When it comes to mourning, it is always tempting to want to begin at the end, as if mourning began only right after or perhaps just before the death or disappearance of the one we love, cherish, or admire. Unable myself to resist this temptation, let me begin this brief essay with some of Derrida’s reflections from right near the end of his life, on the threshold, so to speak, of death, when the question of mourning appears to have been foremost in his thoughts. In a public discussion with Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in Strasbourg on 9 June 2004, that is, just four months before his death, Derrida speaks of inheritance, survival, and, thus, mourning from the perspective of someone who seems to have known that the end was near.1

In my anticipation of death, in my relation to a death to come, a death that I know will completely annihilate me and leave nothing of me behind, there is just below the surface a testamentary desire, a desire that something survive, get left behind or passed on—an inheritance or something that I myself can lay no claim to, that will not return to me, but that will, perhaps, remain. …

(D2 93: my translation)

Nothing would seem to be less extraordinary, more ordinary, than this desire to be remembered and, thus, mourned by means of the traces or memories we leave behind. Though keenly aware that what will be remembered and mourned will not be him exactly, since death, as he says, will annihilate the self to whom such memories could ever again be attached, Derrida nonetheless desires to leave traces behind him, traces and, thus, heirs to inherit and to mourn. These traces would of course include his many books, articles, and interviews, the many marks he will have left on the history of philosophy, but also, Derrida goes on to say, “ordinary or everyday gestures,” anything that
might bear witness to him or retain the memory of him when he is “no longer there.”

In the summer of 2004, therefore, just months before his death and more than a year after he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, Derrida spoke of the trace and the testament in relation to his own death and the mourning and scenes of inheritance he imagined would follow it. But Derrida goes on in this dialogue in Strasbourg with his two long-time friends to say something much more general about the trace, something about its very “essence” or “structure”. “Every trace is in essence testamentary [toute trace est d’essence testamentaire]”, he goes on to say, and it is this testamentary “structure of the trace” that has “always haunted” him (D2: 93). Hence Derrida moves in these extemporaneous remarks from an expressed, personal desire to leave traces behind him to a claim about the structure of the trace in general, a claim he first made nearly four decades earlier in Of Grammatology (1967) when he said in words that are almost identical to those spoken in Strasbourg in 2004: “all graphemes are of a testamentary essence [tout graphème est d’essence testamentaire]” (OG: 69).

Derrida’s reflections in the summer of 2004 about the trace in relation to the testament thus surely did not originate out of his anticipation of, or anxiety before, a death he suspected to be near, even if the proximity of these remarks to his death gives them a particular poignancy. Having claimed from the very start that the trace is in its essence testamentary, Derrida will have been from the very beginning a thinker of legacy and inheritance, and, always inseparable from these, of mourning.

This same movement or oscillation between a personal desire to leave traces behind him and general claims about the nature of the trace can also be seen in Derrida’s final interview, published in Le Monde in August 2004. Just before evoking what he there calls his “passion” for leaving “traces in the history of the French language” (LLF: 37), Derrida evokes a general theory of the trace in relation to the testament. Whether we want or intend it or not, the traces we leave behind are never simply ours but are already and from the very beginning beyond us and outside our control. Whether “spoken or written”, “all these gestures”, says Derrida, “leave us and begin to act independently of us”, like “machines” or like “marionettes”, acting in essence without me, that is, after me or in my wake, after my death or at least as if I were dead (LLF: 32).

My death is thus not some contingent event that may one day befall the trace I produce, marking it from that moment on with my death; rather, my disappearance or my death is the very condition of the production of the trace and the structure it subsequently comes to bear. Hence Derrida can argue that “the trace I leave signifies to me at once
my death, either to come or already come upon me, and the hope that this trace survives me. This is not a striving for immortality; it’s something structural” (LLF: 32). Again, it is not by chance but by structure that the trace survives me, even if only briefly, indeed even if it is in fact immediately destroyed or erased after its production. With the question of the immortality of the self or the soul off the table, and with the sober recognition that no trace can survive forever, survival seems to be limited in its very structure to an indeterminate, finite, and always uncertain and threatened future. It is at this point that Derrida gives us—bequeaths us—one of his simplest and most poignant definitions of the trace and of the uncertainty that conditions every legacy:

I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: it is impossible to escape this structure, it is the unchanging form of my life. Each time I let something go, each time some trace leaves me, “proceeds” from me, unable to be reappropriated, I live my death in writing. It’s the ultimate test: one expropriates oneself without knowing exactly who is being entrusted with what is left behind. Who is going to inherit, and how? Will there even be any heirs? (LLF: 32–33)

In these simple, no doubt deceptively simple, words, spoken, as I said, by someone who suspected that the end was near, Derrida seems to lend credence to the simple version of inheritance and of mourning I evoked at the outset: one lives, one leaves things behind—a piece of paper, a final interview, a corpse and a corpus, traces and memories—and then one goes away, one disappears, one dies, and those who remain are left to inherit and to mourn. Nothing seems more self-evident or ineluctable. As Derrida says, “it is impossible to escape this structure”.

But this simple version of inheritance and of mourning is complicated when Derrida goes on to say that this structure is “the unchanging form of [his] life”. He does not say, and the difference is significant, that this structure is the unchanging and unavoidable trajectory of his life, the fate to which he—like all of us—must one day succumb. He says instead that this “structure” is the “unchanging form” of his life, as if life first had to be thought on the basis of the trace and not the other way around. Once again, it is the very structure of the trace that implies the death or absence of the one who leaves a trace behind, but then also, as we will now see, the death or absence of the one who might inherit that trace, the one whom we might have naively assumed to be fully living and present to mourn the one who has gone.
In his 1971 essay “Signature Event Context,” Derrida is even more explicit and detailed about the way the trace is in its essence and by structure testamentary. Whether written or spoken, every trace, every mark, must be readable in its structure, Derrida argues, in the absence of both the addressee and the addressee. It “must continue to ‘act’ and to be readable even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally absent, or if he is dead” (MP: 316). The trace must remain readable in the absence of the one who produced it. But insofar as it must be able to act independently of any act of production or reproduction, any attempt to reanimate it through reading or interpretation, it must also be able to act in the absence of the one for whom it was produced. Derrida thus goes on to say, placing emphasis yet again on structure: “a writing that was not structurally readable—iterable—beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing” (MP: 315). What Derrida says here about “writing” holds for every mark, every trace. Insofar as it must be able to “act” in the absence of both the addressee and the addressee—a bit like the machine or the marionette Derrida spoke of in his final interview—every trace implies the “death,” the possible or virtual death, of both the one who produced it and the one destined to receive or inherit it.

The result of this understanding of the trace—of every trace, written, spoken, and even unspoken, as in a gesture—is that death is no longer simply exterior to life, what supervenes at a moment in time upon life in order to surprise or seize it in its purity. A certain death—what Derrida would come to call “life-death”—would be originary, constitutive even, of all life or all survival. In short, it is “life-death” that is, for Derrida, “the unchanging form” of our life, a thesis that will come to have profound implications for the scope, temporality, topology, and even the possibility of mourning. For if death does not simply follow upon life, if life is never simply and completely distinct from death or the possibility of death, then—contrary to the commonsense view of things outlined at the outset of this essay—mourning is perhaps already there at the origin.

I leave a piece of paper behind, I go away, I die: the going away or the dying is not some contingent event that will eventually but has not yet come upon the one who leaves a trace behind. It is, we now see, co-extensive with the very production of the trace—and thus with life itself. Hence Derrida in the fifth of the fifty-nine periods or periphrases or, indeed, breaths of “Circumfession” can write, “I posthume as I breathe” (C: 26). With this aphorism Derrida seems to be suggesting that with every breath he takes he is already posthumous, surviving beyond himself, “living on” in marks or traces emptied of all living breath.
“Posthume”, says Derrida in a neologism, because every letter he posts, every trace he sends out, is already and from the beginning post him, past him, already a letter from beyond the tomb, posthumous to him even when he was still living and breathing. The posthumous, then, would be the very air we breathe, the very form of our lives, so that mourning becomes possible not simply at the moment of another’s “actual death” but already with their first mark, which will have always been produced as if he or she were already dead. As the unchanging form of the life of the one who bequeaths the trace as well as of the one destined to inherit it, there is, as Derrida put it in that final interview published in *Le Monde* in August 2004, “an ‘originary mourning’ … that does not wait for the so-called ‘actual death’” (LLF: 26).

In the beginning, then, there is mourning—an originary mourning or melancholy that is not nostalgia for some lost presence but an affirmation that the testamentary trace and a mourning for the other is the unchanging form of our lives. Derrida will thus say in an interview from 1990: “I mourn therefore I am” (P: 321). More originary than death or being-towards-death, mourning for the other, or at least the structural possibility of such mourning, begins not at death but already at the beginning of life, already with the first trace.

But this reference to the other should lead one to suspect that this brief analysis of the testament and of mourning in Derrida’s work has thus far been rather one-sided, approached almost exclusively from the side of the one who faces his or her “own” death in the trace or knows he or she must die, rather than from the side of the one who must at some point face and experience the death of a friend, colleague, or family member, or who must live with the knowledge that a friend, colleague, or family member is destined to die. Such an emphasis on the testamentary structure of the trace and its implications for “my own” death is, however, no accident. To begin with “my own” death is yet another temptation of the philosophical tradition that runs from Plato (who defines philosophy as the “practice of dying”) to Heidegger (whose *Being and Time* is first and foremost the analysis of *Dasein’s* own “being-towards-death”). But as we have seen, it is not only my own death that is implied in the trace but the death of the other, and our earliest and most common experiences of death involve not our own deaths but the deaths of others and the pain we feel in mourning them. In the interview cited above in which Derrida seems to affirm in mock-Cartesian fashion his own existence through mourning—“I mourn therefore I am”—he goes on to say:

I mourn therefore I am, I am—dead with the death of the other, my relation to myself is first of all plunged into mourning, a mourning
that is moreover impossible. This is also what I call ex-appropriation, appropriation caught in a double bind: I must and I must not take the other into myself; mourning is an unfaithful fidelity if it succeeds in interiorizing the other ideally in me, that is, in not respecting his or her infinite exteriority.

(P: 321)

In this interview from 1990, Derrida appears to make two distinct though related points about death and mourning. First, my relation to myself, to my life as well as my death, seems to be conditioned less by an experience of my own death than by the death of others or of the other. Derrida will thus go so far as to affirm that “I can have this experience of ‘my own death’ by relating to myself only in the impossible experience, the experience of the impossible mourning at the death of the other” (P: 321). But that would then mean that the possibility of a relation to my own death is conditioned by an experience of the “impossible mourning” of the other. Mourning would be “impossible”, on this account, even though it would be one of our most common and undeniable experiences.

For Derrida mourning does indeed take place, indeed it happens all the time, it is, in essence, the “unchanging form of our lives”. But because mourning can never be completed or be completely successful, it can never be completely distinguished from melancholy and the aporias that define it. Whereas Freud in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia” (Freud 2005) opposes a successful mourning that results in the eventual incorporation of the lost love object within the psyche to an unsuccessful mourning (or melancholy) that is unable to bring about such an incorporation, Derrida argues in several key works that this incorporation is at once impossible and undesirable and that, as a result, all mourning is and indeed must remain unsuccessful and thus to some extent melancholic. As Derrida puts it in one of his most important texts on the subject, “cryptic incorporation always marks an effect of impossible or refused mourning (melancholy or mourning)” (Derrida 1986b: xxi).3

Because the other whom one mourns is not, for Derrida, a lost object that might be incorporated or interiorised within the psyche but an “infinite exteriority”, mourning is at once originary and impossible. Better, mourning is and must forever remain caught in the aporia or “double bind” of having at once to appropriate the other (so as not to abandon them to indifference) and not appropriate them (so as to respect their singularity and infinite exteriority). Hence mourning is given over to an “unfaithful fidelity” where mourning can succeed only by failing,
where it can succeed only by interiorising or incorporating an absolute singularity or a unique other that must remain in its singularity or uniqueness exterior and unincorporated. Derrida can thus speak in the interview from 1990 cited a moment ago of “the attempt, always doomed to fail (thus a constitutive failure, precisely), to incorporate, interiorize, introject, subjectivize the other in me. Even before the death of the other, the inscription of her or his mortality constitutes me. I mourn therefore I am … ” (P: 321). Just as the trace is testamentary by structure, in essence, and not because of some contingent event like the death of the author, so mourning is doomed to fail not because of some contingent weakness or shortcoming on the part of the one who mourns but because such failure is structural—as well as “constitutive” of the one who mourns. I am who I am because of this relation to an other whom I can never simply make my own. As Derrida says again in the interview from 1990, “This carrying of the mortal other ‘in me outside me’ instructs or institutes my ‘self’ and my relation to ‘myself’ already before the death of the other” (P: 321).

This theory of “impossible mourning” is developed in many texts of Derrida, from “Fors” to Memoires for Paul de Man to Specters of Marx to, most powerfully and poignantly, The Work of Mourning. Beginning in the early 1980s and continuing almost right up until his own death in 2004, Derrida wrote a series of memorial essays or funeral orations on the occasion, so to speak, of the deaths of friends, mentors, and colleagues from Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault to Sarah Kofman, Jean-François Lyotard, Emmanuel Levinas, Gilles Deleuze, and Maurice Blanchot. In these works, Derrida at once elaborates a theory of mourning, its logic, rhetoric, codes, and rituals, and finds both this theory and himself put to the test by these unique events of personal mourning. First published in 2001 in English under the title The Work of Mourning and then in 2003 in French under the title Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde, this series of essays develops in an even more detailed and performative manner the enigma or aporia of a mourning that is at once originary and impossible.

As Derrida makes clear in each of these works of mourning, the death of a loved one or friend is absolutely singular, unique and incomparable, unable to be synthesised, dialectised, or interiorised. And yet, because each of these deaths is unique, because all these unique, singular deaths have come to form a series, a series that, alas, grows only longer with time, mourning always finds itself caught in the double bind of having at once to recognise the uniqueness of the friend for whom one mourns and to compare this death to others. By having to mourn for more than one friend, and by having to do so in the same rhetorically codified way,
often by means of the same gestures, the same words, one betrays the unique singularity of the dead friend.

But it is not only through its repetition in other deaths that the unique death gets betrayed. As we have already seen, insofar as mourning for the other begins already with the trace, the death of each singular other is similarly multiplied, the absolutely unique event of their death already repeated. Mourning for the friend continues—gets repeated—long after their actual death and it begins well before it. As Derrida argues elsewhere, “the melancholic certainty of which I am speaking begins, as always, in the friends’ lifetime” (SQ: 140). If the posthumous is the very air we breathe and the testamentary is the very structure of the trace, then mourning is the very element in which friendship grows. Derrida writes in one of the essays gathered in *The Work of Mourning*:

> To have a friend, to look at him, to follow him with your eyes, to admire him in friendship, is to know in a more intense way, already injured, always insistent, and more and more unforgettable, that one of the two of you will inevitably see the other die.

(WM: 106)

Contrary to the commonplace view with which we began, mourning does not wait for the actual death of the friend to take place; the death of the friend—and thus mourning for the friend—begins already at the beginning, already with the first trace, instituting at once friendship with the other and, as we have seen, my own self relation.

At once absolutely unique and yet inevitably put into a series, repeated, the death of a friend is always, to cite the title of the French edition of *The Work of Mourning*, “chaque fois unique, la fin du monde”, that is, “each time unique or uniquely, the end of the world.” As Derrida puts it elsewhere, “each time, and each time singularly, each time irreplaceably, each time infinitely, death is nothing less than the end of the world” (SQ: 140). While common sense tells us that no matter how painful the death of a friend may be the world continues on for us the living, Derrida claims the contrary. This is not rhetorical hyperbole but, once again, the very structure of mourning and of the “subject” who mourns. Inasmuch as the other’s death cannot be incorporated or interiorised, comprehended within or against the backdrop of an already established horizon of the world, what we experience at the death of a friend is not simply the death or end of someone within the world but the end of the world itself. Because my own self-relation within the world is constituted through the other and my mourning of the other, then the death of the other can never be just another event within the world, or just one death among others.
within the world, but the end of what opens up the world itself. And since this singular and unanticipatable event is, as we have seen, repeated, it is each time, each time uniquely, the end of the world. This is no doubt why Derrida could write in one of his most controversial and easily misunderstood statements that “there is no common measure adequate to persuade me that a personal mourning is less serious than a nuclear war” (Derrida 1984: 28). Each time unique, a personal mourning is nothing less than the end of the world.

The scope and stakes of mourning could thus not be greater for Derrida. Not just one subject or theme among others in his work, mourning is inseparable, as we have seen, from Derrida’s thinking about the trace and the testament, time and repetition, self and other, friendship and world, personal loss and the end of the world.

When it comes to mourning it is always tempting, as I said at the outset, to want to begin at the end. But to think mourning with Derrida we must understand that the end will have already been there from the beginning, that mourning will have begun with the first trace. This structural necessity does not, of course, occlude, negate, or suspend the surprise, the wound or the trauma, of the event of the end when it does “actually” arrive, the moment, each time unique and always as if for the first time, when mourning comes.

Notes
1 Derrida died during the night of 9 October 2004.
2 It should be noted that Derrida is playing on the common French expression “tu mens comme tu respires,” “you lie as easily as you breathe.”
3 I am simplifying in the extreme here a long and complicated argument regarding the topology of this incorporation and the putative difference between it and introjection. (See Derrida 1986: xvi-xvii).