

# HISTORY'S REMAINS: OF MEMORY, MOURNING, AND THE EVENT

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## ABSTRACT

Jacques Derrida has written much in recent years on the topic of mourning. This essay takes Derrida's insights into mourning in general and collective mourning in particular in order to ask about the relationship between mourning and politics. Taking a lead from a recent work of Derrida's on Jean-François Lyotard, the essay develops its argument through two examples, one from ancient Greece and one from twentieth-century America: the role mourning plays in the constitution and maintenance of the state in Plato's *Laws* and the controversy surrounding the consecration of the tomb of the Unknown Soldier of Vietnam in Arlington National Cemetery. This latter example provides the occasion for questioning the possibilities of mourning the unknown or the unidentifiable and for addressing some of the ways in which the United States has mourned or failed to mourn, remembered or failed to remember, in the wake of September 11.

Writing is indeed always marked by death, as Jacques Derrida has shown and taught us for more than four decades now. As soon as ink is put to paper, as soon as signs appear on the computer screen, as soon as a proposed title is sent off by e-mail, writing detaches itself from both its production and its reception and so can do without both its addresser and its intended addressee. In its very structure, then, writing is related always to death, but also by means of this same delay between the sending of a sign and its reception, this deferral between two inscriptions of the sign, to the time of the event—that is, to the unknown and the unforeseen.

In writing the vast majority of this text in spring and summer 2001, in writing about what I then dared to call the “ethics of mourning”<sup>1</sup> in the work of Jacques Derrida, and in developing my argument by means of a particularly poignant example of mourning in the United States, I could have easily imagined that those words, that this text, might survive me or any number of its potential addressees, that the difference

between writing and reading might spell death for me or any number of those I hoped might read me. But what I could have never foreseen in this delay between the sending of a sign and its reception turned out to be precisely “the event,” the event that will have so profoundly shaken the country of which I had written and already changed its relationship to death and to mourning. If I have thus decided to submit for this issue of *Research in Phenomenology* essentially the same words, the same literal signs, I would have sent in summer 2001, it is with the knowledge that this has become a completely other text. For it is clear that, more than one year later, with more than half of the 2,829 victims of the World Trade Towers still unidentified, one can no longer read a title like “History’s Remains” in the same way, at least not in the United States. Today, the same text that speaks of history, of politics, and of mourning is now obliged to respond to what may have been from the beginning its vocation; the same text that would have spoken of “the work of mourning” and of a certain work of collective mourning in the United States is perhaps now destined to participate in that work.

“The work of mourning” I said and put into quotation marks, for it was precisely around September 11, 2001, that a book of essays of Jacques Derrida that I had the opportunity to translate and introduce with Pascale-Anne Brault was published under the very title *The Work of Mourning*.<sup>2</sup> The coincidence between this publication and the events of September 11 was lost on no one: when in early October Derrida did a book signing at Labyrinth Books in New York City, over 400 people turned out—coming, I think, not simply to buy and have signed a book by Derrida, not simply to hear Derrida speak of mourning and learn from his writing something about how to mourn, but, in coming together, in participating even in this commercial ritual, actually to participate in the work of mourning, in one of the first in what would prove to be a long series of public or collective gatherings of mourning in New York and elsewhere. Though this book of Derrida is essentially a book about and of what we might call private mourning, individual mourning, in this case Derrida’s mourning of some fourteen close friends and colleagues, there are clues throughout about how to relate these reflections to public mourning, to better and worse ways of remembering the dead through ritual and memorialization, better and worse ways of speaking about, recalling, or understanding death—or, perhaps, the “event.” I thus propose to take up some of these clues from Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning* in order to think pre-

cisely about how we should mourn and remember in the wake of the event—or the events—of September 11. I shall do this, however, only indirectly, following the same line of investigation I was pursuing in the spring and summer before the “events” of September 11, 2001. And so instead of getting involved in the debate or polemic surrounding the proper response to 9/11 at ground zero, whether to rebuild or not, whether to list names of the deceased on a statue, column, or wall as was done for the Vietnam War Memorial or not, I would like to recall some of the controversy surrounding another relatively recent attempt to remember and memorialize, the controversy surrounding the consecration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier from Vietnam in Arlington National Cemetery. Ignoring here all the differences between a memorial erected to soldiers fallen in combat during wartime and civilians killed in an attack outside conventional warfare, I will suggest that we can learn a great deal about mourning—and perhaps about how to mourn the event, these events—by looking at this controversy and at the way in which it marks a certain epoch of mourning in the West and most particularly in America. My trajectory will thus be from Derrida’s *The Work of Mourning*, through the “beautiful death” of ancient Athens, to what might be called in the wake of recent events “mourning in America.”

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*The Work of Mourning* consists of a series of fourteen rather remarkable texts written by Derrida over the past two decades after the deaths of friends and colleagues such as Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jean-Marie Benoist, Gilles Deleuze, Paul de Man, Michel Foucault, Edmond Jabès, Sarah Kofman, Emmanuel Levinas, Max Loreau, Jean-François Lyotard, Louis Marin, Joseph Riddel, and Michel Servière. Though these texts vary in form between words or letters of condolence, memorial essays, eulogies and funeral orations, they nonetheless share certain traits that make them identifiable as belonging, if not to a clearly defined genre, at least to a delimitable mini-corpus within the corpus of Derrida. In each of these texts, Derrida attempts to continue his decades-long meditation on the structures and ethical implications of death and mourning at the same time as he is undergoing, in a very personal way but also in public, beneath the public light, the death and mourning of a friend. Though Derrida has argued from quite early on, indeed already in his work on Husserl in the 1950s and 1960s, that the very structure of the trace implies death, and though

he has written more recently about how friendship is structured from the very beginning by the possibility at least that one of two friends will see the other die, and so, surviving, will be left to bury, to commemorate, and to mourn, that is, though Derrida has formalized these laws of death and of mourning in numerous texts over the last few decades, he has also had to undergo or bear witness to these laws, as friends—and there are now many of them—have gone before him, making explicit or effective the structural laws that will have determined all his relationships and friendships from the very beginning. From the very first of these essays, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes” (my emphasis), written in 1981, up to the very last or latest, “Lyotard and *Us*,” written in 1999, Derrida has been concerned with the relationship between the singularity of death and its inevitable repetition, with what it means to reckon with death, or with the dead, with all those who were once close to us but who are now either only “in us” or infinitely other. Derrida thus permitted my co-editor and me to take the risk of gathering together into a single volume a series of until then singular responses to singular deaths. We thus collected not those texts that speak of the work of mourning, of phantoms and specters, in a more or less theoretical fashion, but those that enact this work of mourning—and of friendship—in a more explicit way, texts written after the deaths of friends and colleagues to remember their words and deeds, their works and days, and so bear witness to a living relationship with them. We thus gathered together not simply Derrida’s words or works on the *theme* of mourning, but his own *work* or *labor* of mourning, still legible—and so still at work—in these texts.

In what follows, I would like to take these texts of and on mourning in a somewhat different direction in order to ask about collective or communal mourning—particularly here in America. How is it that we mourn together—as a family, a community, or a state? Why do we do it? Is it a good thing? Is it really mourning, or are all the rituals and ceremonies of public mourning designed to assure us that death has not really taken place and that there is no real need to mourn? To flesh out, as we say, these questions concerning collective or communal mourning, I will concentrate on just two examples, one from each end of the Western tradition, so to speak, the first, the role mourning plays in the constitution of the state in Plato, particularly in his *Laws*, and, second, closer to home, in the spirit of repatriating the very concept of mourning, the very unique twentieth-century—and I underscore *twentieth century*—ritual of collective mourning in the United

States known as the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a story of haunting and a story itself haunted, as we shall see, by many of the most pressing ethical and philosophical issues of our time.

In *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida continues his long meditation on the nature of the other and the gaze of the other from Husserl to Levinas by suggesting that mourning has to do with incorporating not just the deceased, but their gaze, a gaze that makes us responsible before the deceased and that can be responded to only as a kind of absolute imperative. It is this gaze that makes all mourning, according to Derrida, at once necessary and impossible, necessary insofar as the work of mourning involves incorporating the friend, coming to terms with his or her death within ourselves, and impossible insofar as the singularity of the friend, that which must be incorporated, that gaze that first calls us to be responsible, always exceeds our subjectivity and our capacity to make the other—here, the deceased other—our own. Hence mourning is always related to the impossible incorporation of a gaze that constitutes for us an infinite demand, a gaze that always hovers between someone and something, the completely identified and the unidentifiable, the knowable and the unknown. Throughout the essays in *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida evokes the possibility of an interiorization of what can never be interiorized, of what is always before and beyond us as the source of our responsibility. This is, Derrida writes, the “unbearable paradox of fidelity” (*WM*, 159). The look that is “in us” is not ours, as the images within us might seem to be. We look at the dead, who have been reduced to images “in us,” and we are looked at by them, but there is no symmetry between these gazes. In other words, writes Derrida, “Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same . . . the completely other, dead, living in me” (*WM*, 41–42).

In all of these texts, Derrida at once thematizes and undergoes this work of mourning, this individual or personal work of mourning, and he does so in each case in a more or less public way, participating in public rituals and using a form if not a genre that is recognizable and repeatable. Indeed, it is only on the basis of this form or genre that all these texts can be delimited within the Derridean corpus and assigned a particular and unique place within it, separate from all the other texts of Derrida that speak of death and of mourning. *The Work of Mourning* is thus a collection of texts that belong to the same “genre”—call it the eulogy, the funeral oration, the memorial essay, or simply “the work of mourning.” And yet, it could be argued, such a genre

is surely not one genre among others but the very one that opens up the possibility of a social or political space to accommodate all the others. Though Derrida does not try to show in *The Work of Mourning* how politics or the political is related to or perhaps even arises *out of* mourning, out of the rites and rituals of mourning, he has written of these larger stakes in many other places, from *Glas* to *Specters of Marx* to *Aporias*. In this latter, for example, he writes:

In an economic, elliptic, hence dogmatic way, I would say that there is no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning, without a topolology of the sepulcher, without an anamnestic and thematic relation to the spirit as ghost.<sup>3</sup>

And in the long essay in *The Work of Mourning* devoted to Jean-François Lyotard, Derrida speaks of Lyotard's own analyses, in *The Differend* and elsewhere, of the political dimensions of the funeral oration. Since Plato's *Menexenus*, or since the funeral oration of Pericles that Plato parodies in this dialogue, politics would seem to be related to, or founded in, mourning. In the Athenian context, for example, it is related to a rhetoric of mourning that tries to complete or else foreclose mourning by lifting death up, sublating it in the fulfillment and glory of the "beautiful death."

The genre of the funeral oration is thus more than a powerful genre within an already constituted social and political context; it is the genre that helps consolidate if not constitute the power of that context, with all the promises and risks this entails. In his 1999 essay entitled "Lyotard and *Us*," written for a conference commemorating the one-year anniversary of Lyotard's death, Derrida analyzes in detail an enigmatic phrase about mourning that Lyotard wrote back in 1990 in an issue of a *revue* dedicated to the work of Derrida. The phrase consisted of just seven words in French, *il n'y aura pas de deuil*, shortened to just five in English, "There shall be no mourning." Derrida spends much of the essay turning round this phrase (in a way that resembles Lyotard's own analyses of phrase regimens). In the wake of the death of Jean-François Lyotard, this elliptical phrase can now be heard as either a description or perhaps a prediction of what *will* happen or what was bound to happen after the death of Lyotard or some other, "There shall be no mourning," in other words, "Wait and see, there will be no mourning, no one will mourn," or else a wish, desire, or prescription, "There shall be no mourning," "I would prefer that there be no mourning," or even a prohibition or order, "There shall be no mourning," "I forbid

you to mourn.” Derrida then goes on in the essay to argue through a reading of Lyotard’s 1983 text *The Differend* that there are two other instances in which Lyotard, without explicitly uttering the word mourning, in effect tells us that there is or shall be no mourning. The first is the instance of the “beautiful death,” the death extolled by Pericles in his funeral oration, or else by Socrates in his pastiche of that oration in the *Menexenus*. The second, around which so much of Lyotard’s work in general and *The Differend* in particular revolves, is “Auschwitz”—the exact opposite of the beautiful death, that is, the opposite of a death undergone for the sake of the city or some higher good. As Lyotard put it in *The Differend*, “‘Auschwitz’ is the forbiddance of the beautiful death.”<sup>4</sup> Though opposites with regard to the meaning of death, or meaning in death, the one assigning an ultimate meaning to death and the other removing all meaning from it, both the beautiful death and Auschwitz give us no reason to mourn, as both at once describe and prescribe that “There shall be no mourning.”

Leaving aside Lyotard’s analyses of the Greek beautiful death and of “Auschwitz,” along with Derrida’s analysis of these analyses in *The Work of Mourning*, I shall now turn, following Derrida following Lyotard, to one example from the Greek period Lyotard discusses and one from the twentieth century, that is, to two examples of collective mourning, two inscriptions, I will argue, of “there shall be no mourning,” namely, the regulation of mourning in Plato’s *Laws* and, closer to us, the consecration of history’s remains in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery.

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Like the *Republic*, Plato’s *Laws* attempts to think nothing less than the social organizations, arrangements, practices, rituals and, of course, laws by which the members of a polis should lead their lives from the cradle to the grave—or, actually, since the Athenian prescribes both a gymnastic regimen for pregnant women and ways of dealing with ghosts—from the womb to well beyond the tomb. The *Laws* is thus an exemplary text for demonstrating Derrida’s claim that “there is no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning, without a topolology of the sepulcher.” Indeed, there are numerous passages in the *Laws* that speak of regulating the form, appearance, size, and duration of the rites or rituals of mourning. Most of these are grouped together near the end of the twelfth and final book of the dialogue—a book devoted, we might say, to the last things, to the

night synod that will preserve and maintain the polis and to the burial of the dead who, as we will see, will serve as the polis's ultimate sanction or guarantor. My hypothesis in reading the *Laws* will be that, for Plato, the banner under which the well-regulated individual and polis must live is always: "There shall be no mourning." Because mourning is a threat to both the individual and the state, to the individual because it convinces us that the body is more important than the soul, and to the state because it puts private or family interests above the interests of the state, the rites of mourning must be tightly regulated and controlled. For both political and philosophical reasons, the city and its citizens must be convinced or taught to get over death and, thus, get over mourning. This will be done not by prohibiting rites of mourning altogether but by controlling, converting, or transforming these rites, or, since Derrida uses the word in his analysis of Lyotard, *sublating* them into the beautiful death, or, indeed, into a philosophical death.

In the *Laws*, mourning is limited or transformed in at least four ways. First, because the right or privilege to mourn or to be mourned is tacitly granted by the state, certain actions on the part of an individual can lead to having that privilege revoked. Those convicted of the willful murder of a parent, child, or sibling, are thus to be executed and cast out of the city "naked" on a "crossroad," their corpse left *unburied* [ἄταφον] (873b).<sup>5</sup> The suicide, though allowed to be buried in a tomb, will not have a headstone to mark the name, and the "nameless" body must be buried on the borders of the city, in a kind of barren no-man's-land (873d; see also 909c). We thus see here that limits to mourning, or to the rituals of mourning, are already thought in conjunction with the limits or borders of the polis. For some, for the worst kinds of criminals, such as those who kill someone of their own blood, there shall be no mourning, no rituals of mourning, not on the part of the city and not on the part of the individuals in the city.

If rituals of mourning are limited or prohibited in the case of individuals whose conduct is unbecoming to the city, it makes sense that the converse should be granted and even proscribed in the case of individuals who have performed heroic or admirable deeds for the city. In the final book of the *Laws*, therefore, we are given prescriptions for how the examiners or inspectors of the state, those most important to maintaining and overseeing its laws, are to be buried. Adorned all in white, the only color appropriate to the gods, these leaders are to be buried in an underground tomb of long-lasting stone whereupon a



grove of trees is to be planted in memory of their service (947e; see 956a). They are to be given a full military funeral, with everyone in military garb and young boys singing the “national anthem [τὸ πατριὸν μέλος]” (947d), since, as the Athenian makes clear, only hymns of praise are to be sung, with no dirges or lamentations allowed. Music, gymnastic, and horse-racing contests are then to be held every year in honor of these men (947e).

Clearly, Plato envisions using the rites of mourning—or rites of remembering the dead—as ways of consolidating the body politic, ways of unifying it around the ghosts of leaders past. The burials of public men are thus celebrated and recalled yearly in an attempt to set before the citizens models of virtuous conduct. At the same time however as they provide explicit models of virtue, they also provide implicit models of the proper way of treating death and the dead. So even here, even in the case of those who deserve the citizens’ honor and thus, it seems, deserve to be mourned, there shall be no mourning.

For the worst citizens, the worst criminals, there shall be no rituals of mourning, no burial, while for the best citizens, the leaders of the polis, there shall be celebration rather than mourning. For those in between these two extremes of virtue, those who die neither criminals nor heroes, mourning will be allowed—or tolerated—but it will be limited, the ideal still being, it seems, the vanishing point at which there shall be *no* mourning. Because, as the Athenian says, for all who have grown up and grown old in a law-abiding life, an “end” will come “in the course of nature [κατὰ φύσιν],” the death of the body, as a natural event, must not be given undue importance (958d–e). A series of regulations is thus implemented to minimize the potentially harmful effects of the dead on the living. Rule number one, get rid of the body as quickly as possible; the body of the deceased, the lifeless body, this site for potential mourning, should remain in the house only long enough for one to be *certain* it is dead, with the burial taking place usually on the third day (959a). Second, tombs, whether great or small, are not to be put on tillable land but on land suitable “to receive and hide [δεχόμενα κρύπτειν] the bodies of the dead with the least hurt to the living” (958d–e). In addition, the memorial mound erected over the dead is to be limited in size to that which can be accomplished by five men in five days, and the stone pillars shall not be “more than is required to hold . . . a eulogy of the dead man’s life consisting of not more than four heroic lines” (958e).<sup>6</sup>

Now, though it is “unseemly,” the lawmaker admits—but probably

also almost impossible and counterproductive—either to ordain or prohibit weeping for the dead, the state can and must nonetheless control its *appearance* in public. Hence loud mourning and lamentation *outside* the house is forbidden, and the dead cannot be carried on open roads and lamented in the streets. The funeral party must thus meet *outside* the city before daybreak (960a). Though citizens will no doubt mourn—and little save education can prevent this—either inside the house or outside the city, there shall be no mourning *outside* the house *inside* the city. Though we are not at the point of completely prohibiting mourning, its scope and public display are being severely limited—or else displaced. There can be mourning, but only outside the city, or only by proxy, with mourners hired from abroad, the implication of the Athenian being that it would be unseemly for a citizen to do the mourning himself (see 800e).

All these limits and conditions to mourning proposed by the Athenian meet with the general approval of his Cretan and Spartan interlocutors, both of whom come from timocratic states with customs, if not laws, already resembling these. Indeed, these three ways of promoting, if not instituting, that there shall be no mourning—prohibiting burial for certain crimes, celebrating the deaths of state leaders, and finally, minimizing the deaths of members of the state for the ultimate good of the state—are hardly unique to Plato and one could cite here any number of passages from Xenophon or others extolling, say, a belief in the glorious or beautiful death as a sacrifice for the polis that should be celebrated rather than lamented (see, for example, Xenophon's *Hellenica* VI.4.16). But what is rather unique and new, I believe, is the ultimate, philosophical justification Plato gives for such sacrifice—the fourth and final inscription in the *Laws* of “there shall be no mourning.” In Plato, or at least in a certain Plato, there is the belief that in giving oneself over to death, and even when doing so for the state, one is not merely sacrificing one's individual life for the continuance and survival of the state itself, or for one's own individual κλέος or glory in the state for generations to come, though these too may be true, but simply recognizing the proper relationship between the body and the soul. For those who understand the true relationship between the body and the soul, for those who understand that the soul is immortal and that, as the *Laws* puts it, the things of soul are to be honored above those of the body, there is no need to prohibit mourning since there simply shall be—there simply *will be*—no mourning. As the Athenian succinctly puts it in the *Laws*, with a formulation that

recalls Socrates's rebuke of those beginning to mourn him in the *Phaedo* (see 63b) and his seeming indifference to the fate of his own body after his death, the corpse is but a "soulless altar [ἄψυχον . . . βωμόν]" to the gods of the underworld on which one must spend in moderation (959d). In other words—and this is the great reversal we call Platonism—the body is but an appearance, an image or εἶδωλον of the soul, in the end, little more than a ghost. The Athenian says on behalf of his lawgiver in the *Laws*:

As in other matters it is right to trust [πείθεσθαι] the lawgiver, so too must we believe him when he asserts that the soul is wholly superior to the body, and that in actual life what makes each of us to be what he is is nothing else than the soul, while the body is a semblance which attends on each of us, it being well said that the bodily corpses are images [εἶδωλα] of the dead, but that which is the real self of each of us [τὸν δὲ ὄντα ἡμῶν ἕκαστον ὄντως], [is what] we term the immortal soul [ἀθάνατον . . . ψυχήν]. (959a–b)

For Plato, then, giving up the ghost means not, as it seems to have for Homer, releasing or expiring the spirit or soul, a kind of ghost, from the body, but, rather, leaving behind the ghost that *is* the body. It thus follows that one should not spend extravagantly on burials, for the "flesh [σαρκῶν]" one is burying, the Athenian affirms, is but the image of the friend or relative who has departed in fulfillment of his "destiny [μοῖραν]" (959c). This would seem to be the final justification, beyond or in addition to any political expediency, for transforming mourning into celebration, the result, I would argue, of subordinating an ethics of mourning to, and organizing the politics of mourning around, an ontology and epistemology marked by a strong opposition between being and becoming. For once one *knows* the difference between being and becoming, the soul and the body, once one *knows* this on the ontological level and is not simply persuaded of it by the guardians of the state, then there can be no mourning, there *will be* no mourning, while for those who do not yet know this the prescription must always remain—for the good of the state but also for what is beyond the state—"there *shall be* no mourning."

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I turn now to my second example, much more current and closer to home, so as to "bring closure," as we in the U.S. are so fond of saying, to this analysis of the politics of mourning. There are many examples

I could have chosen to try to say something about how we here in the U.S., as families, as communities, and as a nation try to forget death and the dead, try to forgo mourning by ritualizing it, but few are as striking as the dedication of a tomb of the unknown soldier—where we all, theoretically, all Americans are asked to collaborate or labor together in mourning the death of someone who has died, we tell ourselves, protecting our freedoms and liberties, someone particular whose name we do not know, someone nameless who stands as a symbol for all those we have lost. I have chosen this example also because of a personal memory—one of the strongest and strangest memories I have of collective mourning. The memory concerns the televised ceremony on Memorial Day 1984 of the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for the War of Vietnam. I still recall very vividly sitting in a small tavern in Boston around noontime with just a couple of other patrons and a bartender in the room, all strangers to me and, I think, to one another, watching on TV without comment the ceremony at Arlington National Ceremony whereby the unidentified remains of a U.S. serviceman were consecrated as part of the Tomb of the Unknowns containing the unidentified remains of soldiers from three previous American wars, the first two World Wars and the Korean War. The setting was something right out of the *Laws*, flags everywhere, officers decked out in full military regalia, a single coffin with an American flag draped over it, and then, presiding over it all, the American Pericles, President Ronald Reagan, larger than life in this ceremony of death, secular leader of the free world, at once president and priest and intercessor between us, all of us watching him on TV, and the Judeo-Christian God. With one hand outstretched toward this God, and the other turned downward toward the casket, Reagan concluded his speech by speaking in our name, or in the name of our nation, to this nameless soldier, speaking to him in the second person without a proper name, appealing to God to take him in glory from this mortal realm. Presenting the Medal of Honor to this unknown soldier, Reagan concluded:

Let us, if we must, debate the lessons learned [from this war] at some other time: Today we simply say with pride, “Thank you, dear son. May God cradle you in His loving arms. We present to you our nation’s highest award, the Medal of Honor, for service above and beyond the call of duty in action with the enemy during the Vietnam Era.”<sup>7</sup>

Part of the reason I can still hear the echo of these words, the ghost of Ronald Reagan, nearly twenty years later, is, I think, that I heard

them in public, that I had to check my emotions as I heard them because I was in public, and because I could tell by the attention and the silence in the tavern that my emotions were shared, profoundly shared. And shared, no doubt, by millions like us across the nation, a collective mourning filmed before a live audience but staged and scripted for satellite transmission to TV screens from coast to coast. Though my fellow patrons and patriots there in Boston were probably just as cynical as I was about these kinds of ritual events, and especially about the Vietnam War, though we all saw the flags and pomp for what they were, though we were well aware that the great communicator before us was no intercessor or priest for our nation, but simply someone who knew how to play one on TV, we were all deeply moved. I don't know whether I had already read at that time Kathleen Hall Jameson's brilliant work on Reagan rhetoric, but I think I already knew some of its guiding principles. And yet, despite this knowledge, I was moved, moved by the ceremony, moved by the death of a young man, and yet also—because this second thought came quickly on the heels of the first—moved and deeply disturbed by the terrifying thought that with this one ceremony all the horror and uncertainty, all the lies and deceptions of Vietnam had been recuperated, lifted up, transformed into a beautiful or glorious death. As if—and this was clearly its intention—all the protests, all the soul-searching, all the criticisms, all the anxiety of all our *Apocalypse Now*s, had been put to work in the service of our national interest, the remains of the unidentified victim of the Vietnam War joining those of three other wars in the American pantheon called Arlington National Cemetery. Though I did not put it in these terms at that time, I remember thinking that, from now on, when it comes to Vietnam, there shall be no mourning. Assuming that there was ever a time for mourning Vietnam, it had been proclaimed over by presidential decree. From now on, I thought, it would do no good mourning Vietnam, for with the burial of those unidentified remains everything in us that could not be identified, all our doubts and all our fears, all our anxieties and uncertainties, would be memorialized, glorified, and forgotten: sublated by presidential decree and a Medal of Honor.

(Let me add here parenthetically that I felt a similar clash of emotions some months ago during the 2002 Super Bowl pre-game and half-time shows, as images of the falling towers and ground zero—images that, after their endless repetition, had been removed for several weeks from our collective image screens—were juxtaposed with shots of our former presidents, the statue commemorating Iwo Jima,

and a tombstone bearing the name “unknown” at Gettysburg. We were even treated to a reconstitution of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, complete with costumes from the period, and then to a reading of the Declaration by former presidents and, yes, present football stars. Watching this spectacle, I felt the same mixed emotions, the same fascination and the same horror, as one of the two remaining Beatles and the Irish U2 played tributes to freedom American style, and as the names of those killed on September 11 were projected onto two enormous screens behind U2 that were raised slowly up to the roof of the Super Dome and then allowed to collapse quickly down to the ground like the crumbling towers. And I said to myself that in a few short months we had done such a fine job remembering these events, such a good job drawing parallels between these events and others that have marked our nation—World War II, the Civil War—that we were well on our way to forgetting them, to transforming our collective dirge of mourning into that triumphant chant that made its debut, I believe, during the U.S. victory in hockey over the Soviet Union in the 1980 Olympics, that collective chant “U-S-A, U-S-A, U-S-A.” And I told myself that, despite the many declarations of its imminent demise, the nation-state still remains pretty effective at glorifying, recuperating, lifting up and putting to work the blood that is spilled, or the bones that are buried in its soil. So good had we become at remembering, so wrapped up had we become in it, that we were clearly well on our way to forgetting. As Lyotard once put it, memorial history “*nous emballé*”—it wraps us up and gets us wrapped up, wraps us up in a flag and gets us wrapped up in a national ideology—like the one I saw conveyed in the gestures of Ronald Reagan back in 1984.)

And yet, over the years, I have continued to think back on this extraordinary event in my own life and in the life of our nation. I have often thought that despite my concerns that the Reagan rhetoric of mourning—whose necessity for a nation I am not here contesting—overcame in one gesture of the hand all the uncertainties that surfaced during what Reagan called the “Vietnam Era,” the fact that a tomb exists in our national cemetery commemorating the *remains* of *unidentified* or *unknown* soldiers leaves open a gaping wound at the very heart of the glorious death. Though they are buried as symbols of other unknown soldiers buried elsewhere, and so represent to some extent the sacrifices of all those killed in war, whether identified or unidentified, these unclaimed pieces of matter, these bones without a

proper name, remain—an unidentifiable specter that haunts our collective mourning and, by resisting our knowledge and our narratives, makes it interminable. These remains remain to claim us, I thought, in some very powerful way, reminding us that the separation of the dead from everything that remains for us the living, and so the separation of the dead from their very name and history, remains for us more palpable here, the absence more present and more pressing.

Though there have no doubt always been soldiers missing in action, soldiers never found, or else soldiers whose remains were found months or years later and so could not be identified, it was only in the last century, after World War I, that the United States has had an official Tomb of the Unknowns (though there was a similar tomb of the unknowns for soldiers killed during the Civil War).<sup>8</sup> Due in part to advances in technology during the First World War that could so ravage the human body as to make identification almost immediately impossible, the first unknown soldier was laid in the Tomb of the Unknowns in 1921, the remains of that soldier being chosen from among more than 1,600 other unidentified remains. In May 1958, when the remains of an unknown soldier from the Second World War and one from the Korean War were buried, there were more than 8,500 sets of unidentifiable remains to choose from for the World War II soldier, and for the Korean War, a war with far fewer American casualties, still more than 800 sets of unidentified remains. And choose the Department of Defense did, using as its criteria the standard of so-called “best remains,” those where at least 80 percent of the body was recovered, the idea being, it seems, to choose remains that were as intact as possible, as identifiable as possible, without being positively identifiable as someone in particular.

But then came Vietnam, where advances in technology that could so mutilate the body as to render it unidentifiable were countered by other technologies that made it easier to retrieve and identify human remains. And so, according to the web site of Arlington National Cemetery, due to the “prompt evacuation of the dead and wounded by helicopter, improved military record-keeping, and scientific advances in identification, there had never been more than four Vietnam unknowns at the Central Identification Laboratory in Hawaii at any one time.” The technology that made victims unidentifiable in the first place now contributed to making them more and more easily identifiable. And so, by 1982, when there were only two unidentified sets of remains from the Vietnam War the question was raised whether to place one

of these into the Tomb of the Unknowns. As one might expect, interests weighed in on both sides and the political stakes became high. (One need only recall, I mention parenthetically, Plato's and Xenophon's accounts of how Socrates almost got himself killed over his unwillingness to participate in the unjust prosecution and putting to death of the generals held responsible for not recovering the Athenian war dead from the waters of the Aegean Sea after the battle of Arginusae.<sup>9</sup> When bodies are not recovered, when the state cannot manage and organize mourning well, one can be sure that other heads will roll.) Thus while groups like the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion wished, along with the Reagan administration, to commemorate one of these remains and so symbolically include the Vietnam War into the twentieth century's list of honorable or glorious war efforts, other groups like the National League of POW-MIA Families fought against such a selection, fearing that the U.S. would reduce its efforts to locate and identify those still missing in action from the war. Though the Department of Defense had followed the orders of Congress in 1973 to construct a Tomb for the Vietnam Unknown, the tomb had remained empty for several years. And so the pressure mounted to identify one of the two unidentifiable remains as being those of the Unknown Soldier of Vietnam.

With just two to choose from, and with techniques for identification constantly improving, the decision over which one to bury was made in large part on the basis of which one appeared *least* likely to be identified or identifiable in the future. This meant that the previous standard of "best remains" had to be ignored or, actually, reversed, the search for the best remains turning into a search for the worst, that is, for those in the worst shape. Because the then-new technique of photo superimposition<sup>10</sup> gave hope that one of the two sets of remains would one day be identified or identifiable, the remaining set of remains, those referred to as X-26, came to be designated. They consisted of only six bones, four ribs, a pelvis, and a humerus, a mere 3 percent of the body—unidentifiable, and thus appropriate for inclusion in the Tomb of the Unknowns, and yet identifiable enough to ensure that these were indeed the bones of an American serviceman, the other necessary condition for the Tomb. Unknown, then, in terms of name, rank, and serial number, these remains were not completely without a profile. Though they held the least promise of ever being identifiable and attached to a proper name, it was nonetheless determined at the Central Identification Laboratory that they were the remains of a



“Caucasoid man of average muscularity, whose height had been approximately 68.4 inches and who had been between 26 and 33 years old.”

Not completely identifiable, though identified like the other remains in the Tomb of the Unknowns as belonging to a man, a soldier, an American soldier, these remains without any proper name were designated those of the unknown Soldier of Vietnam. To ensure that the remains would remain unidentifiable into perpetuity, that is, as an Army spokesperson said, “To preserve the casualty’s anonymity,” the “Army ordered all records pertaining to the case destroyed.” A spokesperson would say only: “He’s an American. We know he died in the conflict, but we just don’t know who he is. We used every trick, but we cannot match him to any known missing soldier. We think we can safely say this is a true Unknown from the Vietnam War.”

And so they were entombed, those six bones, laid in the tomb amidst the controversy I have recalled, during the ceremony I spoke of and still recall so vividly today in its televised version on May 28, 1984. They were entombed on Memorial Day 1984, and there they would remain, it was thought, forever, unidentified and “known but to God.” As the inscription on the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery puts it, “Here rests in honored glory an American soldier known but to God.” Unknown to us, then, but not to God—who is, according to this happy hypothesis, able to recognize, identify, lift up, and glorify any unknown—these remains were entombed and thereafter visited by hundreds of thousands of people a year. Right up until the moment when God’s knowledge became ours, when these remains were overtaken in their eternal repose by the powerful technologies of identification that emerged at the end of the last century and that are in the process of transforming just about everything having to do with our human condition, including the meaning of life and death and the possibilities for mourning, in this new century and millennium. Many Americans can still recall “the rest of the story,” which received a good deal of U.S. media attention a couple of years back, while many others, living in the genome age, could easily anticipate it: because of where the remains designated X-26 were found, because of when it was thought the death took place, hypotheses had long been formed about the possible identity of X-26, hypotheses that could be neither adequately proved nor disproved until the development of mitochondrial DNA testing in the mid-1990s that would allow comparison between the DNA of the remains and that of the presumed relatives of the deceased, particularly those in the matrilineal line. In May 1998,

therefore, at the behest of the Blassie family from St. Louis, which had long suspected the remains in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to be those of their son and sibling, Michael Joseph Blassie, killed in Vietnam in 1972, the remains of the unknown soldier were disinterred, the “hallowed ground” disturbed, as Defense Secretary William Cohen put it, “with deep reluctance.”<sup>11</sup> DNA testing proved that the remains of X-26 were indeed those of Blassie, and so the remains were sent to St. Louis and buried there in July 1998, on the banks of the Mississippi, beneath a simple white tombstone—limited in size, I should add, by cemetery regulations—that included the inscription, “Michael Joseph Blassie, Killed in Action; Unknown Soldier, May 28, 1984, May 14, 1998.”<sup>12</sup>

So ended, it has appeared, the epoch of the unknown soldier, which, as I have tried to suggest and will try to spell out more clearly to conclude, is not one epoch or one ritual among others. The Department of Defense has decided that remains will never again be designated those of an Unknown Soldier unless “it can be unequivocally assured, in perpetuity, that the remains of the American serviceman would be forever unidentifiable.” But “given the advances in DNA analysis techniques,” a Defense Department spokesperson has conceded, “I don’t think we’ll be able to have complete confidence that any set of remains . . . would remain unknown forever.” As long as there are remains, it seems, we will eventually be able to identify, to put a name to the body, or to the piece of body, however small. From now on, there will be no remains unaccounted for. There will no doubt continue to be men and women missing in action, bodies lost or, it is not impossible though it is abhorrent to imagine, pulverized or vaporized right down to the last strand of DNA, but there will no longer be unidentifiable remains, that is, remains any more substantial than ashes. (Indeed it is now thought that some of the victims killed in the World Trade Towers will never be identified, every trace of DNA having been destroyed by the temperatures that exceeded those of a crematorium. It is thus difficult to call these “unidentifiable remains,” which is why, in an article in the *New Yorker* from October 1, 2001, Victor Weedn, the founder of the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory, the very lab that identified the remains of Michael Joseph Blassie, says that, in his opinion, there would be no “Tomb of the Unknown New Yorker in lower Manhattan.” “I don’t believe it would be palatable,” he said, “I don’t think the government could stand the pressure not to identify everyone.”<sup>13</sup> In an attempt to help the families of victims

avoid what is called “ambiguous grief” or “ambiguous mourning,” extraordinary measures were thus already being taken in September to test what may amount to hundreds of thousands of tissue samples found in the rubble. But as of May 30, 2002, the day when the cleanup operation at ground zero was officially declared finished, there were still some 1,700 non-identified victims. And so analyses continue to this day, like the work of mourning itself. Politics and mourning can no longer be thought, it seems, without these new technologies of life and death, technologies which provide the only means of distinguishing one victim from another, or, indeed, a friend from an enemy, which is why, a *New York Times* article pointed out,<sup>14</sup> victims’ families had to scour their homes for microscopic pieces of their loved ones left on tooth and hair brushes or on old clothing and why federal authorities have tried to obtain DNA samples from the family of Bin Laden so that, one day, a piece of burned flesh might find a match in these samples and prove to us that Bin Laden is indeed finally and officially dead.)

Between the identifiable, the single strand of DNA to which a name can, in principle, be attached, and unidentifiable ashes there can be no remains—there shall be no remains. What remains beyond ashes will always, it seems, be identified, in some sense named, understood, repatriated, incorporated into our history and our narratives; there will be no remains known but to God. If mourning is an attempt, as Derrida has argued, to dialecticize the undialectizable, to incorporate what cannot be incorporated, if mourning always negotiates between the infidelity of not mourning because we leave the dead other outside us, leave them to their alterity with no attempt to recognize, identify, and incorporate them, and the infidelity of not mourning because we have identified too much, understood too much, taken in and comprehended an alterity or a remains that cannot and should not become part of us or our history, then mourning remains always somewhere between these two “there shall be no mournings.” If mourning must always endure the aporias of knowing and not knowing, of identifying and not being able to identify, of getting at what cannot and can never be identified through what can, then the Tomb of the Unknowns in Arlington National Cemetery may have been a good symbol of mourning—or perhaps something much less, and thus much more, than a symbol—despite Reagan’s attempt to recover this symbol and so dissolve these aporias. This Tomb of the Unknowns, which recalls so many atrocities of the twentieth century, has the special merit

of marking a site between two epochs of collective mourning, two different epochs, one where the body retained a certain opacity and resistance to knowledge and science, even if it remained vulnerable in its very namelessness to the strategies of glorification and of the beautiful death, and one where the body is readable and thus identifiable, nameable, recuperable, or so we believe, by our narratives and our history, right down to the smallest cell. Though the two epochs of mourning can be differentiated by the advances in technology that have so radically changed our relationship to life and death, both will have provided strategies for the identification and incorporation of the dead into the body politic, whether through narratives of the beautiful death or through the simple inscription of a name on a headstone. For both, the political injunction will have always been “there shall be no mourning”—certainly no interminable mourning. There may be memory and remembrance, or what we call memory and remembrance, and perhaps rituals of celebration and recognition, but if mourning is, as Derrida argues, related to the incorporation of something that can never be completely identified or incorporated, there shall be no mourning as such. Though this is hardly a plea for “ambiguous mourning,” hardly a suggestion that every step *not* be taken to identify the remains of those killed in war or in any other kind of atrocity, I do wish to suggest, as a reader of Derrida, that every mourning is and should remain “ambiguous,” that every mourning that succeeds too well is doomed to fail, while the mourning given over to failure—like the mourning of an unknown—is exemplary of a certain kind of success. In matters of mourning, it might just be necessary that we, as Americans, learn just a bit better how to fail.

The Tomb of the Unknowns thus stands at a kind of crossroad, a very literal no-man’s-land, between identification and non-identification, the technologies of life and those of death, between the interests of the family and those of the state, materiality and the symbolic, the corpse and the corpus, as Plato would say in the *Gorgias*, the  $\sigma\omega\mu\alpha$  and the  $\sigma\eta\mu\alpha$ . Between two different epochs where the political injunction is always “there shall be no mourning,” something about the Tomb of the Unknowns *resists*, something that remains buried in the past century and will remain unknown even to God, something that resists our technologies and our knowledge: an absolute remains, *the* absolute remains, inaccessible to our gaze even as it calls us to attention and to respect, a tomb even more inaccessible and more unknown within the space opened up by the Tomb of the Unknowns. And that

leaves me with the odd thought, the perplexing conclusion, that, from the perspective at least of this exemplary collective ritual of remembrance called the consecration of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the twentieth century, this time of the unknowns, would lie at a critical crossroad between two epochs of state or collective mourning. Insofar as the twentieth century still has remains that cannot be identified, and insofar as it will have memorialized those unknown remains if not all that must remain unknown in them, it still holds open a gap between the name and the body, the corpus of history and the corpse. In other words, the twentieth century will have posed us *the question of remains as such*, a question of what exceeds our history and our science, of what resists all our attempts to cut our losses, a question that, I believe, still remains to be thought even if we today in the twenty-first century are in danger of forgetting it. The question of remains—that is what remains, that is what *shall* remain, and remain for mourning—assuming that we can still identify it.

All this, I recall, was said long ago, and said in a so much more penetrating and economic fashion, by Jacques Derrida. For example, already back during the “Vietnam era,” in *Glas*, when he wrote, “The other—lets the remain(s) fall” (*L’autre—laisse tomber le reste*: or “the other—drop the rest”), and then, “the stone always falls (entombs) again. Remain(s).” (*la pierre retombe toujours. Reste.*), and finally, in two words engraved like an inscription on the very tomb of the Tomb of the Unknowns:

*Tombe, reste.*<sup>15</sup>

## NOTES

1. An earlier version of this text was read at Southern Illinois University (at the “Philosophical Collaborations” conference in March 2001), Vanderbilt University, and Grinnell College. My thanks to Robert Hahn, David Wood, and Alan Shrift for their kind invitations to these institutions and for the many helpful suggestions they and their colleagues were able to bring to this work.
2. *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Hereafter cited as *WM*.
3. *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 61–62.
4. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 100.
5. All passages from *Laws*, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).
6. As for the ceremonies, the lawgiver must set moderate amounts for each of the four

- property classes and the law-warden must act as “overseer” to make sure all the arrangements are carried out in a proper and moderate way (959e).
7. This speech and much of the information to follow concerning the controversy surrounding the Unknown Soldier of Vietnam was found on the official web site of Arlington National Cemetery: [www.arlingtoncemetery.com](http://www.arlingtoncemetery.com).
  8. Hannah Arendt writes in *The Human Condition* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 161: “The monuments to the ‘Unknown Soldier’ after World War I bear testimony to the then still existing need for glorification, for finding a ‘who,’ an identifiable somebody whom four years of mass slaughter should have revealed. The frustration of this wish and the unwillingness to resign oneself to the brutal fact that the agent of the war was actually nobody inspired the erection of the monuments to the ‘unknown,’ to all those whom the war had failed to make known and had robbed thereby, not of their achievement, but of their human dignity.” For an excellent analysis of such attempts to glorify war and the war dead through the construction of a “Myth of the War Experience,” see George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
  9. See Plato, *Apology*, 32b, and Xenophon, *Hellenica*, (I.7.15–16).
  10. This technique uses computer analysis of remains to reconstruct facial features that can then be compared to photographs.
  11. Cohen continued: but “if advances in technology can ease the lingering anguish of even one family, then our path is clear.”
  12. This was not to be the end of the controversy. Because the Medal of Honor, the nation’s highest and most distinguished medal, was awarded to the remains of an unknown soldier who proved to be Michael Joseph Blassie, the question arose whether Blassie had been, or should be, awarded this medal. It was ultimately decided that the Medal of Honor had been awarded to the Unknown Soldier and not to Blassie, and that, as a result, it must not remain with him, that is, it must not be or continue to be attached to his name or his remains.
  13. *New Yorker*, 1 October 2001, 39–40.
  14. *New York Times*, 3 February 2002, A1, A14.
  15. *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., and Richard Rand (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 2b, 70a, 32b. This latter is translated by Leavey and Rand, “Falls (to the tomb), remain(s).” Originally published as *Glas* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1974), 8b, 82a, 41b.