vehicle to make the liquidating character of violent male production of art and history visible. By pointing at the possibility of communication and dialogue between dead Eurydice and living Orpheus prior to the sacrifice, however, Theweleit calls for a boundary-crossing cultural production that makes marginalized voices perceptible via media and arts in the here and now.

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2 Contemporary Practices of Necrodialogues

Anne Kalvig

Familiarized Necrodialogues through the Lens of Nordic Culture

1 Introduction

What are the meanings, emotions, and material conditions that are bound up together in various communications with the dead today? Spiritualist séances, ritualization towards Norse forebears, and the dead interacting with the living in popular culture – do these manifestations have something in common, except transgressing the border between the living and the dead? In this chapter, I ask whether and how necrodialogues are an integrated, cultural trait, bridging the secular and the sacred in late modern, Western cultures, and if so, why death and the dead may be given such a role. I look at how the past, the present, and the future are articulated within this kind of cultural communication, and I do so by juxtaposing examples from Spiritualist, Viking, and Norse past revival and popular culture storytelling contexts, as these are relatively widespread and gaining ground in both Northern and global settings. As will be shown, the contexts chosen are often interlaced or tangled in a way resembling the Viking animal ornamentation; it is difficult to ascertain where different entities begin and end. It is not necessarily important to distinguish between parts, but in order to understand the roles and processes involved in the interconnections and gliding transitions between them, I do employ certain thematic contexts as a structuring principle for the vivid material of necrodialogues. In so doing, I coin the term "familiarized necrodialogues"[1] to convey how the border transgressing of talking with the dead becomes accessible, integrated into everyday life and various situations, and with a focus on family, relationships, and healing. Closely linked to the notion of "familiarization" in my material is the notion of "horizontal" relations and agency, pointing to a dimension everywhere and all around us, created by humans, including the dead ones, and nature.

1 The term "necrodialogues" has been coined by the editors of this volume, see Introduction. The term underscores the communicative and dynamic character of talking with the dead and is gratefully employed in the present analysis. I would also like to thank the editors, Elena Fabietti and Zoë Ghyselinck, for their wise and invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

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2 Material, Method, and Theoretical Considerations

I employ data from fieldwork and interviews carried out between 2012 and 2020 in Spiritualist and Viking revival settings for the current analysis, as well as analyzes of popular cultural products from within the same period. My investigations have been conducted as research in religious and cultural studies, typically as qualitative research with a cultural-analytical perspective (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2001), where people's stories, meaning making, discourses, and power structures are important clues, as well as discussions concerning the materiality of which these are parts (Kalvig 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017b, 2020). In the present analysis, I will identify and explain how *familiarization* takes place within this varied material related to necrodialogues and consider why it is an important aspect of this contemporary cultural production and communication.

By familiarized necrodialogues, I mean the border transgressing of communication between the living and the dead made accessible, near, dear, and meaningful. What is gained from these communications in more specific terms will be scrutinized in the analysis of the material that follows. When discussing this material, I do so from an abductive point of view, where the knowledge used and searched for, the re-searching, consists basically of puzzles to be sorted out, surprising "ripples" to be explained, if we use the metaphor of a stone thrown in water, and the interpretative research as the tracking of "the residual 'ripples' encountered when events – stone-surprises – impact people, places, acts: those things we wish to understand" (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2011, 31). The seemingly anomalous – why is communication with the dead sought for and elaborated in distinct parts of culture and society – is thus explained in an iterative-recursive way, that is, the logic of this puzzle is repeatedly questioned, and the answers result from the previous, accumulated finds (IRA, iterative-recursive abduction). Agar (2010, 290) describes this, stating: "IRA logic is the heart of ethnography – but questions about context and meaning are its soul." From these basic methodological assumptions, I thus mix ethnographic finds and stories with the storytelling provided by society through mainstream popular cultural products like films, TV series, and digital games. Juxtaposing such diverse material can tell us something about whether, how, and why necrodialogues are an integrated, cultural practice bridging the secular and the sacred in late modern, Western cultures, though of course not the whole story. The analysis will point to contexts, meanings, tendencies, and patterns that might deepen our understanding of our own surroundings and contemporary times and the processes at play there.

Since "bridging the secular and the sacred" has been articulated as the nucleus of this investigation, an introduction to what is meant by these categories is needed. What is perceived as secular or sacred is ever-changing and contextual, even subjective, and the subjectivation of culture is seen by many as a now common theme (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Campbell 2007; Partridge 2015). Religion is normally categorized as belonging to the sacred sphere, and non-religion to the secular, even though there are good reasons to hold that religion as a cultural product never leaves the secular sphere, or the realm of ordinary, cultural production (Rothstein 2014, 152). Concerning necrodialogues, they do indeed appear in various spheres of society and in diverse cultural contexts, challenging any labelling of them as religious, even if we define "the sacred," "religion," and "religious" (or "spirituality" and "spiritual" as many would prefer within the subjective culture) as having to do with the transgressing of the ordinary and involving something "transcendent." Meyer has highlighted how religion can be seen as a medium of absence, a bridge between the here and now and the "beyond," where "materializing the sacred" involves multiple media (Meyer 2015, 4). In the present study, this mediation and sensorium orientation is added to Droogers's (2011, 361) methodological, ludic approach to religion, where the human capacity for *playful articulation* of the experienced tension between belonging and separation is stressed, and where an "extra dimension" of reality is added by the "believers."

In what follows, the name "practitioners" is preferred over "believers" when categorizing those involved, following Grimes (2011, 82), in that playful ritualization enables subjunctive – "as if" – experiences of reality, where belief might be peripheral or not. Below I present data from three necrodialogue clusters: Spiritualism/mediumism, Vikings and Norse past revival, and mainstream popular culture storytelling products. I then discuss and analyze them as forms of affective communication and as sacred, horizontal claims, with a ludic and dynamic frame of reference. Thus, my aim is to unpack how these forms of mediation and transtemporal understanding enable/entail *familiarized* necrodialogues.

3 Spiritualism, Mediumism, and Adjacent Practices

Anglo-American Spiritualism and its Continental and Latin American "twin" Spiritism are globally dispersed forms of religion with tight bonds to various other practices of mediumship, channelling, and shamanism. As Gutierrez (2015, 3) holds, "Spiritualism provides a powerful and moving sense of enchantment without the hegemonic discourse of institutionalised religions." Precisely because of

their occultural (Partridge 2004, 2005, 2015) character, that is, their "interwovenness into culture," contemporary spiritual necrodialogues are hard to quantify as to the number of followers, practitioners, and the merely sympathetic. In the optimistic words of the International Spiritualist Federation, spiritual necrodialogues might be one of the world's largest spiritual traditions, despite estimates being "impossible" to assess:

> Millions who fully accept Spirit communication have never associated themselves with Spiritualist societies, organisations or churches. Consequently, no reliable statistics have ever been produced and it is therefore impossible to estimate the total number of people who would readily accept these principles without realising they would thus qualify as Spiritualists. No doubt the figures could run into hundreds of millions.[2]

Numbers of members of Spiritualist and Spiritist organizations and churches are generally low (Singleton 2013, 39) compared to other spiritual or religious traditions, except in Latin America – though here as elsewhere, what statistics truly reveal can be vague: people might adhere to several traditions and world views at the same time, though the adherence is listed as singular in the statistics. In an analysis of European Value Survey data, Haraldsson (2006) found that many Europeans believe in survival after death and also in reincarnation. The focus of my investigation is not the spiritual traditions of Spiritualism/Spiritism as delimited entities; it is rather the practices and dynamic interplay of spiritual views with other parts of culture that is discussed here, that is, the processes of making the dead and our ancestors near and dear through mediumship and spirit communication.

When studying Spiritualism and mediumship in Norway and Nordic countries, and its ties to British Spiritualism and other transnational connections, I have focused on various, though interconnected, forms of talking with the dead in contemporary society (Kalvig 2012, 2015, 2017b). I have seen these small organizations and associations as expressions of the need to form collectives, consolidate practices, and gain legitimacy as faith communities (in those instances where the groups have sought such registration). The culturally far more widespread examples of talking with the dead, however, have had and continue to have a network and market character, with various actors within a diversified, popular cultural field of Spiritualism and mediumship, often connected to therapeutic practices as well as media products (Moberg 2019). Considered together, these practices and products have a substantial impact on society, even though they are not considered educated, venerable, or serious by the standards of mainstream society or by hegemonic voices and institutions. The reasons for this ex-

2 See "History," The International Spiritualist Federation, https://www.theisf.com/about/history/.

clusion are complex; one factor is that communication with dead people transgresses the specific biblical command of not talking to the dead, and in a more generalized, religious-cultural view, talking to people who actually have lived transgresses the Protestant ideals of relying on "faith alone" or "Scripture alone." Ancestors are not part of the biblical Trinity, and even though Western society has gone through processes of both secularization and pluralization, the prototype of "decent" religion is still that of (at least certain forms of) Christianity.

Within such a cultural context, how are necrodialogues within the (popular) cultural field of Spiritualism and mediumship examples of familiarization of transgressive communication and a bridging of the secular and the sacred, and what is gained from such dialogues within this field? The main bulk of actors I have talked to and observed, stress how forgiveness, healing, and connection are conveyed in séances of various kinds, and often by use of humor (Kalvig 2009, 2014, 2017). The dialogues may take the form of one-to-one experiences, as in private séances, of mediations in larger and more public séances, or via social media like Facebook, or psychic telephone lines. Family and dear friends are those allegedly "coming through" and conveying their messages of love and concern. Whereas the messages themselves might be of a rather prosaic kind ("remember to take care of yourself," "buy fresh flowers," "know that all is forgiven and ok"), the fact that the messages are perceived as originating from "the other side" endows them with a cosmic, groundbreaking character. Relief, the confirmation of bonds beyond the border of life and death, and the persuasion that life continues after death and that those we loved continue to love and care from "the other side," are all possible outcomes of the Spiritualist and mediumistic communications. In the UK, Stringer (2008) and Day (2012) have conducted fieldwork analyzing communications with the dead as extraordinary relationality and gendered labor on the one hand (Day 2012, 178) and as elementary forms of (coping) religion (Stringer 2008, 108) on the other that resonate with what is seen on the Nordic scene.

Not all spirit communications are welcome, however. In the larger, popular cultural field of spirit communication and necrodialogues, the gloomier side of "clinging spirits" who invade a person's "energy system" and unruly spirits making noise and distress in homes, are also part of the stories told. Those following these narratives often claim that it is possible to lead and release the unwanted spirits: that is, with the services of a medium, the spirits can be persuaded that they are, in fact, dead and can be led over to the "other side." The massively popular television docudrama "The power of the spirits" (*Åndenes makt*), broadcast in Norway since 2005 (with similar productions in Denmark and Sweden), narrates the happily ending stories of unwanted spirit communication that has to be made relevant and familiar to those affected in order to cease (Kalvig 2009, Mo-

berg 2019) – that is, who the dead are, why they are attached to a certain site, and what they might want to convey, need to be deciphered by the mediums, so that peace may be reinstated.

Whether all spirits are welcomed into the light of "the other side" when death occurs or whether they need help, is a contested issue where various actors hold diverse views – from everything belonging to a realm of higher love to dualist notions of antagonistic forces at play (Kalvig 2017, 77). In the context of this chapter, the "familiarization" of spirit communication can be applied as a comprehensive term, since this border transgressing communication by practitioners and adherents is still seen as near, meaningful, and accessible, even when it is not dear. The outcome of various cleansing practices, such as house cleansing and exorcistic therapeutic practices of getting rid of spirits clinging to one's energy system, may also transform the unwanted communication into a more constructive memory for those involved, as having taken part in restoring and relation-oriented actions. The Church of Norway, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church to which 70 percent of Norwegian people formally adhere, has also offered a spirit cleansing ritual for houses and workplaces called "Liturgy for blessing of house and home" as part of official church liturgy since 2013 (Kalvig 2017, 82). Acknowledging people's experiences, if not the "reality" behind these, by offering tools to manage them, the Church of Norway thus contributes to the spread of belief in transgressing communication with the dead as a phenomenon of our late modern culture, even if this actually transgresses the church's own tradition and premises.

4 Vikings and the Norse Past: Welcome Home

The popularity of Vikings and the Norse past is gaining ground globally. Generally, it can be seen in popular cultural products like books, films, TV series, advertising, festivals, music, and more specifically in various ritualizations, in real life and online (Gregorius 2015, 2020; Birkett and Dale 2019; Skjoldli 2020). The Norse past is summoned as a relatable past where the Viking becomes a malleable figure for present needs – for identity, authenticity, bravery, ecological awareness, and earth-based spiritualities, as well as for "white power"-fueled claims of ancestry and hegemony.[3]

3 Between 2020 and 2024, the research project "Back to Blood: Pursuing a Future from the Norse Past" investigated the consequences of cultural actors supplying the demand for Vikings and the

In the continued popularity of a mythic Norse past, necrodialogues are integral. These may be thematized in three different ways: necrodialogues as part of Norse mythology and its pantheon, made relevant today; as epitomized by the *volva*, the Norse seeress who inspires some contemporary spiritual practices (and also as examples of everyday religious practice of the Norse past); and necrodialogues as an expression of the transtemporal understanding of *kin* as characteristic of contemporary Viking and Norse past popularity.

In the words of the Norse religion expert Gro Steinsland (2005, 337), "communication is a key word for how people conceptualized the relationship between the living and the dead" in the Norse past. The central god Odin was a necromancer, though he himself is portrayed as dependent upon female help in his communications with the dead and with the mistress of the dead, Hel. In *Vegtamskvadet* (Song of Vegtam, one of Odin's names) from the Eddic sources,[4] he performs a kind of double necromancy, in which a katabatic journey is implied: he travels to the realm of Hel in order to raise a specific *volva* from the dead and forces her to decipher the dreams of his beloved son Balder (who suffers a tragic end in Norse mythology). Other Eddic sources tell of people travelling to Hel, like Brynhild in *Brynhilds helferd* (Brynhild's journey to Hel). In *Det andre kvadet om Helge Hundingsbane* (The second song of Helge Hundingsbane) we learn of the hero Helge and the Valkyrian Sigrun who love each other fiercely even after death. The dead Helge is at one point allowed by Odin to return to his farm and beloved wife as a dead man, with the married couple spending one, special night together again.[5]

The *volva* is a central figure from the Norse past who inspires contemporary spiritual and aesthetic practices, for example on Instagram (Downing 2020) and as a figure in films, series, and video games, just like the Norse gods. The *volva*'s clairvoyance and ability to communicate with the powers of nature, various entities, the gods, and "the other side" made her a mediumistic figure who at times knew more than even the gods, as in the poem *Voluspå* (probably written around 1000 AD, from *The Elder Edda*). Both the *volva* as a feminine figure and the cult of the house as dominated by women and where the worship of the ancestors took place, including *alveblot*, an offering to the elves (Steinsland 2005, 345), indicate some structural similarity between this part of Norse past practices and present-

Norse past. See "Back to Blood," University of Stavanger, https://www.uis.no/en/backtoblood (3 January 2024).

4 The *Elder Edda*, where *Vegtamskvadet* is found, and Snorre's *Edda* (the *Younger Edda*) were written down in the medieval period (around 1200) in Iceland, but refer to older, oral material from pre-Christian times.

5 The protagonists of this poem are also explicitly said to have reincarnated after death as two new persons, Helge Haddingjaskade and Kåra Halvdansdotter.

day Spiritualism and mediumship. Further, organized Heathenism/Norse-inspired Paganism and the wider field of solitary practitioners, producers, and consumers of Viking and Norse-inspired culture and spirituality – what Downing (2020, 201) labels "Heathenish" – show structural similarities to the divisions and mergings seen in the Spiritualist mediumistic, therapeutic, and popular cultural field.

The familiarization of necrodialogues should be extended into a global understanding of *family* within the popular Viking and Norse past cultural field, characterized by a transtemporal and trans-spatial understanding of kin. The comments under almost any Wardruna song on YouTube speak of ancestors brought to life and the spirit of the past resurrected. Wardruna is a prominent Viking music group with millions of views, whose frontman is the Norwegian former Black Metal musician Einar Selvik. Comments in the same vein focusing on forebears, spiritual dimensions, and how people experience healing by relating to the past through the music videos, flourish under similar groups' YouTube uploads, like Heilung, Nytt Land, and Enslaved.

"Midgardsblot" is a combined Metal and Viking festival at Borre in Vestfold county, in Norway. Metal and folk music are coupled with a celebration of the Norse past, and the event now houses around six thousand participants. Held for the first time in Borre in 2015, the festival is set in an archaeological site of prehistoric burial mounds, a Viking museum, and a reconstructed guildhall. A large banner salutes the festivalgoers with "Welcome Home," as if the Borre site were home to all those travelling nation- and worldwide to join the festival. The slogan is a deliberate declaration of bonds of relation beyond time, place, and kin. The burial mounds are paramount during the festival: they are alluded to from the festival stages, they are used for morning yoga sessions, and are the destination of guided tours throughout the event; last but not least, they are the sacred site of the closing ritual of the festival, when the participants gather on top of them in the middle of the night, after the closing of the concerts, drumming and chanting.

In interviews I conducted with festival attendees in 2019, those interviewed stated that the music at this particular festival and site makes them "feel connected not just to the people like the Vikings that lived in Borre, but to the first humans, the primitive groups that for sure made music with bones and sticks and repetitive chants, [. . .] that made rituals for the passing of the dead" (festivalgoer 2019). Another informant, who experienced the loss of her grandfather while attending the festival and felt his presence when partaking in the opening "blot" (a ritual with drumming, hailing the [Norse] gods, and smearing of blood on a Frey statue and oneself/other participants), summed up the festival experience of relationality as being not "only between the living ones, but also a connection with the dead ones, with the ancestors, thanks to the music and the Viking Mounds" (festivalgoer 2019). This statement resonates with what was expressed

by music group Heilung's founding member Christopher Juul when reflecting on performing at the Borre festival in 2017:

> We wanted to respect the people who are there alive, but also the people under the hill. This is very sacred ground; it's an enormously important place in history. So when we stood on the stage at Midgardsblot, it became something even more. The arrangements of the songs are made for changing your awareness, and all of a sudden this Heilung thing wasn't just created by us; it was created by the people in front of the stage, too.[6]

Norse past necrodialogues are not only part of the music and festival scenes, they are also frequently used in films and digital games as well. One example is the widely acclaimed digital game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017). It tells the story of Senua, a Pictish warrior travelling to Helheim, Hel's realm, in an attempt to rescue the soul of her dead lover.[7] Dealing with psychosis as one of its central themes, the game has been viewed as a welcome evolution in video games (Fordham and Ball 2019), and the much-anticipated sequel, *Hellblade: Senua's Saga* is allegedly featuring an even darker story and including a soundtrack by the aforementioned Heilung. As with Wardruna providing the soundtrack for the television series *Vikings*, notably the "death song" of the main character Ragnar Lodbrok (as well as the soundtrack of the digital game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*), the necrodialogic elements of music reviving a Norse past seem paramount both to the creators of the music, and to those consuming it.

5 The Return of the Dead in Pop Culture Storytelling

In big budget films, television series, digital games, popular books, and comics, the dead are present, and necrodialogues take place incredibly frequently. The popularity of the Viking past, as well as Spiritualism and mediumism, are undoubtedly vital parts of popular, visual storytelling, for instance in television series *Vikings*, *Medium*, *Ghost Whisperer*, and *Deadbeat*, and digital games *Senua's Sacrifice*, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, *Skyrim*, and *Valheim.* In this section, however,

6 Quoted in "The 10 Best Gigs of 2017," *Metal Hammer*, https://www.loudersound.com/features/the-10-best-gigs-of-2017?fbclid=IwAR0gAm1e1GzS3GuNibwl71Z2uLcYVjis_i5Hez9UHsdZg835FaBOvwLI7d4 (3 January 2024) and emended by Midgardsblot Official Community on Facebook, 1 May, 2021.

7 "Game Receiption," *Archiving* Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, https://archivinghellblade.wordpress.com/about/. Weblog (3 January 2024).

I would like to address the broader, variously thematized presence of death and communication with the dead in mainstream popular culture. Examples are here limited to the storytelling genres of visual media due to space, and popular culture as such is here understood as mass-mediated, global cultural "novel" expressions dominated by consumerist and entertainment functions (Endsjø and Lied 2011, 17)

Consider how the dead and living engage in necrodialogues in blockbuster and big- budget films, to name just a few, like *Ghost* (1990), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), the *Harry Potter* films (2001–2011), *Pirates of the Caribbean* films (2003–2017), *Avatar* (2009), *Gravity* (2013), *Crimson Peak* (2015), *Last Christmas* (2019), *Finding Ohana* (2021), and in numerous television series, like *The Returned* (2012–2015), *River* (2015), *Glitch* (2015–2019), *Midnight Sun* (2016), *Britannia* (2018–2019), and *Katla* (2021), not to mention all the morbid variations of intermediate and supernatural, undead creatures like zombies and vampires, in a broad range of series. Delimiting the analysis to the tales of "authentic" persons (not undead ones, like zombies) appearing as dead persons, spirits, resurrected persons, or ghosts and engaging with the living, we can see that necrodialogues in movies and television series fulfil the purpose of conveying wisdom, hope, survival skills, cosmic knowledge, justice, healing, and love, as well as, though to a lesser degree, revenge and retribution. The angry, avenging, sad, or confused dead ones (like in *The Sixth Sense*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *River*, *Crimson Peak*, *Midnight Sun*) more often than not have a just cause to fight, there is some wrongdoing or imbalance that has to be restored by the living, so that peace may be reinstalled. In *Gravity* and *Last Christmas*, from desolate outer space to busy pre-Christmas London, necrodialogues are central and lifesaving parts of the story for the protagonists. In these narratives, as in *Midnight Sun*, the dead ones are hard to discern from the living, to the extent that the viewer is "tricked" into believing them alive, a twist also used by M. Night Shyalaman in *The Sixth Sense.* In the *Harry Potter* films, for example *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry brings the murdered Sirius Black back to life by "connecting" to a strong, positive memory in the form of a spiritual guardian stag, telling a story of the eternal soul, of time travelling and the power of (human) memory. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films revel in encounters with the living dead, communication with the dead and half-dead, the quest for eternal life, and the triumph of love, and in *Avatar* the dead are in an animist sense living within the Mother Goddess of Pandora, Eywa, and human beings can even have their souls transferred to a new body, the avatar, and thus transcend death (Kalvig 2017b). In *Finding Ohana*, a Netflix family film where two Brooklyn siblings discover their Hawaiian ancestry, their dead father appears as a soldier now turned into a mythical guardian of the island, meeting, embracing,

and consoling them as a real person from the beyond, before turning into some kind of stardust.

In a discussion on why religion (with its spiritual, transcendent elements) pervades popular culture, Endsjø and Lied (2011, 186) point to border transgressing, the counter-intuitive, and the visually striking aspects of popular culture products, as aspects characteristic of religion as well. These aspects enable these cultural products to break through the popular cultural "noise" and gain attention. Necrodialogues can thus be seen as effective cultural strategies beyond their content. Durkin (2003, 48) holds that the "thanatological" elements of popular culture function as a coping mechanism towards the disruptive social impacts of death and dying. Penfold-Mounce (2018, 2), though not focusing on paranormal experiences, stresses the agency of the dead and holds that in "a global consumer culture, corpses are gaining unprecedented agency." Through an analysis of the posthumous careers of celebrities, of mythology surrounding organ transplantation, and both the "undead" and the dead in popular culture, she finds that "the public wisdom that death is taboo" needs to be challenged (Penfold-Mounce 2018, 86). She concludes that death and the dead in popular culture have not bridged the chasm between life and death or allowed us to travel back and forth between the realms: "Instead, popular culture has provided an immense window into death with safety glass fitted into an airtight frame. It allows people to see through it and examine in intimate detail the 'undiscovered country' of death where the dead dwell but are not contained" (Penfold-Mounce 2018, 118), a view that my examples might challenge.

Whereas Penfold-Mounce is interested in the agency of the dead, Khapaeva (2017) sees an alleged contemporary "cult of the dead" as an expression of a new, cultural paradigm based on a contempt for the human race (Khapaeva 2017, 182). She builds this argument on the idea that the cultural influence of French critical theory, together with other contemporary developments, such as an ever more present Gothic Aesthetic, have contributed to the dismantling of any meaningful narrative of human exceptionalism, paving the way for commodification and anti-Humanism (Khapaeva 2017, 178–179). From the point of view of religious studies, such a totalizing and somber understanding of modern and contemporary cultural entanglements with death and the dead is difficult to commend, let alone view as something historically exceptional. Christianity as a religion is, after all, a cult of a dead and resurrected savior, whose flesh and blood are regularly consumed in the Lord's Supper, even though independent communications with the dead are deprecated. Norse religion likewise presented a rich mythology and cultic practice surrounding the dead, as have most religions. In both Penfold-Mounce's and Khapaeva's analyzes of their rich material, there is an underlying claim about death, dying, and the dead as dimensions without ontological, episte-

mological, and ethical depths that stand in and by themselves; "the chasm between life and death" is not bridged, and even if the dead are not "contained" in a world of their own, the window that popular culture offers, has "safety glass fitted into an airtight frame" (Penfold-Mounce 2018, 118). In contrast, I see Spiritualism and mediumship, Norse past revival, and popular culture storytelling as offering "thin veils" between the worlds, permeable borders, extraordinary sensing, and experiencing of sacred, horizontal connections that people seek not out of a morbid fancy created by commodifying forces nor just as a coping mechanism, but as something deeply meaningful, restorative, healing, and promising. In addition to providing income, fun, entertainment, and a pastime, that is.

6 Necrodialogues as Horizontal Communication

In her studies of post death presence (PDP), meaning the spontaneous and direct, unmediated by a third party, experiences of contact with the dead, Austad (2015, 280) finds that the best way to describe how her informants deal with these experiences is through Dialogical Self Theory (DST) (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka 2010; Hermans 2014). Through its focus on how disparate and contrasting positions may appear in the same self (person), this theory allows for an understanding of how cognitive, emotional, and embodied voices coexist side by side within the same self as an echo of contrasting global beliefs and pieces of meaning (Austad 2015, 280–281). As part of studies of grief and world views, Austad's findings and reflections make sense in a larger necrodialogues context where a bridging of the secular and the sacred is at the core of the discussion. Austad calls for a refinement in the understanding of "horizontal" and "vertical" planes or spaces of dialogues, where the first refer to family, both immediate and extended, and community, in both social and physical space, and the second to dialogues within a "transpersonal space" involving relationships with the living dead or ancestors, and God (Austad 2015, 282). The "vertical space," however, is not perceived as such by those involved in Austad's study,[8] and dialogues or other forms of communication with the dead may be located on a "horizontal plane," as something transcending the ordinary but still reachable and attainable within an "immanent frame" as something "secular spiritual" or just "a secular experience" (Austad 2015, 283). This resonates with what Day calls "the sensuous social supernatural"

8 Her sixteen informants have varied backgrounds and hold various world views: Christian, alternative spiritual and/or secular (not Hindu, Jew, Muslim, Sikh, or Sami) (Austad 2015, 107).

(Day 2012, 173), emphasizing the extraordinary relationality implied in the communication with the dead.

Several words can be employed to describe something as being different from the alleged dogmatic and belief-oriented institutional religion or religiosity. If "religion" as a concept must be enlarged with added words like "sensuous," "social," "everyday," or "lived," there is an underlying assumption that religion does not entail these qualities in the first place. As well as making popular beliefs and practices "divergent," this "qualification" of religion might also rule out the practice by people within the "church" it is supposed to conceptualize to begin with. Rather than omitting the word "religion" in favor of other concepts, a definition or clarification in each study is needed. Thus, I have started out with a view of religion as both something playful and dynamic, processing the experienced tension between inexpressibility and representation, between belonging and separation (Drooger 2011). Here, as with Meyer's research on religion in terms of aesthetic forms, religion relies on communication and bridging spheres together, on a materialization of the sacred, already and always bound to the lived experiences of people.

Through Austad's elaboration of Dialogical Self Theory to encompass the experiencing and meaning-making of post-death presence by locating it on a horizontal plane, or through Drooger's articulation of the tension between belonging and separation as characteristic of religion, we can now better approach an understanding of the three cultural clusters of this chapter as bridging the secular and the sacred, or as "hybrid" fields. To these perspectives we may add that offered by Grimes's notion of the subjunctive, describing "as if" experiences of reality for those involved in ritualization (Grimes 2011, 82). Through the iterative-recursive way of putting the puzzles of necrodialogues into context, we can gather answers towards their meaning and function, which we can envision as an extra dimension of reality they "open up." This approach allows us to see disparate spheres of cultural communication as containing related meanings, emotions, and material conditions. What present-day Spiritualism, Viking, and Norse past ritualizations and popular culture remediations of necrodialogues show us, then, are tensions of separation and belonging that can be overcome in playful, aesthetic, or more traditional ways, allowing for questions and answers of a subjunctive – "what if" as well as "as if" – kind. The artistic, performative, and dialogue-oriented practices together represent a bridging of the secular and the sacred in that the border between life and death becomes the sacralizing factor – life's continuity seen in the past and the future is the extra dimension opened up by necrodialogues and yielding hope and joy. One alternative and/or overarching way of interpreting this material is to see the vibrant interest in forebears, the realm(s) of the dead, and necrodialogues as expressions of a broader *animism*.

Animism is "in vogue" in today's contemporary spirituality, seen as a response to ecological disaster and part of Indigenous claims (Kalvig 2020). In the following section, the notion of animism will be employed as an analytical tool, together with a further investigation into the concept of familiarization, before I conclude with a summary of the insights that the conceptual framework of familiarized necrodialogues provides us, and the further programs for research that are still needed.

7 Sacred, Horizontal, and Transformative Relationships beyond Death

Considering what necrodialogues are, where they occur, how, and why, necessarily involves some reflection on the concept of the soul. In the words of Swancutt and Mazard (2018, 11), "anthropological concepts and native epistemologies are jointly redefining the ontological make-up of what we call 'animism' or 'the soul.' The soul is highly unstable and mutually created by the many contexts through which it emerges." The authors label this situation "the reflexive feedback loop" (Swancutt and Mazard 2018, 10), that is, a shaping and reshaping of native epistemologies through time, a border-crossing between those studying something and those being studied, groups that actually may intersect and overlap. The same process is discernible also when doing a cultural analysis of clusters of necrodialogues. Ultimately, necrodialogues are co-created by the observers and the producers – a situation typical of the fieldwork and analysis of human culture and agency. Exploring the concept of animism further and beyond the "tylorian" focus[9] on the human soul, Harvey (2017, 211) clarifies that contemporary animism is about interacting with the world, rather than transcending it, and that through various historical uses and meanings, animism today has come to signify a world view where the world is inhabited by persons, among whom only some are human, and where all deserve respect (Harvey 2017, 213). Animism has also become part of mainstream, cultural usage, as atheist, biologist, journalist, author, and activist Barbara Ehrenreich (2014, 233) writes in her memoir *Living with a Wild God*:

> A hint of – dare I say? – *animism* has entered into the scientific worldview. The physical world is no longer either dead or passively obedient to the "laws" [. . .] As for the emer-

9 For a discussion of Tylor's writing on Spiritualism and animism, see Kalvig (2017a): "'Necromancy Is a Religion': Tylor's Discussion of Spiritualism in *Primitive Culture* and in His Diary."

> gence of matter out of nothing [. . .] we are coming to see that there *is* no Nothing. Even the most austere vacuum is a happening place, bursting with possibility and constantly giving birth to bits of Something, even if they're only fleeting particles of matter and antimatter.

The mediums in Spiritualist groups and on psychic telephone lines, the Norse past enthusiasts who relate to ancestors and gods of nature through the experience of music, landscape, and ritual, or the visual storytellers of popular culture who include the dead ones in their plots may not all adhere to or relate explicitly to notions of animism.[10] The vibrant and living universes they represent, however, do carry similarities with animist notions, and it would be a misrepresentation of their cultural contributions to deprive them of ontological suggestions and cosmic claims, however polyphonic these may seem.

Meanings, emotions, and material conditions connecting the cultural clusters I have presented may be summed up by mirroring these connections with how the past, the present, and the future are articulated within these fields. The persons of the past – be they our forebears, spirits, gods of a pre-Christian time, persons whose stories are of key importance to the living of today – are not only made relevant through necrodialogues of various kinds: they become "alive." By picturing the invisible (Meyer 2015), the various cultural communications and products I have presented in this chapter may be seen as multiple media used to "materialize the sacred" (Meyer 2015, 4). The "sacred" in this respect is the continued life and life force running through generations, even over millennia, where death is a threshold, but not an end, and where insights gained "on the other side" must be passed over to the living, as deep meanings and highly emotional deliveries, going through a plethora of material conditions and constructs used for/being the message and mediation itself. In the material I look at there is a mainly optimistic, life-affirming ethos, despite death being all around. Somber, frightening, grief-oriented aspects are indeed there, but are often placed within a "wheel of life" frame with cyclic and animist dispositions rather than perspectives of linear time and ultimate end (Judgement Day).

Transformation through necrodialogues is common and sought for within those cultural practices and products I have investigated. The present is transformed through love, care, insight, wisdom, restoration, and revelation from the past, producing a healing effect on the present and promises for the future. Connections are made where there previously were none or connections were broken, and this may involve far more than human beings, even though human beings have been the focus of this analysis. Especially in the Norse past revival practices, bonds and family relations between humans, animals, landscape, and

10 Some openly do, like Wardruna's Einar Selvik who calls himself an animist (Lunde 2017).

nature are emphasized. In Spiritualist and mediumistic circles, animals close to us as well as flowers often convey or symbolize wider connections between humans and nature, whereas necrodialogues in popular cultural visual storytelling are so common that a wide range of culture-nature positions may be discerned. Generally, horizontal relationships dominate the totality of forces and connections where the human is entitled to have a say, and where it is possible to make a difference, through ritualizations in a subjective sense. Horizontal relations and agency, whether held by humans (including the dead ones) alone, or humans and nature together, might represent an "extra dimension," but a dimension being everywhere and all around us, not contained in a state of being saved (religiously) or attainable for the enlightened few, or for occult and mystic adepts only. As in the words of the Heilung member cited above, it is a happening and a process involving the living, the dead, our surroundings, and the creative powers yielded by these connections.

8 Concluding Remarks: Familiarization and Border Transgression on Several Planes

To study necrodialogues and material representations of the dead as more than "an everyday and banal form of entertainment" (Penfold-Mounce 2018, 6) does not mean we have to go all in with assemblage models, vibrancy terminology, and New Materialism in order to make sense of the field of study, as Bräunlein (2016) rightly warns us against in his reflections on the material study of religion. But we do need to have a feeling for, or to be open to, the scope of opportunities and possibilities that necrodialogues represent for people. The "familiarization" that I propose is thus not synonymous with making something ordinary, banal, attainable, profitable, even though such characteristics are not adversaries to what I see as the vital point, namely the including of the dead into the present, the future, the family, in more direct, sensuous, and meaningful ways than secular thinking on the one hand or institutional religion (here: Christianity) on the other have allowed for.

Necrodialogues border on the transgressive on several planes. They are counter-intuitive anomalies of reason in that the dead turn out to be (sort of) alive; they are, in a Western social context, countercultural in that talking with or interacting with the dead for millennia have been sanctioned by the Church as heretical and forbidden; and they are structurally anomalous dialogues because they eliminate ordinary divisions of time and space, suggesting a multidimensional reality. For some, they are handled with a playful, subjunctive "as if" atti-

tude, as when one indulges oneself in the visual storytelling of popular culture, or enjoys the weekly house cleansing programs on TV; for others, the same narratives are used to create meaning in one's personal life. As such, necrodialogues might be consoling, but also disturbing – depending on one's own background, and the specificity of the necrodialogue in question: clinging spirits, dead children who have not found peace, spirits who need help to "enter the light." In necrodialogues, family and relations are sacralized, as well as landscape and nature, especially in the Viking and Norse past's revivals. Among a variety of practices, familiarized, border-transgressing necrodialogues constitute a fundamental way in which contemporary culture attempts at bridging the secular and the sacred through interactions with the dead. I believe there is much to gain from a study of these cultural communications, also regarding how and why we assign something to the secular versus the sacred realm, and whether we should avoid such delimitations in favor of more integrated ways of understanding human agency, finding ways to conceptualize how meanings assemble, shift, and differ. As such, contemporary interests in forebears and the dead may point to long-lasting, elemental, as well as advanced forms of spiritual and cultural production, partly finding new forms, in new contexts, and in new arenas.

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Claudia Mattalucci

A Message from Babe: Necrodialogues in Pregnancy Loss

1 Introduction: Telling a Pregnancy Loss Story, Raising a Lost Child

In 1996, the Italian writer Dacia Maraini published a book entitled *Un clandestino a bordo* (A stowaway aboard). It is an essay on abortion in which the author evokes one of her most painful, intimate experiences: the loss during pregnancy of her first and only child. This occurred over thirty years earlier, when Maraini was married to the painter Lucio Pozzi. She writes,

> I saw myself convalescing in my mother-in-law's garden on the Garda Lake, after losing a child in my seventh month of pregnancy. I was pale, bloated, and drained. I had been tempted to leave with the unborn child who clung stubbornly to me, unwilling to separate from me, even though he was already dead. (1996, 10)[1]

Maraini describes pregnancy as a time in which mother and child are bound by a deeper understanding, as are the captain of Conrad's ship and the stowaway he welcomes on board. This is why pregnancy loss leaves the woman irreparably empty and dispossessed:

> For me, pregnancy loss was above all an expropriation, something unwanted and unanticipated that broke a happy expectation, which never ended in an encounter, an encounter with the other from me. The stowaway on my ship suddenly disappeared in the darkness of the night without leaving a trace, a name, a memory. (1996, 20)

Maraini recounts this experience several times, mentioning it in interviews and the novel *La grande festa* (The great feast, 2011). In this book, after describing the pregnancy loss that took away her chances of becoming pregnant again, she writes:

> It is strange to suffer that much for a son you never got to know! But maybe there is an inner knowledge, a bond that the mother establishes from the very first days with her newly conceived child. A language made up of heartbeats, of nourishing lymph flowing from one vein to another, mineral salts, and delicate movements of a body that turns on

1 Translations are mine.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110733457-009

> and grows, and another that unconsciously nourishes it, observes it, spies its secret motions. (2011, 45)

Corpo felice: storia di donne, rivoluzioni e un figlio che se ne va (Happy body: the story of women, revolutions, and a son that goes away, 2018) is a more recent novel. It consists of a long dialogue between the writer and her dead son. Beginning at birth, when the doctor and the nun in attendance interpret the words she addresses to the child as a symptom of delirium, their silent conversation continues. Maraini calls her son, who had not yet been named, *Perduto*, *Perdutello* or, in French, *Perdu*. The lost child opens his eyes wide and looks at his mother. She shares with him her reflections on Eve, Simone de Beauvoir, women who were once interned in asylums, her ex-husband (the child's father), and her desire for motherhood. She talks about women, their taste for life and their desire for redemption, their happy and desperate bodies, love and violence. The "ghost child's" curiosity pressures her narrative. Through the pages, time passes, and the baby becomes a boy:

> As you grow up [the mother says] I feel like I'm losing sight of you. It is harder for me to follow. I have never abandoned you with my lukewarm gaze. But you run away, and I don't want to give you the impression of running after you. (2018, 169)

Thus, she observes, from a distance, her son's transformation on his way to maturity. At times, the dialogue reveals the fiction behind it. For instance, Perdu replies to his mother reproaching him for his lies: "You made it all up; you know very well that I never grew up, I remained a shadow in your belly. The real liar is you, I only played and got lost" (2018, 184). But then the conversation resumes. Eventually, Perdu becomes a man. "I know I have lost my child," Maraini writes on the final page, "But I also know a man has been born" (2018, 229). Through storytelling, loss no longer stands as the limit of the mother-child relationship. Maraini's novel provides Perdu with a body, and weaves together the plot of his existence, becoming the means through which the author can let him go, by handing him over to her readers.

What distinguishes children lost during pregnancy or soon after birth from other dead? How can we talk to them? When this happens, is it a dialogue, a monologue, or just a fantasy of the living? *Corpo felice* is a good starting point for posing these questions. By addressing a child who grows up while inhabiting only her memory, the author constructs a space-time in which the child becomes real, and its presence in the world can leave a trace. In this essay, I interrogate the conditions that have made possible the emergence of necrodialogues between parents and the children they have lost in pregnancy, the nature of these exchanges, and the effects they produce. To do so, I draw on the socio-anthropological litera-

ture on pregnancy loss and a long-term research experience in Italy, where I followed the activities of associations and support groups for parents who suffered a loss and met several couples affected by this experience.[2] Vinciane Despret's (2015) investigation of the ways in which the dead enter the lives of the living will allow me to read some of the material I collected from the perspective of necrodialogues.

2 The Cultural Making of Perinatal Death

Until recently, stillborn and newborn babies who died before baptism were treated differently from other dead. Between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the Italian and French Alps, but also Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, and southern Germany, there were sacred places known as *sanctuaires à répit* (respite sanctuaries) to which the little dead were brought, so that, thanks to the prayers of the living and the intercession of the Virgin, they could briefly return to life and receive baptism. According to the doctrine of *Limbus puerorum*, dating back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, their souls could not enter paradise because of original sin. Limbo was a place where they did not suffer affliction but could not enjoy the vision of God.[3] Areas around these remote mountain Marian shrines were burial grounds: skeletons of infants and large premature babies were found close to these buildings (Morel 1998; Gélis 2006; 2013; Hausmair 2018; Dall'Ò 2020). More generally, until the last decades of the twentieth century, stillborn babies or babies who died soon after birth were buried anonymously in dedicated spaces, such as the *cilliní* in Northern Ireland (Cecil 1996; Garattini

2 For further discussion on the methodology used in this research, see Mattalucci (2017, 2019, 2022b). The stories I tell in this chapter are based on longstanding knowledge of the people whose stories I discuss. I met Alessia and Marco in 2014, and Sara and Cristian in 2016 at the national gathering of CiaoLapo, Italy's leading perinatal bereavement association. I saw these couples again at other public events organized by the association. For about a year, I attended a self-help group with Sara and Cristian. Afterwards, I conducted an interview with Sara and Cristian (14 October 2021) and one with Alessia (24 April 2023) to discuss their interactions with their children. Alessia and Sara kindly read and commented on the first draft of this paper.

3 Beginning in the twelfth century, theologians began to move away from Augustine's idea that as children were born into sin, the souls of those who died without baptism would be sent to hell. In the twelfth century, the creation of *Limbo puerorum* by medieval scholars such as Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, Anselm, and Abelard marked a crucial change in theological thought. Infant limbo was a fourth place, apart from hell, purgatory, or heaven, where the souls of stillborn or unbaptized children floated, separated from God, but in a state of bliss (Franceschini 2017).

2007); with the corpse of a stranger who died on the same day, as was the case in Iceland (Pons 2009); or in a relative's grave or under an unmarked headstone, in Italy (Mattalucci 2017). Legally unborn, they did not have the same status as the other deceased. Neither were they part of the Christian community because they did not receive baptism.

Historians and anthropologists have analyzed how pregnancy loss and perinatal death are dealt with in European and North American countries. In the last decades of the twentieth century, from a socially denied, unspoken event, pregnancy loss has become a mournful event to be acknowledged. Several factors contribute to this cultural change: the decline in birth rates, the medicalization of pregnancy and birth, and the use of sonograms and other diagnostic technologies have all changed how fetuses, children, and parents are imagined and the lived experience of bereaved couples.[4] As Linda Layne[5] (2003) points out, shifts in pregnancy and childbirth care have produced a cognitive dissonance between cultural forces pushing for early recognition of the embryo/fetus as a person, and its denial if the pregnancy does not result in the birth of a living child. Psychologists, counsellors, associations, and self-help groups have played a key role in the production of specific knowledge about pregnancy loss.[6] They emphasized the risks to parents' mental health that the denial of pregnancy and childbirth can produce; fostered relations among people with similar experiences; organized events to raise public awareness; and provided resources for dealing with bereavement. This new pregnancy culture finds expressions in hospital practices that encourage contact with the baby's body and the production of mementos, e.g., photographs, the baby's hand or footprints, etc., in the celebration of a funeral service, as well as in commemorations that may involve relatives, friends, or other couples who went through the same experience. Several studies show that many hospitals today provide parents with specific care.[7] Many couples ritualize the

4 See among others Morgan and Michaels (1999); Mitchell (2001); Duden (2002); Boltanski (2004); Taylor (2008); Han, Betsinger, and Scott (2018).

5 Layne's book is an ethnography conducted in the United States within pregnancy bereavement support groups in the 1990s. These groups were all led and attended by middle-class white women/couples.

6 In the United States and subsequently in several European countries, breaking the silence around perinatal death was brought about by what was called the Pregnancy Loss Movement, a social movement that developed at different times and places with the aim of offering support to parents affected by a loss, guaranteeing them certain rights (such as parental leave, the possibility of giving the remains a burial, etc.), changing hospital practices, and encouraging research into miscarriages, in utero and prenatal deaths.

7 See Earle, Komaromy and Layne (2012); Memmi (2011, 2014); Kilshaw and Borg (2020).

event.[8] Dedicated cemetery spaces exist.[9] There are widespread practices to keep the memory alive and materialize the relationship with the child lost during pregnancy.[10] Studies investigating how couples and families experience pregnancy loss have analyzed the narratives produced by people affected by these experiences.[11] Some of these discursive productions directly address children. However, the dialogue between the living and their little dead has not yet been thematized. Before providing examples of these communicative exchanges and highlighting their peculiarities, I will highlight the characteristics of the children who die before or just after birth.

3 A Very Particular Category of Dead

Pregnancy loss generates a very particular category of dead. During pregnancy, expectant parents choose a name for their child. The conversations and images they share with relatives and friends – pregnancy announcements, stories about its course, ultrasounds posted on social media, etc. – introduce them to a social network. Babies may have received gifts before birth or given gifts to others on celebrations, such as Christmas, when it is not unusual for expectant parents to offer gifts on behalf of the child. Mum and Dad speak to their children using baby talk, laying the foundations for communication after birth. Loss, however, interrupts the continuity between life in and out of the womb, leaving expectant parents and children suspended. As Rosalind Cecil points out in the introduction to the first collective volume on the anthropology of pregnancy loss, it may seem self-evident that these events do not have the same social impact as live births or other deaths. In the author's words: "[pregnancy loss] does not result in the creation of a new person who is to be incorporated into society, neither is it the loss of one who has been recognized part of the existing social order" (1996, 1). As a short circuit of birth and death, losses occurring during or soon after pregnancy

8 See Layne (2003); Le Grand-Sébille (2004); Peelen (2012); Kuberska (2020); McIntyre, Alvarez, and Marre (2022).

9 Garattini (2007); Peelen (2009); Woodthrope (2012).

10 See Layne (2006); Bleyen (2010); Bremborg (2012); Bremborg and Rådestad (2013); Mattalucci (2015, 2018, 2022b).

11 Until recently, ethnographies describing pregnancy loss culture have focused on white, heterosexual, middle-class Euro-American couples. Some recent studies have considered how different subjectivities experience these reproductive disruptions (Bennett and de Kok 2018; Kilshaw and Borg 2020; van der Sijpt 2021).

generate a liminal category of dead.[12] The liminality of who or what has been lost emerges in rules governing personal identity registrations and burials. In Italy, for example, legislation requires parents to register stillbirths and children who, at any time during pregnancy, are born alive and die after birth. While in the latter case, the registrar draws up a birth and a death certificate, in the former, he only registers a birth certificate.[13] Before the twenty-fifth week and fifth day of gestation, the threshold that distinguishes spontaneous abortions from stillbirths,[14] parents or those acting on their behalf may uplay for burial, but not for civil registration.[15] The uncertain ontological status of babies who died before or soon after birth is also reflected in the different ways they are named. While most couples I have met say they have lost a child,[16] in regulatory texts, statistical reports, healthcare spaces, and most of the interactions in which couples are involved, these "children" are called "embryos," "fetuses," "abortions," or, at best, "unborn babies."[17] Below the stillbirth age limit, the body is described as the "product of conception" or "abortive material." The images and the things left after a pregnancy loss are further evidence of the dead's peculiarity. Generally, couples have ultrasound scans and, in some cases, photographs of the body they took after birth in the hospital, on their initiative, or after healthcare workers' suggestion. Things bought or received as gifts for the child – baby clothes, furniture, and toys – are the only material traces of their existence. Some couples I met had a funeral; others let the hospital and the municipality dispose of the remains according to local regulations.[18] Most of those who made private funeral

12 In social and cultural anthropology, liminality is the transitional state, period, or phase of a rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960 [1909]). It refers to a condition "betwixt and between" a beginning and final state (Turner 1967). The beginnings and ends of life sustained by biomedical techniques are also described as liminal states and frozen embryos, miscarried fetuses, unconscious, severely demented, or long-term comatose persons as liminal beings (Kaufman and Morgan 2005).

13 Art. 74 of Royal Decree 09 July 1939 no. 1238.

14 This is the age limit for Italy. Internationally, the prevailing age limit of stillbirth is twenty-two weeks of pregnancy (500g body weight, or 25cm crown-heel length). On the implications of this time lag for statistical comparisons, see Loghi and D'Errico (2020).

15 Presidential Decree 285, 10 September 1990.

16 I use the terms employed by the subjects I met. I speak of babies, children, mothers, and fathers, although the public recognition of these roles is circumscribed, as is the use of kinship terms qualifying them. Not all the couples I met use these terms. For some expectant parents, pregnancy loss entails a shift towards medical language and terms that do not belong to kinship.

17 Many of the women I have met have given birth and delivered their dead children. Therefore, they consider the phrase "unborn babies" particularly demeaning.

18 Elsewhere, I highlighted the lack of transparency of such provisions. In Italy, burial regulations vary on a regional basis but also from one city to another. I analyzed the misunderstand-

arrangements have an individual grave in an angels' garden or a children's field; others buried the remains in their family grave or had the body cremated and keep the ashes at home.

Despite the liminality of the event and the being that has been lost, death often does not interrupt the relationship created during pregnancy. Scholars have highlighted that the new culture of pregnancy loss creates an environment allowing for the public expression of grief (Layne 2003; Earle, Komaromy and Layne 2012; Kilshaw and Borg 2020). Bonds continue and develop through memorial gestures, small gifts, and stories. Many parents I met address the children they lost in pregnancy with silent words, letters, or messages that they keep at home, take to the grave, and/or post on social media. Sometimes, to communicate with their children, they use images and material objects: photographs, small paintings, soft toys, pinwheels, or other playthings. Regardless of their nature, often these gestures receive what the parents interpret as a response. Necrodialogues between the living and the little dead are verbal, affective, and material exchanges that can occur through various means. They exist not only in people's minds but in the material world they inhabit and through the stories they tell. Although the semantic content of these communications is minimal, they have significant existential and emotional relevance, as we shall see.

4 Dialogues with the Little Dead

On 7 May 2010, Alessia and Marco's first and only baby, Cateno, was stillborn at twenty-four weeks of pregnancy. As she does every year, on 7 May 2023, Alessia posted a message addressed to him on her Facebook page:

> It's 13 years now, on this day full of infinite memories, I am overcome by so many questions I will never be able to answer: what would you have looked like, what sport would you have played and what kind of teenage years would you have experienced, what would your school commitment had been . . . a thousand other questions crowd in my mind. What I do know is that we miss you immensely. Today is your day and I hope that up there you can celebrate with your little friends.
>
> Ps. Thank you for meeting your cousins yesterday to say goodbye to them . . . I am sure you would have had so much fun with them. A kiss from mummy and daddy.

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ings and pointed out the consequences that ambiguous communication over the treatment of fetal remains produces in couples (Mattalucci 2022a).

Alessia and Marco are part of an association that supports bereaved parents.[19] Some of its members choose an animal to symbolize the baby they lost in pregnancy. Alessia and Marco identified Cateno as a squirrel. The postscript refers to an event that happened on the day before the baby's anniversary. Alessia received a voicemail from her sister's seven-year-old daughter. While she was in the car with her brother and mother, a small red squirrel stopped in front of them for a moment. The day after Cateno's "birthday" is Alessia and Marco's wedding anniversary. On that occasion, they received a message from their child. Alessia took a photograph that she published on Facebook and wrote these words: "Yesterday, walking in the sand, your daddy and I came across this hole [in the shape of a heart]. We looked down, and my heart smiled. You wanted to give us this beautiful heart while we talked about our last goodbye on the day of our anniversary. We love you. Happy 19th anniversary to us!"

Alessia is a nurse and had to give herself permission to suffer from what she describes as an unacknowledged loss, learning to talk about her baby and herself as a "mum," and recognize the signs her child was sending her. The mothers whom she met through the association provided guidance. She recalls one of them urging her to "open the door" that would allow to communicate with her baby: to pay attention to the unusual silhouettes drawn by the clouds, the shape of the stones, uncommon phenomena and, of course, squirrels. At first, she did not want to see: "I said, but no, come on! It's not possible, these are not real things . . ." Yet, she started writing to Cateno soon after losing him, on a message thread she started on the support group forum to discuss with other mothers the right time to resume assisted reproduction cycles.

Messages flowed for almost three years. Often, they were letters addressed to the baby. Alessia told Cateno about her daily difficulties, her family, her work, the pain and hopes of months studded with hardship – assisted reproductive cycles gone awry, her mother's illness and therapies. She commended to him her loved ones, the children and mothers of the ward on which she worked, the mothers and fathers of the association, and the children who, like him, died before birth. On the same thread, other mothers also wrote. They wished Cateno happy anniversary, advised him to stay close to his mother and father, and let him know that he had a place in their lives. Sometimes they helped Alessia decode his messages. For example, while dusting, she unintentionally dropped a little angel she bought for him and wrote in despair: "Cateno, you have to explain your message to me, I'm trying

19 Since 2008, the association has offered support to couples and professionals; it produces self-help manuals and online resources; it runs self-help groups and training courses; and carries out research on pregnancy loss and bereavement. In October, International Perinatal Bereavement Awareness Month, it organizes local and national public events on this issue (ciaolapo.org).

to understand but I can't . . . your statuette is on the ground shattered . . . I don't know what to say . . . I'm sorry little one if I made you angry . . ." Other mothers reassured her, writing that Cateno only wanted to play. It took two or three years for her to begin to clearly see the signs Cateno was sending her: "At first I saw them and smiled to myself, but I didn't say anything. Then I started to say 'OK, but why? Why do I have to close my eyes to something that is so blatant?' Then I started to open my eyes and search. There were times when I looked around and he would show up, maybe on special occasions, and others when I saw nothing . . ." Marco remained skeptical: he told Alessia not to believe such things. But every now and then he sees a squirrel crossing the road and, when it happens, he lets her know.

Unlike Alessia and Marco, Sara and Cristian started picking up the signs of Elisa's presence from the very beginning.[20] Elisa, their third daughter, was stillborn on 30 January 2016, while Sara was thirty-five weeks and four days pregnant. Sara has a degree in statistics and works in a research institute. At the time of Elisa's birth/death she was on maternity leave. In the months following stillbirth, she went on bike rides in the countryside to find relief. She remembers these months as the time when she learned to be with her daughter. Whenever she felt the presence of her little girl particularly strongly, she took a photograph. For her first anniversary she posted some of these pictures on Facebook and, as she had done for her other children, prepared an album. She thought she would not have enough pictures, but the pages filled up quickly, giving her the impression that Elisa had grown up. "In those moments," she explains, "She was there because she was in my thoughts, she was in my emotions . . . The photograph for me represents that memory . . . As for other children, there are photos that mark passages . . . Even now, there are photos that remind me of moments when for me she was there, with me."

Cristian also began to feel Elisa's presence early on. While training on his bicycle or when he went running, he often saw a butterfly flying around. Butterflies are one of the symbols used by pregnancy loss support groups and are the elective symbol of the self-help group the couple attended.[21] For Cristian, they were signs of his little girl. The randomly found objects are another medium for his relationship with her: a pair of pink heart-patterned sunglasses found in the sand, a butterfly hair clip found in a car park, a baby sock, a bracelet . . .

20 I wrote more about the story of Sara, Cristian, and Elisa in Mattalucci (2022b).

21 In her analysis of natural symbols used by bereaved parents, Layne (2003, 192–193) suggests that sometimes mothers liken themselves to butterflies. Sometimes butterflies are also used to represent deceased children.

> Who knows how many times we had already seen a hair clip, a pair of sunglasses, or a baby sock on the ground and didn't give it the same meaning? However, when certain things happen to you, you develop a different sensitivity, an ability to read these messages, or at least that's how I think of them, as if she were saying: "Hey, I'm here, have you forgotten me?" It's always nice to find these things around. They connect you to her. They make you feel good . . . It's nice to reconnect with what happened . . . because, in the end, it's part of us.

The two brothers born before Elisa also learned to acknowledge her presence and to communicate with her through gift giving. They made drawings full of colors and butterflies. When they visited the cemetery with their parents, they brought her a toy. One year, one of them found a butterfly in his Easter egg and Sara's most beautiful surprise was hearing him say, "Mummy, I want to give this one to Elisa." Sara posts a message on her Facebook page on every anniversary, name day, and 15 October – International Pregnancy Loss Awareness Day. This year, on 30 January, she wrote:

> It has been seven long years since our first and only hug. I never imagined that that huge black hole would slowly fill with colours. I never thought I would still have the chance to walk my path with you. Instead, we have walked so much together. Our steps were initially uncertain and then increasingly determined. We have grown together, and what you are to me every day is a secret hidden in my heart. There is the nostalgia of not seeing you grow up together with your brothers, but the feelings and emotions I feel when I stop and listen to you speak of life and love, despite everything. So today, I'll stop for a while to listen to the music of my heart. Best wishes puppy!

The story of Alessia, Marco, and Cateno, and that of Sara, Cristian, Elisa, and her siblings, show that communication between the living and the children lost in pregnancy is not monological. As with other families I met, the dead answer the words, thoughts, and emotions of the living through signs: a squirrel, a butterfly, a found object that has specific childlike characteristics. A peculiar shape that stands out against an otherwise ordinary landscape signals a presence. Messages from the little dead seldom go beyond the "Hey, I'm here! Have you forgotten me?" reported by Cristian. Knowing how to grasp them is not obvious. Parents need to cultivate a willingness and take the risk of venturing into an unknown territory, transgressing ordinary rationality. In this apprenticeship, a relationship with people who went through similar experiences plays a key role: it allows bereaved parents to normalize necrodialogues and to acquire the skills to convene and establish their babies' presence.[22] They must look for signs that they may not

22 I take these terms from Despret for whom communication with the dead is not totally determined by the living. To bring a being into existence requires a willingness to welcome: "We help the dead to be or to become what they are, we do not invent them" (2015, 14).

find. Their unexpected appearance proves that the message does not entirely depend on the living's intentionality but on the dead, too.

Dialogue with the little dead can take place in real and virtual spaces specifically dedicated to them, such as the place where they are buried, a corner of the house, a Facebook page, etc. After Cateno's death, Alessia and Marco decided not to have a funeral and let the hospital take care of the remains.[23] His body was buried anonymously in a cemetery paired with the hospital where he was born dead. Almost three years after their loss, they searched for the plot where his body had been placed. Thanks to the support of other mothers in the association, their attempts were successful. Personalizing that space, making it somewhere that could be visited, gave them comfort. Burial places for miscarriages and stillbirths, however, are temporary, and the thought that one day they might find the earth disturbed for reuse haunted them. So when Alessia's grandmother died, they collected some earth from the place where Cateno had been buried and transferred it to her grave, along with some symbolically important things – her aunt's First Communion favor that served as an urn, the half-heart pendant complementary to the one his mother wears on her wrist, and his little cousin's favorite toy. In the house, there are many squirrels of different colors, shapes, and sizes that Alessia and Marco have bought or received from others, giving materiality to their relationship. Elisa has an individual grave in the children's garden in the city where Sara, Cristian, and their other three children live. On her first anniversary, they bought a pink cabinet, which they mounted in the children's room to hold her things: memories of her pregnancy, things Sara and Cristian made or bought for her, and small gifts from relatives or friends of the couple. Four years after the baby's birth/death Sara and Cristian joined the support group project to create an orchard dedicated to children lost in pregnancy: they planted an apricot tree for Elisa. The orchard has become another place to visit her and where she stays, together with other children. Cateno and Elisa, however, manifest themselves outside these spaces too, on special days when their parents follow in their footsteps, or just stop and listen to them.

23 The Lombardy regulation on funerals (Regional Regulation 6, 9 November 2004), amended in 2007 states that: "for abortion products of a presumed gestational age of twenty to twenty-eight complete weeks and for foetuses that have presumably reached twenty-eight weeks, as well as for conception products of a presumed age of less than twenty weeks, the hospital management shall inform the parents of the possibility of requesting burial." If the parents wish to bury the remains, the hospital informs the local health unit directly to issue transport and burial permits. In the absence of such a request, the hospital proceeds in the same way as for recognizable anatomical parts, which are cremated or/and buried in common graves.

5 Giving the Little Dead a Second Life: The Soul, the Body, the Story

According to philosopher Vinciane Despret (2015), different societies and cultures have developed various practices that allow the living to connect with those to whom they were close. Necrodialogues allow the living to maintain a connection with the dead and allow the dead to continue their journey among the living, through another mode of existence. The stories of those who remain testify to the possibility of cultivating closeness. Proximity may be direct or transmitted – when, for example, relatives hand over to their loved ones the memory of ancestors they have never known. Communication with the living and their accounts can prolong even the long-dead's experience. Necrodialogues can be verbal or non-verbal, occur directly or be mediated by specialists, such as mediums (Bergé 1990) or midwives of the dead, figures who became popular in the United States through the home funeral movement (Hagerty 2014). Communicating with the dead presupposes an openness to another rationality, an ability to trace phenomena back to multiple causalities. In pregnancy loss, messages from the little dead are often natural elements or objects that become signs. The people I have met know that a cloud's appearance is caused by the nature, size, number, and distribution of the particles that compose it, the intensity and color of the light that illuminates it, and the relative position of the observer and the light source. But they also know that when a cloud takes the shape of a heart, it becomes a message of love for those left behind. They know that there are various squirrel-shaped objects on the market. The squirrel is a cute animal that, unlike other rodents, has a beautiful tail; you can find it as soft toys, knick-knacks, decorative pictures. But for Alessia, finding one of these objects close to her son's anniversary has meaning: the consumer object is also a message, especially when it is the last one left, if it is May (a month in which it seems it is not easy to find squirrels in Milan's shops) and she, who had looked for it so much, almost lost hope of seeing one. Butterflies are beautiful, winged insects. They are symbols of transformation, hope, faith, and rebirth. It is easy to see them in the countryside. Their silhouette is used for decorations, reproduced on textiles and other goods. But when a butterfly flies around a special daddy or mummy or when they find a butterfly-shaped object by chance, they may assume that their baby is present. What is at stake here is squirrels', butterflies', clouds', and other natural or manufactured items' materiality. These things are not just symbols to be interpreted in order to grasp their meaning; they are the stuff of parent child relationships. After pregnancy loss, the silent conversation made up of heartbeats, nourishing lymph, and delicate movements

that Maraini (2011) so powerfully describes continues through parents' thoughts and emotions but also through small animals met by chance, surprising visions, and found objects that are the means of a lasting relationship.[24]

Although transfigured, the dead that Despret writes about have recognizable characteristics: their appearance and personality traits belong to their previous life or refer to the circumstances of their death. Sometimes their messages are articulate and allow unresolved quarrels to be solved, knots to be unraveled; other messages do not go beyond the attestation of a presence. Accounts of these experiences are not easily revealed. We must ask the right questions, because necrodialogues, dreams, and visions of the dead are not ordinary experiences. The internalized suspicion surrounding them authorizes a doubtful, eventual account that can become direct only when the listener believes that the dead can continue to exist and communicate with the living. As pointed out above, pregnancy loss generates a special category of dead. The lives of these babies ended before they had a story. Therefore, their manifestations are not an extension of their past existence; rather, through their parents' gestures and accounts, they acquire a new one. Sara and Alessia wonder what it would have been like to raise their child: they did not experience important milestones such as their first steps or their first day of school; Sara wonders what relationship Elisa would have had with her siblings and Alessia would have liked to see Cateno play with his little cousins. So many things did not happen. Yet, in another way, children lost in pregnancy grow up and their parents grow up too. After life in the womb, many of the parents I met cultivate relationships with their dead children and their stories, as Maraini's (2018) novel, provide them with a second life. Parents' stories are shared with others through spoken or written words, images – as Sara's photographs – and objects that make necrodialogues somewhat public. The new life that is given to miscarried, stillborn, or dead babies is not the same as the one that, centuries ago, the little dead could receive in the *sanctuaires à repit* where, through one last breath, they could receive baptism. The journey to the sanctuary, the prayers of the living, the burial rites, and the ex-votos for the grace received were not meant to comfort the living, nor to make the absent present, but to obtain salvation. Returning to life and baptism allowed the soul to enjoy God's grace and made burial on consecrated ground possible. The souls of unbaptized chil-

24 Although not in contradiction with Layne's (2003), my interpretation departs from hers and comes close to one of her informants. A woman she quotes, whose child had died of a metabolic disorder following several months in NICU, wrote: "Whenever we are having a difficult moment in our grief, a butterfly seems to go by" (Layne 2003, 193). The point, for me, is not what that butterfly represents, but what it does and what it makes others do: feel better, through talking about the encounter, writing, evoking it through poetry, etc.

dren were destined for limbo, while their bodies, excluded from cemeteries, were buried in ordinary places – fields, woods, or gardens. At the end of the twentieth century, other gestures became widespread. Dominique Memmi (2011) has described the new practices around the dead body enacted by health professionals as actions that give deceased children a second life. The body is washed, dressed, and brought to the parents in a thermal cradle so that they can meet their child *as if* they were alive: holding them in their arms one last time, photographing the baby and being photographed with them, stroking them and preparing to let go. The second life that Memmi mentions is thus a temporary fiction that acts on the body to console the parents and to support mourning. But, as Despret (2015) suggests, mourning does not necessarily have to be processed and closed.[25] Her research stems precisely from a rejection of what she considers a dogma of our culture, which dictates that we mourn our dead by focusing our energies on the loss for a longer or shorter period of time to be able to release them and fully reinvest them in the realm of the living. Although, over time, grief over pregnancy losses evolves and makes way for something else, children lost in pregnancy often remain the objects of a lasting emotional investment. As several studies have shown, the materiality of the body, images, and objects is a core feature of the practices aimed at accompanying the mourners, memorializing deceased children, and maintaining a relationship with them. The perspective of necrodialogues suggests placing the narrative alongside the matter. The living develop a set of practices, discursive and otherwise, to remain in contact with the little dead, who manifest themselves through natural elements and things that become signs. And, above all, they can tell their story. In doing so, they give the children lost in pregnancy a new life, an existence that is neither of the soul nor of the body and, entrusted to others, would continue; a life written in a future anterior tense, where each new story will be able to say what they will have been.

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Adam J. Powell

Hearing Spirits: The Work and Technique of Controlled Clairaudience

> At a certain point you say to the woods, to the sea, to the mountains, the world, Now I am ready [. . .] You empty yourself and wait, listening.
> Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk* (1982, 89–90)
>
> The eardrum [is] the sounding board of the religious sense and the ear the womb of the gods.
> Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion* (1967 [1851], 27)

1 Introduction

Spiritualism, the quasi-religious movement often traced back to nineteenth-century America whose hallmarks include the belief that the souls or spirits of deceased humans continue to live in much the same way they did as corporeal beings, is often mentioned as a product and reflection of rationalism and a fortiori secularization, rather than other social or cultural values and trends. Rooted in the Enlightenment and the corresponding rise of empiricism and scientism, Spiritualism, the story goes, is an expression of Western culture's gradual decentering and suspicion of religious institutions as well as increasing demand for demonstrable/material correlates to the supernatural (Cerullo 1982). Traditional religious communities and systems of meaning had for too long relied on untenable supra-empirical claims of immortality – belief in life after death persisted, but spiritual mediums (individuals capable of communicating with the dead) emerged as the new shamans claiming they could manipulate the physical world to prove that something agentive, but incorporeal, survives the grave. Thus, mediums of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have long been understood as embodying a democratized spirituality alongside an emerging Modernist metaphysics as they contacted the spirit world.

Mediumship, that act of communicating with those lingering spirits, however, remains a key practice of contemporary forms of Spiritualism and may shine a wider beam on Western society than has been assumed. For example, the experience of spirit communication is of particular relevance to researchers interested in how and why some individuals claim to have supernatural encounters when many others do not. From 2016 to 2019, a team of researchers at Durham University engaged in a two-part study of contemporary mediumship, asking mediums about their experiences of clairaudience ("hearing" spiritual communications rather than using other spiritual abilities, such as seeing through "clairvoyance"

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or feeling through "clairsentience").[1] An initial set of interviews with clairaudient members of the Spiritualist National Union in Britain was followed by an online survey of sixty-five practicing mediums. The aim of our investigations was not only to gather a fulsome account of what it is like to hear the spirits of the dead but also to learn more about how the experience occurs and what life is like for clairaudient mediums. Among other results, the survey found that mediums often have unexplained sensory-perceptual experiences very early in life and that they are more prone to becoming immersed in mental thoughts and imagination than the general population (Powell and Moseley 2020).

The semi-structured phenomenological interviews generated richly detailed accounts of spirit communication. Indeed, the interviews shed much light on the practice of mediumship and its framing by mediums as "work" requiring "discipline." While much has been published by mental health researchers on the comfort and sense of control that accompanies clairaudience (Roxburgh and Roe 2014; Powers et al. 2017; Powell and Moseley 2020), there are relatively few detailed accounts of the mental processes, sensory phenomena, emotional motivations, and self-regulation of mediums as they pursue that control. Our two-part study generated considerable qualitative data pertaining to those experiences and concerns, results that testify to a striking and recurrent preoccupation with "getting it right" in the "spirit work" of mediumship. It was found that clairaudience is sometimes experienced as relentless, and mediums may place greater and greater emphasis on mediumistic technique as they seek to resist the incessant intrusion of the spirit realm into their lived realities. In the light of such findings, the following pages argue that mediumship generally, and clairaudience specifically, may have originally reflected an Industrial-era esteem for materiality and individual spirituality but, due to internal and external pressures discussed below, now also bears marks related to modern expectations around labor and capital that continue to erode the boundaries between product and personhood – placing the burden of death and transcendence squarely on the shoulders of the individual and the proficiency of their mental work. Indeed, mediumship qua mediumship in the twenty-first century is arguably more about our collective drive for, and infatuation with, efficiency and control – the incessant honing of process – than about the marshalling of material media to prove life exists beyond the grave.

1 I would like to express my gratitude to the Wellcome Trust for funding the research and to my collaborators, Ben Alderson-Day and Peter Moseley, for their vast contributions to the study.

2 (Im)Material Communication

Materialism came to form the very heart of Spiritualism in the nineteenth century, with its origins often traced to mysterious events which took place at the home of sisters Maggie and Kate Fox in Hydesville, NY, in the spring of 1848 (Weisberg 2005). Strange sounds described as "knockings" and "rappings" began to disturb the Fox family's sleep. The family became convinced that a spirit was inside their house, and on the night of 31 March, eleven-year-old Kate asked the spirit questions – hoping that the number of knocks would indicate a clear response. Indeed, neighbors were called in to witness the "spirit" knocking out the correct number when asked about Kate and Maggie's ages.

Decades later, the sisters would reveal that they had been behind this event (and many more as they took their "abilities" on the road), creating the strange sounds by dropping apples on the floor or snapping their toes. In the interim, however, these types of occurrences were increasingly embraced in North America and in Britain as evidence that life continued beyond the grave and that some individuals were gifted with the ability to communicate with those on the other side. The central conceit, of course, was that the mostly invisible and absolutely incorporeal spirits communicated through the use and manipulation of the physical environment. Public séances and mediumistic demonstrations included levitating objects, spinning furniture, and even a translucent ghostly substance called "ectoplasm" materializing from mediums' orifices in addition to the thumps and knocks associated with the Fox sisters. In fact, as Spiritualism spread and matured into and beyond the Victorian period, the media of mediumship came to include phenomena such as self-playing musical instruments, disembodied heads, as well as the pen-and-paper compositions resulting from so-called "automatic writing" (Oppenheim 1985).

All such phenomena were meant to be the tangible manifestations of spiritual communiqués – spirits had messages that they desired to convey to living relatives and others, and mediums were at pains to assert their abilities as intermediaries. In that striving, the material, the media, of mediumship escalated. Popular technologies, such as the telegraph, inspired and were, at times, even incorporated into the practices of spiritual communication. The ability to tap out a message without being physically present was at once fascinating and empowering, a commonplace miracle in a world forging new amalgams of spirituality and human innovation. As industrialization and mechanical ingenuity progressed, so did the machinations of mediums. By the 1880s, for example, séances held by some celebrity mediums began to include "full-form materializations" in which specters, usually in the form of attractive young women, appeared in the room with messages transmitted through gesticulations, singing, or speaking (Oppenheim 1985, 16). That same de-

cade, a New York magazine, *Gallery of Spirit Art*, began publication of paintings, spirit photography, and other material forms of spirit communication. Its pages commonly depicted the full-form visitations witnessed by artists and photographers who attended public and private spiritual demonstrations. Of course, much as the "rappings" of spirits echoed the contemporaneous sounds of the telegraph machine, so "spirit art" required and reflected the burgeoning potential of technologies like photography. Mediumship captured something of the hopes, values, and human industriousness of its nineteenth-century context.

3 The Immmaterial Turn?

Yet, Spiritualism arguably has earlier origins – at least as early as the writings and experiences of the eighteenth-century Swedish scientist, theologian, and visionary Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Swedenborg, whose writings and affiliated New Church movement were gaining popularity in America during the first three or four decades of the nineteenth century, claimed to experience many extraordinary spiritual events. He wrote of lengthy visits to spiritual realms and of enlightening theological conversations with angels and deceased figures: "It has been granted me to have fellowship with angels, to speak with them and to see things that are in the heavens, and also to speak with those who have died, with nearly all who were known to me" (Swedenborg 1975, 7). Notably, his extensive writings on the possibility of such spiritual experiences articulated not only the basic notion of verbally communicative deceased loved ones but also some of the specific tenets later espoused by mediums: "When a [person] arrives after death in the spiritual world, which generally happens on the third day after [they] have breathed [their] last, [they] seem to [themselves] to be alive as [they] were in the world, living in a similar house, room and bedroom, with similar dress and clothes, and with similar companions at home" (Swedenborg 1975, 163). Living as they had prior to death, these spirits also seemed to speak as they once spoke. Swedenborg clearly believed that God had graced him with the capacity to "hear" these spirits, a sign of his righteousness and selection as a revelator, but there was technique involved in hearing spirits and it did not entail any materialization. Swedenborg's supernatural interlocutors spoke spiritually but verbally. In fact, psychologists Simon McCarthy-Jones and Charles Fernyhough have noted that Swedenborg seems primarily to have experienced auditory verbal phenomena – highlighting Swedenborg's description of one of these events as a months-long ceaseless dialogue (2008). The trick to this "fellowship with angels," Swedenborg suggested, was to practice "inward breathing," an ability divinely bestowed

in childhood which permitted him to cease physical respiration for long periods and to "be with spirits and speak with them" (Swedenborg 1880, 50).

The historian Leigh Eric Schmidt has observed that this sort of aural spiritual experience came to be linked to one's faith and obedience to God during Swedenborg's time, with the assumption that truly "to hear" God (or other divine agents) required honing and improving one's spiritual "ear" in a passive act of submission to the divine (Schmidt 2002). What is perhaps most important for the present purposes is that this Swedenborgian posture and process is largely interior, private, and immaterial. While Swedenborg engaged in "inward breathing," the evidence of his claims remained personal and beyond the reach of his skeptics, who were limited to abstract theological or philosophical argumentation. A century later, mediums relying on material substantiation of their claims and abilities increasingly faced calls for scientific verification. This led to a complex crisis of authority. Traditional religious leaders denied Spiritualist claims on the grounds that divine knowledge is revealed directly to the heart and soul of true believers. Scientists and other researchers devised elaborate and controlled experiments to test those same claims. By the twentieth century, many mediums had been exposed as charlatans because of such investigations. As Peter Lamont notes, "the association with fraud led to a decline in interest in physical phenomena, and research was concentrated primarily on ostensibly mental phenomena" (Lamont 2004, 915).

Mediumship changed accordingly. With the burden of proof growing heavier and heavier, the seat of spiritual communication became the mind rather than the séance room (Wooffitt 2006). Society was changing and, with it, mediums catered to those who sought comfort in the midst of grief by "tuning in" telepathically or clairvoyantly – purely mental imagery superseding the sorts of pictures found in the pages of *Gallery of Spirit Art*. Just as American Catholics in the mid-twentieth century would change their death rites to be less material – almost completely forgoing the use of rosary beads, for example (Orsi 2016, 177) – as a reflection of societal shifts towards depersonalized funeral homes/directors and Protestant hegemony, so mediums began to turn inward. The messages from beyond began to echo the spirit of an age which would witness tremendous death during the Frist World War alongside a growing faith in the revelations of scientific method and, as is explored in the following pages, an unreserved commitment to efficiency and refinement in industry.

4 Tireless Technique

Writing at the end of the nineteenth century, William James remarked that Spiritualist mediums in the United States all seemed to describe their experiences using the same or similar language (spirit, harmony, beauty, "Indian", "squaws", etc.) – reflecting, he believed, an element of the zeitgeist (James 1890, 394). James's Swiss contemporary, the psychologist Théodore Flournoy, similarly highlighted the incursion of available cultural beliefs and resources into the accounts of mediums, demonstrating in his case study of the medium Mlle Smith, for example, that her account of a past life in India included stereotypes and descriptors of fourteenth-century Arabia that reflected the images and prejudices of her own day (Flournoy 1900, 277, 443). Indeed, psychologist Carlos Alvarado lists both James and Flournoy as examples of researchers postulating the power of suggestibility and imagination in the production and recording of spiritual experience (Alvarado 2010, 205). Certainly, for both James and Flournoy, the process and the content of mediumship could be said to mirror or to betray more widespread beliefs, debates, and anxieties of society.

As previously mentioned, the immaterial turn in mediumship seems to reflect tensions within the religious arena as well as pressures exerted directly on Spiritualism by those who sought to challenge or disconfirm its central claims. Yet, the shift to mental manifestations of spirit, a hallmark of mediumistic abilities even into the twenty-first century, likely reveals something of broader cultural trends over the past century. Indeed, the very process of connecting with the dead or receiving communications therefrom may bear the marks of a particular zeitgeist. After all, as Swedenborg made explicitly clear, spiritual hearing involved more than either floating furniture or mental imagery, more than linguistic resources or psychological suggestibility. Clairaudience, mediumship in general, involved technique, and technique, too, is a marker of the time.

In *The Technological Society*, Jacques Ellul, French philosopher and social scientist, wrote in the mid-twentieth century of social and economic changes in the West and their relationship to "technology" and "technique." Perhaps more than any other social theorist, Ellul writes knowingly of potentially problematic tendencies in how the Western world is coming to define progress. In his cutting analysis, he defines technology as "the machine," the material innovation and offspring of industrialization and capitalism's answer to social instability. Technology is the endpoint of a broadening horizon of inventive designs; it was originally the destination on the path of specialized labor and refined production – the train, the tractor, the assembly line. Technique, however, is how the machine became wholly integrated into society (Ellul 1964, 3–5). For Ellul, technique is not solely or primarily about productivity. It is more than the sum of its steps or ac-

tions. Technique is a totalizing quest for the best absolute means. In other words, technique is found in societal contexts which have comprehensively replaced the ends with the means. In such contexts, Ellul argues, technique becomes an all-encompassing moral system predicated on worker conformity and the illusion of individual agency. Everyone must act in loyalty and comportment to technique. Like moral codes, technique is both the existential plane in which one lives and the ideal towards which one strives.

A key element of Ellul's argument is that Western society has shifted its esteem and commitment from technology to technique. Here he follows Norbert Wiener,[2] creator of cybernetics and forerunner to artificial intelligence, who saw two "revolutions" in relation to work and technique: 1) the Industrial Revolution which replaced human muscle, and 2) the Intellectual Revolution which began in the twentieth century to replace human brains (1961). In *God and Golem, Inc.* (1964), published the same year as the English version of Ellul's *Technological Society*, Wiener highlights parallels between the relation of humanity to machine and God to humanity. In our technological haste and zeal, humanity, Wiener believes, has moved from designing machines to help us to designing machines to be us. The implication for Ellul, of course, is that these social changes are increasingly all-encompassing and seem to represent a sort of irreversible inertia. With a prophetic tone, Ellul suggests that the "spirit of the age" from the mid-twentieth century is one in which total devotion to efficiency and means is not only expected but increasingly unavoidable, as technocrats spend ever-greater capital and energy on perfecting processes and honing systems while the labor force marches on accordingly.

But what of technique and mediumship in relation to the distinctive features of late or postmodernity? From the Fox sisters on, technique has typically been mentioned alongside mediumship when discussing scientific and psychical research – where cutting-edge investigative/experimental methods have been used to examine the possibilities of spiritual communication. Yet, techniques for "hearing" from the supernatural realm reveal much about sociocultural trends and anxieties as well as about the in-group's efforts to demarcate socio-religious territories. Mediums of the nineteenth century erected boundaries between themselves and the predominant Protestant Christian culture by looking externally to

2 It is also worth mentioning that Zygmunt Bauman would outline a similar commentary on sociocultural changes in the West to that of both Ellul and Wiener in his influential text, *Liquid Modernity* (2000). Bauman notes, for example, that modernity is actually multiple, with an earlier modernity being characterized by stability and later modernity largely characterized by constant change. Bauman, like the other two social theorists, underscores that one hallmark of late modernity is a concern for optimization above all.

material signs of life after death, to something tangible and apart from inner faith. Their technique was bound up with their reliance on materiality. Later, as noted in the discussion of the immaterial turn, technique transformed into something more strikingly interior and mental when social pressures demanded such a shift. Even more recently, Protestant Evangelical communities have been shown to engage in practices (praying and paying close attention to sacred texts, homilies, faithful podcasts, and other media) of "hearing" or "listening to" God that sociologists have recognized as an important means by which members distinguish between legitimate forms of Christian faith and the forms of "material" or "ritual" Christianity they deem illegitimate (Luhrmann 2012; Strhan 2014). For those communities, the technique, so to speak, of receiving spiritual communication confirms and reinforces the specifics of that particular faith group in relation to the beliefs and practices of other groups.

In a different sense, however, spiritual technique perhaps follows patterns less discernable in the religious sphere and more conspicuous in the public (economic, consumer, political) sphere. As asserted above, the history of mediumship seems to reflect fluctuations in the sociocultural zeitgeist, specifically in relation to notions of labor and personhood. Emerging on the heels of the Industrial Revolution, Spiritualism of the second half of the nineteenth century, for example, saw the medium as a producer of material goods and mediumship as the virtuosic means of production possessed by a select few. Industry had its titans, and Spiritualism had its gifted celebrities. Now, in the early twenty-first century, Ellul's observations appear prescient. As Jonathan Crary puts it, the developed world now operates under a "24/7" regime in which "the modelling of one's personal and social identity has been reorganized to conform to the uninterrupted operation of markets, information networks, and other systems" (Crary 2014, 9). This environment, Crary warns, "has the semblance of a social world, but it is actually a nonsocial model of machinic performance and a suspension of living that does not disclose the human cost required to sustain its effectiveness" (2014, 9). What is more, the 24/7 paradigm "renders plausible, even normal, the idea of working without pause, without limits" (Crary 2014, 10). This accords easily with Ellul's own observation regarding the total dissolution or subsuming of the individual by the prevailing labor regime: "work technique necessitates the complete integration of the worker" (1964, 353). Conformity, repetition, tirelessness, the dissolving of boundaries between personal and social, between production and consumption, between efficiency and progress, these traits seem to mark the era of late modern technique.

5 Spirit Work: Contemporary Clairaudience

If mediumship is a sort of representation of those same sociocultural properties mentioned above, then one should expect to find in its current form signs of such pervasive technique – indications, for instance, that mediums, too, are engaged 24/7 in work of a sort that demands repetition and the perfecting/refinement of processes. Beyond simply bearing the marks of common language, as James highlighted, contemporary mediumship should, in some way, be quintessentially identifiable by its time and place. Before turning to recent qualitative accounts[3] of mediumistic experiences that support that contention, it is instructive to note that nearly 40 per cent of clairaudient British mediums interviewed by our Durham team mentioned the importance of "discipline" in mediumship, and many more spoke of improving their abilities through "development" as well as described their communications with the dead as "spirit *work*" (my emphasis).

It is perhaps worth recognizing from the outset that the term "spirit work" is a common, and rather broad, label used in Spiritualist, esoteric, and other so-called New Age social circles to refer to the actions and experiences of connecting with the supernatural realm. Within Spiritualism, the term is also apropos in that many mediums are professionalized, charging customers who pay the medium to attempt to make contact with a deceased loved one. That the term is pervasive across those circles more generally, however, all the more strongly suggests a resonance or affinity between cultural conceptions of labor and the behaviors in which members of these movements engage, a sort of implicit argument from those within that their experiences are more than, or opposed to, leisure/recreation. Although the individual accounts quoted here were given only in response to questions about their own subjective experience, the work-related language of "development," "discipline," "bosses," and "training" appearing across our interviewees' answers seems to endorse the notion that the diction and descriptions of mediums shed some light back on greater cultural penchants. In the cases below, mediums embedded their experiences of spirit communications within a framework of what might be called mediumship's "best practices" – a general, but fastidious, fixation on proper means that bears striking resemblance to Ellul's notion of technique.

3 The anonymous first-hand accounts in this section are taken directly from transcripts of interviews and free-text responses to surveys conducted by the Durham research team with clairaudient members of the Spiritualist National Union. All language has been left verbatim as the participants spoke it or wrote it. In exceptional cases, punctuation has been added for grammatical structure and easier reading.

In one clear example of work-related parlance, a sixty-four-year-old clairaudient female described being a medium as being "your own boss." She then elaborated about the "discipline" and "focus" needed to control spiritual voices properly: "There are people I know who are a bit like dripping taps, and that is not a good way to be 1) because it takes an awful lot out of you and 2) I don't think it is very professional." Echoing this language closely, another participant (male, fifty-two) indirectly acknowledged a potentially relentless, 24/7 component to mediumship that necessitates a combination of acumen and restraint:

> I'm very disciplined. I'm not a dripping tap [. . .] I learnt a lesson with that [. . .] I spent about four weeks running around like a headless chicken, feeding off everybody's energy and just spilling out everything that I felt, saw, heard and it made me ill.

Similarly, another medium, a fifty-year-old female, spoke of "working" as a professional and "allowing the spirit world to come in" but followed that account of control with a disclosure that sometimes the voices enter her head when she "is not even consciously thinking about anything." In one such instance, she recalls, she asked the spirits a question and received an answer from them nearly nonstop for three days. Remembering this experience brought her back to the issue of management, explaining that the proper approach is more measured: "How I do it is I have a little mantra I go through, which is, and I just basically say to the spirit world that I am ready to work, and that I want to work, I want to work with love and light [. . . , or] I'm not ready to work, sorry, I need to put that in or else they'll just come in you see?" The same sentiment was repeated by others. One male medium, for instance, remarking that if he walks by a cemetery, "it sounds like 100 people talking at once."

The significance of these admissions should not be gainsaid. Apart from provoking discussions around mental health and intrusive thoughts/hallucinations, a discussion beyond the scope of the present chapter, the revelation that clairaudience can be experienced as incessant voices that threaten to harm the medium's work/life balance is a powerful illustration of technique's incursion into the lived reality of Spiritualism. Furthermore, the relentlessness of the spirits and the matched tirelessness of the mediums calls to mind Crary's elucidation of the twenty-first century's 24/7 paradigm – one in which "the individual [. . .] is constantly engaged, interfacing, interacting, communicating, responding, or processing," and sleep is constantly at odds with those demands (Crary 2014, 15). Indeed, this same participant later recounted having to "say yes or no straight away" to avoid being constantly "bothered" by the voices. She claimed to avoid that undesirable outcome in most cases by remaining "very disciplined."

6 Mediumship: Controlled Clairaudience

Discipline and control, in fact, appear central to the experiences relayed by contemporary clairaudient mediums. Several recent studies have identified experiencing control over the spirit voices as a hallmark of clairaudients when compared with other voice-hearers (Roxburgh and Roe 2014; Powers et al. 2017; Moseley et al. 2022). In part, this may relate to the phenomenology of their spiritual voice-hearing episodes. Of those interviewed in Durham, 65 per cent experienced conversational spirit voices, and the vast majority experienced the voices inside their heads rather than as external auditory sounds. A similar study of Anglican Christians who report having heard a spiritual voice found only 10 per cent had experiences consistent with the category "conversational" and almost half (48 per cent) heard the voices outside of their heads (Cook et al. 2020). Although somewhat speculative, it may be that internal communications that are sometimes unbidden and dialogical are perceived as needing more control due to their essentially invasive and inextricable qualities. When the element of professionalization is considered alongside this, creating contexts (not shared by the Christian voice-hearers) in which the medium feels a sense of responsibility or ethical obligation to their audience, the desire and esteem for discipline and control become more understandable. As the participant who emphasized professionalism above stated, "You have a responsibility as a medium to be careful what comes out of your mouth."

6.1 Process

How does the medium receive and convey spiritual messages responsibly? Technique may be more than procedure, but it is also that, and today's mediumship is certainly more technique than technology. One of the participants interviewed, Kathleen,[4] a fifty-six-year-old female with several years of experience as a practicing medium, provides a helpful study of the process and attendant pressures of modern mediumship. She, too, felt "you need to work responsibly" as a medium and that "if you were doing this all the time, your whole life would be totally disrupted." She said, "When I'm off duty, I'm off duty." Even setting aside her use of "duty" and "responsibility" for the experience of receiving spiritual communications, this participant presented perhaps the clearest example of both the tireless

4 This is a pseudonym.

work involved in mediumship and the immaterial, and constantly perfected, skills involved in receiving and "proving" clairaudient messages from the dead.

Unlike several of the other mediums interviewed, Kathleen did not report having had anomalous sensory/perceptual experiences since early childhood. Instead, she was an adult when she first accepted an invitation to join a Spiritualist "development circle" (an open gathering of those, old and new, interested in learning to be mediums). Only eighteen months later, Kathleen was so adept at receiving communications that she began leading services at her local Spiritualist church on her own. For her, it is the ability to discern the difference between thoughts and "thought vibrations" that separates a good medium from others. Over time, Kathleen said, she "learned to cope with noise [. . . to] override it [. . . with her] mind working on two levels." Although she admitted that a few voices have come through unexpectedly, she expressed pride in her progress and increased control over time. Good development, she said, was learning to filter voices and spirits that mean harm or that, perhaps, were not the right spirits for the moment. This meant relying on her spirit guide – a common component of mediumship that posits specific spirits assigned to mediums who can recurrently aide the medium – to serve as a "doorkeeper" to prevent bad spirits from "stepping forward."

When an appropriate spirit did step forward, Kathleen emphasized that a portion of the content of their message was used to establish "proof" of the communication. This was done, she said, by presenting the audience (whether an individual in a one-on-one session or an entire congregation as a church event) with identifiers such as a name, place, color, song lyrics, etc. If the audience responded to this material, provided by the spirit and conveyed by Kathleen, by claiming familiarity and identifying a deceased loved one with whom that information corresponded, then the message and spirit were considered verified. As another medium put it, "Good practice is that your recipient needs to know who the communicator is." At that point, with the identity of the spirit-speaker established, a more complete message was relayed to the audience member, often one of comfort and encouragement (e.g., "Your grandfather wants you to know he sees your accomplishments").

Of course, the steps taken to establish the communication in the first place needed to be followed properly:

1. Kathleen would "open" and connect with the spirit energies. This was when her mind would "operate at two levels" simultaneously. She would begin to sort her own thoughts from the "thought vibrations" of the spirit world.
2. After establishing the link with the spiritual realm, Kathleen described then receiving a message – which could be anything from hearing a single word to

being presented with a mental image – and using the approach above to confirm its validity.
3. After identifying the spirit, Kathleen would convey the complete message. She was insistent that this was nearly always a message of love, her spirit guide having filtered out malevolent spirits.
4. Finally, Kathleen described closing the link with spirit. She would no longer need to "override" the sensory input of the immediate physical world and would cease focusing on "energies" and "vibrations."

One should note, in this description of the process involved in mediumship, the centrality of mentation, sensory override, and social feedback. Far from relying on alterations in, or the manipulation of, the physical space, Kathleen's contact with the dead involved ignoring "the noise" of the environment and paying close attention to "thought vibrations." Mediumship, at least for Kathleen, was the total system of responsibly filtering, selecting, verifying, and conveying entirely immaterial communications as the primary task of her spirit work.

6.2 Practice

Kathleen readily acknowledged that training and learning were needed to execute the process well. She credited her attendance at development circles and years of practice for having gotten her to a place of virtually no unwanted spirits and the ability to shut off when she so desires. Other interviewees expressed similar thoughts. Good technique took practice, and the heavy burden of potentially unpredictable and limitless spirits trying to communicate must be met with a commensurate dedication to improvement as a medium.

The participant who described spirit work as "being your own boss," for example, spoke of a time in her late forties when she decided to forego further training in yoga to pursue "mediumistic training." This meant working with "good teachers" to help her realize she was "hearing more than she thought she was." Most of her development came down to years of "determination" and "focus": "There are certain exercises you can do to help various things, but a lot of it is to do with focus."

For others, the language of training and exercise was expressed metaphorically. A thirty-year-old male medium attempted to bring concepts of focus, work, training, and development together to clarify how mediumship is improved and honed over time:

> I think one way to describe it is maybe as a muscle, because people talk about as you sort of *train* a muscle you can do more, you can *work* more, and almost I found that [. . .] when I first started off [. . .] it would be a real struggle to get information across. But now I can demonstrate for an hour, you know go through a number of contacts and it's not really too much of a problem. You're almost *developing* a bit of muscle just to hold the *focus*. (my emphasis)

A comparable reflection by another thirty-something participant mentioned having surpassed the mediumistic aptitude of their relatives: "To my knowledge, no one in my family has *exercised* these abilities to the point that I have, to where I can actively read other people and seek to help as many of the living and the dead as I can" (my emphasis).

Of course, in all of this, the medium speaks of improvement, training, and the "development of 'muscle'" as an inherent good, a worthy goal linked to the labor of relaying messages between two worlds. They have bought into, so to speak, the technique of progress towards efficiency, endurance, and ease – where those latter three terms represent a lion's share of the end-goal, mediumship's raison d'etre rather than a set of prospective, but dispensable, features of the process. The medium cited above who used the metaphor of muscle-building also concluded that "training and development" is intended to render the spirit work "easier." Most importantly, the easiness of the work is indissolubly linked to Kathleen's process as well as the "duties" and "responsibilities" and the "discipline" mentioned by the others. To do mediumship well (responsibly) is to do mediumship effectively (filtering inappropriate spirits and channeling appropriate spirits with loving messages) is to do mediumship efficiently (managing the incessant cacophony of spirit voices and "working" tirelessly).

7 Conclusion: A Quest for the Best

That expectations around duty, responsibility, and best practices have made inroads into spirituality would not surprise Ellul. He ends *The Technological Society* with an in-depth analysis of the facets of life affected by technique: "[Humanity] is caught like a fly in a bottle. Its attempts at culture, freedom, and creative endeavor have become mere entries in technique's filing cabinet" (1964, 418). Nowhere else is this truer, he avers, than in the realm of humanity's "efforts toward the spiritual." While modern spirituality is largely defined by its strident individualism, an oft-repeated marker of Spiritualism, Ellul incisively notes that it is technique that provides both the "modes of expression" and the "indispensable alienation from the self" necessary to form and to facilitate mystical and spiritual

movements (1964, 420, 423). In other words, as has been argued above with regard to mediumship, it is contemporary devotion to efficiency and models of labor that provide both the language and concepts used by Spiritualists to describe, explain, and justify their (now immaterial) experiences. Furthermore, the same semblance of agency within a totalizing structure, or the same separation of the "I" from the "Thou," the person from the product, that is needed to sustain infinite workloads and interminable innovation is also there at the heart of spiritual movements that promise empowerment and personal advancement entangled with individual charisma and ready-made identities.

Indeed, without naming it explicitly, Ellul implicates Spiritualism as just such a "new religious life" with a "mechanical character" in which the ecstatic or mystical is "organized, centralized, and diffused by technique" (1964, 423). Perhaps from their very inception, Spiritualism and mediumship confused and elided meaning, motives, and means. Although influenced, or at least anticipated, by Swedenborg, the earliest mediums of the nineteenth century engaged in a sort of divination – a ritual evocation of spirit communication via physical media. Over time, and in response to various changes in the values and allegiances of society, mediumship shifted to a psychosocial internalization of the process. External "evidence" became the social affirmation of the recipient while opportunity and impetus for contact with the "other side" increasingly came to be a function of the medium's practice, skill, and hard work. Spirits may have once needed coaxing into cryptic physical expressions, but they now seem to manifest as a potential cacophony of messages that must be controlled by proper process and sound judgement.

With mediums feeling that they must resist being always "on," the relentless activity of receiving and relaying communications reflects societal veneration of, and norms around, unending capital and labor. This is consonant with the manner by which early Spiritualism involved the manipulation of the environment and relied on arguments of empirical falsifiability at a time when positivism, rationalism, and human potential sang in harmony as the loudest trio on the Western stage. Now, in an era of 24/7 workforce engagement and updateable, ever-expanding digital markets and metrics, our impulse to reach out and touch the transcendent or to sit and listen for its whispers may have been commandeered and piloted by late-capitalist technique. Look no further than spiritual mediumship and its discontented drive towards efficiency, where the medium is rarely "off duty" even if they are their "own boss."

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Eva Van Hoey

When the Victims Speak: Necrodialogues in Selva Almada's *Dead Girls*

1 Introduction: Giving a Voice to the Victims of Femicide

With the publication of his famous novel *2666* (2004) on the femicides of Ciudad Juárez, Chilean author Roberto Bolaño drew international attention to the problem of gender violence in Mexico. In this Mexican border town, during the 1990s, hundreds of women were raped, killed, and dumped in the desert. What Bolaño depicted was only the tip of the iceberg: in Latin America, nine women are killed each day, a phenomenon called femicide.[1] According to the United Nations, "Latin America is the deadliest place for women outside of warzones" (2017). Women fall victim to physical, psychological, and structural violence because of the normative ideas that surround their biological sex or because they do not conform to heterosexual female identities (Merry 2009). A machismo culture prevails throughout the continent (García 2014), according to which men can express their dominance through the control of women and their bodies (Rodríguez 2009). Since the 2010s, there has been a surge in feminist movements that denounce the violence and expose its systematic character (Félix de Souza 2019).

In Argentina, mass protests against gender violence started after the femicide of the seventeen-year-old student María Soledad Morales in 1990, a brutal incident that caused a national political scandal due to the involvement of the sons of politicians (Bollig 2016). Protests by women's organizations eventually led to the adoption of law 26,791. This law amends the Argentine Criminal Code by incorporating femicide as an aggravating condition in the case of homicide ("El femicido" 2012). The culmination of a long struggle for women's rights in Argentinian society was the founding of "Ni Una Menos" (not one [woman] less) in 2015, the year in which

1 Both "femicide" and "feminicide" are used to refer to the killing of women because of their gender. The terms are used interchangeably but are linked to specific contexts and contain a slight difference in meaning. Whereas "feminicide" is used in the Mexican context, "femicide" is the common term in Argentina. Furthermore, the notion "feminicide," introduced by Marcela Lagarde, emphasizes the involvement of the (Mexican) state in the killings (Navallo 2020, 70).

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235 women were killed for gender reasons (CEPAL 2021).[2] The first Ni Una Menos protest, organized in Buenos Aires after the femicide of fourteen-year-old Chiara Páez, who was buried pregnant underneath her boyfriend's house, mobilized over two hundred thousand people. After various marches in Argentina organized around the hashtag #NiUnaMenos, mobilizations took place in Chile, Uruguay, Mexico, and Peru. In its mission statement, Ni Una Menos indicates that the collective was born to stand up against "*machista* violence which has its cruelest point in femicide" (Ni Una Menos 2017).[3] The success of these movements illustrates public aversion to gender violence, a phenomenon that is also widely discussed in the literary production of Argentina.

In 2014, a year before Ni Una Menos started its fight against gender violence, Argentinian author Selva Almada published *Dead Girls* (original title in Spanish: *Chicas muertas*), a chronicle[4] in which she focuses on extreme violence against women through the real stories of three ordinary girls. Andrea Danne, María Luisa Quevedo, and Sarita Mundín were murdered during the 1980s. The three young girls were born and raised in small towns in the provinces of Chaco, Entre Ríos, and Córdoba, located in the interior of Argentina, a peripheric and economically abandoned region that is characterized by patriarchy, police corruption, and fierce local leaders (*caudillos*) and stands in stark contrast with Argentina's capital region (Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area). The female narrator, an alter ego of the author who was also born in Entre Ríos, investigates the three unsolved femicides. In the text, she establishes links between the lives of the three girls and her own experiences with *machista* violence, thereby exposing the harsh reality of women living in the Argentine inland. The femicides of the girls are not represented as isolated cases but rather as symptoms of a profound and structural problem of violence against women in Argentina.

Strikingly, the narrator, who stands in for Almada, does not only talk *about* the girls, but also talks *with* them through a personal medium, a person who mediates messages between the dead and the living. With the use of esoteric practices (Bubello 2010), the text crosses the border between the dead and the living. In

2 CEPAL is the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. This commission gathers data on, for example, femicide in Latin America and the Caribbean.

3 "Machismo" can be defined as "male behavior that is strong and forceful, and shows very traditional ideas about how men and women should behave." "Machismo," *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed 3 January 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/machismo.

4 Dating back to the sixteenth century *Chronicles of the Indies*, the Latin American chronicle is a versatile literary form that combines fiction and journalism. For more information on the genre of the (contemporary) Latin American chronicle I recommend Rotker (1992); Idez (2011); Jaramillo Agudelo (2012); Darrigrandi (2013); and Altamar (2019).

this way, the realm of the spectral is introduced, a concept that can be defined as that which "resists the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the living and the dead" and "what is present, and what is absent (what is present and what is past)" (Bevernage 2011, 135). Scholarship on *Dead Girls* has equally criticized and acclaimed the appearance of necrodialogues in *Dead Girls*.[5] Cabral (2016) labels them as untrustworthy and even inappropriate, whereas Bollig defends the personal medium's discourse by stating that the medium "is a popular figure in rural Argentina, who operates less through supernatural powers than by insight and close attention" (2016, par. 10). Interestingly, the legitimacy of esoteric practices is not only debated in scholarship on the chronicle, but is even discussed in the chronicle itself by the narrator, who, at times, is suspicious about esotericism. This raises the question why Almada included these necrodialogues in her chronicle. The issue becomes even more relevant if we take into account that Almada is not the only chronicle author who includes spectral elements in the form of esoteric rituals: in Leila Guerriero's chronicle *Los suicidas del fin del mundo* (2005), Satanism plays an important role and Fernanda Melchor's chronicle *Aquí no es Míami* (2012) displays a young girl who is possessed by the devil.

In *Spectres de Marx* (1993), Jacques Derrida argues that talking *about*, *to*, and *with* "ghosts" (the dead) is a necessary ethical and political act. According to Derrida, the past, and consequentially the dead, cannot be separated from the present, as is the case in Western thought, since the dead of the past can "haunt" the present, an idea expressed in the concept of "hauntology." The notion of an "absolute present" is harmful since such a present "does not want to hear about death" (Bevernage 2011, 144). Avery Gordon defines "haunting" as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known" (2011, 2). In that sense, family members of, for example, the victims of femicide whose cases were never solved, can be haunted by those crimes. Moreover, she points out that haunting produces a state of "something-to-be-done," linking "ghosts" to political change (Gordon 2011, 3). According to Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen (2017, 5), spectrality can be used to shed light on violence imposed on a dominated group or population.

In the case of Argentinian literature, the spectral has been studied mainly in relation to the crimes of the last military dictatorship (1976–1983). In particular, the figure of *el desaparecido* as a spectral entity has been widely analyzed (e.g., Mandolessi [2018]; Reati [2019]). Derrida's (1993) concept of the spectral together with Gabriele Schwab's work on haunting legacies (2010) has played an important

5 The term "necrodialogues" is defined by Zoë Ghyselinck and Elena Fabietti in the introduction to this volume. For more information on the notion, I recommend Ghyselinck (2021).

role in the process of reflecting on how to narrate the unsayable horrors of that military regime. The example of *Dead Girls,* however, shows that the figure of the spectral not only appears in novels on the last military dictatorship but also plays a role in contemporary Latin American chronicles dealing with societal problems such as gender violence.[6] In *Dead Girls*, the necrodialogues seem to have a political role, which can be explained by the insights of hauntology, namely that communication with the dead can influence the present and can open up future possibilities of resistance or political change. However, in Almada's chronicle, the necrodialogues are performed through esoteric practices, specifically through a personal medium. These practices of communicating with the dead through mediums do not coincide with the productive effects of the dead (past) as described by hauntology, since figures such as personal mediums can in fact provide closure for the living and evoke extrarational explanations for the murders, thereby closing off the crimes and relegating the dead to the past. Still, in both cases our fear or desire to get in touch with the other world is at stake.

Moreover, in *Dead Girls*, centered on femicides that took place in the years in which Argentina returned to democracy after a brutal and profoundly patriarchal dictatorship, the question seems to be not so much how to express the unsayable violence, as is the case in literature on the military dictatorship, but rather how writers of the twenty-first century can deconstruct dominant discourses of the State and the mainstream media and stereotypes on the endemic and naturalized gender violence on the continent. This is precisely what the currently thriving genre of the contemporary chronicle tries to do throughout Latin America, including Argentina. In the contemporary chronicle, journalist writings and fiction are combined to create a discourse on social tensions in Latin America that goes against dominant discourse, such as that of the State and the mainstream media that tend to represent gender violence in a sensationalist way or blame the victims (Castillo 2015).

In the following pages, I explore the ways in which the dead girls are summoned in Almada's text and examine the function of necrodialogues in her chronicle. The central argument will be that talking about and *with* the dead girls enables Almada to create an alternative, counterhegemonic discourse on femicide that strengthens her overall denunciation of gender violence. Thereby, Almada reveals the emancipatory potential of the voices of the dead while also recognizing the potentially problematic role of esoteric practices in this context.

6 Other recent examples of the presence of the spectral outside of the context of the chronicle include the fantastic and gothic works of Argentinian authors Mariana Enriquez (b.1973) and Samantha Schweblin (b.1978).

2 A Thin Borderline between Life and Death

In *Dead Girls*, Almada presents her investigation into the femicides of three Argentinian girls: Andrea was stabbed in her bed, María Luisa was raped and strangled, and Sarita was last seen with her boyfriend Dady Olivero. To write her chronicle, Almada interviewed their friends and family, consulted press articles on the femicides, official police reports, and even legal documents. *Dead Girls* simultaneously constitutes the process and result of that intensive research. In the chronicle, the narrator talks about the dead girls, bringing them back to life through her narrative. However, she also talks *with* them through the Señora, a personal medium, thereby producing necrodialogues. Apart from the narrator, the families of the dead girls seem to likewise resort to esoteric practices to find much-needed answers. In what follows, I will first briefly explore how the girls are represented by their families and the narrator. Secondly, I will turn to the staged necrodialogues.

In her chronicle, Almada gives the family members of the girls the opportunity to discuss the crimes and, more importantly, to sketch an image of who the murdered girls were, putting them in the foreground of the story. According to Sara, Sarita's mother, "Sarita was a very good daughter, she was always helping me out" (Almada 2020, 95).[7] Yogui, María Luisa's brother, states that María Luisa "was a real homebody" (74) and Eduardo, Andrea's boyfriend at the time of her murder, says they had "a wonderful relationship" (110). The narrator herself also gives descriptions of the three girls based on testimonies. About Andrea she states: "She was nineteen, blonde, pretty, with blue eyes, she had a boyfriend and was training to be a psychology teacher" (4). She adds that for Andrea her studies were important because she dreamt of leaving her hometown of San José (111). This is not surprising since San José is described as "an ugly, uninspiring place. [. . .] Its high chimneys were always smoking [. . .]" (45). Not only Andrea but also María Luisa and Sarita lived in isolated places that did not offer many economic possibilities. The narrator emphasizes the class divide in Argentina and points out that because of their low socio-economic status, the girls had very little power. In addition, the narrator describes the few photographs that exist of the girls to offer a more detailed image of them: "Under her [María Luisa's] thick fringe, her large, serious eyes look slightly downwards [. . .]." (82)

7 All quotations are from the English translation *Dead Girls* (translated by Annie McDermott) published in 2020 by Charco Press. The English translation contains a new foreword by the author called "Author's Note" (i–iii), written in March 2020, in which she contextualizes the reality of the Argentine inland for an English-speaking audience. I will refer to this translation by putting the page numbers of the quotations in parentheses.

Moreover, the narrator offers insights into the feelings of the girls: "She [María Luisa] was happy because it was her first job [as a maid]" (22). Sometimes, she offers conjectures about the possible feelings of the girls by using conditional structures: "*Maybe* María Luisa and Sarita felt lost in the moments before they died" (18; my emphasis). The narrator even describes how the girls experienced their last days by imagining re-enactments of their last moments: "In the torpor of her room, María Luisa opened her eyes and sat up in bed, ready to go to work [. . .]" (11). Here, a fictional device clearly enters the mainly non-fiction text, which is a key feature of the chronicle (Montes 2014).

Furthermore, throughout the chronicle, the narrator reveals the names and stories of countless other young women who were murdered and often also raped by men. An example is the story of Rosa who was brutally murdered by her ex-boyfriend because she had ended their relationship (Almada 2020, 67). By including these stories, she constructs the image of a society that tolerates violence against women and she stresses that the femicides of Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita are not marginal cases but are part of a larger phenomenon in Argentinian society. In addition, Almada talks about her personal experiences with gender violence, in the preface to the English translation: "As a girl, I sensed that there wasn't really anywhere I was safe" (i). In the chronicle, she includes personal anecdotes, for example how she and her friend were threatened several times by men who thought it was their right to touch them (16–18).[8]

Apart from bringing the girls back to life by talking *about* them in her narrative, the narrator also talks *with* Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita with the help of the Señora. The Señora is a personal medium who facilitates communication between the living and (spirits of) the other side. As a medium, the Señora performs esoteric practices. Bubello (2019, 2) defines esotericism as "a heterogeneous but particular set of cultural currents of the western tradition," which includes magic, alchemy, astrology, occultism, spiritualism, and Gnosticism. All these share the idea that (hidden) correspondences between this world and a world beyond exist, and that contact between these worlds is possible through mediation by practitioners of esotericism, such as personal mediums and tarot readers. In addition, Spiritualists believe that the beyond is populated by the spirits of the dead. In that sense, esotericism is an umbrella term that includes heterogeneous discourses, objects, and practices. Esotericism arrived in South America with the

8 The presence of autobiographical reflections is a distinctive characteristic of the contemporary chronicle. In contrast to traditional journalism and the testimonial genre, the authors of contemporary chronicles choose to make themselves explicitly visible. See Idez (2011).

Conquista in the sixteenth century and changed under the impulse of local beliefs and rituals, creating a syncretic esotericism (Bubello 2010).

The narrator comes into contact with the Señora through her "writer friends" (Almada 2020, 29). Her friends consult the Señora when they have important decisions to make and state that she has "sound judgement" (29). This indicates that the Señora is someone who is respected within the artistic milieu. This idea is confirmed when the narrator states that upon meeting each other, they talk about their "mutual acquaintances" (31). The narrator stresses that she is familiar with spiritual mediums and believes in their magical powers to contact the dead (28). In the context of her investigation, the narrator has several private sessions or séances with the Señora to evoke "three women who are dead" (29), something which the Señora states to be "more common than I think" (29). Moreover, she assures the narrator that it is never too late to establish contact with the "next world" (31), which she describes as "a ball of wool" (31). She adds that it is necessary to be patient and to slowly tug at the end of the thread to untangle the next world where everything is intertwined.[9] These consultations in the present, narrated in the first person, alternate with fragments in the third person on the lives of the murdered girls in the past.

The Señora is described as a slim woman with long, black hair and tattoos who wears miniskirts. The narrator states that although she must be her mother's age, the Señora looks like a young girl (31), which creates an idea of identification with the murdered girls. The room in which the séances take place is depicted as a bright studio with many windows. During the sessions, the Señora takes a seat on her "throne" (31) directly across from the narrator. In between them stands a coffee table with a green cloth on top of it. Inside the cloth, the Señora keeps her tarot cards. During the session, "[s]he peels the cloth back carefully, as if uncovering a sleeping child" (81). The Señora asks the narrator to "cut the deck into three. Then to shuffle each third, moving the cards in a circle, seven times, with my right hand" (81). To establish contact with Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita, "we hold hands over the freshly shuffled deck, saying aloud the name and surname of the girl we want to ask about" (81).[10]

9 The comparison with "wool" and "threads" seems to be a reference to Greek mythology where the Fates Klotho, Lachesis, and Atropos spin yarn and cut the thread of life.

10 Almada includes the Señora as a full-fledged character in her chronicle and extensively describes the conversations that the narrator had through her. When the narrator describes the séances, she dedicates, for example, detailed attention to the décor and the Señora, thereby creating actual "scenes." Here, the text clearly leans towards a fictional narrative. This combination of fictional techniques and journalistic facts is inherent to the genre of the Latin American chronicle.

The borderline between life and death is crossed in several ways during these conversations. On the one hand, the Señora uses the older, technical medium of tarot cards to talk with the girls. The cards indicate that "[n]o one forced María Luisa. She went on that trip [. . .] because she wanted to" and "she's not annoyed" (82–83). Moreover, the cards reveal that "Andrea wanted something different" (84). She did not want to get married and become a teacher but dreamt of leaving her hometown. Through the cards, the girls have the possibility to express their emotions and new information about them is revealed. In this way, Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita become an active part of the narrative on their femicides and are represented as real people with feelings, dreams, and opinions. On the other hand, the narrator indicates that sometimes, "the girls get in ahead of the cards" (81) and take possession of the Señora who then gets into a trancelike state. During a certain session, the Señora suddenly cannot breathe and feels pain "in her neck and then between her legs" (81). She says: "It's María Luisa, strangled and raped" (81). María Luisa transfers her physical pain onto the body of the personal medium. The narrator also has "sensorial" contact with the girls. She "feel[s] the girls" (144) when she holds the hands of the Señora and through her, "they looked at me and I understood" (144).

The only girl who "never speaks" is Sarita (98). Furthermore, "[t]here's never any sign of Sarita in the tarot" (98). The narrator reveals that the body that was initially identified as Sarita's is actually someone else's. Whereas Sarita's sister believes that Sarita is dead, both the Señora and Sarita's mother are convinced she is still alive. The Señora states that she "feels that Sarita is alive" (98) and after having received an anonymous phone call saying that Sarita is in Spain, Sarita's mother thinks she was sold to a human trafficking network (91). Sarita, however, remains missing and therefore literally balances between life and death as a phantom, preventing her family from coming to terms with their loss because they have no body to bury. Here, a link is established with the tragedy of the *desaparecidos* during the military dictatorship. Similarly, Andrea and María Luisa can be described as ghosts because they cross the border between the living and the dead through (the body of) the Señora. All three are spectral in the sense that they exist between the real and the unreal, the alive and the dead, the present and the absent.

Although the Señora is only one of many voices included in the chronicle – polyphony being characteristic of the genre – the legitimacy of her knowledge about the girls is made clear. Not only is she able to provide the same information as the families and the official authorities, "In the tarot cards a lover appears [. . .]. In the case file, too" (85), but she knows more than other, more official sources. For example, she reveals that Andrea's father is not her biological father (93). Moreover, she seems to know more about the murders: "He didn't kill Andrea. He was in love with her [. . .]" (87). Furthermore, she is also capable of filling gaps

regarding the feelings of the teenage girls. Therefore, her knowledge can be considered as an alternative "regimen of truth" (Cabral 2016, 5).

Aside from the narrator, the girls' family members also put their faith in psychics[11] and believe that they will be able to give the bereaved much-needed answers. Yogui, for example, visits a Paraguayan psychic and although he received "divine justice" (Almada 2020, 122) for the murder of his sister, he admits that his family did not learn much from the consultations. Eduardo consults two different psychics. One of them is Danta who is so popular that "[m]any people crossed the [. . .] international bridge [. . .] every day to see" him. (26) The magical discourse does not provide Eduardo with any answers either. It is clear that there is a difference between the Señora, whose discourse is presented as valid knowledge, and the psychics consulted by the family members. From this distinction it follows that, although the esoteric practices performed by the Señora provide valid knowledge on the femicides of the three girls, not all practitioners of esotericism are capable of generating reliable information.

Through the testimonies, descriptions, and the use of fictional techniques, Almada intends to recreate an image of the girls in which they are presented not only as victims of femicide (Elizondo Oviedo 2015, 7), but as real girls who were growing up, who had dreams, and were part of loving families. More importantly, through the necrodialogues, she gives them a voice and the (political) chance to speak, a chance that only a medium can grant. The formal techniques characteristic of the chronicle tie these touching images and voices together into a narrative, intended to make the reader grieve their deaths and reflect on the problem of gender violence. In an interview with the Colombian newspaper *El Espectador*, Almada specifies that she "wanted the reader to have no doubt that the dead were girls made out of flesh and blood, with lives, desires, and dreams of their own" (Castaño Gúzman 2015; my trans.).

3 An Alternative Discourse

In *Dead Girls*, Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita are given the opportunity to become a part of the existing discourse on their killings through the uses of esoteric

11 "Mediums" and "psychics" both practice esotericism. Whereas mediums specifically enable contact between the world of the living and the other world, psychics are characterized by the fact that they "have abilities, esp. involving a knowledge of the future, that cannot be explained by modern science", "psychic", *Cambridge Dictionary*, accessed 8 July 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/psychic#google_vignette.

practices. In Argentina, esoteric beliefs and practices are an important part of the rural culture up to today. They are particularly prevalent in the area bordering Paraguay and Brazil, a region called "Mesopotamia." Bubello (2010) indicates that esotericism is not accepted by the dominant classes, such as the political and economic elite, who consider it to be irrational, nor by Catholicism, which is the official religion in Argentina.

In the chronicle, the narrator recurs to esotericism, and more specifically Spiritualism, which is a non-dominant discourse that is not part of official religion and that is strongly tied to the dominated classes to which the three girls belonged, to learn more about Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita and to let them speak for themselves. Together with the testimonies of the family members, she uses this knowledge linked to the living world of the girls to create a narrative in which the girls are presented as human beings in their own right. This esoteric discourse stands in contrast to the more dominant discourses, such as the media coverage on femicide, that are evoked in *Dead Girls* (Navallo 2020). For example, the narrator explicitly discusses the ways in which the Argentinian mainstream media usually report gender violence. Regarding the media coverage of María Luisa's femicide, the narrator remarks:

> The news of María Luisa Quevedo's murder was covered [. . .] with fantastical flourishes by the local press. [. . .] becoming the number one mystery and horror series of that 1984 Chaco summer. A tale of intrigue, suspicion, red herrings and false testimony, which people followed as if it were a soap opera or a serialised novel. (Almada 2020, 119)

Moreover, Yogui states: "you know how those magazines like morbid shit" (72). The narrator adds that people like morbid things as well, as she describes how "relatives, friends and curious bystanders gathered in Andrea's room, looking at her laid out in bed and covered in blood" (103), because they did not want to "miss the scene people would be talking about for years to come" (106).

Apart from the obvious sensationalism, another critique formulated against the media's discourse on gender violence is the presence of overt sexism.[12] In *Dead Girls*, this sexism and victim blaming is referred to when a journalist writes that María Luisa "wasn't raped, but already had an active sex life" (121). Almada stresses the problem of victim blaming by stating that "[a]ll the responsibility for what happened to us was laid at our feet. [. . .] If you were raped it was always your fault" (ii). Moreover, in her epilogue, the author emphasizes that many femi-

12 A well-known example of this is the article "A Fan of Nightclubs Who Dropped Out of High School" published in 2014 by the Argentinian national newspaper *Clarín*. The article, on the disappearance of a young Argentinian girl, does not focus on the crime but on her behavior, insinuating that she is to blame for what happened to her.

cides do not even receive any attention: "I say at least because these are the names that appeared in the papers, the ones that counted as news" (143).

Furthermore, the narrator notices that in the small provincial towns where the girls grew up, countless sensationalist and sexist rumors circulate about the killings. In Andrea's case, "the most outlandish theories did the rounds in San José. Many people saw the shadowy hand of a cult behind the murder, or of drugs, or prostitution" (128). Cabral (2016) indicates that the rumors discussed in *Dead Girls* not only provide false information and damaging images of the girls but that they can also function as a means of resisting gender violence. Since gender violence is not discussed "loudly" (Almada 2020, 39) in these towns, it is through rumors that women learn the stories of other women who were abused or violated: "After her death, word got around that he'd killed her and covered it up" (38).

Another dominant discourse that is referenced throughout the chronicle is that of the Argentinian authorities, the so-called official discourse, i.e., government statements on the matter. The authorities are characterized as inefficient and corrupt in *Dead Girls*, which makes their discourse untrustworthy. Their inefficiency is shown by the fact that in the case of María Luisa "[n]o one was tried for the murder" (Almada 2020, 4), the murder of Sarita is "[a]nother unresolved case" (4), and the case of Andrea is addressed as an "unpunished murder" (4). The corruption is pointed to by both the narrator: "rumours [. . .] connected the case to [. . .] the sons of politicians and police officers" (48), and Yogui: "these key witnesses [. . .] were bought off" (75). The police are even described as uninterested and sexist, and several reports and testimonies are missing. When María Luisa's family reported her disappearance to the police, they were "being met with the usual response – that they should wait, that she must have gone off with a boyfriend and would be back in no time" (25). The clinical and impersonal discourse in which the victims are completely dehumanized is clear in the forensic reports that are cited several times:

> The skeleton was found at the tip of the island [. . .]. The remains were found lying perpendicular to the course of the river, in a supine position, with the legs facing towards the bank [. . .]. The skeleton presented more damage on the right side than on the left, and the top of the skull more than the lower part. (96)

But what characterizes the official authorities' reactions and their discourse in *Dead Girls* the most, is their overall silence on these brutal crimes against young women, leading to conspicuous impunity and naturalization of the violence.

In *Formas comunes: Animalidad, cultura, biopolítica* (2014), Gabriel Giorgi argues that in contemporary Latin American culture there is a split between lives to protect and lives to abandon. Those who belong to the second category are not

socially or politically recognized and are considered to have "disposable lives" that can be used as commodities, as is the case of prostitutes. Moreover, the killing of a person of that category is not even considered to be a crime (Giorgi 2014, 22). In *Dead Girls*, it becomes clear that Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita, belonging to a low social class and living on the periphery of the Global South, are considered as lives to abandon and therefore become disposable.

Not only were their crimes not properly investigated, but María Luisa's raped and strangled body appeared "on a patch of wasteland on the outskirts of the city" (Almada 2020, 4), which emphasizes her status as disposable object that can be used and dumped. Throughout the chronicle, the narrator mentions other cases of girls whose bodies were found "in the wasteland" (87) and "on the conveyor belt at a waste processor plant" (92). Even before her death, Sarita had to commodify her body by prostituting herself to gain enough money for her family (41). Almada declared in an interview that "less importance is given to the death of a girl from a poor background than of one from a family with means" (Bollig 2016).

This impunity and lack of attention by the official authorities is also the main reason why the family members turn to psychics. Through them, both Yogui and Eduardo hope to receive reassurance, consolation, and answers, which they do not receive through "conventional" channels. The role of esotericism for the family members coincides with what Parker (2015) has described as an important function of popular religion. According to him, it can be a response to a threatening situation or incertitude (30), a way to give meaning to "the great contradiction of life and death" (31). In the chronicle, other popular, esoteric beliefs are depicted, showing that they play an important role in the rural areas of Argentina. Eduardo, for example, spots a jararaca viper and considers this to be a sign of the devil's involvement in Andrea's murder (Almada 2020, 27). Sarita's mother refuses to believe that her daughter is dead because she has "never been able to dream about her" (98).

4 Political Potential of the Voices of the Dead

The contemporary Latin American chronicle is considered to be "political" (Caparrós 2012) because it brings "subaltern actors, events, places and ideas" to the public's attention (Castillo 2015). Chronicle authors want to present another version of events, persons, or objects that do not receive sufficient attention or are represented in a problematic way in other discourses (Castillo 2015). In her chronicle, Almada uses esotericism and the testimonies of the families to offer an

alternative discourse on the murdered girls. She is open to a number of popular beliefs that exist in rural Argentina, where the three girls lived and where she herself grew up, and draws on them to offer a discourse on Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita in which they are recognized as human beings with personal agency, feelings, and imagination. In that discourse, the girls are not the protagonists of a horror series, as in the case of the discourse of the media and the public, nor disposable lives that can be ignored, as in the case of the official discourse. The important role and possible influence of this discourse is emphasized in the following remark by the Señora: "I think we have to find a way of reconstructing how the world saw them. If we can understand how people saw the girls, we'll be able to understand how they saw the world" (Almada 2020, 83). Through the recuperation of a living tradition in the rural communities that has become marginal in contemporary Argentinian society, Almada goes against hegemonic discourse that normalizes gender violence or blames the victims for their own rape and murder and gives the three girls a voice and the possibility to be heard.

This alternative discourse on the girls is in line with the overall message and goal of Almada's chronicle, which is to denaturalize gender violence and expose the problematic culture that makes this violence possible. According to Almada, she wrote *Dead Girls* because "[t]here must be a story of violence against women that is not recorded anywhere because until recently it was naturalized" (Castaño Gúzman 2015; my trans.). From the beginning of the chronicle, through the use of a poem by Susana Thénon, an Argentinian avant-garde poet, she stresses that violence against women is naturalized in the rural areas of Argentina. The narrator exemplifies: "I don't remember a specific conversation about violence against women [. . .]. But the topic was always there" (Almada 2020, 37). Moreover, she emphasizes that femicide is so frequent that when asking a couple about the place where María Luisa was found, they evoke another, more recent, victim of femicide (138). That idea is repeated in the epilogue when Almada indicates that the fact that she is forty and still alive is "purely a matter of luck" (143), also indicating that violence exists in every social class.

In that way, the dead girls become an intrinsic part of Almada's denunciation of gender violence in general. The political use of the girls is mirrored in the actions of their family members who also fight against official hegemonic discourse. Yogui, María Luisa's brother, has turned into a spokesperson for cases of femicides: "[he] is consulted every time there's a similar case [. . .]" (127–128). Yogui indicates that he is "the only one who keeps going with it all" (68), admitting that not all his family members want to be involved in his "mission" for justice for his sister. Likewise, Eduardo has organized various "silent marches" for Andrea in the past and refused to cut his hair until Andrea's murderer was caught (114).

And Sarita's mother "moved heaven and earth to [. . .] exhume Sarita's body" (97) after she discovered DNA testing.

Thus, the spectral ghosts of Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita become an important part of a political movement against gender violence and its impunity in Argentina. They are evoked to ensure justice for their murders and to raise awareness on the cruelty of femicide. The important role of the dead in this movement shows that the dead can constitute a political force in the present and that the present should not close itself to the past. Almada explicitly shows that the past, the decade of the 1980s during which the girls were murdered, is not at all separated from the present in which she wrote her chronicle, as the problem of gender violence still persisted in 2014 and in 2020, the year in which the English translation was published. The link between the past and the present is made explicit by Almada in her epilogue. She stresses that in the month of January 2014 only, no fewer than ten women had been murdered because of their gender in Argentina (143), thereby adding a further sense of urgency to her text.

Moreover, the relation between the past and the present is made explicit by showing how the ghosts of the murdered girls continue to exert a heavy burden of pain on their families. Portraying the families' suffering is also a way of denouncing femicide. When the narrator visits Sara, she describes her as "a woman who's suffered" (93), and Fabiana, Andrea's sister, testifies that her "life was never the same after [her] sister's death." This painful presence also legitimizes the function of the dead from the past in the present; in reality they were never in the past, because they always remained present in the lives of their families. The families actively keep the girls alive through photography. The importance of photos and their sentimental value is repeated on various occasions. Upon their first meeting, Yogui immediately shows the narrator the only picture he has of his sister (98), and also in Sara's house, the narrator notices "the photo [. . .] at the head of the bed [. . .]. It must be Sarita" (94). In contrast to the Señora, who uses an older medium of tarot to contact the girls, the families remember the girls through the technical medium of photography. Sarita is physically absent in the tarot cards but will forever be remembered by her mother through her photograph above her bed.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that Almada is well aware that the esoteric practices the narrator uses to talk with the girls do not always contribute to a counterhegemonic discourse and are therefore a somewhat ambiguous emancipatory tool. Not only are the psychics not always capable of helping the family members, but Almada shows that esoteric discourse can even oppose the message that she wants to bring with her chronicle (Amado 2019). An example is the anecdote told by the narrator about "the Satyr." When she was a child, she was told

that it was a magical creature called "the Satyr" who raped girls in dark allies pointing out that "[t]hey never told us you could be raped by your husband, your dad, your brother [. . .]. A man you trusted completely" (Almada 2020, 38). In this case, the magical discourse is collectively used to conceal men's responsibility in gender violence. According to the narrator, the same mechanism applies to the esoteric explanation that is evoked in the case of Andrea's murder: "Soon people were talking about cults, satanic rituals, witchcraft" (46). By insinuating that Andrea's murder was ritualistic, the crime is relegated to the personal sphere and thereby risks losing its political potential. However, Almada wants to show that the private reality of the dead girls cannot be separated from the larger social reality in Argentina. The same risk exists for Yogui, who received divine justice and could therefore be inclined to end his fight for conventional justice. However, the narrator underlines that Yogui is still occupied with his sister's murder. In that sense, Almada shows that even though esoteric practices enable the girls to recover a voice and a more complete identity, these practices also present risks and can even oppose her message by deflecting the attention from the actual culprits.

At times, the narrator herself seems to depoliticize the role of the dead in the present and the future, thereby including a broader dimension of mourning and grief in the chronicle. The three dead girls do not come back to haunt those who are responsible for their deaths as macabre phantoms, as is often the case in the gothic tradition, but are represented as innocent and harmless figures. Moreover, the narrator indicates that contact with the dead can be healing: "a kind of reconciliation" (136). The cemetery, the quintessential place of the tension between life and death, is even represented as a friendly place: the narrator sees two laughing girls while visiting Andrea's tomb (140). She also remembers that as a child she loved going to the cemetery to visit the dead: "On sunny afternoons [. . .] with bags of chrysanthemums [. . .]" (135).

She even seems to argue explicitly in favor of a protective border between the dead and the living, the past and the present, an idea that goes directly against the overall message of the chronicle. When the narrator leaves the cemetery, thereby crossing "the gates" (141), she says that "when you're leaving a cemetery, you should never [. . .] look back." (141), a reference to the myth of Orpheus. In this context, the "gates" of the cemetery can be interpreted as the "threshold" between the world of the living and that of the dead. The Señora also stresses the importance of this border: "She told me it's time to let go, that it's not good to spend too long drifting from one side to the other, from life into death. That now the girls have to go back to where they belong" (144). At the end, she lights three white candles in remembrance of the young girls: "My farewell to the girls" (144).

These passages, standing in contrast with Almada's overall goal to intervene in society, seem to soften the openly polemical nature of the chronicle, but should rather be seen as a way of negotiating between the two sides of the debate: on the one hand turning the page to find peace with the past and move on, and on the other remembering the past in order to keep the struggle for justice alive. Honoring different choices is also Almada's intention when lending voice to family members who chose not to remember what happened and not to continue the fight for justice: Andrea's sister says, "I can't keep remembering because what happened that night destroys me [. . .]" (129). This debate is explicitly significant in the case of the transition after extreme State-sponsored violence, such as the violence that took place during the military dictatorship in Argentina (Bevernage 2011). In that context, a dilemma arises: do we "let go" or do we continue to fight for justice?

If on the one hand the narrator declares "I began to let go" (Almada 2020, 144), Almada also keeps stressing the importance of remembering these girls throughout her chronicle, stating at some point that "forgetting is another way of killing them" (Venegas 2016). By talking about and *with* them in *Dead Girls*, she draws the spectral girls into the present and refuses to leave them in the past as absent or distant cases. Almada immortalizes their story and voices by including them in her chronicle through necrodialogues. Every reader of *Dead Girls* will not only remember the girls but will also bring them back to life, even if only in their imagination. This idea is made explicit in the dedication of the chronicle: "In memory of Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita." In that context, it is worth mentioning the afterlife of the book. Originally written in Spanish, *Chicas muertas* has already been translated into English, French, and Dutch, and a TV series of seven episodes based on the chronicle is currently being made by Murillo Cine: the voices of Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita will thus reach an even broader audience (De Pablos 2019).

During one of their private sessions, the Señora tells the narrator about "Bone Woman," a half-woman/half-animal creature (Almada 2020, 31). The task of this magical figure consists of "gathering bones" (31) to protect "everything that's in danger of being lost" (31). After collecting the bones, she creates the skeleton of a wolf and by singing to it, she brings it to life. The wolf starts running and "turns into a woman who runs, free and unfettered, into the horizon" (32). The Señora adds: "Maybe this is your mission: to gather the bones of these girls, piece them together, give them a voice and then let them run, free and unfettered, wherever they have to go" (31).

5 Conclusion

From the beginning of the story, the narrator, who coincides with Almada, talks about Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita not only to evoke their brutal killings but also to show their personalities through the testimonies of their families. She links their stories to those of other murdered girls as well as to her own experiences and thus creates a narrative about the situation of women in Argentina's rural areas. At the same time, with the help of narrative techniques, she manages to present the girls as more than victims by giving them a voice, a face, an internal world, and aspirations. By representing mediums and psychics who destabilize the borders between the dead and the living, she also communicates *with* them and literally gives Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita the opportunity to tell their side of the story. Through the Señora, the dead girls cross the border between this world and the next and become spectral figures that are neither real nor unreal, dead nor living, present nor absent.

The discourse created through the conversations *about* and *with* the dead presents an alternative to the existing discourses on femicide present in *Dead Girls* such as the sensationalist discourse of the mainstream media and the disinterested discourse of the authorities. In that way, Almada's chronicle confirms the idea that contemporary chronicle authors do not just try to narrate violence but they rather create an alternative representation of reality that differs from the dominant one in society. This alternative perspective on the femicides of Andrea, María Luisa, and Sarita functions as a means to denounce the naturalization of violence against women in Argentina. Ultimately, Almada does not let the girls rest in peace, an option she discusses in her chronicle; on the contrary: she mobilizes them in the contemporary struggle against gender violence in Argentina, where in 2020 another 251 women were killed because of their gender (Oficina de la Mujer). Even though Almada looks with some skepticism at the use of esoteric practices, the necrodialogues produced by the Señora enable Almada to formulate a counterhegemonic narrative on gender violence as well as recover and restore the lost voices of the victims of femicide. The voices of the dead, haunting the present, acquire the political force to change it.

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About the Authors

Elena FABIETTI is a scholar of Comparative Literature currently teaching and conducting research at the University of Regensburg, Germany. She earned a PhD from the University of Siena, Italy and another one from the Johns Hopkins University, USA (2017). She has written a book on the semiotics of poetic images in Baudelaire and Rilke (Nerosubianco, 2015) and one on the cultural and literary history of transparent humans, entitled *Glass Bodies* (Stanford University Press, forthcoming). She has published extensively in journals and edited volumes on early Modern and Modern European authors at the intersection of literature and various forms and practices of knowledge, with a special focus on notions of corporeality produced at the crossroads of different discourses. Her current research focuses on practices of embodied writing within European Occultism.

Zoë GHYSELINCK, trained in classical philology, is a visiting professor of German and Comparative Literature as well as the coordinator of the Consortium for Health Humanities, Arts, Reading and Medicine (CHARM) at Ghent University in Belgium. She obtained her PhD from Ghent University with a dissertation on the reception of the tragic and ancient tragedy in early twentieth-century German literature (De Gruyter, 2015). Her second monograph (Routledge, forthcoming) explores the literary imagination of communicating with the dead from the late nineteenth century to the present day, focusing on its entanglement with the development of media technologies. Her publications cover receptions of antiquity in twentieth- and twenty-first-century German, French, and Dutch literature, cognitive narratology, and religion and spirituality in the context of Medical and Health Humanities. In her current research, she examines how literature can deepen our understanding of contemporary narrative legacy practices in end-of-life and bereavement care.

Nicholas DE SUTTER is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Latin Literature at KU Leuven, Belgium. He studied Latin and English Literature as well as Law at the same university, where, in 2023, he defended his FWO-funded doctoral dissertation titled “Modern Times in Classical Guise. A Study of the Reception of Modernity in the Neo-Latin Poetry of the Long Nineteenth Century (ca. 1821–1921)”. His research interests focus on modern Neo-Latin poetry on the one hand, and early modern Neo-Latin theatre on the other. Supported by funding from both KU Leuven’s Research Council and the FWO, he is currently conducting a postdoctoral project on the manuscript legacy of Latin school drama from the Southern Low Countries (sixteenth-eighteenth centuries).

Luisa DREWS is a research assistant at the Department of German Literature at Humboldt University Berlin, Germany. In her dissertation, she examines the various searches and problem descriptions of the German-language post-war radio play on its way to becoming an independent art form in sound and text. Her further research interests include the history and theory of media and the senses, the relationship between music and literature, and temporalities in seventeenth-century Trauerspiel. She is co-editor of a volume of Friedrich Kittler’s early writings (together with Eva Horn, 2021) and of a special issue on literature as medium in Kittler’s methodology (together with Burkhardt Wolf, 2025). Among her publications are an extensive review of the methods, concepts, and research questions surrounding audiobooks (IASL 49/2024) and, together with Patrick Hohlweck and Stefan Willer, an essay on spatiotemporal manifestations of the future in various genres of German-language literature (Daphnis 51/2023).

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Ralf SIMON studied German Literature and Philosophy in Bonn, Germany. He wrote his dissertation in 1989, entitled *Einführung in die strukturalistische Poetik des mittelalterlichen Romans* (1990), and his habilitation in 1996, entitled *Das Gedächtnis der Interpretation. Gedächtnistheorie als Fundament für Hermeneutik, Ästhetik und Interpretation bei Johann Gottfried Herder* (1998). He published several books, such as *Der poetische Text als Bildkritik* (2009), *Die Bildlichkeit des lyrischen Textes. Studien zu Hölderlin, Brentano, Eichendorff, Heine, Mörike, George und Rilke* (2011), *Die Idee der Prosa. Zur Ästhetikgeschichte von Baumgarten bis Hegel mit einem Schwerpunkt bei Jean Paul* (2013), and *Grundlagen einer Theorie der Prosa. Überlegungen zur basalen Selbstreferentialität der Dichtung nach Roman Jakobson* (2022). His other publications include anthologies and essays on German literature from the eighteenth century to the present, with a particular focus on Jean Paul, Arno Schmidt, Herder, Romanticism and Realism. His research focuses on structuralism, image theory, theory of prose and philosophical aesthetics.

Michael LORPER is research assistant and doctoral student at the Graduate School of Language and Literature of the Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, Germany. His research interest focuses on twentieth century literature in connection with anthropology, media studies and gender studies. After working mostly on Elias Canetti and Klaus Theweleit during his Master studies in Regensburg, his current PhD project puts the latter center stage and focuses on the analysis and depiction of male violence in the works of Theweleit. In 2024, his first article, entitled "Jagdmeuten, Fluchtverwandlungen, Trinkerhalluzinationen: Anthropologie und Psychopathologie in Elias Canettis literarischer Kulturkritik," was published in *Recherches Germaniques*. Between September 2024 and January 2025, he was granted a research stay at New York University.

Anne KALVIG is a historian of religions specializing in new forms of religion ("alternative spirituality") and the relations between religion and culture, media, bodily practices, and gender. In 2016 she published her study *The Rise of Contemporary Spiritualism: Concepts and controversies in talking to the dead*, which combined field work and cultural analytical perspectives. Her many other publications explore various dimensions of folk religion and popular culture, at the intersection of the spiritual and the material. She has been engaged in the Norwegian women's movement as a women's rights advocate. She was a professor of religion at the University of Stavanger, Norway, until 2023. She is now working as a gardener.

Claudia MATTALUCCI is an associate professor of Cultural Anthropology in the Department of Human Sciences for Education at the University of Milan-Bicocca, Italy. She has conducted research in Tanzania, Turkey, and Italy. Her research interests include kinship and gender, reproduction, death, historical anthropology, and missionary writings. She has edited with Roberta Raffaetà *Generare al confine tra la vita e la morte. Aborto e morte perinatale in una prospettiva interdisciplinare* (Angeli, 2020), with Corinna S. Guerzoni *Reproductive Governance and Body Materiality* (Emerald, 2022), with Alessandra Brivio *La materia per pensare la morte* (Libreria Cortina, 2022) and with Simonetta Grilli the Special Issues "Parentele del terzo millennio" (Rivista di Antropologia Contemporanea 2022, III, 2) and "Relazionalità contemporanee tra normatività e trasgressione" (Antropologia 2024, XI, 2).

Adam J. POWELL is an assistant professor of Medical Humanities in the Department of Theology & Religion at Durham University in the UK. He is the author of *Irenaeus, Joseph Smith, and God-Making Heresy* (Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2015) and *Hans Mol and the Sociology of Religion* (Routledge,2017), co-editor of *The Routledge Handbook of Spirituality, Religion, and Medical Humanities* as well as author of several articles on anomalous spiritual experiences, social conflict, and minority religious communities. Powell is the founder and current chair of Religion, Health, and Humanities

Researchers (RHHR), a global network for scholars of religion and spirituality working in medical and health humanities. His research into those who hear supernatural voices has been featured in *Slate*, *Forbes*, *BBC Science Focus*, and news outlets in over 30 countries.

Eva VAN HOEY is a doctoral researcher at Ghent University, Belgium, where she specializes in contemporary Latin American literature. She holds a Master's degree in Comparative Literature from Ghent University and another in Literary Studies from the Catholic University of Leuven. Her research focuses on how contemporary Argentine and Mexican writers use the genre of the Latin American chronicle to document and denounce gender-based violence. She has published in edited volumes, such as *Carto(corpo)grafías: Nuevo reparto de las voces en la narrativa de autoras latinoamericanas del siglo XXI* (Iberoamericana Vervuert, 2024), and in peer-reviewed journals such as *Confluencia*. She has been a visiting researcher in Spain, the Netherlands, and Argentina.

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