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ABSTRACT

This article develops a view of collective memory as a rhetorical practice with an intimate connection to death. Drawing on the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, I argue that memory is inhabited by death – the loss of a living presence which, nonetheless, is the very condition for recollection and communication. Memory can never retrieve presence, for time is discontinuous, disjointed rather than linear. Instead, memory is presented as an ‘impossible gift’, a form of inheritance that charges us to remember anew. These motifs, I argue, are central in epideictic rhetoric which, by dwelling on the present, invites collective recognition and affirmation concerning what fundamentally *is*. In the genre of the eulogy, especially, the event of death is encountered by reference to the fracturing of time, the experience of the gift, and the question of inheritance. Eulogy rhetoric, I suggest, is a powerful mode of collective memory that captures much of how we remember.

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Introduction

Few events prompt memory quite like death – be it the passing of a loved one, a celebrity figure, or the loss of many innocents. Such occasions make powerful, emotional claims on the living, inviting not just casual recollection but a heightened responsibility to memory itself. Remembrance and the memorialisation of the dead are acts that underscore the communal nature of this responsibility – as is evidenced on sombre occasions such as Armistice Day gatherings, post-mortem tributes of various kinds, but also in appeals to acknowledge the lives of those whose memory has never been recalled (Olusoga, 2021). Deaths invite remembrance not only of those lost but also of who ‘we’ are in relation to that loss.

In this article, I develop the view that collective memory is a rhetorical practice with a close relation to death. That is not merely because funerals and public memorial events are so often voiced in various ways – by readings, speeches, recollections as well as formal rites – but, as philosopher Jacques Derrida has argued, because death and loss inhabit *all* efforts to recollect and communicate experience. Language necessarily entails the separation of words from their animating intention, their original context, and from any control over what their recipients may understand by, or do with, them. Memorial discourse is

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thus charged with retrieving an absence but – because it can never restore presence – contains traces of death and loss. Stimulating and communicating memory involves experiencing a tension between the desire for plenitude and presence but also acknowledging its impossibility. That tension, I argue, is frequently staged inside the rhetorical strategies of epideictic (or ceremonial) speech which foregrounds the present moment's articulation to the past and future. The eulogy, or funeral speech, in particular, testifies to the temporal fracture occasioned by death that sets memory in motion, invites us to hear a story, but also to give memory a future by opening up the question of inheritance. The aporetic experience pursued in this rhetoric, I want to suggest, captures the vital dimension of collective memory.

In what follows, I explore the intimate relation between death and memory by setting out Derrida's arguments about temporality and *différance*. Next, I argue that these insights can be understood through the analysis of epideictic rhetoric generally and, most notably, the eulogy. These exemplify what Derrida calls 'the logic of the gift', that is, the desire for an impossible fullness that is annulled in its very enactment. In giving praise and remembering the highest qualities, memorial rhetoric evokes both the desire for a living presence but also withdraws from it, leaving audiences exposed to an aporetic experience. The eulogy is thus especially attuned to the temporal dis-adjustment involved in speaking of the dead, which I illustrate by reference to two examples.

Derrida and the catastrophe of memory

According to Derrida, memory is an impossible experience. To retrieve the past in its singularity and to preserve it from being forgotten is the driving force of memory. But it can never be achieved: 'This for me is the very experience of death, of catastrophe' (1974, p. 207). Indeed, for Derrida, death and memory are inextricably bound together. The 'catastrophic' relation between memory and loss are central to his entire philosophy (Dooley & Kavanagh, 2007). We can never separate, absolutely, life from death or from the destructive effects of time, he argues. To live is, simply, to be exposed to loss and the annihilation of memory (Hägglund, 2008). Yet, far from being a wholly tragic situation, that exposure is the very condition of life and all its possibilities (whether good or bad), which Derrida often describes as a form of survival: 'life *is* living on, life *is* survival' (2007, p. 26. Italics in original). On that general outlook, Derrida develops important analytical and ethical observations that, I will suggest, can help us to understand the relation between rhetoric and collective memory.

Derrida's philosophy of 'deconstruction' undertakes a critique of metaphysics, which he understands as a mode of thinking aimed at founding knowledge on the authority of an incontestable principle that escapes time. Metaphysical 'truth' is, accordingly, conceived 'on the basis of the present' (1982, p. 13); which is to say, it is conceived as having an immediacy and integrity as if completely, unconditionally present to consciousness. In western philosophy, to know is to grasp a truth as though it were fully before us now. This 'metaphysics of presence' is expressed philosophically in the principle of 'noncontradiction' – a thing cannot both be A and not-A at the same time. The metaphysical gesture resides in the attribution of self-identity, or indivisible unity, to a principle or figure that distinguishes it from everything else that is contingent or passes away (Hägglund, 2008, pp. 14–15).

For Derrida, however, the claim to full presence cannot be sustained and the logic of non-contradiction cannot hold universally. All identity is vulnerable to the differentiation brought by time. The barest interval, or space, between temporal moments separating one instance from another is required to discriminate the present. That means that no present element can be thought without reference to 'what it is not', to its difference from what it was or what it will be (1982, p. 13). The logic of non-contradiction is thereby violated: there is no simultaneous 'now' where something is entirely for itself. There is only a present perpetually divided in its 'becoming' by a receding past and an oncoming future. The present moment is always 'contaminated' by what precedes or follows it.

What makes for any continuity is not a fixed essence separable from contingent circumstances but, rather, what Derrida calls 'the trace' – for example, writing or an image – which is an inscription that marks presence and permits it to move 'through' time. The logic of the trace is one of *différance*, Derrida's neologism to describe the 'movement' by which any inscription both differs from other of its instances and defers its fullness before what else may come (Derrida, 1982, pp. 1–27). To 'have' identity something must be recognisable in relation to prior versions of the same while also distinct from others; and it is open to future alteration in a new context that means a trace is never simply repeated but 'iterated' in a new context that modifies it. A commonplace phrase, for example, is a repetition of some distinct arrangement of words made on prior occasions. But its meaning is not utterly determined by its past; it depends also on how events to which it is newly related turn out. The meaning of any existing thing – of a communication, a text, a historical moment, a life – is never given absolutely because it is both delayed (it depends on what came before) and deferred (it depends on what may come after). The movement of *différance*, then, both produces the prospect of identity and meaning *and* reveals it as radically unstable since nothing ever fully is what it is (as the principle of non-contradiction demands).

For Derrida, the differential structure of the trace makes impossible any notion of absolute 'origin' or 'sovereign' principle since these imply some element that endures entirely in itself without relation to others, unaffected by context. Against such metaphysical fictions, which have been central to western thought, deconstruction demonstrates how all such claims hang on the violent exclusion of a relation to some other element upon which identity is dependent, thereby undercutting its pretensions to full presence. Derrida describes this predicament as one of exposure to 'otherness', 'alterity', or the 'unconditional condition'; that is, to a general possibility that a given identity will alter, reveal some dimension till now hidden, or even be destroyed. No permanent rule or principle guarantees the integrity or sameness of anything in the future, no 'absolute immunity' prevents things from transforming beyond recognition.

It is through this unconditional condition that we can understand the link between death and memory. All conceptual meaning, for example, is constituted through *différance* in that, to be communicable at all, it must be inscribed either in graphic writing or the recognised phonic sounds of language which transmit sense by being repeatable in new contexts. This is a basic premise of any communication or transmission of meaning (Derrida, 1988). But it means that there is no guarantee that the same meanings, investments, or conclusions are discerned by the recipient. Indeed, there is no guarantee that the recipient will understand or even receive the message at all. In western thought

since Plato, Derrida detects a tendency to treat writing as secondary to an authentic moment of speech where sound and concept were coincident such that no interval could separate them. Writing was therefore secondary to speech, a defilement of the living presence of thought in the speaker. Indeed, writing was regarded as an 'economy of death' – a tomb inside which the original presence was encased and rendered lifeless (1982, p. 4).

So, for Derrida, in language, memory and death are bound together rather than separate. Death inhabits memory since inscription (whether in thought, speech or writing) is necessary for communication – we 'remember' something by repeating its traces – but repetition separates meaning from its former presence and exposes it to its death. The condition of possibility of communication across time is therefore simultaneously the condition of its impossibility – there can only be meaning if it can be transmitted, but transmission threatens to corrupt or annihilate it. Strictly speaking, then, memory is irretrievable in its fullness. No presence can ever be restored to life since its loss is the condition of it being remembered at all – a memory is always a copy, not the original. Indeed, for Derrida, there never was a pure original since that, too, was conditioned by delay and anticipation. At best all we have are past traces in new contexts which themselves leave further traces for future contexts.

But that is not to say memory is undesirable nor that remembering is pointless. On the contrary, memory is something we cannot avoid since it is the precondition for any understanding and experience. If pure memory is impossible, so is pure forgetting. As inheritors of traditions of thought and experience, we cannot help but repeat and so remember in some way. Past experiences may be irretrievable, but their traces saturate our lives, even if we refuse or ignore them. Time, as Derrida liked to remind his audiences, is 'out of joint': not a linear movement forwards towards some final truth but a discontinuous multiplicity (Derrida, 1994). The 'non-contemporaneity of present time with itself' (1994, p. 25) means the present is inflected by past traces which are not all revealed at once and cannot all be simply recontextualised. Likewise, the future perpetually opens the prospect of such traces being destroyed or forgotten. So, memory is never simply 'behind' us but remains urgent, threatening to upturn our grasp of things, even though (indeed because) it is impossible to retrieve. A past event may emerge that, in the manner of Hamlet's ghost, alters how we think and enact the future.

In drawing attention to the conditions of communication, inheritance, and memory this way, Derrida critiques metaphysical hierarchies that assert the priority of a 'pure', uncontaminated presence: an original intention, a determining context, an unchangeable rule or founding principle, a claim to permanent and incontestable authority, and so on. That is not so we can ignore or simply refuse such things. Rather, it is to highlight the moments at which decisions are made to delimit their meaning and to assert some 'final' truth. For these decisions are better grasped as 'aporetic' (Derrida, 1993, pp. 12–21). That is, they are taken in 'undecidable' contexts, where a frame is imposed rather than logically deduced. Any decision could also be taken differently or later changed. We must make such decisions, of course, if we are to live, but that only highlights their ethical weight. To decide is always to kill off some options in favour of others – leaving us 'haunted' by the choices we might otherwise have made (Derrida, 2002, pp. 252–255). The burden of decision is one of having to risk a calculation without full knowledge of how events may transpire. Decisions – over our responsibilities to friends, to strangers,

and so on – are made in an unconditional openness to the possibility that we are mistaken, that things go against us, or that we regret our choice. Derrida underlines his preference for an openness to the other, that is to the affirmation of alterity as such. His point is not that we should always grant other people their way over our own. Rather, we should regard fixed hierarchies about how we read, understand, or respond to the wishes of others as refusals of the unconditional, therefore closing off even the opportunity to make choices at all. Affirmation of the other, as Hägglund (2008) points out, acknowledges that the threat of choosing badly is necessary for *any* choice at all. The risk that one's judgement might be wrong is the condition for it possibly being right.

For Derrida, then, life and death are not opposites but mutually conditioning dimensions of survival, which he describes as 'a complication of the opposition life/death' (2007, p. 51). To live in time is always and unconditionally to be exposed, in varying degrees, to loss, to the 'incinerating blaze' (1989, p. 21) of presence through change and forgetting, the deaths of our friends, or the failure of intentions to come to fruition. All existence is permeated by death in one form or another. But that is the condition of any adaptation, improvement, or recollection. In being exposed to death, we live on (*sur-vivre*), and that is a situation we can also affirm.

Impossible gifts: epideictic rhetoric and the eulogy

Derrida helps us to approach the question of how, and with what effects, public speech appeals to memory. The movement of *différance* can be found, I want to suggest, in the workings of rhetoric. This is particularly significant in – though not restricted to – the eulogy and other such forms of remembrance, where speech turns directly to the experience of loss (see Martin, 2019). Eulogies are distinctive in so far as they make death both the occasion and focus of their discourse. What I want to do here is consider how eulogies, as instances of epideictic (or ceremonial) speech, make Derrida's analytical and ethical themes their own. By responding to loss in the present, eulogies register the fracturing of time and the simultaneous urgency/impossibility of memory. We can understand this, I shall suggest, through Derrida's account of the logic of the gift, which underscores the tension between a desire for presence and its impossibility. In the next section, I offer some examples to illustrate the different ways that eulogy can occupy this tension.

What does it mean to say that eulogies are forms of epideictic? In classical rhetoric, the ceremonial or 'display' speech was a broad category for discourses delivered at moments of collective celebration or mourning. Included in this category are matrimonial speeches, 'encomia' to celebrate the victories of great heroes, 'panegyric' verses idealising the extraordinary qualities of a leader, discourses delivered at festivals and other regular public events, and funeral orations (Habinek, 2005, pp. 54–59; Pernot, 2015). What differentiates these speech events from others, claimed Aristotle (350 B.C.E./1991, 1358b–1359a), is their orientation to time. In his account, the three, exemplary types of rhetoric – deliberative, forensic, and ceremonial – correspond to different temporal occasions: the future, the past, and the present, respectively. Of course, in any actual oration, all three may appear in some form. But the tripartite distinction helps to highlight a dominant preoccupation and, consequently, the types of argument and techniques associated with it. For example, deliberative (or political) speech is concerned with what is expedient for the future; forensic (or legal) speech focuses on events that have happened in the past.

Rhetorical strategies in these instances encourage an audience to make a judgement; for example, about the best way to proceed or what precisely has occurred and who is responsible. Vital here are techniques oriented to the presentation of evidence (or 'proofs') and rational argumentation since these help the audience come to a decision on the matter. Epideictic, however, does not make the same intellectual claim on its audience; its orientation to the present means it does not demand auditors work purposively towards a judgement by weighing up evidence. Instead, ceremonial speeches often have a 'ritual' function of affirming a common feeling or sentiment, typically through praise, about the immediate moment (Carter, 1991).

The absence of a role for judgement has brought epideictic into disrepute. With no requirement for technical precision or reflection, it is frequently regarded as the form in which the worst excesses of rhetoric can be found. Hyperbole, mawkish indulgence, excessive decoration, and theatricality, rather than truth or critical reflection, are often attributed to such speeches (Sheard, 1996, pp. 767–770). Often epideictic is understood, somewhat narrowly, as the genre of 'praise or blame'. We laud heroes and we denounce villains, not to prove anything new but, rather, to affirm by way of amplification that we know where we stand on the matter before us, rallying the audience to a collective sentiment with which it already agrees. At its best, that might involve exhorting sentiments of pride and good will at graduation ceremonies or appeals to hope and strength in rousing sermons at times of peril; at its worst, we may associate it with extremist political gatherings, dogmatic ideology, fawning adulation, or social media outrage. Since the audience is not expected to weigh up any claims, its role is one of passive reception, reflecting through silence or applause its solid assent to purportedly common sentiments.

That does not mean that epideictic cannot contribute to making judgements – modern scholars increasingly highlight the role of display speech in reinforcing moral, civic, even ideological, values to 'strengthen a consensus', as Perelman (1982, p. 20) puts it, and thus also to influence deliberation and judgement (Sheard, 1996, pp. 771–776). Classical rhetoricians certainly understood that amplified sentiments can themselves function as forms of persuasive advice for or against certain actions (Habinek, 2005, p. 57). Today, ceremony-like 'celebrations' to affirm normative positions are a staple of most organisational communications, whether overtly political or not. These encourage audiences to identify, reason or judge from the apparent self-evidence of communally agreed truths that may inspire 'critical reflection' and thus action (Sheard, 1996, p. 787). Such rhetoric mobilises terms, homilies, and commonplaces that remind the audience of its distinctive character as a community, or of its purported moral standards (Atkins, 2018; Condit, 1985; Richardson, 2018). Conveying such values may well serve a practical function of 'solidifying the social order' by subtly warning people not to stray from communal expectations – as religious sermons do explicitly (Pernot, 2015, p. 99).

However, efforts to redeem epideictic by aligning it to the other, supposedly more 'serious', practical aims of speech diminish the temporal dimension that makes it distinctive and gives it potency (Rollins, 2005, pp. 10–11). Epideictic's attention to the present – that is, to the event of the here and now – uniquely invites the audience to be a witness to an event, thereby fostering communal recognition of what *is*. As Rosenfield (1980, p. 135) underlines, epideictic comes from the Greek *epideixis*, meaning 'to shine' or 'show off'. 'Display' speech makes visible what is there that, otherwise, might be missed; it magnifies attention to the current event and encourages audiences to find there a

source of communal affirmation – whether that is the accomplishment of great deeds, the union of friends, or the passing of a life. The point is not to lead the audience to a new judgement (although that is possible) but to grasp the present as a moment already pregnant with meaning. The present, as Rollins underlines, is revealed as ‘a state of neither temporal nor spatial stasis; it is not simply there’ (2005, p. 10). Rather, something worthy of collective attention is actively being worked out, revealing itself in the present.

Epideictic therefore intensifies the present moment, revealing it to be not a discrete, passing instance between the past and future but, rather, a point of convergence that discloses an underlying precondition. By breaking with normal time in order to ‘give time’ to the moment, a communal disposition is thereby performed. The audience is reminded of who it is and what should matter to it – excellence, success, love, virtue, bravery, and so on. These involve not simply the defence of established civic values or moral norms, nor even a spur to direct action at some later point; they describe stances, ways of opening to the future and preparing for what may come.

If many ceremonies are events that are repeated regularly or seem to be superficial spectacles, the same cannot be said of funerals. The funeral oration, or eulogy, is a subcategory of epideictic rhetoric. Closely tied to the elaborate, ancient practices of burying the dead (the funeral rites) and to the wider process of mourning by the bereaved (which begins before and continues after a funeral), the eulogy laments a singular, unrepeatable loss to the community (Loraux, 2006). As a form of epideictic rhetoric, it attends primarily to the present moment by offering praise for the deceased – formally ‘paying respects’, as it were. ‘Memory’ in this instance is not a historical excavation or narrative account of details so much as a shared tribute to the dead, exalted recognition of their existence as such. It is a discourse about the dead given in full knowledge of their death. As such, the eulogy speaks in response to the loss of presence and the fracturing of time that brings, foregrounding loss itself as the focal point and prompt for memory.

Here the analytical and ethical dimensions to deconstruction can be seen to combine. The eulogy might be conceived as an encounter with the very necessity and impossibility of memory. On the one hand, there is an urgent desire to reconstitute the presence of the deceased, to recollect their character, state their accomplishments, to ‘bear witness’ to a life. The eulogy acknowledges the singularity of a living being who made a mark and left behind traces. Yet, at the same time, there is an anguished awareness that such recollection cannot restore what was lost, that the singularity of the deceased – their unique outlook on the world, their plans and potential, the world they occupied and shared with us – cannot be restored and is gone forever. The failure of language adequately to evoke, the lack of preparation for this moment, perhaps a hesitancy to speak at all – these are all common to the eulogy’s implicit awareness that the lost person (or people) is now a spectral presence and their memory shattered. The tragedy of this aporia, however, can be partially offset by reference to the future. Remembering the dead is frequently presented, not as a useless indulgence or idealisation but, rather, as a chance to recall a lesson or moral example; a promise for a past that is yet to come. The catastrophe of memory can then be transformed into a ‘work of mourning’ (Derrida, 2001), a process of recollection that seeks not to restore presence but to transmit its traces to the future.

Eulogies obviously vary in each instance, but we can see how, in the time given over to the dis-adjustment of time brought by death, they offer potential for what Rollins (2005)

calls 'ethical interruption'. Memory operates here not as forensic mastery by gathering and presenting the full 'truth' of a life but, in accord with its epideictic form, as a celebratory praise. Derrida provides a way of understanding this in his account of 'the logic of the gift' (Derrida, 1992). This logic describes the aporetic experience of the impossible. To make a gift is to give generously something of value, with no expectation of receiving anything in exchange. But giving nonetheless generates a sense of debt on the part of the recipient that, by evoking a desire to 'repay' such generosity, immediately annuls the unconditional principle that makes it a gift. The logic of the gift invokes an impossible refusal of reciprocity. The only way to avoid annulment might be just to say nothing, whether in the process of giving or in response. But then the gift would not be understood as a gift, or it may be acknowledged silently with an obligation that remains implicit.

Derrida's point here is that the logic of the gift highlights an impossible desire – we are profoundly motivated by the unconditional promise of a pure gift, but it can never be adequately presented. Epideictic speech, as we have seen, traverses a similar logic: generous, abundant praise is offered in return for great deeds or virtuous conduct. But if the deed is itself a gift (of public service, of bravery, of virtue) can it ever be rewarded without falling short, appearing overstated, or simply being a cynical exchange aimed at cancelling out a sense of debt? Excessive attention and praise (but also criticism) can often seem out of sorts with what is being praised. We may be tempted to think that there is a disguised practical calculation at work that makes high praise functional to some other end (ideology, critique, etc.). But perhaps it is the gap itself, the interruption of a normal means-ends economy, that is important here. Exuberant praise will always exceed any practical purpose or empirical self-evidence and, in so doing, allows us to just glimpse a difference between an ideal and concrete experience.

A similar observation can be made of the eulogy. In remembering, we recall the vibrant, living presence of the other. In death, the other seems closer to us than ever, their memory is interiorised, and the future once promised is magnified by their loss. So, we offer a tribute that exceeds our usual relationship to them, and we confer recognition and laud their presence in a way we never would were they still alive. At the same time, we do this only in a hurry, from our own perspective, without adequate preparation, amid inconsolable grief or in a distracting political context, therefore always insufficiently. We can never 'do justice' to the gift of a life in one afternoon or one discrete service alone. Inevitably, we calculate and maintain certain conditions even as we seek to remember unconditionally – a tribute will never be enough, or it will seem 'too much'. The gift of remembrance is always a failed gift since its motivating desire is impossible to achieve.

But herein lies the eulogy's potential for ethical interruption. 'The possibility of the impossible commands here the whole rhetoric of mourning, and describes the essence of memory' (Derrida, 1989, p. 34). The eulogy mediates the tension between remembrance and its failure. To respect the other, as Derrida underscores, is to grant them their distance, to accept their singularity as 'wholly other' by *refusing* their 'reappropriation' for our own ends, even as the traces of their presence are recalled (1989, p. 38). There is an opportunity here to situate the audience in the gap between the 'passion' for the impossible (to restore the other in memory) and its inevitable failure (Caputo, 1997, p. 147). That way, memory is not fulfilled but remains still to come, an ongoing 'inheritance' that it is our responsibility, or 'task', to work out for ourselves. The rhetorical

art of the eulogy, I want to suggest, consists in figuring this temporal gap between memory and the future.

The memory politics of the eulogy

I want to illustrate the points made above by briefly exploring the rhetoric of two public eulogies. It might be hard to think of eulogies as instances of collective memory since they are, frequently, responses to uniquely ‘tragic’ events or to the loss of individuals largely unknown to the wider society. The public significance of this rhetoric may therefore seem remote. Yet, understood as epideictic interventions aimed at deepening our sense of the present and who we are in relation to it, eulogies often make a distinctive (and sometimes highly memorable) effort to set the terms of collective memory.

This can be done in a variety of ways with different emphases – sometimes with great attention to the deceased and, at others, more by specifying the legacy of their memory. Derrida’s thoughtful eulogies for his friends, for example, are very intimate personal tributes (Derrida, 2001). In contrast, President Abraham Lincoln’s famous three-minute address at Gettysburg in November 1863 does not even mention the thousands of soldiers buried in the cemetery at which it was delivered (Lincoln, 1995). Yet it has become a defining statement of the promise of democracy (‘government of the people, by the people, and for the people’), that is, as a future always yet to come (Wills, 1992). The tone and style of remembrance will also differ depending on the notoriety of who has died, the manner of their death, and the context in which it occurred. Eulogies may be full of cliché and platitudes, drawing upon known, perhaps rather ‘worn’ phrases and idealised observations – especially those devoted to celebrities and figures in popular culture (Cooper, 2017). But they may also be inventive, humorous, or mournful lamentations, sharply critical interventions, or positive, forward-looking orations. The moment of the eulogy offers a wide range of rhetorical choices about how to figure memory in the context of an aporetic experience of loss.

To illustrate some of the different choices that might be made in eulogy rhetoric, I want to sketch just two examples. Given the discussion above, I have approached these with attention to three specific dimensions: the disjuncture occasioned by death; the memory of the deceased; and the issue of inheritance.

The wound of memory: Gwyn Thomas on the Aberfan disaster

A collapse in the colliery spoil tip above the mining village of Aberfan in Glamorganshire, Wales on the morning of 21 October 1966 brought tons of slurry down the hillside, crushing and killing 144 people, 116 of them children, most of whom had only just begun lessons in their junior school. The comparatively large scale and sudden nature of the deaths brought to the fore the dangerously precarious way of life in the mining industry, as well as the poor management of its risks.

A week after the collapse, on the day of mass funerals, the BBC broadcast a eulogy by the Welsh novelist and playwright, Gwyn Thomas (Thomas, 1966). Thomas, who had grown up in the Rhondda Valley and had written of its industrial communities and characters, gave a poignant speech that put the event into historical and emotional context. Speaking from the distance of an informed observer of Welsh mining life, rather than an

intimate of anyone in the village, he acknowledges a national history of suffering among working people in the industry. Yet, he announces, despite that tragic history, ‘Aberfan is different’. The loss of so many children marked an incalculable blow to the always precarious struggle of Welsh mining communities to balance work below the ground with the life above it. He describes the disaster as a ‘wound’ – a lasting, physical memory of profound violence – both on the landscape and the community, which had been robbed of its stake in the future.

Thomas narrates the arrival of this wound by way of distinctions between below and above, death and life, the darkness of the mines and the light and visibility of open air, whose bare separation had at least preserved a durable, if often bleak, existence. ‘Long before’ the tragedy, mining communities had lived amidst ‘a wind of mourning remembrance’. ‘Many of our villages have been torn apart by abrupt calamity’ occasioned by death and disaster in the pits.

Men were below the earth doing a grim, unnatural job, and sometimes the job would blow up in their faces – and most of the doom was underground, out of sight, tucked tactfully away from the public view. But Aberfan is different. [...] In Aberfan, everything was in view.

Now, the community stood ‘breathless’, unable to speak in the encompassing horror and silence brought by death. The children had been a vibrant living presence, a ‘sweetness, laughter, innocence’ – young people undefined by time, and the schools ‘the most beautiful of communities [...] the living emblem of everybody’s hopes’ to remake the world beyond the pits, ‘to heal the old wounds and demand a reasonable restitution of life’. Unlike the inhospitable conditions below the ground, the children embodied a welcoming of the future ‘for the enjoyment of a better earth’. But this living promise had been cut short, supplanted by ‘a black indignity of silence and death’.

Thomas’s unrelentingly sombre discourse offers up little more than a faint, spectral ‘hope’ – ‘laying, at least, the beginning of a flower’ – that greater care be given to the welfare of the young. His aim in the eulogy is not to console anyone, nor to make overt political gestures, but to register the stark otherness of death and unretrievable loss to the community for whom all life was itself a precious gift. But, with the gift destroyed, the eulogy extends to its audience only a guilty, despairing apprehension of responsibility.

Repeating a crime: Reverend Al Sharpton on George Floyd

The killing in May 2020 by a Minnesotan police officer of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, by kneeling on his neck while he was being arrested, sparked a series of protests in the US and beyond. One officer was eventually charged and convicted of Floyd’s murder. But the event itself was widely understood as further, indisputable evidence of the longstanding experience of arbitrary violence suffered by black Americans and people of colour generally in the US, which often goes unpunished and frequently unacknowledged. Because the killing was caught on camera – capturing Floyd’s audible cry of ‘I can’t breathe’ moments prior to his death – it quickly provoked global outrage.

Responding to widespread public alarm and sympathy, several memorial services were held, including one in Minneapolis on 4 June 2020 where Rev. Al Sharpton

gave the eulogy, after which Floyd's body was returned to Houston, Texas, for burial (Sharpton, 2020). Sharpton, a Baptist minister, and black civil rights activist is a defiant, outspoken figure with sometimes controversial views. His eulogy for Floyd was delivered both from the perspective of a churchman and as a leading political voice who could speak to the wider situation. His lengthy, rambling oration took as its focus not so much the life of the man but the circumstance of his death. Floyd's killing, he underlined, 'was not just a tragedy. It was a crime'. Yet another transgression in a long history of the same – so not itself a marker of discontinuity – his killing reaffirmed the existing fight for justice, which Sharpton presents as a debt to be repaid: 'Because lives like George will not matter until somebody pays the cost for taking their lives'.

Sharpton's eulogy locates Floyd within a larger time horizon that is already out-of-joint, which he describes by reference to the Bible as 'forces of wickedness' before returning to the details of the death itself and highlighting the minimal sympathy shown by the police. For Sharpton, that timeline dates to slavery: 'And we're still being treated less than other. And until America comes to terms with what it has done and what it did, we will not be able to heal, because you are not recognizing the wound'. Floyd's death, then, is a repetition of similar unequal treatment shown to black Americans: 'Floyd could have been anybody'. Indeed, Sharpton later digresses to talk of other killings and offences against black Americans. George was 'an ordinary brother from the third ward, from the housing projects, that nobody thought much about'. Nonetheless, as a gift of God, his breath was 'divine': 'Breath is sanctified, breath is sacred. You don't have the right to take God's breath out of anybody'. To kneel on Floyd's neck as if it were not precious was simply sheer 'wickedness'.

Sharpton goes on to reference Biblical passages and to inscribe the suffering of black Americans in the story of a testing but ultimately redemptive God. Addressing Floyd directly, as if he were still alive, he tells him his fate is part of a higher purpose now taken up by those marching in his name.

Your family is going to miss you George, but your nation is going to always remember your name because your neck was one that represented all of us and how you suffered represented our suffering.

Ending on the repeated phrase 'We're going to fight on', it is clear that Sharpton is focussed less on Floyd, the singular individual, than the wider 'struggle' to which Sharpton attaches Floyd's name. In keeping with a religious style of sermon, Floyd's loss is aligned to a temporal narrative of redemption for which death is not a catastrophe so much as a necessary suffering that awakens others.

And I know how this story is going to end. The first will be last. The last will be first. The lion and the lamb is going to lay down together and God will take care of his children. We got some difficult days ahead, but I know how the story is going to end. There's going to be justice for George Floyd.

What is remembered through the crime against Floyd is a progression towards a timeless truth that does away with death. This powerful, rousing sentiment is teleological in so far as it regards the contingent irruptions in time as moments in a positive story of eventual return in which African Americans are finally repaid for their suffering.

The two eulogies both respond to a temporal fracture brought by death. Each takes up the epideictic task of attending to the present to reveal in that fracture a deeper truth that instructs the audience on how and what to remember. For Thomas, the memory draws attention to a visible ‘wound’ in the national body, while for Sharpton it is a ‘crime’ (though he, too, refers once to a wound). Whereas a wound suggests a permanent scar that carries the memory forwards, a crime suggests a civil debt that can be repaid. Sharpton’s message is that justice will eventually heal the violence, while Thomas’ holds back, leaving undeclared what may follow. Sharpton’s eulogy is thus inclined to diminish death and to reassure those angered by Floyd’s killing that it is no interruption at all. Whereas Thomas offers a sombre rhetoric of aporia, or doubt, Sharpton’s is a rhetoric of acclaim that looks to rouse his audience with a positive sentiment.

These rhetorical differences doubtless correspond to two very distinct speech occasions: the first is a radio broadcast to a general, physically absent audience, the second is a live oration before a quite particular audience (some of whom are also explicitly named and thanked by the speaker). Additionally, accidental deaths of children invite a spontaneous pathos that does not need to be elaborately sustained; while the murder of a relatively unknown individual may require greater amplification and direction to extract a message. Nonetheless, each eulogy generates its own account of what kind of inheritance the memory of the dead passes on. For Thomas, nothing can be said to soothe the loss of Aberfan’s children. That itself is the stark lesson – survival is precarious, and life and death are cruelly entangled. We inherit only a dreadful, abyssal responsibility to our consciences for the loss of the future. For Sharpton, the lesson of Floyd’s murder is that death is never the end (‘This is the beginning of the fight’) and our responsibility is to a struggle for the better life we are promised.

Conclusion

I have argued that death is an intrinsic dimension of memory, and that eulogy rhetoric instantiates a distinct way to remember collectively. There are, of course, ways that memory is rhetorically constructed that do not dwell on death: public debates can also proceed as ‘forensic’ disputes over facts and truths, for example, or as political deliberations over which memories matter and with what consequences (Cento Bull & Hansen, 2016). But, in these instances, death or loss is not absent; it is only effaced by the urgency granted to recovering the past or securing a future. What is unique about eulogy rhetoric, by contrast, is its epideictic orientation to the present (rather than the past or the future), conceived here as a temporal dis-adjustment that provokes a response to the ‘catastrophe’ of memory, that is, to its impossible retrieval. Although they may respond in various ways, eulogies are charged with defining the terms in which we remember by relating loss to inheritance.

This way of constructing memory – by giving context to a death, offering praise, apprehending a legacy – presents the past as an incomplete moment in an opening to the future. It might even be understood as one of the primary modes in which memory is popularly experienced: namely, as an inheritance yet to be reclaimed, rather than as a static past. Forms of cultural and political remembrance so often involve recollections of the dead because, as I have tried to argue by reference to the insights of Derrida, death inhabits memory, it puts time out-of-joint and prevents the closure of self-identity.

'National' memories of various kinds resonate because they 'speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it' (Derrida, 1994, p. xix. Italics in original; see also Ben-Amos, 2000). Although death in western culture is typically disparaged as destructive of life, it is also a stimulus to desire because it promises change and movement (Dollimore, 2001). Derrida helps us think this uncanny proximity of life and death as something we perpetually negotiate in all manner of ways. The tension between the desire for presence and its impossible retrieval, given exemplary form in the eulogy, might even be viewed as the condition for any survival.

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