

Embodied and Remembered Lives

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On 5 May 1981 Robert Gerard Sands, better known as ‘Bobby Sands,’ died at the age of twenty-seven in a prison hospital in Belfast after a hunger strike lasting sixty-six days. An active member of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and as such committed to the armed struggle against British rule in Northern Ireland, he had been sentenced three years earlier to fourteen years in prison for the possession of firearms. There he joined in a series of protests among the nationalist inmates designed to achieve recognition of their status as political prisoners captured in combat rather than as criminals caught breaking the law. This recognition would mean a different prison regime in terms of clothing, visits, and freedom to associate, but it was above all the principle that was at stake, since recognition of political status was in itself tantamount to defining the Northern Ireland Troubles as a war between legitimate parties (between British rule in Northern Ireland and those nationalists committed to creating an independent all-Ireland Republic) rather than as a matter of criminal behavior against the law. The protests escalated over a four-year period and led finally to the hunger strikes of 1981 in close consultation with the IRA leadership outside the prison. The strikes were led by Bobby Sands, whose death two months later led to rioting across Ireland and to worldwide protests directed at what was perceived to be the inhuman intransigence of the British government. More than 100,000 people attended Sands’ funeral in Belfast and it was widely broadcast.

Bobby Sands was not the only hunger striker to die in the summer of 1981. His death was followed by that of nine other young men (all of them in their twenties) who went on strike and died in a prolonged agony across the summer months, their deaths staggered strategically across the weeks so as to maximize the public impact of their determination and of British intransigence. It was only with the death of the tenth man that the strike was called off under pressure from the men's families without there having been any overt concessions from the British government (though in the months that followed many of the desired changes in prison regime were effectuated without any formal declaration of a change in the prisoners' status). Francis Hughes, Patsy O'Hara, Ray McCreesh, Joe McDonnell, Martin Hurson, Kevin Lynch, Kieran Doherty, Thomas McElwee, and Michael Devine: these nine men died after Bobby Sands as part of the same action, but it is above all Bobby Sands, the leader of the group and the first to die, who has come to stand for the whole group and whose death stands for one of the most intense moments of the Northern Ireland Troubles. For that very reason its significance continues to be highly contested: was he a martyr who died courageously for a legitimate cause, a terrorist complicit in taking innocent lives or, as the British prime minister put it, a "convicted criminal" who "chose to take his own life"? As we have seen, radically opposing interpretations of the IRA campaign (as a military struggle for a just cause or as criminal activity) were at the very heart of the whole protest in the first place. Indeed the strike was about symbolism and definitions even as it was played out through the destruction of actual bodies. The man whose body wasted away on hunger strike in 1981, who had been active in the IRA paramilitary campaign and later active as a writer and poet during his years in prison, has become 'Bobby Sands': a highly charged symbol of republican martyrdom and/or republican terror depending on which narrative you place him in.

There is obviously much that could be said about the hunger strikes of 1981, now seen by many to have marked both a highpoint and a turning point in the conflict (Beresford). But my concern here is with the more general issue of how lives are turned into stories and, specifically, how those storied lives are seen both by the people involved and by the people around them as part and parcel of *collective* stories extending beyond the range of a single embodied life.

Making Selves

There is by now more or less a consensus among theorists that personal identity has an important narrative dimension: it is in retelling our experiences as stories that we make sense of our lives and construct a sense of self. Self-fashioning is above all a way of constructing a story about one's self in response to the physical, social, and cultural conditions in which we find ourselves. Thus John Paul Eakin, in his well-known *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (1999), provides a compelling analysis of the ways in which individuals construct a self-image by continuously telling their own stories. Elsewhere he puts this in terms of 'the movie in our brain' that is constantly generating images of who we are and where we are going to. (Eakin "What Are We Reading") Stories that we have read or heard about other people may provide models for shaping this narrative understanding of our own lives but we nevertheless believe it to be uniquely 'ours.' As we grow older we inevitably have to change our perspective on the past and future and, in the process, adapt the story on which our coherent sense of self is made so that it fits in with new circumstances. Following this logic, the experience of trauma is tantamount to a failure of narrativity (what Eakin calls: *dysnarrativia*), since it involves having to deal with experiences that shake the very foundations of our storied selves by refusing to 'fit' (on this point, see further Caruth). Eakin's basic view on the centrality of narrativity to personal identity is echoed in the work among others of Paul Ricoeur, who defined personal identity as above all a "narrative identity." (Ricoeur)

Some recent studies have suggested that the link between narrativity and selfhood may have become less strong in contemporary culture where an immersion in the sensations of the here and now, it is argued, may be replacing the highly narrativized versions of the self that were more current in the self-fashionings of earlier generations where a 'sense of purpose' combined with a sense of 'coming from somewhere' was paramount. With respect to contemporary self-fashioning Jos de Mul (2005) has argued that we now have a keener sense *that* identities are constructed through interpretations and, hence, that they may therefore be constructed in multiple ways. Indeed, he suggests that narrative as the basis of identity is giving way to 'ludic identities' in which people experiment with different lifestyles that they self-consciously adopt for shorter periods, like make-up or clothes. Identity is something we perform, rather than something we embody in some continuous way across time. De Mul's idea of a ludic identity, facilitated by new media technologies and consumerism, does not in itself

preclude the possibility of our experimenting with life *stories* projected across time; but it does imply that a long-term developmental view has at the very least become sidelined by the short-term excitements of performing new identities and a new willingness to live our lives from day to day rather than as part of an ongoing story. This point is elevated to a principle by Douglas Rushkoff whose *Children of Chaos* (1997) takes the image of 'surfing' as a key figure of our times, arguing that the upcoming generations are learning to live without the need for a narrative backbone to their lives as they concentrate on the excitement of the paths being followed rather than on the places they are going to or leaving behind.

There is much that is valuable, as we shall see, in these recent discussions of narrativity and performativity in relation to selfhood. There are differences of emphasis among theorists regarding the relative importance of performativity, and, in some cases, there is basic disagreement on fundamentals (where for Eakin narrativity is essential to selfhood, for example, Rushkoff sees it rather as a particular historical variation of selfhood that we are now leaving behind us). But by and large recent discussions of the relationship between narrativity and the individual life (whether to deny or underscore its importance) have shared something: an atomistic view. They assume that the individual life(story) is the given unit of analysis and thus assume that individuals operate outside of a social context without a sense of belonging to a community with a trans-generational continuity across time. Even where it is recognized (as in Ricoeur) that we construct our own self-image in dialogue with others, the unit of analysis is taken to be the temporal life span of the individual and the story that defines it. This means in effect that theoretical discussions of the relationship between 'life and narrative' – to evoke the theme of this special issue – also share a common *temporal* limitation in supposing that a life-story begins with birth and ends with death.

Recent developments in cultural memory studies allow me to tell – literally – a different story; namely, that the narrative of a particular life *as told by other people* can extend well beyond the lifetime of the narrative subject. To put this in another way: individual narrative subjects live on in the memories of others with death being less the end of their story, than the beginning of their afterlife. In the first place, this is a matter of surviving in the 'living memory' of those who knew them and, later with the help of family stories and gravestones put up 'in loving memory', of those who did not know them directly but have heard of them through the family grapevine. As Maurice Halbwachs (1925)

argued in his pioneering work on collective memory, the family provides one of the most important social frames for the recollection of persons and events. Given certain conditions, however, individuals can also enjoy a long 'second life' in the shared memory of a larger community (what has recently come to be known as 'cultural memory'), as this has been shaped by stories in a variety of media and by public monuments and rituals. In order to be remembered by one's family and friends, it is enough to have lived and to have been loved. In order to gain access to a second life in posterity as part of cultural memory, however, more is needed. One has to have *become* memorable in some way because of one's successes (as in the case of heroes), because of the intensity of one's sufferings for a cause (as in the case of martyrs) or because of one's role as victim (a variation which has become particularly important in twentieth-century memory cultures). From the perspective of cultural memory studies, then, immortality is nothing less than gaining the power of never being forgotten by later generations. In practice, of course, immortality is impossible to achieve, since the remembrance of even the greatest of heroes tends to die out after several centuries, and yet it is clear that there are figures (such as Jesus Christ, Mohammed, Julius Caesar, Napoleon and so on) who have had an extremely long 'second life' in cultural memory.

One way of gaining a place in 'second life' is by leaving material traces that can be used to re-activate one's image or voice, as Krapp famously did in his 'last tape.' (Beckett) But however important trace materials are, they will not in themselves be enough to guarantee a place in cultural memory if later generations are not interested enough in making an effort to remember you (in the case of Krapp, by replaying his tape; in other cases, by retrieving information from the archive). So is there any insurance against oblivion? Leo Braudy shows in *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and its History* (1986) how people believed for many centuries that enjoying an afterlife in posterity (alongside a heavenly afterlife) was almost as important as enjoying one's embodied life – hence the value attached to honour and reputation as guarantors of posthumous survival and hence the efforts people were prepared to make to achieve glory. The memories of later generations of that glory, it was believed, would provide a temporal prosthesis that would prolong existence beyond the grave. Thus one of the worst punishments to be meted out in ancient Rome was the so-called *damnatio memoriae*, a lot that befell Nero and Caligula among others, and that consisted of erasing all traces of their works and possessions so that they would also be denied an afterlife in collective memory. Where others could

leave their triumphal arches and columns as material reminders of their achievements, those who had committed crimes were punished with oblivion, a secular version of the Christian hell. As Braudy shows, 'the frenzy for renown' thus stimulated action and helped model lives right into the modern period. It also created a feedback mechanism working across generations in that the remembered lives of earlier heroes provided models of correct, and (for the truly ambitious) heroic, behaviour that could be emulated in the embodied lives of those who came later. Since such a discourse in support of emulation and collective ideals seems alien to the 'ludic' discourses of today, it is worthwhile recalling the importance of patriotic duty in many of those who "ardent for some desperate glory," in the famous words of Siegfried Sassoon, enlisted in World War One only to discover that Horace's adagium *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* (it is sweet and fitting to die for one's fatherland) was "an old lie." That a young man at the beginning of the twentieth century could still invoke Horace's adagium as a model of behaviour is itself indicative of the longevity of cultural memory. More specifically, it illustrates the power of earlier lives to 'premeditate' later ones (Erll), creating across generations a temporally complex set of interactions between the remembered and the embodied.

Before going on to analyze this complexity in the case of Bobby Sands, something more needs to be said about the selectivity of cultural memory. If cultural memory provides a virtual place where individuals live on (in stories), it is nevertheless a place to which access is restricted by specifically cultural mechanisms. Thus recent work has shown that cultural memory structurally works on a highly selective basis by concentrating on a limited number of "memory sites" (Nora) or "figures of memory" (Assmann) which are considered particularly representative of the past or, more specifically, of that part of the past that is worth remembering. As the link above between 'glory' and 'posterity' already suggested, public acts of remembrance, as distinct from private acts of remembrance relating to loved ones, is related to values and agenda-setting. As I have argued elsewhere, cultural memory is always based on the "principle of scarcity" (Rigney) and not of total recall. It involves investing and re-investing in a limited number of memory sites that are considered particularly relevant as vehicles for expressing common values and a common "narrative identity" and which, by being reproduced over and over again, have managed to become common currency in a given community. It is not enough for individuals to have done something 'glorious' for them to be remembered, then, there has to be 'room' in the canon of memory sites for them. Through selection

and over-investment in a limited number of sites, a canon is created that can effect a symbolic connection between past and present, at the same time as it provides points of stability against which historical changes relating to the group can be measured. Jan Assmann refers in this regard to “the body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey the society’s self-image.” (Assmann)

In Pierre Nora’s definition of the term, the role of memory sites is “to stop time, to block the work of forgetting [...] to immortalize death, to *materialize the immaterial* [...] all of this in order to capture a maximum amount of meaning in the fewest of signs.” (Nora 19; my emphasis) The key to memory sites then is that they materialize values in a concentrated way – they *figure* significance – and so provide a focal point for relating to the past as part of an ongoing narrative. The idea that memory sites combine a material and a symbolic dimension has been generally recognized, but the emphasis on materiality – what I have elsewhere called the figurability and representability of memory (Rigney) – has not received the attention it deserves. But figurability helps explain the paradoxical importance of individuals – of faces and bodies – as sites of collective remembrance. The ubiquity of statues to national heroes in the capital cities of Europe along with the importance of statues to saints and crucifixes in medieval churches, bears out the fact that very often ‘figures of memory’ are often literally that: individual human figures who are seen to embody the collective story and who provide a distinctly human point of reference in our imagining of the past and, when it comes to heroes, a benchmark for future action on the part of those who seek to emulate them. In this way the afterlife of heroes can become the blueprint for the future lives of those who identify with them as part of a common story.

The Cultural Memory of Hunger-Striking

This complex relationship between embodied and remembered lives, between the individual and the collective, can be illustrated by the case of the Northern Ireland hunger strikers of 1981. To begin with, the protagonists of the strike were simultaneously staging a protest and remembering earlier lives. Hunger-strikes had played an important part as a passive weapon in Irish Republican protests for the best part of the twentieth century. It had been practised by different generations acting against successive governments and had led to the deaths of at least ten people: in 1917, 1920 (under British rule) and in 1923, 1940, 1946 (in

1 The story of Republicanism becomes extra complicated here by political shifts: when Ireland was granted independence from Britain in 1921 that independence was only partial since it did not include Northern Ireland; a Republican minority both North and South of the new border refused to accept that as a final solution and continued to struggle through the IRA – both against Britain and against the Irish Free State, later called the Irish Republic – for the independence of the entire island.

the independent South of Ireland).¹ The most spectacular and symbolically-charged death in this tradition was that of the Lord Mayor of the city of Cork, Terence McSwiney, who in 1920 had died in a London prison after seventy-four days without food. This event and the highly publicized funeral that followed it had had an enormous public impact across the world and certainly played a role in forging the treaty that led to independence for the southern part of the island in 1921. As David Beresford writes in his detailed account of the unfolding of the 1981 strike, McSwiney was looked to as a model. His famous words of defiance (almost proverbial in Irish cultural memory) were invoked by his spiritual descendents as guidelines for their own action: “the context on our side is not one of rivalry or vengeance, but of endurance. It is not those who can inflict the most, but those who can suffer the most who will conquer.” (quoted in Beresford 19) The idea that suffering and endurance were a key to political salvation had thus become enshrined in Republican discourse parallel to the commitment to armed struggle. It drew, moreover – and this is surely part of its imaginative and emotive resonance – upon long-seated Christian models of martyrdom and sacrifice. Closer to home it also drew on an ancient Irish tradition of fasting at the ruler’s door in order to achieve your goal, something that had been recognised as a legitimate tool in the ancient Irish laws used to regulate society prior to English rule. (Lennon) This defunct tradition was only integrated into Irish narrative identity and cultural memory at the beginning of the twentieth century in combination with the recent prevalence of hunger strikes among Irish nationalists (hunger strikes were also important as a weapon among suffragettes, but this was not

part of the Irish national narrative). The symbolic importance of the ancient tradition had also been enhanced by William B. Yeats's play on *The King's Threshold* (1904) about a hunger striker in ancient Ireland, a play which he subsequently rewrote in 1922 after McSwiney's death, so that it ended with the actual death of the hunger-striker and the admonitory words:

When I and these are dead
 We should be carried to some windy hill
 To lie there with uncovered face awhile
 That mankind and that leper there may know
 Dead faces laugh. King! King! Dead faces laugh. (141)

The cultural memory of earlier hunger strikers thus gave a resonance to the strikes of 1981 which went beyond their immediate impact. The unique protest action by ten unique individuals was at the same time a way of acting out a particular Republican tradition (on re-enactment as a form of political action, see Solterer). As they agitated for specific goals (recognition of their political status) the ten young hunger strikers were also performing a national identity on the media stage, playing parts in a national narrative that had been pre-mediated in earlier moments of struggle. They did so apparently from deep conviction, not ludic playfulness. There is some doubt as to the commitment of some of the later strikers to the chosen strategy and the degree to which they were pressurized by the IRA command into continuing the strike. (O'Rawe) But the diary written by Sands in the earlier parts of the strike certainly suggests that he was acting from the belief that his own life was part of a greater cause: his self was not only storied, but also nationalized. It was part of an unfolding collective story, including the tradition of hunger striking, that had started 800 years before he was born (the usual way of dating the arrival of the English in Ireland) and that would continue after his death until the time when Ireland would once (again) be free. Both the diary he wrote until he was too weak to continue (Beresford 99) and his posthumous *One Day in my Life*, end by invoking the future – in the case of *One Day* this is done by using the mantra of the Republican movement: “our day will come” (*Tiocfaidh ár lá*). In Sand's narrative self-fashioning, we can thus see the complex temporality at play which is characteristic of myth as defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss: the idea of the ever-presence of the past (McSwiney and ancient Ireland are still alive in 1981) combined with the idea of the continuous unfolding of an ongoing narrative (a messianic struggle for ultimate justice).

Since the work of Hayden White, it has become generally accepted that history itself does not take the shape of a story and that any attempt to narrativize history reflects more on the desire to have real events assume an imaginary coherence than on the nature of events themselves. Nevertheless, this sort of narrativization is clearly at work in the case of Sands and his comrades (and echoed in other ego-documents relating to the Northern Ireland Troubles) who see themselves as players in a much bigger narrative than that of their own lives. To indicate its imaginary character is less relevant than to point to its evident power to mobilize people – in this case into taking extreme, and ultimately self-destructive, action. But even in less extreme cases, it is arguably the sense of congruence between a personal and a collective narrative identity that is the key to all forms of political activism, from anti-globalism to Islamic fundamentalism.

The complex relation between individual and collective stories is also reflected in the ‘afterlife’ of Bobby Sands. As with McSwiney and others before him, his physical death marked the beginning of his second life. In the days, months and years following his funeral, various memorials were erected to his memory, not only in Northern Ireland but also in the U.S., Cuba, and Australia; while streets have been named after him in Teheran and in the French towns of Nantes and St. Denis. His death has been narrated in biographies and histories (including McKittrick’s compendium of *Lost Lives*) and has been the subject of many songs often in the form of traditional ballads (most famously, Christy Moore’s ‘The People’s Own MP’). Moreover, his death has also been the subject of a number of films, including *Some Mother’s Son* (John Lynch, 1996), *H3* (Mark O’Halloran, 2001), the *Silence of the Skylark* (David Ballerini, 2005) and, most recently and memorably, *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008), a riveting and grueling visual poem about the intensely violent battle of wills played out on and through the bodies of the strikers. The other nine men who died are also regularly remembered, but usually as part of a group memorial along with all the others, rather than as individuals. Certainly their names are not the household name that Bobby Sands has become. Indeed, one could say that Sands’ fame has largely eclipsed the memory of the other nine men (as had been predicted by some, McQueen’s *Hunger* suggests). In many ways, this is itself an unwitting replay of 1920 when two other men died alongside McSwiney and are now almost entirely forgotten.

The Historical Significance of 'Bobby Sands'

There are a number of reasons for Sand's prominence in cultural memory. To begin with, the fact that he was the first striker to die in 1981 meant that the media coverage was more intense and its political significance all the greater (if the British government could let one striker die, then a Rubicon had been crossed). There was considerable media attention paid to the subsequent strikers, but as the weeks passed and the numbers increased this inevitably made for less headlines in a media world driven by the promise of continuously renewed 'news.' Secondly, Sands was a charismatic figure who, in his time in prison, had written poems (in a rather traditional style) and memoirs, including *One Day in my Life* (1983), mentioned earlier, whose title may have been an echo of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1963). The fact that Sands himself had already been a source of mediatized self-representations disseminated through the Republican press undoubtedly fed into his ability to be remembered since it meant that people have had imaginative materials to go on, an actual story to tell and not just a name. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, we see in the foregrounding of Sands in relation to his relatively forgotten comrades the workings of the 'scarcity principle' in cultural memory. Collective memory is never egalitarian. As I argued above, memory sites work on the basis of a minimum number of signs with a maximum amount of meaning; in this case, the icon 'Bobby Sands' has come to stand for the ten hunger strikers; more generally, for the IRA campaign in Northern Ireland and, more generally still, the whole centuries-long struggle against British rule in Ireland. Given this iconic status, it is not surprising that when there was a debate in the Northern Irish Assembly on 11 June 2002 regarding the erection of memorials in public places,² one of the Unionist politicians should have voiced his objection in particular to the recent erection of a memorial to "Bobby Sands" in the town of Enniskillen: in 1987 this had been the site of one of the worst IRA atrocities of the entire Troubles, with a bomb claiming 11 civilian victims. In societies fraught by historical conflict remembered lives, be these of perpetrators or of victims, are coloured by their collective and their historical significance: they were individuals, but also freedom fighters, terrorists, martyrs and, too frequently, innocent bystanders (see also Conway). In the case of Bobby Sands, his memory continues to be invoked in public precisely because his exact historical significance is still the subject of intense dispute.

The case of Bobby Sands is an extreme one. But the complex interactions between remembrance and embodiment that it exemplifies

suggests that discussions of 'life and narrative' need to be broadened to include the ways in which private and public lives become interlocked, often tragically so.

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SUMMARY

This article approaches the theme of 'life and narrative' from the perspective of cultural memory studies and argues for a less individualized approach to the analysis of narrative self-fashioning. It uses the case of Bobby Sands, who died on hunger strike in Northern Ireland in 1981, as an example of the complex interactions between embodied and remembered lives, and between individual and collective identities. It shows how Sands modeled himself on the remembered lives of predecessors within the Republican tradition and how he, in turn, has been memorialized as an icon of that tradition.

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Masterclass

In de rubriek Masterclass wordt studenten de mogelijkheid geboden eigen onderzoek te publiceren. Deze keer drie artikelen van Isis Butôt, Aleksandra Rychlicka en Jeroen Dera.