



## The Semiotics of Hunger from “Le Cygne” to “Ein Hüngrerkunstler”

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Le signe/le cygne

Quel est celui de nous qui n’a pas, dans ses jours d’ambition, rêvé le miracle d’une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime, assez souple et assez heurtée pour s’adapter aux mouvements lyriques de l’âme, aux ondulations de la rêverie, aux soubresauts de la conscience?

C’est surtout de la fréquentation des villes énormes, c’est du croisement de leurs innombrables rapports que naît cet idéal obsédant. Vous-même, mon cher ami, n’avez-vous pas tenté de traduire en une chanson le cri strident du Vitrier, et d’exprimer dans une prose lyrique toutes les désolantes suggestions que ce cri envoie jusqu’aux mansardes à travers les plus hautes brumes de la rue?

(Baudelaire, 1966, 7-8)

In the dedication to Arsene Houssaye of *Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire asks how a poetic prose could capture the spirit of the modern city, that is of modernity itself. The obsessive desire for such an ideal is born out of the “crossing of innumerable relations” in the city. The streets are the narrative intersections which comprise the semiotic map of the city and it is the flâneur whom we associate with the figure of the stroller whose walking is a writing of the city. The city is made legible as well as visible; yet, as Walter

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Benjamin tells us in his classic analysis of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, we do not see the city: it is not described, but perceived through figures whom the poet meets on the streets of Paris in a problematic relationship between the Self and the object of his gaze. “Le cygne,” in a famous critical trope, is a sign (“signe”) for the multiple meanings of that “crossing of innumerable relations,” but it is a sign which is at once visible and legible (visible and lisible), and one which resists its reading – “es lässt sich nicht lesen,” to quote Poe’s “Man of the Crowd.”

The trace of pastoral innocence is marked by its absence in the corrupt, satanic city, a Babylon of monstrous whores and a negated space in bipolar opposition to Eden, a city-prison opposed to the freedom of Nature; the city is a space of ennui opposed to a total desire which is inaccessible (see Sicher, 1986). The absence is a lack, a hunger which must never be sated, for without the experience of exile the writing of the city would be impossible. If you like, the dying swan is a double sign of imprisonment because it has escaped from its cage into the unnatural dust of the city street, where it must die of thirst. This is an image of the poet’s own experience of exile in the city but also a sign of writing as exile of self, a negative signature of the seeming impossibility of writing. The city’s river is a “pauvre et triste miroir” of Andromache’s former majesty which refuses any mimesis of the ever-changing capital, while the poet’s yearning and his feelings of irreparable loss are reflected not in the dried-up stream but in the native lake symbolizing exile in the heart of the swan, which has escaped from a menagerie that is itself, in a further exile of the self, no longer there. It is a performance of hunger which thrives on lack, on exile, for these figures exist only in as much as they appear fleetingly in the poet’s field of vision in his perception of the city as a monumental façade of civilization hiding the more vivid consciousness of unrequited desire and nostalgia for exotic shores. As performers of their hunger, the Negress and the Swan cannot act other than as hirelings of the poet’s imagination, serving his insatiable desire, which must never be fed for it would then die. They must always be there, starving on the streets, at least as mental images, for the poet to create his urban poetics, and to be an artist.

Hunger artists were not only figures of the imagination but performers on the city streets. Strolling through Paris on Mardi Gras in 1832, Heinrich Heine noticed the figure of a hunger artist:

Near the Porte Saint-Martin there lay on the damp pavement a death pale, hoarsely coughing man, of whom the crowd said that he was dying of hunger. But my companion assured me that this man died of hunger every day in another street and got his living by it, being paid for it by the Carlists, in order that the mob by such a sight might be goaded against the government. It would appear however, that this cannot be a very remunerative calling, because such numbers of those who follow it actually do starve to death. There is this that is remarkable as regards dying for want of food, which is that we should see daily many thousands of people in such a state if they could endure it longer. But generally after three days without food the poor sufferers perish. One after the other are silently interred and hardly noticed. (1893: 130)

The staging of hunger here is designed to unmask the carnival masks which, Heine suspects, conceal not a few gendarmes and government agents paid to keep up the people’s spirits. To be a successful hunger artist, however, it is essential to know how to starve without actually dying.

The first half of the nineteenth century saw the display of the body as an entertainment, something on which to feed one’s curiosity by admiring feats of inhuman endurance. These museum exhibitions and later circus side-shows constructed the healthy “normality” of European civilization and masculinity. Such freaks as deformed “monsters” and midgets, the Elephant Man or the Snake Woman were very popular in the travelling shows and circuses that attracted adults in nineteenth-century Europe. In America well into the years of Depression such spectacles could feed hungry masses, if only momentarily. In Book VII of *The Prelude*, William Wordsworth saw in the freak show at London’s St. Bartholomew’s Fair the city’s unnatural body. It was a spectacle whose performance suggested to the poet that the creative powers were asleep:

What a shock  
For eyes and ears! What anarchy and din  
Barbarian and infernal—a phantasma  
Monstrous in color, motion, shape, sight, sound! (The Prelude vii, 685-8)

Wordsworth, unlike Baudelaire, cannot read the signs — “dumb proclamations” — of the city’s show, just as the Blind Beggar’s story is illegible, a blank text, because he cannot access the experience without summoning the Muse of Nature who will put these fragmentary and disparate impressions

into the order of a coherent whole of humanity. The bodies on display are not themselves natural but

All freaks of Nature, all Promethean thoughts  
Of man; his dullness, madness and their feats.  
All jumbled up together, to compose  
A Parliament of Monsters, Tents and Booths... (The Prelude, vii, 714-18)

The “blank confusion” which was the “true epitome” of the city represents the illegibility of the monstrous body, which is not to say that it is unrepresentable but, on the contrary, requires a new kind of art to represent it, to make the visible readable (lisible).

The illegibility of the city in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” provides another example of the estranged visitor attempting to read the conditions of modernity. The fascinating pull of the figure on the street destroys the coveted loneliness of Poe’s coffee lounge and drags him from his private view of the stage of life into the public sphere where he has to face his own kinship with the rest of humanity and the horror of recognition of the depths of the psyche—the true meaning of the prohibited “es lässt sich nicht lesen.” If the glass window had served as a “miroir sur la chaussée,” now the observer has passed through the mimetic glass and finds himself pursuing a figure of a mysterious old man, whose story he will never read. The recognition is of the uncanny, Freud’s “unheimlich,” and it is in a return of the repressed that the observer must repeatedly and compulsively return to his origins, the Hotel D—, signalled alliteratively by the old man’s diamond and dagger, which bring him face to face with the Self, so that it is no longer possible to distinguish the figure from the observer, the figure from its meaning.

### Visible / Lisible, Figure / Parable

Let us try to all this a little more legible by imagining an art exhibition. A critic, perhaps it is Charles Baudelaire, or perhaps it is a provincial journalist writing in a Vienna newspaper, is reporting on a new exhibition which displays a strange, unfamiliar art form. It might be an Expressionist picture, like the drawings by George Grosz which Kafka described as deriving their force from “the impossibility of love” (Janouch 144-5). Indeed, Kafka said

of his own “doodles” that they were as much intimate expressions of his loneliness as his stories, but he needed to see, “to hold fast to what was seen,” in an effort at controlling the conditions of freedom (Janouch 33-6).

We are reading the narrator’s reading of the picture. In the picture is a figure of a performer, a hunger artist in a cage.<sup>2</sup> We cannot help asking why the hunger artist has to be in the cage, why this is “art” and what is the point of the story (though these questions may be part of a trap that has been set for us). The narrative is itself a performance of the hunger artist’s art.



Figure 1: Picasso, “A Frugal Meal” — © Succession Picasso 1999 with the kind permission of the Israel Museum Jerusalem.

An early Picasso etching from his Blue Period, “The Acrobats” (1913) will illustrate the point. Only five of this series actually show acrobats, and

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2. An artist (Künstler) is here a performer, rather than a painter or sculptor. In English we might speak of acrobats and strippers as “artistes.” See Spann (164-7) on this and other critical blunders in the story’s interpretation.

these display the artist's evident sympathy for the hungry members of a dangerous profession, survivors who make art out of survival. The averted look, the distorted body contours, the sunken cheeks and breasts—all speak for a hopeless despair in contrast to the expected image of the healthy, athletic body. The few drawings for the series that do deal with circus performers do not foreground hunger or emaciation, yet they nevertheless display the body as a performance by nude or semi-naked figures. In “A Frugal Meal,” the performance is the artistic creation of hunger in the still-life of an empty bowl and the bottle and glasses. These have not satiated starving, emaciated bodies that are barely draped in thin rags which make more visible the art of hunger.



Figure 2: Marc Chagall, “Acrobat with a Violin” (1919)  
(in Aronson) — © ADAGP Paris 1999

A different example that illustrates the visual reading of the performance of the text is Chagall's 1919 drawing “Acrobat with a Violin” (Figure 2, above), a constructionist experiment which recalls the more painterly *The Violinist* (1912-1913, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; a variant on the theme is *The Violinist*, 1911/14, Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf)

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dorf). The motifs of the *shtetl* violinist, the cockerel and the absurd trapeze artist with the head of a goat (a biblical scapegoat?) are characteristic of Chagall’s whimsical humor. The artist is struggling not to fall off the tight-rope and struggling to maintain this balancing-act of constructionist forms, semi-erotic and Jewish symbols, as well as no doubt his unpaid grocery-store bills. Boris Aronson, in a little book about Chagall, insisted on Chagall’s “*zhivopisnost*” (painterliness), which further underscores the way we read the visible, painterly space of the artistic performance, as distinct from a linear narrative — a point very much at issue in the artistic debates in Russia in the early twentieth-century between line and color.<sup>3</sup> This would then be a performance of hunger that dialogizes with other artistic modes of representation in a contemporary debate involving Malevich, Lissitzky and Chagall himself and in a struggle for survival.

The drawing clearly looks forwards to the clowning figures in the ekphrastic murals Chagall did before he left Russia in 1922 for the vestibule of the Moscow State Jewish Theatre which represent art and literature, including a portrayal of the artist himself being borne into the theatre by a critic—a performance that is a preamble or prologue to the dramatic performance in the theatre. These clowns and acrobats (some with long beards and phylacteries) are turning tradition upside-down in a revolutionary, carnivalesque Purimspiel, which celebrates the inversion of the Jews’ fortunes in the Book of Esther. The inversion of the official cultural code and hierarchy of values visualizes Yiddish sayings and thus renders the legible visible in a parody of sign and signifier. Chagall performs a balancing-act with politics and the insecurities of Soviet life—critics had little sympathy for the plight of a starving artist and after losing his post as art commissar in Vitebsk, Chagall was reduced to teaching art to war orphans. In Chagall’s much later “Three Acrobats” and “The Juggler” too we find an ekphrastic statement in which the performer resists any simple interpretation of the figure of the artist. One artist is reading the performance of another kind of artist, and for both the performance of art is a self-deprecating, self-sacrificing, almost suicidal act to keep alive and to celebrate life, a parable of art as an acrobatic display.

Kafka, too, did an allegorical drawing of acrobats, which Claude Gandelman has read as the artist’s attempt to metamorphose art into life: in

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3. For another example of the “line” and “color” debate in the short story writer Isaak Babel’, see Sicher, *Style and Structure* 104-23; Gandelman *Reading Pictures*, chapter 5 *passim*.

both Kafka's drawings and Expressionist art there is raised the similar question of the meaning of the figure, whether it should be read as prophetic vision, as allegorical of the human condition, or as a phenomenological reduction to the sign in some Theatre of the Absurd (Gandelman, 1974). Elsewhere, Kafka speaks of his precarious position as a Jew between cultures as that of a circus rider on two horses (Loeb 1998: 188), but my argument is that these "straight" readings scramble for easy interpretation while ignoring the complex relations between the *lisible* and the *visible* in the performance of the text. Kafka's "Erstes Leid" ("First Sorrow"), for example, tells a story of a trapeze artist who cannot distinguish between life and art, and who spends all his time at the top of the circus tent, in perpetual performance of his art. The plot is complicated by one small request of the artist, for a second trapeze to be always available to him. The story ends with the artist's unresolved dissatisfaction, thus frustrating any satisfactory interpretation of what the story "means."

## Performing the Body / The Body of Performance

The body of the figure of the artist in these pictures is under the public gaze, but demands the autonomy of solitude. As in Poe's "Man of the Crowd," which Baudelaire translated, the paradox is set up when the gaze is returned. The figure is imprisoned in the frame, but the gaze of the observer enters the scene and unwillingly or unconsciously participates in the game of gazer and gazed. The rules of the game have changed, however. The glass of Baudelaire's "Vitrier" (in *Spleen de Paris*) has smashed, and the *flâneur* can no longer dream of even false Edens. The *flâneur* has disappeared into the crowd. He is a cog in the machine, like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, with no leisure to roam the streets or dream of the absent pastoral of Baudelaire's "Paysage." With the *flâneur* has gone an epistemology. How to explain what has happened to the artist and to art? How to bring a minority interest to the attention of a new bourgeois public that has not the slightest interest in a hunger artist? How to be an artist if one can't even starve without dying? Or more accurately, as Maud Ellmann has pointed out in her meditation on anorexia and hunger strikes, how can the hunger artist exist when his self-immolation is no longer subject to the public gaze, when nobody is paying the attention for which he is literally starving. (Ellmann 17)

Franz Kafka's short story "Ein Hungerkünstler" (A Hunger Artist), the title story of the collection in which "First Sorrow" also appeared, has de-

feated most attempts to interpret its meaning. Knowing that there really were such “hunger artists” and that much was written about them at the end of the nineteenth century does not advance our understanding of the meaning of Kafka’s story except to remind us that the textual code is embedded in a web of signs, specifically artistic and scientific constructions of the human body (Mitchell; Gandelman, *Reading Pictures* 60-1). But we might be nearer understanding the figure in the cage as something more than just a Nietzschean ascetic priest if we look at the story as a parable not of the artist or the artist’s situation, but as a parable of the way in which the text’s own body is performing a resistance to interpretation in order to express the paradoxical impossibility of writing and its existential necessity, indeed the impossibility of existence and its simultaneous necessity:

In den letzten Jahrzehnten ist das Interesse an Hungerkünstlern sehr zurückgegangen. Während es sich früher gut lohnte, große derartige Vorführungen in eigener Regie zu veranstalten, ist dies heute voellig unmöglich. Es waren andere Zeiten. (Kafka, *Ein Hungerkünstler*. 33)

The situation is one in which the text cannot any longer be read because the keys to its hermeneutics are lost in a world that denies the artist the performance of his art. Previously, the performance of fasting gave the artist all he wanted—an audience which felt his body and admired his starving: he could lie in the straw; “um niemanden sich kümmerte, nicht einmal um den für ihn so wichtigen Schlag der Uhr, die das einzige Moebelstück des Käfigs war, sondern nur vor sich hinsah mit fast geschlossenen Augen und hie und da aus einem winzigen Gläschen Wasser nippte, um sich die Lippen zu feuchten” (*Ein Hungerkünstler* 32). Now self-denial does not attract an audience that would give his performance meaning. Without self-denial there is no self and no art.

Art has become literally an act of self-destruction, not just a sacrificial death of the author, not just the giving of one’s all in the self-destructive act of creation—a destructiveness that William Blake sensed within the process of creation in his parable-like poem, “The Tyger”:

What the hammer? what the chain?  
In what furnace was thy brain?  
What the anvil? what dread grasp  
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

Instead of Scheherazade's postponement of death for one more night, in modern literature writing has become a post-Nietzschean murder of the author which Michel Foucault reads in Proust and Kafka, an art of dying which is also a dying art (*Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* 113—38). Kafka confessed to Max Brod that he would lie contentedly on his deathbed, but refrained from telling him that

the best things I have written have their basis in this capacity of mine to meet death with contentment. All these fine and very convincing passages always deal with the fact that someone is dying, that it is hard for him to do, that it seems unjust to him, or at least harsh, and the reader is moved by this or at least he should be. But for me, who believe that I shall be able to lie contentedly on my deathbed, such scenes are secretly a game; indeed, in the death enacted I rejoice in my own death, hence calculatingly exploit the attention that the reader concentrates on death, have a much clearer understanding of it than he, of whom I suppose that he will loudly lament on his deathbed, and for these reasons my lament is as perfect as can be, nor does it suddenly break off, as is likely to be the case with a real lament, but dies beautifully and purely away. It is the same thing as my perpetual lamenting to my mother over pains that were not nearly so great as my laments would lead one to believe. With my mother, of course, I did not need to make so great a display of art as with the reader. (Brod, 1914: 321).

“Dying/ is an art, like everything else” declared Sylvia Plath in “Lady Lazarus,” “I do it exceptionally well.”

In his discussion of Kafka's connection with Expressionist depictions of the body as a living cadaver, Claude Gandelman argues that Kafka's art of anorexia was a useful parable of the writer tortured by tuberculosis who could retort to his father, “See what you have done to me!” (Gandelman, 1991: 62). This sounds rather like Sylvia Plath's accusation against her father, yet in the Jewish tradition, as Gandelman goes on to explain, the letter of the alphabet is an agency of creation, so that writing anorexically is to create a world and at the same time to destroy the self in an act of self-denial. After all, the writing of the story is a writing-out of self, or to put it another way, the emission of speech in the narrative of starvation is a refusal to take in, to admit interpretation, while his art is slowly killing the artist in an act of what Girard calls “semantic abstinence” (quoted in Ellmann 66). Kafka the writer is reduced to a cabalistic anagram or expressionist figurine, the letter K, a sign that expresses the absence of the father and the absence of the name of God. Or rather we are left standing in despair “Before the Law” (Gandelman, 1974: 275-6; 1991: 63-7). Yet by leaving us with that gaping

hole of hermeneutics, transcendence itself is called into existence by the void of meaning.

### The Panther and the Vegetarian

Kafka’s story works beautifully in its cruel paradoxical logic, yet it leaves us without a solution, not necessarily because there isn’t one, but because in the world in which the hunger artist’s performance is no longer visible, the performance can only work if we understand why it is impossible.

Kafka’s text would then become in such a reading itself a fast to prove its own necessity as an insatiable desire in resistance to the gorging of the bourgeois public on more corporeal passions. The panther instantly satisfies the public’s hunger for instant gratification of the body. The healthy panther<sup>4</sup> has replaced the diseased figure in the cage, who is soon forgotten, like Gregor Samsa’s corpse, which is eclipsed at the end of *Metamorphosis* by the yearning of his sister’s young body for sexual fulfilment. The swan pining for water and Nature has been forgotten too, and Kafka’s Hunger Artist has taken the place of both Baudelaire’s consumptive Negress and the caged animal in Rilke’s “Der Panther” (1903), whose “great will stands stunned and numb”; when a shape does enter its vision, it “slips through the tightened silence of the shoulders, reaches the heart and dies.”

Dann geht ein Bild hinein  
geht durch der Glieder angespannte Stille—  
und hoert im Herzen auf zu sein. (Rilke 138-9)

When the Hunger Artist tells the impresario that he should not admire his fasting, after seeking such admiration, we have a bitter indictment of an inhumane and philistine society which has “commodified” the body and profaned any idea of the sacred or spiritual. It is a society in which art can be produced only in such imprisoning conditions and when society has denied the meaning of art. The paradox is that the Hunger Artist wanted his fasting

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4. Actually “leopard” is a more accurate translation of the German, though disappointing to those seeking, in a big black cat, any form of evil (Spann 167).

to be admired, but it was not something that should be admired. The artist fasts because he has to, he can do nothing else, “Weil ich hungern muß, ich kann nicht anders” (Kafka, *Ein Hungerkünstler* 50). He has to because he didn’t find the “food” he liked (“weil ich nicht die Speise finden konnte, die mir schmeckt” [50]). This he whispers in the impresario’s ear with his lips pursed as in a kiss, as if to underscore exactly what kind of sustenance he is lacking. The Hunger Artist is reduced to the state of Gregor Samsa, set apart by his monstrosity and unable to stuff himself as he would like with everyone else.

The irony, that in his dying breath, the artist admits he would have eaten had he been given the food he liked may be a humorous allusion to Kafka’s vegetarianism, which was part of his obsessive concern with bodily health but also, according to Sander Gilman, linked to Kafka’s feelings of inferiority next to his father’s healthy bulk and possibly a reaction to common beliefs that Jewish ritual slaughter (as practiced by Kafka’s own grandfather) was unhealthy or that it was part of ritual murder (a medieval libel revived at the turn of the century, the victim being a woman and the blood used to cure alleged menstruation in Jewish males)—images that undermine the Jew’s sense of his body as masculine and healthy. The slaughter of K in *The Trial* is also an animal ritual (his executioners use the knife of pork butchers), and the bestial indignity of K’s death is likened to the death of a dog; the Hunger Artist’s fast is watched over by butchers who thus represent a carnivorous, materialistic and bestial society. None of this, of course, relieves the Hunger Artist’s insistence on being an enigma, on his artistic credo of resisting interpretation to the end.

The consumptive body in “The Hunger Artist” reminds us of Baudelaire’s *Negress*, another consumptive alien, but one whose exile evokes the poet’s affinities. Gilman relates these images of the body to feminization of the Jew (167), so that the Hunger Artist’s death would reflect fear of becoming something monstrous, arising from anxiety about sexuality and internalization of racial stereotypes which are encoded in the body and are therefore beyond his control (237). However, a reading of the Hunger Artist’s situation as that of the dying Kafka is concerned with the cultural constructs of Kafka’s self-image, rather than with the interpretive difficulties of the text which pose an unsolvable riddle to the reader hungry for a satisfactory explanation. In “In the Penal Colony” the inscription of the text is similarly illegible to the condemned man, a cipher worked by cogs, as in the Enigma machine the Germans had developed for intelligence operations. In both stories, there is a similar circularity: the Hunger Artist is consumed by his own art without being able to read the text of his story and

without our being able to decode the text. In both stories any absolute knowledge is denied, even the post-Nietzschean knowledge that meaning is relative, but rather meaning circulates in a series of logical circles that generate multiple (though not endless) possibilities of interpretation.

Abstinence once practiced by mystics or Christian saints has become a sign of the self-destruction caused by the conspicuous display of what one can afford not to eat (Ellmann 7), as distinct from the control over the body which gave ascendancy to the spirit. Kafka's Hunger Artist speaks of the “initiate” (“Eingeweihter”) to a public ritual, and his fasting for forty days suggests (while also denying) the role of a Moses or Jesus, but without the fulfilment of a prophetic mission; indeed, the term “initiate” suggests, besides a professional novice, the sort of mystical communion and interpretive community which does not exist in Kafka's story. Moreover, it is not fasting that is difficult—it's the easiest thing in the world!—but the quest for satisfaction—both satisfaction for the artist and for the reader seeking meaning in his performance. The more he performs his art, the further the hunger artist gets from any satisfaction or ascendancy to a higher spiritual level. This is the absurd but inescapable situation of the total severance of artist from marketplace which characterizes the feeling of impotence and alienation in modernism (Bürger; Gandelman, “Kafka as an Expressionist Draftsman”). It is also Kafka's own situation on Berlin streets and his situation as an artist dying in a sanitarium, but the referential meaning of the text is not limited to that historical and biographical reality. In the end, the hunger artist has failed, abandoned to his delusion that he is now free to fast as long as he wants, but the text has succeeded in performing that failure.

### A Postmodern Postscript

Nowadays fasting is politically correct and so has lost its former protest value. The glossy magazines scream at you to get thin and stay slim. Twiggy, the anorexic idol of the sixties, has recently been canonized in a campaign that persuades us to eat without feeling guilty about the “crime” of breaking our diet “fast” [Figure 3, below]. This is a way of enticing the bourgeois body from what Stanley Corngold sees, in his reading of “The Metamorphosis,” its revolt against socialization and conformity to the authority of the family, a freedom which would be parallel with the Hunger Artist's initial autonomy and Kafka's bid for opaqueness, impervious to the imposition of social purposes, without desire, vanishing into the perfection of a literary

sign; the body has become the absolute sign (Corngold 7; Neumann cited Corngold 7 note 17).



Figure 3: “Twiggy—,” Model Hunger Artist

Flagellation cults might be one origin of the self-exhibition of the body; but the conspicuous display of the body as an object of consumption in late capitalism might offer a more plausible explanation for public self-mutilation (for example in body-piercing and tattooing). Canadian artist Jana Sterbak makes a mute comment on postmodern society with an anorexic model dressed in dried meat, bringing alive carnivorous male desire in an image adapted from Soutine, while inverting consumption and display, meat and skin.

As in Rimbaud’s “Fêtes de la faim” (“Festival of Hunger”) to write is to hunger, both in the sense of starving and desire for a woman’s flesh and in the sense of a consumptive, consuming landscape.<sup>5</sup> Rimbaud puns on poetic

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5. See Maud Ellmann’s Lacanian explanation for the relationship of fasting and writing. For a different perspective see Furst and Graham. A survey of writing as food from the Eucharist to Beckett’s verbal abstinence and Barthes’ alimetic structuralism may be found in Eagleton. The trope of eating the text is well known

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and carnal desire *faim/femme*, sucking/being consumed, reading/being read (Rimbaud 83-4), a ludic hunger quite different from the hunger-writing of Knut Hamsun’s unnamed journalist who fasts because he is too proud and “decent” to admit he is starving and accept help. His concealed insistence on bygone values is, like the Hunger Artist’s, a bygone fashion in the cruel materialistic world of the cold modern city that denies humanity and God. Hunger brings on hallucinations and delirium, which does not necessarily help inspire the writing that will bring him a crust of bread, though it is in the moments of bare existence that his pencil stub yields realms of prose. Indeed, delirium encourages him to fantasize about women passers-by, whom he molests before waking to his diminished sense of masculinity; yet his sick mind doesn’t quite rise to the malicious spite of Dostoevsky’s underground man, even when he victimizes a gentleman in the park with his invented identities. Rather, Hamsun’s cult novel voices a social indictment and a Jobian quest for justice that enables us to feed on a sense of anger and vengeance. Kafka’s story gives us no such food for thought.

The obverse of the anorexic writer is the sado-masochistic figure of the officer in “In The Penal Colony,” who straps himself into the machine that inscribes the punishment on the text of the body, which Ellmann interprets as a Foucauldian model of inscription of cultural practices on the body, which must be disciplined as part of social control (Ellman, 4). This self-inscription of the body goes back to Job who describes the boils and ailments inscribing his punishment on his back, and the inscription of bodily pain is written into the text in the same manner as pain is literally written into the landscape in Edvard Munch’s lithograph *Scream*. This is also how Kafka represented his own position undergoing treatment for tuberculosis, as he expressed it in a doodle drawn in a letter to Milena Jasná which portrays a man being punished by being torn apart by vertical poles (Letters to Milena 204). Gandelman relates this also to the flayed artist in Kokoschka (*Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts* 118-20), and Kafka’s image of the body in his doodled figurines as split in two is an Expressionist visualization of the

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from Ezekiel, 2-3, where the prophet is told to ingest the scroll and then display abstinence and consumption of strange substances (including dung) in order to exhibit the symbolic meaning of God’s punishment. In Kafka’s case, abstinence through celibacy and dietary restrictions characterizes the presentation of his refusal to conform to his father’s expectations and in marital life in his letters to his Father and to Felice.

pain racking the artist as a condition of his art and of the public exhibition of his body.

As a political protest fasting began with the suffragettes and Irish nationalists like Terence MacSwiney, who fasted himself to death, bequeathing to the IRA hunger strikers of Long Kesh the slogan, “It is not those who can inflict the most, but those who can suffer the most who will conquer.” MacSwiney also bequeathed the revised ending of Yeats’ *The King’s Threshold* (Ellmann 60). Nowadays Mahatma Gandhi would not even be force-fed like the suffragettes in Holloway prison, but given an audience by the Pope; Gandhi is also considered worthy of admiration by the typical Californian for being ideally “thin, brown, and moral” (cited Ellmann 5). Hunger-striking has become routine in political struggles or wage negotiations in some Western countries, while self-immolation is a ritual of public protest practiced in Korea and Czechoslovakia. There nevertheless remains a certain power over the authorities in this demonstration of self-destruction which is essentially a form of language and dialogue as much as any other. Recently, a Palestinian Arab journalist, called appropriately Daoud Kuttab (whose name in Arabic makes him a man of the book, a textual artist), discovered that it wasn’t easy being a hunger striker when thrown in jail for dissident opinions. K. was a model Hunger Artist—observed through a waist-high window by the other prisoners who came to him as Writer of Petitions in flowery language to Arafat. However, the prison authorities simply didn’t recognize his hunger strike. First agree to our demands, they seemed to say, then you can go on hunger strike and starve as much as you like. Fasting is a subversive claim to control over the body by wilful self-destruction and it is thus a negotiable form of blackmail. K. even offered to drink something if the warder would agree to smuggle out a note to his family. When it came to the force-feeding, K. sipped from a can of mango juice in order to fortify himself to withstand the ordeal but also to assert his control over his fasting; he hid the can when he was suddenly released without being able to prove he was fasting! They don’t give you a chance these days.

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