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Emotions and writing the history of death. An interview with Michel Vovelle, Régis Bertrand and Anne Carol

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ABSTRACT *In recent years, the presence and the role that historians' own emotions play in their work has been the topic of a vivid debate amongst academics. Are the emotions felt by the historian dangerous, something to be avoided, or could they also be a historiographical resource and an explorative tool? This interview offers a great opportunity to become acquainted with the perspective of three different generations of French scholars who have made important contributions to the historiography of dying, death and grief. They have been asked to explore the emotional dimensions of their work within both the private and professional spheres: the choice of their research topics, the feelings emerging from intellectual and physical "contact" with sources and finally, the relationship between their intellectual knowledge and their intimate experiences of loss.*

KEYWORDS: historians' emotions; history of death; historiography; history of grief; history of emotions; writing history of death

Introduction

Ever since the nineteenth century, historians have perceived the progress of their discipline as based on rationality and the marginalisation of the emotions, which only generate confusion and a lack of clarity. Emotions are often regarded as a hindrance to comprehension (Rowley & d'Almeida, 2013, p. 15) and historians occasionally *tend to understand the emotions (even [their] own) which go along with the cognitive procedures of historical thinking as something additional, but non-essential, a kind of a background music that has not real function in [their] work* (Rüsen, 2008, p. 43). While this epistemological diffidence toward emotions does not mean that doing history and writing history was, and still is, 'emotion-proof', the question of the presence and role of the emotional components in historiography has emerged in a more-defined and prominent way only during the last decade. Some specialists of contemporary and political history, such as Christophe Prochasson, for example, exposed the risks of hyper-compassionate accounts of violent historical events. To him, empathy must always be accompanied by rationalisation in approaching the historical analysis of extreme situations (Prochasson, 2008, pp. 105–107), in order to avoid the dangerous confusion between memory and

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history. Other scholars, specialising in the history of the emotions, have underlined that historians cannot avoid dealing with the ‘emotional echoes’ generated by the sources themselves and the question of transmitting the feelings of the past to the reader of their historiographical analysis. The emotions of historians can be a research tool, but only on the condition that historians, at all stages of their work, use such analytical and rhetorical lucidity in order to avoid being overwhelmed by their feelings (Boquet & Nagy, 2008/2011; Farge, 2002). From a certain point of view, both emotion and cognition can contribute to the processes of generating awareness of past events activated by the work of historians, and feeling a deep emotion can uncover new possibilities for historical thinking (Rüsen, 2008). According to Canadian historian Piroska Nagy, working on emotions of the past even seems to have broadened her own emotional culture, her capacity for emotional communication and perhaps her emotional intelligence (Boquet & Nagy, 2008/2011).

Illness, dying, death and grief are undoubtedly historiographical topics that carry with them a high emotional charge and at the same time that are common elements of human life which historians will, directly or indirectly, experience in their professional and private spheres. Throughout my university education and academic career, during which I have worked on several aspects of the Western funerary culture, I have often been questioned by colleagues, family members or even perfect strangers on the emotional dimension of my research, on the supposed ‘existential’ ‘philosophical’ or even ‘morbid’ reasons for my choice. I have decided to offer this legitimate general curiosity a more intellectual depth, inscribing it within the broader scientific and academic debate presented above concerning historians’ emotions, and to address this issue with some of the greatest specialists on the history of death in the Western world. I have chosen three generations of historians who have made some of the most significant contributions to the field: Michel Vovelle, Régis Bertrand and Anne Carol. They are all linked to what is called today the University of Aix-Marseille, located in the southern part of France. Michel Vovelle worked here for several years and Régis Bertrand and Anne Carol have also been working at this university for the greater part of their careers. I asked these historians to explore the emotional aspects of their work both in their private and professional sphere, focusing on the feelings emerging from the intellectual and physical ‘contact’ with the traces of the past, and to express their opinion on the role of emotions in doing and communicating history. The interviews were conducted in French via postal (with Michel Vovelle) and electronic mail (with Régis Bertrand and Anne Carol) in summer 2013. The questions and answers, originally provided separately by each scholar, have been rearranged around certain major topics and translated into English.

The three historians

Michel Vovelle, eminent figure of French historiography, taught for several years at the University of Aix-Marseille, maintaining ongoing intellectual and academic relations with this institution also during his long tenure at the

University Panthéon-Sorbonne. In Paris, he was Professor of History of the French Revolution. He also held the position of Director of the Institut d'Histoire de la Révolution française and played a paramount role in the celebrations of the two hundredth anniversary of this historical event in 1989 as President of the scientific commission. Along with Philippe Ariès, he is one of the most influential figures on the subject of history of death in Western cultures, covering a period of several centuries (the *longue durée*). His famous early research on purgatory altars in churches and on the wills in Provence was the first in a long series of projects combining social history and the *histoire des mentalités* of dying, death and grief, culminating in *La Mort et l'Occident de 1300 à nos jours*, first published in 1983, one of the most famous and accomplished books on the topic to date.

Régis Bertrand is a Professor Emeritus of Modern History (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) at the University of Aix-Marseille. He wrote his doctoral thesis under the direction of Vovelle in 1994. He is specialised in History of Religion and has been working on cemeteries, funerary rituals and material culture, religious confraternities and practices both at the French and European levels. He has dedicated almost 40 years to, and published more than 90 works on what can be generally defined as the history of death. Among his works, it is worth mentioning: *La ville des morts*, co-edited with Michel Vovelle in 1983; *L'exécution capitale. Une mort donnée en spectacle XVI^e-XX^e siècle*, co-edited with Anne Carol in 2003. In *Mort et mémoire. Provence, XVIII^e-XX^e siècles. Une approche d'historien*, published in 2011, he compiled, for the first time, a corpus of his own main works on the multidimensional and complex relationship that men and women have with their own finitude.

Anne Carol is a Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Aix-Marseille and member of the Institut Universitaire de France. She specialises in History of Medicine and in History of the body (both alive and dead). She has recently focused on the relationship between the medical profession and death, and between medicine and death penalty. Her piece *Les médecins et la mort, XIX^e-XX^e siècles* (2004) was awarded the prestigious Société française d'histoire de la médecine in Paris. Her *Physiologie de la Veuve. Une histoire médicale de la guillotine*, published in 2012, not only met with success within the academic and scientific community, but also received the literary award 'Mauvais Genres essai'. With Isabelle Renaudet, she has recently edited a volume on the representation of corpses in art, *La mort à l'œuvre* (2013).

The interview

GMV: According to Christophe Prochasson (2008), twentieth-century historians could be, for several reasons, more prone to compassionate drifts and tormented outpouring. Have you ever felt this danger in your work, or in that of a colleague's?

RB: I am not sure that the historians of the past had more perspective and objectivity with regard to subjects considered as 'sensitive' in their time. I am thinking, for example, of Catholic and Protestant historiography of the

‘martyrs’, i.e. the victims of religious wars of both confessions. I do know that the prominent historian of funerary architecture Stevens Curl wanted to study tombs *combining wit with compassion* (Curl, 1972/2004). But this word does not have quite the same semantic field in English and in contemporary French. ‘Compassion’ for the dead can only be retrospective and take place through remembrance. Apart from compassion due to the victims of genocides or disasters, in my country today, it is often ‘geometrically variable’, as people say in France, and strongly related to the views expressed by politicians. I am struck by your emphasis on the emotional aspect of these researches. For my generation, emotions counted little compared to the political and ideological commitments. It is perhaps the consequence of going from written cultural impregnation to audio-visual impregnation. Nevertheless, a historian is a child of their time. They are steeped in the collective attitudes of their time. The death of youths and of children in particular, is an absolute tragedy for the people of our time and thus for me. When doing my surveys in the framework of my doctoral thesis, I dreaded coming across tombs of children and teenagers. I saw that one of them was enriched with engravings and new objects over the years, all brought by its mother to the child at each of its posthumous birthdays. She must have died since because the tomb is now abandoned and its furniture vandalised.

- AC: No, because I am able to work on ‘cold’ subjects (a bad play on words!) with regard to the news or current issues, on subjects where there is no emotional overload, no controversy, nor any stake in remembering something like the colonial history, for example. Besides, death being a universal experience, these subjects immediately speak to all and touch the reader without resorting to ‘tormented outpouring’ as a rhetoric tool.
- GMV: To give an example, Arlette Farge underlines that every historian has to remain clear-headed in order to keep a distance from the subject of her study, without completely banning empathy. It is not a natural process; it derives from constant work. What has been your strategy to avoid any identification that would hamper critical understanding of a historical document?
- MV: I have always repeated, at the risk of sounding like a broken record to my students, Alphonse Aulard’s well-known quote (1849–1928): *In order to understand the French Revolution, you have to love it*. I was hoping to trigger surprise, and then reflection. In his time, Alphonse Aulard was often associated to the school of positivist historians, along with Charles-Victor Langlois (1863–1929) and Charles Seignobos (1854–1942),¹ who laid the foundations of a would-be objective history and of a critical study of texts and documents, behind which the personality of the researcher has to give way in order to let the document speak for itself. This is shown by the multiple compendiums of sources supervised by Aulard. The Master was no rookie; and yet he let go: you need to love what you want to understand. He thus illustrated clearly one well-known trait of the revolutionary historiography, which lies at the core of a debate to which you cannot stay indifferent. Could it be a genuine trait of certain periods, topics or characters? The imposed studies, teaching and research show us that many historical subjects are annoying. Some characters make us feel like Dorine in Molière’s *Tartuffe*: *I could see you stark naked from head to toe without being the least bit tempted*. Some French people, quizzed on the French Revolution by Frédéric Garcia in 1988, answered that it did not strike an emotional chord (Garcia, 2000). Emotion is not compulsory. But now

that referring to positivist history has become obsolete, because history was deconstructed step by step since the generation that published the *Annales*. We have since witnessed successive categories: first, there was the traditional, positivist and political history of events; then economic and social history as demonstrated by the *Annales* group, but without enough quantification, globalisation, or Marxist or liberal modelling. Then came the *Histoire des Mentalités* – a new historiographical category that claimed to know what humans have in the back of their minds; but too fragile and unsettled, it was replaced by the study of collective representations, however still abstract and reductionistic. Then came the history of emotions. The historian no longer had to apologise to get involved in the story they were telling because getting involved had become both the fabric and the goal of history. In addition to over 50 years of historical research and 80 years of life, I have been through almost all these steps. I have had passions, whether historical or else, I have been angry, appalled or dazzled. But while studying history, I have always had care to respect its goal, which is to track (or to express) not truth, but one truth among other truths – the ones I found in the counterfeit *Memoirs of Joseph Fouché (1759–1820)* (Vovelle, 1992–1993), or by studying heroes I first disliked, such as Jean-Paul Marat (1743–1793), who was the subject of my first book (Vovelle, 1963). And of course, when it came to the topics that caught my attention the most, i.e. the French Revolution and collective representations of death, I have always respected the truth with regard to myself. I have never chosen them at random; they had become obvious as subjects of study. However, studying history was more than a selfish occupation, a gloomy pleasure or the repetition of my dreams.

- GMV: Beyond the dangerous aspects of historian's emotions which would prevent them from stepping back, do you see positive aspects in certain emotions in historiographical work? Can they be a (re)source of knowledge?
- RB: A form of empathy, i.e. the will to share the emotions of others to understand them, makes you lenient and allows you to step back from the prejudices of our time and our social category: the tombstone covered in urns, vases et statuettes of angels I have mentioned earlier was in very 'bad taste'. But the naivety of the engraving also made it heart-wrenching (*With you for your twentieth birthday, your mom*). In a very touristic urban cemetery, the large tomb of a wife who died too early is almost covered with the plaques added each year by the widower who had it build. These texts may seem ridiculous because of the clumsy expression, the poor vocabulary or the spelling mistakes. But they represent a document which is invaluable and worthy of respect, if only for everyone's freedom of speech. The person in charge of the cemetery is severely critical of this proof of marital faithfulness and discreetly regrets not having the power to ban these texts.
- GMV: In the work of the historian, are their own emotions rather a danger or can they also be one (re)source of knowledge? Is this positive or negative dimension, above all a question of measure and intensity?
- AC: Emotions and intuitions open channels that reason is responsible to check: they are complementary. A source that shows or causes emotion acts like a pulse generator or an indicator, and sheds new light on the corpus it is related to. For me, emotion unveils relief and riches and raises questions that the analytical approach, preprogrammed by the way the problem is stated, does not necessarily reveal. For example, when I started to study the official reports of capital punishment in the nineteenth

century, I was touched by the recurrent descriptions of physical symptoms of fear among the convicts; in retrospect, the historiography of capital punishment suddenly seemed conceptual, disembodied and overhanging. I felt like trying to write a history of capital punishment as a physical and emotional test, and to reinterpret the ritual from this perspective in order to make an emotional history of the guillotine focusing on the actors of history, and more specifically, on the often-forgotten convicts.

GMV: What role did your own emotions play in your work?

MV: The question seems less futile than inappropriate, as it refers to an issue or a model that I don't endorse. The answer could be: a great role. But I didn't spend my private life pinching myself so as not to cry. Emotional factors have initiated and/or shaped a good part of my research. I mentioned it in some of my forewords and dedications: *Vision de la mort* (Vovelle & Vovelle, 1970), *Piété baroque* (Vovelle, 1978), *Les Âmes du purgatoire* (Vovelle, 1996), *Les Sans-culottes marseillais* (Vovelle, 2009)²; but in other works, I kept it for myself, like in *Religion et révolution* (Vovelle, 1976).³ As for the rest, I would like to quote an old Italian Jansenist confessor I met while preparing *Mourir autrefois* (Vovelle, 1974): 'That would be most indiscrete'.

GMV: Your work covered many aspects of the complex relationship human beings have with their own finitude. What subject did you feel the closest to, when it came to feeling empathy for people of the past?

RB: I am increasingly sensitive to the massive cultural losses that mark our times. Languages are dying out – including that of my ancestors', Occitan; a huge written and oral heritage is threatened; knowledge, professional know-how, gestures, lifestyles connected to nature or even social relationships have disappeared or are disappearing. I consider that the *ars moriendi*, or preparing to die, and more generally, the attitudes to death and the hereafter as formerly defined by Catholicism and Protestantism, were a major aspect of the West's spiritual contribution and dynamism, as well as a chance for the ancient populations.

GMV: Since your first work, written after your doctoral thesis dedicated to eugenics in France in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Carol, 1995), you concentrated your research on the history of the human body, and more especially in the light of medical sciences. What has been the role of emotions – those of people from the past – in your history of the body?

AC: My experience as a historian of medicine goes from theory to practice, and from abstract to concrete. With eugenics, I focused mostly on intellectual history; I felt frustrated, as I wanted to see the impact of medicine on the bodies – hence my choice to work on medical management of death. Only at that point did I come across the complex variety of emotions that surround death, and that medical staff have to handle and monitor: terror, pity, repulsion ...

GMV: In the course of your career, you have worked in a large number of archives and libraries, and have delved into tens of thousands of documents. What emotions have you generally been through while in touch with this factual, but also 'sensory' past? Were there recurrent emotions and others that were extremely rare? How have they changed over the years?

MV: Eagerness, fatigue as everything had to be done by hand at the time of 'quantitative history', obstinacy when the result of my first research met with hostility and incomprehension; but obviously joy also, when

discovering unexplored documents, organising ideas and confirming assumptions at the end of a blind research; and amazement when I browsed 3000 images for my books on the iconography of the French Revolution. I took visual pleasure in all the books where I used images. More perverse (?)⁴ for today's emotional readers may be my very strong addiction to percentages as well as curves and graphs, inherited from my semi-geographical training, and my insidious ambition to demonstrate: here are emotions which, I'm afraid, not to have been able to share with the wider public. But that component of my activity has evolved: the quantitative historian has grown a strong temptation for case studies, offbeat, inspired or even deviant characters like Theodore Desorgues (Vovelle, 1985), Joseph Sec (Vovelle, 1975) or Jean-Baptiste Boyer d'Argens (Vovelle, 2003). Identification doesn't imply complete assent or complicity though. The last emotion, in case no one realised it, is irony or – more nicely – humour, and a distance from certain subjects.

GMV: Like Michel Vovelle with the altar of purgatory in churches, you also outlined what could be called an ethnographic history by visiting cemeteries like Saint-Pierre cemetery in Marseilles or the Père-Lachaise in Paris, to which you dedicated several studies. What was the emotional dimension of your work in this particular historical space?

RB: Immersing oneself in such a landscape is a specific experiment, and all the more so as I often did surveys on Sunday, when there are fewer visitors, so as not to be interrupted by guards or strollers eager to know what I'm doing, or even mere passers-by sometimes pathetically looking for someone to talk to. The old cemetery is a plentiful space, clearly partitioned by the tombs and the vegetation. I once saw thieves break into a chapel and plunder it, unaware of my presence nearby, between the monuments. The cemetery of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century is a space composed on both public and private initiatives, with a view to stirring the visitor's senses and imagination, and causing emotion. When there are really lots of tombs and trees, it can give a strong sense of a 'world of death'. However, it should be noted that yesterday's inscriptions offer a rather invigorating image of an ideal society thanks to consistent praise of the deceased. It is the recent and modern cemetery that is gloomy, with its monotonous shapes, its laconic inscriptions, its scarce statuary and a usual lack of landscape research.

GMV: Arlette Farge talks about the taste for archives. What are the emotional and sensory aspects of this taste in your relationship with the written and unwritten sources?

RB: Arlette Farge studies legal archives, in which interrogations and incriminating evidences can give an illusion of looking directly at aspects of the past. My written documentation is much more administrative, although certain scholars have left astonishing testimonies (Bertrand, Carol, & Pelen, 2005). In Avignon, an eighteenth-century canon wrote a collection of epitaphs. Between two statements of Latin inscriptions, he told one of its exploits: as the archbishop had suddenly died, he could go down in the archiepiscopal vault, described it, identified the coffins, listed the vases containing the viscera, proof of the embalming. His writings show the enthusiasm of the explorer. Small surprising discoveries can be made in the cemetery, and not only in the monumental cemeteries of the big cities: small, rural cemeteries can contain unexpected tombs, like statues made by amateurs out of modelled cement, similar to those made by Ferdinand Cheval.⁵ I also saw a simple tombstone, behind which was painted in

awkward letters: '[plot] rented for fifteen years'. One never knows what one is going to find further down the alley. Once, at the Père-Lachaise, hidden behind a line of high monuments, a couple of young people in bathing suits were sunbathing on a flagstone.

- GMV: You have worked a lot on the deformed and sick bodies (Bertrand & Carol, 2005), on the corpses, and on the bodies destroyed or mutilated by criminal justice. In order to write this history, you used various written and iconographic sources, but you also studied the scientific and anatomical collections. What are the emotional dimensions of your contact with these traces of the past and with the places where they are kept?
- AC: Working on these sources for years is not insignificant. In a certain way, death grew familiar to me, and the emotion it causes has faded away and settled down. But examining, for example, hundreds of official reports of capital punishment awakens the emotion and brings a feeling being overwhelmed – so many heads cut off! – which is paradoxically accompanied by a satisfaction of having done my duty: to apprehend and restore the three-dimensional perspective and dignity of each of these lives sentenced to oblivion and penal infamy thanks to a 'moved' reinterpretation of their anguish.
- GMV: In your written works and oral contributions (teaching, conferences, interviews) on the relationship that men and women of the past have with death, have you ever imposed a form of self-censorship with regard to a subject, an image to publish, or a word or expression to use, in fear of the emotions they could arouse?
- MV: I have partly answered this question. While dealing, in some of my research (especially at the beginning), with subjects related to religious history which caused a good part of my readership to think I was tackling issues that were not my concern, I had to apply self-censorship, which I didn't like, as well as what appeared as a provocation. It happened more specifically when I talked about 'dechristianization' in relation to the age of the Enlightenment, a provocation I repeated several times by using this 'fallacious word' – to quote René Rémond (1918–2007) – several decades ago, when speaking about 'dechristianisation' was still taboo or restricted. Images have often conveyed my ideas and dreams much better than words.
- RB: Like most of those who have dealt with funerary topics, I have only exceptionally mentioned the decomposition of corpses; that was in a communication on exhumation in the French law, which is due to be published in Spanish in Mexico City. Indeed, this phenomenon appears only implicitly in sources. In cemeteries, everything tries to hide it and make people forget it.
- AC: If I have applied forms of self-censorship, it is not in the way your question seems to suggest it. What I fear more than to shock, is to be tempted to fall into easy macabre or 'Grand-Guignol'⁶ to 'impress' the audience, because the macabre fascinates people at little expense. Indeed, around dead bodies, violent death and thanatomorphosis, there seem to be an anthropological fascination (comparable to that described by Jean-Jacques Courtine about freakshows) (Courtine, 2006) that can no longer be seen collectively in public space (as mortuaries, scaffolds or dissections are no longer visible), except perhaps through art, which creates a distance and gives us a more 'noble' outlook on death. But this scopical drive is always satisfied in the private sphere, in front of a television or computer screen or when browsing the pages of a magazine. Could this drive be a way,

once the shock is over, to feel alive, as if we were becoming more aware of our own normality in front of an exhibition of monsters? It is simply necessary to remain in the scientific field, show only what is justified by the subject – and be Doctor Frederick Treves,⁷ rather than Phineas Taylor Barnum!⁸

GMV: In France, like in other countries, the history of medicine is dominated by men. Have there been any particular emotions linked to this ‘gender’ aspect of your work?

AC: No.

GMV: In a television programme entitled *Apostrophes* (on October 28th, 1983), a few months after his wife died, historian Philippe Ariès said that on this occasion, he was able to understand better the behaviour of doctors and hospitals, but as for the researcher’s own feelings, that having written or reflected on death brings absolutely nothing. Is the historian thus as ‘naked’ as anyone else when confronted to the death of others? Or has the study of these people of the past with their fears, certainties and hopes played a role in your relationship with the private and intimate dimension of death?

MV: I can’t deny, obviously, that in my research on death, I was deeply touched by my personal life; first, the death of my first wife Gaby after the intimate struggle her illness had brought about from 1964 to 1969, echoing with our strange pilgrimage when we were spending so much time looking for the souls in purgatory across the churches of Provence – the believer that she was and the non-believer that I was, can be seen as bordering on the history of the emotions. Just try making sense of that. During our wanderings, we discovered in our own way the purgatory the historian Jacques Le Goff invented 12 years later (Le Goff, 1981/1984). I have been lucky to spend 37 more years with Monique, my second wife. I thus believe that I had already learnt much when I started writing the following episodes of my series on death (Vovelle, 1974; Vovelle, 1996; Vovelle, 1983/2000). Can this series be considered as the stages of a therapy designed to help me face my own work of mourning? That can be said since I was imprudent enough to dedicate *Les âmes du purgatoire* (Vovelle, 1996) to Monique by quoting poet Paul Éluard (1895–1952): ‘Take my hand, I shall take you far’.⁹ Death caught up with us. I was careful however, and the successive publications and republications 20 years later are an imposing testimony of my obstinacy to explain more than to understand. What I rewrote 20 years after the conclusion of the first edition that had then become the introduction of the second edition, I took of the changes that had occurred in such a short time in the experience of death. This shows how much I have learnt and am still learning today at almost 80 years old, while death has already laid its hand on my shoulder. I have changed. For nearly 20 years, I have given one of the inaugural conferences of the preparation course for palliative care at the hospital Paul Brousse in Villejuif. Invited today to contribute to a scientific publication as a senior and elderly historian, I am now embarrassed to say that I would be grateful to a doctor to help me in this final passage. Is that an indiscreet confidence? I’ll risk it for the sake of science, i.e. for the sake of this investigation. I have learnt much in books and endeavoured to transmit my knowledge. But in the end I can hear Jacques-Benigne Bossuet (1627–1704) declaim: ‘What will it serve you to have written so much in this book, to have filled all its pages with beautiful script, when in the end a single stroke will erase it all?’¹⁰ What a style!

- GMV: In the foreword of the new edition of *La Mort et l'Occident* (Vovelle, 1983/2000), you emphasise how, in the 1990s, you were appointed as an expert adviser on the topics related to death and dying even beyond the historical field itself. What were our contemporaries seeking, and what are they still seeking today by delving into the past? What were the intellectual, professional but also personal reasons which have convinced you to make a contribution as an historian to the debates on extremely significant subjects such as AIDS or infant death?
- MV: I'm afraid I have already given long answers to the previous questions. What are our contemporaries seeking? Pierre Nora, who doesn't like death, but is often mistaken (there are 15 death-related items in his *Lieux de Mémoire*) (Nora, 1984, 1986, 1992), had warned me in 1976 while reluctantly entrusting me with the drafting of *Mourir autrefois* (Vovelle, 1974): 'My dear Michel, this won't have any success; it is a frightening subject'. Today, as much as yesterday, death is doing well. Preoccupations have changed; the dominant issues are now ageing, Alzheimer's disease and degeneration. It is with concern that the elders are beating their retreat. I will not write the third foreword I had promised to *La Mort et l'Occident* (Vovelle, 1983/2000). The subject, as you say it with relevance, is particularly 'sensitive'.
- GMV: To what extent and how has working 'scientifically' on death influenced your relationship to this event in your private life?
- RB: I am very surprised to see that my contemporaries hardly seem to foresee that they are going to die – and even that they can die any moment. My studies on death have at least provided me with a more-refined perception of the passing time and the remaining time.
- AC: One of the reasons why I have worked on death is the rather brutal confrontation with the dead body of a relative right after his death. I was afraid to remove the sheet that was covering him, but at the same time, I felt I had to go and look at the body, not to make as if it were 'nothing'. This experience affected me deeply. Then, after studying death for many years, I had the feeling I had tamed the prospect of my own death. On the other hand, when I lost my father recently, even if a part of me observed, understood and anticipated what was happening around him, the violent separation has yet remained unbearable; nothing, I believe, prepares to the loss of the beloved ones.

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Notes

- [1] These two historians have authored the famous *Introduction aux études historiques*. Paris: Hachette, 1898.

- [2] These books are dedicated to his first wife, Gaby Vovelle, who died in 1969, or to his second wife, Monique Vovelle, who died in 2008. Michel Vovelle refers to this personal grief further in the interview.
- [3] Michel Vovelle started his book on a quotation from Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1876): 'Go around' – Bøyg's leading line to Peer in the second act. What M. Vovelle meant was: 'Turn around [the subject studied]'.
[4] The question mark is Michel Vovelle's.
- [5] Ferdinand Cheval, who worked as a postman, built in the village of Hauterives (in Rhône-Alpes, France) from 1879 to 1912 his 'ideal palace', an extraordinary monument covered in sculptures made of modelled cement where he expected to be buried (before building a tomb for himself in the cemetery). This example of naive art was much admired by the surrealist writers and was listed as a historical monument.
- [6] The *Théâtre du Grand-Guignol* was a theatre in Paris which, from 1897 to 1962, specialised in naturalistic horror shows.
- [7] Sir Frederick Treves (1853–1923), eminent British physician, still known today for having taken care of Joseph Carey Merrick, the 'Elephant Man', whose story became also a famous movie in 1980 by David Lynch.
- [8] Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810–1891) was a famous American show business man whose amusements (circus, exhibitions and musical concerts) had great success both the United States and in Europe.
- [9] Paul Eluard, *Vivre*, *Le Livre ouvert*. 1939–1940. Paul Eluard, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. de Marcelle Dumas et Lucien Scheler. Paris : Gallimard, 1968, vol. I, p. 1013.
- [10] Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, famous bishop of the French Catholic Church, was renowned for his sermons and speeches. The quotation comes from the *Sermon pour le vendredi de la quatrième semaine de carême. Sur la mort* given in 1666. See *Œuvres complètes de Bossuet* [...], Vol. IX, II, *Les Sermons*, par F. Lachat. Paris : Librairie de Louis Vivès, 1862, p. 363.

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