The Sluipweg and the History of Death
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Before the nineteenth century, people in Europe were buried in church plots if they could afford it, otherwise, they were consigned to pauper's graves or charnel houses. Napoleon, in his effort to exalt the idealism of the empire and garner support among the military changed the rules. His 1804 Imperial Decree on Burials ordered that each person should be buried separately. A coffin was mandatory, and everyone had the right to erect a tombstone over a loved one's grave. If a soldier fought for the nation, the nation would provide for the burial and cemetery plot free of charge. Death was in essence democratized and secularized; it was also ennobled. Soldiers were seen as heroes, and their caskets were draped with the national flag. Père Lachaise, a garden necropolis in the hilly suburbs of Paris that was laid out in the same year as the decree, was the prototype of the new cemetery design. It was envisioned as an Elysian Field, the mythological resting place of heroes and the virtuous. Trees which were once frowned upon in cemeteries as they were thought to restrict the circulation of air were now introduced to serve 'as a somber and religious veil' over the grounds.[1] Tombstones were no longer decorated with skull and bones indicating the immanent and perhaps not all too pleasant day of reckoning, as had been the case for centuries, but adorned with smiling angels. By 1825, guidebooks published maps with itineraries that pointed out the cemetery's architectural features and the tombs of illustrious personages.[2] On Sunday afternoons, families would stretch out a blanket for a picnic. The following lines, found penciled on the cemetery's terrace wall in 1813, convey the sentiment.

> At this peaceful site, amid trees and flowers,
> Sorrows and laments come to cry their tears:
> Here they can find a sympathetic shade:
> Death hides from their eyes its hideous scythe.
> As it spreads its subjects throughout a vast garden:
> For the home of the dead has become a new Eden.3

But there was a Faustian deal. Graves were to last only five years unless the plot was bought by the relatives of the deceased. In other words, the body that began its journey to the hereafter as a part of the public sphere was thrust back into private hands. And worse yet, if no family members showed up to claim the body, it and its grave were unceremoniously made to disappear. With the stroke of a clock the body changed from a glorious metaphysical proposition evoking the grandeur of civic participation to a dusty burden. All this meant that there were two deaths; the first one guaranteed a mixture of public acclaim and heavenly bliss; the second one - five years later - promised, or at least threatened, total obscurity. Eternal dignity, as it turned out, was a short-lived affair.

First at Père Lachaise then in places across Europe, the dual - and one should say bizarre - nature of modern death slowly came into shape with its strongest legacy today in Germany, France, Sweden and Holland. In Germany, plots are usually rented for twenty, sometimes thirty years, with the possibility of an extension. In the Netherlands, the dead are usually buried for ten years and after that the family has to prolong the rental agreement for the plot if they want it to be preserved. In both countries when that period expires, if the rent is not forthcoming, a backhoe is brought in, the remains removed and the process starts over again for a new body.

Hans van Houwelingen's Sluipweg - a path made up of tombstones laid flat on the ground - is a poignant critique of this cultural phenomenon. The full title of the construction is Sluipweg, waarlangs de dood heeft weten te ontsnappen which translates into something like: 'A Secret path, along which death made its escape.' I will try to unravel the meaning of this enigmatic phrase showing that we have to understand Sluipweg as a puzzle created out an exchange between old and the new epistemological regimes. What it represents can be summarized best as a post-metaphysical practice

of commemoration that challenges the lingering tendency to put death in the pretend landscape of a garden cemetery.

On the surface of things, the projects seems very much like a repeat of the Elysian cemeteries of old, since it is located along the top of an embankment inside a fort that is about thirteen kilometers to the west of Amsterdam and that belongs to the Defense Line of Amsterdam. There are here, however, no bodies. Those have long since disappeared back in the public cemeteries. Most of the tombstones that make up the path were donated by individuals to whom the stones were returned after their relatives' graves had been removed from the cemetery. This reuse was made possible because of a recent Dutch law that made it clear that tombstones were the property of those who commissioned them, meaning that family members could do whatever they wanted with them.[4] In essence, Van Houwelingen's project saves these stones and returns them to the public domain. The body may not have found its final resting place, but its tombstone has, laid flat on the ground as a semiotic reference to the absent body. By laying the stones flat on the ground, Van Houwelingen decommissioned the stones as grave-markers. Thus even though the site is park-like, and a military ground to boot, the re-enactment of death is not associated with sorry and personal grief. There are no tears.

Van Houwelingen's project is, therefore, much more than just a salvage operation. The peculiarities of the site play a critical role in its design. The Defense Line, which extends 135 km around the city and consists of a series of dykes, canals, and forts, and which was initiated by King William I in 1815 to defend Holland against invasion, became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1996. It was found to have what UNESCO calls 'outstanding universal value,'[5] which means that it has, according to the official definition of that term, a 'cultural and/or natural significance which is so exceptional as to transcend national boundaries and to be of common importance for present and future generations of all humanity.'[6]

Lurking behind this statement is the destruction during World War II of cathedrals, palaces and monuments, the shock of which produced a movement that, beginning in the 1950s, culminated in the 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage which established the idea of 'outstanding universal value'. One by one, monuments came to be added to what is now called the World Heritage List. Over nine hundred monuments are currently on the list, monuments that have a protective bubble around them that all parties to the United Nations are expected to respect. In a world of fractured political, national, and religious identities, these sites, in theory at least, represent the only places where the universal ideal of 'humanity' - such as it is - can still be championed. World Heritage Sites are islands of permanence, both physically and legally.

Placing the Sluipweg within this political, temporal environment is the first step to understanding the inner logic of Van Houwelingen's project. The ultimate impermanence of modern death - defined by a state-imposed boundedness - is here seemingly rectified. What the modern cemetery promised but would not deliver, namely eternal rest, is finally being provided for. It is a complex form of eternal rest, for death has been placed within the realm of the concept of humanity that is just as abstract, placeless, and vacuous as it supposedly permanent.

Again there was a quid pro quo. The tombstones, in order to be embraced by UNESCO's alternate metaphysics, are stripped of their memorial status. They are no longer 'monuments' but alienated memories of a disembodied reality. The fact that one is supposed to walk on the stones reinforces this condition and indeed the more people traverse the path the more the wear on the surface will erase the names etched in the stones, leaving only the most ghostly of traces. The final condition is when the physical residue of memory is fully dematerialized. The slow erasure of memory stands in contrast to the brutal punctuation of time when the stones were cast off as just so much excess baggage.

The irony lies in the fact that by the time the fortifications came to be completed, they had become obsolete and were in fact never used militarily. This point was lost on the UNESCO committee who celebrated the defenses as an example of the 'Dutch genius' for hydraulic engineering. "The site is of outstanding universal value as it is an exceptional example of an extensive integrated defense system of the modern period which has survived intact and well conserved since it was created in the later

nineteenth century. It is also notable for the unique way in which the Dutch genius for hydraulic engineering has been incorporated into the defenses of the nation's capital city.7"

It would be more accurate to claim that the Defense Line should be preserved as a folly commemorating nationalist pretenses. There was never any real death associated with the site, only a type of nation-sponsored longing for death. In that context, as the messages on the tombstones slowly wear away, the Defense Line becomes the perfect place to meditate on the thematics of erasure in the modern post-Enlightenment, post-World War II world. What at first might seem a simulation of death turns out to be the production of deathlessness.

What is being constructed for the visitor by the Sluipweg is, therefore, not a conventional commemoration. If the modern idea of death is built around the memorial placed within the domain of human history and if the postmodern idea of death is built around the principle of loss placed within the domain of human emotions, we have here a construction that undoes both. It is a project that brings-into-awareness the complex processes of death-making in both the modern and post-modern world. Death is restored and evacuated; it is returned to the temporal present and allowed to point to an otherworldly future. It is dematerialized into a philosophical abstraction and materialized into the form of stone rubbed smooth by passers-by.

There is yet another twist in Sluipweg's slippery logic. Because this is not Dutch ground, but a United Nations quasi-demilitarized, international zone that is preserved in the name of 'humanity,' the tombstones cannot represent Dutch citizens. So what type of person do they represent at least in the period before the names become illegible?
The word 'civilian' came into currency during the English colonial period in the mid nineteenth century to refer to the English-born administrative personnel generally referred to as 'civil servants' including their families who often lived permanently in India. Even so it was a relatively rare word until the second half of the twentieth century. It was given its modern definition at the Fourth Geneva Convention (1949-50) in the wake, obviously, of the horrors of World War II. The implicit hypothesis of the convention was that the military and the civilian world exist in two different plains of reality. The military produces a disruption in the fabric of history, whereas the civilian embodies social continuity and as such needs to be protected during war as much as possible. 'Civilians' were viewed as society's constitutive fabric existing in a type of natural state of peacefulness. After hostilities were over, civilians were, therefore, to be the essential component of a return to normalcy.

The post-World War II concept of a 'civilian' challenged the traditional concept of 'the citizen' that arose after the Napoleonic era when the rights and obligations of citizenship concomitant with the newly emerging nation-state required that a member of that state take a stance as to wartime participation. Whereas a citizen was by definition a soldier, whether in spirit or reality, a post World War II civilian was seen as a non-combatant living within the nation-state but outside or beneath the reach of its ideological claims. Whereas the nation-state as it was understood in the nineteenth century implicated all its citizens in its activities, the contemporary nation-state, from the point of view of the UN, is split between its military and non-military populations. Furthermore, whereas the citizen is protected only by his or her government, the civilian has at least conceptually the protection of international law.

But whereas a civilian death is by definition marked as a tragedy, here at the Sluipweg, an alternative is provided in that though death is 'civilianized' it is not part any particular tragedy. It remains poignant nonetheless, in that this death is released from the conceptual tyranny of citizenship.

There is an obvious historical parallel between the post-World War II creation of 'the civilian' and its subsequent protection by international law and the post-War World II creation of the World Heritage List and the protection of monuments whose value ostensibly transcends national boundaries. At UNESCO property 759, the official designation of the Amsterdam Defense Line, these two vectors intersect. Just as the people who are memorialized on the stones of the Sluipweg are being eternalized and 'protected' within the conceptual enclave of a monument that represents all of humanity, they are no longer Dutch citizens, but civilians freed to universal obligation to be in death a national citizen.

In turning the stones flat, the artist is not only re-turning the stone from private to public and from metaphysical to temporal, but also shifting the political ground on which the stones rest, from national to universal. It is clear that in this multifaceted act of constructing - and perhaps one can say deconstructing - the concept of death is both intimate and historically poignant.

Though the institutions of the state and religion still today need their monuments as tokens to their long-proclaimed association with metaphysics, it is clear that Sluipweg is different. This is neither a memorial that yet again elevates death onto the plateau of cultural memory nor a counter-memorial that focuses on the darker modalities of death in the modern world. Instead it is a rare example of a post-metaphysical practice of commemoration, for it does not seek out the standard duality of hero and victim. Instead, as the names wear away, the stones give up their ghost. Dust to dust, stone to stone. Their position as semiotic stand-ins for the universal is thus transitory. Memories that have been disembodied and dislocated are ultimately 'disappeared', and as such the Sluipweg holds the inevitable metaphysics of death within the framework of quotation marks. What is, after all, the 'universality' of death when body and memory have been separated each in their own way along different historical vectors? Sluipweg does not answer the question but it does force us to think through the terms by which death is produced and understood. Sluipweg is thus a path where death is indeed able to ultimately make its escape.

Notes

1. Richard Etlin, *The Architecture of Death: the Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984) 300.
2. Margaret Fields Denton, 'Death in French Arcady: Nicolas Poussin's The Arcadian Shepherds and Burial Reform in France c. 1800', in: *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 36/2 (Winter 2003)195-216.
3. Etlin, The Architecture of Death*: the Transformation of the Cemetery in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984) 303.
4. Reuters, 'Do what you like with your tombstone: Dutch government says',January 31, 2011, *http://in.reuters.com/article/2011/01/31/us-dutch-tombstones-idINTRE70U5XN20110131* (accessed: June 30, 2011).
5. UNESCO World Heritage Convention, art. 11.2, *http://whc.unesco.org/en/conventiontext/* (accessed: June 30, 2011).
6. UNESCO, 'Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention', 14 (§49), *http://whc.unesco.org/archive/opguide05-en.pdf* (accessed: June 30, 2011).
7. 'Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage World Heritage Committee; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization Report WHC-96/CONF.20l/CLD.1.' Twentieth session, Merida, Mexico, March 10, 1997, 71-2, *http://whc.unesco.org/archive/1996/whc-96-conf201-21e.pdf* (accessed June 30, 2011).