

## Future's Past: Reading Vergílio Ferreira's *Carta ao Futuro* Today

### Abstract

In *Carta ao Futuro* (Letter to the Future) Vergílio Ferreira already announces many of the key themes to be developed throughout his entire oeuvre. One of those is the obsession with death; another the problematics of writing. This essay attempts a reading of Vergílio Ferreira's thought through a comparison with another brief but very significant text: *Préface à la disparition* of Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe. Although both essays can diverge widely, there is in both a strong preoccupation with reflection on death dialectically in a perspective informed by phenomenology. As a whole both essays also constitute a form of posthumous writing: a writing always geared towards a future to come in which Art, following on the lead of Adorno's view on the function of philosophy, assumes a redemptive value.

**Keywords:** Vergílio Ferreira, Carta ao Futuro, Lacoue-Labarthe, Death, Art and Redemption

### Resumo

Em *Carta ao Futuro* Vergílio Ferreira anuncia já muitos dos temas principais desenvolvidos em toda a sua obra, e um deles é a obsessão com a morte assim como a questão da escrita. Neste ensaio tenta-se uma leitura da contemporaneidade do pensamento de Vergílio Ferreira através de uma comparação com outro breve texto de grande significância, o *Préface à la disparition* de Phillipe Lacoue-Labarthe. Embora haja divergências grandes entre os dois textos há uma preocupação muito forte em ambos de tratar a morte numa perspectiva dialéctica informada pela fenomenologia. Ambos os textos no seu todo constituem uma escrita póstuma, sempre virada para um futuro a devir em que a Arte, na esteira da perspectiva de Adorno sobre a função da filosofia, assume um valor redentor.

**Palavras-chave:** Vergílio Ferreira Carta ao Futuro, Lacoue-Labarthe, Morte, Arte e Redenção

## Future's Past: Reading Vergílio Ferreira's *Carta ao Futuro* Today

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Zum Ende. - Philosophie, wie sie im Angesicht der Verzweiflung einzig noch zu verantworten ist, wäre der Versuch, alle Dinge so zu betrachten, wie sie vom Standpunkt der Erlösung aus sich darstellten. Erkenntnis hat kein Licht, als das von der Erlösung her auf die Welt scheint.

*At the end.* – The only philosophy, which would still be accountable in the face of despair, would be the attempt to consider all things, as they would be portrayed from the standpoint of redemption. Cognition has no other light than that which shines from redemption out upon the world

Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*

What does it mean to write to the future, to write a letter to the future, addressed to no one and everyone, to an unnamed, unspecified friend (“amigo”), who only enters the stage sporadically, especially at the very beginning in the invocation, and once it is all over and done, at the endpoint of the text, in a first, and last, salutation: “Saúde, amigo” (*Carta ao Futuro*, 102). I would not know how to answer that in any way that would not be a reading and what, even if all writing in a trivial sense always is a writing to the future, is also an attempt to construct a possible meaning from the past without which there is no way of being in the present. Another, intrinsically related question, would be what it might mean to read Vergílio Ferreira today, that is, to read him as a contemporary still and not just as a relic from the past, however much admired. Without question the name of Vergílio Ferreira stands for one of the highest markers of Portuguese culture in the twentieth-century in a way that defies banal assumptions as it imbricates thought in writing and makes writing, often elegant and powerful writing, a condition for thought. As such what I propose is a reading of one of his earlier, seemingly less significant texts, *Carta ao Futuro*, written in 1957 and published in 1958 together with another, seemingly insignificant, text by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, his *Préface à la disparition*, written just before his death in 2007, or rather, written much earlier, in 1966, as *La disparition*, but revisited and altered just before he died, even though he

could not finish it – and indeed could not even write the Preface that he planned. As divergent as both texts are, they also share a number of common attributes, starting with the obsession with death that informs both. But my reading, even as it will draw necessarily on those, is much more interested in trying to find what both say to us today about the future, that is, how their writing, inasmuch as it is a writing of the end and at the end, also reinscribes the possibility of restarting again, of inaugurating a kind of perpetual beginning.

Both Vergílio Ferreira and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe start their texts with a short reflection on their textual quality, their insignificance as it were. This is Vergílio Ferreira's very opening lines: "Meu amigo: Escrevo-te para daqui a um século, cinco séculos, para daqui a mil anos ... É quase certo que esta carta te não chegará às mãos ou que, chegando, a não lerás. Pouco importa." (*Carta ao Futuro*, 11). It is not just the uncertainty of the letter's survival down the centuries, nor the necessary reflection that even if the text were to survive no one can guarantee it would find an addressee and be read. It is the form itself of a letter that makes it ephemeral, and as such an object of desire as Ferreira immediately adds: "... uma carta: papel de acaso, redigido numa hora intervalar, um vento de acaso o leva pelos caminhos, o perde ou não aí, o atira ao cesto dos papéis e do olvido, ou o guarda entre os sinais da memória" (*Carta ao Futuro*, 12). The mention of memory at the end of the passage is of course already a denial of the lack of importance, the casualness claimed for the epistolary form – to which I will return. But for now I am foremost interested in noticing how, even though apparently very different, both Ferreira's and Lacoue-Labarthe's texts start from the same need to deny any importance to themselves, which far more than simple false modesty or a convention, is an intrinsic part of the meaning of the texts themselves. In the case of Ferreira, assuming the form of the letter (even though the book is published under the category of "essay" is a deliberate *mise-en-scène*, a staging of the scene of writing as it were, that claims for itself the precariousness of the moment, a time of writing that would be always in-between, a kind of gap or intermission ("intervalar") between other, more orderly and regimented, times.

The beginning of Lacoue-Labarthe's text – the beginning of the original *disparition* from 1966, so equally a youthful writing as Ferreira's, before the addition of two very significant epigraphs taken from Blanchot – is uncannily close in its portent, even if a bit longer, to Ferreira's:

Certains textes qui peut-être ne sont pas toujours parmi les meilleurs de leur auteur (...) certains livres qu'on ne considère jamais tout à fait comme de la littérature et qu'on réserve à un usage éphémère (à l'avance exclus, rejetés aux frontières de la chose écrite ...) peuvent avoir, pour qui ne saurait vivre sans lire beaucoup, l'étrange pouvoir de hanter longtemps la mémoire, de s'y inscrire, pourrait-on dire naïvement, et comme d'y occuper un espace quasiment insituable entre l'oubli et la conscience... (*Préface à la disparition*, 15-16).

Perhaps it is precisely that characteristic of a certain undecidability of time, very much like a present that, always between a future to come and a past that it rapidly leaves behind itself, must constantly start anew. Even imagining that one's writing might survive into the future at all, let alone a distant future, a thousand years from now, would be monstrous. Just as believing it would be irreducibly lost and forgotten would be cruel. That hope, a form of illumination both texts might say, might just be a form of being human that gives sense to a life that otherwise might be null and void. Or, as Lacoue-Labarthe puts it in the conclusion, the very end of the "postscript" he wrote in 2007, a kind of metaphysical tightrope walking without any metaphysical safety net (*Préface à la disparition*, 46). Lacoue-Labarthe stages the scene of writing such that it focuses on the ephemeral and inhabits the liminal space that such "literature", if one can still call it that, has been proscribed to, while being inscribed into memory. And, to recall his words, such a scene is also always the scene of a haunting.

Confronting the notion of the divine is another project common to both texts. Their respective strategies differ but it is almost as if Ferreira and Lacoue-Labarthe would exchange and reverse their respective roles of novelist and philosopher and as such reject essentializing them. *Carta ao Futuro* is divided in six parts and part III, its center as it were, is where Ferreira explores in detail the question of the death of God, or rather the multiple deaths of God, which for many, who have not yet heard the news, or who refuse to see the evidence for themselves, is still, as it were, waiting to die. As surprising as it might seem to see Ferreira, writing in Portugal in 1957, declaring the death of God, it is of course absolutely coherent with the humanism he would continue exploring and developing. In a sense, and without wanting to engage in any form of reductionism, one could say that the entire *Carta ao Futuro* is that announcement, that the first two parts are merely a preface to the core and that once the twilight of the gods has been ruthlessly expounded in Part III, the remainder of the text is a way of picking up the debris, of trying to have readers realize that it is only through the necessary death of God that Humanity can be fully human. This is far from being simple though and one can see how Ferreira both has recourse to a traditional notion of God becoming flesh

and rejects any simplistic Christology. Even if it might appear indirect, Ferreira's position, I would argue, is clear enough in siding with the "others": "Porque para os outros, Cristo ficou definitivamente um filho de uma mulher e de um carpinteiro, sujeito, como eles, ao tempo e à morte." (*Carta ao Futuro*, 47).

The death of the Gods is also one of the central issues in Lacoue-Labarthe's text. Or rather, the pretext (both what comes before the text and its cause) that gives rise to *La disparition* is a very brief short narrative by Jorge Luis Borges from 1960 with the title of "Ragnarök". This brief narrative gets included almost in its entirety in a French translation, at the same time that Lacoue-Labarthe tells us he is haunted by it even if he does not know its original text, in Spanish, nor the meaning of its title. This disclaimer, unlike the opening one about the lack of significance of the entire text cannot be taken at face value. Obviously both claims of textual insignificance by Lacoue-Labarthe and Ferreira can only be taken at face value inasmuch as they part of a complex writing strategy that depends on declaring insignificance only to make its importance more felt. This other negative claim, that is, Lacoue-Labarthe's claim of not knowing the original language of Borges's text – which he makes his own (in the translation of Roger Caillois published in 1964) by citing the entire dream narrative, which is parallel to his own dream of it, only leaving out the supposed filiation of Borges' narrative in Coleridge – cannot even be taken at face value for one moment. In a sense, it is like Borges invoking Coleridge at the beginning of his narrative, a too obvious clue that is only meant to throw the reader off (the topic of detection of course is related although remains sort of subterranean as the other texts that haunt Lacoue-Labarthe are by Dashiell Hammett). But what to make of the claim of non-knowledge? The issue of translations would have been interesting, especially as Borges had preserved the original Old Norse word for twilight of the gods, or death of the gods, but it is not one Lacoue-Labarthe picks up at all. At the same time it is obvious that he must know its meaning even if not its exact linguistic derivation, as the concept sketched out in the ancient Germanic epics had been variously picked in modern times, notably by Wagner and other artists and especially by Nietzsche, as he does actually mention when saying that the unnamed traces of Hegel, Michelet, and Nietzsche are clear: "bref tout l'écho qu'on y perçoit. Non de Coleridge, trop évidemment cité peut-être, mais de Hegel, de Michelet, de Nietzsche qui bien entendu ne sont pas nommés" (*Préface à la disparition*, 20).

Writing on the edge of the sixties about the death of God or of the gods more generally, might have seemed very contemporary, neither really shocking nor quite

yet obsolete. Reading about it in the present, curiously, can also feel very contemporary given what many refer to as a religion turn in the Humanities or the advent of a post-secular society. In any case, in both Ferreira and Lacoue-Labarthe, the centrality of the annihilation of the gods is intrinsically linked with the construction of the Self as both autonomous subject and as member of a species, as a human being, whose condition might well be that, not only of mortality, but of its isolation. In Lacoue-Labarthe the scene of writing is always the playing out of a dream, a nightmare, which becomes a grotesque haunting and in which the death of God, in all its bestiality, is in fact the death of the Self: “En m’approchant, je vis que l’homme étendu couvert de sang avait le visage d’un oiseau de proie – comes certains personnages des litographies de Goya ou des collages de Max Ernst. On lui retira brutalement ce masque et je découvris qu’il s’agissait de moi” (*Préface à la disparition*, 38). The death of God in Ferreira, even if presented differently also assumes the character of a discovery, a revelation, or even, as so often in his work, a form of apparition, in which he discovers that man is utterly alone in the world: “Que Deus tenha morrido, meu amigo, é uma surpresa tão extraordinária, que poucos de nós se deram ainda conta disso. (...) Eis que, porém, depois de todas as negações, depois da falência de todas as formas de uma pacificação, o homem descobre enfim que está só” (*Carta ao Futuro*, 42-50).

The emphasis on solitude as perhaps the defining condition of humanity would become common in much that Ferreira would write throughout his life. In Lacoue-Labarthe, it is perhaps another feeling of absolute fear as defining, if not of the human condition, at least of the Self, that becomes inescapable, be it in the description of the Nordic apocalypse in Borges, or in Lacoue-Labarthe’s own retake of a frightful nightmare, or in his citation of a passage from Genette – to which I will return – or even in the last word itself of the original text from 1966, left suspended and incomplete: “l’horreur ...” (*Préface à la disparition*, 43). Humanity in Lacoue-Labarthe’s text is not made of isolated monads devoid of any form of community. Rather, what the text, in its multiple reiterations, gives us as readers is the sense of an inevitable link between the various authors, Borges, Lacoue-Labarthe, Genette (and the others already mentioned, or only hinted at, or perhaps even completely unnamed – is there an echo, however faint, of Conrad in the ‘horror’?). And yet, what does unite them precisely, if not the horror, the paradoxical memory of something that has been forgotten or repressed, the violence in the destruction of the gods that is as devastating as it is inevitable? The conclusion to Lacoue-Labarthe’s initial text is open and as much a question as it is an affirmation, as he

starts to ponder on a threat, a form of silence, that would attach to the texts of Dashiell Hammet and of Borges and from which there would be no possible escape except the suspension brought on by death: “(...) ce qui ne s’achève pas, ne s’achèvera pas jamais et que seule la mort peut suspendre, l’horreur ...” (*Préface à la disparition*, 43). As such, I would suggest, there is no significant difference between Ferreira and Lacoue-Labarthe’s texts when it comes to the haunting quality of human existence in modernity, be it utter solitude or the ineffability of ever escaping being haunted by the original scene of a becoming human that is always the consequence of the death of the gods.

Death permeates both texts – and death, the necessity to confront and dialogue with death, is one of the constant elements of all of Vergílio Ferreira’s oeuvre. Yet there is no morbidity, nor any fatality in either text – quite the contrary. Likewise there is no nihilism, not even veiled or unassumed. Instead, there is a stark realism that draws much of its strength through recognition of the power of fiction, and of language, as the one creative force capable of transforming reality. There is no point in pretending that both texts have the same understanding of death for that would be absurd. Not just because of the differences in background and social context of the two writers but because Lacoue-Labarthe’s text, even if not really altered in its substance, is augmented by the important additions that constitute the two epigraphs and the postscript. Still, it is remarkable to see how in the original texts there is so much that is similar concerning death. One of the key aspects in both texts is the fact that death is not presented as something purely negative or to be avoided, shunned or feared, but rather as part of a dialectic process in which the other term is life. In other words, it is not so much that death opposes life but rather that both can only be properly understood in function of each other. One of the subject phrases that accompany Ferreira’s text on the margins reads, “Projecção da vida na morte”. Another, a few pages further, “Vida-Morte e Humanismo” as if in the brief space the text has in between those two notations, life had become so projected onto death as to constitute a new unity, “Life-Death” to be paired with yet another term, this time the designation of “Humanism”, even as Ferreira is careful to warn away a simplistic, banal, understanding of the latter. One point that Ferreira makes throughout the text relates to the necessity to know and to assume knowledge not only as condition of being but as a very form of living. When he refers to a projection of life onto death he considers that an unreflected assumption that death would be a form of continuing life beyond life. Such an understanding of life, Ferreira argues, would be no more than a simulacrum of eternity (“contrafacção de eternidade”

*Carta ao Futuro*, 67). For Ferreira, once one would go beyond such an assumption, one would come to the realization that death is not yet another form of presence continued beyond life, not even in the shape of memory. Rather, death would be a void.

It is inescapable to read here a direct reference to Jean-Paul Sartre (following Heidegger and others); indeed, as is well known, Ferreira worked extensively with the works of the French philosopher and his long and detailed “Preface” to Sartre’s *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1946) with the title of “Da Fenomenologia a Sartre” (1962). Ferreira’s imbrication in, and development of, existentialist thought has long been one of the most pursued topics and I have no pretention here of contributing to it. Nonetheless, I would like to lift one sentence from Sartre’s *L’être et le néant* (1943), in the English translation by Hazel E. Barnes: “At my limit, at that infinitesimal instant of my death, I shall be no more than my past. (...) Death reunites us with ourselves” (*Being and Nothingness*, 1957; 2003). This reverberates in a number of ways both with the reflections of Ferreira as well as those of Lacoue-Labarthe on the significance of death for life. In the very abbreviated passage just cited Sartre seems to focus on the instant of death and how the finitude it represents at the same time is also a form of completion of the Self, even of a return of the Self. Ferreira, quite obviously, builds on this throughout *Carta ao Futuro* and perhaps nowhere is this more visible than when he reflects on the void, or nothingness:

Pobres palavras vãs: um “nada” imaginamo-lo sempre como algo que é ... Mas o nada é a desapareição de nós a nós próprios, a anulação desta evidência que é a pessoa que está em nós, o puro vazio deste *quid* único, desta realidade que há em nós e nos assusta, porque é terrivelmente viva e verdadeira. A massa de tudo o que nos habita não é um aglomerado de coisas que se dispersem e fiquem como ficam as pedras de um muro que se desmorona: é a totalização de nós próprios, incrível individualidade, fulgurante presença, acto puro de ser, absurda *necessidade* de estar vivo, que é como se fosse maior que nós e nos dominasse e nos vivesse – essa flagrante evidência que nos assusta quando nos olhamos a um espelho (*Carta ao Futuro*, 68-69).

As this passage makes remarkably clear, in spite of its brevity the text of *Carta ao Futuro* is complex and dense with meaning, the words evoking suggestions – the “poor words in vain” which themselves are already an index of that void they cannot but fail to represent – or piling up additional meanings, going from a disappearance to a doubling in the inverted reflected image of the Self in a mirror. Nothingness here is a form of disappearance and it is curious that this peculiar term would be the one Lacoue-Labarthe would seize upon for a title. At stake is, again, death. Death, which returns the Self to



itself and simultaneously brings about its very dissolution and disappearance. It is useful to read the passage by Ferreira just cited in parallel with this from Lacoue-Labarthe: "... il me semblait chaque fois que je pénétrais dans un espace vide ou même nul que je savais bien impensable et où, j'allais ne plus me reconnaître et disparaître à moi-même. Ainsi, pris au piège de mon propre délire, je me rêvais disparaissant ... " (*Préface à la disparition*, 31).

The disappearance, annulment, void, in question, is both generally human, at the very base of the human condition, and a personal one. Vergílio Ferreira addresses his "letter" to a future friend and as such already posits a possibility of surviving onto the future as I have already remarked. In Lacoue-Labarthe's text the presence of death amidst life is a deeply personal condition that exceeds a simple sharing in humanity. This because, as the postscript announces, it is as if Lacoue-Labarthe had already died twice (he had gone into coma) before deciding to take again the youthful text of *La disparition* and revisit it for the future: "Deux fois, donc, je suis mort. En l'espace d'à peine quelques mois: 25 mai 2006, 29 décembre de la même année. (...) (*Préface à la disparition*, 45). Reflecting on the fact that he was reanimated Lacoue-Labarthe also comments on the traditional expression, "ramener à la conscience", which, by indicating a return to consciousness, also already inscribes in the very language an image of going back that is tantamount at the same time to the only way of progressing towards any kind of future at all.

Ferreira's text moves by accretion as images succeed more images and the reader is confronted with a specular kind of doubling of meaning, life and death, presence and absence, in which, they are set in scene not as simple oppositions but almost dialectically. There is a constant tension, I would like to suggest, between life and death, ultimately between the material and the transcendental – by which the would-be transcendental is revealed in its materiality. That at least might be one way of reading the importance of the focus on the death of God, placed at the center of the text. In part one can observe a similar problematic informing Lacoue-Labarthe, Yet, there are also significant differences between the two. The death of God, or more properly of the gods, is not so much placed at the center of the text as at its origin. The foundational myth, "Ragnarök" in Borges' version (the beginning of which Lacoue-Labarthe leaves out, the better to appropriate it) is the model for the entire text as well as for its parts: Lacoue-Labarthe dreams himself disappearing much in the same way that in the dream about that other dream which is Borges' text, he sees his face appearing once the bird of prey

mask is removed from the dead figure. To Ferreira's method of accumulation, one could contrast Lacoue-Labarthe's propensity towards a form of imbedding of the images so that one invariably folds itself into another. Whereas Ferreira's writing strategy borders on the dialectic, Lacoue-Labarthe's seems to rely on it, however unwittingly. Crudely put, it is as if the original dream (which obviously also is a dream of origins) would bring about another dream of a presence revealed in death, which of course is more of an absence in itself and as such already helps to lead us into the notion of the disappearance foretold and yet, seemingly, constantly postponed ("Deux fois, donc, je suis mort").

It is possible to read both texts as postponements of their respective authors' deaths. As with any text, but especially in the case of these two, which openly thematize a questioning of the meaning of life and death and of the possibilities of surviving beyond death, that is an immediate and inescapable reading. Ferreira's writing to the future is propelled by the desire not only to still be read after his death but to be able to go on affirming himself as a singular being. Likewise, Lacoue-Labarthe, in still insisting to revisit the youthful text of his disappearance, after he had just "died" twice, reinscribes once again his absence as a form of presence that would go on repeating itself much in the same way as the dreams within dreams would constitute a process of indefinite, and perhaps infinite, survival. In both cases the body is inseparable from consciousness as both that which guarantees identity (Lacoue-Labarthe's face underneath the bird mask) and serves as evidence for the singularity of being: "Que ninguém nos demonstre o nosso erro nem a nossa verdade: mais forte que toda a demonstração é a evidência feita carne e ossos e sangue e nervos, é esta plenitude sem margem de *sermos*" (*Carta ao Futuro*, 52). The grounding of knowledge and being in the materiality of the body, the flesh and blood, bones and sinews, can be seen in a straight line of phenomenological filiation. Although the more common references are usually Sartre and Malraux, perhaps in this earlier text, what would have been more marking might have been Husserl. What interests me at the moment though, is not so much the establishment of any given filiation, but rather the reading, today, of what Ferreira – and Lacoue-Labarthe – wrote to the future. As such, it is Blanchot I would like to invoke now, not just because of the way Lacoue-Labarthe brought him in to head his own text, but primarily because of the way Ferreira already anticipated the points for which Lacoue-Labarthe cites him. What is at stake then is not at all any sort of influence study but much more a tracing of a common lineage that revolves around a certain conception of literature, of truth, and of the dialectic between life and death, remembrance and forgetting, haunting and silence.

The two small quotations from Blanchot that Lacoue-Labarthe chose to head his own “disappearance” can be seen as tightly linked on the subject of death even though they come from two separate works, one *The Instant of My Death* (*L’Instant de ma mort*, 1994), the other *The Writing of Disaster* (*L’écriture du désastre*, 1980). Both also come after the texts in question, both Lacoue-Labarthe’s original *La disparition* (1966) and Ferreira’s *Carta ao Futuro* (1958). But of course, not only is the question of death always dominant in Blanchot’s writing but that very small and highly complex text, *The instant of My Death* is already a going back to events that took place much before, in 1944. As such it is immediately apparent why Lacoue-Labarthe might have drawn on it beyond the thematic aspect, since Blanchot’s little text – and in all three cases we are dealing specifically with highly complex but brief texts – is already a way of foregrounding the reinscription of the past in the present as a form of remembering but also, and this cannot be overstated, a haunting. In both passages Blanchot makes clear the irreducible connection between life and death, between a form of life that not only contains death, but is always already a prolonging of death. This might seem to be more evident in the excerpt from *The Instant of My Death* inasmuch as it recalls the moment in 1944 when the young man, the narrator (leaving aside the autobiographical component so as not to complicate matters even at the risk of reduction), thinks he is going to be shot, thinks that he is already dying. In a sense, life, and writing, and the text we can thus read all become forms of dying in perpetual suspension. The very beginning of Blanchot’s narrative, not quoted by Lacoue-Labarthe, should be kept in mind: “I remember a young man – a man still young – prevented from dying by death itself – and perhaps the error of injustice” (*The Instant of My Death*, 3). The passage Lacoue-Labarthe quotes is at the other spectrum of the text, coming as its conclusion: “Neither happiness, nor unhappiness. Nor the absence of fear and perhaps already the step beyond. I know, I imagine that this unanalyzable feeling changed what there remained for him of existence. As if death outside of him could only henceforth collide with the death in him. ‘I am alive. No, you are dead.’” (*The Instant of My Death*, 9). Much as been written about what often is considered the most complex or enigmatic of Blanchot’s texts, including the long and often quoted essay by Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, originally delivered as a lecture in 1995. Here I have no intention of even attempting to contribute to that conversation; rather, my purpose is simply to try to understand how the complexity of the relation between death and life that Blanchot posits at one extreme, “I

am alive. No you are dead,” is key to understand what both Ferreira and Lacoue-Labarthe were already doing in their own earlier texts.

Where Lacoue-Labarthe is concerned, perhaps the significance of Blanchot is so obvious as to dispense with any further commenting. After all, as he tells the reader in the postscript, he had already died twice and so it is in light of such a continuation of death in life that he seizes on Blanchot’s paradox and makes it his own. But concerning Ferreira, whose text appears, at least on the surface, to be more optimistic, would Blanchot’s views be an overstatement? I would like to suggest the contrary: the very writing imperative of Blanchot’s, the inescapability of revisiting the past and a specific singular, traumatic, event of the past is key to read Ferreira’s own writing imperative in *Carta ao Futuro* that makes of that text equally a difficult mix of the fictional, the autobiographical (the narrator at various points provides hints that could tempt the reader to identify him with Ferreira as, for instance, the recollection of seeing for the first time Diana’s Temple, *Carta ao Futuro*, 14), and the philosophical. One link between all three texts (leaving aside for the moment the second epigraph) is their posthumous character. Even if only Lacoue-Labarthe’s can be said to be literally posthumous, there is much to recommend viewing the other two under the same light. For one, it would take a kind of myopic pedantic to insist on only considering Lacoue-Labarthe’s – because published after his death – as posthumous. It is far more significant to see how Blanchot, and indeed Ferreira, assume a similar tone. For Blanchot it is obvious that since that fatidic moment in 1944 the narrator/Blanchot have been living a kind of suspended death in life as he affirms it. In the case of Ferreira, though, it is the decision to write to the future to address himself to an unknown, and necessarily silent, interlocutor to come that indicates the posthumous nature of the writing.

Inseparable from the question of the posthumous is the problematic of truth and redemption. Truth in opposition to all that would be unreal and a pretense, a mask – the bird mask for instance in the Borges’ story or the revelation needed for knowledge, even when such knowledge may be a desolate one as when Ferreira affirms: “E depois, para muitos de nós, que vale a certeza de uma terra desabitada em face da ilusão de uma terra povoada de fantasmas?” (*Carta ao Futuro*, 17). The emphasis on the primacy of truth and self-knowledge does not constitute a surprise to any one and it is as vehement in Blanchot as in Lacoue-Labarthe or Ferreira. It is also intrinsically linked with art and as such, in a decisive loop, with writing itself. This is the conclusion of *Carta ao Futuro* where the epistemological primacy of emotion and the senses is unavoidable:

Porque é dentro da emotividade que o mundo tem sentido, e a verdade humana, e a orientação fundamental de tudo o que nos orienta. Porque o sentimento estético é uma comunicação original com a essencialidade da vida – como esta que se abre na voz obscura da chuva que dura ainda. Eu a ouço, eu a ouço, desde os confins da memória (...) Que a água de pureza que te trespasse, e seja tu, rememore a água obscura do nosso horizonte – e a vida se continuará, una, indestrutível, igual e sem margens, como é igual na sua total presença, a vertigem da noite e a iluminação do dia” (*Carta ao Futuro*, 102).

At first sight one might be tempted to think that this insistence on the possibility of a future is what most separates Ferreira from either Lacoue-Labarthe or Blanchot. After all, Lacoue-Labarthe admits at having had already died twice before, whereas Blanchot’s writing in *The Instant of My Death* could be read as the assumption of a failure, a defeat of life, evident in the narrator’s inability to survive the imminence of death and forever after feeling not just guilt at having survived but actually death itself: “I am alive. No you are dead”. And yet, what remains of Lacoue-Labarthe after those two deaths if not the writing itself? Or why does Blanchot, in the other excerpt used by Lacoue-Labarthe and taken from *The Writing of the Disaster* (1980; 1986), stress that it is writing that which sends death back to the past, a past where it has always already taken place (even if it actually never did as in *Instant of My Death*) and as such prevents death from invading the present and taking over the future? “To write is no longer to situate death in the future – the death which is always already past; to write is to accept that one has to die without making death present and without making oneself present to it. To write is to know that death has taken place ...” (*The Writing of the Disaster*, 66). It is this knowledge that might come to be seen as redemptive and as a common feature of all four texts, be it Ferreira’s, Lacoue-Labarthe’s or even Blanchot’s. Obviously it is not a redemption in a religious sense – God is dead, the gods are dead, the young man who undergoes an experience of the limit does not undergo any spiritual revelation, and so on. No, the redemption in cause is very much a human, if not downright material, one.

Art – very directly and explicitly in Ferreira, more indirectly but still unmistakably in Lacoue-Labarthe (and the same, only more so in Blanchot) – is seen as the human means to bring about redemption and to move beyond the impasse of the death of the gods in all their guises towards a different future. But there is never a simple exaltation of art as the aesthetic remains grounded on the material and even on abject suffering. Death, the singular confrontation with the fear of death, the (near)-experience of death, these all propel the writing that is at the one and same time a way of bearing

witness and of invoking the future. Both 1958 and 1966 (to say nothing of 1944 in the case of Blanchot of course) are significant as dates that stand on the cusp of radical historical events in both Portugal and France. 1966 stands in the eve of May 1968 and all the changes it would effect, not just in France, but also across Europe. 1958 in Portugal on the other hand, was the year of the Presidential elections when all those opposed to the fascist regime of the *Estado Novo* led by Salazar had pinned their hopes in the figure of General Humberto Delgado. The outcome of the rigged elections did not manage to bring down the regime but it had become clear that a change was inevitable – as it proved to be. What no one could have predicted was that it would take so long, that the Portuguese would have to wait until 1974, for a different future. Or that Humberto Delgado himself would be assassinated by the secret police in 1962. Vergílio Ferreira had reason perhaps to imagine his future friend as only reading him, if at all, in a distant future. But the very process of imagining that future and imagining it as a form of resisting death – even though to the very end the dialectic between life and death is never resolved – should also be seen as a form of redemption in the sense which Adorno gave to it in *Minima Moralia*: “*At the end.* – ‘The only philosophy, which would still be accountable in the face of despair, would be the attempt to consider all things, as they would be portrayed from the standpoint of redemption. Cognition has no other light than that which shines from redemption out upon the world’”. Perhaps it is not too much to recall that this often-cited conclusion to *Minima Moralia*, the “melancholy science” as Adorno phrased it, is also an irreducible paradox that calls for philosophy to fulfill its duty, “to be accountable in the face of despair” even when it may seem all the more impossible to do so. We who read Vergílio Ferreira in the present are, in a fashion, his future, even if like others already before us, we too will soon be past, already have become past. Reading him today we are reminded, not without some rage, that the world has not yet managed to become any more of a better place, precisely because of our human, all-too-human, actions and that if anything, perhaps today more so even than in Ferreira’s or Lacoue-Labarthe’s times, the future has become more precarious, and is as tainted by the figure of death as ever. More of a reason to go on dreaming Lacoue-Labarthe’s dream of a certain dream of Borges that would be the rebirth of the gods after the end of times, and to keep on writing an unending letter to the future.

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