Ruins of the Future: On Mourning and Memory in Hans van Houwelingen's Sluipweg
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'Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament.'
- Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement' (1979)

In the opening chapter of his 1861 novel *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens conjures a scene of memorial inscription and interpretation that has paradoxical consequences for the narrative that is about to unfold and, if we pause to reflect on its complexity, for the manner in which we understand the category of the monument in general. The novel's young narrator and protagonist, Pip, finds himself alone on the coastal marshes near his home in the southeastern county of Kent, contemplating the graves of his parents, whom he has never known, and of his five brothers who died in infancy. The first thing we know about Pip is that he suffers from a certain ambiguity regarding his own name and therefore identity: he is called Philip Pirrip, but cannot yet pronounce the name and so contracts it to 'Pip'.

But Pip's immediate predicament is not only linguistic, or rather it is a problem regarding the conjunction of language and memorial things. The seven graves with their seven names — the brothers Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias and Roger; his mother Georgiana and father, also Philip — that he discovers in a small country churchyard connect the child to a past that he can never recover, but also to a landscape that is both homely and bleak: as a child, he knows only vaguely that 'the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dikes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing was the sea.' Pip finds himself dispersed among material reminders of the dead and within or across a territory that is only partly known, haunted by maritime and military histories, alive with danger and possibility.

This sense of an individual identity both grounded in place and history and at the same time uneasily conjoined with the dead is a recurring theme in the literature of the nineteenth century. The poet William Wordsworth had already described such a scene at the end of the previous century in his 1798 poem 'We are Seven', recounting a conversation with a child for whom there is no distinction between her living siblings and those buried in the nearby churchyard, 'Twelve steps or more from my mother's door.' But the more elaborate formulation of the temporal paradox of the monument to the dead comes in the first of Wordsworth's three 'Essays Upon Epitaphs' of 1810. Here, the poet reflects upon the proper rhetorical register of the text inscribed upon a monument to a dead individual and reaches, perhaps despite himself, a somewhat paradoxical or anachronous conclusion.

Initially, the rhetorical or poetic stakes of the epitaph are clear: it ought to give as accurate and affecting an idea of the dead person as possible. The proper formal qualities of the epitaph, writes Wordsworth, 'will be found to lie in a due proportion of the common or universal feeling of humanity to sensations excited by a distinct and clear conception, conveyed to the reader's mind, of the individual, whose death is deplored and whose memory is to be preserved; at least of his character as, after death, it appeared to those who loved him and lament his loss. The general sympathy ought to be quickened, provoked, and diversified, by particular thoughts, actions, images, — circumstances of age, occupation, manner of life, prosperity which the deceased had known, or adversity to which he had been subject; and these ought to be bound together and solemnised into one harmony by the general sympathy.' But this balance or mean between biographical truth and an appeal to the

melancholy sentiments of the survivors is not merely hard to attain; it is also, Wordsworth is forced to admit, a type of fiction. Anecdotes and instances from the life must be chosen with care, and others left out; certain effects must be heightened and mundane histories played down. All of this has an effect precisely upon the status of the name of the deceased as it appears on the inscription; such a proper name becomes the designator of a fictional character, a presence that hovers somewhere between the person who no longer exists and the sentiments or memories attached to that person. This is especially the case when the inscribed text speaks as if in the voice of the deceased, thus summoning a being suspended between life and death, a ghost who addresses us from beyond the grave and troublingly blurs the distinction between life and death that the epitaph and the monument seem at first so solidly to insist upon. The dead person becomes a 'tender fiction', a 'shadowy interposition [which] harmoniously unites the two worlds of the living and the dead'.

This is also, of course, in one sense the precise function of the monument: to populate the present with material reminders or remnants of the dead, to make death present and indeed immortal. (That is to say, the individual lives on to the extent that he or she is remembered, but the record of his or her death lives on too; death in this sense becomes its own epitaph.) But the dual function of the monument remains — the requirement that it commemorate both the specificity of those who have died and the general sense of loss, and appeal to Death rather than the individual lives of the dead. No memorial better exemplifies and embodies this ambiguity than the monument erected to those lost in war. In his book The Missing of the Somme, a detailed but subjective account of the cultural memories that attach to World War I, the English novelist and critic Geoff Dyer recounts the history of the Cenotaph (in Greek literally an empty tomb) and in particular the structure erected — temporarily in wood at first, to a design by Sir Edwin Lutyens, later in an identical version made of Portland stone — in central London to honour the dead of 1914-1918. In the week following the monument's unveiling on 11 November 1919, over a million people passed by to view it and pay their respects: the living, as Dyer puts it, standing in for the invisible dead, whose names soon appeared on smaller monuments in towns and villages across Britain. The very scale of the loss that such monuments recorded became, according to Dyer, a kind of comfort: 'The pain of mothers, wives and fathers was subsumed in a list of names whose sheer scale was numbing. In the course of the war the casualties had been played down. Then, realising that grief could be rendered more manageable if simultaneously divided and shared by a million, the scale of sacrifice was emphasized. Publicising the scale of the loss was the best way to make it bearable.' These monuments to the absent dead seem then to serve a dual purpose: to remind the living of the real, individual lives that have been lost, and to expand personal grief into a shared public response, even to turn emotion into sentiment: a feeling that can be generalized to the extent that it risks becoming meaningless.

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It is into this perplex of conflicting meanings, memories and emotions that Hans van Houwelingen's *Sluipweg* project insinuates itself, albeit from a very different set of historical perspectives. There is first of all the specific insertion of a series of displaced gravestones into the landscape: objects that immediately recall the marshland churchyard described by Dickens, with its relics devoted to individuals who hover between death and life, determining the future of the protagonist even as they recede from historical view. In *Great Expectations*, Pip's first lesson in self-invention comes with the effort to 'invent' his own lost family, to put fictional flesh on their bones. To walk the path erected by Van Houwelingen is to engage in a kind of fictionalisation; one inevitably constructs narratives for each of the names on which one walks, or conjures from the whole cohort of the dead a collective loss such as Dyer describes in the monuments to the war dead; but more than this, the artefacts seem to constitute a collective or cohort of the dead, as if they have all expired at the same instant and in the same nameless catastrophe. In one sense, the pathway effects a kind of historical flattening or 'platitude', turning historical specificity into a generalized idea of Death, such as Wordsworth argues is an essential component of the monument's address to the living. But the pathway, encircling in part the fortress at its centre, describes competing temporal journeys, both into and away from the past. The monument and its attendant inscription, instituted to ensure a particular act of memory, becomes part of a portrait of Memory as such.

In this respect, the memorial or monument comes to resemble a category with which historically it has frequently coincided: the ruin. The aesthetic of ruination, fragmentation and decay that was central to and even dominate the art and literature of the Romantic period in Europe was only ever in part predicated on the recollection of specific instances of destruction or collapse. It was a source of inspiration, of a veritable 'ruin lust', precisely also to the extent that it broached a much broader perception of the inevitability of decay, whether environmental, societal or as a result of the depredations or war. Ruins symbolized the hubris of civilisation or of humanity in the broadest sense. But they were not only structures or sites that pointed towards past examples of such doomed overreaching; the ruin is oriented as much to the future as the past, conjuring both potential catastrophe and the lineaments of a future that might have been. If the monument, as both Dickens and Wordsworth knew, invited the viewer to invent a fictional life both for the remembered individual and for his or her own uncertain subjectivity, so too the ruin is an invitation to consider what might have been.

Nowhere is this more obvious than the case of structures and apparatuses that have outlived their original purpose, as is dramatically the case with the system of fortifications and conduits that the artist asks us to consider as we walk his memorial pathway. Built between 1881 and 1914, these monuments to a type of land-based warfare that was about to become extinct are classic instances of a temporal paradox that has exercised many artists in recent decades: the temporal predicament of the future anterior, or of what will have been, in the absence of actual subsequent technological advancement (if that is the correct word for the institution of aerial bombardment and invasion). These structures, swiftly made obsolete with the advent of military air power, point both to a past that now appears less destructive, and to the future catastrophe that overcame their historical moment. But they ask us also to imagine a future that did not occur, a future in which portions of the landscape were to be flooded so as to avert military attack. (In this sense Van Houwelingen's work reminds us, for example, of Tacita Dean's 1999 film *Sound Mirrors*, a portrait of the acoustic early-warning system built on the south-east coast by the British army in the 1930s and very quickly rendered obsolete by the invention of radar in the early years of the Second World War.) Like the monuments that now partially surround them, they cast us back into the historical past and at the same time summon a fictional or semi-fictional future, equally as destructive as the century in which they became obsolete. In this, they accord with an observation of W.G. Sebald's, or rather of the narrator of his last novel, *Austerlitz* (2001), who at the outset of the narrative has been contemplating the ruins of a massive fort (used by the Nazis as a transit camp to Auschwitz during the Second World War) and now reflects more generally: 'At the most we gaze at it in wonder, a kind of wonder which in itself is a form of dawning horror, for somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins.'

Sluipweg exists then at the intersection of this ruinous time-scale — a convoluted timeframe in which a structure that casts us into the past is at the same time an opening onto a potentially catastrophic future — and the specific arc or narrative contrived out of the remnants of certain real deaths. The material monument here becomes oddly dematerialized, because the gravestones in question have been removed from their original sites as new interments replace the old. The work thus takes advantage of a paradox regarding the status of the dead, whose burial and accompanying memorial may be seen as curiously temporary, subject to revision and reinterpretation. If as Wordsworth argues the memorial is intended to ensure the persistence (however ghostly) of the dead in the present, in this case that presence may be suspended or its traces removed and redeployed elsewhere. (This is not of course to say that death is here simply forgotten, rather perhaps that it enters the state of generality of which Wordsworth writes.)

To return to the epigraph from Paul de Man with which this essay began, death is here construed as a linguistic predicament of sorts, its meaning, and the meaning of the memorial texts that accompany it,

curiously fluid and mobile. Van Houwelingen sets in motion exactly the aspect of death — its persistence in the memory of those left behind — tha t one imagines to be the only truly permanent remnant of the deceased individual, which is seen to depend upon inscription itself, that is on language as such. What then to conclude of the construction of a pathway around the fort out of such solid but wavering and immaterial texts? The effect is to cast the structure (itself a type of monument) and the landscape, into the future, to suggest that their temporal reference today is not merely to the past or to a single alternative history that was cut short by technological progress, but to a realm of possibility or potential, of reactivating or reinventing the past, that is opened up by every instance of monument-making.