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Richard W. Sheppard


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INTERPRETATION

KAFFKA'S EIN HUNGERKÜNSTLER: A RECONSIDERATION.

RICHARD W. SHEPPARD

In the general attempt to say what the figure of Kafka's Hunger Artist signifies, scarcely any attention has been paid to another person in the story who is at least as important as the Hunger Artist: the narrator. On the whole, it has been assumed that the narrator is Kafka himself, if perhaps speaking in an odd voice. But this is not the case. In fact, the narrator has a distinct personality and functions as an independent character in the story.

The narrator's personality is above all evident from his style: Außer den wechselnden Zuschauern waren auch ständige, vom Publikum gewählte Wächter da, merkwürdigerweise gewöhnlich Fleischhauer, welche, immer drei gleichzeitig, die Aufgabe hatten, Tag und Nacht den Hungerkünstler zu beobachten, damit er nicht etwa auf irgendeine heimliche Weise doch Nahrung zu sich nehme. Es war das aber lediglich eine Formalität, eingeführt zur Beruhigung der Massen, denn die Eingeweihen wüßten wohl, daß der Hungerkünstler während der Hungerzeit niemals, unter keinen Umständen, selbst unter Zwang nicht, auch das geringste nur gegessen hätte; die Ehre seiner Kunst verbot dies. Freilich, nicht jeder Wächter konnte das begreifen, es fanden sich manchmal nächtliche Wachgruppen, welche die Bewachung sehr lax durchführten, absichtlich in eine ferne Ecke sich zusammensetzten und dort sich ins Kartenspiel vertieften, in der offenbaren Absicht, dem Hungerkünstler eine kleine Erfrischung zu gönnen, die er ihrer Meinung nach aus irgendwelchen geheimen Vorräten hervorholen konnte.

Important features of this passage suggest that the speaker is a professional administrator or lawyer: the relative frequency of words which include the suffix -ig (ständige, merkwürdigerweise, gleichzeitig, lediglich); the insertion of pedantic qualifications (etwa, aber, doch, wohl, freilich); the unnecessary repetition of virtually redundant phrases (niemals, unter keinen Umständen, selbst unter Zwang nicht); the vocabulary and turn of phrase reminiscent of the "amtlicher Erlaß" (irgendeine, lediglich, eine Formalität, zur Beruhigung der Massen, unter keinen Umständen, ihrer Meinung nach); a liking for the slightly pompous impersonal construction (es war das . . ., es fanden sich . . .); a preference for the formal or circumlocutory expression rather than the more colloquial expression.

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(damit instead of so daß; Nahrung zu sich nehmen instead of essen; the present subjunctive nehme instead of the more normal nehmen konnte; in der offenen Absicht, dem Hungerkünstler eine kleine Erfrischung zu gönnen instead of so daß der Hungerkünstler etwas essen konnte); a predilection for long sentences and pre-positive adjectival phrases (ständige, vom Publikum gewählte Wächter): all this suggests that the narrator of Ein Hungerkünstler would be most at home in one of the chancelleries of Das Schloß!

It might be objected that this is not at all surprising, since Kafka was by profession a lawyer and would therefore be completely at home in a bureaucratic, legalistic style. This is true, but it does not follow that the narrator of Ein Hungerkünstler and Franz Kafka are the same person. In fact, Kafka detested his professional life and it would therefore be very surprising if, in his writing, an area which he always thought of as completely distinct from his office life, he should have chosen the legal style, which he once likened to the bars of a cage, as an authoritative vehicle for his own attitudes. Furthermore, we shall argue that one of the points of this story is to reveal the deficiencies in the narrative point of view, and if the force of these arguments is admitted, then it becomes impossible to maintain that Kafka's point of view is identical with that of his narrator.

Further information about the personality of the narrator is provided by a close look at the scale of values according to which he passes explicit judgment on the events of the story. Like the good administrator that he is, he hardly ever ventures an independent opinion on the fictional reality which he administers. (“Man ist zum Erzählen angestellt, also erzählt man.”) Heweighs the pros and cons of a situation with great conscientiousness (especially if the matter being discussed is not all that important), and he offers both sides of an argument (as he does, for instance, in the great debate about the provision of breakfasts for the guards), but he rarely passes direct judgment on the events of the story. Indeed, in the entire story, there are only five examples of direct comment by the narrator:

... es fanden sich manchmal nächtliche Wachgruppen, welche die Bewachung sehr lax durchführten, ...3
Als Höchstzeit für das Hungern hatte der Impresario vierzig Tage festgesetzt, darüber hinaus ließ er niemals hungern, auch in den Weltstädten nicht, und zwar aus gutem Grund. ...
... jedenfalls sah sich eines Tages der verwöhnte Hungerkünstler von der vergnügungssüchtigen Menge verlassen. ...
KAFKA'S EIN HUNGERKÜNSTLER

and, most emphatically:

Und wenn einmal in der Zeit ein Müßiggänger stehenblieb, sich über die alte Ziffer lustig machte und von Schwindel sprach, so war das in diesem Sinn die dümmeste Lüge, welche Gleichgültigkeit und eingeborene Bösartigkeit erfinden konnte, denn nicht der Hungerkünstler betrog, er arbeitete ehrlich, aber die Welt betrog ihn um seinen Lohn.4

Because of the relative rarity of direct comment by the narrator, these five passages have a special status and require careful scrutiny. In the first, we see that although the narrator knows that the Hunger Artist would never eat anything anyway, he feels the need to censurate the guards' slackness because it is in his nature to be concerned about questions of efficiency, mechanical conscientiousness, and dutifulness. In the second extract, the narrator finds it entirely reasonable that the impresario should wish to maximize profits by preventing the Hunger Artist from fasting for more than forty days. He is interested neither in the rights and wrongs of the Hunger Artist's behavior, nor in the rights and wrongs of the impresario's treatment of the Hunger Artist, he simply condones the principles of profitability and efficiency. The third example is less easy to explain. Why should the Hunger Artist, who, the narrator has told us, suffers from a profound sense of frustration, suddenly be described as "spoilt"? There is something inappropriate about this adjective and it suggests that for all the narrator's exact reporting of the Hunger Artist's plight, his sympathy for him does not run all that deep. Just when the Hunger Artist's persistent discomfort is compounded by the desertion of the general public, the narrator reveals that his own attitude toward the Hunger Artist is not free from a certain detached superiority. The fourth example involves precisely the kind of conventional assessment that might be expected from an official. The defection of the "mob" is attributed to their "addiction to pleasure" (as though this in itself were necessarily bad) and no consideration is given to the possibility that the Hunger Artist might be partly to blame for this defection. "Vergnügungssüchtig" smacks of the snap, stereotyped judgment and completely contradicts the assessment of the situation which, as will be shown, the narrator makes elsewhere.

Thus, even before we arrive at the all-important fifth passage, considerable doubt has been raised in our minds concerning the reliability of the bureaucratic narrator and his ability to deal adequately with the complex problems which face him. His judgments are
unnecessary, facile, or inappropriate, and where judgment is called
for, none is made. The fifth passage quoted above completes the
picture. Despite the emphasis and confidence with which judgment
is passed there, the Hunger Artist reveals on the very next page that
the narrator’s assessment is wrong. The Hunger Artist’s words towards
the end of the story have a special status because they are given
directly, uncensored by the mind of the narrator, and because they
amount to a deathbed confession. They must therefore be
taken seriously. But if they are, then it is clear that the Hunger
Artist has not been entirely honest—and this contradicts the narrator’s statement: “denn nicht der Hungerkünstler betrog, er arbeitete
ehrlich. . . .” It is supremely ironic that at the point when the
narrator most emphatically exercises his traditional right to pass
judgment, he is immediately proved wrong.

The narrator also reveals his values and attitudes in less direct
ways:

Diese dem Hungerkünstler zwar wohlbekannte, immer aber
von neuem ihn entnervende Verdrehung der Wahrheit war
ihm zu viel. Was die Folge der vorzeitigen Beendigung des
Hungerns war, stellte man hier als Ursache dar!

Ein großer Zirkus mit seiner Unzahl von einander immer
wieder ausgleichenden und ergänzenden Menschen und Tieren
und Apparaten kann jeden und zu jeder Zeit brauchen, auch
einen Hungerkünstler, bei entsprechend bescheidenen An-
sprüchen natürlich, . . .

The exclamation mark in the first of these two passages indicates
that the narrator is taking up an attitude towards the events and
facts that he is reporting, and close inspection reveals that this re-
action has been provoked not by a distortion of the truth but by a
confusion of cause and effect. The narrator seems to be slightly more
bothered by logical than by ethical impropriety, with the result that
our faith in the validity of his judgments is further shaken. In the
second extract, the rather prissy bit of officialese “bei entsprechend
bescheidenen Ansprüchen” evokes the character of the petty official
who has learnt to keep his head down so as not to draw attention
to himself.

Other insights into the narrator’s personality can be obtained
by looking at the kind of thing that engages his interest, the kind of
thing that he skates over rapidly, and the emotional level at which
he reacts to the various events and details of the narrative. The nar-
rator’s eye is caught, for example, by the fact that it is usually
butchers who are appointed to guard the Hunger Artist—"immer drei gleichzeitig." Objectively considered, this provision has something brutally monstrous and excessive about it, but the narrator's response is one of mild curiosity only: "merkwürdigerweise." This would seem to indicate that he is not able to respond appropriately to what he sees. Again, on the next page, the narrator shows an undue interest in the elaborate precautions which the authorities take in order to make sure that the Hunger Artist cannot cheat. Here again, he seems interested in these precautions primarily as an efficient administrator who appreciates efficiency in others and who is concerned to report meticulously the extent of the precautions that are taken. And, as was the case in the last example, the narrator completely fails to react emotionally to the inhumanity which characterizes these precautions. Or when the narrator deals with the ceremony which has evolved to greet the Hunger Artist's emergence from his cage on the fortieth day, we hear that there are small differences between the townspeople and the countrypeople in their ability to wait patiently for the end of the Hunger Artist's fast. We hear that the results of the medical inspection (carried out by two doctors) are communicated to the audience through a megaphone. We hear that the meal for the Hunger Artist is served "auf einem kleinen Tischchen." We hear that the music makes speech impossible, and so on. Wherever the reader cares to look in this passage, he will see that the narrator is concerned to record irrelevant details, and that in the process of doing so he fails to react to the sordid and exploitative aspects of the scene. Likewise, the narrator never bothers to distinguish between insignificant and significant details: early in the story, he records that the only piece of furniture in the cage is a clock, but he never asks himself what this detail might signify. He simply notes it in the same tone and with the same emphasis as he notes the fact of the two doctors or the little table.

Also, the narrator at one point makes the revealing remark that the Hunger Artist listens to his guards' stories: "alles nur, um sie wachzuhalten, um ihnen immer wieder zeigen zu können, daß er nichts Eßbares im Käfig hatte und daß er hungerte, wie keiner von ihnen es könnte." This is an important hint as to the nature of the Hunger Artist's guilt, his self-centeredness, but the narrator gives it in the same tone in which he had recorded the precautionary details. And he is then able, without more ado, to move on and spend an inordinate number of lines reporting with evident interest the great breakfast controversy.
Throughout the story, the narrator's vision is distorted by false priorities, misplaced emphases, and a quirkish perspective. He spends excessive time over incidental details and insufficient time over vitally important information. His emotional responses are, as often as not, inappropriate to the event in question, and when he does manage to get below the surface of the world which he beholds, he seems to do so by accident rather than by design. The efficient bureaucrat who is concerned to record as many facts as possible and to see both sides of even the most irrelevant question is unable to come to grips with the real problem of his world: the meaning of the Hunger Artist. Not surprisingly then, when he comes to make a final judgment, he gets things completely wrong. Much has been written about the distorted world of Franz Kafka, but it is always worth asking whether the distortions exist in the world itself, in the mind of Franz Kafka, or in the mind of the person who happens to be doing the narrating.

Ingeborg Henel, in a helpful essay on *Ein Hungerkünstler*, overlooks the distorted vision of the narrator and writes:

> Da die Welt mit den Augen des suchenden und irrenden Helden gesehen wird, herrscht in ihr auch nicht das sonst bei Kafka übliche Dunkel, die dicke Luft oder das Schneegestöber, die zu große Nähe oder die weite Ferne, die die Dinge nur verschwommen erkennen lassen.

But, as has been indicated above, nothing could be further from the truth. The style of *Ein Hungerkünstler* is far from "objektiv" precisely because we are able to attach a definite personality to the narrator, locate him within space and time, and show how his vision is unreliable because of this location. For all its apparent clarity, the vision of the narrator of *Ein Hungerkünstler* is as dark as if it were clouded by snowstorms, because it is the product of an identifiable set of contingent circumstances. Thus, in one short story, Kafka has called into question the essential basis of nineteenth-century prose fiction, the reliability of the narrator, by the brilliant device of providing us with an ostensibly reliable narrator, who seems himself to believe in his own reliability, but is, in fact, highly unreliable. Whereas nineteenth-century prose fiction assumes that the narrator stands on an Archimedean point outside space and time, Kafka shows the impossibility of continuing to make this assumption. Whereas nineteenth-century fiction assumes that the values of the narrator, rooted in a particular and living social class, are adequate and authentic, Kafka shows us the inadequacy of a nar-
rator who takes his identity from a hypertrophied profession. Whereas nineteenth-century fiction assumes that the narrator understood what he was looking at, Kafka shows us a narrator who fails to respond adequately to what he sees, looks without seeing and sees without understanding. Whereas nineteenth-century fiction assumes the omniscience of the narrator, Kafka shows us his narrator faced with two situations which he cannot explain. First, the narrator tells us about the change of public taste which has come about and then asks who is competent to explain this sudden swing. From the point of view of the traditional conventions of prose fiction, it is the responsibility of the narrator to do this, and it is therefore highly ironic that this particular narrator should implicitly admit that he is not up to the task which he has taken on with so much confidence. Then again, the narrator says later on in the story: “Versuche, jemandem die Hungerkunst zu erklären! Wer es nicht fühlt, dem kann man es nicht begreiflich machen.” Just when the narrator ought to be helping us to understand the all-important nature of the “Hungerkunst,” he abdicates his responsibility and opens the way for limitless speculation.

Thus, while Dr. Henel is justified in pointing out that the narrative technique of *Ein Hungerkünstler* is an unusual one for Kafka,\(^8\) it is more than a little misleading to suggest that this story represents a radically new departure. In this short story, Kafka says exactly the same thing about narrative unreliability as he does in his two major novels—though he says it in a different way. The unreliability of the narrator which is made clear implicitly throughout *Der Prozeß* and *Das Schloß* by having the narrator withdraw from these works to the greatest possible extent, is shown explicitly in *Ein Hungerkünstler* through the provision of a narrator who seems to be reliable but in fact is not. *Ein Hungerkünstler* can be read as the story of the struggles of a lesser K., seen through the eyes of one of the Castle officials who believes himself to be god-like, but who, like the official in K.’s dream before Bürgel, is really nothing more than a Greek god who squeals like a girl when he is pinched. Where the narrator of *Das Schloß* refuses to pass explicit judgment on K. and the world of the village because of his sense of the relativity of his own position, the narrator of *Ein Hungerkünstler* simply does not have enough imagination to pass relevant comments. If the narrator of *Das Schloß* holds back from his fictional world out of a sense of strength and tact, the narrator of *Ein Hungerkünstler* holds back
from his fictional world because of his limitations. The narrator of Das Schloß refuses a god-like rôle, but the narrator of Ein Hungerkünstler assumes one and then rapidly reveals that he is all too human.

The effect produced in the mind of the reader when the authority of Kafka’s narrator is seen to be spurious is a kind of shock. Suddenly, the reader discovers that he has been fooled by the narrator, and the shock of this realization is compounded when the reader understands that he has identified with the unreliable point of view of the narrator because it is so like his own, so like the careless way in which he himself normally deals with the world. The reader must now learn an entirely new way of reading if he is to deal with this little story. He must now keep one eye on the person of the narrator, who stands in the foreground, and one eye on the events of the narrative in the background. He discovers that he must pay as much or more attention to the details which the narrator skates over, as to those he dwells on, since this is the only way of getting past the person of the narrator and gaining a clear picture of the Hunger Artist himself.

On the whole, critics have assumed that the Hunger Artist is an allegorical figure. R. W. Stallman sees the Hunger Artist as a threefold allegory;9 Ingeborg Henel, in the essay referred to above, sees him as an allegory of the artist in general; and Harry Steinhauer sees him as an allegory of the position of religion in contemporary society.10 Although certain aspects of the story lend themselves to such allegorical interpretations, Kafka made (in connection with George Grosz) some penetrating remarks about allegory which we need to take into account:

Clearly, the same argument can be applied to allegorical interpretations of *Ein Hungerkünstler*. They are right and they are wrong. They are right in that one can think of many artists and divines who are "hunger artists," but they are wrong in that one can think of many artists and divines who are not "hunger artists." Even if one particularizes the allegory to the extent of saying that the Hunger Artist stands for the position of the artist or the situation of religion in *contemporary* society, the same objection applies. If the Hunger Artist is regarded as an allegory, the critic either finds himself forced into proclaiming a "Teilansicht" as the "Gesamタンsicht" (in which case he probably ends up by making abstract and pretentious generalizations about the relationship of "art" and "life"), or he has to qualify his statements to make it sufficiently clear that he is talking about a particular kind of artist or divine (in which case he automatically diminishes the scope, importance, and power of Kafka's story).

In order to avoid these pitfalls, it is probably better to regard the Hunger Artist not as an allegory of anything, but as the symbol of a psychological (or, perhaps more exactly, a meta-psychological) state which is not peculiar to artists or divines but which has undoubtedly characterized not a few artists and divines of all eras. This approach is corroborated by a passage from Kafka's *Fragmente* which suggests that Kafka himself thought of the Hunger Artist as a psychological type:

Die Unersättlichen sind manche Asketen, sie machen Hungerstreik auf allen Gebieten des Lebens und wollen dadurch gleichzeitig folgendes erreichen:

1. Eine Stimme soll sagen: Genug, du hast genug gefastet, jetzt darfst du essen wie die andern und es wird nicht als Essen angerechnet werden.

2. Die gleiche Stimme soll gleichzeitig sagen: Jetzt hast du so lange unter Zwang gefastet, von jetzt an wirst du mit Freude fasten, es wird süßer als Speise sein (gleichzeitig aber wirst du auch wirklich essen).


Zudem kommt noch eine seit jeher zu ihnen redende unablässige Stimme: Du fastest zwar nicht vollständig, aber du hast den guten Willen und der genügt.¹²

The Hunger Artist is one of the "Unersättlichen" who can be found "auf allen Gebieten des Lebens" because he cannot find the right
food. But, unlike the three types of ascetics to whom Kafka refers in the above passage, it is doubtful whether the Hunger Artist has any purpose at all, whether, despite his confession, he has ever looked for the right food. The narrator, in that tone of flat reportage which characterizes his treatment of anything important, seems to suggest this when he writes:

Warum wollte man ihn des Ruhmes berauben, weiter zu hungern, nicht nur der größte Hungerkünstler aller Zeiten zu werden, der er ja wahrscheinlich schon war, aber auch noch sich selbst zu übertreffen bis ins Unbegreifliche, denn für seine Fähigkeit zu hungern fühlte er keine Grenzen.

Because the narrator is concerned at this point simply to report the thoughts of the Hunger Artist like the good "Protokollführer" that he is, he fails to remark that the idea of "sich selbst zu übertreffen bis ins Unbegreifliche," being impossible of realization, implies doubt in the existence of "the right food," a refusal to look for it, and a love of never-ending struggle for its own sake.

Thus, even when the day of the big fasting-spectaculars is past, the Hunger Artist is too addicted to his "art," or, more exactly, to struggle, to be able to give it up, and as far as we can see from the narrator's account, this addiction to struggle is bound up with a negative impulse, an inability on the part of the Hunger Artist to accept himself for what he is. This in turn results in perpetual flight from himself:

. . . sondern er war nur so abgemagert aus Unzufriedenheit mit sich selbst. Er allein nämlich wußte, auch kein Eingeweihter sonst wußte das, wie leicht das Hungern war. Es war die leichteste Sache von der Welt.

Because the Hunger Artist is unwilling to accept the limitations of his human existence, symbolized by his refusal to eat, he resolves to flee those limitations and the self which they define, in order willfully to pursue the ideal of absolute fasting which is vacuous because it is tantamount to death. Again, without realizing the force of what he is saying, the narrator manages to suggest that such a daemonic willfulness lies at the root of the Hunger Artist's predicament when he reports:

. . . ja er behauptete sogar, er werde, wenn man ihm seinen Willen lasse, und dies versprach man ihm ohne weiteres, eigentlich erst jetzt die Welt in berechtigtes Erstaunen setzen. . . .

Most of all, the Hunger Artist desires to be left alone with his will and the fiction of greatness which he hopes to create for himself by
its exercise. Thus, the Hunger Artist is in exactly the same position as Kierkegaard’s “man who wills despairingly to be himself”:

By the aid of this infinite form the self despairingly wills to dispose of itself or to create itself, to make itself the self it wills to be, distinguishing in the concrete self what it will and what it will not accept. The man’s concrete self, or his concretion, has in fact necessity and limitations, it is this perfectly definite thing, with these faculties, dispositions, etc. But by the aid of the infinite form, the negative self, he wills first to undertake to refashion the whole thing, in order to get out of it in this way a self such as he wants to have, produced by the aid of the infinite form of the negative self—and it is thus he wills to be himself. . . . He is not willing to attire himself in himself, nor to see his task in the self given him; by the aid of being the infinite form he wills to construct it himself. . . . So the despairing self is constantly building nothing but castles in the air. . . . Just at the instant when it seems to be nearest to having the fabric finished it can arbitrarily resolve the whole thing into nothing.13

Like this man, the Hunger Artist “is not willing to attire himself in himself, nor to see his task in the self given him.” He “undertakes to refashion the whole thing” and constantly builds castles in the air which would be shattered by the first contact with the reality of which he is so afraid. Consequently, in his despair, the Hunger Artist is forced to exert himself ever more strenuously to escape that self which he cannot accept, and only succeeds in driving himself ever more deeply into a state of despair.

Furthermore, like “the man who wills despairingly to be himself,” the Hunger Artist is, even if he himself does not realize it, infinitely close to salvation,14 for at the root of his striving is an unconscious desire for transcendence. This desire is legitimate enough, but the way in which the Hunger Artist tries to realize it is profoundly misguided. Camus’ Sisypheus could have become a Hunger Artist, could have sought transcendence in despairingly and willfully trying to escape from the task and the condition to which he had been condemned. But because he does not try to escape and learns to accept both himself and his limitations, he transcends these and achieves a form of happiness. By contrast, Kafka’s Hunger Artist is incapable of suspending the activity of his will in order to make Sisypheus’ leap of faith; he confuses transcendence with self-overcoming and flees from the limitations of his humanity in order to chase the will-o’-the-wisp of absolute fasting. Whereas Sisypheus accepts his situation as a prison and transcends this prison at the
moment *when* he accepts it, the Hunger Artist’s willful attempt to break out of the prison of his fleshliness only imprisons him more inescapably. Thus, the narrator, without realizing the hidden force of his remarks, records that the Hunger Artist never left his cage “freiwillig,” by the action of his free will, and that the only piece of furniture in his cage was a clock, the symbol of the Hunger Artist’s despairing imprisonment within time. In short, the Hunger Artist’s legitimate desire for transcendence becomes illegitimate because he is prepared to accept transcendence only on the terms which he himself decrees, and runs away from that self which needs to be accepted if ever it is to be overcome. The outbreaks of pathological rage to which the Hunger Artist is prone are thus the emotional symptoms of a deeply unstable personality in which will and self are disjunct. Once more, Kierkegaard’s analysis of the despairing personality provides us with a direct insight into the Hunger Artist’s state of soul:

\[... \text{he is afraid of eternity—for this reason, namely, that it might rid him of his (demoniacally understood) infinite advantage over other men, his (demoniacally understood) justification for being what he is. \ldots He rages most of all at the thought that eternity might get it into its head to take his misery from him}^{15}\]

Just as the Hunger Artist cannot accept himself and strives despairingly to become something that he is not, so too, it is suggested, he is unable to accept other people and strives, indirectly, to dominate them as well. Thus, he listens to the guards’ stories only to prove “daß er hungerte, wie keiner von ihnen es könnte” and he yearns for the admiration of the crowds during the circus performances even though he secretly despises them. Only on his deathbed, when he begs forgiveness for having willed that people should admire him, does he realize that he had been more concerned to mystify, impress, and dominate than he had been to communicate through his art. To put it paradoxically, the man who refuses the food which the world holds out to him, who “gives thanks that he is not as other men,” is completely incapable of providing the world with any food in return. Thus, early on in the story, it is said that the Hunger Artist answers questions “angestrengt lächelnd,” the implication of which is that his smile, the specifically human gesture of acceptance and communication, is artificial. Consequently, one can almost hear the high of relief when, a few lines later, the Hunger Artist is permitted to sink back into himself and “bother himself with no-
one." This is not an isolated action. The Hunger Artist prefers to live in the solipsistic illusion of his own excellence, rather than in the world of men, prefers to try to dominate rather than communicate. Later in the story, when the narrator records that the Hunger Artist himself was the only completely "satisfied" spectator of his fasting, he uses the German word "befriedigt," which has sexual overtones and thus suggests that the Hunger Artist's self-absorbed attempt to flee from himself and impose the fiction of his greatness upon others is tantamount to spiritual masturbation.

In view of what the narrator implies about the Hunger Artist's attitude to his world, it is surprising that he should explicitly claim that the latter had worked "honestly" and that the world had cheated him of his reward. When all is said and done, it is not really strange that the world should remain uncomprehending towards the Hunger Artist since the Hunger Artist has provided it with nothing but the spurious glamor of spectacle. The Hunger Artist has no right to complain of being misunderstood, for the simple reason that he never seriously tried to communicate anything intelligible. It is thus hard to blame the world for its scepticism and brutality towards the Hunger Artist: by his deceptions, he has deserved the former and asked for the latter. Kafka once described sin as "das Zurückweichen vor der eigenen Sendung," and this remark applies exactly to the Hunger Artist's basic failing. His task is to be a man among men, but he refuses this and turns his back upon men out of a deep-seated sense of pride. When, however, he comes to understand what he had done and confesses when he is on the point of death, something in him breaks, the pride goes out of him and the narrator, again oblivious of the full force of his own remark, records:

Das waren die letzten Worte, aber noch in seinen gebrochenen Augen war die feste, wenn auch nicht mehr stolze Überzeugung, daß er weiterhungere.

I do not mean to suggest that the problem of the narrator and the problem of the meaning of the figure of the Hunger Artist are two distinct problems conjoined for convenience in one story. Despite the real differences in temperament between the pragmatically official narrator and the introvertedly obsessed Hunger Artist, both men have one thing in common—a deep-seated self-centeredness. Both men have interposed a barrier of subjective prejudice, a fraudulent fiction, between themselves and the real world. The narrator tries to assimilate the complexities of the world to his legalist preconceptions, and
the Hunger Artist tries to mold the world according to private fantasies of his own greatness. Both are imprisoned behind bars which they have created for themselves, and neither is able to see any of the light that may shine from behind the mundane and apparently distorted surface of the world which stands over and against them. Each in his own way condescends to the world: the narrator, like Josef K., regards the world and its inhabitants as insignificant and trivial, and the Hunger Artist, like K., assumes that the world revolves around him. Ultimately, the narrator and the central figure of *Ein Hungerkünstler* are not distinct, but complementary figures, a lesser K. seen through the eyes of a lesser Josef K. who is his hybistic Doppelgänger.

*University of East Anglia*

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1 This omission is surprising in view of the extent to which the Kafka critics of the sixties, notably Walter Sokel, have stressed the importance of understanding the narrative perspective in Kafka's work.


3 My italics in all five cases.

4 Admittedly, there are other places in the text where it looks as if the narrator is passing direct comment: "Und er blickte empor in die Augen der *scheinbar so freundlichen in Wirklichkeit so grausamen* Damen" or "diesen *bedauernswerten* Märtyrer, welcher der Hungerkünstler allerdings war" (my italics in both cases). But a closer inspection of the context reveals that in the first of these two cases the Hunger Artist's point of view is being reported but not subscribed to by the narrator, and that in the second case, the narrator is reporting the nature of the impression that the impresario is trying to make on the audience without necessarily affirming the truth of this impression.

5 Ingeborg Henel, "*Ein Hungerkünstler*," *DVLG*, 38 (1964), 230-47.

6 Ibid., 245.

7 Ibid., 247.

8 Ibid., 245.

11 Janouch, pp. 205-6.
14 Ibid., 201.
15 Ibid., 206.
16 Janouch, p. 231.