SPEAKING TO THE DEAD
HISTORICITY AND THE ANCESTRAL
HANS RUIN

...allow the claim of the dead...
*Teiresias to Chreon, in Sophocles' Antigone*

**Introduction**

After Odysseus is washed ashore in the land of the Faiaecans, he is treated with a feast by the king Alkinoos. During this party, he is asked to recount the story of his adventures. He speaks for several hours about the remarkable and terrible things he has experienced. When he wants to stop, the king begs him to continue. Odysseus then responds that there is a time for storytelling, for *mythos*, but also a time for sleep, for *hypnos*. Yet Alkinoos insists, and the story goes on through the night, with tales from the Trojan War, of its heroes and of their dismal fates. At one point during this feast the king asks the bard Demodocus to sing the stories from the great war which by then have already become folk mythology. In the presence of one of the protagonists who actually experienced it, the story of these dramatic events is thus recounted in poetic form within the framework of the literary narrative itself.

In one of her essays in the collection *Between Past and Future*, Hannah Arendt pointed to this particular scene as the beginning of history, where myth and historical facticity meet in the image of the bard and the factual hero. Toward the end of this essay I will return to the same passages from the *Odyssey*, but in order to make a somewhat different point. I will argue that we do indeed encounter an original sense of the historical in the Homeric epic, but not primarily in the contrast between the actual hero and the mythical account of his journey, but instead in the account of his journey to the land of the dead, of which he gives a powerful and moving account during the same night-long banquet at the court of Alkinoos. In short, my thesis will be that it is in the report from the land of the dead, enabled by a sacrificial passage across this threshold, that we can find an early model for the very *ethos* of historical narrative and also of historical consciousness in early Greek literature. In order to reach this point, I will move along a trajectory that brings together Patočka's
remarks on being-with-the-dead with Heidegger’s theory of historicity with the problem of the spectral in Derrida. I will then discuss how the claim of the dead is actualized in Hegel’s reading of Antigone, and from there move to the general problem of burial practices and rituals as a way to understand the emergence of historical consciousness and the writing of history. Finally, I return again to Homer as an original articulation of this simultaneous communication with and separation from the dead in relation to Nietzsche and de Certeau.2

I

The task uniting us in this thematic issue is to activate resources from phenomenology to try again to think history, to think the phenomenon history. But is there such a phenomenon? Is there History, as a something that we can explore in terms of how it is meant, given and constituted for an experiencing subject? Is not this purported phenomenon, or that which is recognized under its name, already from the start multifaceted and dispersed? The Greeks did not have a specific word for it. Greek historia, as is well known, means “inquiry”, from the verb historeo, to inquire or examine, but also to give an account. It has also been traced by philologians back to the word istor as the agent of an archaic perfective form of having seen, oida, designating “the one who knows from having seen or learned”. In the Iliad, in the few places where the histor is mentioned, it is as a knowledgeable and authoritative person, translated as the “judge” or “arbiter” (e.g., 18:501). In some cases the histor can also designate a “witness”, which in later Attic Greek is the martus.3 If we try to create a tentative definition of the historian on the basis of these etymological sources it could be: “an inquiring witness who recounts what has been seen”.

This is also more or less how the term appears in the writings of Herodotus, in the first instance of a genre of writing that from that moment onward is recognized as “history”. The historian is here an inquirer into that which has taken place, in order “to preserve from decay the remembrance of what men have done”, as it is stated in the opening passages of his Historia.4 Its object is not an entity, not history or the past as such, but precisely the deeds of men, and with the purpose of preventing them from disappearing into oblivion. It is only later that the term “history” also becomes a name for the object of this inquiring narration, and ultimately as equivalent to the totality of past events.

This same inherent ambiguity of the term “history” (Geschichte), is addressed by Heidegger, in §73 of Sein und Zeit, where he turns toward the gen-