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### **Reading the Inscriptions of Our Lifeworld: Transgenerational Existence and the Metaphysics of the Grave**

**Abstract:** This existential phenomenological exploration concerns how writing is not the mere tool for communication and commemoration, or the supplementary image of a memory, but is closely connected to the phenomenon of the grave. The exploration aims to show a transgenerational mode of human existence and moral life, by considering how the becoming of a historical, which is to say a *transgenerational subject* through the features that writing and the grave together lets us capture, is also importantly bound to the becoming of a moral subject, or an “I,” in relation to the passed away other.

**Key words:** writing, reading, Hans Jonas, Jacques Derrida, Hans Ruin, Matthias Fritsch, existential phenomenology, hermeneutics, transgenerational ethics, responsibility

#### **Introduction**

In the essay “Tool, Image, and Grave,” Hans Jonas argues that “meta- physics arises from the graves” (1996b: 84). These thoughts also guide Hans Ruin’s recent study, *Being With the Dead* (2018), as he argues that “the grave is a metaphysical site” (112). Matthias Fritsch’s *Taking Turns With the Earth* (2018) is a development of a similar metaphysics when he claims that “social relations among the living are structured by an anticipatory mourning, by the sense that one will die before the other, having to interiorize and bury her or him” (52). The meaning of metaphysics in the work of these thinkers is the existential acknowledgement that other people have lived before us, and that we are transgenerationally connected to other persons who are no longer alive. In that sense, we understand that we share a space which is not determined by biological transience—a space inherently ethical as to what it means to care for persons who are gone, and who are beyond our intuitive sight. “There is,” says Ruin, “no social space entirely outside the shared space with the dead. To learn to live is to learn to inhabit this space in a responsible way” (2018: 201).

This existential realization of a transgenerational connectedness to others before us could also be ascribed to the essence of writing. In the act of reading, we are with another person. The written word brings us to the other person having been, with whom we share a space and who is given a voice through the moral work of letting them speak in our hearts

(Derrida 2003: 209). If, as Ruin claims, “written literature is literally born in the grave” (2018: 185), how are we to understand this connection between writing and the grave regarding what is essentially involved in writing and reading the written? If we bracket the communicative, representative, and prosthetic meanings that the written word is often conceived to have, is not an essential aspect of the phenomenology of writing an opening of a transgenerational horizon to the other having been? In other words, is it possible to understand the essence of writing as not merely the *tool* for communication and commemoration, or as the supplementary *image* of a memory, but as inherently connected to the meaning of the *grave*, which opens or manifests a transgenerational mode of human existence and moral life? Through the following existential-phenomenological exploration I will show how a becoming of a historical, by which I mean *transgenerational subject* through the features that writing and the grave together lets us capture, is also importantly bound to the becoming of a moral subject, or an “I” in relation to the passed away other.

The exploration proceeds by first showing Hans Jonas’s conceptions of what belongs to tool, image, and grave as human phenomena, as well as how the grave becomes a metaphysical mark of transgenerational togetherness. Thereafter the discussion focuses on the moral subject’s acknowledgement of responsibility for the other person that is importantly awakened by the essence of the grave, by virtue of the moral subject’s standing in relation to both their mortal fellow beings and departed others. The last part of the reflection consists of bracketing the technical aspects of the phenomenon of writing, by focusing, with Jacques Derrida, on what the work of reading and repeating inscriptions as an opening of a transgenerational horizon of being in time may be taken to mean for the very idea of how writing and the grave essentially belong together.

### **Tomb: The Other beyond the Visible**

In “Tool, Image, and Grave,” Jonas describes three different phenomena that characterize the human being, and which makes the human being different from animals: the tool, the image, and the grave. According to him, these phenomena are anchored differently in human life, which means they allow us to grasp different aspects of our existence.

The most pragmatic of them, the tool, he suggests is an “artificially devised, inert object interpolated as a means between the acting bodily organ (usually the hand) and the extracorporeal object of the action” (1996b: 78). In this sense, the tool is essentially not whatever lifeless object there is, a stone or a stick just lying there. In order to become a tool, it requires that someone includes or attends to that object as part of their action, even if the tool,

when not in use, is only at hand. Thus, the tool is involved in a work, and is also an object that is being worked on in order to suffice for the work it is intended for. What is transanimal in a fishing net is that it is a tool. It is not comparable with the spider's web, since the spider web belongs to the spider as a biological creature, while the fishing net is not part of human biology despite the fact that food supply for humans is a biological need just as for spiders. Thus, in a rather different way than for the spider whose web belongs to its lifeform, the fishing net is entangled in the human lifeform through their ability to create and use tools. This ability means that humans can change themselves as well as their material environment in a different way than the spider, by creating tools and transforming their lifeworld through the work in which the tools are included.

The image, on its part, seems completely different. The image is hardly understandable as a biological necessity or as a tool. Jonas claims, quite radically, that "the depiction of something . . . changes neither the environment nor the [biological] condition of the organism itself" (1996b: 79). The image as such, as well as what belongs to creating an image, expresses a completely different kind of human activity than does the pragmatic tool. Although the image requires a material basis, its material conditions are not congruent with the essence of the image. Thus, although the work involved in creating a spear for hunting deer and the depiction of a deer hunt are activities that characterize the human being, they are two essentially distinct works that are vital to human existence in their own distinct ways.

Beyond the tool that transforms the human material lifeworld, and the image that by shaping the human being's possible world transforms their world, stands the grave. Through the grave, through the mortality and death of the other, a person's relationship to transience is formed long before she experiences that someone close to her die. Unlike the biological or physiological realization that a human's heart stops beating, or that the organism no longer lives, or that the plant has withered, the grave "def[ies] our apparent mortality" (Jonas 1996b: 83) in that the human exists, not as perished but as attended to and remembered. The grave and the care for the dead essentially expressed through the practice of burying means that human survival after their biological passing is not necessarily a metaphorical or religious survival, as the expression "life after death" allows us to grasp. (Jonas 2001: 11; Ruin 2018: 164). The tomb, mortuary practices and remembrance are in themselves expressions of what it means to say that a human being is dead, the forms that caring for the dead as dead take in human life. Human death, therefore, does not primarily mean that the human being as an organism no longer metabolizes and thus no longer lives (Jonas 1996a: 88); instead the dead are still part of our lifeworld in a way that can neither be understood as material or biological.

Transience is defied by the grave in which it no longer has a hold. (Jonas 1996b: 83–85; Jonas 2001: 8)

Jonas aptly claims that “metaphysics arises from the graves. But so does that commemoration of the past which we call history, as the cult of ancestors first makes clear” (Jonas 1996b: 84). What one could call metaphysical in our moral life is care for the other who is not limited to their materiality, and this is made visible in the essence of the grave, in the reflexive question “What am I—beyond what I do and experience at a given time?” (1996b: 83) The grave is a relation to others who have lived before us, and who thereby affect what we can conceive of ourselves.

### **The Experience of Becoming a Transgenerational Moral Subject**

If the grave has this transgenerational meaning in human life, how should one further understand the “I” having this experience of a transgenerational relation to others? To follow Jonas, the experience enters our life in togetherness. “Among all beings,” says Jonas, “man is the only one who knows that he must die” (1996b: 83). He continues, “In considering ‘the afterwards’ and ‘the there,’ he also considers ‘the now’ and ‘the here’ of his existence—that is, he reflects about himself” (1996b: 83). But a child is not born knowing that they must die, they have no anxiety toward death in experiencing the world “for the first time” (1996a: 96). Death is not an event in the child’s life, it enters their life through the other, by living in a world where others have been, in a world where other persons and living beings occasionally are dying, gradually understanding their relations to the transient other as well as to their own finitude (Fritsch 2018: 68; see Heinämaa 2015: 110). By learning to live the child must relate to the transient other who has lived before them, as much as they must relate to the vulnerable and mortal others who are their contemporaries.

Thus, the child’s experience of an “I” is made possible, as Jean Wahl says, “through the other” (2016: 21), or in “union with another” (21). In every instance of our being, “concrete existence is always existence before a task, in action or in facing another being” (21). In other words, the moral subject that the “I” is, must stand in relation to someone “other than oneself” (21); in realizing this, they are already *inside* that relation. Gabriel Marcel powerfully demonstrates how the “I” comes into being in togetherness. “The child . . . runs up to his mother and offers her a flower. ‘Look,’ he says, ‘that was me, I picked it’” (1950: 175). And by the same act of an ego who seeks gratitude or admiration, manifesting their place in the world, the mother and the child’s siblings are already there as the ones in relation to whom the child says, “I picked it” and in in face of whom an “I” acts, and occasionally realizes how

they must be. This experience of selfhood in an interwoven life would not be less revealing if someone in the child's family is dead. In life together we stand in relations to living and passed persons; family members, friends, ancestors, or strangers. Our actions are meaningful within these relations, and we imagine their meanings differently. By acting in togetherness we find our own identity as well as theirs. Thus, Jonas claims that our existence is beyond the immediacy of an "I" and is constituted in a relationship with others than myself—the mother, or the deceased other before me—and it is only in the lived experience of this togetherness that the ego grasps itself as a moral subject.

This means that the metaphysics of the grave invokes two interconnected, yet different existential experiences: (1) the experience of transgenerational temporality, and (2) the experience of becoming a moral subject.

Transgenerational experience of being in time is, as Martin Heidegger shows, different from "vulgar" empirical or representational experiences of time that concerns the individual experience of mere change in state of affairs or representations of that change. The temporality of being, he says, "does not exist as the sum of the momentary actualities of Experiences which come along successively and disappear. Nor is there a sort of framework which this succession gradually fills up" (2001: §72: 426). Transgenerational experience of being in time arises from the human beings' existence as being an inherent relationship to their impermanence, which means that they relates to birth and death as the horizon of their existence, or rather that their existence "stretches along between birth and death" (§72: 425). However, they relates to these frames not as an object, because "the 'between' which relates to birth and death already lies *in the Being* of Dasein" (§72: 426); that is to say, in their own being. (See also Gadamer 2006: 247–48) But their understanding of their impermanence enters their life through being with others who are already there (Heidegger 2001: §73: 431), through the mortality of others and things that were, through the grave and its essence, which means that a being in time cannot be confined to their own immediate horizon of life (§73: 432–34). To understand oneself as being in time, and to experience transgenerational temporality which enters most importantly in our relations to others who were "there" (§73: 432), is fundamentally to relate to the *transience* of the other who was there before me. And this transience makes it both possible to say that being in time is the very possibility for an "I" to exist, and simultaneously that the "I" goes beyond the particular temporality of my personal experience of duration or immediacy. Transience is the condition, therefore, of becoming a moral subject, most importantly through our being entangled in transient others (Ruin 2018: 199–201).

One could say that the grave confronts me with otherness beyond the visible (Jonas 1996b: 85; 2001: 8–11). The deceased is not equivalent to the grave I perceive sensibly, nor am I caring for a burial mound. As Emmanuel Lévinas argues in a similar reflection on death: “Beyond the visibility of whatever is unveiled, and prior to any knowledge about death, mortality lies in the Other” (Lévinas 1989: 83). To care for the other mortal being is, “as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself,” and furthermore, “as if I had to answer for the other’s death even before *being*” (1989, 83). Thus, as Fritsch adds to Lévinas, “the interpersonal order from which death comes calls on me to take responsibility for the other above all” (Fritsch 2018: 72). After their passing, I remain in relation to them (see Lévinas 1991: 91). Even if the deceased are no longer visible as something other than a burial mound or as the material traces of their activities in life, it is still not these remnants contemporary with me but rather the deceased as having been for whom I am responsible. It is, as Fritsch argues, through being in relation to vulnerable others in “mortal time” that my unity as being in time comes to be. (Fritsch 2018: 70; see also Lévinas 2000)

As Fritsch suggests, the experience of moral relationality and responsibility announces itself through our finding ourselves within the “time of birth and death” (2018: 8)—our being transgenerationally and involuntarily bound to passed away and coming others in our lives. “Vulnerability,” says Fritsch, “means being subject to mortal time,” our responding to and being responsible for our mortal fellow beings as our sole horizon of intelligibility (52). We anticipate our mourning the dead (as well as our rejoicing the newborn or the yet unborn) among the living not in the sense that we welcome the death of the other, but rather in the sense that noncoincidence is part of our lives, as the very contexture of terrestrial existence means that “one is born before the other, and one will die before the other” (52), calling for our acknowledging how we continuously answer for other persons’ being subject to finitude, as well as their being noncoincident with ourselves (54, 104–05). In living a life where we have outlived others and will continue to do so until the day we are outlived ourselves, responsibility does not cease to fall upon us as soon as the other no longer breathes, but rather calls for another form of caring response; our “having to interiorize and bury him or her” (52) by our continuously sharing a life with the passed away other as we have done since times immemorial (58).

This realization that “I” only comes into being through the other, that “I” is not primary to and not separated from the other, that the “I” does not exist in the way my sensual perception or biological instinct gives at hand, is what Jonas alludes to as the transanimalic that is awakened in the metaphysical essence of the grave. Through the grave, the dead is not

a lifeless organism that rots, which we relate to as biomaterial. Rather, it is a relation to a human who precedes us and to whom a moral subject stands in relation. The phenomenology of the departed other—the grave—and the absent other—the one who is not sensibly visible—suggests that the human being is a being beyond their empirical horizon. One could say that this “I” become a moral subject, a historical being, through grasping their responsibility to a transgenerational being in time, is the human way of growing up. As Nietzsche points out, the child, “has nothing yet of the past to disown” (1910: 7) and “plays in a happy blindness between the walls of the past and the future” (7); which means that they have no transgenerational horizon, no burden, and acknowledge no responsibility. But this is only to already acknowledge that the child has a path to maturity, a path to becoming human; “without the historical, life could never become *human* life” (Ward 2013: 73). The human being can only become *human* by understanding their relation to those who have preceded in the transgenerational life they is born in to, the lifeworld they is learning to live in. (Ruin 2018: 201; Fritsch 2018: 90–91)

### **The Suprapersonality of Remembrance**

There is a general human dimension of the meaning of transience and remembrance, which Jonas tries to make visible by reflecting on the essence of the grave. Even if we usually live, and sometimes even retreat into, a “here and now,” an empirically particular place where we cut our ties to anything that is not tangible, the grave shows that being is irretrievably entangled in a trans- generational horizon of existence. The metaphysics that the grave lets us grasp enters not only particular instances of burial and grief, but rather shows that our understanding of ourselves as humans already means that we stand in relation to people before us.

But in Jonas’s reflection, there is also an important suprapersonal dimension to the moral subject’s *relation* to others having been there. Even if my existence comes about through the others already there, it becomes clear that my responsibility for others is not dependent on my own temporal particularity. This asymmetrical feature of the moral subject’s responsibility for the transient other is an important aspect of the moral metaphysics that is awakened in vicinity of the grave, i.e. of *how* we stand in relation to others. Jonas says:

Preserving the link with our forefathers merges the transitory “now” of the single existence with the continuity of the succession of generations, and the memory of the temporal becomes just as suprapersonal as the commemoration of the eternal. In both



respects the self attains distance from itself, thus discovering itself— with the ultimate sacrifice of immediacy—for the first time. (Jonas 1996b: 84)

What does it mean, then, that the “I” *am* is the becoming of a person, but “I” *remembering* is suprapersonal? The experience can be understood by reflecting on the way the “I” becomes a *moral* subject, by acknowledging paradoxically how “I” must let go of myself by *letting* the other speak to me, and thereby how “I” simultaneously have ipseity in face of the other (see also Ricoeur 1994: 332–39; Fritsch 2018: 70). If it is in relation to the other’s grave—not necessarily the grave as such but the artefacts, remnants and ideas that predecessors in this lifeworld have left behind—that “I” discover myself through the other’s mortality and impermanence, I do so at the expense of my own immediacy as the *face* of the passed away other cannot be reduced to what is biologically or empirically tangible. To follow Lévinas, there can be nothing ethically relevant within this sensible horizon as long as the other in the grave is not reduced to the materiality of a pile of bones, or as long as remnants and ideas are just ideally there. Thus, in so far as remnants and ideas are always of a human before me, which means that they are a *grave* and that we thereby stand in vicinity of the grave, the past other takes me beyond the time I can immediately perceive and experience. And in this relationship with the grave, I also understand that I am with them, and I understand too that this care for the other that I express in remembrance is common to meaning of the grave in human life. I thus understand to what extent remembering the deceased is *not* dependent on me.

To follow Jonas, then, the “memory of the temporal” invoked through the grave crushes one’s temporal particularity in two important senses. On the one hand, the very understanding of transgenerational temporality is not confined to an “I” who lives within the immediate horizon of a “here and now” and on the other hand, that the relationship to the transient other as well as the act of commemoration could be ascribed to any moral subject. The tomb takes us beyond the visible, and remembrance beyond the personal. Remembering the other having been, or relating to a transgenerational horizon, cannot depend on me, because the other exists and is remembered also without me; however, it is nonetheless crucial for my becoming a moral subject or an “I” to find myself in relation to others having been, of acknowledging how I stand in relation to the other before me. Care for the impermanent other, therefore which defines transience both in the past and will do so in the next generations, is suprapersonal and frames the existence which an “I” can call its own (see Jonas 1996a: 96).

## Writing: The Tomb in Language

Jonas's reflection raises important differences between the essence of the tool, the image, and the grave. The grave opens a metaphysical temporality which concerns "the mystery of existence and what lay beyond the realm of appearances" (Jonas 1996b: 85). What are we to conceive of this metaphysics?

The pastness of the tool, Heidegger claims, consists in its no longer belonging to the life context when it was in use. Even if the tool is in use by posterity, its significance as remnant, or as antiquarian object, means that it has fallen "out of use" (§73: 432), and it testifies to a having been, to a having been in use by someone "there" before. What is no longer is the tool being "encountered as ready-to-hand and used by a concerned Dasein" (§73: 432). In this sense, the tool as remnant lives on inside the historical lifeworld, as a no longer, as past, while it simultaneously testifies to the temporality of the Dasein—of this being the *past* of the Dasein.

But in the light of this phenomenology, the grave can hardly be understood as having been in use and now is no longer, as its meaning is to be for all eternity. The grave is as much in posterity as it was "back then." There is nothing *past* in the moral relationship with the other person before whom I stand, or in the metaphysics that the grave invokes on us as moral subjects. This is one way of understanding how the essence of the grave is radically different from the essence of the tool and the image. Even if burial and the material construction of the tomb took place in the past, and in that sense are no longer, the temporality of the grave both opens the temporal horizon to another person having lived before me, and simultaneously by the same phenomenality defies their pastness. (Jonas 1996b: 85) In this sense, the other in the grave is rather the *precondition* for my very understanding or experiencing transgenerational pastness, by invoking the possibility to resist the hold that transience has on our existence through our being together with the other beyond contemporaneity, beyond our empirical or biological immediacy. Thus, the other in the grave does not exist as a mere dead *thing* in the past, like a tool that has fallen "out of use" testifying to a having been in use by a caring being long gone. Nor are they a mere *image* of an object which is depicted by the means of a posterior historical science (see Heidegger 2001: §76: 446). As with any idea of "historical material," which as Heidegger argues only makes sense "when they have been understood in advance with regard to their within-the-world-ness" (§76: 446), the tool or its image could not make sense as fallen "out of use" if the other person did not live before me; if they were not already another to whom I answer, another person who opens the possibility for my understanding that they used the tool. By acknowledging my connectedness to another before

me, I thus both recognize and resist that her life has ended by continuing to share a transgenerational space with her, as existing or being both *with* me and *before* me. This means that the transient other as the one I have outlived is the *possibility* for my understanding myself as being, as it is only in the face of those transient others that my transgenerational temporal orientation makes sense.

In his reflection on mortuary practices and the metaphysics of the grave, Hans Ruin similarly argues that memory is in itself the *grave*, “through which the dead are maintained in a resting temporality of eternity” (2018: 191). In commemoration, we share a space with the departed others where another temporality has the hold: “We too are part of this space. Indeed, we are held together by it and thus continue to move within it, especially when we seek to approach and decipher the shredded remains of the aspirations of earlier generations” (191). This metaphysical togetherness is the root of historical consciousness, of our sharing a space with earlier generations in another temporal mode than the personal experience of duration or coincidence. In Ruin’s account, “*memory* becomes the name for a symbolic space that is accomplished by transitory human life” (190), and it is upheld by means of “various cultural practices and techniques, and in particular by means of *writing*” (190). Thus, commemoration of earlier generations and the essence of the grave together have an obvious interconnection with the phenomenon of writing. “The grave,” says Ruin in line with Jacques Derrida, “is the first sign—the *sema*—of the departed person” (Ruin 2018: 185). It is in face of the grave, or the sign, of the other before us, that hermeneutics in terms of a reflective historical consciousness becomes possible (Ruin 2018: 184; see Gadamer 2006: 353–54). Nevertheless, if the grave as *sema* is the first sign, and its metaphysical essence concerns, as Jonas claims, the tendency to “defy our apparent mortality” (Jonas 1996b: 83; Ruin 2018: 182), which is not confined to what “bears visible testimony to this defiance” (Jonas 1996b: 83), the practices and ideas connected to burial and remembering must themselves be bearers of our being metaphysically held together. Is not *writing* in itself to be understood as bearing the essence of the grave?

Although writing is connected with memory and especially with the meaning of the grave, writing as an *ars memoriae* must obviously be different from the kind of remembering that is confined to a personal horizon of life (Ricoeur 2006: 141–42, 412–13). A person can remember what they did in their childhood. The memory can change in later life in connection with other life-experiences. They can remember their grandparents who perhaps are now passed; they relates to them and what they have said, as well as to stories about them. But the opening of a transgenerational existence with persons beyond any particular horizons of life,

the retelling of a story no one person can remember, implies that the *anamnesis* connected to writing and the grave has a different modality.

Plato's *Phaedrus*, and particularly its reference to the ancient Egyptian notion of writing, invokes this transgenerational meaning that writing has in human life. The written words, especially the narratives and scripts of our collective human tradition, have an unclear past, for when "one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence" (Plato 1953: 275d), and when one attends to them they "always say only one and the same thing" (275d). In face of written words, our sense of truth and moral understanding may be obscured by appeals to mythical imagination and playful amusement (van der Heiden 2010: 59–62). Although this notion of writing opens a space with other generations, it does so only, as Derrida puts it, through being "a history that is recited, a fable that is repeated" (Derrida 1981: 74; see Ruin 2018: 184–85). And by performing this act of *repeating* a story about a past no one person would remember, a past beyond any personal horizon of life, one must acknowledge responsibility for what it means to be the one who is the repeater. Thus, Socrates says, any genuine act of writing or reading, or of transgenerational commemoration, involves the moral understanding that the words planted in "the garden of letters" should not be for the mere sake of "amusement" (Plato 1953: 276d), in order to "treasure up reminders" when one "comes to the forgetfulness of old age, and for others who follow the same path" (276d), but rather demands that the words planted there should be "intelligent words which are able to help themselves and him who planted them" (276e) so that there may "spring up in other minds other words capable of continuing the process forever" (277a). This *eternalization* of the temporal other through the memory of her, with strong reference to the ancient Egyptian notion of script, means that the repeater is the one who has a responsibility in this opening of a horizon. Genuine remembrance is a moral work that springs from an understanding heart (Carr 2005: 63–64, 127–29).

The Egyptian concept of writing that Plato refers to is essentially entangled in religious memory rituals, where the inscription would have to be read aloud in order to be actualized. In a papyrus from the New Kingdom, *The Immortality of Writers*, the essence of defying mortality is inscribed in the written words, which suggests that the immortality of the written word *is* the grave (Lichtheim 1976: 175–78; see also Carr 2005: 10). It reads, "Better is a book than a graven stela, than a solid 'tomb-enclosure,' they act as chapels and tombs, in the heart of him who speaks their name; surely useful in the graveyard is a name in people's mouth!" (Lichtheim 1976: 177; for another translation see Ruin 2018: 189) In other words, just as it is today in Judaic tradition, the ethical emphasis is not on the technique of

inscription, but above all on the divine work of reading, which enables the written word to be capable of being what it is; that is, a defiance of mortality by being the continued voice of the other who is let to speak “in the heart of him who speaks their name” (Carr 2005: 64, 74–76).

This invites a reflection on the suprapersonal aspect of the act of reading inscriptions, which is important to the understanding of how the phenomenon of writing and the grave are interconnected. The ritual “opening of the mouth” from another text from the New Kingdom, *The Book of the Dead*, embodies this religious and ethical dimension of remembrance, because it is by reading the formula of the passed away other, one obtains what shall happen to them in death (Lichtheim 1976: 120; see Powell 2012: 125). To pronounce the right words in the ritual of a necropolis before another’s funeral, and thereby opening the mouth on the other through the formula, means giving the passed a voice in the form of continued life and protection against spells. The responsibility towards the dead is therefore not to *resurrect* but to give them a *gift*, the continuation of life, where the dead receives the readers voice. (Lichtheim 1976: 119–20) This remembrance of the gods, the ancestors, and their deeds by the gift of voice is made possible by the divine inscriptions being uttered in the right way by anyone who is in the ethically demanding position of reading. This suggests that the written *anamnesis* of commemorating the departed person through repeating a story or a spell, and thereby giving them a voice, is a demand on the reading person, but is not confined to a personal horizon.

In his anthropology of reading, Jesper Svenbro suggests that in archaic-Greek culture, a memory text was read aloud—“This is the *sēma* of Archias”—whereby the high-reading person through the memorial song kindly gave their voice to the dead who rested in the grave (Svenbro 1993: 46; see Carr 2005: 97). The speaking person’s voice thus becomes the instrument of the written word, rather than the opposite (Svenbro 1993: 44–47). Nevertheless, Svenbro also argues that although the “one lending his voice to the mute inscription” thereby became its instrument, the reader’s “I” did still “not clash with an ‘I’ that is not his own” (46), because “the reader is the instrument necessary for the text to be realized” (46). To give one’s voice to another is the ultimate gift through which, simultaneously, the reader’s own “I” becomes.

In the light of these examples of the morality of repeating and reading—heavily burdened on the moral subject and essentially internal to our idea of being literate—it is also possible to understand how posterity is responsible for the transient other after their passing. The Egyptian verse of *The Immortality of Writers* ends, “death made their names forgotten, but books made them remembered!” (Lichtheim 1976: 177) Remembering the passed by

carefully building the grave “in the heart” in the act of reading, is an expression of responsibility for the other.

This phenomenology of remembrance, which is also found in the *Phaedrus*, counteracts the impulse to believe that the essence of writing is parasitic to lived memory and to lived speech (see Carr 2005: 63–64). The human being inevitably cohabitates in a world that presupposes generations that have preceded us—written laws, myths, stories of the past, and divine memory culture—in the absence of which a human could not be human. The written word manifests that a human being lives in a generational lifeworld that exceeds their own particular temporal horizon of life. There they also understand themselves, not in the first instance as a biological creature, but as a responsible resident of a human lifeworld.

### **Historical Becoming Through Writing**

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes:

[H]istoricity itself is tied to the possibility of writing; to the possibility of writing in general, beyond those particular forms of writing in the name of which we have long spoken of peoples without writing and without history. Before being the object of a history—of an historical science—writing opens the field of history—of historical becoming. And the former (*Historie* in German) presupposes the latter (*Geschichte*). (Derrida 1997: 27)

In the light of the metaphysics of the grave, it is clear that the essence of writing that Derrida describes cannot be made visible if writing is merely attributed to its instrumental value, or to its being a representational pictorial activity. The essence of writing as an integral part of the human way of life opens the field of history—our transgenerational existence—in a variety of ways. In everyday concrete life, through learning about our grammatically correct written language, we deepen our understanding of the meaning of our language, that is, the way in which we are linguistic beings. Through the written language that is taught at school, the grammatically correct language on which books are written, our mother tongue is developed in a way that it could never be only through speech. In writing we come into contact with words, formulas and thoughts that we would seldom, if ever, come into contact with in a spoken living context. In reading the book, we also understand the difference between the grammar of writing and the grammar of speech; that is, how these two forms of language carry elements that can have distinctly different meanings for human existence.

But in Derrida’s reflection, which is utterly close to what Jonas called the metaphysical essence of the grave, writing signifies something even deeper for human

existence—the opening of our transgenerational being in time. In writing, we will relate to a world that lies beyond what a person, or a few generations, has the opportunity to experience and remember (Eliade 1963: 134–38). This means, as Ruin puts it, that “life is able to maintain itself over a time span that extends far beyond the limited framework of (oral) social-collective memory” (Ruin 2018: 190). The historical consciousness of the Occident, a so called chronotemporal worldview based primarily on writings from earlier times, is a typical example of how the field of history is opened. The fact that Rome was overthrown by the Huns could not be a possible historical understanding based solely on the horizon that an oral memory lives. It would soon be forgotten. Neither Thucydides’s writings on the Peloponnesian War nor Flavius Josephus’s writings on the destruction of Jerusalem are contemporary with us, but our chronotemporal worldview means that they are not only our precursors but also are themselves temporally separated. Without the writings Thucydides left behind, without the written remnants that are bound to his time, or tellings thereof—the documents and signs that cast light on a horizon no one can experience or remember today—no one could today relate to Thucydides’s words and his contemporaries, nor to how Thucydides’s writings relate to Flavius Josephus’s by being temporally separated ones. In this way writing in general (the human placing of the mark/*sema* of the past other) opens up the possibility for historical becoming, because through it we realize a suprapersonal pastness, through which we ourselves become historical—that is to say, transgenerational—subjects.

This reflection on the interconnection between writing and the grave suggest there are two contradictory dimensions of human existence that are awakened in their shared metaphysics—the transient and the eternal. Indeed, as Jonas says, in vicinity of the grave “the memory of the temporal becomes just as suprapersonal as the commemoration of the eternal” (1996b: 84). Like Zeus, who in *The Theogony* kills his father Cronos—time, or transience—and establishes the eternal mandate of the gods (Hesiod 1920: 500–35), mythological or religious thinking often throws us out of a temporal reality, but so does a chronotemporal understanding too as it, in Mircea Eliade’s terms, will “project man out of is ‘historical moment’” (1963: 138). The defiance of time passing is, paradoxically enough, inscribed in our very temporal understanding by the ethics of transgenerational entanglement—the metaphysics of the grave. And through “this historiographic *anamnesis*” of defying time by acknowledging a transgenerational connectedness to departed others through writing, “man enters deep into himself” (136). But our *entering* our trans- generational selves through the *sema* of the other is essentially a personal work, which as Fritsch importantly argues, means that we must continuously “perform it from where we are, in ‘our’ historical context, to which

we respond with a promise to renew it” (2018: 105), so that it continuously can be regenerated and integrated in the lives of the next generation (see also Lindén 2017: 237).

Inscriptions, however, can also as such *remind* us of what is involved in the moral work of historiographic *anamnesis*. Jonas reflects on this direction in reference to Psalm 90—“Teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom” (1996a: 87). Speaking from the vantage point of humanity as such, the psalm calls not for salvation by God, but rather calls for our evoking a moral vision, “a heart of wisdom” in our life with our fellow beings. It calls for our seeing that our days are numbered, our understanding that our fellows in life is vulnerable as they too are subject to finitude, but it calls also for our being able to protect their lives by virtue of their being subject to finitude, as well as for our continuing a life with them despite her finitude (98). Thus, if the psalm invites that “the burden of mortality laid on all of us is heavy and meaningful at once” (94), it is not primarily in the sense of invoking the vision that death gives life its purpose and meaning, a mortal life that the gods envy. It is rather to show what is precluded in responding to another as one whose days are (or were) numbered, what their life and their *sema* demands of us. To read the call for “a heart of wisdom” through this inscribed *anamnesis* about numbering our days, which in itself is a call for being reminded of the finitude of one’s fellow beings, regenerates our responsibility for continuously seeing the other person’s noncoincidence with ourselves in our thinking and being with them.

### **The Immorality of an Unhistorical Existence**

It is difficult to imagine a human way of life without the interconnected ideas of script, burial, and remembrance. Yet, one often talks of unhistorical and pre-historical cultures as supposedly lacking the technique of writing, or lacking a literary tradition (Derrida 1997: 27; Renfrew 2009: 3–4). This restricted idea of writing is not what has been at stake throughout this investigation. When Derrida speaks of our being in time as tied to the possibility of writing, it points not so much to the technique as such, as it points to the repetitious opening of a transgenerational horizon, which is, as Ruin also shows, inscribed as one essential aspect of what writing means, as the mark of the other, in any idea of human life (Derrida 1981: 74; Ruin 2018: 184–85). Thus, in line with Heidegger, an unhistorical existential attitude is neither the lack of a historical science nor a lack of a literary tradition but is rather a forgetful or nonchalant way of acknowledging one’s transgenerational being in time (2001: §76: 448). This nonchalance is galvanized far more strongly when the transgenerational horizon is articulated as a moral relation of responsibility with other persons before me.



In Bernard Schlink's novel *The Reader*, the illiterate former SS guard Hanna Schmitz importantly shows the attitude of such an unhistorical person. Her not being able to read either the past or the present, metaphorically shows that she is not only literally incapable, but more importantly, is a morally disoriented person, who does not see how her actions and responsibilities are invoked by other persons beyond her limited and immediate horizon. Her unhistorical existence implies that it is not a generational world she relates to—her concerns are limited to certain sensual impressions; her responsibility to certain pragmatic situations. (Schlink 1999: 126–28) And only at the end of her life, when she learns to read, her “I” begins to be destroyed by all the faces the world always contained but which she never saw before (198–99).

*The Reader* makes it clear that literacy in life is learning to respond to other persons in a responsible way. The story shows that the human *will* to live in a tangible “here and now” is morally difficult, as human life is also, as Ruin suggests, to a great extent “a life after” where we unavoidably stand in relation to the living and the dead (2018: 201). Acknowledging this burdensome existence means that a human must “learn to inhabit” the shared space with the dead “in a responsible way” (Ruin 2018: 201; see Gilbert 2019: 192–98; Gadamer 2006: 301). This responsibility is, I have suggested, a question of being able to read and morally understand the inscriptions of our shared lifeworld; of being, so to speak, *literate* in a moral sense. Being able to read these writings has a strong moral meaning that characterizes what it means to be human, when in the act of caring we give our voice to another beyond us, and understand that there is no “I” without them.

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