



The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment

Maud Ellmann

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The phenomenon of voluntary self-starvation - whether by political hunger strikers or lone anorectics - is a puzzle of engrossing power, suggesting a message more radical than any uttered aloud. In this fascinating phenomenology, Maud Ellmann teases out this message, its genesis, expression, and significance. How, she asks, has the act of eating become the metaphor for compliance, starvation the metaphor for protest? How does the rejection of food become the rejection of intolerable social constraints - or of actual imprisonment? What is achieved at the extremity of such a protest - at the moment of death? Ellmann brilliantly unravels the answers; they lie, she shows, in the inverse relationship between bodily hunger and verbal expression. Drawing her examples from Yeats and Kafka, Marx and Freud, Wole Soyinka and the suffragettes, Mahatma Ghandi and Jane Fonda, she explores the entangled meanings of writing and hunger in our culture of starvers. Central to her discussion is an arresting comparison between the Irish Hunger Strike of 1981 and the plot of Richardson's *Clarissa*, in which the heroine starves herself to death in penance for - or, perhaps, revenge against - her rape. Both cases show a strange excess of words in contrast to the savage reduction of the flesh, as if the bodies of the starvers were devoured by their own verbosity. *The Hunger Artists* examines this vampirical feeding of words on flesh, revealing uncanny affinities between the labor of starvation and the birth of letters, diaries, poems, books. In her lean and vibrant prose, Ellmann reaches beyond the fashionable preoccupation with the body to the terrifying logic of disembodiment.

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