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# Hunger and Modern Writing

Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright



**Hunger and Modern Writing**  
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# Contents

Acknowledgements	VII
Summary	IX
<b>I. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
I.i Methodology and structure	6
<b>II. Theoretical Overview of Hunger and Modern Writing</b>	<b>15</b>
II.i Hunger and the body	15
II.ii The writer under conditions of modernity	22
<b>Part 1: Herman Melville and Franz Kafka</b>	<b>27</b>
1. "I would prefer not to": Absence and Appetite in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener"	29
1.1 "Dollars damn me..."	30
1.2 The Wall Street lawyer	33
1.3 The mechanical scrivener	39
1.4 Visionary, artist, or madman?	42
2. Alienation and the Unknown Nourishment in Franz Kafka's <i>Die Verwandlung</i> and "Ein Hungerkünstler"	49
2.1 Kafka's modernism	53
2.2 Kafka's <i>Die Verwandlung</i>	56
2.3 Kafka's "Ein Hungerkünstler"	69
<b>Part 2: Knut Hamsun and Richard Wright</b>	<b>83</b>
3. Starvation and Self-Destructiveness in Knut Hamsun's <i>Hunger (Sult)</i>	85
3.1 <i>Hunger</i>	86
3.2 Hunger and subjectivity	95
3.3 "Cheap happiness"	102
3.4 "Noble suffering"	108
4. Hunger and Self-Fashioning in Richard Wright's <i>Black Boy (American Hunger)</i>	111
4.1 Wright's naturalism	114
4.2 The grim, hostile stranger	122

4.3	Hunger, reading, and the self-made man	126
4.4	Wright's <i>American Hunger</i>	133
<b>Conclusion</b>		<b>139</b>
<b>Abbreviations and Works Cited</b>		<b>143</b>

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## Summary

This book examines the relevance of hunger in the writing of Herman Melville, Franz Kafka, Knut Hamsun, and Richard Wright. It argues that hunger is an important theme not only for the selected works of these authors, but also for the way it is deeply involved with concepts of modernity and modernist literature and how it is bound up with a writer's role in modern society.

In my discussion I draw upon two contentious and complex views of hunger: the first is material, relating to the body as a physical entity that has a material existence in reality. Hunger in this sense is a physiological process that affects the body as a result of the need for food, the lack of which leads to discomfort, listlessness, and eventually death. The second view is that of hunger as an appetite of the mind, the kind of hunger for immaterial things that is normally associated with an individual's desire for a new form of knowledge, sentiment, or a different way of perceiving the reality of the world.

By means of this dualistic approach I address the ongoing discussion regarding the figure of the modern author, a creative individual who strives for independence of thought and action, yet is influenced by the same biological, cultural, and economic forces that shape the rest of society. By introducing the theme of hunger into this debate, I argue that the interaction between the artist's immaterial, creative life of spontaneous thought and emotion and the way in which this inner life is rooted in the material world of the body offers an approach to the work of these canonical writers that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

The first of this book's four chapters examines how Melville draws upon two aspects of hunger—appetite and absence—in his portrayal of the scriveners on Wall Street, and it supports the idea that *Bartleby* exhibits an artistic temperament. Chapter 2 explores the link between modernist art and the alienation of the individual in Kafka's writing, and it examines how hunger is bound up with both the physical decline and the spiritual withdrawal of Kafka's heroes, which culminate in their death from starvation. Chapter 3 demonstrates the significance of hunger for Hamsun's narrator with regard to his self-destructive tendencies, and how his rejection of society and willingness to act against his own interests may be read as an expression of Hamsun adopting an anti-modern stance comparable to that of Dostoevsky's. Chapter 4 discusses how, in Wright's text, hunger is bound up with self-fashioning, an important theme in the narrative that is also relevant to an appreciation of the book as an intellectual autobiography. All four chapters discuss how perceptions and experiences of hunger may alter reality in the narrative and how hunger impacts and transforms the substance and conditions of the protagonists' lives.

The works of Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright can thus be directly linked with conflicting concepts of modernity and its consequences for the individual and the author, as well as with conflicting concepts of a hunger that can be read



both as a symbol of a materialist, capitalist modernity and as a potential cure for its inherent ills of greed and indifference. This book examines the inconsistencies and contradictions in the selected authors' conceptualization of hunger as both desire and absence of desire, or as both a creative and a destructive force, and argues how these contradictions relate to the broader conflicts relating to the writer's role in modern society.

## I. Introduction

*Versuche, jemandem die Hungerkunst zu erklären! Wer es nicht fühlt, dem kann man es nicht begreiflich machen.*

— Kafka, “Ein Hungerkünstler”

Hunger, in the most fundamental, primal sense, is a physical need that is common to all living things. The word denotes a general need for sustenance, and the resulting effort to secure a regular supply of food to meet the body’s requirements is one of the most fundamental drives and challenges for sustaining life. There is, however, another kind of hunger, if we look beyond the reflexive drive of the appetite. It is one that belongs exclusively to humanity: the hunger that is inherent to personality and intellect. This form of hunger manifests itself in different ways and to different degrees in each individual. The problem of identifying the object of hunger and its source, of understanding its particular dynamic and all the myriad profusion of places, people, and events that it involves, is precisely an issue of character, of observing the minutiae of a person’s language and behaviour. The rationalization of the term “hunger” as a physical, intellectual, or emotional state, one that may be described in either sweeping or narrowly individualistic terms, offers a range and depth of possible meanings. It is the versatility of the concept of hunger that has motivated the kind of comparative study of Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”, Franz Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung* and “Ein Hungerkünstler”, Knut Hamsun’s novel *Hunger* (*Sult*), and Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) undertaken here.

Hunger is a flexible term, and may therefore be used in conjunction with a range of diverse and often contentious issues and themes. The subject of hunger is found in an expansive field of works that appear to gravitate inexorably toward each other: the literature of hunger strikes, religious fasting, anorexia, poverty, famine, and the Third World may be found alongside a range of works of utopian visions and political ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Hunger affects nearly all aspects of human life

1 The broad socio-political and historical relevance of hunger has been addressed in James Vernon’s *Hunger: A Modern History*, for instance, where Vernon examines the shift in the perception of hunger as being an individual problem to the perception of it being a matter of politics, as well as the view that the poor and underfed were no longer simply idle, but victims of forces beyond their control. Vernon sees hunger as a material and cultural phenomenon, and yet argues that it has increasingly developed a strong political dimension, as food and nutritional matters have become entrenched in issues of class. He juxtaposes the theories of two prominent economists, Adam Smith and Thomas Malthus, and their conflicting explanations of the relevant cause of hunger and of hunger’s existence as a human or divine force. He also charts the late 18th-century development of the separation of a collective mass of individuals into the three distinct ontological domains of politics, economics, and society and shows how this came to affect the discussion and contextualization of hunger in cultural discourse (see Vernon 2007). The socio-historical relevance of hunger is also addressed in Terry Eagleton’s *Heathcliffe and the Great Hunger* (1996), where Eagleton examines the events of the Great Famine in Ireland (1845–1852) in conjunction with providing a critical analysis of Emily Bronte’s novel *Wuthering Heights*. Of particular interest

and thus plays a prominent role in science and medicine, in politics and economics, but also in psychology and sociology, and reaches into every form of thought or human endeavour. It encompasses the separation of human knowledge into the sciences, which may be loosely defined as the study of matter and the body, and also plays a prominent role in the humanities, which may be defined as the study of the mind and its expressions through art and literature.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore difficult to address the topic of hunger without falling into one or the other category, and while I have made use of a broad range of sources, the present discussion will examine how hunger and its physical effects influence and impact the emotions and intellect of the protagonists in the literary works selected.

This study thus takes a cultural rather than a scientific approach and draws upon two contentious and complex views of hunger: the first is material, relating to the body as a physical entity that has a material existence in reality. Hunger in this sense is a physiological process that affects the body as a result of the need for food, the lack of which leads to discomfort, listlessness, and eventually death.<sup>3</sup> The

are his views on the long-standing conflict between nature (Ireland) and culture (Britain) and the various socio-political factors that he cites as responsible for the catastrophe. A line may be drawn, however crudely, to link the potato famine and Irish exodus and the dust bowl effect and the ensuing crop failure and mass flight to California depicted by John Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. When viewed in comparison, these disastrous historical events reveal a pattern of attitudes to and perceptions of hunger that resonate on a global scale and that have shaped many of the cultural ideas and attitudes, as well as the economic and political policies, of the modern world. The approaches to the topic hunger adopted by Vernon, Eagleton, and Steinbeck are all valuable points of reference and would present a rewarding field for future study.

- 2 The perceived overlap between science and the humanities in the analysis of hunger has been the subject of numerous studies that have sought to address the long-standing debate concerning biological determinism versus free will. Two prominent examples of such studies are *The Hungry Soul* by Leon Kass and *Hunger* by Raymond Tallis. Kass argues "against modern science's corporalist hypothesis and seeking to establish the independence and supremacy of the living form in relation to its own materiality" (Kass 1994, 13). Tallis builds directly on the work of Kass and asserts: "Unfortunately, this biologism seems to have common sense and honesty on its side. The shallow knowingness that sees human hungers as essentially unreformed animal instincts—as being, or boiling down to, physiological hunger—is, however, wrong for a variety of reasons" (Tallis 2008, 2). Among these reasons, Tallis cites humanity's capacity to build and create in a manner that goes far beyond anything found in the animal kingdom. My own interpretation of human hunger also employs a dualist concept insofar as I maintain that the mind has a capacity to influence and suppress the needs of the body during the creation of works of art, and hence my discussion of hunger in physical and intellectual or psychological terms also touches on this debate.
- 3 See for example Stefan Simanowitz's discussion of the effects of hunger in "The Body Politic: The Enduring Power of the Hunger Strike", where he describes the physical process that takes place in a starving body: "Anyone who has seen *Hunger*, Alexander McQueen's 2008 film about the Maze prison hunger strike will have some idea of just how horrific is starvation as a way to die. The body literally consumes itself. After about three days the liver starts to break down body fat in a process called ketosis. The body slows its metabolism to compensate but after about three weeks starts to 'mine' its muscles and vital organs for energy. The skin becomes waxy, the body exudes off a sour odour and breath takes on a sweet smell like pears. Ketosis results in the production of toxic ketone bodies which can be excreted through urine, oxidized by the brain or even expelled through the lungs but ultimately causes a potentially lethal condition called ketoacidosis. Death comes by dehydration, atrophication and the painful failure of internal organs, chiefly kidneys and liver"

second form of hunger is that of the mind or intellect, the kind of hunger that is normally associated with an individual's desire or appetite for immaterial things—whether this is for a new form of knowledge, sentiment, or for a different way of perceiving the reality of the world. This distinction advances the dualist position that mind and matter are two distinct yet mutually influencing entities.<sup>4</sup> I base my reading of hunger on the assumption that, while the body can influence and affect mental processes, the mind can also influence the functions and processes of the body. For the purpose of my study on hunger and modern writing, I have thus adopted the theory elaborated by Jerome Shaffer in *Philosophy of Mind*, insofar as he proposes the following: “It holds that (1) states of consciousness can be causally affected by states of the body and (2) states of the body can be causally affected by states of consciousness; thus the mind and body can interact” (Shaffer 1968, 61). This concept of psychophysical interactionism frames my approach to hunger in the context of the four literary works examined.

I also employ this interactionist view of hunger in order to address the notion of the writer's role in modern society, and I address the ongoing debate regarding the conflicting ideas surrounding the concept of the modern author; on the one hand, there is the idea that, as a creative artist, the writer possesses certain distinctive qualities and capacities of thought and feeling that mark him or her out from the rest of society. On the other hand, the artist is also subject to the same laws and customs as other individuals and is shaped by the same biological, social,

(Simanowitz 2010, 326). It is necessary to state at this point that I address cultural perceptions and representations of the body, as well as physical symptoms of starvation, from the relatively safe distance of academic research, and do not profess any familiarity or first-hand knowledge of these symptoms.

- 4 The concept of mind-body dualism addressed in the present study of hunger stems from the Cartesian position of mind and body being distinct kinds of substances, though my view is that the interaction between them is non-linear, as there is no clearly defined line where mind and body interact. In Chapter V of the *Discourse on Method*, Descartes discusses the relation of the body of man to God: “For, examining the functions which could, consequentially, be in this body, I found precisely all those which can be in us without our thinking of them, and therefore, without our soul, that is to say, that part distinct from the body about which it has been said above that its nature is only to think, contributing to them, and these are all the same functions in which one can say that the animals, devoid of reason, resemble us. But I was unable for all that to find any of those functions which, being dependent on thought, are the only ones that belong to us men, whereas I found them all afterwards, once I had supposed that God had created a rational soul, and joined it to this body in a particular way which I described” (Descartes [1637] 1968, 65). My own view of hunger does not presuppose the existence of the body in purely “mechanical” terms or it being distinct or separated from mental or intellectual faculties. I do, however, maintain that there is a parallelism between the concept of bodily hunger and the appetites of the mind, and I would further argue that hunger differs from other bodily functions and processes, such as physical pain, precisely because the intellectual notion of hunger (that need for something that is derived from absence or lack) so closely resembles its physical counterpart. This similarity may be the basis for the metaphorical concept of hunger that compares mental to physical processes, where mental hunger is not simply a form of imitation of the physical processes of the body, but rather a reflection of the impulse of the mind to acquire and assimilate knowledge. This can be shown by the degenerative capacities of mind and body, where, just as the body needs food to survive, so too does the mind need mental stimuli in order to avoid intellectual stagnation.

cultural, and economic forces. By introducing hunger into this debate, I argue that the interaction between the artist's immaterial, creative life of spontaneous thought and emotion and the way in which this inner life is rooted in the material world of substance and form can be brought to light in a manner that might otherwise remain concealed.

This conflict may also be framed in terms of two mutually hostile concepts of modernity; the first encompasses the view of modernity as historical progress, marked by the upheavals brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the rise of bourgeois capitalism, and technological and scientific advances. This is in contrast to the other modernity, aesthetic modernity, which seeks to counter the perceived negative, alienating effects of these historical developments.<sup>5</sup> The outcome of these latter efforts has been a sharp break with earlier forms of art and literature, one that stimulated a revolutionary turn in aesthetics and poetics, with a critical emphasis placed on the banality and hypocrisy of urban capitalist societies. Yet the advances in science and technology have also led to a vast expansion of human experience and perception, which has changed contemporary attitudes to artistic production,<sup>6</sup> as well as had an irrevocable impact on everyday life. For the purpose of the present study, the term "modern" will therefore encompass a range of themes and styles employed by writers that have become synonymous with the literary movement of modernism, and which also relate to commonly held patterns of thought and behaviour found in the urban, industrial societies of Europe and America in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The present study of hunger and modern writing thus contributes to the ongoing debate concerning how writers reflect upon and are influenced by modernity insofar as they either resist or submit to the pressures of a society built upon the foundations of egalitarian, rationalist principles. It addresses the long-standing conflict between the solid, material world of bourgeois capitalism, with its emphasis on prosperity and progress and its relative indifference to art, and the aesthetic world that challenges this materialistic, pragmatic view of life. It examines the perceived tension between the author as an autonomous, creative individual and the idea that this uniqueness has led to an increasing sense of isolation and alienation of the author from the rest of society. This form of alienation draws upon the idea that a writer is subject to the pressure to either create works of art that conform to public taste or face destitution and starvation.<sup>7</sup> The present study also addresses

5 The idea of "two modernities" is for instance addressed in Matei Călinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987, 41).

6 See for example Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", where Benjamin examines the position of art in the context of capitalism and modern systems of mass production, and argues that because of the loss of its ritualistic value, art in the modern age would essentially be based on the practice of politics (see Benjamin [1935] 1998, 282).

7 In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx argued that in a capitalist society, all major institutional spheres, such as the state, the political economy, and religion, are marked by a condition he called *Entfremdung*, where in a stratified society a worker is alienated from the products of his labour, from the act of producing, from himself as the producer, and finally from

how the comparatively recent perception of art and literature as commodities has further exacerbated the ambiguous and precarious position of the artist, while art itself has been viewed as a redemptive space that suspends the alienating effects of capitalist modernity. Hence one of my aims in the following study is to examine the validity of the concept of art and literature as a redemptive space that permits non-conformity and autonomous, creative forms of expression.

The works of Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright have been linked by scholars and critics with the conflicting concepts of modernity and its consequences for the individual and the author, and my contribution to this debate is to argue that hunger can itself be read as a symbol both of the hostile forces of consumerism, greed, and voracity and of their opposites—asceticism, spiritualism, and a wilful rejection of materialism. I address the inconsistencies and contradictions relating to hunger as both a creative and a destructive force and explore how the term relates to the broader concept of the writer's role in society. As my discussion will focus on a select group of authors whose writings span the period from 1856 to 1945, I discuss in each chapter the relevance of social and historical background with regard to their work.

For example, the absurd and nihilistic refusals of Melville's recalcitrant scrivener to think and behave in a conventional manner have led to the story being read as a "proto-modern" critique of Wall Street capitalism. The story can also be read in terms of a veiled critique of the commercialization of literature, which has relegated the imaginative artist to being just another producer of commodities for the market and reduced authorship to an almost "mechanical" function. This suggests that Melville was addressing the ambiguous position of the artist under conditions of modernity from a Romantic point of view, and I examine how the ideas presented in "Bartleby" reflect those found in works of American Romanticism such as Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful"<sup>8</sup> while also anticipating Kafka's portrayal of starving individuals in *Die Verwandlung* and "Ein Hungerkünstler".

his fellow workers. It is significant here that the artist's relationship to his or her work can be described by Karl Marx's concept of "objectification", where objectification is a process by which human attributes and capacities are transmitted onto material objects and thus embodied in them. According to Karl Marx, "objectification is the practice of alienation. Just as man, so long as he is engrossed in religion, can only objectify his essence by an alien and fantastic being; so under the sway of egoistic need, he can only affirm himself and produce objects in practice by subordinating his products and his own activity to the domination of an alien entity, and by attributing to them the significance of an alien entity, namely money" (quoted from Coser 1977, 51).

- 8 As Benesch points out in his discussion of Hawthorne's views on technology and the fine arts, these views should not be simplified as a reactionary conservatism on the part of a Romantic author, given that Hawthorne maintained "that literary representation is not just a treacherous reflection of the real world but an idealization, a transformation of the real into an image of spirituality which must then be viewed as the representation of an original artistic idea. Yet he was also convinced that the products of the mind cannot (and should not) be cut off completely from their material underpinnings. Artistic creations—and here Hawthorne appears to deviate from Romantic antimodernism and New England transcendentalism—are tied up inextricably with the physical medium with which they are addressed to the public" (Benesch 2002, 86).

In order to present ideas and themes that involve both Romantic and modernist approaches to writing I have placed my reading of “Bartleby, the Scrivener” at the beginning of Part 1, as these ideas are carried over in part to my discussion of Kafka’s texts. The ideas examined in these first two chapters provide the basis for my subsequent discussion of Knut Hamsun’s and Richard Wright’s works, where I juxtapose the neo-Romantic, anti-modern aspects of Hamsun’s first-person novel *Hunger* with the purported naturalism of Wright’s autobiography *Black Boy*, and these later chapters constitute Part 2 of this study.

The main focus of my study of these four authors is to examine the formal and thematic representations and conceptualizations of hunger—from which I have identified two main areas as being central to the discussion of modern writing: the first is the idea of hunger being of the mind and of the body; the second is the ambiguous position of the writer under conditions of modernity—and how they reflect the preoccupation with the interaction of hunger and art shown in the selected texts. The two identified areas will be examined in more detail in my theoretical overview, where I discuss the work of relevant theorists within the fields of the body, hunger, and modern writing. The conflict between mind and body is an ongoing theme in this study, as well as the tension between the individual and society, which may be observed through the interaction of the inner life of the protagonist and the external world of the narrative; this tension or conflict forms a common thread that runs through each of the four chapters.

Each of my readings will aim to show how hunger plays a major role in shaping how we think not only of the texts and their main protagonists, but also of the various arguments and discourses that have come to characterize discussions of these important works of modern literature. Though I draw upon a number of theoretical ideas of the past and present, I do not challenge or promote any single critical position or theorist. This, I felt, would not best serve my topic, as hunger is a highly diverse subject which can be projected onto a broad mosaic of ideas and concepts relating to modern writing. Hunger can be understood as a desire for that which we do not possess and as an expression of negation for all forms of material longing; the paradoxes inherent in the understanding of hunger are duly reflected in the conflicting and contradictory theories concerning modern authorship.

## I.i Methodology and structure

Before examining the main ideas that have formed the basis of this study, I will first describe the methodological approach adopted to identify and select the relevant critical sources, and I will follow with a short discussion of my reason for adopting a two-part structure. I believe this to be useful, as selecting and organizing the large amount of research material involved in the discussion of hunger and modern writing proved to be challenging, and this methodological discussion could be helpful to similar undertakings in the future.

My methodology was reliant on a highly selective process, which was necessitated by the sheer breadth of material on the four authors in question, on whom so much has been written and published that each author has become a literary and cultural institution in his own right. In light of the large amount of material available, I opted against an encyclopaedic approach to my discussion of hunger. The first reason is that it would quickly move well beyond the level of research required for a project of this kind; the second, that I felt that it was unnecessary to draw up a list of other relevant authors under a single genre or theoretical concept, which would potentially involve compiling an index of recurring “hunger-motifs” pertaining to each relevant text. A book of this kind would not only be monotonous to read but also tedious to write, and above all it would have a levelling effect that would remove crucial elements of heterogeneity and ambiguity involved in the interpretation of hunger that make it such a challenging and compelling subject of study.

I have also refrained from identifying any single theorist to whom I refer as having shaped a single, monolithic discourse on hunger against which all subsequent ideas must be positioned. Hence there is no single idea or theory that I argue either in favour of or against; rather, I have attempted to exploit both the literary and theoretical potentials of the diverse and diffuse themes and ideas prevalent in the fields of hunger and modern writing. Though my approach to researching this topic was at first eclectic, it gradually became more focused and clearly defined. During this selective process, I found that the secondary sources tended to fall into one of two categories: the first consists of those critical works that I deemed central to the study of a particular author, the second of those critics that, similarly to my own approach, examined the link between hunger and writing in a range of literary texts. To cite a relevant example of the first category, in Chapter 1 I draw upon Leo Marx’s essay “Melville’s Parable of the Walls” in my reading of “Bartleby”, even though Marx does not address the theme of hunger in Melville’s text. This was both a challenge and an advantage for my own research, as I have attempted to adapt Marx’s ideas to my own discussion with the aim of rearranging and perhaps even extending his ideas as a consequence. Critics who have specifically addressed the subject of hunger in one of the authors’ texts, such as Dan McCall (mentioned in Chapter 1), James Rolleston (in Chapter 2), Paul Auster (in Chapter 3), and Gavin Jones (in Chapter 4), I discuss in relation to my own critical analysis and concept of hunger in the corresponding chapter. The second category of sources draws upon those studies of hunger and writing that were valuable to my own approach to the overall topic, two of which have been cited on a number of occasions, namely Maud Ellmann’s *The Hunger Artists* (1993) and Nina Diezemann’s *Die Kunst des Hungerns* (2006). As I have focused on these two writers in particular, I will now give a rough overview of how their approaches proved useful to my discussion.

Ellmann’s influential work addresses a wide range of ideas on hunger and fasting from the past and present in her discussion of the works of Joyce, Yeats, and



Kafka. These ideas have imposed themselves in various ways on social and cultural discourse, and her eclectic study encompasses issues of class and gender, as well as the way in which hunger is expressed through language and performance. Her book addresses a plethora of topics, from the Irish hunger strikers of Long Kesh to Jane Fonda and to the Romantic poets, and her discussion touches on elements of feminism, Marxism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, and Christian doctrine, among others, as she describes how figures such as the Christian saint, the Irish hunger striker, the obsessive dieter, and the anorexic, as well as the starving poet, have become archetypes of fasting and have remained important subjects in art and literature in the late 20th century. Ellmann's analysis of these figures shows how meaning is attributed to hunger depending on circumstance, association, and classification, as in order for hunger to gain attention it requires written or verbal signification, as well as an institutional concept of symptoms and causes by means of which it can be delineated and understood. Her book examines the denial of food in various forms and also reveals how concepts such as fasting, self-starvation, famine, dieting, hunger strikes, and anorexia are bound up with the production of literary texts.

In "Autophagy", the first of the book's four sections, Ellmann addresses the discourse of the body, which she positions in relation to the wider theoretical debates prevalent in academic circles at the time:

the cult of the body has arisen in defense against poststructuralism, and especially against the fear that "history" and "real life" have been overlooked in favour of a dangerous Gallic fascination with the signifier. In this context, the body has come to represent the last bastion of materiality: if history is nothing but a narrative, 'a tale like any other too often heard', and if the universe is merely an effect of rhetoric, the body seems to stand for an incontestable reality, a throbbing substance in a wilderness of signs. (Ellmann 1993, 3)

Ellmann points out that her own book, "by way of warning, is concerned with *disembodiment*, not bodies; with the deconstruction of the flesh; and with writing and starvation as the arts of disincarnation" (Ellmann 1993, 4). She reinforces her argument by drawing upon Foucault's theories of the body and their relevance in shaping cultural, political, and historical discourse. She points out that, according to Foucault, "cultural forces 'inscribe' themselves upon the body predetermining its 'forces, energies, sensations, pleasures'" (1993, 4), and she reads hunger in a similar vein, insofar as "the body is determined by its culture, because the meanings of starvation differ so profoundly according to the social contexts in which it is endured" (1993, 4). She cites the difference between those who diet in order to achieve the "perfect" physique and "triumph in their hunger as a consequence of temptation" and those who suffered hunger as the result of atrocities and famine, whereby "the implications of their ordeals are so drastically opposed that it would be idle to contend that even the corporeal sensations were the same" (1993, 5). The social contexts in which hunger occurs thus reflect both the circumstances of

those affected and the forces that deprive them of food. These contexts and forces can differ enormously, and can encompass political, economic, and psychological factors; as Ellmann argues, “it would be reductive to equate these forces just because they work the same effect on the physique” (1993, 4). It is language and the associations that words provoke which ultimately influence our perceptions and understanding of hunger; based on my own research of the subject, I would support the veracity of this claim.

My own study of hunger differs from Ellmann’s insofar as it acknowledges and evokes the materiality of the body and all the implied positive and negative effects it has on the individual. It seeks to position the body not as a “defense against post-structuralism”, as Ellmann maintains it has been positioned, but rather as a living, breathing space upon which all manner of ideas and theories might be projected. I hold that the body is a solid and dynamic entity that can also shape and alter the direction of an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and ideas, and I seek to discuss how this mutual interaction is revealed in the form and content of literary works of art. I maintain that an awareness of the “throbbing substance” of the body is vital to the understanding of how hunger is employed and portrayed in literary texts.

Ellmann also examines a concept of cultural production that has, since the Romantics, drawn upon the idea of self-denial as a way to produce memorable, lasting works of art. Aside from the positive effects of literature on the life of the mind, authors have often emphasized the negative effect of certain texts on the health of the body. Ellmann suggests that the nature of authorship is one of destructiveness embedded in the very act of creation: “For writing voids the mind of words just as starving voids the body of flesh, and both express the yearning for an unimaginable destitution” (1993, 27). Whether this yearning is self-sacrifice or a kind of death impulse is unclear, but it is not only the intellect that is purged by the glut of words, and Ellmann re-asserts the metaphor linking reading and writing with the process of eating and excretion and substantiates her argument with the observation that recent interest in fasting and anorexia coincides with an ever-increasing literary output, “as if more reading meant less feeding” (1993, 24). Ellmann proposes a concept of an unstable and precarious individual “self”, as she develops the idea of the self being regulated by the process of eating and excretion of the “otherness” of food (1993, 105). While the act of eating implies a division between the self and the “other”, it also implies a form of recognition through an achieved “wholeness” once the object has been assimilated as part of the self. In her discussion of the Irish hunger strikes that took place in 1981, Ellmann explores how the act of eating has become synonymous with compliance, while starvation is a metaphor for protest. These ideas have been relevant for my discussion of Melville and Kafka in particular, as I address how hunger is bound up with their protagonists’ withdrawal into silence and isolation and how it might constitute a wilful rejection of the world around them.

While I draw upon a number of Ellmann’s ideas, I find it is necessary to stress how hunger provides a means of challenging and testing established ideas pertaining

to notions of the body, authorship, and the figure of the artist. As hunger is an expansive concept that encompasses both the mind and matter, its study can open a dialogue between proponents of a materialist, determinist worldview and those who maintain that reality is constructed by processes of the mind. Furthermore, while I maintain that starvation is largely a destructive force that depends greatly on language and culture to identify and classify hunger as its source, my study also differs from Ellmann's in that I do not examine the consequence of gendered perceptions of society that reduce bodies, both female and male, to commodities, as this is a subject which has already received a great deal of attention in the past.<sup>9</sup> I do, however, examine hunger within the context of racial identity, and argue that hunger, while destructive and negative, can also take on positive connotations as a desire or impetus to transcend the bounds of race and class, a view that is presented in my reading of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* in Chapter 4. I maintain that, while it is primarily a source of pain and discomfort, hunger can also disturb the mind and alter its patterns of thought and desire and thus provide a potential help or hindrance to the creative process.<sup>10</sup> The idea that an individual's thoughts and beliefs are predominantly determined by the world around them seemingly negates the power of the mind to bring forth new ideas and ways of being. Hunger can reflect a desire for change and novelty, while an artist can integrate this craving for newness in visionary works of art that challenge and destabilize the existing order, an idea that features prominently in my reading of Hamsun's *Hunger* in

9 For instance, Leslie Heywood (1996) discusses the link between concepts of gender, dieting, and anorexia in *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture*, in which she also critiques Mark Anderson's much-quoted essay "Anorexia and Modernism, or How I Learned to Diet in All Directions" (1988–1989). Heywood addresses Anderson's juxtaposition of two fields of inquiry that had previously been discussed only in isolation, namely a select group of canonical modern texts that he argues is characterized by an "anorexic logic" and the appearance of anorexia nervosa as a largely female "disease". Heywood challenges Anderson's assertions that the figure of male anorectics in modernist texts "embody an ambiguity of gender that would either deny sexual difference or fuse male and female identities in a complex androgynous form [...]" and that "the modernist produces an 'anti-body' which withdraws from the traditional arena of male privilege, authority, and responsibility" (Anderson 1988–1989, 37).

10 For example, Carol H. Flynn (1990) examines the discourse of the body in writing in the context of the "writers of the Spleen" in 18th-century English literature, citing the prominent example of Dr. Cheyne, who sought to cure Samuel Richardson of his hypochondria and tendency toward corpulence and drink. Cheyne's selected method was the "hobby horse", a device by which Richardson would stay perpetually in motion during the writing process. Flynn points out that "Cheyne's faith in both machines, material and imaginary, testifies to a widespread interest in the ways body and spirit intersect. While investigating the possibility of treating disorders of the soul mechanically and externally, writers against the spleen approached the body as a physical space affected by a spirit in need of diversion. Cheyne and his numerous medical colleagues set out to treat a disease known as the English Malady, that psychosomatic disorder also known as the Hypochondriack Disease, the Hyp, Hysteria, Melancholy, and the Spleen. Their theories, however, had significant implications not only for medical and psychiatric practitioners but for creative writers in the process of developing the novel. Medical theorists and early English novelists were committed in their different ways to sustaining, and at times inventing, modes of feeling to sustain vitality and to cheat, if not conquer, death" (Flynn 1990, 149).

Chapter 3. I also maintain that the act of eating confirms the existence of the “real”, and thus incorporates outside reality into the body. This means that hunger and fasting can offer the artist a form of refuge, a way of indulging the desire to experience the mind’s own inner reality, and thus form a link between the internal world of imagined possibilities and the reality these imaginings create.

Diezemann’s *Die Kunst des Hungerns* (2006) addresses the development of the concept of anorexia nervosa in both medical and literary texts from 1870 to 1920 that examined the effects of hunger on a patient’s or individual’s nerves, metabolism, and circulation. She cites the growing importance of hunger in the field of scientific medicine, which in turn impacted the works of various authors, notably Walser, Fontane, Hamsun, and Kafka. Diezemann’s study provides a detailed examination of a number of relevant texts on fasting and anorexia, and Diezemann seeks to blend literary and scientific approaches in her study of hunger. She cites the fact that medical journals often employed metaphors and literary flourishes that were not used for the purpose of ornamentation, but which rather had a highly practical function in that they raised questions and provided imaginative ways to solve medical problems—a practitioner named Dr. Oppenheim even suggested that doctors should monitor patients’ reading habits, as these constituted the “psychic diet” which complemented the physical intake of food. She points out that, conversely, writers also paid close attention not only to what they ate but also to how they ate, as they believed that this had a direct impact on the kind of literature they produced (Diezemann 2006, 13).

Diezemann also develops certain ideas discussed by Ellmann, for instance when she examines the idea of the “starving poet” or the idea that all poets or writers must necessarily be thin, which fits the image of individuals who appear to spend the majority of their time thinking rather than eating. She points out that Walser, despite having written words meant to convey this image, contradicts it through his reputation as a notorious glutton (Diezemann 2006, 9). Diezemann’s examination of Kafka’s diaries and letters in this context is also intriguing, and I address her discussion of Kafka’s views on hunger, food, and his own fragile body in more detail at the beginning of Chapter 2. She also discusses differences between attitudes to fasting in the late 19th century and in the Middle Ages and draws upon the established studies in the field, such as Caroline Walker Bynum’s *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (1987). Bynum examines certain individuals whose devotion to a life of abstinence has shocked an age renowned for fasting and who have been known to take profound satisfaction in their extreme moderation, so much so that they became enamoured with their own powers of self-restraint (see Bynum 1987). Diezemann points out that the change between the Middle Ages and the late 19th century was one of cultural practices, as fasting in the Middle Ages was commonplace and thus should not be read in similar terms as the accounts of those suffering from anorexia in the 19th and 20th centuries. The studies into the lives of famous ascetics have also given rise to one of the main critical approaches to Kafka’s story “Ein Hungerkünstler”, as critics have in the past

likened Kafka's fasting artist to a religious ascetic or saint. I do not support this view, however, as I maintain that the hunger artist's vanity and singular condition condemn him to a life of fasting, as he remains enamoured with and entrapped by the destructive glory of his dubious art, and this reading frames my own discussion of "Ein Hungerkünstler". Though Diezemann's discussion is well argued and provides a number of useful ideas which will be discussed later on in this book, my own approach differs fundamentally from hers in that I do not adopt a medical approach to hunger and fasting in the work of the four writers discussed.

Ellmann's and Diezemann's works have proved valuable to my own study of hunger not only by establishing a coherent discourse in which I could position my ideas, but also by presenting two differing approaches to structuring a monograph on hunger and authorship. Ellmann's book is extremely broad in scope, and while it offers a wide range of ideas on the subject of hunger and writing, I have endeavoured to adopt a more selective approach in my discussion. My method is in fact more like that of Diezemann's insofar as I present a more focused discussion of hunger with regard to my chosen authors. What I have therefore sought to achieve in my reading of all the selected sources is a form of dialogue that involves the authors, critics, and my own textual analyses. This methodological approach is adopted in all four chapters, which is shown by the frequent overlap in the discussions, where certain ideas that are presented during the reading of one author are at times carried over to the reading of the next.

Hence the two-part structure adopted in the present study employs a formal and thematic, rather than a chronological or historical, approach to the discussion of four very different authors and their works. My decision to divide the four main chapters into a two-part structure was based on the theoretical investigation of man and his environment undertaken by Bertrand Russell in *An Outline of Philosophy*:

We all have an inner life, open to our own inspection but to no one else's. This is no doubt the source of the traditional distinction between mind and body: the body was supposed to be that part of us which others could observe, and the mind that part which was private to ourselves. (Russell 1970, 20)

The reason for selecting the texts discussed in Part 1 is that they take an outside view of the starving individual from a third-person perspective, where the reader is shown the protagonist's body, but is left to guess at his thoughts and sensations (though this is only partially the case for Kafka's use of the free indirect style in *Die Verwandlung*). Part 2 is concerned with texts that reveal the intense experiences of hunger through a first-person narrator, where the reader is granted access to the intimate sphere of thoughts, emotions, and sensations during the narrator's struggles with hunger and with the pursuit of literary success. I argue that the narrative perspectives adopted in each of these texts is important to the understanding of how hunger relates to modern authorship: each text provides a distinctive image of the starving body as either subject or object and portrays the thoughts and

anxieties that hunger inspires in the perceiver or the perceived. Furthermore, each text offers a different account of an individual's viewing and interacting with the world and experiencing time and reality through the mind and body, and also provides rare glimpses into the hidden depths of the subconscious. Each text, therefore, provides not only a *view*, but also an *experience* of hunger that is unique but also concurrent with many of the ideas and themes that have come to be viewed as characteristic of literary modernism. What I have endeavoured to reveal in both the method and the structure of my research is that in spite of marked historical and cultural differences, a pattern emerges in the works of this highly diverse selection of authors that allows a cohesive interpretative approach without diminishing the singularity and intensity of their work.



## II. Theoretical Overview of Hunger and Modern Writing

In the following section I discuss certain relevant ideas from a selection of writers and theorists who have influenced the direction of my own research and argumentation. As I have drawn upon a range of critical sources, I will not reiterate those that relate specifically to a given text and that will be presented and discussed in considerable detail in each relevant chapter. I will confine the following discussion to those authors who address the two main fields of study that have emerged as central to my thesis, namely hunger and the body on the one hand, and the position of the artist under conditions of modernity on the other. While I present them here in two distinct categories, there is a strong underlying connection between these fields that will be made apparent during the course of my work.

### II.i Hunger and the body

An important idea addressed in my discussion is that of the suppression of appetite and the apparent disregard for the needs of the body shown by the starving writer or protagonist. The body may be viewed as an obstacle or hindrance to be overcome, as the mind seeks to suppress and override physical impulses, whether in the form of hunger, fatigue, or discomfort, in order to reach a desired goal. As discussed earlier on, it can also be read in political terms as a sign of dissent, a metaphor for protest on the part of the starving individual. The physical degeneration and weakening of the body through hunger can, however, also lead to an enhancement or intensification of thought and perception, and these hunger-induced states can in turn affect the artist in a creative or positive way. This idea of hunger as a positive or negative force, which can either diminish and enfeeble or incite and strengthen an individual's desire is bound up with a concept of desire that is rooted in the body.

This concept can be found, for example, in works such as Sigmund Freud's *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where Freud contends that an individual's mental life derives mainly from his or her biological drives, whether these be life-affirming or an instinct toward death, and that the greatest artistic achievements of civilized life are inseparable from the instinctual urges toward pleasure and the release of energy which occurs in those who create them (Rivkin 1998, 119). Freud held that even at the most advanced levels of society, food and digestion are among the remnants of our primal, animal nature. He argues that, beyond this primary longing, the structure of desire is determined by socialization, as society creates the conditions that define how we think and behave. Freud argues that desire is effectively mobile and therefore has no fundamental nature, no identifiable object beyond the infant's hallucinatory desire for the mother's breast, and thus the constant yearning for physical gratification is a form of leftover from the primal needs of infancy. The



most fundamental desires are thus attached to bodily needs, and our first desire for maternal milk forms the pattern for our desires in the future.<sup>11</sup> Freud also intimated that, while certain experiences create a compulsion toward repetition that can result in an instinctual satisfaction, the nature of desire is irreconcilable with satisfaction, and the repetitive nature of desire may endlessly defer complete satisfaction; Freud sees this simply as an inescapable aspect of what it means to be human.

This study also examines whether desire must always be conceptualized as linear, or, in other words, as René Girard argues in “Triangular Desire”, whether it can “always be portrayed by a simple straight line from subject to object” (Girard 1998, 225). My discussion explores whether self-starvation and fasting can be read not just as the repression of immediate physical gratification, but rather as the absence or negation of desires that are imposed on the individual externally. For example, in my reading of “Bartleby”, I discuss how physical appetite and desire form an important part of the working environment of the Wall Street office, which later stands in contrast with Bartleby’s lack of appetite and refusal to speak, work, or later leave the premises. I argue that Bartleby’s hunger may be read as a sign that he desires nothing, as he sees nothing in the world worth striving for. He has, as a consequence, been perceived as a stoic or ascetic figure, but I would argue that this is only half the truth; Bartleby introduces a symbolic element into the reality of the narrative, as he represents an absence or lack that is the antithesis of the world he inhabits. The steadfast faith in the accumulation of wealth, along with the rational, pragmatic worldview, of the story’s narrator ultimately breaks down when confronted with Bartleby’s lack of desire and passive, irrational resistance.

Furthermore, in my discussion of hunger and desire in Part 2, I examine the correlation between hunger, writing, and subjectivity and how this correlation relates to the concept of an identity that is either constructed or dismantled through a resistance to social conventions. I examine the concept of desire in the works of Hamsun and Wright not just in terms of a linear relation between subject and object, but also in terms of a process of self-destruction or self-creation in which hunger and desire play a prominent part. In Chapter 4, for instance, I discuss Wright’s *Black Boy* in conjunction with Frederick Douglass’s lecture titled “Self-Made Men”, though it is necessary to briefly differentiate between the concept of the self-made man and the idea of self-fashioning with which I frame my discussion. The latter suggests an active, ongoing process, which encompasses an entire range of thoughts and behaviours that are constantly in flux.<sup>12</sup> The concept

11 Freudian theorists such as Abraham Maslow have contended that hunger arguably remains our strongest impulse, although this argument pre-dates Freud and has long been disputed, most notably by Thomas R. Malthus in the first edition of *An Essay on the Principles of Population*, published in 1798.

12 The term “self-fashioning” used in my reading of Wright’s *Black Boy* was first examined as a literary concept by Stephen Greenblatt in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, where Greenblatt defines it in the following terms: “the power to impose a shape upon oneself is an

of a self-made man, however, represents the fulfilment of desire and thus presupposes a fixed, static end that has already been achieved.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the term “self-made man” is implicitly divisive and non-inclusive in the obvious gendered sense of the term, but also insofar as it involves a level of achievement that is extraordinary and differs from the norm. This uncommon act of self-creation suggests that in normal circumstances a man does not construct his identity, but that his identity is rather shaped by some external, determining force, which makes the self-made man an exceptional case. I argue in my discussion that this idea is important in Wright’s account of his own developing identity, and of his autodidactic ambitions of becoming a successful writer. Furthermore, the cultural ideal of a self-made man implies a transition from poverty to wealth, and thus upholds the fundamental values of a capitalist economy. This process of becoming a self-made man implies a linear concept of desire, and yet hunger can move the individual along both sides of the curve; as well as being a motivating force and the source of constructive energy, hunger is also disruptive and negative, and can be as much of a hindrance as a help in the achievement of a desired outcome. Hunger can cause the most carefully laid plans to unravel, as it is a need more immediate and more pressing than the desire for wealth, fame, or knowledge.

As Maslow argued, hunger is an irrefutable fact of daily life, and in order to pursue any desire or wish-fulfilment one must first vanquish the body’s more immediate needs.<sup>14</sup> I argue that this idea, which has arguably been fundamental

aspect of the more general power to control identity—that of others at least as often as one’s own” (Greenblatt 1987, 1). This concept can be juxtaposed with Catherine Belsey’s elaboration of a deterministic theory of man’s development in *Critical Practice*: “like works of literature, man himself is a social construct, the sloppy composition of social and political forces—there is no such thing as a human nature that transcends history” (Belsey 1980, 144). My discussion of Wright’s novel *Black Boy* addresses both sides of this debate insofar as I examine a notion of identity that is as much dependent on internal, subjective processes as on social, cultural, and economic forces.

- 13 An intriguing analogy to the discussion of desire, hunger, and the self-made man may be found in the idea of static and dynamic pleasures examined by Bertrand Russell in his study of Epicurus. As Russell points out, Epicurus believed in the “pleasure principle”, meaning in this case that one of the most important things in life was to live without pain. Epicurus viewed the stomach as the root from which all other bodily pleasures were derived and thought that “even wisdom and culture must be referred to this” (Russell 1961, 252). Epicurus’ concept of static and dynamic pleasures relate to the search for food (dynamic) and the feeling of satiety after eating (static). The most desirable thing, he argued, was to achieve a state of equilibrium in the body, which is to be neither hungry nor over-satiated. With regard to pleasure and the body, his teaching is that of moderation and prudence, as the wise man seeks to live without pain and without making enemies, and therefore refrains from the dynamic pleasures associated with the pursuit of luxury or status. The negative consequences of dynamic pleasures, Epicurus maintains, are wont to outweigh the benefits they bring.
- 14 See for instance the model put forward by Maslow in *A Theory of Human Motivation* (1943), where he states that incentive and happiness can be reduced to a “hierarchy of needs”; the requirements of the body must first be satisfied before intellectual or spiritual pleasures, or peak moments of “self-actualization”, may be considered. In other words, higher needs cannot become important to the individual until lower needs have been satisfied: “Undoubtedly these physiological needs are the most pre-potent of all needs. What this means specifically is, that in the human being who is missing everything in life in an extreme fashion, it is most likely that the major motivation would

to the development of consumer capitalism that is based on desire and immediate gratification, has been undermined or at least challenged by a preoccupation with deathly and destructive drives in the works of some modernist writers. The subversive effects of hunger with regard to the concept of linear desire is, for instance, made apparent in Kafka's story of the hunger artist, where hunger is itself transformed into an object of desire, leading the artist to starve himself to death in triumphant dedication to his art. Furthermore, in my discussion of Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger*, I argue that the narrator knowingly acts against his self-interests, and that his embrace of hunger during his struggle for artistic success culminates in his rejection of the dominant social order. While I do not address the theories of Freud, Girard, or Maslow directly, my readings of Kafka's and Hamsun's texts both take into account and challenge the notion of linear desire and the need for constant, physical gratification.

There are also ethical and political dimensions to the notion of hunger that results from ascetic denial of appetite. In the third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, entitled "The Care of the Self", Foucault discusses developments in the moral and ethical considerations of physicians and philosophers during the first two centuries AD and examines those historical texts that address matters of pleasure. Foucault examines assertions that relate to customs and habits of ancient forms of asceticism pertaining to the regulation of the body and finds that of particular relevance were philosophical rules on the care and the conduct of the self:

the intensity of the relations to self, that is, of the forms in which one is called upon to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action, so as to transform, correct, and purify oneself, and find salvation. These attitudes can be interconnected, no doubt. Thus it can happen that individualism entails an intensification of the values of private life, or that the importance accorded to the relations to self is associated with an exaltation of individual singularity. (Foucault 1986, 42)

One of Foucault's main concerns addressed in his later writings is the examination of strategies for keeping power relations mobile and thus preventing them from coalescing into forms of domination. The care of the self, Foucault argues, is an ethical sphere in which an individual can engage in practices of freedom.<sup>15</sup>

be the physiological needs rather than any others. A person who is lacking food, safety, love, and esteem would most probably hunger for food more strongly than for anything else" (quoted from Barnes 2007).

- 15 In his book *On Alternative Modernities*, Dilip P. Gaonkar presents an intriguing discussion of Foucault's thoughts on asceticism and modernity: "Foucault argues that modernity entails both a form of relationship to the present and to oneself. This gives the task of discovering 'the eternal and the immovable' in the midst of temporal flux a new inflection: 'The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; but it is to take oneself as the object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire in the vocabulary of his day, calls dandysme.' There is a striking similarity between the Greek view of the care of the self as summed up in the concept of ethos and 'the asceticism of the

This requires an individual to gain mastery over his or her appetites and desires and thus avoid succumbing to the vagaries of popular opinion. This concept of turning the body into “an object of knowledge and field of action” is vital to my understanding of the link between hunger and the drive toward individuality and personal freedom evinced by the protagonists in the selected texts, as I also discuss the tension between the artist or individual’s perception of his or her body and the way it is viewed and perceived by others. The freedom from social or public pressure, or that freedom attained by the ascetic through embracing hardship and poverty and withdrawing from the mainstream, insofar as he or she “does what the crowd does, but in a different way” (Foucault 1986, 60), can be juxtaposed with the negative freedom of the outcast or exile. Each of my four texts shows how a body transformed by hunger or other ordeals can be ignored, reviled, and even attacked by those whose implied sense of “normalcy” does not allow for deviations from an accepted standard. For instance, beneath the familial conflict in Kafka’s depiction of Gregor Samsa after his miraculous transformation or Richard Wright’s struggle to break free from his impoverished life in the Jim Crow South is the sense of a deep-seated need for community and common feeling.

References made to external forces that act upon, influence, and shape both the mind and the body of the literary figures discussed are also drawn from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, where Foucault addresses the relationship between the individual body and society, as well as the question of how changing perceptions of the body have influenced cultural, social, and political discourses. Foucault argues that it is not only through an act of forceful coercion that the individual is turned into a subject, but rather through a more subtle relationship in which the subject is to some degree complicit:

But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, or force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. The political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated, and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body. (Foucault 1979, 25f.)

Foucault argues that the body is subject to numerous forces, whether biological, social, anthropological, or historical, but that there is also a political relation of the

dandy who makes his body, his behavior, his feelings and passions, his very existence, a work of art.’ This is a crucial move because it undercuts the conservative critique of cultural modernity as a temperament that by privileging individual self-realization and by promoting adversary culture unleashes hedonistic impulses irreconcilable with the requirements of a well-ordered society. By placing practices of freedom and the regimen of asceticism in the foreground, Foucault gives the quest for and of the self an ethical dimension” (Gaonkar 2001, 12).

body that is bound up with its economic function. The subjection of the individual is not only brought about by the overt implementation of physical violence, but rather it is calculated and organized and remains subtle in its effects. Foucault maintains that there “may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them” (Foucault 1979, 26). This knowledge or “technology” of the body is rarely implemented as a single coherent discourse, but rather it is diffuse and utilizes a disparate range of tools and methods. While the overall result is coherent, it operates on a number of different levels which Foucault terms “the micro-physics of power” (1979, 26). Power and domination are therefore “conceived not as a property, but as a strategy”, and the “effects of domination are attributed not to ‘appropriation’, but to dispositions, manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings” (1979, 26). Foucault also maintains that those who comply, either willingly or passively, with their own subjugation may extend this strategy: power “is transmitted by them and through them” (1979, 27) as it exerts pressure just as the subjects struggle against and resist the grip it maintains upon them.

I draw upon Foucault’s ideas on power and subjugation in two chapters in particular. In my discussion of Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung*, I point out that Gregor Samsa is threatened with violence and is physically injured at the hands of his father. Rather than reading this conflict as autobiographical on the part of Kafka, as many other critics have done, I argue that the conflict between Gregor and his father can be viewed in terms of the wider discourse of power, violence, and the body of the protagonist that occurs in a number of Kafka’s stories. For instance, in “Das Urteil”, where the protagonist Georg Bendemann drowns himself at the command of his father, or “In der Strafkolonie”, when prisoners are executed by a device that resembles a diabolical typewriter, Kafka examines the taxonomy of punishment, where excessive violence is often the outcome of an arbitrary whim or highly ambiguous judicial process. The body is the space where relationships of power and subjugation between father and son, judge and accused, or the condemned and the executioner are played out.

The other chapter where I draw upon Foucault’s ideas on power and subjugation is in my reading of “Bartleby”, when I observe how Foucault’s concept of power relations is apparent in the lawyer’s almost obsessive concern with the eating habits of his scriveners and argue that the authority exerted by the lawyer depends in part on the causal relationship between food and work. As Melville’s characters interact with the material reality of the world in which they exist, the actions and behaviour of the scriveners are largely determined by their social and economic relationships. What is also notable is the manner in which the lawyer observes and monitors the idiosyncrasies of his employees and how the knowledge that he gains enables him to assert control over them. I argue that this control is exercised for the purpose of smoothing over differences in character and opinion, thus enabling him to tolerate insubordination and thereby better maintain his position. There is also an ideological dimension to this control, as the lawyer embodies many of the

values of the capitalist society of which he is, to a certain degree, a representative. Eating and food keep the engine of his Wall Street office running, and when hunger and denial are introduced into the story through the figure of Bartleby, they bring with them passivity, motionlessness, and eventually death. Bartleby's lack of appetite and refusal to participate in the other scriveners' habits of work, speech, and consumption, present a stark alternative to the lawyer's vision of an agreeable life maintained by constant production.

In more general terms, modern societies have also experienced a growing level of surveillance of food consumption that further echoes Foucault's ideas. Not only has there been an increase in control over the means of food production and distribution, but there has also been more attention paid to the content of food as well as the calories consumed by each class or social group. This has become an intrinsic aspect of the eating habits of modern societies, and the changing attitudes to food production and consumption have been one of the major influences in the transition from agrarian to urban industrial societies.<sup>16</sup> The increased attention paid to food content has also influenced perceptions of the body, as the historian Anson Rabinbach, for instance, shows in *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*. Rabinbach discusses the body in terms of a "human motor" (Rabinbach 1990, 1), a theory that he extends not just to individuals but to an entire nation, arguing that the discovery of the caloric content of food enabled a nation's output to be calculated in terms of food consumption (see also Diezemann 2006, 12). While this development of nutritional science has been widely embraced and has led to a marked improvement in the health of millions of people worldwide, the attitude of certain writers and artists to the perceived reduction of a human being to a unit of consumption or production has been more ambivalent. The transition from the system of patronage to that of art being sold as a commodity on the marketplace led to a readjustment of certain values and perceptions regarding an author's position in society, as writers were required to produce something new and appetizing in order to appease a fickle, voracious readership. The following discussion will thus examine the role of the marketplace in shaping some of these ideas and attitudes to modern authorship, as well as its effect on those who are torn between a desire to create original, autonomous works of art and the need to avoid starvation while doing so.

16 For instance, in *Plenty and Want*, the sociologist John Burnett relates the transformation of dietary habits in England from 1815 up until the 1960s. In one particular passage he cites a study of the British wartime economy dating from 1916, titled *Feeding the Munition Worker*: "There is now an overpowering body of evidence and experience which proves that productive output in regard to quality, output, and speed is largely dependent upon the physical efficiency and health of the worker. In its turn, such fitness is dependent upon nutrition, the purpose of which is to secure the proper development, growth, and energy of the human body. The human body calls for a constant supply of food, first for growth, for the building up of its tissues and for repair, and secondly, as fuel for the production of heat and energy. Both requirements are indispensable and absolutely necessary. You cannot get health, work, and a reasonable output apart from good nourishing food; with increase in work there must be proportionate increase in quantity and in nutritive value of the food eaten" (quoted from Burnett 1966, 277).

## II.ii The writer under conditions of modernity

In the present section I examine two authors whose ideas have informed my study of hunger and the position of the artist under conditions of modernity; I will address the ideas put forward by Raymond Williams with regard to his discussion of the Romantic author in *Culture and Society 1780–1950*, and I will subsequently consider Jochen Schulte-Sasse's essay "The Prestige of the Artist under Conditions of Modernity" and go on to discuss the possibility of hunger and art providing a redemptive space from the alienating effects of the highly organized and regulated aspects of modern life.

Williams examines the position of the author within the context of the social, political, and economic upheavals that had caused profound changes in the position of the artist and his or her place in society in the 19th century. The 19th century was a period of great transformation and upheaval, and the changes that were taking place were manifold, though Williams points out a number of significant developments that affected the artist in particular. Williams for instance describes the conflict between artists and the institutionalizing forces of society in the shape of the literary marketplace, and he examines the negative attitudes of artists toward the wider public, insofar as they objected to the perceived power of the un-intellectual over the intellectual, deeming those less cultivated as being incapable of judging their work: "At a time when the artist is being described as just one more producer of a commodity for the market, he is describing himself as a specially endowed person, the guiding light of common life" (Williams 1963, 53). Certain artists thus positioned themselves as the purveyors of a special kind of knowledge originating from genius or an "exalted special ability" (1963, 60). Williams acknowledges that it is tempting to view the hostile attitude of the artist to the wider public as a form of compensation, insofar as the more mundane the occupation of the artist became, the more vigorously he or she needed to assert a privileged position as the purveyor of "imaginative truth" (1963, 57). He argues that this simplifies matters, however, as what these authors were addressing was the perceived threat to certain human values resulting from the increasingly rapid movement of society toward industrialization. Hence the conflict between the artist and the marketplace goes beyond a sense of professional pride or existential anxiety; rather, it is an effort to protect and preserve certain ideals and values that were being undermined by an increasingly materialistic way of life. This development was viewed as the main reason for the increasing isolation of the artist, who was forced to take up the role of exile or outsider in order to preserve the purity of his or her artistic ideals and, as a consequence, those of mankind in general:

The changes we receive as record were experienced in these years, on the senses: hunger, suffering, conflict, dislocation, hope, energy, vision, dedication. The pattern of change was not background, as we may now be inclined to study it; it was, rather, the general mould from which experience was cast. (Williams 1963, 49)



In order to better demonstrate the link between Williams' theories and the depictions of hunger and authorship in the modern industrial era, I will briefly discuss one of the earliest works of American realist fiction, namely Rebecca Harding Davis' short story "Life in the Iron Mills", which was published in 1861. Davis' description of the harsh conditions of the working poor illustrates the broader issues that affect society in general, regardless of the class to which people belong. The theme of hunger recurs in a variety of ways during the story, as there is hunger that results from poverty and deprivation, but also spiritual hunger for love and the desire for a better way of life. The simple classification of rich and poor into those who are "fed" and those who are "hungry" is complicated by the presence of an artistic outcast, the ironworker Wolf, who intuitively grasps that the very nature of artistic creation denotes a higher state of being, an intellectual transcendence of the narrow physical limits placed upon his impoverished existence. Where the concepts of art, class, and hunger collide is in the sculpture Wolf makes out of *korl*, the waste substance left over from the production of pig iron. The aesthetic beauty of the *korl* statue lends it worth beyond the apparent worthlessness of its material, and the sculpted figure is clearly meant to represent the world out of which it emerges: "A working-woman—the very type of her class" (Davis 2012). The very substance of Wolf's art is the by-product of drudgery and hard labour, and the spiritual suffering and striving that the figure expresses is summed up by the line: "She be hungry" (Davis 2012). Wolf, on the other hand, is ostracized from his own class on account of his unusual habits and artistic temperament and is a solitary and disillusioned individual to whom his gifts are a burden and torment. His one means of social elevation, money, later proves to be his downfall.

Melville's depiction of hunger and writing in "Bartleby", on the other hand, provides an intriguing parallel to Davis' short story and to Williams' argument. The reader is first introduced to the narrator, a lawyer who is a member of the dominant social class and upholds the status quo. Though the lawyer is faced with Bartleby's subversion of his authority and point-blank refusal to conform or obey, the story does not adhere to any notion of an artistic rebel defying an oppressive authority or seeking to change his position in a society differentiated in terms of wealth and class. Bartleby is not an artist in the Romantic sense, as he does not conform to the image of a "specially endowed person" who through genius or inspiration is able to transcend the monotony of everyday life. Bartleby does not outwardly display the energy, imagination, or creativity with which the figure of the artist has come to be associated; neither does he display any obvious desire or impulse for wealth or fame. He does not even write or produce anything of cultural value, and when he does write he does so mechanically, or, in other words, in precisely the opposite manner to the imaginative or creative artist described by Williams. Bartleby displays no hunger in the "spiritual" or "psychological" sense, yet he does starve, for no apparent reason. I argue that hunger is bound up with his withdrawal into silence and passivity, which can be read as a retreat into a private, inner world of thought and feeling. Although this is an assumption on my part,



Bartleby's reiteration that he "prefers not" to eat can be read as a way of resisting outside pressure in its most basic, fundamental form, that of the level of the body. He dies of starvation, paradoxically, as he does not hunger for worldly things. It is his lack of desire that enables him to subvert and even counteract the materialistic system of values against which he is judged and which had proved detrimental to the artist in Davis' story. Hence Bartleby remains an anomaly, a paradoxical figure that resists classification as the product of the experience of an age.

The paradoxical position of the artist is also the subject of Jochen Schulte-Sasse's essay "The Prestige of the Artist under Conditions of Modernity", in which Schulte-Sasse explores the idea of the prestige of the artist being drawn from a privileged space outside of modern daily life. What is relevant here is the notion of art reflecting a desire for an autonomous cultural space, "a privileged space of cultural activities that is able to suspend the negative effects of the functional differentiation of society" (Schulte-Sasse 1989, 87). This desire has, according to Schulte-Sasse, been observable in the attitudes to cultural practices since the 18th century. The main paradox perceived by Schulte-Sasse in his discussion of the ideas of Rousseau, Moritz, and Schiller relates to the effects of modern civilization on humanity, and the disruption or alienation it causes: "The paradox [...] is a necessary inherent feature of this search since the longed for space has to be located both within the modernity that generates it and outside the modernity because the object of desire is the other of modernity" (Schulte-Sasse 1989, 90).

Schulte-Sasse points out that a reconciliation of this paradox is only possible as a "discursive or imaginary event" (1989, 90), or as an attempt to locate and define the "other" of modernity. He is referring here to that idealized state of existence in which an individual can take refuge from the constant habit of worry for the future insofar as the "rationalization of society has a fundamental effect (sic!) on man's relation to time" (1989, 86). The most common areas where modern mankind seeks such a refuge are "nature, the savage, and art" (1989, 86). The problem with this idea is, as Schulte-Sasse points out, that it must take modern man and modernity as its starting point, and so must acknowledge the language and terminology of modernism as part of a civilized discourse on these subjects.

What motivates my own examination of these ideas is the question whether hunger can provide, to borrow Schulte-Sasse's terminology, the kind of "decentring" experience which may lead to the suspension of the negative effects of external time and the dependence on other people that results from the functional differentiation of modern society. Hence in my reading of the four texts in question, I also explore the idea of hunger as a decentring experience shown by certain sensations and states of mind into which the starving protagonists descend. These states can result in an altered perception of time and reality and an increasing withdrawal into solitude and isolation, or they can coincide with a need or desire to produce art. One of the problems identified by Schulte-Sasse is that if art provides such a redemptive space, it also affirms society's structures and systems insofar as its role or function turns out to be compensatory. Yet this begs the question

as to what precisely it is compensating for. If it is the loss of the bond between human beings and nature, then this would suggest that the alienation modern mankind suffers from is the price that is to be paid for human progress. Yet it can also be argued that this progress is to a large extent driven by the ongoing battle against biological hunger, along with the need to create lasting cultural achievements. It could be argued that if hunger is a natural human experience that can affect an individual to the extent that it alters perceptions of time and reality, then it might also potentially offer a kind of “redemptive space” similar to that provided by great works of art. This seems unlikely, however, as hunger is uncomfortable and intrusive, and the more relevant question is not whether hunger can be used as a substitute for the kind of decentring experiences provided by an enjoyment of nature or works of art, but rather how it relates to the creation, rather than just the consumption, of art and literature. If self-starvation were to become bound up with the creative process, then it might possibly offer a refuge from the alienation described by Schulte-Sasse. When taken as a theme or concept, however, it extends far beyond the boundaries of a single human life or historical moment, and it thus only becomes relevant to the artist under conditions of modernity as a briefly disruptive influence, providing a decentring experience rooted in the reality of the body that is not purely imaginary or figurative as Schulte-Sasse maintains. As a physical sensation hunger can thus be perceived as modern only insofar as it relates to the body of a given individual at a specific point in time.

If one accepts that self-starvation can momentarily provide a decentring experience and thus a kind of refuge for the artist, then the opposite can also be argued, that is, that hunger is what drives an individual to work and devise a means of ending his or her hunger and preventing hunger in the future. It can be a means of escape into contemplation and creativity for those who feel alienated from modern society, while also being viewed as one of the main causes of the drive toward an ever-increasing organization and industrialization. It thus encompasses two conflicting sides of modern life: the desire for comfort, security, and physical gratification versus the unshakeable sense of an absence or emptiness at the heart of these civilized pursuits and the need of certain individuals to immerse themselves in an art that explores suffering, self-destructiveness, and death. What the following chapters will therefore examine is not so much a hunger *for* art, but rather hunger *as* art, which Paul Auster described in *The Art of Hunger* as

first of all an art that is indistinguishable from the life of the artist who makes it. That is not to say an art of autobiographical excess, but rather, an art that is the direct expression of its effort to express itself. In other words, an art of hunger: an art of need, of necessity, of desire. Certainty yields to doubt, form gives way to process. There can be no arbitrary imposition of order, and yet, more than ever, there is the obligation to achieve clarity. It is an art that begins with the knowledge that there are no right answers. For that reason, it becomes essential to ask the right questions. (Auster 1992, 18)



# Part 1

**Herman Melville and Franz Kafka**



## 1. “I would prefer not to”: Absence and Appetite in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

Hunger is a prominent and baffling theme in Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street”. Despite the surge in interest in Melville’s writing following the “Melville Renaissance” of the 1920s, the relevance of hunger has received only limited critical attention, and hunger remains a peripheral topic among the exhaustive amount of material that has been published in the past.<sup>17</sup> This comparative lack of interest is surprising given that allusions to food and the appetite abound throughout Melville’s work: it is perhaps more than a coincidence that “Bartleby” and “Cock-A-Doodle-Do!”, both published in 1853, culminate in death by starvation, and much has been made of the delight that Melville took in depicting a male society preoccupied with feasting, as shown in “A Paradise of Bachelors”, or in the dark fear of vulturism in the Cook’s sermon on the “voraciousness” of the sharks in *Moby-Dick*. The frugality of Melville’s lifestyle at the time of composing “Bartleby” was well known, and the author’s straitened circumstances have been linked in the past with the dialectic of feasting and fasting that recurs throughout his writing. In his critical biography *Herman Melville*, Newton Arvin even went as far as to state that in his imagination “Melville allowed himself to die of sheer hunger like Bartleby” (Arvin 1950, 211), though it is the textual and symbolic significance of hunger, rather than its biographical origins, that will form the main subject of the current discussion.

The aim of this chapter is to show that hunger is in fact a vital theme in the narrative, and that it can offer a fresh perspective on one of the central issues scholars have come to associate with the text, namely the notion of authorship. The significance of authorship is clearly expressed in the story’s title as well as during its opening lines, where the lawyer-narrator reveals his fascination with the “interesting and singular set of men” (B, 3) that work as law-copyists or scriveners in his Wall Street office. The term “scrivener” is a slight alteration of the more familiar “scribe”, though both mainly refer to an individual who earns his living by his ability to read and write. While the scope of the term lends itself conveniently to the interpretation of the story as an allegory of authorship, there is more at stake here than the discussion of self-reflexive modes of representation. My reading of “Bartleby” as a modern text is closely bound up with antebellum

17 The posthumous publication of *Billy Budd* in 1924, along with Raymond Weaver’s 1921 biography *Herman Melville: Mariner and Mystic* and other critical texts, helped to re-ignite interest in Melville’s writing, and since then arguably more critical attention has been devoted to “Bartleby” than to any other of Melville’s short stories. Interest in “Bartleby” is still strong today, with an estimated five thousand publications dedicated to it since the 1960s. Though now somewhat dated, Allen F. Stein’s essay “The Motif of Voracity in ‘Bartleby’” (1975), where he explores the themes of voracity and cannibalism, still remains one of the few to approach the story exclusively in terms of hunger. For an overview of critical texts published between 1920 and 1979, see the extended bibliography in *Bartleby the Inscrutable*, (Inge 1979, 199–234).

America's embrace of capitalism, along with the increasingly materialistic outlook that it fostered (see Benesch 2002, 152).

The present discussion of "Bartleby" will also rest upon two entirely different interpretations of hunger, which roughly correspond to two distinct parts, or "movements", of the narrative. The first reading of hunger refers to the physical desire for food and the appetite presented during the opening passages, while the second draws upon the implications of Bartleby's appearance and his fast, which is expressed in terms of absence or a lack. Melville's representations of hunger and appetite in the narrative draw upon the causal relationship between the body and its surroundings, as the scriveners are forced to acknowledge the world of flesh and blood which they inhabit, where they are obliged "to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (Foucault 1979, 25) in accordance with the social conventions that enable them to secure their livelihoods.

The second reading of hunger in the narrative presents an alternative to the idea that all actions occur as a result of the body's needs. In a society ostensibly devoted to the pursuit of material wealth, Bartleby's mild-mannered refusals, contemplative silences, and unproductive "dead-wall reveries", culminating in his final act of self-starvation, can be read as expressions of the absurdity of material concerns in the face of death. Bartleby's asceticism and nihilism both fascinate and appal in equal measure, and it is unsurprising that critics from the 1950s onwards have attempted to modernize Melville's story by comparing it to the writings of Kafka.<sup>18</sup> The notion that "Bartleby" is a proto-modernist text that anticipated contemporary ideas and attitudes to life is validated by the fact that it has continued to grow in influence since the 20th century, and is still seen as a pertinent critique of Wall Street capitalism to this day.

### 1.1 "Dollars damn me..."

There has also been a strong tendency to refer back to Melville's life and career as a source of explanation for the many riddles posed by the text, and the comparisons that have been drawn between Melville and Bartleby suggest that the scrivener's poverty and hunger somehow reflect Melville's own situation during his miserable year in 1853. Leo Marx argued in "Melville's Parable of the Walls" that "there are excellent reasons for reading 'Bartleby' as a parable having to do with Melville's own fate as a writer" (Marx 1953, 73), though it is difficult to accept such a statement at face value given that Melville was an outspoken critic and social commentator, while Bartleby's withdrawal into silence and contemplation makes him appear wholly disengaged from those around him. Marx saw in Bartleby's

18 See for instance Maurice Friedman's discussion of Melville and Kafka in *Problematic Rebel: Melville, Kafka, Dostoevsky, Camus* (1970), where he expounds on the often difficult, paradoxical, unsystematic presentation of modern man in this selected group of authors.

withdrawal a parallel with Melville's shift in focus from writing South Sea travelogues such as *Typee* and other popular fiction to composing imaginative though commercially unsuccessful works such as *Moby-Dick* and *Pierre*. It is precisely this notion that Bartleby symbolizes a certain kind of writer, "one that forsakes conventional modes because of an irresistible preoccupation with the most baffling philosophical questions" (Marx 1953, 85), that suggests that Melville was addressing his own shift in artistic perspective, one that he did not view altogether favourably.

Michael T. Gilmore has also taken the view that Melville was deeply affected by the social and economic changes that had transformed America since the early 19th century and that had come to alter the balance in the relationship between certain Romantic writers and their audience, along with the way they felt contemporary society valued their art. Melville had conveyed his thoughts on the difficulties he faced in his famous "Dollars damn me..." letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne, written in 1851, where he relates his desire to work in peace on the imaginative though unprofitable books he felt compelled to write and bemoans the fact that he depended on the sale of his works for his livelihood:

I am so pulled hither and thither by circumstances. The calm, the coolness, the silent grass-growing mood in which a man *ought* always to compose—that, I fear, can seldom be mine. Dollars damn me; and the malicious Devil is forever grinning in upon me, holding the door ajar. My dear Sir, a presentiment is on me—I shall at last be worn out and perish, like an old nutmeg-grater, grated to pieces by the constant attrition of the wood, that is, the nutmeg. What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches. (Melville [1851], quoted in Lathrop 1997)

The views Melville expressed in that letter echoed the general hostility of other major writers such as Hawthorne, Thoreau, and Emerson toward the free-market mentality that had turned literature into a lucrative business. The new movement in fiction, they argued, was toward pleasing a reading public that desired sentiment and diversion, one that had neither the desire nor the capacity to understand "real" artistic expression.

As Gilmore points out, Melville's reaction to the wider reading public was largely hostile and was bound up with his ambivalent attitudes to the increasing commercialization of American literature. Gilmore cites Henry Nash Smith, who maintains that "Hawthorne and Melville repudiated the ideology of popular culture and deliberately affronted the expectations of their readers" (Gilmore 1985, 6). Melville believed that there was a crucial division between the enlightened people, who were capable of appreciating works of artistic genius, and the vulgar masses whose taste was governed by the market. The divide between the elite literary world inhabited by "the aristocracy of the brain" (Melville 1851), such as Hawthorne, Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville himself, and those writing for the marketplace could be portrayed in tangible figures. For example, Hawthorne's



*Scarlet Letter*, one of the most popular successes of any of the Romantics, sold in the entire year following its publication only a fraction of the 40,000 copies that Susan B. Warner's *Wide, Wide World* sold in less time that same year.

Gilmore suggests that those authors who railed against this growing influence of the marketplace had in fact reproduced in their work the very conditions against which they protested, as their disillusionment prompted them to adopt "textual strategies of difficulty and concealment, causing them to reconstruct in their relations to their audience the alienation they criticised in modern society" (Gilmore 1985, 13). While the issue of whether Melville's composition of "Bartleby" can be viewed as a by-product of the Romantic hostility toward early American capitalism remains debatable, the narrative strategies that Melville actively employs, which address the position of the writer *vis à vis* the changes taking place, form a more tangible subject of consideration.

I find it more advantageous, however, to steer away from following other attempts to read "Bartleby" in Marxist or generally anti-capitalist terms, given that such readings have become particularly fashionable given the current climate of anger and resentment directed against the financial institutions on Wall Street.<sup>19</sup> Though the link between hunger and capitalism plays a part in my discussion, what makes the relatively recent shift in perception of Melville's short story from a near-obsolete work of 19th-century Romanticism to a modern *tour de force* at all plausible is not its expediency as a source of social and political critique, but rather the way in which the irreconcilable clash of social and artistic ideas is played out in the unmistakably modern environs of its Wall Street setting.<sup>20</sup>

Bartleby's arrival on the scene marks a clear break in the narrative, and the focus will therefore shift from the lawyer's descriptions of the minutiae of his white-collar workplace to his account of Bartleby's transition from industrious employee to ascetic rebel. This development provides the story with its only real source of tension, and the controlled antagonism between the lawyer and Bartleby only ends after the latter's death from starvation. In spite of Bartleby's vulnerability and apparent helplessness, his passive, irrational defiance confounds the rational

19 Melville's short story has become something of a *cause célèbre* with the Occupy Wall Street movement, as protesters held up signs reading "I would prefer not to" during rallies in Zuccotti Park. As Jonathan D. Greenberg remarks in his article for *The Atlantic* (30 April 2012), "Bartleby was the first laid-off worker to occupy Wall Street."

20 Jonathan Poore, for instance, examines past attempts to conflate Melville's "Bartleby" and the ideas put forward by Thoreau in "Civil Disobedience" with a general anti-establishment sentiment, though Poore makes an important distinction: "What these (otherwise very different) critical interpretations have in common is that they ultimately regard Bartleby and Thoreau as resisting a version of the same thing, described variously as 'society,' 'social institutions' or 'the social system.' In my view, however, these terms collapse an important distinction between two kinds of social 'institution'—the market and the state—that is fundamental to understanding the nature of Bartleby's resistance and its difference from Thoreau's" (Poore 2013). The present discussion will focus on Melville's opposition to the market along with Bartleby's resistance to the lawyer's role as an employer in a Wall Street office, where the authority he exerts effectively upholds and perpetuates an economic, rather than a political, system.

stance adopted by the lawyer, and I argue that *Bartleby's* embrace of hunger and the trance-like states it induces, coupled with his unrelenting obstinacy, allows him some measure of triumph over a materialistic society that is either unable or unwilling to find a practical use for him.

## 1.2 The Wall Street lawyer

The kind of society Melville sets out to describe is revealed in his choice of subtitle, and some critics have argued that the story's Wall Street setting offers an unobstructed view into 19th-century America's embrace of capitalism and the kind of materialistic outlook it fostered. In his essay "The Motif of Voracity in 'Bartleby'", Allen F. Stein builds upon the notion that Melville's depiction of Wall Street functions as a microcosm of American society, where the narrator's preoccupation with matters of business, coupled with the frequent allusions to food and the appetite, strengthens the impression that he and those around him are mainly driven by greed. *Bartleby's* mildness and detachment from material concerns not only confound the narrator's as well as the readers' expectations, but also suggest that he rejects the paradigm that human life is governed by constant desire and fulfilment. To follow Stein's argument to its logical conclusion, *Bartleby's* death in prison from self-starvation becomes less an act of self-denial than a form of hunger strike against Wall Street's oppressive capitalist system. What complicates this interpretation is that any act of protest is designed to generate some kind of discourse or debate, or at least provide a statement directed at an object of discontent. There is no such statement divulged during *Bartleby's* fast, however, as *Bartleby* expresses himself almost entirely in the negative, and the moral and quasi-religious connotations of fasting make the circumstances of his death all the more ambiguous. What adds further to the ambiguity is the fact that the only witness is the Wall Street lawyer, and the reader must carefully sift through his speculative ramblings in order to distinguish fact from the emotions and prejudices that inevitably distort his narration of events.

The lawyer is a central figure in the narrative not only because it is through his eyes and mind that events are perceived, but also for the practical reason that his demand for labour draws and holds the small community of scribes together. On a structural level, the narrator's opening remarks can be divided into three distinct sequences: the first is his self-introduction and a brief account of his profession, the second is a description of his Wall Street office and its surroundings, while the third and by far the longest section relates to the other two scribes and the errand-boy who make up its regular inhabitants. While these three passages set the scene for the arrival of *Bartleby*, it is the third sequence that introduces the theme of hunger and appetite into the narrative.

Before examining the lawyer's narrative in detail, it may be worthwhile to examine briefly the kind of man who is telling the story, and what might motivate his

interest in its main protagonist. Melville's anonymous narrator is a highly divisive figure, about whom much has been written, and at whom many critical remarks have been aimed. As Dan McCall points out, it is inviting to approach him as a surrogate for the reader, a figure we can identify with in our attempts to understand Bartleby (McCall 1989, 100). Instead of a conventional autobiography, the narrator offers an account of his character and occupation. He is of middling age and social status, and his ambition in life only seems to extend as far as his pride in earning praise from social superiors like John Jacob Astor and as his displeasure at losing the financial advantages he once held as "Master of Chancery". As his attention to the detail and layout of his offices show, he finds solace in structure and order, though he dwells on the rather *triste* aspect of his urban surroundings, which he remarks as being "deficient in what landscape painters refer to as 'life'" (B, 6). He appears to be good-natured and inclined to be generous, though his generosity seems to be spurred more by guilt than philanthropy, and we later learn that the limits of his charity do not extend beyond his concern over appearances and his reputation, as exemplified by his abandonment of Bartleby to arrest and imprisonment in the Tombs. In spite of his various faults, however, the narrator resists being cast as the villain of the piece. His initial reaction to Bartleby's refusal to work is measured and pragmatic, and one cannot hold the qualities that society might otherwise deem virtuous against him. What is also perplexing about the lawyer is the fact that he is the only character who remains nameless throughout, and while this does not diminish the impression that Melville is portraying a certain social type, he comes across as being more than simply a representative of the American middle class.<sup>21</sup> The narrator's significance cannot be gleaned only by what he represents but rather by what he says and does, and it seems more constructive to view the narrator as a witness who fulfils the main authorial role in the story rather than simply as the embodiment of a particular class or creed. As the narrative progresses, however, the lawyer appears as much of a prisoner of his own complacency and limited worldview as Bartleby later becomes a physical inhabitant of the Tombs. The narrator's conservatism, coupled with his attention to the gloomy architecture of his offices, suggests that there are barriers less tangible, though equally as restrictive, than the lifeless walls that demarcate the narrow boundaries of Wall Street.

The lengthy sequence that follows is made up of anecdotes and descriptions of the scriveners Turkey and Nippers, along with the office boy Ginger Nut. While the lawyer's account had hitherto been related in a businesslike manner, he abruptly changes tone, and his steady monologue begins to exhibit more flair and inventiveness. The stylistic flourishes add flavour to what had up to then been rather dry

21 The lawyer's scrupulous awareness of prestige and class distinction, his devotion to matters of business, and his high regard for rational self-interest were apparently typical of the outlook of the New York bourgeoisie during the 19th century. For an in-depth account of the subject, see Sven Beckert's "The Making of New York City's Bourgeoisie, 1850–1886" (1996).

and conventional fare; the descriptions of the scriveners, for example, introduce a comic and slightly grotesque element into the story. The first aberration comes with the names themselves, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut:

the like of which are not usually found in the Directory. In truth, they were nicknames, mutually conferred upon each other by my three clerks, and were deemed expressive of their respective persons or characters. (*B*, 6)

It seems a strange coincidence that all of these names refer to food (McCall suggests that “Nippers” most likely refers to lobster claws), though precisely how these culinary nicknames reflect the personalities of these individuals is not entirely clear. What is clear, however, is that each character in his own way displays a remarkable appetite, and it is through the language of food and the appetite that the reader gains a sense of the working relationships upon which the daily routine of the office depends.

Being the first on the list, Turkey is aptly the most senior and the most obstreperous of the lawyer’s employees. We learn that he has a weakness for “red ink”, and that his penchant for drink also causes a marked decline in his productivity after twelve o’clock midday, and brings a “strange, inflamed, flurried, flighty recklessness” (*B*, 7) to his writing and general behaviour after this hour. His person, manners, and even his clothes, “which were apt to look oily, and smell of eating houses” (*B*, 12), are all testimony to his appetite, and are at times a source of irritation and embarrassment to his employer. In spite of this, “he was the blandest and most reverential of men in the morning” (*B*, 8) and, like Nippers, his services at a certain time of day are deemed valuable enough for his eccentricities to be overlooked. The reader learns that the perpetual rise and decline in the scriveners’ productivity is part of the daily routine on which the operation of the office depends.

Nippers, on the other hand, is presented in contrast to his fellow scrivener: he is a well-dressed, “piratical looking” young man, albeit of a “brandy-like” disposition (*B*, 13). His complexion is sallow where Turkey’s is florid, and while Turkey is docile in the morning, Nippers is loud and ill tempered. According to the narrator, Nippers is

the victim of two evil powers: ambition and indigestion. The ambition was evinced by a certain impatience with the duties of a mere copyist [...]. The indigestion seemed betokened in an occasional nervous testiness and grinning irritability, causing the teeth to audibly grind together over mistakes made in copying. (*B*, 10)

The restlessness brought on by his indigestion is shown by the noisy adjustment of the height of the table where he works and the various modifications he undertakes to relieve the physical discomfort brought on by long hours of writing. The height of the desk can be read as signifying the scrivener’s aspirations, and the fact that it never suited him shows that “Nippers knew not what he wanted. Or, if he wanted anything, it was to be rid of a scriveners table altogether” (*B*, 11).

Ginger Nut is the office boy, whose vocation to study law came as a result of his father's ambition. His main function is as "cake and apple purveyor" (B, 15) to the other two, and while he himself displays none of their unruliness, he is often the source of their eccentricities:

Copying law-papers being proverbially a dry, husky sort of business, my two scriveners were fain to moisten their mouths very often with Spitzenbergs, to be had at the numerous stalls nigh the Custom House and the Post Office. Also, they sent Ginger Nut for that peculiar cake—small, flat, round, and very spicy—after which he had been named by them. Of a cold morning, when business was but dull, Turkey would gobble up scores of these cakes, as if they were mere wafers—indeed, they sell them at a rate of six or eight for a penny—the scrape of his pen blending with the crunching of crisp particles in his mouth. (B, 15)

Despite their comical idiosyncrasies, these characters appear remarkably flat, and this impression is accentuated by the way Turkey and Nippers personify certain humours, with the former displaying a sanguine and the latter a choleric temperament. The importance of the body is further illustrated by the way that the mannerisms and physical characteristics of the two scriveners come to define their work in the office, and by the fact that the narrator pays a great deal of attention to the way their appetites influence their capacity to carry out their assigned tasks. In the passage quoted above, the lawyer describes how Turkey's chewing actually merges with the movement of his pen, and the union of eating and copying is later brought to a climax when Turkey claps his half-eaten biscuit onto a document "for a seal" (B, 16). The close connection between ingestion and writing makes Turkey's munching seem less a force of habit than an integral part of an organic process, reminiscent of the time-worn analogy of reading and writing as the digestion of words and their subsequent excretion as written text.<sup>22</sup> It seems fitting therefore that the scriveners' constitutions should be affected at certain times of the day, since the lapse in their productivity during office hours is caused either by Turkey's afternoon excesses or by Nippers' morning indigestion. The lawyer is quick to point out that the situation is manageable as "their fits relieved each other, like guards. When Nippers' was on, Turkey was off, and *vice-versa*. This was a good natural arrangement, under the circumstances" (B, 14).

There is an element of shrewdness that belies the lawyer's good-natured forbearance when dealing with his scriveners' outbursts, however. The lawyer's preoccupation with workings of the appetite brings to mind Foucault's assertion, cited

22 The notion that language in the form of text can be "digested" also calls to mind Samuel T. Coleridge's famous critique of the Enlightenment and of the mechanical view of the mind as atomistic or as simply the sum of its experience. Coleridge viewed the mind more in organic terms, in that art and poetry do not imitate the externals of nature, but rather its operation (see Raine 1957, 12f.). For a more explicit discussion of the excremental theme in a literary context, see Norman O. Brown's essay on Jonathan Swift in "The Excremental Vision" (see Lodge 1972, 509).

earlier on, that “the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body”. The scriveners’ physical wants are indeed portrayed as being an intrusive, albeit necessary, aspect of the writing process, since they need to be clothed and fed, and they react to the food they eat as well as to the discomfort of sitting for long hours over a dull and repetitive task. The lawyer’s strategy for dealing with any disobedience oscillates between mild severity and sympathetic tolerance, and his acceptance of the human frailties around him also validates his self-image as an easy-going man rather than a ruthless capitalist exploiter. Yet his understanding of the scriveners’ various tastes and foibles allows the “natural arrangement” of the office to remain undisturbed, and this knowledge duly enables him to maximize their productive output while keeping their frequent insubordinations in check.

Furthermore, there is also a discrepancy between the descriptions of the organic workings of the appetite and the lawyer’s intermittent use of industrial imagery. For example, along with references to the mechanical task of copying are frequent allusions to fire and combustion:

In the morning, one might say, [Turkey’s] face was a fine florid hue, but after twelve o’clock meridian it blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals [...]. At such times too, his face flamed with augmented blazonry, as if cannel coal had been heaped on anthracite. (*B*, 7f.)

Along with providing a source of relief and distraction, the consumption of food quite literally fuels the writers’ endeavours, and at such times the office resembles a furnace room in a factory rather than a quiet sanctum devoted to the drawing-up of legal documents. The fact that the productivity of the scriveners depends on the regular ingestion of food and *vice-versa* suggests that their labour and livelihood are governed by market forces, as an increase in work must necessarily coincide with an increase in the level of consumption, and thus food and drink help to grease the wheels of the lawyer’s steady and pleasantly remunerative enterprise. The narrator’s attention to his employees’ efficiency, coupled with his use of quasi-industrial terminology, echoes the modern capitalist preoccupation with accumulation and growth, and his concern masks an underlying fear of cessation—a fear that to stop producing, expanding, and accumulating would mean “failing” and stopping altogether. To approach this idea from another angle, we can see that Melville had himself called upon the image of an assembly line as a means of capturing his surplus of creative energy in the postscript of another letter to Hawthorne, where he writes:

I can’t stop yet. If the world was entirely made up of Magians, I’ll tell you what I should do. I should have a paper mill established at one end of the house, and so have an endless riband of foolscap running in upon my desk; and upon that endless riband I should write a thousand—a million—billion thoughts. (Melville, [1897] quoted in Lathrop 2004)

There is clearly a marked difference between Melville’s image of overproduction culminating in a desire to capture his “billion” thoughts for the purpose of

writing literature and the "dull, wearisome, and lethargic" (B, 18) kind of writing his lawyer-narrator depicts being carried out in his office on Wall Street. Indeed, the scribes' repetitive and potentially endless task of copying law documents is portrayed as the antithesis to the composition of literary genius:

For example, I cannot credit that the mettlesome poet, Byron, would have contentedly sat down with Bartleby to examine a law document of, say five hundred pages, closely written in a crimped hand. (B, 18)

The lawyer's reference to his role as "conveyancer and title-hunter, and drawer-up of recondite documents of all sorts" (B, 16) also serves as an oblique reference to America's growing obsession with property and finance. Although by the mid 19th century America's embrace of industrial capitalism had not yet reached the same level that it had in Britain at that time, the scribes Turkey and Nippers anticipate the legion of "middlebrow" hack writers that would make up the growing workforce demanded by ever-expanding urban marketplaces, and who feature in late 19th-century works such as George Gissing's *New Grub Street*.

Gissing's depiction of the contrasting fortunes of a group of struggling writers illustrates the theory of social Darwinism at work in a literary milieu, as the story culminates in the decline or death of all except the ambitious and adaptable.<sup>23</sup> Jasper Milvain, the novel's anti-hero, states the rule of the literary marketplace from the very beginning, which rests on a writer's knowing what the public wants and exploiting this knowledge to the fullest. In what might easily be read as an open attack on the literary trade of his day, Milvain maintains that for the ambitious and ultimately successful author, writing is simply a matter of finding the right formula in the process of matching supply with demand:

Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your successful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of good begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising. He knows perfectly all the possible sources of income. [...] our Grub Street today [...] is supplied with telegraphic communication, it knows what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world, its inhabitants today are men of business, however seedy. (Gissing 2009, 3f.)

In keeping with Melville's image of the rise and decline in the temperaments of his mismatched scribes, by the end of the 19th century advances in technology, along with the rise of the financial industry centred on Wall Street, marked the

23 The term "social Darwinism" was first used by Joseph Fisher in his article on *The History of Landholding in Ireland* (1877), which had little in common with its later use in capitalist, imperialist, or racial discourses and ideology. As Lewis D. Moore points out: "In *New Grub Street*, Gissing shows that the struggle for existence does not lead to progress, especially in the lives of creative artists, but rather to a leveling process in which the independent artist is defeated and the mediocre triumphs" (Moore 2008, 21).



arrival of a more acquisitive, materialistic age, a development exemplified by the success of a new breed of adaptable and pragmatic literary entrepreneur. Hence both Gissing's and Melville's texts suggest that the transformation of literature into a commodity for the market meant that a writer's success depended on the ability to quickly produce new and appetizing material for a voracious reading public. It seems fitting, therefore, that in "Bartleby" the narrator's choice of image and metaphor should equally reflect a businesslike preoccupation with the workings of the appetite. In the microcosm of the Wall Street office, Melville describes how the scrivener's efficiency and productivity depend on the steady consumption of certain kinds of food, which fuel the seemingly endless production of legal and financial documents that feed the fires of the Wall Street machine.

Along with the appetite for the printed word there is also the concern over the physical limitations of the body acting as a hindrance to the rapid production of text. This idea can be traced to an earlier discourse in modern writing: as Flynn points out, since the 18th century, authors had seen the body as an obstacle to be conquered, and this preoccupation with the temporality of matter and the mortality of the flesh became the subject of writers whose "narrative strategies are designed to frustrate the logical end of their discourse, fictional closure that represents physical death" (Flynn 1990, 151). Hence, both inefficiency and mortality are to be avoided through a careful cultivation of the appetite, as managing hunger is a key element in maintaining the body's maximum productive output. Yet this begs the question as to what would happen when the demands of the body are purposefully ignored and the scrivener should simply refuse to produce any more writing: where there was once energy and growth, there would be only passivity and inaction—enter Bartleby.

### 1.3 The mechanical scrivener

From the moment of Bartleby's arrival, his appearance and mannerisms provide a stark contrast to those of the other scriveners, and the narrator admits that it is this difference, along with the increase in work due to his elevation to "Master of Chancery", that are his main motives for hiring him in the first place:

In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby. [...] After a few words touching his qualifications, I engaged him, glad to have among my corps a man of so singularly sedate an aspect, which I thought might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers. (*B*, 16)

The introduction of the "incurably forlorn" young scrivener to the office does not have the effect that the lawyer intended. Far from being a positive influence, the



new arrival seems decidedly uninterested in the society of his fellow scriveners, and his mild refusals to do anything but write soon becomes a much greater cause of concern than the latters' habitual fits of bad temper. Yet Bartleby is not subversive or rebellious from the outset, as at first it seems that the only remarkable things about his presence are covered by the terms the narrator uses to describe him: the lawyer portrays Bartleby alternately as "pallid" and "motionless", or as working "silently", or later on even as appearing "cadaverous" and "ghostly", thus making him seem to merge with the grey and lifeless aspect of his surroundings. While the terms used by the lawyer vividly evoke the "singular" aspect of his new scrivener, I would argue that these adjectives also denote some form of absence or deficiency. Bartleby's apparent lack of any defining feature creates a stark contrast with the energy and physicality of the other scriveners, and it is therefore unsurprising that his "pallid" countenance appears "ghostly" when placed beside Turkey's fiery complexion, or that his silent exertions should appear machine-like next to Nipper's unruly tinkering with the office furniture. As Bartleby becomes a growing presence in the lawyer's thoughts, the lawyer's obsessive desire to "know" and "understand" becomes driven by anxiety and the fear of the unknown that Bartleby comes to represent. As the lawyer is accustomed to thinking in binary terms, Bartleby comes to embody all the qualities the other scriveners' lack, to the point where this absence appears to be the negation of life itself. Indeed, Bartleby disturbs the lawyer-narrator to the point of distraction, as the latter is no longer able to "read" his character:

Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance. If the individual so resisted be of a not inhumane temper, and the resisting one perfectly harmless in his passivity, then, in the better moods of the former, he will endeavour to charitably construe to his imagination what proves impossible to be solved by his judgement. (*B*, 25)

The lawyer's assessment of Bartleby only rests on his judgement of appearances and actions, however, and the lack of any definitive insight into Bartleby's character is implicitly tied up with his reticence, as the lawyer notes that speaking and eating are two things Bartleby "prefers" not to do:

I now recalled all the quiet mysteries which I had noted in the man. I remembered that he never spoke but to answer; that, though at intervals he had considerable time to himself, yet I had never seen him reading—no, not even a newspaper; that for long periods he would stand looking out, at his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall; I was quite sure he never visited any refectory or eating-house; while his pale face clearly indicated that he never drank beer like Turkey, or tea and coffee even, like other men; that he never went anywhere in particular, that I could learn... (*B*, 35)

Bartleby's "quiet mysteries" can be linked to the more general theme of the loss of language explored in Melville's other works, a notable example being the reticence

and stutter of the condemned hero in his posthumously published short story *Billy Budd*. While Bartleby and Billy Budd suffer under the rigid structures of Wall Street and the British Navy respectively, their actions arguably convey their innocence and individuality more effectively than the words, both spoken and written, used to describe the circumstances surrounding their deaths. Silence and muteness are indicative of Melville's "'visionary' recognition that language is not always very effective at conveying meaning and that gestures and visual images work better" (Benesch 2010). The fact that Bartleby makes no effort to justify his actions in no way diminishes their impact, and the reader is inclined to sympathize with the lawyer's misguided stumbling from one explanation to the next.

In spite of Bartleby being described in a manner that is the antithesis to that of the other scriveners, there is nothing to distinguish the three writers in terms of class or profession. Bartleby must still toil at copying law papers, though it is the way he goes about his task that is truly remarkable. While Turkey and Nippers seem to work in fits and starts, Bartleby starts out as a model of productivity, even surpassing the expectations of his employer:

At first, Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion. He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candle-light. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote silently, palely, mechanically. (B, 18)

This passage offers the only real glimpse of Bartleby writing, as the lawyer soon becomes more concerned with what Bartleby prefers not to do, rather than what he actually does. Unlike Turkey and Nippers, who constantly eat while they work, Bartleby appears to feast on words themselves, as though they alone provide the kind of sustenance he craves. The lawyer's rather cryptic choice of imagery creates a puzzling image of the scene, as it seems unusual to project hunger onto something mechanical or for a machine to exhibit such unrestrained voracity. By way of cross-reference, we can note that Melville's contemporary Henry David Thoreau also employed the image of a machine producing and consuming literature in a passage in *Civil Disobedience and Reading*. Thoreau bemoaned the lack of sophistication of his reading public and its bland contentment with the array of near-identical plots and characters found in the popular novels of the day, which he likened to so many morsels served up as fodder to be consumed by the masses:

There are those who, like cormorants and ostriches, can digest all sorts of this, even after the fullest dinner of meats and vegetables, for they suffer nothing to be wasted. If others are the machines to provide the provender, they are the machines to read it. (Thoreau 1995, 50)

Bartleby's ability to "digest" even the dullest, most uninspiring text seems to echo Thoreau's vision of a "mechanical" reader, and Bartleby shows no interest in any

other form of writing than what is provided by the lawyer. Furthermore, Bartleby's likeness to a machine, coupled with the lawyer's comparing him to the office furniture, echoes the Romantic distrust of the industrial mode of production and of its detrimental and dehumanizing effects on the individual. Bartleby's mechanical labours suggest that it is not just the cultural product that is devoid of spiritual and intellectual value, but the producers themselves (see Williams 1963, 60).

Bartleby's devotion to his work also appears to be the cause of his rapid physical decline, as his copying in a cramped space with poor lighting results in his failing eyesight: "instantly it occurred to me, that his unexampled diligence in copying by his dim window [...] might have temporarily impaired his vision" (B, 41). I would argue that Bartleby's refusal to eat also contributes to his passivity and inertia, as the increasing stillness and lethargy following his initial burst of energy appear to be the symptoms of starvation.<sup>24</sup> Bartleby's retreat into his motionless "dead-wall reveries" could be the result of his highly singular diet of ginger nuts, but Bartleby does nothing to remedy the situation. He either cannot or will not eat in the manner of Turkey and Nippers, and he "prefers" to keep his reasons for fasting to himself. It is only after he becomes surplus to requirements as an efficient unit of labour, however, that his role in the narrative develops in significance.

#### 1.4 Visionary, artist, or madman?

In spite of the lawyer's misgivings concerning his scrivener's unusual conduct and refusal to work, he clearly feels responsible for the stubborn writer he employs, though whether these feelings are derived from empathy or guilt is debatable. Bartleby certainly poses a moral dilemma for the lawyer, who admits that should he succeed in helping the unfortunate scrivener he would acquire a "sweet morsel" for his conscience to be savoured later on (B, 25). It could also be argued that his efforts to help Bartleby are a result of him projecting his own fears of mortality and financial ruin onto the "penniless wight" (B, 27) who haunts his offices, as the lawyer seeks to assuage his own fear of death through his charitable tolerance of Bartleby's eccentricities. Furthermore, he attempts to understand Bartleby in the same way as he cross-examines the cravings and aspirations of his other employees, for instance when during one particularly revealing passage the lawyer observes Bartleby's habits "narrowly" in order to learn something of his character. He notices that Bartleby never leaves the office, and that he tasks Ginger Nut with bringing him biscuits. Based on these observations, the lawyer deduces the following:

He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian, then; but no; he never eats even vegetables,

<sup>24</sup> The physical symptoms of starvation and its effects on the human body are discussed extensively in Keys' *The Biology of Human Starvation* (1950).

he eats nothing but ginger-nuts. My mind then ran on in reveries concerning the probable effects upon the human constitution of living entirely on ginger-nuts. Ginger-nuts are so called, because they contain ginger as one of their peculiar constituents, and the final flavoring one. Now, what was ginger? A hot, spicy thing. Was Bartleby hot and spicy? Not at all. Ginger, then, had no effect upon Bartleby. Probably he preferred it should have none. (*B*, 25)

The lawyer's line of reasoning that Bartleby should take on the properties of ginger on account of his diet of ginger nuts is absurd, though it remains consistent with his earlier habit of equating his employees' temperaments with their appetites. The lawyer has evidently grasped the fact that Bartleby's preference to go hungry is an expression of wilfulness, though he does not realize quite how far Bartleby is prepared to go. Both Marx and Friedman have argued that Bartleby's assertion of his preferences sets him apart from the other scriveners; Marx points out, for instance, that when Turkey and Nippers use the word "prefer" it is merely because they are "unconsciously imitating the manner, the surface vocabulary of the truly independent writer [...]. In their mouths, 'prefer' is actually indistinguishable from 'submission'; only in Bartleby's does it stand for a genuine act of will" (Marx 1979, 100). Yet this independence comes at a price, and, as Friedman argues, Bartleby "retains the responsibility for his will, but it is the will of wilfulness, the will of the man who is sick in his relations to others and to himself" (Friedman 1963, 80). What remains clear in either case, I would argue, is that the lawyer seems unable to grasp that Bartleby's "incurable condition" cannot be remedied with the same brand of coercion he uses with Turkey and Nippers. The lawyer's habitual regard of relations between himself and others as a monetary transaction blinds him to the deeper implications of Bartleby's hunger, which can equally be read as an act of will, as it is bound up with Bartleby's negation of the world around him.

It is clear that Bartleby prefers to remain outside the cycle of eating and writing that goes on in the office, though one of the most puzzling questions is why he chooses to go hungry in the first place, even after the lawyer has made it clear that at the very least he will rescue Bartleby from starvation. Rather than follow Turkey and Nippers in adapting to an environment dominated by consumption or take some comfort in the Grub-man's offer while in the foreboding setting of the Tombs, Bartleby prefers to remain isolated and detached from his surroundings. During the lawyer's visit to the prison, Bartleby declares that a large meal would "disagree" with him on account of his being "unused to dinners" (*B*, 63), a reason so prosaic as to seem almost comical under the circumstances. By the time the lawyer has grasped that his efforts were doomed from the outset, however, it is already too late: "I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach" (*B*, 36).

The dualistic interpretation of Bartleby's behaviour neatly sums up the lawyer's dilemma, as the real issue at stake is not so much the effect of hunger on Bartleby's body, but rather its impact and influence on his mind. Hunger plays a fundamental role in Bartleby's transition from an active employee to a solitary and

contemplative individual, a development that ultimately ends in his social exile and death. Bartleby's mantra, "I prefer not to", is only elicited as a response to any suggestion he should speak and act in a socially acceptable way. It may be tempting to view Bartleby's self-isolation in pathological terms, yet his self-isolation is not a response to any known trauma, nor is it the result of any apparent illness. I would argue instead that Bartleby's refusal to accept the lawyer's offer of food is bound up with his denial of the exchange of labour that forms the basis of the relationship between the lawyer and the other scriveners, of which food and the appetite form a fundamental part. The lawyer's efforts to feed Bartleby appear driven by the guilt he feels over his role in the arrest of his former employee, and the lawyer's pact with the Grub-man is evidently meant as a form of reparation, though Bartleby offers no definite sign as to whether he recognizes the lawyer's desire to be reconciled:

"It was not I that brought you here, Bartleby" said I, keenly pained at his implied suspicion. "And to you, this should not be so vile a place. Nothing reproachful attaches to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass."  
 "I know where I am," he replied, but would say nothing more, and so I left him. (*B*, 62)

The customs and rituals associated with the sharing of food are a means of creating and strengthening social bonds, yet the physical sensation of hunger also serves as a reminder that in our needs and wants we remain solitary individuals. As Ellmann points out, to go without eating is to deny the intrusive other of the physical world in the form of food, in that "eating is the origin of subjectivity. For it is by ingesting the external world that the subject establishes his body as his own" (Ellmann 1993, 30). Thus, if Bartleby's decision to go without food, coupled with his passive contemplation of the walls of the lawyer's office, is part of a process of self-alienation that moves him toward imprisonment and death, then this same process also affords him a degree of autonomy from the crushing routine that governed his life as a Wall Street scrivener. His passivity and asceticism are acts of revolt (whether this revolt is intentional or not), but unlike the rebel who is driven by a destructive desire to rebuild the world in his image, Bartleby's rebellion is directed inwards—he starves to death, under the open sky and watchful eyes of the thieves and murderers who look on from the windows of their cells, men who, like Bartleby, are pariahs in the eyes of society.

Bartleby's public fast in the prison grounds has invited parallels with "Ein Hungerkünstler", though where Kafka's hunger artist starves in a cage for the entertainment of others, Bartleby's fast is not enacted in order to please an audience. Bartleby's plight seems instead to be more similar to that of Gregor Samsa's, who becomes confined to his room after his miraculous transformation into a giant insect. Gregor's life also shrinks to the size of the space he inhabits, while his perception of the world outside his window as a wasteland echoes Bartleby's contemplation of the "dead" walls around him.

The lawyer's choice of the phrase "dead-wall reverie" is significant, though it is unclear what prompts him to describe Bartleby's bouts of contemplation in such negative, nihilistic terms, though Marx suggests that it refers to the "contemplation of the walls that hem in the reflective artist or for that matter every reflective man" (Marx 1979, 86). Marx goes on to suggest that these trance-like states are the contemplation befitting an artistic temperament of the limits imposed on human existence, though any conceivable attempt to depict Bartleby as an artist would be frustrated by the fact that he does nothing but copy legal documents, and eventually stops writing altogether. Clearly Bartleby is not an artist in the conventional sense, and yet I agree with Marx that this lack of productivity does not preclude his thinking or feeling in an artistic manner. For instance, one might question whether the term "dead-wall reverie" really reflects what Bartleby thinks and feels during these moments, or whether the lawyer is in fact offering his own bleak view of the world in place of the scrivener's. The lawyer seems content to dwell on the gloomy and lifeless surface of things, but this does not mean Bartleby's view of the world is just as bereft of life; it has, for instance, been demonstrated in the past how fasting and a restrictive environment have brought on visionary experiences to individuals, and the limited space and bad lighting of a Wall Street office may well serve as a modern equivalent of a prophet's cave.<sup>25</sup> Whether the reader chooses to accept the lawyer's verdict that Bartleby is "a little deranged" (B, 63) or the reader admires him as an artistic rebel willing to go to the furthest lengths in his struggle against the Wall Street establishment, the notion of seeing the world through Bartleby's eyes remains an intriguing one.

As an isolated and contemplative individual, Bartleby also shows a certain similarity to the solitary, idealistic dreamer of Dostoevsky's "White Nights", published only a few years earlier in 1848. Dostoevsky's nameless narrator is portrayed as a man who has ostracized himself from the world and lost himself in thoughts and dreams, as he

desires nothing, because he is superior to all desire, because he has everything, because he is satiated, because he is the artist of his own life, and creates it for himself every hour to suit his latest whim. (Dostoevsky 2003, 72)

I would argue that Bartleby can also be viewed as the "the artist of his own life", even though he produces nothing of material value and the reader is given no masterpiece or memorial on which to fix Bartleby's memory other than the story told by the narrator. The notion that Bartleby's life takes on the quality of a work

25 In the epilogue to *The Doors of Perception: Heaven and Hell*, Aldous Huxley infers that the reason for the comparatively high number of visionaries of the Middle Ages was due to the fact that "the undernourished person tends to be afflicted by anxiety, depression, hypochondria, and feelings of anxiety. He is also liable to see visions; [...] Much of what the earlier visionaries experienced was terrifying. To use the language of Christian theology, the Devil revealed himself in their visions and ecstasies a good deal more than did God. In an age where vitamins were deficient and a belief in Satan universal, this was not surprising" (Huxley 1994, 108).

of art is in keeping with the Romantic principle that a feeling or an idea is of far greater worth than the material form through which it is expressed. This line of thinking is neatly formulated at the end of Hawthorne's short story "The Artist of the Beautiful", in which Hawthorne depicts a struggling artist's pursuit of beauty in spite of the intrusions and barriers imposed upon him by the utilitarian coarseness of more practical men:

When the artist rose high enough to achieve the beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value in his eyes while his spirit possessed itself in the enjoyment of the reality. (Hawthorne 2009)

It appears that in the kind of society like the one envisioned by Melville, an idealistic, artistic temperament has no place in the daily grind of the office environment, while works of art become mere decorative objects like the lawyer's pale bust of Cicero. Dostoevsky, Hawthorne, and Melville thus examine the lives of those who resist the pressure to think or act in a practical way, while also suggesting that should human beings be judged solely in terms of the material value of the products of their labour, then works of art will become even further removed from the incalculable quality of the ideas and impulses from which they emerge.<sup>26</sup>

The embrace of hunger can thus offer an outlet, a means of reaching a higher form of consciousness in the face of the demands of the material world, as the starving individual may perceive the world as transformed into something more beautiful, terrifying, or real. Melville's story suggests that far from deteriorating through hunger, the mind can actually profit from the body's weakened state, as fasting becomes a way of exploring the limits of the body and a means of experiencing the proximity of death. If embracing the gnawing emptiness of hunger implies that one remains pure and untouched by the outside world, then Bartleby achieves a measure of triumph over the materialistic society that condemns him. The very fact that he is ageless, friendless, and to an extent even sexless, means that he is affected by nothing, and remains unmoved and untouched by the lives and appetites of others.

Bartleby's life and death may be conceived of as a form of art, though it is not an art of a physical or material kind, and thus cannot be explained in terms of material value. The need for explanations or a conclusive logic with which to interpret the narrative is held up against Bartleby's impenetrable silences, while hunger becomes a potential means of transcending the barriers that confine him. On finding the scrivener's lifeless body, the narrator's musing that Bartleby now sleeps

26 For a more detailed discussion of this idea, see how Millicent Bell also examines it in *Hawthorne's View of the Artist*, where she points out that: "By means of the Imagination, the artist aspires to knowledge of the pure forms, the Platonic absolutes, which, according to transcendental philosophy, Nature is constantly in the process of approximating [...] It is his Imagination that enables the artist to reach this higher truth—invisible, eternal, nonpractical..." (Bell 1962, 100f.).

with “kings and counsellors” (*B*, 65) is misleading, not because it implies that in suffering and death all humanity is equal, but rather because these words serve as an epitaph for a man who wilfully distanced himself from wealth and social status. Bartleby may be regarded as an artist in the most stoic and idealistic sense: he needed nothing to survive, as he carried his kingdom within him.





## 2. Alienation and the Unknown Nourishment in Franz Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* and "Ein Hungerkünstler"

There have been few authors whose writing has been as strongly associated with hunger and fasting as Franz Kafka. Both in critical and in scholarly texts, as well as in Kafka's own letters, journals, and narratives, hunger is a recurring theme that complicates the already challenging task of reading Kafka's work. Hunger is a motif that threads its way through a number of Kafka's texts, as shown for instance in *Das Urteil*, where Georg Bendemann, in the moment before drowning himself, clutches at the railings of the bridge "wie ein Hungriger die Nahrung" (Kafka 2000, 60), or in *Forschung eines Hundes*, where the canine narrator declares that "das Höchste ist nur der höchsten Leistung erreichbar, wenn es erreichbar ist, und diese höchste Leistung ist bei uns freiwilliges Hungern" (Kafka 2000, 446), an idea that had been rendered allegorically in Kafka's story of the hunger artist. The following chapter will focus on two of Kafka's stories where the link between hunger, art, and the alienation of the individual is arguably the strongest; during my discussion of *Die Verwandlung* and "Ein Hungerkünstler", I will be revisiting a central idea touched on previously, namely the dual interpretation of hunger as both a physical drive and an absence or lack. By means of this distinction, I will examine Gregor Samsa's withdrawal and isolation from the petty bourgeois life of his family in *Die Verwandlung*, along with the more ambiguous relationship between art and the limits of fasting in "Ein Hungerkünstler" and how hunger becomes bound up with both the physical decline and the spiritual withdrawal of Kafka's heroes, culminating in their death from starvation.

Kafka began work on *Die Verwandlung* in 1912 and published the story in the monthly magazine *Die weißen Blätter* in 1915, coming on the back of the success of *Das Urteil* in 1913, which marked a breakthrough for Kafka as an author and built the foundation for the highly productive two years that followed. During that time, Kafka often wrote through the night in a state of nervous tension, as his position as a clerk and trainee lawyer at the Allgemeine Unfallversicherungsanstalt für das Königreich Böhmen meant that he had to find time for his literary pursuits outside of working hours. In 1915, after unsuccessful attempts to complete the novels *Der Verschollene* and *Der Prozeß*, he temporarily broke off writing, and these works, like a number of Kafka's other stories, were left as unfinished fragments. The tension between daily work and nightly composition proved detrimental to both Kafka's literary output and his health, as his fragile constitution proved a constant source of worry and irritation to him, and he wrote in his diary in November 1911 that "Mit einem solchen Körper läßt sich nichts erreichen."<sup>27</sup> One evening in August 1917, Kafka suffered a haemorrhage, and he was later diagnosed

27 The passages from Kafka's diaries quoted in this chapter are taken from the online resource cited under Franz Kafka's *Tagebücher, 1910–1923* (1976). (Instead of page numbers, I will quote the

with tuberculosis. He wrote "Ein Hungerkünstler" over the space of a few days in May 1922, most likely while on convalescent leave at the sanatorium at Spindlermühle. Kafka read the final proofs after his return to Prague, at which point the disease had gained his larynx, making eating and drinking extremely painful. "Ein Hungerkünstler" was first published in the edited volume of the same name in *Die Neue Rundschau* in October 1922, one of the relatively few complete works to appear during his lifetime. Kafka eventually succumbed to his illness two years later, at the age of forty.

Kafka was a self-confessed hypochondriac, who often recorded the minute details of his dietary habits and the effects these had on his constitution in his letters and diaries: "Ich schreibe das ganz bestimmt aus Verzweiflung über meinen Körper und über die Zukunft mit diesem Körper" (Kafka 1976, 1910). Kafka also made frequent references to the link between his hunger and writing, which he regarded as his true calling in life. In another entry in his diary, dated 3 January 1912, he wrote:

Als es in meinem Organismus klar geworden war, daß das Schreiben die ergiebigste Richtung meines Wesens sei, drängte sich alles hin und ließ alle Fähigkeiten leer stehn, die sich auf die Freuden des Geschlechtes, des Essens, des Trinkens, des philosophischen Nachdenkens der Musik zu allererst richteten. Ich magerte nach allen diesen Richtungen ab. Das war notwendig, weil meine Kräfte in ihrer Gesamtheit so gering waren, daß sie nur gesammelt dem Zweck des Schreibens dienen konnten. (Kafka 1976)

The close connection between Kafka's writing and his obsessive concern with food, illness, and the state of his body has already been discussed in considerable detail by Diezemann in *Die Kunst des Hungerns*, in which she explores the link between fasting, authorship, and eating disorders. Diezemann's discussion addresses past studies as well as the relevance of medical discourses on fasting and anorexia for Kafka's writing, and she argues that Kafka had himself suffered from a nervous illness that manifested itself as an eating disorder. Diezemann is, however, aware of the intense fascination shown by the media for Kafka's possible anorexia since the late 20th century. She even cites the boulevard magazine *Bunte's* having retrospectively declared Kafka the most famous anorexic of the 20th century as evidence of the possible arbitrariness of such classifications (Diezemann 2006, 11). Diezemann seeks to support this assertion, however, through her reading of Kafka's diaries and letters, as well as through the analysis of the figure of Gregor Samsa in *Die Verwandlung*. She argues that Gregor Samsa's contemplation of the strange sensations of his insect-body, coupled with the absurd assertion that he is in fact quite healthy and normal, indicates the kind of destabilized relationship between body and mind commonly diagnosed in patients suffering from anorexia (Diezemann 2006, 116).

date of these entries.) For Diezemann's commentary of this passage, see *Die Kunst des Hungerns* (Diezemann 2006, 104).

Though Diezemann's reading is persuasive, I do not share her views on Kafka's text. In my own discussion I read Gregor's transformation as a concrete physical occurrence in the narrative and not as the manifestation or symptom of a mental illness, and I maintain that Gregor's alienation and eventual death from starvation occur as a consequence of the main conflicts and events that take place in the story.

I will also address the way hunger affects the interaction between Gregor's body and his mind, and how it is also both the cause and a symptom of his withdrawal from the world around him. Diezemann points out that "die Familie, der Gesamtorganismus, wird von [Kafka] als eine Gemeinschaft geschildert, die sich durch Essen konstituiert und aus der nur ausscheiden kann, wer nicht mehr am Essen teilnimmt" (Diezemann 2006, 120). The members of the Samsa family are effectively held together by their eating habits and the time they spend together at mealtimes, but what is more important to my own reading is the way hunger plays a part in Gregor's search for identity, as the early breakdown in communication leads to his feelings of uncertainty and resentment.

Gregor's self-isolation and retreat into the close confines of his room thus offer an intriguing parallel with Melville's depiction of Bartleby discussed in the previous chapter. I would argue that Gregor's behaviour follows a similar pattern to that of Bartleby's: an initial willingness to conform gives way to increasing apathy and seclusion, with the loss of appetite culminating in death from starvation. Once it becomes clear that Gregor, like Bartleby, is neither able to live on his own terms nor able to meet the demands placed upon him, the only path that seems open to him is withdrawal to the point of complete self-isolation. Yet Gregor does not starve himself out of a belief that food would "disagree" with him or that he would "prefer not to" eat as Bartleby does, rather his lack of appetite is expressed as an absence of the unknown nourishment he seeks.

Gregor's transformation is the main source of conflict in the story, though his lack of appetite also confirms his status as an outsider, as he prefers to eat that which appeals to his "animal" nature or to consume nothing at all. Yet this deterministic reading of the story is counterbalanced by Gregor's fascination with the unknown nourishment represented by his sister's music and by how music, and art in general, briefly offers a redemptive moment, an interlude to the tension between Gregor and his family, though this proves short-lived and ultimately illusory.

There has also been a tendency to read the conflict between Gregor and his family in autobiographical terms, as Kafka had expressed in his diary the loneliness and frustration he felt at his own family's lack of understanding for his writing, making comparisons between the author and his characters inevitable:

Die Einsamkeit, die mir zum größten Teil seit jeher aufgezwungen war, zum Teil von mir gesucht wurde—doch was war auch dies anderes als Zwang—, wird jetzt ganz unzweideutig und geht auf das Äußerste. Wohin führt sie? Sie kann, dies scheint am zwingendsten, zum Irrsinn führen, darüber kann nichts weiter ausgesagt werden, die Jagd geht durch mich und zerreißt mich.  
(Kafka 1976, 16 January 1922)

In his later years, Kafka came to view his literary pursuits as more than just a calling, rather he felt the urge to write as a form of intense physical craving, and the act of writing appeared beyond his control, as though he were an instrument at the mercy of some higher power. One of the last diary entries before his death, dated 12 July 1923, presents this idea at its most extreme:

Immer ängstlicher im Niederschreiben. Es ist begreiflich. Jedes Wort, gewendet in der Hand der Geister—dieser Schwung der Hand ist ihre charakteristische Bewegung—wird zum Spieß, gekehrt gegen den Sprecher. Eine Bemerkung wie diese ganz besonders. Und so ins Unendliche. Der Trost wäre nur: es geschieht, ob du willst oder nicht. Und was du willst, hilft nur unmerklich wenig. Mehr als Trost ist: Auch du hast Waffen. (Kafka 1976)

This passage marks a sad conclusion to the struggle between Kafka the writer and Kafka the human being, a struggle that might continue “into eternity”, though it was clear that every stroke of the pen was a torment to the man who held it. The tone of resignation was also characteristic of a shift in Kafka's artistic outlook during the last few years of his life, as later narratives such as “Erstes Leid” and “Ein Hungerkünstler” are stories that have been read as parables of the dilemma facing the modern artist, namely the pursuit of an ideal of perfection in the face of an uncomprehending and indifferent world. Heinz Politzer has argued, for instance, that in his later work Kafka “had succeeded [...] in elevating the raw material of his life to the realm of literature. As life became parable, the parables he wrote became more and more personal” (Politzer 1966, 302). James Rolleston corroborates this view insofar as he maintains that Kafka “populated his late works with partial selves—and in fact originally imagined another one for this story” (Rolleston 1995, 141). Kafka evidently felt most alive when writing, though clearly his work was intimately bound up with physical and spiritual suffering, both his own and that of his characters. Friedman suggests that for Kafka, there was no difference between his existence as an artist and as a human being. Kafka was not so much suffering for literature, but rather his writing became the compulsory expression of his suffering: “Kafka's art was for him not a separate realm where he could take refuge from existence, but the special form of existence itself” (Friedman 1963, 377). While successful moments provided Kafka with great pleasure, he was constantly dissatisfied with both life and artistic work; his failing health, his frustrated love life, and his unfinished novels were all a source of anguish to him:

Vielleicht bin ich wirklich verloren, die Traurigkeit von heute morgen wird wiederkommen, ich werde ihr nicht lange widerstehen können, sie nimmt mir jede Hoffnung. Ich habe nicht einmal Lust, ein Tagebuch zu führen, vielleicht weil darin schon zuviel fehlt, vielleicht weil ich immerfort nur halbe und allem Anschein nach notwendig halbe Handlungsweisen beschreiben müßte, vielleicht weil selbst das Schreiben zu meiner Traurigkeit beiträgt. (Kafka 1976, 20 October 1913)

Kafka's sense of failure and his wish that his unfinished and unpublished works be destroyed after his death point to the kind of crisis faced by the perpetually dissatisfied hunger artist.<sup>28</sup> There is a similarity in their shared desire for confirmation and recognition, and yet also in their shared knowledge that their art would never fully be understood by their respective audiences. In much the same way that the fasting artist would never eat the smallest morsel because the integrity of his art forbade it, Kafka wrote according to an ideal that made it impossible to show or publish anything he regarded as sub-standard. Friedman suggests that, like the hunger artist who would have stuffed himself had he found the food he liked, Kafka would have given up writing and lived a happy and carefree existence had he discovered a way to do so. Friedman postulates that Kafka's compulsion to write and his desire for confirmation were much like the "fraud" of the hunger artist—he starved because he had to, because hunger was the necessary form of his existence. He did not deserve praise for his achievements, as he was essentially left with no other choice than to live life through his art.

## 2.1 Kafka's modernism

As J.M.S. Pasley states in his introduction to Kafka's *Short Stories*, the alienation and isolation of the individual is widely held to be the central theme of Kafka's writing. Kafka's heroes feel themselves estranged from the objects of physical experience, from their family or social community, or from the spiritual truths or beliefs to which they must adhere (Kafka 1963, 12). Alienation occurs on multiple levels in Kafka's writing, particularly given the view that Kafka's texts often frustrate the readers' appetite for coherency and conclusive meaning. Kafka's writing must be read against the view that if a text has no clear meaning, then it has no social value, and it must be distanced from the notion that close readings are an attempt at bringing a text under control, of subjecting it to the ordering forces implicit in the evaluative process of mastering its possible meanings and weighing their importance (see Sicher 1999).

This kind of reading makes sense in the traditional view that the reader is drawn into the story by the author's powers of representation, bearing in mind that both author and reader share the same vision of reality. The idiosyncrasies of Kafka's

28 There has been some controversy surrounding the question whether Kafka really did want to have his works posthumously destroyed, or whether he knew that his friends, and Max Brod in particular, would publish his writing regardless of his wishes. Gustav Janouch's *Gespräche mit Kafka*, first published in 1951, reveals Kafka's reluctance to impose on his friends by seeking to publish what he regarded as private material, but also his disinclination to destroy this material himself: "Ich will ihnen keine Unannehmlichkeiten bereiten, und so kommt es zum Schluß zur Herausgabe von Dingen, die eigentlich nur ganz private Aufzeichnungen oder Spielereien sind. Persönliche Belege meiner menschlichen Schwäche werden gedruckt und sogar verkauft, weil meine Freunde, mit Max Brod an der Spitze, es sich in den Kopf gesetzt haben, daraus Literatur zu machen, und ich nicht die Kraft besitze, diese Zeugnisse der Einsamkeit zu vernichten" (Kafka [1951], quoted in Janouch 1961, 11).

narratives and the originality of his literary method have long placed him outside the mainstream of contemporary German writing and, as Pasley points out, Kafka has been regarded as a lone figure, who was “averse to the clichés of literary Romanticism, but neither was he in sympathy with the more hectic gestures of the modernists” (Kafka 1963, 11). As a result of this, Pasley argues that “we go wrong if behind his symbolic legends we start hunting for systems of abstract thought, or indeed for anything that lay outside the immediate experience of the author” (Kafka 1963, 35). Kafka’s sole demand was that literature should be the honest expression of an inner reality: “Der Traum enthüllt die Wirklichkeit, hinter der die Vorstellung zurückbleibt. Das ist das Schreckliche des Lebens—das Erschütternde der Kunst” (see Janouch 1961, 13).

This suggests that literary scholars should be wary of taking for granted his place within the canon of literary modernism. Kafka has long been ranked among high modernist authors, and his name is frequently mentioned alongside writers such as Mallarmé, Hamsun, Joyce, and Stein. Walter Sokel discusses in depth the modernist myth-making that has become part of the industry that has been built up around Kafka’s writing and life. In his essay “Kafka and Modernism” (1995), Sokel discusses Kafka’s writing within the context of modernism as “a deliberate and programmatic rupture with all preceding art, a revolutionary turn in aesthetics and poetics”, which can be described in terms of two different yet interrelated propensities: the first is for a “thematic emphasis on modern urban life, highlighting not only its banality, sordidness, and hypocrisy but also the enormous broadening of experience and sensation its technological advances betokened” (Sokel 1995, 22). According to Sokel, Kafka had taken Gustave Flaubert as his model and placed his narratives in the setting and scenarios of petty bourgeois life. The second propensity was for the view that art should be autonomous, that “it should consider itself free from the ancillary relation to nature and society to which it was consigned by traditional aesthetics” (1995, 22)—a relation that came to be defined as the “mimetic contract” that exists between the author and reader, denoting a shared sense of reality that was characteristic of the novel from the 18th to the mid 19th century. The writing of Baudelaire, who viewed art as “not a representation but a presentation” (1995, 23), contributed to the “fundamental rift between the notion of truth or reality and the notion of meaning” (1995, 27). Sokel argues that the alienation of the reader accounts for two seemingly contradictory yet closely related elements of modernism: on the one hand, there is the aggressive attempt to provoke, as an author seeks to shock, outrage, and scandalize; on the other hand, there is the withdrawal from public comprehension into difficulty and obscurity. Both tendencies reveal an antagonism toward a mainstream audience perceived as a group of undiscerning consumers, and hence modernism sets out to frustrate readers in their most habitual, elemental concern, that is, the attempt to understand, to empathize, to recognize, and to translate the newly encountered into familiar terms. Hence, “the modernist work makes it extremely difficult for the reader to cross the chasm that separates a text from life” (1995, 27). According to Sokel, when perceived in the

context of a liberal view of history, the modernist project was a positive step toward the emancipation of the individual from tradition and authority, which conferred to art the general principle of liberty. Seen from a Marxist view of history, however, it was a further step toward the alienation of the artist from the rest of society, and is therefore seen as characteristic of bourgeois, capitalist modernity.

Kafka's mature writing, which can be dated roughly to between 1912 and 1924, coincided almost precisely with the period of literary Expressionism, and Kafka, along with his close friends Max Brod and the poet Franz Werfel, has since been ranked among the leading figures of the movement. Yet Pasley stresses that Kafka was in fact "the enemy of high flights of feeling and all noisy literary effects. 'Der Lärm stört den Ausdruck.' Such was his opinion" (Kafka 1963, 11). On reading the Expressionist anthology *Menschheitsdämmerung* published in 1919, Kafka wrote:

Das Buch macht mich traurig. Die Dichter strecken nach den Menschen die Hände aus. Die Menschen sehen aber keine freundschaftlichen Hände, sondern nur krampfhaft geschlossene Fäuste, die nach den Augen und Herzen zielen.<sup>29</sup> (Kafka 1963, 11)

Yet in spite of these views, Kafka has long been perceived as belonging to the modernist tradition as his work discourages the reader's attempt to "understand" Kafka often presents images, narrates events, and makes statements outside any discernible context, such as the context supplied by causality. For instance, there is no reason or explanation given for Gregor's metamorphosis, nor for the hunger artist's inclination to starve in a cage in front of an audience, as this is presented as an irrefutable fact, its logic understood by an initiated few. Kafka's friend Max Brod maintained that one of Kafka's greatest talents lay in his ability to turn the surreal into a matter of fact (see Bradbury 1988, 258). Sokel argues that in order to make sense of the shock tactics employed by Kafka, which were intended to reveal and unmask the spiritual reality that underlies the world of sensation and appearance, it is therefore necessary to view his writing within the context of the growing scepticism concerning the very ideas of truth and reality that have become associated with modernist writing.<sup>30</sup> Kafka is perceived as a modernist author primarily in the sense that the subject of his writing is not the representation or imitation of an external reality, but rather of the intimate longings, hopes, and suffering of the individual: Kafka's "work confronts readers as a challenge for them to participate in and, in a sense, continue the writer's activity" (Sokel 1995, 29).<sup>31</sup>

29 For a more detailed discussion of Kafka's attitude to and place within the Expressionist movement, see Pasley (Kafka 1963, 11) and Rolleston (1995, 141).

30 Kafka had written in an early letter to Oskar Pollak in 1904: "Ich glaube, man sollte überhaupt nur solche Bücher lesen, die einen beißen und stechen. Wenn das Buch, das wir lesen, uns nicht mit einem Faustschlag auf den Schädel weckt, wozu lesen wir dann das Buch? [...] Ein Buch muß die Axt sein für das gefrorene Meer in uns." This much-quoted phrase can be found in *Briefe, 1902–1924* (Kafka 1958, 27).

31 Sokel goes on to explain what he means by this: "Kafka's text(s) present itself on two levels. The literal or writer's level—the level of indeterminacy—withholds referential meaning and



The difficulties in continuing the writer's activity are well known and thoroughly documented.<sup>32</sup> There has seldom been an idea or theory put forward in the study of Kafka that has not been contradicted or re-invented by a long line of critics and commentators. When judging the viability and persuasiveness of these arguments, one is repeatedly struck by their fragmentary and often contradictory nature, which is no doubt a natural outcome of the profound difficulty of Kafka's writing, and perhaps offers further proof confirming his status as a modernist author. The ambiguities of Kafka's writing, coupled with this array of critical approaches, underscores W.G. Kudsus's claim that "it is difficult to be wrong about Kafka" (Kudsus 1987, 158), though I would argue that it is equally difficult to find any real consistency in the surfeit of claims and counterclaims that surround his work. In my discussion of *Die Verwandlung* and "Ein Hungerkünstler", I will focus primarily on the thematic and stylistic relevance of hunger and on the starving protagonist's relation with his respective society, and I will also examine the broader theme of the hero's longing or striving for an ideal, whether it be love, community, or an idea of perfection in art.

## 2.2 Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*

The most striking and problematic aspect of Kafka's *Die Verwandlung* is Gregor Samsa's sudden, mysterious transformation into a large beetle-like insect, and the various crises that occur during the narrative as a result of this event. The questions which Kafka's story provokes with regard to hunger mainly revolve around the interaction between the body and mind of its protagonist. The arc of the narrative describes Gregor's sudden transition from a successful commercial traveller to a social outcast that dies of starvation, though the notion that this event is caused by his new body is complicated by the sense that Gregor's malaise is spiritual as well as physical. There is a popular belief that a healthy appetite is crucial to both physical and mental well-being, yet it is never quite clear whether Gregor loses his appetite as a direct result of his transformation, or whether his loss of appetite is

causal coherence. The second level, however, empowers the reader to discern functional roles in the elements of narration, which combine into a mimetic sequence. On this level, the text enables the reader to fill in missing links in the representation of an action that, though empirically impossible, achieves psychological and sociological plausibility and thus a meaningful connection with the world outside the text" (Sokel 1995, 29).

- 32 Despite the constant assertion that Kafka's parables are not meant to be read literally, (mis)interpreting Kafka's writing seems an inevitable part of Kafka scholarship. David Zane Mairowitz perhaps said it best in *Introducing Kafka* when he wrote that "no writer of our time, and probably none since Shakespeare, has been so widely over-interpreted and pigeon-holed. Jean-Paul Sartre claimed him for Existentialism, Camus saw him as an Absurdist, his lifelong friend and editor, Max Brod, convinced several generations of scholars that his parables were part of an elaborate quest for an unreachable God" (Mairowitz 1993, 5). It could be argued that those who seek to claim Kafka for modernism only emphasize the validity of this statement.

an emotional reaction to the disgust and hostility his new body inspires in others. Kafka had himself revealed in his letters and diaries an ambivalent attitude to the curative power of food insofar as overeating became the cause, rather than the cure, of his ailments, and this same ambivalence is carried over into his story.<sup>33</sup>

Much has also been written on Kafka's method, as well as the question as to what genre *Die Verwandlung* belongs to. There has been a prevailing tendency to read many of Kafka's shorter narratives as parables, and many of Kafka's stories invite interpretations in these terms.<sup>34</sup> In the case of *Die Verwandlung*, however, I am inclined to agree with the view that the story resembles a modern fairy tale. As Zimmermann points out in *Kafka für Fortgeschrittene*, the main difference between *Die Verwandlung* and more traditional folk tales such as the Brothers Grimm's "Der Froschkönig" or "Brüderchen und Schwesterchen" is the naturalistic quality of Kafka's setting, and that the narrative forgoes many of the elements of the traditional fairy tale genre: the hero suffers hunger, humiliation, and neglect in his new body, but there is no salvation in the form of a reversal, and good certainly does not triumph over evil (Zimmermann 2004, 75). The story instead draws upon the modern convention of weaving fantastical characters and events into the routine business of everyday life, a style which since the early 20th century has come to be known as "magic realism", but had its roots in Romanticism and stories like E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Der goldne Topf: ein Märchen aus der neuen Zeit", published in 1814. Hoffmann, for instance, begins his fairytale at three o'clock in the afternoon in Dresden, rather than isolating events in the vague, mythical past otherwise typical of the genre. Kafka adopts a similar technique, as Gregor's character and surroundings are unmistakably modern, and his transformation is presented to the reader as an empirical fact rather than a dream or hallucination: "'Was ist mit mir Geschehen?' dachte er. Es war kein Traum" (DW, 96). Furthermore, Gregor's insect-body should not be considered simply as a metaphor, as he is not merely likened to an insect, but is physically turned into one by some unknown and unexplained power. As Gregor's horror subsides and he becomes more acquainted with his new body, he upholds the belief that the world will return to its natural and familiar state of affairs, "als erwartete er vielleicht von der völligen Stille die Wiederkehr der wirklichen und selbstverständlichen

33 Kafka had visited a number of sanatoriums by the time *Die Verwandlung* was written, and among their common features were regular meals at frequent intervals. He felt this constant feeding to be not only excessive but also detrimental to his writing, to the point where he wrote in a letter to Max Brod in 1911: "Mein Hauptleiden besteht darin, daß ich zuviel esse. [...] Die gute Wirkung des Sanatoriums zeigt sich darin, daß ich mir bei allem den Magen nicht eigentlich verderbe, er wird bloß stumpfsinnig. Es ist damit nicht ohne Zusammenhang, daß meine Schreibung langsamer weiter geht als in Prag" (quoted from Diezemann 2006, 102).

34 For example, in her essay "Beyond the Body: Kafka's The Metamorphosis and Gibson's Neuro-mancer" Chia-Yi Lee reads Kafka's metamorphosis as a parable of Gregor Samsa's "infinite suspension", with "Gregor's becoming-animal as a becoming 'parable-subject': his crucial problem is that he is caught in-between the human-state and insect-state, unwilling to let go of the first and afraid to fully enter into the latter" (Lee 2004, 201).

Verhältnisse" (*DW*, 102). What Gregor's transformation in fact reveals is the precariousness of the self-evident aspect of reality in the first place.

I also argue in favor of Gregor's transformation being the cause of his death from hunger, and base this assertion on the notion of eating as a transaction between the self and the other, where food both constitutes and endangers the autonomy of the individual. As Ellmann points out, eating is a precarious process where an individual absorbs and incorporates the otherness of food and where only after the food has been successfully digested can the individual again become whole (Ellmann 1993, 105). While the act of eating implies a division between self and the object consumed, it also implies a form of recognition once the object has been assimilated as part of the self. Individuation beckons to those who may keep themselves inviolate, who deny the pernicious other implicit in consumption. Gregor's lack of appetite therefore results in his denial and negation of the external world, though it also confirms his role as an outsider, as he prefers to eat that which suits his condition or to consume nothing at all. Yet this deterministic reading is counterbalanced by Gregor's referring at the end of the story to his sister's music as the unknown nourishment he seeks, which offers an idealistic vision of redemption in the form of reconciliation and platonic love. The following reading of the story will thus examine both sides of this discussion.

Gregor Samsa's hunger is therefore bound up with questions of identity, as the main tension of the story rests on the reader's knowledge that Gregor has retained the awareness of his old self, though he is unable to communicate this awareness to his family, because of their inability to understand him. At the beginning of the story, the narrative voice shifts between the interiority of Gregor's thoughts and memories and the implications that his transformation has on the world around him; it is clear that Gregor has undergone only a partial transformation, as he keeps the consciousness of a human being. Any feelings of sympathy his plight arouses in the reader may be attributed to Kafka's inserting a perceptive human mind into the body of an insect, and Gregor suffers primarily because his thoughts, emotions, and memories remain unchanged. During these initial moments, Gregor's impressions are very much the focus of both his and the reader's attention. Gregor's thoughts blend with the narrator's commentary in the free indirect style, and thus the wider implications of his predicament are expressed through internal monologues:

"Ach Gott", dachte er, "was für einen anstrengenden Beruf habe ich gewählt! Tag aus, Tag ein auf der Reise. Die geschäftlichen Aufregungen sind viel größer, als im eigentlichen Geschäft zu Hause, und außerdem ist mir noch diese Plage des Reisens auferlegt, die Sorgen um die Zuganschlüsse, das unregelmäßige, schlechte Essen, ein immer wechselnder, nie andauernder, nie herzlich werdender menschlicher Verkehr. Der Teufel soll das alles holen!" (*DW*, 97)

Gregor has been obliged to lead the busy life of a travelling salesman, and his grievances are those of a disgruntled, alienated employee. After years of bad food,

long hours, and a lack of genuine human contact, it is plausible he should feel “burned out”, but it is highly improbable that his irregular meals and stressful work life should be the cause of his transformation. Kafka provides no logical reason for this event, and while Gregor is left to deliberate the symptoms brought on by his bizarre condition, he grows increasingly anxious as to what the immediate future holds for him:

Und selbst wenn er den Zug einholte, ein Donnerwetter des Chefs war nicht zu vermeiden [...]. Gewiß würde der Chef mit dem Krankenkassenarzt kommen, würde den Eltern wegen des faulen Sohnes Vorwürfe machen und alle Einwände durch den Hinweis auf den Krankenkassenarzt abschneiden, für den es ja überhaupt nur ganz gesunde, aber arbeitsscheue Menschen gibt. Und hätte er übrigens in diesem Falle so ganz unrecht? (DW, 98)

Any judgement relating to health and illness are taken away from the individual and placed in the hands of those in authority. Gregor's cynical view of his employer and of the medical profession are pertinent given Kafka's own experiences of medical institutions, and this passage can be read as a veiled critique of the accident insurance company which employed him, where he would have known first-hand the kind of inquest into the health of employees that Gregor imagines. For example, Kafka's diary, in an entry dated 19 February 1911, provides an account of his working life that bears a striking resemblance to that of his unfortunate hero:

Wie ich heute aus dem Bett steigen wollte, bin ich einfach zusammengeklappt. Es hat das einen sehr einfachen Grund, ich bin vollkommen überarbeitet. Nicht durch das Bureau, aber durch meine sonstige Arbeit. [...] Schließlich, das weiß ich ja, ist das nur Geschwätz, schuldig bin ich, und das Bureau hat gegen mich die klarsten und berechtigtesten Forderungen. Nur ist es eben für mich ein schreckliches Doppelleben, aus dem es wahrscheinlich nur den Irrsinn als Ausweg gibt. (Kafka 1976)

Though Kafka blamed his fatigue on his dedication to writing, Gregor is similarly engaged in what Kafka referred to as a “Brotberuf”,<sup>35</sup> though Gregor does not work to support his writing like Kafka did, rather he works to compensate for his father's ill-health and to pay off the debts he owes to the chief of his company. While Kafka's literary ambitions had forced him to lead a double life, Gregor is spared such a dilemma, as we learn that he spends his free time at home occupied with fretwork or with studying railway timetables. Gregor has been an obedient employee, as he has managed to suppress his real feelings under the veneer of hard work: “Gregor war während seines fünffährigen Dienstes noch nicht einmal krank gewesen” (DW, 98). Overwork, suppression of illness, and anxiety over money and debts are

35 Meaning literally “to work for bread”. Kafka's literary projects wholly depended on his steady employment: “When Kafka the secretary privately buries himself in writing, he does so only to restore Kafka the poet” (Benesch 1997, 83).

all familiar challenges facing the modern workforce, and Gregor's predicament could be seen as a critique of an unequal system weighted in favour of businesses rather than employees, culminating in one man's spectacular breakdown. Yet Gregor's transformation is the beginning, rather than the end, of a sequence of events leading up to his death from hunger, and at this point his unusually strong appetite is actually a sign of his good health: "Gregor fühlte sich tatsächlich, abgesehen von einer nach dem langen Schlaf wirklich überflüssigen Schläfrigkeit, ganz wohl und hatte sogar einen besonders kräftigen Hunger" (DW, 99).

Gregor's hunger proves a stumbling block in his attempts to order his thoughts and rationalize his sensations. He feels a keen awareness of the awkwardness of his insect-body, though he also recalls having felt minor aches and pains in the past that he had dismissed as imaginary, "und er war gespannt, wie sich seine heutigen Vorstellungen allmählich auflösen würden" (DW, 100). Similarly, he attributes his inability to utter any recognizable sounds to a sore throat, "einer tüchtigen Verkühlung, einer Berufskrankheit der Reisenden" (DW, 100). One of the most significant consequences of Gregor's metamorphosis is that his body has become the centre of his attention, even though he somewhat absurdly attempts to dismiss his transformation as a minor ailment and there remains a sense of dislocation between Gregor's sensory experience and perception of events. Gregor's hunger is a sign of vitality, as well as the only sensation that he can fully trust. This can be read as a further indication that his transformation is "real", as hunger is the one sensation he does not try to dismiss out of hand, since his most immediate desire is to get up and eat breakfast. It is typical of the paradoxes prevalent in Kafka's writing that the sensation that evidently affirms Gregor's existence will eventually be the cause of his death. The effect of the narrator's intermingling Gregor's sensory perceptions with his memories and ideas is to create a surreal yet absurdly plausible scenario, as the reality of the physical world constantly encroaches on the waking nightmare of his transformation.<sup>36</sup>

Gregor's musings are interrupted by the arrival of the chief clerk, whose voice Gregor instantly recognizes, which prompts another internal monologue on how the company responds to its employees' slightest indiscretion by sending a person of such high rank. When the chief clerk is unexpectedly met with a locked door and Gregor's blank refusal to speak with him, he grows increasingly irritated and threatens to report him to the chief. As Gregor makes a grovelling apology, claiming he is unwell, it becomes clear to all concerned that his speech has become unintelligible:

36 According to Vladimir Nabokov, "the beauty of Kafka's [...] private nightmares is that [his] central human characters belong to the same private fantastic world as the inhuman characters around them, but the central one tries to get out of that world, to cast off the mask, to transcend the cloak or the carapace". (Nabokov 2011) The juxtaposition of the idea of Gregor's humanity and of the inhuman treatment he receives is a constant theme in *Die Verwandlung*, though Gregor's desire to "transcend" the nightmare of his predicament only leads to his downfall.

Gregor erschrak, als er seine antwortende Stimme hörte, die wohl unverkennbar seine frühere war, in die sich aber, wie von unten her, ein nicht zu unterdrückendes, schmerzliches Piepsen mischte, das die Worte förmlich nur im ersten Augenblick in ihrer Deutlichkeit beließ, um sie im Nachklang derart zu zerstören. (DW, 99)

Gregor's new body distorts his ability to speak, so that his words are incomprehensible to anyone but himself. The sound Gregor makes is not only unintelligible, but not even recognizably human, as the chief clerk remarks: "Das war eine Tierstimme" (DW, 108). This is a crucial development in the story, as Gregor's inability to communicate throws doubt over his true identity, and the family's lack of knowledge is the main ground for their violence and hostility toward the insect that they believe has taken his place. Gregor's metamorphosis and inability to communicate present an ontological dilemma that, from the family's perspective, remains impossible to resolve. If Gregor is not the giant insect that has suddenly appeared in his room, then he must have either completely vanished or escaped from the apartment in some way. If Gregor has in fact *become* the insect, then his family must decide to what degree it is still Gregor or whether it is in fact an animal and not really Gregor at all.

Food then fills the void when language fails, for instance as his sister observes how Gregor loses the taste for milk, his once favorite food, and then brings him the kind of rotten scraps he had once declared inedible. While the reader is allowed to share in Gregor's inner life, the confusion of signs and meanings within the text itself leads to a breakdown in familial relations. While Grete and her parents at first tolerate Gregor in the belief that the monstrous insect is still their brother or son, they finally lose faith and disown him once their tolerance reaches an end. While Gregor clings to the knowledge of his former identity, he is unable to exert any influence over his family, and his appearance in their midst only provokes embarrassment and outrage.

As time passes, the members of Gregor's family become less concerned with the truth regarding his whereabouts and more preoccupied with the wider implications of his sudden disappearance. Not only have they lost their main source of income and gained another mouth to feed, but the giant insect living in their apartment poses a real threat to the family's good reputation. The crisis that Gregor's transformation brings about is of a social and economic, as well as an emotional, nature. The crisis is resolved once the members of the Samsa family agree in the end that the "thing" is not Gregor at all and should be gotten rid of. Gregor's loss of language, coupled with his diminishing appetite, ensures that he must contend with the private consequences of his transformation along with the ignorance of those around him.

In the early stages of the narrative, however, Gregor is still hopeful of making amends. Spurred on by the chief clerk's harangue and his father's insistence, Gregor manages to turn the key in the lock with his jaws and open his bedroom door, leading to an escalation as confusion and chaos ensues. An interesting detail

interposed amid the general uproar is the lavish breakfast laid out on the dining room table:

Das Frühstücksgeschirr stand in überreicher Zahl auf dem Tisch, denn für den Vater war das Frühstück die wichtigste Mahlzeit des Tages, die er bei der Lektüre verschiedener Zeitungen stundenlang hinzog. (DW, 111)

Gregor had previously expressed indignation and resentment toward the appetite of his fellow commercial travellers, who he felt, on account of the time that they, like his father, lingered over breakfast, lived like harem women. The mention of the father's leisurely habits indicates the larger conflict between father and son that ends the first and second chapters, conflict which escalates in violence with each confrontation. The injuries Gregor receives affect him physically and mentally, and are ostensibly the cause of his sense of isolation, as his diminishing appetite later coincides with his growing withdrawal from his surroundings. Despite Gregor's secretly clinging to his human identity in spite of his "animal" needs, his monstrous appearance remains a constant affront to the genteel façade of the household, making conflict and antagonism inevitable.

Once Gregor appears in the hallway the reaction of his family and the chief clerk is predictably hostile. His mother faints in shock while the chief clerk flees the apartment, leaving Gregor to face his father's wrath:

Unerbitterlich drängte der Vater und stieß Zischlaute aus, wie ein Wilder [...]. Wenn sich Gregor nur hätte umdrehen dürfen, er wäre gleich in seinem Zimmer gewesen, aber er fürchtete sich, den Vater durch die zeitraubende Umdrehung ungeduldig zu machen, und jeden Augenblick drohte ihm doch von dem Stock in des Vaters Hand der tödliche Schlag auf den Rücken oder auf den Kopf. (DW, 115)

The conflict that occurs between Gregor and his father has been viewed as a clear example of Kafka's difficult relation with his own father, and it becomes one of the central conflicts in the narrative.<sup>37</sup> The level of violence directed toward Gregor is remarkable given the innocuous nature of his transgressions, as though the

37 Freudian analyses of the story also contend that vermin represent children, and that Gregor's scuttling retreat might indicate his feelings of worthlessness before his father. A prominent source of such readings was Kafka's *Brief an den Vater* (1919), in which he wrote lines such as: "Du bekamst für mich das Rätselhafte, das alle Tyrannen haben, deren Recht auf ihrer Person, nicht auf dem Denken begründet ist." This letter has been used as a key text in biographical and psychoanalytical studies of Kafka such as Charles Neider's influential biography titled *The Frozen Sea*, published in 1948. Over the last few decades, however, Freudian analyses have fallen out of favour, and while Kafka's letter describes archetypal differences in character between father and son as well as his own feelings of guilt and inadequacy, Kafka's letters and diaries have increasingly been examined as literary compositions in their own right. I for instance find it more interesting to read this scene in terms of the wider discourse of power, violence, and the body of the protagonist that occurs in Kafka's other writing. For a more detailed analysis of this discussion, see also Zimmermann (2004) and Pasley (Kafka 1963).



father's actions reveal the crudeness and brutality lurking beneath the civilized veneer of family life, where respectable appearances must evidently be upheld at all costs. The father's first reaction to Gregor is one of repression, as he forces Gregor back into his room by shoving him through his bedroom doorway. By doing so, the father not only demonstrates his physical strength over the relative weakness of his son, he also establishes the boundary between the private space in the apartment that Gregor is permitted to occupy and the public space inhabited by the rest of the family. Furthermore, the father's repression of Gregor seems more like an affirmation of power than an act of retribution; it seems it is presented "in such a way as to give a spectacle not of measure, but of imbalance and excess; in this liturgy of punishment, there must be an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority" (Foucault 1979, 49). Remarkably, the father never enters Gregor's room to punish him in private, rather all acts of aggression occur in the open space of the dining area, in plain view of all concerned. The spectacle of punishment thus becomes a means by which the father's authority is consolidated, and while Gregor's financial income had hitherto made him the *de facto* patriarch, through violence the father is able to re-assume his former position while appearing to bring order and discipline to the household.

The father's rough treatment of Gregor leads to a form of reconciliation, and Gregor's appetite and eating habits are then brought more sharply into focus. After the excitement and shock of the confrontation with his father and the chief clerk have passed, Gregor is awoken by a gnawing hunger and finds a bowl of bread and milk laid out for him:

Denn dort stand ein Napf mit süßer Milch gefüllt, in der kleine Schnitten von Weißbrot schwammen. Fast hätte er vor Freude gelacht, denn er hatte noch größeren Hunger als am Morgen, und gleich tauchte er seinen Kopf fast bis über die Augen in die Milch hinein. Aber bald zog er ihn enttäuscht wieder zurück; nicht nur, daß ihm das Essen wegen seiner heiklen linken Seite Schwierigkeiten machte—und er konnte nur essen, wenn der ganze Körper schnaufend mitarbeitete—so schmeckte ihm überdies die Milch, die sonst sein Lieblingsgetränk war, und die ihm gewiß die Schwester deshalb hinein gestellt hat, gar nicht. (DW, 117)

The narrator emphasizes the fact that Gregor must eat and be fed like an animal, and the physiology of his new form alters the physical act of consumption, so that Gregor must eat with his entire body rather than just his jaws. The injury he sustained from his father's attack impedes him while feeding, and he also finds that the milk is no longer to his taste. Gregor's disappointment over the food Grete brings to him emphasizes the divide between his former self and the needs of his new body, and as milk is the food given both to infants and to those dying from starvation, this rejection suggests both a break with his past and the fate that lies in store for him.

Gregor's change in taste marks the beginning of his search for bodily nourishment, for a kind of food that best suits his condition. When Grete notices that



Gregor has left the milk and bread uneaten, she brings him a selection of food in various stages of decay in order to test his palate:

Sie brachte ihm, um seinen Geschmack zu prüfen, eine ganze Auswahl [...]. Da war altes halbverfaultes Gemüse; Knochen vom Nachtmal her, die von festgewordener weißer Sauce umgeben waren; ein paar Rosinen und Mandeln; ein Käse, den Gregor vor zwei Tagen für ungenießbar erklärt hat. (DW, 120)

Gregor feels drawn to the decaying food as this is clearly the type of nourishment that most appeals to his transformed senses: "Rasch hintereinander und vor Befriedigung tränenden Augen verzehrte er den Käse, das Gemüse und die Sauce; die frischen Speisen dagegen schmeckten ihm nicht" (DW, 121). In spite of the intense pleasure brought on by the food, Gregor feels shame over the disgust his appearance provokes in his sister. The physical act of eating, as much as the repulsive nature of the food, creates an obvious contrast between what is acceptable and civilized, and what is repulsive and bestial. Grete's brief appearances at feeding times form the only contact Gregor has with his family, as clearly Gregor's presence is only tolerated and his sister tries to shield her parents from any contact with their son. The family's not allowing him to starve seems the only indication that they still recognize him in some way: "Gewiß wollten auch sie nicht, daß Gregor verhungere, aber vielleicht hätten sie es nicht ertragen können, von seinem Essen mehr als durch Hörensagen zu erfahren" (DW, 122). The only words uttered in his vicinity are his sister's comments on whether he has eaten or left his food untouched, and while Gregor can still understand his family, they assume that, because the sounds he makes are unintelligible, he cannot be spoken to directly. Indeed, Grete rarely speaks to her brother, but rather addresses him in the third person, as though he were not present at all: "Heute hat es ihm aber geschmeckt, sagte sie, wenn Gregor unter dem Essen tüchtig aufgeräumt hatte" (DW, 122). The implication is that Gregor exists somewhere in the room, yet his existence cannot be reconciled with the insect hiding itself from view. The sense of dislocation between Gregor's mind, which contains the essence of his "true" self, and the reality of his body as an object of disgust is made clear at this point. As Gregor grows more accustomed to his predicament he begins to take a more active interest in the affairs of the family.

The family discussions, which take place mainly during meals, focus on Gregor and on the plight of the household in general. After the departure of the cook the task of preparing food has fallen to his mother and sister, though it does not amount to much, and the family's lack of appetite conveys their general mood of despondency. As Gregor listens to their talk with a mixture of shame and guilt, he grows agitated, and he no longer takes any pleasure in eating, "das Essen machte ihm bald nicht mehr das geringste Vergnügen, und so nahm er zur Zerstreuung die Gewohnheit an, kreuz und quer über Wände und Plafond zu kriechen" (DW, 129). Gregor's growing nervousness and dissatisfaction coincide with his lack of appetite, so that he appears to be literally "climbing the walls" after such a long bout of confinement.

As Gregor becomes increasingly isolated from the outside world, the temporal structure of the narrative breaks down, as the daily routine of his old life is replaced by the unrecorded passage of hours and days. Much like the hero of Kafka's "Ein Hungerkünstler", Gregor lives from one meal to the next, and flits between moments of wakefulness and semi-consciousness. He spends the passing days lying restlessly without sleeping or gazing out of the window until his sight fades and the street and buildings outside his window appear to him as a grey, lifeless desert:<sup>38</sup>

Denn tatsächlich sah er von Tag zu Tag die auch nur ein wenig entfernten Dinge immer undeutlicher [...] und wenn er nicht genau gewußt hätte, daß er in der stillen, aber völlig städtischen Charlottenstraße wohnte, hätte er glauben können, von seinem Fenster aus in eine Einöde zu schauen, in welche der grauen Himmel und die graue Erde ununterscheidbar sich vereinigten. (DW, 127)

As Gregor's eyesight fades and the world becomes a colourless wasteland, his bouts of gazing from the window take on an uncanny resemblance to *Bartleby's* lapsing into "dead-wall reveries", as Gregor's previous desire for freedom and independence has now been replaced by his contemplation of the barrenness of the world around him. His insular and restrictive living conditions only deepen his withdrawal and self-isolation, and as the narrative focus shifts to the details of Gregor's room, his sister notices his habit of crawling across the walls and ceilings, and is determined to remove Gregor's furniture in order to make more space for him. This is not only a misinterpretation of Gregor's desires on his sister's part; the decision marks the moment when Gregor's family finally give up hope of his being "cured", or have at least reconciled themselves to the permanence of Gregor's transformation.

While Gregor no longer derives any pleasure from eating, he is still caught between the desires of his new body for space and freedom of movement and his longing to be accepted as one of the family, or to partake in his former life. Gregor keenly senses any attempt to separate him from his past, and thus to lose the contents of his room would both literally and metaphorically strip him of his human identity, consigning him to his animal nature:

Nichts sollte entfernt werden; alles mußte bleiben; die guten Einwirkungen der Möbel auf seinen Zustand konnte er nicht entbehren; und wenn die Möbel ihn hinderten, das sinnlose Herumkriechen zu betreiben, so war es kein Schaden, sondern ein großer Vorteil. (DW, 132)

38 The image of the city as a wasteland had become a predominant theme in 20th-century writing; it is present, for example, in Camus' essay "The Minotaur or the Stop in Oran", where Camus observes the mythical and mundane quality of the desert and urban landscape, respectively, existing in symbiosis, where each landscape in turn expresses a form of desolation: "the great value of such overpopulated islands is that in them the heart strips bare. Silence is no longer possible, except in noisy cities" (Camus [1942] 1975, 147).

His sister, however, has other ideas, and her conviction that she is the expert in Gregor's affairs enables her to assert her will over the good impulses of her mother and to proceed to move the furniture out of Gregor's room. Gregor recognizes in these objects the last vestige of his old self, for without the positive, civilizing influences he is left with nothing on which to fix his thoughts and memories. Gregor only physically intervenes, however, when his mother and sister attempt to move the picture of the woman in the fur muffler hanging on his wall—on the one hand the frame is his own handiwork, and on the other it represents the only woman in his life outside of his immediate family circle. The picture of the woman evokes the fantasy of sexual fulfilment, and though his transformation has rendered him physically repulsive, especially to women, the picture is the symbol of Gregor's long-held desire to escape the claustrophobia of living with his parents and to start living an independent life.<sup>39</sup>

When Gregor's father returns home from work, he is incensed by the uproar and finds Gregor stranded in the dining area. What then follows is an absurd, surreal chase around the dining table before the father changes tactics and Gregor, who by now is quite exhausted, notices small hard objects landing round him:

Es war ein Apfel; gleich flog ihm ein zweiter nach; Gregor blieb vor Schrecken stehen; ein Weiterlaufen war nutzlos, denn der Vater hatte sich entschlossen, ihn zu bombardieren. Aus der Obstschele auf der Kredenz hatte er sich die Taschen gefüllt und warf nun, ohne vorläufig zu zielen, Apfel für Apfel. (DW, 138)

Gregor receives an agonizing shock as one of the apples lodges in his back. The imagery surrounding the father's choice of weapon is telling, as it presages Gregor's fall from the family's graces, and the injury it causes accelerates Gregor's bodily decline. Furthermore, food has now become more than a form of communication between Gregor and his family; it has become a means of punishing him as well. The apples are an extension of the father's anger, while his family members have now gone from being his sole means of support to his antagonists. Before losing consciousness, Gregor sees his mother running from his bedroom, pleading dramatically for his life to his father. As hostility toward Gregor reaches its climax, only his mother retains a measure of sympathy for the insect she still believes to be her son.

39 Critics have viewed Gregor Samsa's relations with those around him through the lens of Kafka's own complex relationship with women, which has been seen as both a burden and a stimulus to his literary endeavours. Friedman suggests that on the one hand Kafka was drawn to the idea of marriage as the only real source of happiness and fulfilment, yet on the other was concerned that proximity would stifle his creativity. Friedman sums up Kafka's attitude to marriage and family life in the following terms: "[His] relations with women constituted the only middle ground between the two alternatives that tore his life apart—solitude and writing, on the one hand, and marriage and community, on the other" (Friedman 1963, 278). Kafka did however enjoy a brief period of happiness living in Berlin with Dora Diamant, with whom he remained until his death.

Gregor's injury completes the role reversal between Gregor and his father, as the former now creeps along the floor of his room in much the same way he once recalled his father slowly ambling along on family outings. As Gregor contemplates the reduction of the household staff and the menial work his family are employed in, he observes that they have now been reduced to poverty: "Was die Welt von armen Leute verlangt, erfüllten sie bis zum äußersten" (DW, 147). Gregor's attitude to his family varies between sympathy for their plight and anger at their neglect of him, though the revenge he conceives of is intriguing; instead of protesting against his family's neglect of him by refusing food, he instead embraces the role his family have thrust upon him, that of the unwanted parasite. He imagines creeping into the larder and eating all the food that was, after all, his due:

[...] und trotzdem er sich nichts vorstellen konnte, worauf er Appetit gehabt hätte, machte er doch Pläne, wie er in die Speisekammer gelangen könnte, um dort zu nehmen, was ihm, auch wenn er keinen Hunger hatte, immerhin gebührte. (DW, 143)

The food that Grete throws into his room he now leaves uneaten. He attributes his lack of appetite to his chagrin over the increasing clutter of objects piling up around him on account of the lodgers taken on in order to supplement the family's income. These three bearded men are caricatures, comical figures that put on airs and condescend to the family. They are also men of appetite, who exert their authority during mealtimes, where they set themselves at the head of the family table, relegating their landlords to the kitchen. Gregor notes how they eat in complete silence that is only disturbed by the sound of their masticating teeth. Gregor becomes aware of the anatomical absence that distinguishes his insect-body from those of the lodgers. He muses that without teeth one cannot eat, and even with toothless jaws of the finest make one can achieve nothing. Yet food is no longer what Gregor desires; Gregor becomes aware not only of his physical inadequacy, but also of a lack that he feels keenly at this moment: "Ich habe ja Appetit", sagte sich Gregor sorgenvoll, 'aber nicht auf diese Dinge'. Wie sich diese Zimmerherren nähren, und ich komme um!" (DW, 143).

The paradox of Gregor's situation is revealed in full as he acknowledges his body's needs, yet cannot find the food that will satisfy him. Yet, unlike in the story of the hunger artist, who admits that he would not have fasted to death had he found the food he liked, Gregor Samsa is given a brief glimpse of salvation. After the lodgers finish their meal, they request that Grete give an impromptu concert. As Gregor listens with rapture to his sister's violin playing, he feels instinctively drawn to the beauty of her music, and enters the spotless living area, trailing the contents of his filthy bedroom behind him. He has lost all awareness of the repulsiveness of his body and of the boundary that separates the community and the individual, the civilized and the bestial. His self-consciousness dissolves into a longing for wholeness or unity with his surroundings, and Grete's music is presented as the means to achieving a resolution of the dilemma that troubled him

from the outset: "War er ein Tier, da ihn Musik so ergriff? Ihm war, als zeige sich ihm der Weg zu der ersehnten unbekannten Nahrung" (DW, 149).

At the very moment Gregor becomes aware that the music is an abstract expression of his own desire for harmony and intimacy and that it is the one thing that can provide succour and sustenance to him, the lodgers notice his arrival, and the spell is broken. While the music had prompted Gregor to fantasize about how he would fulfil his promise to his sister and send her to the Conservatorium, and how she would repay his kindness with love and lifelong devotion to him, the situation turns out quite differently. After the disaster of his discovery by the lodgers, and their subsequent refusal to pay their rent, Grete Samsa breaks down in tears, and denies that the thing that has caused so much trouble was ever her brother in the first place:

"Aber wie kann es denn Gregor sein? Wenn es Gregor wäre, er hätte längst eingesehen, daß ein Zusammenleben von Menschen mit einem solchen Tier nicht möglich ist, und wäre freiwillig fortgegangen." (DW, 153)

Hence the brief moment of harmony is shattered as the material, worldly concerns of the family regain precedence. Although Grete's logic is based on a misjudgement of Gregor's character, Gregor's expectations of his sister are equally unrealistic. As Friedman points out, Gregor's predicament presents "an image of modern man confronting a transcendent reality which can neither be dismissed as unreal nor rationalized as anything less than absurd" (Friedman 1963, 392). Gregor upholds his family's wishes, returns to his room, and dies quietly and alone with the apple thrown by his father still lodged in his back. Yet in spite of his treatment he still holds his family in reverence: "An seine Familie dachte er mit Rührung und Liebe zurück" (DW, 155). The following day, the last remaining servant informs the family that she has disposed of Gregor's body, which means that they are free to embark on a new life of their choosing.

In his discussion of the story's ending, Zimmermann points out the wider implications of Grete's rejection of her brother after his death: "Gregor habe die Ruhe der Familie gestört [...] nun sei die Ruhe wieder hergestellt: 'Grete Samsa verkörpert diese unerschütterliche Ruhe der modernen Zeit, die sich nicht aus der Fassung bringen lässt, und ihrem Ziel entgegengeht—über Leichen'" (Zimmermann 2004, 80). The contrasting fortunes of brother and sister are exemplified by the description of their bodies; while Gregor's carcass is dry and thin, covered with dust and debris, Grete has developed into "einem schönen und üppigen Mädchen" (DW, 160), in the full bloom of health and beauty. From the family's point of view, Gregor's transformation is first a misfortune to be suffered, then finally an obstacle to be overcome on their road to happiness. Order has been restored, and the terrible calm of modern life will endure into the future.

In Kafka's *Die Verwandlung*, the absurdity of Gregor's situation is made apparent once his expectations, prompted by the intoxicating effect of his sister's music, clash with the hard facts of reality. Gregor's transformation had offered him the

possibility of freedom and autonomy from the demands of his work and family, even if this freedom meant a total breakdown of relations with those around him. Gregor's search for spiritual, rather than bodily, nourishment is prompted by his knowledge of an absence or lack, and he is drawn out of the sanctuary of his confinement by the vision of unanimity and love with his family, and the longing for harmony between the conflicting desires of mind and body. Gregor's death is both absurd and romantic, as he was drawn briefly into the higher sphere of beauty and art, which presented a path to the unknown nourishment he craved. Gregor's hunger for love and community awakened by his sister's music marked the final phase of his metamorphosis, which had begun with his individuation and separation from the narrow-minded materialism of bourgeois family life, and culminated with his realization that the bonds of community are forged in the soul and not the body. Music, and art in general, briefly offered a redemptive moment, an interlude to the tension between society and the individual, though this proved short-lived and ultimately illusory.

Gregor's transformation led to a heightened self-awareness to the point where music had an overpowering, magnetic effect on him, though the source of his salvation, his capacity to be moved by art, eventually proved his downfall. The idea that art is detrimental to the well-being of the individual in that it heightens rather than diminishes the antagonism of our physical and spiritual hungers is one of the main themes of Kafka's later writing, and the destructive impulse to sacrifice life to art is nowhere better expressed than in Kafka's parable of the hunger artist.

### 2.3 Kafka's "Ein Hungerkünstler"

Kafka's parable of the hunger artist is, as the title suggests, about an individual who starves himself as a form of art, but this is where the analogy ends. It is left up to the reader to decide whether to accept either of the terms "hunger" and "art" at face value, and whether to accept the popular reading of the parable as the dilemma facing the modern artist, or as that of the pursuit of artistic perfection in a materialistic, indifferent world. If we take, for example, Rolleston's reading of the hunger motif which he develops in "Purification unto Death: 'A Hunger Artist' as Allegory of Modernism":

Kafka's use of the hunger motif renders the very notion of the self allegorical: our opposing drives toward bodily satisfaction and spiritual enlightenment can be reconciled only through a process of elaborate self-deception, a process we call living, projecting a unitary self. As soon as we lay claim to such a self, the one hunger cancels out the other and, structurally speaking, we begin our death [...]. When Kafka's heroes come into existence, they are defined by their separation from everyone else: to overcome that separateness is to begin a process of self-destruction, since the hunger for life and the hunger for spiritual uniqueness invariably exist in perpetual mutual cancellation. (Rolleston 1995, 137)

The performance of hunger is based on a form of negation, if we accept that the individual can negate the existence of the world through the starvation of the self, as mentioned above. Kafka's hunger artist is not a "unitary being", a self or subject in the ordinary, everyday sense that Rolleston uses, but the living embodiment of the idea of hunger in its most abstract form. He has neither a desire for "uniqueness" nor a hunger for "life". His existence is solely to strive after an ideal form of fasting, which is to fast indefinitely, without limits. It is this idea to which he sacrifices himself, whereby the destruction of the body is a logical outcome of a supposed artistic process. I would therefore argue that hunger here functions in much the same way as beauty in Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful", discussed earlier on, where the artist realizes at the end that all things participate in the idea of beauty, and that beauty exists as an idea beyond its material form. Yet while Hawthorne's artist pursues his art away from the prying eyes of the world, what the hunger artist desires is recognition and legitimacy above all else, even when faced with the constant doubt and scepticism that his performance of hunger provokes. The hunger artist participates in a concept of hunger that is both uniquely his own and the kind recognized and understood by the crowds that watch him.

The performance of fasting in "Ein Hungerkünstler" is the work of a professional artiste whose deepest wish is to be allowed to fast indefinitely, and who only breaks his fast in order not to test the patience of his audience. The plot of Kafka's parable is divided into two halves, each ending with a significant change in the hero's fortune. The first half begins with a retrospective account of fasting artists in general: "In den letzten Jahrzehnten ist das Interesse an Hungerkünstlern sehr zurückgegangen..." (EH, 392); history bears out the accuracy of this declaration, as hunger artists similar to Kafka's hero did exist.<sup>40</sup> The reader is introduced to the hunger artist at the height of his fame, at a time when he drew large crowds in all the major cities. This first phase of the narrative deals with the various limits placed upon the hunger artist, such as the time frame of the biblical forty days, after which the audience apparently loses interest. The limits placed on the hunger artist ensure that there is never any variation to the performance, even as the spectacle is repeated time and again. The hunger artist's art is formulaic, or as Rolleston phrases it: "the social realm is defined by an exclusive concentration on the purity of the fasting process, and the temporal dimension is defined as an open-ended repetition of the same pure moment" (Rolleston 1995, 139).

40 In his essay "Kafka and the Hunger Artists" (1987), Breon Mitchell argues that from beginning to end, Kafka's narrative accurately reflects, and might well have been inspired by, the appearance of these figures in the popular press during the late-19th and early-20th centuries. Mitchell describes the rise and decline of these dubious figures, beginning with the accounts of the famous medical study into fasting undertaken by Dr. Henry Tanner, then culminating and declining with "fasting icons" like Giovane Succi. Other hunger artists who sought to outdo Succi's achievements found employment on the stages of circuses and country fairs, until they eventually lost the interest of even these modest audiences to the allure of the menagerie. Mitchell alludes to the panther that replaces the hunger artist at the end of "Ein Hungerkünstler" as further proof of Kafka's familiarity with this historical development.



The performance of the hunger artist is a routine based on trial and error that is rigidly imposed by the canny Impresario. There is evidently a conflict relating to the Impresario's hold over the artist and the spectacle he sells to the public, as the Impresario's main function is to ensure the success of the performance, and to make sure the rigid time limit that governs the performance is maintained. The Impresario in "Ein Hungerkünstler" also calls to mind Goethe's allegorical "Vor-spiel auf dem Theater" at the beginning of *Faust I*, in which Goethe dramatizes his views on the relationship between art, the artist, and the audience. Goethe's Direktor and Kafka's Impresario are both spokesmen for the kind of hard-nosed pragmatism that counterbalances the idealism and self-absorption of the artist or poet. In his capacity as agent and stage manager, the Impresario in Kafka's story transforms the ambition and impulsiveness of the hunger artist into a marketable event that is palatable to the masses:

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. Vierzig Tage etwa konnte man erfahrungsgemäß durch allmählich sich steigende Reklame das Interesse einer Stadt immer mehr aufstacheln, dann aber versagte das Publikum, eine wesentliche Abnahme des Zuspruchs war festzustellen. (HK, 395)

The audience in the story consists of faceless crowds, "satte Menschen" (EH, 398) who select volunteers from their ranks to watch over the hunger artist, "merkwürdigerweise gewöhnlich Fleischhauer" (EH, 393), and these sentries are men with healthy appetites who receive a hearty breakfast as payment for their night's supervision. Diezemann points out that they do not only symbolize food in the form of "Fleisch" (which can mean either flesh or meat), they also ensure that it is always readily available, and some even encourage the hunger artist to break his fast by paying no attention to him (Diezemann 2006, 120). The crude appetite of these men is the exact reverse of the pure, ascetic hunger of the fasting artist,<sup>41</sup> and there is a grotesque, even cannibalistic element to the breakfast that the sentries enjoy at the hunger artist's expense, as it is the artist's starving body that ultimately feeds their own.<sup>42</sup> These sentries are divided into two categories: the suspicious kind who observe the hunger artist's every move, and the incredulous kind who

41 Harry Steinbauer maintained that "Kafka is not writing about an artist but about an ascetic saint" (Steinhauer 1962, 33) and that "his starvation is a self-imposed confinement and must always be so. For he does not want the freedom of the active man, of the materialist" (Steinhauer 1962, 40). I would argue against Steinbauer's reading, however, as the hunger artist's motives for fasting in public remain largely ambiguous, and it also seems unlikely that a saint would attain genuine beatification by seeking fame through the spectacle of his own martyrdom.

42 Rolleston cites an intriguing passage that was later deleted from the published text, but was printed in an article written by Pasley in 1966: "In a second, longer deleted passage, the artist converses with a cannibal ('Menschenfresser') who claims to be a friend from old times and likes to talk to the hunger artist because there's nothing there to eat (Pasley, 105f.). The cannibal is, of course, the opposite of the artist: he has a profusion of hair, a powerful head, 'superhuman desires.' But the



leave him alone so that he might eat from the cache of food they believe he keeps hidden away in his cage. The discipline of fasting, with its strict code of conduct, is clearly lost on both sets of watchers, yet while the scrutiny of the former group of sentries is easily endured, there is nothing more unbearable to the hunger artist than the ignorant generosity of the latter:

Nichts war dem Hungerkünstler quälender als solche Wächter; sie machten ihn trübselig; sie machten ihm das Hungern entsetzlich schwer; manchmal überwand er seine Schwäche und sang während dieser Wachzeit, solange er es nur aushielt, um den Leute zu zeigen, wie ungerecht sie ihn verdächtigten. Doch half das wenig; sie wunderten sich dann nur über seine Geschicklichkeit, selbst während des Singens zu essen. (*EH*, 393)

At such times, the artist sings to his audience in order to actively assert his honesty rather than remain a passive object of their scepticism. The hunger artist is constantly faced with scepticism regarding the authenticity of his fast, despite his emaciated frame and best efforts to prove his artistic integrity. Indeed, it is his sole wish to be free of all constraints in order to demonstrate to the world his unrivalled powers of starvation, “warum gerade jetzt aufhören, wo er im besten, ja noch nicht einmal im besten Hungern war? [...] denn für seine Fähigkeit zu hungern fühlte er keine Grenzen” (*EH*, 396). Despite the hunger artist's unhappiness and protestations at being unable to fast beyond the forty-day time span, this period marks a relatively constant, uneventful phase in his career, as he continues to enjoy the attention of the public. When the time comes to break the fast, however, what is presented to the audience as a triumph of the artist's self-control, the mastery of the will over the body, is in reality the hunger artist's moment of defeat.

The breaking of the fast is staged as a set-piece performance designed to delight and entertain—an impressive hall, with flowers and a brass band, is used as the location of the performance, and the emaciated hunger artist is reluctantly led out to great applause and fanfare by two young women:

Dann also am vierzigsten Tage wurde die Tür des mit Blumen umkränzten Käfigs geöffnet, eine begeisterte Zuschauerschaft erfüllte das Amphitheater, eine Militärkapelle spielte, zwei Ärzte betraten den Käfig, um die nötigen Messungen am Hungerkünstler vorzunehmen, durch ein Megaphon wurden die Resultate dem Saale verkündet, und schließlich kamen zwei junge Damen, glücklich darüber, daß gerade sie ausgelost worden waren, und wollten den Hungerkünstler aus dem Käfig ein paar Stufen hinabführen, wo auf einem kleinen Tischchen eine sorgfältig ausgewählte Krankenhospitalzeit serviert war. (*EH*, 395)

cannibal ‘transforms’ people by consuming them, just as the artist seeks to do so by refusing all consumption” (Rolleston 1995, 141).

The measurements taken by doctors that are subsequently read out to the audience are an important part of the performance, as the presence of these men legitimizes the claims of the hunger artist that he fasted honestly. Diezemann also discusses the controversy surrounding numerous publications in medical journals describing an eleven-day fast undertaken by Francesco Cetti in 1887, which show that "einerseits der Wissenschaftszweig der Physiologie sich wie die Hungerkunst des Spektakels bediente und andererseits die Darbietungen der Hungerkünstler wie ein Experiment aufgebaut waren" (Diezemann 2006, 73). In a later essay, "Figurationen des Nahrungsabstinenz in der Moderne", Diezemann compares medical accounts of fasting of hunger artists, who are likened to athletes ("Leistungssportler"), and medical records of female patients suffering from anorexia. The key difference, she observes, is that the art of fasting involves the repression of appetite, whereas those doctors studying anorexic patients attributed the latter's condition to a loss or absence of appetite: "Dementsprechend fragten die Ärzten nicht nach Gründen für das Nichtessen, sondern versuchten, die kranken zum Essen zu bringen" (Diezemann 2008, 120). I agree that the hunger artist's condition can be understood in terms of absence, although his hunger can be read as spiritual as well as physical. As he later confesses, his hunger is an expression of distaste for the food the world readily provides, as he cannot find the food he likes. Though the tone of the narration is detached and analytical, the sequence is marked by a nightmarish sensuality as the body of the hunger artist is paraded for the crowds and Kafka describes in anatomical detail the ravages of hunger on it as the hunger artist is led out of the cage:

[...] der Leib war ausgehöhlt; die Beine drückten sich im Selbsterhaltungstrieb fest in den Knien an einander, scharften aber doch den Boden, so, als sei es nicht der wirkliche, den wirklichen suchen sie erst. (EH, 396)

The hunger artist's body remains the sole, irrefutable proof of the artist's integrity. For the hunger artist, the world he inhabits fluctuates between the luridly real and the unreal: there is no "normal reality" or solid ground on which to place his feet. At such moments the scene crosses the boundary separating a representation of a "real" performance of fasting from fable, yet the dislocation between the symbolism of fasting and its actual performance is problematic, as hunger artistry is not really art in the conventional sense. As Pasley points out, "art by its very nature cannot be wholly divorced from illusion and trickery, from the urge to persuade the public, and to earn adulation and fame" (Kafka 1963, 31). The hunger artist is not imitating the gestures and appearances of a starving man, he is not fasting "artistically", rather he is genuinely, honestly starving himself:

Niemand war ja imstande, alle die Tage und Nächte beim Hungerkünstler ununterbrochen als Wächter zu verbringen, niemand also konnte aus eigener Anschauung wissen, ob wirklich ununterbrochen, fehlerlos gehungert worden war; nur der Hungerkünstler selbst konnte das wissen, nur er also gleichzeitig der von seinem Hungern vollkommen befriedigte Zuschauer sein.

Er war aber wieder aus einem andern Grunde niemals befriedigt; vielleicht war er gar nicht vom Hungern so sehr abgemagert, daß manche zu ihrem Bedauern den Vorführungen fernbleiben mußten, weil sie seinen Anblick nicht ertrugen, sondern er war nur so abgemagert aus Unzufriedenheit mit sich selbst. (EH, 394)

The artist's claim that fasting was the easiest thing in the world, and that he starved out of unhappiness with himself, again brings to mind the earlier comparison between Kafka and the hunger artist made by Friedman. For Kafka, art was not the refuge from existence, but rather a special form of existence itself. The collection of Kafka's stories published under the title *Ein Hungerkünstler* in 1924 deals with the subject of the artiste, the kind of performer Kafka had encountered at fairs and Varieté theatres in his youth and early adulthood,<sup>43</sup> and what is striking is that Kafka should return to these marginal figures at a time when his own doubt and self-questioning of his role as an artist became strongest. Over a decade before the publication of stories such as "Ein Hungerkünstler", "Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse", and "Erstes Leid", Kafka had come into contact with troupes of Yiddish performers in Prague, and his reflections at the time on what constituted a good or bad artist mixed with his self-analysis provide an intriguing backdrop to these later texts:

Mein Nachahmungstrieb hat nichts Schauspielerisches, es fehlt ihm vor allem die Einheitlichkeit. Das Grobe, auffallend Charakteristische in seinem ganzen Umfange kann ich gar nicht nachahmen, ähnliche Versuche sind mir immer mißlungen, sie sind gegen meine Natur [...]. Aber gerade dieses Mühe-lose, dieser Durst nach Nachahmung entfernt mich vom Schauspieler, weil diese Mühelosigkeit ihr Gegenspiel darin hat, daß niemand merkt, daß ich nachahme. Nur meine eigene zufriedene oder öfter widerwillige Anerkennung zeigt mir das Gelingen an. (Kafka 1976, 30 December 1911)

Kafka's powers of imitation did not lend themselves to theatricality—his imitations lacked the consistency of a trained performer, rather his mimicry was the effortless expression of an inner compulsion. No one noticed whether his gestures were authentic or imitations, as he had no inclination to "perform", rather the pleasure Kafka derived from these imitations was the sole measure of their success. In works such as "Ein Hungerkünstler" and "Erstes Leid", the reader is faced with a similar issue, as Kafka's heroes perform for an audience, and yet their motive for doing so is not just to please the crowd. There is instead some hidden drive or longing that compels the acrobat and the hunger artist to pursue their art to the exclusion of all else, yet at the same time there is the sense that their

43 There are many biographies of Kafka that deal with Kafka's fascination with the actors at fairs and theatres; for example, in his study of Kafka's life, *Franz Kafka: Der ewige Sohn: eine Biographie*, Peter-André Alt suggests that, beyond his fascination with their varying artistic merits, Kafka was drawn to the eroticism and promiscuity of the performers (see Alt 2005, 185).

art is inextricably bound up with the conditions of their lives and the limitations placed upon them, and that these limits are both the product and the source of the "authenticity" of their art. The boundary between art and life becomes blurred, as does the distinction between what is real and what is art, insofar as art is held to be an imitation of reality.<sup>44</sup>

The art of hunger does not adhere to the principle that fasting can only become art if it is somehow elevated to the realm of the exceptional, to something that distinguishes it from the common run-of-the-mill hunger experienced by the audience; to equate hunger with art in such terms only means succumbing to one of many contradictions presented by Kafka's text. Kafka's short story "Josefine, die Sängerin oder Das Volk der Mäuse" sheds light on this problem, as the story can be read as a parable for the relationship between the artist and her community, as Josefine's concerts serve to strengthen the social bond of the mouse-folk. Yet the story's heroine must also contend with the doubt and mistrust of her audience; the narrator articulates precisely this issue of the commonplace being rendered an art form:

Die einfachste Antwort wäre, daß die Schönheit dieses Gesanges so groß ist, daß auch der stumpfste Sinn ihr nicht widerstehen kann, aber dieser Antwort ist nicht befriedigend [...]. Ist es denn überhaupt Gesang? [...] Ist es vielleicht doch nur ein Pfeifen? Und Pfeifen allerdings kennen wir alle, es ist die eigentliche Kunstfertigkeit unseres Volkes, oder vielmehr gar keine Fertigkeit, sondern eine charakteristische Lebensäußerung. Alle pfeifen wir, aber freilich denkt niemand daran, das als Kunst auszugeben, wir pfeifen, ohne darauf zu achten, ja, ohne es zu merken und es gibt sogar viele unter uns, die gar nicht wissen, daß das Pfeifen zu unsern Eigentümlichkeiten gehört. (Kafka 2000, 519)

The question of art may be found not so much in beauty as in the distinction between the innate, commonplace sounds of the mouse-people and the effect created by the skill of Josefine as an artist. The narrator suggests that there must be some form of boundary or a distinction between the imitation of a common sound and what may be considered music. Clearly the potency of Josefine's singing, the measure and value of her performance, is only ascertained by the weighing of its imposition on the consciousness of its audience, the impression and depth of feeling that it arouses on the minds and memories of the mouse-folk.

The same logic can be applied, albeit with greater difficulty, to the performance of the hunger artist. Hunger is difficult to express other than by language or by the physical signs of starvation; thus the hunger artist does not create art in the strict

44 The concept of art as imitation has preoccupied philosophers and artists since Plato's discussion of *mimesis* and *diegesis* in the *Republic*, while Umberto Eco's essay "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics" places this debate within the framework of modern popular culture. According to Eco "the artistic criterion for recognizing artistic value was *novelty*, high information. The pleasurable repetition of an already known pattern was considered, by modern theories of art, typical of Crafts—not of Art—and of industry" (Eco 1985, 161).

sense of the word, as Josefina does. Only those who feel hunger can understand the art of hunger, but such a simple explanation falls short. "Versuche, jemandem die Hungerkunst zu erklären! Wer es nicht fühlt, dem kann man es nicht begreiflich machen" (EH, 402): it is not just the sensation of hunger, but *something else* that elevates it beyond physiological workings of the body. The art of hunger cannot be conveyed or expressed, rather it must be felt and lived through, in the same way that the sentences of the condemned are written on their flesh in Kafka's "In der Strafkolonie". This would suggest that hunger as art is based on what Rolleston described as a "perpetual mutual cancellation", for, in order to be understood, hunger must be felt by the audience, by which point it is simply imitation and may no longer be considered art, making the spectacle of the fasting artist redundant. The audience is drawn to the artist not in the same manner as the mouse-folk, they are not inclined to reflect on their common experience of hunger, rather their attendance is the result of the fervour drummed up by advertising and the popular press. Ellmann argues that "there is something about hunger, or more specifically about the *spectacle* of hunger, that deranges the distinction between the self and the other" (Ellmann 1993, 54); however, in the case of the hunger artist, the distinction is clearly defined and upheld. The performance is set up to create both physical and psychological distance between the observing spectator and the passive, enigmatic figure behind the bars of the cage. The spectacle of the hunger artist does not provoke pity or terror; there is no empathy felt by the audience, only a kind of vague mistrust, as though the fast was not all it was claimed to be.

The hunger artist is, in essence, always performing. The audience, on the other hand, must be reminded of the artist's hunger primarily by the signs of hunger on his body, as well as by the cage and the clock that measures the passing hours of the fast. As Rolleston points out:

The hunger artist imposes a coherent structure on the flux of time (time, according to Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* is the substrate, the primary material of all modernist art). Time ceases to be the open ended, unpredictable element of everyday life and is organized into the minutes, the hours, and finally the biblical forty days of the fasting sequence. (Rolleston 1995, 140)

The clock and the cage, which form the external trappings of the performance, are representative of the spatial and temporal limits of human existence in general, but they are also material objects that have a practical use, as they lend a tangible reality to the performance of hunger that compensates for the entirely subjective experience of the artist's starvation.<sup>45</sup> This appears from the outset to refute the

45 In a diary entry dated 16 January 1922, Kafka presents an intriguing analogy of the objective, external passage of time and the internal, subjective perception of temporality as two antagonistic forces tearing the individual in two opposing directions: "Die Uhren stimmen nicht überein, die innere jagt in einer teuflischen oder dämonischen oder jedenfalls unmenschlichen Art, die äußere geht stockend ihren gewöhnlichen Gang. Was kann anders geschehen, als daß sich die zwei verschiedenen Welten trennen, und sie trennen sich oder reißen zumindest auseinander in einer fürchterlichen Art. Die

idea expressed by Hawthorne discussed earlier on, as rather than the value of art being derived from the quality of ideas from which it originates, the art of hunger requires the aid of physical objects in order to be considered as art in the first place. With most forms of art, there is some difference or variation between a given work of art and the category or genre to which it belongs. With the art of fasting, however, there are no such differences between the universal idea and its material expression. Hence the clock, the cage, and, above all, the Impresario give meaning that would otherwise be lacking, and yet they bear no direct relation to the starving body on display. If the hunger artist's performance is expressed through a collection of symbols that are on the one hand arbitrary, and are on the other hand crucial to its success, then it would suggest that the performance of hunger can only be appreciated if it is mediated through objects or people that, although arbitrary, have a useful function. The artist must rely on these practical objects in order to make hunger comprehensible, or even recognizable, as art.

The restrictions placed upon the artist in the form of the hall and cage, along with the temporal limits signified by the clock, give some visual credibility to hunger as an authentic art form, though I would argue that there are other, less tangible, ways of judging the success of the performance. For all its theatrical effects, the spectacle seems to leave no lasting impression on those who had been enthralled during the forty-day time period, and the manner with which the hunger artist is later neglected and ultimately forgotten calls into question the merits of such a performance altogether. From a theatrical point of view, the idea that a single performance should last for forty days is ambitious to the point of absurdity and goes against all the conventions of dramatic art laid down since Aristotle. For example, in the *Poetics*, Aristotle recommends that the artist limit the size or length of a drama or epic so the audience may best remember and reflect upon what has been spoken or performed, as the human faculties for perceiving a work of art provide natural limits for the artist to follow. Hence beauty is also a matter of proportions that is not only attained through representation, but also through finding the correct magnitude and arrangement (Aristotle 1942, 16). These considerations seem to be lacking from the performance of hunger, as the audience is absorbed in a spectacle that seems to have no broader meaning beyond its self-contained limits and the question is inevitably raised as to what point it serves other than as a means of acquiring fame and wealth for those involved. As an artistic project, the very nature of fasting makes it forever doomed to failure, its social significance reduced by circumstance and its cessation enforced by the compulsory meal or by death. Kafka's hunger artist ceases to be an artist the moment his hunger ceases to be acted out, implying that, for all his vanity and perseverance, he requires a perceptive, appreciative audience outside of himself. Auster identified the one unique

Wildheit des inneren Ganges mag verschiedene Gründe haben, der sichtbarste ist die Selbstbeobachtung, die keine Vorstellung zur Ruhe kommen läßt, jede emporjagt, um dann selbst wieder als Vorstellung von neuer Selbstbeobachtung weitergejagt zu werden" (Kafka 1976).

skill of the hunger artist as the ability to starve while carrying on living, to stand on the brink of dying and yet remain alive, "neither advancing nor retreating along the precipice" (Auster 1992, 13).

The relationship between the artist and the audience dominates the first phase of the narrative, but in the second phase that relationship is altered, primarily through the absence of the limits necessary to establish the success or failure of the fast. A sudden shift in public taste means that the hunger artist no longer commands the same crowds that he once did:

Denn inzwischen war jener Umschwung eingetreten [...] jedenfalls sah sich eines Tages der verwöhnte Hungerkünstler von der Vergnügungssüchtigen Menge verlassen, die lieber zu anderen Schausstellungen strömte. (EH, 398)

He parts ways with his manager, and the dissolution of the stable framework consisting of the artist, Impresario, and audience marks the end of the hunger artist's fast as an artistic project. The hunger artist consents to join a circus, which guarantees a steady stream of visitors and where he is free to fast to his heart's content, yet where there is no clock to measure the passing days and where eventually the circus keepers neglect to change the number on the sign outside the cage:

[...] das Täfelchen mit der Ziffer der abgeleisteten Hungertage, das in der ersten Zeit sorgfältig täglich erneut worden war, blieb schon längst immer das gleiche, denn nach den ersten Wochen war das Personal selbst dieser kleinen Arbeit überdrüssig geworden. (EH, 402)

For the hunger artist time effectively stands still, and yet he still hungers on, while his cage presents little else but a distraction for the audience on its way to the menagerie. The absence of limits calls into question the very idea of time-keeping on which the discipline of fasting evidently depends. The hunger artist's ambition to transcend the limitations placed upon him is ultimately rendered futile by the indifference of the public, as the duration of his fast becomes meaningless if no one is on hand to record it. The loss of his audience is arguably itself a form of death for the artist; beyond the physical, material death of the flesh lies the death of the artist's reputation, as the memory of the artist lives on only through the relevance of his or her work. Rolleston sums up the artist's dilemma when he states:

The artist's project makes sense in certain historical circumstances (i.e. when he attracts an audience) but not in others. Again, there is an insurmountable barrier between the artist and history understood as a coherent whole: he strives to be "the record hunger artist of all time" (CS 271), but, to adapt one of Kafka's aphorisms (see *Great Wall* 168), what if "all time" can be defined as "indifference to hunger artists"? (Rolleston 1995, 136)

Rolleston also states that the popularity of professional fasting does not conform to our expectations of how Kafka's audience might have thought and felt



about hunger. Why would the poor and disenfranchised masses of Europe in the 19th and early 20th centuries pay to watch someone starve to death? And was the build-up and publicity surrounding these fame-hungry artistes nothing more than mere distraction, or did it reflect a genuine interest in a deep-rooted cultural phenomenon? Rolleston argues that such questions are a symptom of the dislocation between past and present, and he cites the predominant belief that, in the current post-materialist age, there is a lack of imminent danger from the hunger that marked the lives of past generations. He argues that as a consequence of this belief "the artist is forced into the realm of fable. What was obvious yesterday can be reconstructed only with difficulty today" (Rolleston 1995, 135).<sup>46</sup>

The narrator of the story reflects that there is a slender hope for the resurgence of the art of fasting, however, though it is projected onto an unknown and uncertain future that offers no consolation for those suffering in the present:

Und es war kein allzu häufiger Glücksfall, daß ein Familienvater mit seinen Kindern kam, mit dem Finger auf den Hungerkünstler zeigte, ausführlich erklärte, um was es sich hier handelte, von früheren Jahren erzählte, wo er bei ähnlichen, aber unvergleichlich großartigeren Vorführungen gewesen war, und dann die Kinder, wegen ihrer ungenügenden Vorbereitung von Schule und Leben her, zwar immer noch verständnislos blieben—was war ihnen Hungern?—, aber doch in dem Glanz ihrer forschenden Augen etwas von neuen, kommenden, gnädigeren Zeiten verrieten. (*EH*, 401)

Eventually an overseer asks the hunger artist's keepers why a perfectly good cage is standing unused, at which point the skeletal hunger artist is discovered in a pile of dirty straw strewn on the floor. With his dying breath he reveals he only wished to be admired, though in truth his fast deserved no admiration—going hungry was in fact the easiest thing in the world, as he could never find the food he liked, and had he done so he would have stuffed himself with food like everyone else:

Weil ich nicht die Speise finden konnte, die mir schmeckt. Hätte ich sie gefunden, glaube mir, ich hätte kein Aufsehn gemacht und mich vollgeessen wie du and alle. (*HK*, 403)

The hunger artist is never satisfied, even at the height of his success, and his dissatisfaction is the main stimulus as well as the main flaw of his art. For all his discipline and devotion, he finally admits that he is compelled to fast out of necessity, as he could never find any food to his liking. This in turn makes fasting the easiest

46 It should be noted, however, that Rolleston's essay was published at a time when faith in free-market capitalism was arguably at its strongest. Rolleston argues that "the psychology of an everyday life confined within poverty, humiliation, dire memories, and material wreckage cannot easily be grasped from our (American) vantage point. [...] The extreme experiences of the past, its cycles of prosperity and misery, are becoming ever harder to grasp imaginatively within the eternal present of consumer capitalism" (Rolleston 1995, 141). Many parallels have since been drawn between the financial crisis that began in 2008 and the stock market crash of 1929.



thing in the world, and hence unworthy of admiration. Yet to be admired is his sole reason for living, and if there is no audience to appreciate the fast, there is no point in his starving in the first place. The truth of the performance is based not on the repression or denial of appetite, but on the absence of appetite altogether: the hunger artist is not denying himself anything, because there is nothing to deny himself of. The desire for physical satisfaction is transformed into a craving for recognition, for fame and adulation. All that the hunger artist wants is recognition of the fact that he exists, as living and fasting become one and the same, and hence there is no distinction between art and life. The cathartic quality of the artist's dying confession belies the absurdity and circular logic of his hunger. It is not starvation that is the primary cause of the artist's death, for as long as the public interest is maintained he will accept the limitations placed upon him and break his fast, and the cycle can be repeated indefinitely.

Kafka's story of the hunger artist rests on a paradox, as the incongruity of his calling is that his art is both passive and self-destructive. The paradox lies in the fact that, on the one hand, fasting is simply not eating, or doing nothing to address the body's basic need for food; and, on the other hand, hunger is a biological process that causes nausea, weakness, and death, meaning that to go hungry is an active assertion of will in the face of all the symptoms of starvation. The hunger artist's dissatisfaction with himself is falsely interpreted by the audience as an effect induced by his repression of hunger, rather than as what the hunger artist perceives as the audience's lack of patience which denies him his sole wish to fast indefinitely, without limits: "Was die Folge der vorzeitigen Beendigung des Hungerns war, stellte man hier als die Ursache dar!" (*EH*, 398). His insistence that he clearly does not feel hunger in the same way as ordinary people is met with incredulity, and only heightens the mystique surrounding his performance. The question of whether the hunger artist is fasting "honestly" is therefore reversed, since the only "fraud" the hunger artist is now guilty of is being bound by different biological rules than that of those who watch him. While his fast is extraordinary, it deserves no praise as fasting comes naturally to him. The success of the fast depends on the hunger artist's ability to maintain a balance between doubt and legitimacy, just as the hunger artist's talent consists of testing the boundaries of the body's endurance.

After the death of the hunger artist his body is removed and unceremoniously buried, though the cage he occupied remains standing, as it provides a means of housing different exhibits and may thus keep producing the kind of fascination that drew the crowds in the first place: it is thus, ironically, the cage that endures and not the artist. A young panther is put in the cage, and its animal vitality soon attracts the public, who are reluctant to move away. Some critics have seen in the introduction of the panther a resolution to the main conflict in the narrative that the hunger artist's fast was a spiritual striving for an artistic ideal stemming from absence or lack of suitable nourishment, as the panther represents the triumph of the body and of its physical urges:

Nicht einmal die Freiheit schien er zu vermissen; dieser edele, mit allem Nötigen bis knapp zum Zerreißen ausgestattete Körper schien auch die Freiheit mit sich herumzutragen; irgendwo im Gebiß schien sie zu stecken; und die Freude am Leben kam mit derart starker Glut aus seinem Rachen, daß es für die Zuschauer nicht leicht war, ihr standzuhalten. Aber sie überwandten sich, umdrängten den Käfig und wollten sich gar nicht fortrühren. (EH, 404)

It is unsurprising that the panther should prove popular with the fickle public, as its idealized qualities of strength and animal vitality offer a welcome change from the emaciated hunger artist. The introduction of the panther after the hunger artist's death sets up the inevitable distinction between physical need and our spiritual appetites, as Steinhauer for instance argues that those dead to their own spirituality are like the panther "who needs no freedom, no transcendence, only meat to tear between [their] teeth" (Steinhauer 1962, 40). The panther's raw physicality is a reminder that all living things are temporarily trapped within a cage of skin, muscle, and bone, and that it is only through the cultivation of the mind that human beings may hope to achieve a degree of freedom from their animal impulses. Politzer observes, however, that "had [Kafka] wanted to allegorize in his artist the impotence of the spirit as opposed to the unbroken power of life, the [panther's] *joie de vivre* would, by contrast, have revealed the intention of the story" (Politzer 1966, 307).

Kafka's story of the hunger artist allegorizes many of the problems and contradictions inherent in modern attitudes to art: the art of hunger is evidently not the work of sublime genius, and the hunger artist does not claim an ascetic mastery over desire and its limitations, which have long been viewed as a burden for human existence. Rather his confession is a mocking admission of his own sense of failure, of futile searching in an unsatisfying world. His art presents a spectacle of the tension between the necessity of artistic boundaries and the artist's longing for the negation of these boundaries and for freedom beyond the external limits imposed by society. The art of fasting may thus be read as an ambiguous performance of both vanity and self-exclusion, with the basic principle that the man who cannot find the spiritual food to his liking is doomed to a life of isolation. The hunger artist's hubristic longing to be the greatest of all time can only ever end in death and defeat, however hard he struggles to make the best out of an impossible situation. In his hunger for artistic perfection and spiritual nourishment, he remains at the mercy of his appetite like everyone else.



## Part 2

**Knut Hamsun and Richard Wright**



### 3. Starvation and Self-Destructiveness in Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* (Sult)

In his study of what he argued were the ten greatest writers of the modern period, Malcolm Bradbury points out that “modern literature, like modern life, moves always closer to the abyss, in the world of action or the world of inward consciousness” (Bradbury 1988, 31). There can have been few statements made that so neatly encapsulate the issues at stake in Knut Hamsun's novel *Hunger*, even if Bradbury was discussing the work of Dostoevsky at the time. Although Hamsun's reputation still remains a point of contention among scholars and critics,<sup>47</sup> the merits of novels such as *Hunger*, *Mysteries*, and the Nobel Prize-winning *Growth of the Soil* remain universally acknowledged, and Hamsun has rightly been recognized as the literary heir of Dostoevsky, Strindberg, and Ibsen.<sup>48</sup> The focus of the present chapter is not, however, Hamsun's reputation or lack thereof, nor does this chapter discuss the period from his struggle to overcome his humble origins and poverty up to his literary breakthrough with *Hunger*.<sup>49</sup> It aims instead to discuss the significance of hunger for Hamsun's nameless narrator, whose self-destructive tendencies culminate in his sometimes tragic, sometimes comical, battles with himself, God, and the world in general. I examine how the narrator's willing embrace of hunger makes him a singular example of the modern anti-hero,<sup>50</sup> whose apparent

47 For a discussion of the primitivism and anti-modern stance perceived by critics in Hamsun's later novels, as well as of his controversial views on politics and race, see Monika Zagar's “Knut Hamsun's ‘White Negro’ From Ringen Sluttet (1936) or The Politics of Race” (2007).

48 Hamsun's views on literature were strongly influenced by his reading of Dostoevsky, and he made no secret of whom he was most indebted to when he wrote in 1929: “I am no man of stone, I am impressionable, excitable, hysterical some might think; perhaps I have learnt from all those authors I have read, how should I know! But in my younger days, none made such an impression on me as Dostoevsky, Nietzsche and Strindberg” (Original source in Vor Verden 1929; quoted in Francis Bull, Frederik Paasche, and A.H. Winsnes, Norsk litteratur historie [Oslo, 1937], v, 281; see McFarlane 1956, 564).

49 Critics have often pointed out that *Hunger*, to a greater or lesser degree, is based on Hamsun's own experiences of poverty and hunger, as well as his feelings of revolt and defiance, during his time as a struggling writer in the 1880s. Frode Saugestad, for instance, maintains that Hamsun and the book's nameless narrator are inextricably linked as, at the time of writing *Hunger*, Hamsun was “not only starving in the physical sense, he also had a desperate desire for social acceptance and education that continued throughout his lifetime until his late artistic breakthrough” (Saugestad 2009, 44). Atle Kittang, however, has argued that “such a reading may explain some of the links between the novel and its author, and thus shed some light upon that ambiguous space between fiction and autobiography from which so many of Hamsun's works seem to emerge. But it does not explain the structural aspects of the book, nor its deeper thematic purport. And consequently, the interpretation of the main motif, of the novel's hero, and of its plot, is too narrow and even superficial” (Kittang 1985, 295). I agree with Kittang's view that reading *Hunger* as an autobiography is not conducive to an in-depth study of the narrator's plight and suffering; hence the link between Hamsun and the novel's narrator will not be the main focus of the present discussion.

50 Bradbury remarks in his discussion of *Crime and Punishment* and *Notes from Underground* that “in the outcast and the criminal, the anti-hero and the superhero, Dostoevsky wanted to display the contradictions and extremities of his own day. But the age that followed was persistently to recognize them, in their conflicts, dilemmas and irritable rages, and make them into a fundamental part

disregard for society and for his own best interests is inextricably linked to his primary urge to produce literature.

### 3.1 *Hunger*

When the first fragment of the novel *Sult* ("Hunger") appeared anonymously in the Danish journal *Ny Jord* ("New Earth") in 1888, it was received with curiosity and enthusiasm by Denmark and Norway's intellectual elites, though few at that time could anticipate the influence that the story, which Georg Brandes later labelled as "monotonous",<sup>51</sup> would have on Western literature in the 20th century.<sup>52</sup> Hamsun had embarked upon the task of writing a book that was not a novel in the traditional sense. In a letter to the literary critic and translator Marie Herzfeld, he wrote:

I can see that your interests are also for the psychological, and that makes me really glad, for after all it is this alone that has the highest worth. Ordinary fiction about dances and engagements and excursions and marriages is nothing but reading for sea-captains and coachmen looking for an hour's entertainment. Cheap writing! (Hamsun, quoted in McFarlane 1956, 565)<sup>53</sup>

Both the unconventional, highly subjective narrative mode of *Hunger* and the plight of its narrator are demonstrative of Hamsun's view that "the proper role of

of modernity in literature" (Bradbury 1988, 31). Hamsun's impressionable, highly-strung narrator exhibits many traits of the Dostoevskyan anti-hero, yet the highly subjective mode of narration he adopts, coupled with his obsessive concern with starvation and how it affects mind and body, also sets him apart from his predecessors.

51 Hamsun addressed Brandes' criticism of *Hunger* in an undated letter, in which he wrote: "I have just been thinking about what you said about my book. From *you* I did not expect the judgment that it was monotonous. First of all, it plays out over just a few months, and seldom more than I have described happens in such a short period of time; second of all, I have purposely omitted the usual poetizing on suicide, marriage, picnics and balls put on by a wholesale merchant—I find that too cheap. What interests me are the infinite movements in my little soul, and I think that the moods I have described *Hunger*, whose absolute strangeness cannot be worn out by monotony [...] There are enough people who write novels when they want to depict hunger—from Zola to Kielland, they all do it. So is it the lack of a novelistic quality which perhaps makes my book monotonous, so this is a commendation, since I had set out not to write a novel in the first place" (Hamsun 1957, 91f.). (As I have quoted in the main text the English translations from various sources of Hamsun's letters, the German translations of Hamsun's letters found in Hamsun 1957 have also been translated into English for the sake of consistency.)

52 Irina Hron-Öberg examines Hamsun's influence on modern Scandinavian literature, as well as the religious semantics and the creative aspects of Hamsun's writing, in her recently published dissertation titled *Hervorbringungen: Zur Poetik des Anfangens um 1900*, where she points out that "Der hochkomplexe und fragmenthafte Romantext *Sult*, dem für die skandinavische Literatur eine ähnlich radikale und wegweisende Rolle zugeschrieben wird, wie dem joyceschen *Ulysses* innerhalb der englischsprachigen Dichtung, verhandelt eine überwältigende Fülle an für die Jahrhundertwende um 1900 vordringlichen (ästhetischen) Problemstellungen" (Hron-Öberg 2014, 104).

53 Hamsun's letter to Herzfeld can be found in Brevsamling nr. 64, Universitetsbiblioteket, Oslo.

literature had to be to pursue thought in its innermost concealed corners, on its darkest and most remote paths, in its most fantastic flights into mystery and madness, even to the distant spheres, to the gates of Heaven and Hell.”<sup>54</sup> Even before the success of *Hunger* catapulted him to fame, Hamsun had been highly critical of the literary establishment of Kristiania (Oslo) and Copenhagen, which throughout the 1870s and 1880s had been influenced by the development of realism and naturalism, and he derided the attempts of prominent writers to educate and enlighten the wider public.<sup>55</sup> Hamsun felt that literature should not be written to serve a social, political, or educational purpose, nor should it be concerned solely with matters of objective truth, reason, or morality. Hamsun instead called for a form of writing dedicated to the inner life of an individual in its full complexity that would capture psychic activity too delicate to be expressed through existing literary techniques. In his much quoted essay “From the Unconscious Life of the Mind”, which was also published in 1890, he wrote:

We would get to know a little about the secret stirrings that go on unnoticed in the remote parts of the mind, the incalculable chaos of impressions, the delicate life of the imagination seen under the magnifying-glass; the random wanderings of those thoughts and feelings; untrodden, trackless journeyings by brain and heart, strange workings of the nerves, the whisper of the blood, the entreaty of the bone, all the unconscious life of the mind. (Hamsun, quoted in McFarlane 1956, 568f.)

Hamsun’s use of an idiosyncratic first-person narrator has been viewed as the mark of a proto-modernist author, and critical works such as McFarlane’s groundbreaking essay “The Whisper of the Blood: A Study of Knut Hamsun’s Early Novels”

54 Quoted in Francis Bull, etc, Norsk lit. hist., v, 285 (see McFarlane 1956, 566).

55 The 1870s and 1880s in Scandinavia were marked by a move toward progressive and liberal reforms, and literature and the arts were important spheres in which writers and intellectuals could debate social and political issues. The emergence of naturalism and realism in Scandinavia was largely the result of political and economic developments, and certain writers and critics enjoyed a status almost equal to that of politicians. The famous Danish critic Georg Brandes was a leading figure at this time, and works such as *Main Currents in the Literature of the Nineteenth Century* and *Men of the Modern Transition* served as the theoretical foundations of the movement that came to be known as the “Modern Breakthrough” in Scandinavia (see Heitmann 2006, 183). Martin Humpál points out in *The Roots of Modernist Narrative* that “literature was to advance social progress by furthering rational and critical discussion, to educate citizens about social issues and to promote a liberal political agenda. The underlying premise of this literature was that humans are rational beings, capable of mastering their uncertainties and confusions, and thus responsible for their actions. This belief, central to the development of modernity since the Enlightenment, also promoted objectivity in rendering facts in accordance with the recent development of scientific positivism.” Humpál goes on to argue that the failure of liberal policies led to a shift in the direction of Norwegian literature: “The new cultural-political situation produces a more deterministic naturalism on the one hand, and the interest in symbolism and the individual psyche on the other. The latter orientation becomes the major trend in Norwegian literature in the 1890’s, a period traditionally called Neo-Romanticism, which focuses on the mysteries of the psyche and the senses, intuition, and imagination” (Humpál 1996, 47f.).



have done much to advance the cause of Hamsun as a pioneer of modern psychological writing.<sup>56</sup> The novelty of Hamsun's undertaking in *Hunger* may be found in its intensely subjective portrayal of an anonymous yet aspiring writer from the first stirring of consciousness until his final, climactic rupture with all that he fought against and aspired to be. Yet throughout the duration of this struggle he is ultimately alone; divested of God, love, and friendship, he must come to terms with the emptiness and futility of his own existence. In a letter to the Swedish novelist and publisher Gustav af Geijerstam, Hamsun revealed the concept behind the story's remarkable narrator:

This "I" is no ordinary person, no type; he is a [...] finely tuned, strange, sensitive, impressionable nature; for that reason his almost constantly abnormal state causes him to succumb to hunger and go downhill in every way.<sup>57</sup> (Hamsun 1957, 87)

*Hunger* is true to Hamsun's vision in that it is devoid of characters and plot in the conventional sense. It is an episodic account of a down-and-out writer who struggles to save himself from poverty and starvation, though often only succeeding in deepening his misery and hastening his physical and mental decline. Interspersed among his thoughts and impressions of Kristiania, "that strange city that no one leaves before it has set its mark upon him..." (*H*, 3), are scenes in garret rooms and pawnshops, idle hours on park benches, and nights in the city's jail, where his bouts of intense joy, fear, and loathing are played out. The sequential and impulsive qualities of the narrator's thoughts and experiences are contained in a four-part structure that makes up the narrative, and each of the four sections deals with a separate crisis of hunger. During the first three chapters the narrator is saved by obtaining money: he receives payment for an article in the first chapter, charity from a friend in the second, and assistance from a benevolent editor in the third. In the fourth and final chapter he refuses the help offered to him, tears up his last effort at writing, then signs on board a ship as a deckhand, thereby ending the story. Each part of the text deals with an episode when the narrator, through bad luck, pride, or incompetence, is left homeless, hungry, and penniless, and his

56 In his discussion of Hamsun's literary technique within the literary and historical context of modern writing Humpál also builds on the work undertaken by McFarlane. Humpál argues that *Hunger* is a "stream-of-consciousness" novel that achieves a measure of directness through Hamsun's use of free indirect discourse and by the elimination of the narrative voice. Humpál's study examines the similarities between Knut Hamsun and later modernist figures such as Joyce, Kafka, Proust, and Woolf, though not solely in terms of the thematic affinities between these writers, but also in terms of literary technique and narrative presentation (Humpál 1996, 60).

57 Hamsun was a well-known author by then, and his correspondence with Geijerstam offers a number of insights into his attitudes to literature, as well as into his less than complimentary views of the wider reading public. Hamsun maintained the view that those authors who addressed themselves to the masses submitted their thoughts to an empty abstraction rather than addressing a thoughtful, understanding readership. "I don't care for wider public" Hamsun wrote in a letter in 1890, "though with some regret I find it is open to me, though I renounce it. I only value the encouragement of *selected* people" (translated from Hamsun 1957, 87).

fate often depends on chance meetings and unexpected interventions, which for better or worse determine the course of his frantic battles with hunger and keep him going until the next crisis.

It has been observed that the narrative as a whole omits those periods when the narrator has been able to dig himself out of poverty, dwelling instead on the details of his suffering and hardships. Part Three, for example, opens with the line: "A week went by in joy and gladness" (*H*, 99). By this stage the pattern of the narrative has been established, and the reader can anticipate the slow descent into hunger and despair that will follow. In the introduction to his English translation of *Hunger*, Sverre Lyngstad remarks that "the narrative absence of the carefree periods in his life conforms to one of the most banal facts of human experience: happiness is aesthetically uninteresting" (Lyngstad 1996, xx). It has also been argued that the suffering brought on by hunger is only one of a number of challenges facing the narrator in his struggle for literary success, as Hamsun wrote in a letter to Kristofer Janson that "the book deliberately plays on a single string, but with an attempt to draw from that string hundreds of tones" (see McFarlane 1956, 574). McFarlane points out that:

The physical torment of hunger, however large it may seem to bulk, plays only an incidental role; the actual theme of the novel, as Heiberg has rightly claimed, is that of privation at a number of different levels—physical, erotic, social—and of an individual's struggle to build up an inner psychological defence against it. The mere fact of hunger is in itself something that a few kroner, borrowed or earned, can halt; its significance is as an agent of mental activity, bruising the mind in such a way as to make the hero excruciatingly sensitive to the touch of even the slightest things. (McFarlane 1956, 574)

For Hamsun's struggling writer, poverty and hunger form a destructive tide that sweeps him to the limits of his mental and physical endurance, though I would argue that he does not strive to build a "psychological defence" against the effects of hunger, quite the contrary. He appears hell-bent on breaking down all these psychological barriers to the point where he is left with nothing, not even a language to tell his story: "I had passed over into the sheer madness of hunger. I was empty and without pain and my thoughts were running riot" (*H*, 66). In his stubborn pride, the narrator resolutely denies himself the consolations of religious faith and romantic love, though he is quick to blame his failed love affair and his aborted literary attempts on his poverty and hunger and is further plagued by a sense of persecution at the hands of God, fate, and mankind, which only intensifies his sense of alienation from society and self:<sup>58</sup> "I felt I was myself a crawling

58 Saugestad points out that *Hunger* resembles other works of modernist art and literature in that it deals with an individual's search for meaning in both his own inner life and society in general: "In the late twentieth century a distinctive type of structural change transformed modern societies. Through the fragmentation of the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality, our personal identities changed, and our sense of ourselves as integrated subjects was

insect doomed to perish, seized by destruction in the midst of a whole world ready to go to sleep" (*H*, 27).

*Hunger* has been viewed as distinctly modern in both its outlook and subject matter, and Lyngstad observes that "twenty five years before Kafka created Gregor Samsa, man as an insect, and more than fifty years before Camus popularized the absurd hero as a modern Sisyphus, Hamsun in *Hunger* did both" (Lyngstad 1996, xviii). Although Hamsun's novel abounds with insect imagery and employs themes that have been made famous by later writers, unlike in the case of Gregor Samsa in *Die Verwandlung*, the reader is given a realistic account of events, coupled with direct access to the narrator's thoughts and perceptions, which become increasingly unbalanced the more acute his hunger becomes. Furthermore, unlike the work of Camus and other existentialist writers, *Hunger* has no political message, or, as Auster maintains in *The Art of Hunger*: "Although *Hunger* puts us in the jaws of misery, it offers no analysis of that misery, contains no call to political action" (Auster 1992, 11). *Hunger*, like other works of 19th-century literature, is concerned with an individual's search for meaning in the anonymous desert of urban environments, though rather than depicting this search through the lens of social or political conflicts, the narrator depicts his real adversary as the city of Kristiana itself.

It has also been noted in the past that Hamsun's narrator resembles the heroes of the great 19th-century novels of disenchantment and disillusionment like those of Dickens or Balzac, insofar as the former is a young man from the provinces struggling to make his way in the city.<sup>59</sup> Lyngstad, for instance, argues that "the

undermined. Hall claims that 'this loss of a stable "sense of self" is sometimes called the dislocation or de-centring of the subject. This set of double displacements—de-centring individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves—constitutes a "crisis of identity" for the individual'" (Saugestad 2009, 25). The "crisis of identity" suffered by Hamsun's narrator is both provoked by and expressed through the bodily effects and literary imagery of hunger. His sense of alienation from society and self is as much his own doing as the result of the "fragmentation" of social and cultural landscapes.

- 59 In 1887, on his second visit to America, Hamsun delivered a series of lectures in Minneapolis which took as their subject figures such as Zola, Balzac, Flaubert, Strindberg, and Ibsen, and in which is displayed his familiarity with the literature of his day. It is therefore conceivable that Hamsun knowingly adopted an established literary "type" for his own purposes, and McFarlane points out the similarities between *Hunger* and the work of some of the most famous writers of the 19th century: "Inasmuch as he is poor, proud, intelligent, sensitive and to some extent set apart from his fellows, the hero of *Hunger* belongs to an established tradition in the novel; he shows a strong family resemblance to what Lionel Trilling, in writing of the nineteenth-century novel, has called the Young Man from the Provinces, a characteristic figure that he finds in Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, Balzac's *Père Goriot* and *Lost Illusions*, Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, and—with certain reservations—Tolstoi's *War and Peace* and Dostoevski's *The Idiot*. The provinciality of the hero, the thing that marks him off from the others and, although possibly putting him at an initial disadvantage, yet equips him in some special way for the observing of society, need not—as Trilling himself has indicated—mean literally a provincial birth; in many instances it has happened that his 'province' has been social class. As an index of Hamsun's break with the tradition of a socially orientated literature, the 'provinciality' of his hero is neither that of geography nor that of class but of sensibility..." (McFarlane 1956, 573). The selected letters

ancestor of Hamsun's wanderer in the streets of Kristiania can be traced to the Romantic hero, now become a kind of flâneur by virtue of finding himself down and out" (Lyngstad 1996, xvi). For Hamsun's starving hero, life in the city appears to be a labyrinth without exit, where despite his intimate knowledge of the city's geography and its rhythms, its inhabitants rarely regard him as anything other than an outsider. During Part One, upon hearing his accent, an old man asks him outright: "You're a stranger here?" (*H*, 22). Though he maintains a lofty contempt for people he meets, for the lovers, students, bank clerks, and merchants whom he inwardly derides as drunkards and gluttons, the disdain he lavishes on "the brutes" is mainly provoked by the fact that he has no money: "It was a torment, a misery like no other, to be so impoverished. What humiliation, what disgrace!" (*H*, 104)

There has also been a tendency to read the narrator's embrace of the trance-like moods that hunger induces as a kind of decadence, though McFarlane conjectures that only if he had *chosen* the life he leads, could he then be compared to other degenerate literary figures of the 1890s:

[...] his mode of life bears a number of superficial resemblances to that of the orthodox decadents: a certain lack of proportion, a certain over-refinement of the sensibility, a recurring joy and astonishment at his own mental processes. But whereas the decadent, when the "unwashed mood" was upon him, went slumming of his own volition, Hamsun's hero is cast down by a single rejection slip. There was no call for the hero of *Hunger* to seek vivid sensation, to court experience; where others had deliberate recourse to drugs and narcotics to extend their range of sensation and stimulate their reactions, hunger is enough for him; he sees no romance in the meanness and squalor of the capital, he is simply entrapped by it. (McFarlane 1956, 575)

Hamsun's narrator is indeed trapped in a downward spiral of poverty and hunger, and in many ways his plight is that of any other degenerate, impecunious writers striving to find an audience for their work. Yet the narrator's attitude to his hunger and poverty remains ambiguous, and I would argue that his poverty is for the most part self-inflicted; for example, after being accosted by a beggar at the beginning of Part One, he makes the impractical decision to pawn his waistcoat and hand over the lion's share of the proceeds, an act which he later comes to regret as his situation deteriorates and the season changes from autumn to winter. The outward transformation of the city's landscape during these early passages is significant, as the images of decline and decay presage the narrator's bouts of injury and sickness and his flirtation with death that result from his poverty and intensify as the story progresses: "The mood of the dying day makes me despondent and sentimental. [...] It's fall, the very carnival of transience; the roses have an inflamed flush, their blood-red color tinged with a wonderfully hectic hue" (*H*, 27).

quoted above also emphasize the idea of "sensibility" as a defining feature of the book's unnamed protagonist that becomes vital to the depiction of hunger, as well as of its effect on the narrator's nerves and psyche during the course of the novel.

It has been common practice to read the narrator's generosity as a willingness to starve, thus inviting comparisons with Kafka's hunger artist. Lyngstad, however, rightly points out that the analogy "casts him in a more abnormal role than the text justifies" as the narrator's generosity appears a quirk or habit "indicative of his visceral contempt of material values" (Lyngstad 1996, xx). Though the narrator remains largely contemptuous of society, he is still very much aware of its material values, and is acutely self-conscious of the lowly social status resulting from his poverty. As a consequence he often goes to considerable lengths to appear better off than he really is, such as in a passage in Part Two where, after taking refuge in a guardhouse under the assumed identity of a journalist named Tangen, he forfeits the chance of a badly needed breakfast in order to maintain appearances and avoid suspicion. The narrator must indeed live up to the reality of his words and act as the successful journalist—his grandiloquence has left him no alternative: "Head high, with the bearing of a millionaire and my hands gripping my lapels, I strode out of the jail" (*H*, 70).

Hence the narrator's excessive generosity is not inspired by altruism or even asceticism, but rather is a self-destructive impulse that is often provoked by pride, guilt, or embarrassment. His pride and vanity drive him to demonstrate to those he considers to be his inferiors, such as the crippled beggar mentioned above, that they are "in the presence of a person of integrity, honest to his fingertips" (*H*, 9), as he is convinced of being "a man of character, a white beacon in the midst of a turbid human sea with floating wreckage everywhere" (*H*, 42). Yet his "noble" sentiments are undermined by his own actions at regular intervals, as he plays pranks and tells lies both for the sake of his own amusement and to make up for his various shortcomings.

For instance, on meeting an old man on a park bench in Part One, he first makes an offer of a cigarette he does not possess, and then engages him in an increasingly one-sided conversation, inventing tales of growingly outlandish proportions: "The little dwarf's gullibility made me reckless, I felt like stuffing him full of lies come what may, driving him from the field in grand style" (*H*, 23). He also invents self-aggrandizing fictions concerning his prowess as a writer, such as when he retrieves the pencil stub he had forgotten in the pocket of his recently pawned waistcoat: "With this pencil, I continued coolly, I had written my monograph about philosophical cognition in three volumes. Hadn't he heard of it?" (*H*, 15). The pattern of the narrative is briefly interrupted during Part Three, when he re-encounters his love interest, a young woman on whom he had bestowed the imaginary name "Ylajali", "a name with a nervous, gliding sound..." (*H*, 11). However, instead of allowing his erotic, amorous impulses to supersede his nervousness and anxiety and potentially alter the course of his life for the better, he makes her another object in the game of deceit and self-abasement he persists in playing.<sup>60</sup>

60 For an in-depth discussion of the narrator's complex feelings of desire, self-contempt, and humiliation in his courtship of Ylajali, see Saugestad's "Individuation and the Shaping of Personal Identity" (2009, 58).

During their rendezvous he concocts an elaborate reason not to take her to see the animals at the menagerie, when his real reason is his shame over his appearance:

But I was afraid that this bored her, and the feeling of my extreme poverty beset me anew and weighed me down. If only I had been reasonably well dressed, then I could have made her happy with that walk in the amusement park. I couldn't understand this person who was able to take pleasure in letting herself be escorted up the whole length of Karl Johan Street by a half-naked tramp. (*H*, 119)

Their brief courtship ends ignominiously when he reveals to her that it is not drunkenness that had been the cause of his erratic behaviour during their first meeting, but rather the effects of hunger, which she believes to be a sign of madness rather than a common physical condition, leading her to exclaim in genuine fear: "Why, I believe you're crazy!" (*H*, 150). It is the narrator's confession that breaks the tentative bond between them, as his desire and possessiveness appear a further manifestation of the disturbed mental states brought about by hunger.

Despite his near-pathological dishonesty and absurd antics, he is highly conscious of the discrepancy between his brazen self-image and the reality of his deteriorating body:

Good God, what an awful state I was in! I was so thoroughly sick and tired of my whole wretched life that I didn't find it worth my while to go on fighting in order to hang on to it. The hardships had got the better of me, they had been too gross; I was so strangely ruined, nothing but a shadow of what I once was. My shoulders had slumped completely to one side, and I had fallen into the habit of leaning sharply when I walked, in order to spare my chest what little I could. I had examined my body a few days ago, at noon up in my room, and I had stood there and cried over it the whole time. (*H*, 129)

His appearance even provokes comments from strangers on the street, leading him to exclaim: "The devil only knew why you had to be turned into a veritable freak just from hunger!" (*H*, 87). Because he is both poor and an outsider, he is never able to fully integrate into the city's social life. Yet he turns this comparative powerlessness to his advantage, as he manages to loosen the tenuous hold society has upon him and attain moments of almost perfect seclusion during which he experiences thoughts and sensations of profound intensity. Furthermore, though hunger weakens his body, it expands his powers of observation and heightens his awareness of the world around him. On account of his poverty, he claims to possess keener sensibilities in his wanderings of the city's parks and boulevards than those "happy hearts" (*H*, 16) whose comparative wealth lets them take the city for granted:

The fact was that my poverty had sharpened certain aptitudes in me to such a degree that it got me into outright trouble. [...] But it also had its advantages,

it helped me in certain situations. The intelligent poor individual was a much finer observer than the intelligent rich one. The poor individual looks around him at every step, listens suspiciously to every word he hears from the people he meets; thus, every step he takes presents a problem, a task, for his thoughts and feelings. He is alert and sensitive, he is experienced, his soul has been burned... (*H*, 153)

Though he is frequently humbled and humiliated by his poverty, the narrator does not seek redemption or recognition from the people he meets: his lies and fabrications also indicate a reluctance to be judged under the normal conditions that define identity and social status. He sees himself as a moral person, the guiding light of humanity, but he is also a clown, whose vanity, conscientiousness, and guilt seem so incongruous when set against the life he chooses and make him appear almost a parody of Kristiania's hard-working, God-fearing bourgeoisie. Hence it may be argued that this antagonism makes the narrator of *Hunger* a peculiar brand of social misfit or even anti-hero, whose ironic defiance is riddled with self-contradiction and inconsistency. As Lyngstad points out, Hamsun anticipates "many other modernists in portraying the artist as clown—a superfluous man who knows the depth of human suffering but makes light of it, turning it into entertainment both for himself and others" (Lyngstad 1996, xx).

Hamsun's narrator also mocks his own literary pretensions, absurd posturing, and self-aggrandizement as "claptrap and rhetoric" (*H*, 152), yet his lies and inventions appear a suitable outlet for his vivid fantasies and daydreams, those feverish lapses in consciousness that are themselves highly creative acts.<sup>61</sup> What differentiates the narrator from the "normal" people he encounters is that he permits himself to act out these fantasies in public, giving voice to thoughts and feelings that would otherwise remain hidden or expressed only privately or in writing. The narrator's hunger and suffering are largely the cause of these fevered states that at times allow the narrator a certain measure of freedom from social anxiety or forethought, as he simply has nothing to lose in his dealings with others. By allowing his thoughts to merge into actions in a highly spontaneous, impulsive manner, his dreams and desires are brought into the world and enacted in a way that both engages and provokes those around him.

61 This idea is derived from Freud's examination of the connection that exists between a creative writer and his or her work in "Creative writers and day-dreaming", though my reading varies insofar as I do not examine Hamsun's novel in terms of "wish fulfilment", nor do I strictly rely on the concept of the writer as a form of "spectator". Freud writes: "It has struck me that in many of what are known as 'psychological' novels only one person—once again the hero—is described from within. The author sits inside his mind, as it were, and looks at the other characters from outside. The psychological novel in general no doubt owes its special nature to the inclination of the modern writer to split up his ego, by self-observation, into many part egos, and in consequence, to personify the currents of his own mental life in several heroes" (see Lodge 1972, 40). The notion of the division or splitting of the narrator into different characters has become a standard one in critical readings of *Hunger*, and will only be touched upon during my own discussion of the novel (see also Kittang 1985 and Lyngstad 1996).



The profoundly subjective mode of narration employed by Hamsun thus delineates and at the same time distorts the narrator's physical and mental experiences of poverty, hunger, and writing that dominate the narrative, and past scholarship has tried to elucidate the complex interaction between thought and impulse that make up its strange sequence of events. McFarlane set the tone for subsequent discussions when he stated that for Hamsun, "*personal identity and the individual response were the real crux of things; and it was his conviction that the novel ought to extend to these previously almost neglected areas the general range of human consciousness*" (McFarlane 1956, 567). The plight of Hamsun's solitary artist marked a decisive shift away from the socially orientated writing of the 19th century where the hero first surmounts the obstacles in his or her path before fully integrating into society; the narrator of *Hunger* indeed transcends the social order by unburdening himself of love, hope, or desire for salvation, while sounding the depths of body and mind in the process.

### 3.2 Hunger and subjectivity

A great amount has been written on the psychological aspects of *Hunger*, and Lyngstad remarks that perhaps too much emphasis has been placed on Hamsun "as a depth psychologist on a par with Freud" (Lyngstad 1996, xxi)—citing for instance Fechner-Smarsly's book-long study into the subject titled *Die wiederkehrenden Zeichen. Eine psychoanalytische Studie zu Knut Hamsun's "Hunger"*. Though the narrator evokes his thoughts and impressions with at times an almost dreamlike effect, he does not, for instance, cross-examine his own psychological motives in the manner of Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, even though certain passages of the two books show remarkable similarities.<sup>62</sup> He instead records the quirks of his conscious and semi-conscious states and the flow of thoughts as they happen, conveying the emotions and sensations of a man who starves himself to the edge of physical and mental breakdown. The novel's depiction of these mental states makes the narrator's inner life appear fragmented and discontinuous, and hunger encroaches upon his thoughts with frequent regularity and is discernable in his words and actions. Hunger thus exerts considerable influences over the course of the narrative, as the constant interplay between thought,

62 Jörg Pottbeckers makes a detailed study of the similarities in characterization and setting of the two novels in *Stumme Sprache: Innere Monolog und erzählerische Diskurs in Knut Hamsun's frühen Romanen im Kontext von Dostojewski, Schnitzler und Joyce*. Pottbeckers also quotes Walter Baumgartner, who points out in *Intertextuelle Mysterien: Hamsun, Brandes, und Dostojewsky* that "Die Menschliche Seele bei Dostojewsky und Hamsun ist nicht nur widersprüchlich, sie ist deshalb auch irrational, die Menschen handeln unfreiwillig destruktiv und selbstdestruktiv. [...] Auffällig bei Hamsun und Dostojewskis Figuren ist eine Tendenz, irrationalen Impulsen nachzugeben, Mitmenschen zu schockieren, den Bogen zu überspannen. [...] Oft scheitern ihre Projekte gerade wegen des Einsatzes von zu grobem Geschütz, zu viel Phantasie, zu komplizierte Strategie." For a full commentary, see Pottbeckers (2008, 113).



sensation, and external events provides the raw material from which the story is fashioned.

The reader is given direct access to the narrator's thoughts and is thus afforded a privileged view of his creative moments and increasingly frantic battles with hunger, though it is not always clear to what extent physical need, or psychological want, drives the consciousness telling the story. Kittang argues in "Knut Hamsun's *Sult*: Psychological Deep Structures and Metapoetic Plot" that the various episodes of the narrative are held together by two stable traits only: a sense of emptiness or lack signified by hunger; and the artistic impulse signified by his need to write. Kittang's Lacanian reading of *Hunger* addresses the book's thematic structure, as he argues that the link between the narrative consciousness telling the story and the movement or action of the novel is immediately apparent during the opening passages, as the world of the narrative is gradually revealed upon the hero's awakening from sleep. Kittang points out that the advertisements from the *Morgenbladet* plastered over the walls of his room are deliberately chosen, as these snippets of text introduce major themes that recur throughout the story: there is, for example, the strong death motif indicated by the "thin, grinning letters concerning 'Shrouds at Madam Andersen's'", as well as the duality of hunger and nourishment signified by "a fat, swelling ad for freshly baked bread by Fabian Olson, Baker" (*H*, 3). As the focus shifts from the narrator's awakening to his detailed observations of the world around him, the reader is presented with a perpetual movement or transition in his thoughts and observations. Kittang argues that:

Instead of presenting us with a fully-fledged character, the text shows how a human subjectivity is beginning to take shape, in a dialectic interplay between the nothingness of pure consciousness and some exterior fragments of symbols, that is, of meaning. It is not a process where the outer world is firmly grasped by a mind already formed as an identity, nor is it a process where the mind seeks to identify with the outer world. It is rather a process where the mind's access to the world is mediated through an order of symbols which makes recognition possible and, simultaneously, separates consciousness from reality itself. (Kittang 1985, 297)

The fact that the narrator's identity is never revealed, coupled with his habit of acting out the fictional roles he invents for himself, supports the notion of the narrator as *tabula rasa*, and he remains unburdened by biography or by "character" in the conventional sense. Kittang's reading also draws upon a dualist concept of hunger as both physical need and psychological lack, as for him "the motif of starvation goes far beyond the mere 'Naturalistic' or physiological level of meaning [...] hunger is also a metaphor, signifying a more fundamental lack or emptiness, which is a central aspect of the psychological deep structures investigated by the writer" (Kittang 1985, 295). The narrator does not always rely on metaphorical language to describe the profound effects of hunger on his thoughts, however:

I felt my brain literally snap, my head was emptying and emptying, and in the end it sat light and void on my shoulders. I perceived this gaping emptiness in my head with my whole body, I felt hollowed out from top to toe. (*H*, 28)

This apparent disconnect between consciousness and reality, between the literal and metaphorical representations of hunger, invites interpretation of the narrator's thoughts and feelings on binary lines. Yet a reading of *Hunger* in terms of a thematic "order" of symbols is obviated by the narrator's intense susceptibility to the most random and trifling details of everyday living, which have no further bearing on the narrative:

I couldn't sit down on a bench or set foot anywhere without being attacked by small, trivial incidents, miserable trifles that forced their way among my ideas and scattered my powers to the four winds. A dog streaking past, a yellow rose in a gentleman's buttonhole, could start my thoughts vibrating and occupy me for a long time. (*H*, 16)

Overwhelmed by the sheer weight of sensory impressions, the random sights and sounds that crowd in upon him, he is beguiled by the intensity of the physical and mental states brought on by hunger and, when he does eat, by the effects of food: "glutted and irritated, I walked to and fro without looking up; the people who came and went around me glided by like flickering shadows" (*H*, 17). There is a striking level of detail devoted to the narrator's thoughts and feelings during these moments, as he is a keen observer of his own unpredictable moods and the way they reflect upon those people around him. As Kittang points out, those people he meets often mirror his own predicament, as his hunger becomes manifest in the external reality of the novel, and yet this mirroring further obscures the lines between thought, feeling, and response:

If only one had a bite to eat on such a clear day! Overwhelmed by the impression of the happy morning, I experienced an irrepressible sense of well-being and started humming for joy for no particular reason. A woman with a basket on her arm stood outside a butcher's shop pondering sausages for dinner; she glanced at me as I walked past. She had only a single tooth in the front of her mouth. Nervous and susceptible as I had become during the last few days, the woman's face made a repellent impression on me right off; that long yellow tooth looked like a little finger sticking up from her jaw, and her eyes were still full of sausage as she turned towards me. I lost my appetite instantly and felt nauseated. (*H*, 6)

Hunger clearly has a painful effect on the narrator, and there are times when he seeks to escape his physical discomfort, such as when he drifts off into voluptuous daydreams of food: "I saw a tray on the table loaded with huge sandwiches, it changed and turned into beefsteak, a seductive beefsteak, a snow-white napkin, bread galore, a silver fork" (*H*, 38). Although the physical symptoms of hunger drive him to distraction and disrupt his train of thought, in the paragraph that follows he claims to prefer starvation to satiation, and thus echoes Melville's Bartleby

and prefigures Kafka's hunger artist when he declares that he is better off without food altogether:

Visions and dreams! I told myself that if I took some food now, my head would be confused again, my brain get feverish as before, and I would have lots of crazy ideas to contend with. I couldn't stand food, I wasn't made that way; it was a peculiarity of mine, an idiosyncrasy. (*H*, 38)

There is a school of thought that argues that in a modern developed society, going hungry should indeed be viewed as an "idiosyncrasy", as it must originate to some extent from an active assertion of will on the part of the starving individual, rather than a passive state brought on by famine or dearth. Diezemann, for instance, looks back to the scientific and medical studies of fasting of the late 19th century to decipher the link between Hamsun's narrator's physical condition and those "crazy" states into which he descends:

Hungern fungiert in diesem Roman als Katalysator, um Psyche und Körper einander anzunähern. Schnittstelle zwischen Psyche und Körper sind die Nerven, sie erweisen sich—in der medizinischen Tradition genauso wie in Hamsuns Roman—als durch Hungern und Essen stimulierbar. (Diezemann 2008, 122)<sup>63</sup>

As Diezemann points out, hunger acts as a source of discord upon the narrator's frayed nerves and senses, thereby disturbing his train of thought and increasing his sensitivity to all manner of stimuli. What remains unclear, however, is whether the narrator's hunger excites a healthy or an already disturbed mind, and whether it is cause or the symptom of his self-destructive impulse. Auster suggests that although hunger opens the narrator's mind to a multitude of external impressions, it is also a potent force in its own right: "The hero is seized against his will by a force of his own making and is compelled to respond to its demands" (Auster 1992, 14). The paradoxical nature of the narrator's hunger identified by Auster rests on a form of parallelism between the narrator's "will", or the control his mind exerts over his body, and the way hunger acts as an unpredictable "force" originating within him (Auster 1992, 14). The result is an apparent division or split between one "active" part of his psyche that drives him onwards, and the "passive" half that suffers in indignation. McFarlane also discusses this division:

63 Diezemann bases her reading on Marie Herzfeld's essay on *Hunger* published in 1890, where the latter argues that her contemporaries had treated Hamsun's novel as a kind of "hunger study", a further instance of the mania for fasting that gripped Europe at the time. Herzfeld argued that the book was not concerned with the circumstances which produce hunger, but rather was concerned with the effects of hunger on the individual: "Hamsun zeichnet nicht die Zustände, welche den Hunger hervorrufen, sondern er analysiert die Zustände, welche der Hunger hervorruft, seine Wirkung auf den Körper und seine Wirkung auf die Seele; er studiert vor Allem die eigenthümlichen Störungen, die ein lang fortgesetztes Hungern in unserem Geiste zuwege bringt, die Erschaffung der centralen Willenskraft, die morbide Reizbarkeit aller Sinne, die zügellosen Sprung der Phantasie,—ein Stückchen vom Wahnwitz, der in uns allen lauert" (see Diezemann 2008, 122).

It is in the changing attitude of his reflective Self to this sort of conduct that any development the novel has must be sought; the hero changes in the course of the book not in the sense that his instincts and impulses vary but in respect of the attitudes adopted by this reflective Self to the goings-on of its other half. It is a process of self-liberation, in which the freedom is that Hegelian freedom of the mind that comes with a knowledge of what the mind is up to and what its purposes are... (McFarlane 1956, 577)

There are moments when the narrator's thoughts and sensations seem to exist in symbiosis, as the narrator accepts the transformative powers of hunger to affect and distort his perception. Yet there are also times when the narrator's consciousness and the body inhabiting the reality of the story appear completely divided, and this separation or estrangement is clearly evident during Part One, when the narrator experiences a bizarre self-encounter expressed as a form of self-recognition:

I sit up half-way and look down at my feet, and at this moment I experience a fantastic, alien state I'd never felt before; a delicate, mysterious thrill spreads through my nerves, as though they were flooded by surges of light. When I looked at my shoes, it was as though I had met a good friend or got back a torn off part of me: a feeling of recognition trembles through all my senses, tears spring to my eyes, and I perceive my shoes as a softly murmuring tune coming towards me. (*H*, 20)

Another moment where the division is not only likened to, but directly influenced by, the concerted effects of hunger and music occurs in Part Three, where the hungry narrator momentarily relaxes and allows his thoughts to be transported by the mournful melody of an organ grinder:

The poignant flute-like sound of the organ ripples through my blood, my nerves begin to vibrate as though resonating with it, and a moment later I fall back upon the bench, murmuring and humming along with the music. What whims one's feelings give rise to when one is starving! I feel caught up in these notes, dissolved into a tune—I float, and I perceive so clearly how I float, soaring high above the mountains, dancing through realms of light... (*H*, 77)

Hunger and music thus combine to act as a catalyst for a state of heightened consciousness, during which the narrator becomes both observer and active participant, though not all his experiences of starvation are as placid or pleasurable. There is a strong hint of madness that underlies the narrator's exuberant moods, and Hamsun presents the image of a man driven to distraction by the warring elements within him. During one drawn-out sequence in Part Two, he is left temporarily homeless after having lost his keys, and this seemingly trivial event sets him on a self-destructive path that continues for the rest of the chapter: "imagine running around like a madman on sopping-wet streets in the dark of night! My hunger pains were excruciating and didn't leave me for a moment" (*H*, 60). Though at times he appears "drunk with starvation", as though hunger had made

him “intoxicated” (*H*, 56), the manner in which he recollects these overwhelming bodily experiences remains lucid and concise. Having found refuge in a jail cell for the night, the narrator questions his own sanity and even takes a strange delight in playing the lunatic, though he never truly descends into madness: “My madness was a delirium of weakness and exhaustion, but I was not out of my senses” (*H*, 68). The narrator’s thoughts are increasingly galvanized by hunger, and his near-manic exuberance is rendered in a highly charged, semi-lyrical prose, as though his words were the direct consequence of the strange states into which he descends.

The narrator’s nervousness reaches a fever pitch once he finds himself locked in a police cell with the lights out. His intense hunger gives way to fear and anxiety, and he feels overwhelmed by the impenetrable darkness around him. While mentally wrestling with this “special kind of darkness, a desperate element which no one had previously been aware of”, he invents a new word, “*Kuboå*”, which seems “of great grammatical importance” (*H*, 65). This word, “which stood sharply against the darkness”, could not mean something as mundane as “padlock or sunrise”, or even “emigration or tobacco factory”; rather “the word was really suited to mean something *spiritual*, a feeling, a state of mind—” (*H*, 66).

Though critics have tended to agree that this linguistic intervention saves the narrator from certain collapse, there has been some difference of opinion regarding this sequence, which Auster called “perhaps the most painful in the book” (Auster 1992, 16). Auster argues that the invention of this new word is a further indication of the narrator’s “language disease” (Auster 1992, 16), insofar as the creative act resembles his other lies and inventions and general disregard for objective truth, and may be seen as further proof that he “no longer believes in anything” (Auster 1992, 17). Kittang, on the other hand, reads the creation of the word not in terms of a fixed definition, but rather as “pure difference” (Kittang 1985, 305), as the narrator is preoccupied in the first instance with what the word does not mean rather than what it does, although a conclusive definition can never be reached: “As a hole—or gap—in language, the word *kuboå* signifies nothing more or nothing less than the void or emptiness which is the necessary condition for symbolism or meaning in general” (Kittang 1985, 306). In my view, the invention of the word suggests that the narrator’s last resort in the face of the emptiness of body and mind is his ability to fashion and create, which is derived from the need to impose a measure of order upon the chaos of random thoughts raging within him.<sup>64</sup> As an aspiring writer, language is both his chosen means of survival and his only real source of pleasure and amusement, as his pranks and inventions are nothing other than literary diversions dreamt up on the spur of the moment. Hence when he is confronted with the absolute void or emptiness signified by the darkness, it is his honed literary instinct that saves him from succumbing to madness and despair. The darkness also reminds him of the ships waiting in the harbour, “those black

64 This interpretation is derived in part from research undertaken for the writing of “Hunger and Self-Fashioning in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and Knut Hamsun’s *Sult*” (see Rees 2010).

monsters. They wanted to suck me up and hold me up tight and sail with me by sea and land, through dark kingdoms no human had ever seen" (*H*, 67). This fear presages the end of the story, a form of closure signifying artistic, rather than physical or spiritual, death.

Some have regarded hunger as the dominant influence on the narrator's feelings and perceptions, which implies that the narrator's physical condition ultimately determines the flow of thoughts that form the bulk of the narrative. In his assessment of the psychological aspects of *Hunger*, Lyngstad argues that:

In the last analysis [...] what holds the hero together is nothing but his emaciated body, which to a large extent determines the behaviour of his mind. The very imagery of the book, with its wealth of psychological metaphors for mental happenings, supports this view. From this perspective, *Hunger* is a vivid example of the "writing of the body." (Lyngstad 1996, xxii)

Though this argument is persuasive, Lyngstad elects at this point to refer to Per Maeling's study titled "Fysiognomier. Kommentar til kroppen som skriftens scene. Lesning av Knut Hamsuns *Sult*", where Maeling argues that "the rhythms of the novel's discourse are determined by the phases of bulimia" (see Lyngstad 1996, xxv). Maeling takes matters too far, however, as those instances where the narrator suffers from sickness and nausea, as well as near mental collapse, appear to be symptoms rather than causes of his hunger. One particularly vivid example occurs during Part Three, when the narrator's hunger drives him to desperately gnaw the raw meat from a bone:

It had no taste at all; a sickening smell of dried blood rose from the bone and I had to vomit immediately. I tried again—if I could just keep it down, it would be sure to do some good, the important thing was to make it stay down. But I vomited again. I got angry, ground my teeth into the meat, ripped off a small piece and forced myself to swallow it. It was no use: as soon as the tiny bits of meat grew warm in my stomach, up they came again. Frantic, I clenched my fists, burst into tears from helplessness and gnawed like mad; I cried so hard the bone got wet and dirty from my tears—I threw up, cursed and gnawed again, crying as if my heart would break, then threw up once more. I swore at the top of my voice, damning all the powers of this world to eternal torment. (*H*, 136)

This sequence shows the depths to which a writer and intellectual, the self-proclaimed "white beacon in the midst of a turbid human sea" (*H*, 42), is willing to stoop to save himself from starvation. In this sequence, hunger signifies not so much a metaphorical absence or mental illness as a savage certainty of human existence, and the suffering and desperation it inspires emphatically illustrate the flipside of social prosperity and cultivated urban life. As Auster points out, "the world of art has been translated into the world of the body—and the original text has been abandoned. Hunger is not a metaphor; it is the very crux of the problem itself" (Auster 1992, 18).

What lends further weight to a deterministic reading of the narrator's hunger is the fact that his claim of being innately disinclined toward food or "good at starving" (*H*, 103) is demonstrably untrue, and is contradicted at frequent intervals throughout the narrative. Yet questions still remain with regard to the narrator's motivation: if hunger is the cause of so much of his suffering, then why does he continually place himself in situations that lead to poverty and starvation? Why does he not simply find work of any kind or leave the city? Despite his lack of money and deteriorating health, he elects to remain in Kristiania and keep writing, though he receives little encouragement and holds on to only the most rudimentary possessions—and even these he is liable to pawn or give away. He does not arouse the reader's sympathy, nor does he desire it from others. As Auster maintains, the hero's predicament is his own choice, and he suffers of his own free will: "Solutions exist, if not in the city, then at least departure. But buoyed by an obsessive, suicidal pride, the young man's actions continually betray a scorn for his own best interests" (Auster 1992, 11). Yet the narrator's actions cannot solely be ascribed to an ascetic disdain for material possessions, or even an underlying death-drive (or *Thanatos*), as he is both remarkably vain about his appearance and stubbornly unwilling to die: "I had no intention of collapsing. I would die on my feet" (*H*, 188). I would argue that his self-destructive disregard for his own best interests is the wilful negation of the principles of rationalism and positivism on which bourgeois society is based, and while his situation cannot readily be framed in terms of class struggle or political ideology, it can be illustrated in terms of the "idle" question posed by Dostoevsky's irascible narrator at the end of *Notes from Underground*: "And actually—now I am asking an idle question on my own account: which is better—cheap happiness, or noble suffering? Well, which is better?" (Dostoevsky 1974, 151).

### 3.3 "Cheap happiness"

The question posed by Dostoevsky's underground man can, and perhaps should, be put differently: why would anyone choose suffering at all? This question is highly relevant to the present discussion of starvation and self-destruction in Hamsun's novel, as my argument rests on the notion that the narrator's suffering is largely self-inflicted and not strictly the result of misfortune or material circumstance. The narrator's conscious disregard for his health and well-being also runs contrary to the expectations of modern bourgeois society, which Humpál broadly describes as having been the "driving force behind the development of capitalism, industrialization, and scientific positivism" as well as having "traditionally been the bearer and executor of the idea of modernity" (Humpál 1996, 13). Hamsun was highly critical of the kind of thinking that reduces human beings to a social or economic abstraction, and Humpál points out that this anti-modern view was prevalent among later modernists as well:



[Hamsun's] modernism may be slightly less complex simply because his "enemy" was more clearly recognizable than that of later modernists who came face to face with more subtle manifestations of modernity. Hamsun's "enemy" was mainly the Norwegian bourgeois society of the late nineteenth century, which his early works expose as reducing human existence to the empirical norms inaugurated by Enlightenment modernity. His modernism reacted primarily against Norwegian writers as rational social arbiters, against Norwegian realist literature as a commodity of explicit social utility, and against Norwegian readers as consumers of such literature. (Humpál 1996, 219)

While Hamsun does not address his "enemy" directly in *Hunger*, the book's narrator displays what may be deemed to be a flagrant disregard for one of the guiding tenets of utilitarian thinking, one that has heavily influenced Western capitalist societies to the present day: namely that human beings, given the choice, will always act in their own best interest. For example, Henry Sidgwick discusses the matter of individual choice in *The Method of Ethics*, published in 1874:

According to this the rational agent regards quantity of consequent pleasure and pain to himself as alone important in choosing between alternatives of action; and seeks always the greatest attainable surplus of pleasure over pain—which, without violation of usage, we may designate as his "greatest happiness". (Sidgwick 1981, 95)

This raises the question as to what the narrator's best interests actually are, as the distinction between pleasure and suffering in *Hunger* is not always clear. It would seem as though the narrator derives the most pleasure and hence the "greatest happiness" from his literary successes; for instance, at the very end of Part One, upon receiving a complimentary letter and payment for an article from an editor, he reveals: "All night long, till daybreak, I went yodelling about the streets dazed with joy, repeating: promising work, meaning a little masterpiece, a stroke of genius. And ten kroner!" (*H*, 51). These moments of success are rare and fleeting, however, and his efforts at writing mainly increase rather than assuage his suffering and hunger. The irony of the narrator's predicament is that his desire to become a writer is what leads to the destructive breakdown of his body and mind in the first place. Lyngstad, for example, corroborates this view by pointing out that, "while naturalism, with its affinity for decline and attrition, may provide part of the answer to this development, the hero's artistic ambition is clearly [its] root cause" (Lyngstad 1996, xvii).

To put the matter of the narrator's self-destructive pursuit of literary success in a broader context, let us note that Hamsun, like Dostoevsky before him, objected to the concept of man as a wholly rational being driven by a deterministic view of life. Neo-Romantic writers of the late 19th century, of which Hamsun is a leading example, responded to Dostoevsky's call for freedom of choice and condemned materialism and naturalism as overly pessimistic doctrines. For instance,



in Chapter VII of *Notes from Underground*, Dostoevsky's narrator criticizes the concept of rational self-interest put forward by the revolutionary thinker N.G. Chernyshevsky, who maintained that science and reason were the answers to the suffering of large sections of humanity. In his *Anthropological Principles of Philosophy*, Chernyshevsky wrote that "Self-Interest lies only in good deeds; and only he is rational who is good, and precisely to the extent he is good."<sup>65</sup> Chernyshevsky argues that if individuals were to understand where their true interests lie, they would become noble and enlightened, as they would see that goodness was to their advantage and no man would willingly act against his own interests. The underground man responds to this idea by stating:

For this stupid thing, this whim of ours, gentlemen, may really be more advantageous to us than anything on earth, especially in certain cases. In fact, it may be the most advantageous of all advantages even when it brings us obvious harm and contradicts the most sensible conclusions of our reasons concerning our advantage. Because, at any rate, it preserves for us the most important and most precious thing—our personality, our individuality. (Dostoevsky 1974, 32)

I would argue that the narrator of *Hunger* succeeds in preserving his individuality at the cost of his happiness, but that the narrator's hard-won autonomy is not simply the antithesis to the deadening effects of bourgeois modernity described by Humpál. Romanticizing the narrator's behaviour as that of a defiant individualist does not really do justice to the highly problematic relationship between writing, hunger, and society touched upon earlier in this chapter, as hunger appears both an internal and an external force to be reckoned with, being at times wilfully chosen and at other moments seemingly forced upon him by circumstance or the powers that be. The narrator's attitudes toward hunger are also bound up with a system of beliefs and social values that he has himself internalized. For example, during Part One he delivers a series of fatalistic diatribes during which he expresses the conviction that his hunger and suffering originate from the fact that he is predestined for hardship and misery, insofar as he has been hand-picked by God to suffer for the sake of humanity:

Why had these last few months been so exceedingly rough on me? I couldn't recognize my cheerful disposition anymore, and had the weirdest troubles wherever I turned. [...] Had the Lord's finger pointed at me? Why not just as well at some person in South America? When I pondered this, it became more and more incomprehensible to me why precisely I should have been chosen as a guinea pig for a caprice of divine grace. To skip a whole world in order to get to me—that was a rather odd way of doing things [...] I wandered about debating this matter, unable to get it out of my mind; I discovered the

65 A commentary on Chernyshevsky's ideas is supplied by Donald Fanger in Mirra Ginsburg's translation of *Notes from Underground* (Dostoevsky 1974, 156).

weightiest objections to the Lord's arbitrariness in letting me suffer for everybody else's sake. Even after I had found a bench and sat down, the question continued to occupy me, hindering me from thinking about anything else. From that day in May when my adversities had begun I could clearly perceive a gradually increasing weakness, I seemed to have become too feeble to steer or guide myself where I wanted to go; a swarm of tiny vermin had forced its way inside me and hollowed me out. What if God simply intended to annihilate me? (*H*, 16f.)

He maintains that his entire situation is the result of an act of divine caprice, and God is held to be the source of his inspiration, salvation, or ruin as the case may be. During one of the most striking passages in the first part of *Hunger*, the narrator accuses God of having disturbed his mind to the point of distraction and appears undecided as to whether he is guided by an undefined and ungovernable impulse, or has been the victim of unseen powers all along: "And God sat up in his heaven keeping a watchful eye on me, making sure that my destruction took place according to all the rules of the game, slowly and steadily, with no letup" (*H*, 45). His attitude toward God remains inconsistent, one moment cursing him as a sworn enemy, the next praising him as the architect of his good fortune. After one particularly successful morning's work during Part One, he exclaims:

This glorious feeling of having come out on top enchanted me, making me grateful to God and everyone, and I kneeled down by the bed and thanked God in a loud voice for his great goodness toward me this morning. I knew—oh yes, I knew that the exalted moment and the inspiration I had just experienced and written down was a wonderful work of heaven in my soul, an answer to my cry of distress yesterday. "It's God! It's God!" I cried to myself, and I wept from enthusiasm over my own words... (*H*, 32)

The moment of divine inspiration does not recur, however, as he remains trapped in an earthly quagmire of poverty, restlessness, and fatigue. His primary desire to find a quiet room and write in earnest is also thwarted by the intense discomfort brought on by hunger, as well as by thoughts of his unpaid bills and ever-present need for money. In Hamsun's novel, hunger is less a spur to creative achievement than a mark of failure and a hindrance to the hero's literary endeavours, as the narrator cannot feed himself if he cannot write, and the worse his situation becomes, the harder it is for him to produce anything of value:

A few brief sentences got done with great effort, a dozen or two miserable words that I forced out at all costs simply to make some progress. Then I stopped—my head was empty and I didn't have the strength to go on. When I just couldn't get any further, I began staring with wide-open eyes at those last words, that unfinished sheet of paper, peering at the strange, trembling letters which stared up at me from the paper like small unkempt figures, and at the end I understood nothing at all and didn't have a thought in my head. (*H*, 109)

The narrator is fully aware that his actions are irrational and most likely futile, and yet in spite of constant setbacks and lack of tangible success, he feverishly labours on regardless: “But good Lord, this is mad!” Still I carried on as insanely as ever” (*H*, 109). By Part Four of the novel, the narrator has found some measure of comfort and stability in a guesthouse, where he is permitted to sleep and is even given regular meals despite not having the means to pay for his room. This arrangement forms one of the most outwardly stable periods of the novel, and yet his relative security is not conducive to his writing either:

I had resumed my writing several days ago, but I was no longer able to come up with anything I was satisfied with; I had no luck at all anymore, though I worked very hard and kept trying at all times. It was no use whatever I tried, my luck was gone. (*H*, 159)

He expounds on this idea of “luck” in a discussion with his landlady, who becomes the main antagonist during the course of the chapter. After she questions him regarding his unpaid rent, the narrator tries to assure her that his next article will soon be finished, which will enable him to pay his bills:

“But you won’t ever finish that article, will you?”  
 “You think so? I may feel inspired to write tomorrow, or maybe even tonight; it’s not at all impossible that the inspiration will come sometime tonight, and then my article will be finished in a quarter of an hour, at the most. You see, it’s not the same with my work as with other people’s; I can’t just sit down and get so much done every day, I have to wait for the right moment. And nobody can tell the day or the hour when the spirit will come upon him. It must take its course.” (*H*, 162)

By attributing the success of his endeavours to his “inspiration”, the narrator lays claim to a privileged space outside society’s conventional habits and routines, but at the same time admits that he is at the mercy of his random moods and impulses. The narrator’s assertion that he is waiting “for the right moment” is in keeping with one of the more general themes of the narrative, as one of the most disruptive effects of the narrator’s circumstances is that his internal sense of time grows out of sync with the external time of the city.<sup>66</sup> Having long since pawned his watch, the narrator is prone to lose track of the passing hours, and must rely on the clocks associated with the city’s major institutions, such as the University, the jail, and the church tower, as well as on the watches of passing policemen, to guide him. He remains unable to fully attune himself to their regular rhythms, however, and

66 The distinction between internal and external time was to become a major theme of modernist writing, as Bradbury points out in his discussion of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*: “Mann shared with Proust and others a deep sense of the difference between inner and outer—subjective and objective—time, and he considered the clock and the calendar as imperfect registers of human consciousness and the human spirit” (Bradbury 1988, 105).

is hence either too early or too late for his appointments, to the detriment of both his health and his literary aspirations.

Even when he does manage to finish an article and deliver it on time to the editor, he is told, as in Part Two, that he is "much too high-strung" and that his work contains "too much fever" (*H*, 80). During a meeting with "the Commander" in Part Three, his work is politely rejected on the grounds that the paper can only publish what is popular: "You know the sort of public we have. Couldn't you try to make it a bit simpler? Or else come up with something that people understand better?" (*H*, 101). Kittang makes the following remarks on this type of refusals:

The innermost dream of the writer is to gain access to the Literary Establishment—to the Holy Family of Letters where the Almighty Editor [...] reigns as some sort of quasi-divine Father figure. To reach this aim the hero is willing to sacrifice his own individual talent on the altar of conformity and taste. He tries to write about the subjects and ideas that are most popular at the time, and at the Editor's request attempts to remove from his articles and sketches all the traces of fever and intensity which come from his restless imagination. Behind this ambition it is easy to find a dream of social recognition and narcissistic wish for self-realisation and integration [...]. The dream of the writer is once more a mirror dream: a desire to recognize his own genius, his artistic Ego, in those signs of public recognition which arrive from The Other. Therefore, he has to conform to the images of success that Society keeps putting before him, like a mirror. (Kittang 1985, 303)

Thus according to Kittang, the narrator's "narcissistic" need for literary achievement and recognition is both fuelled by and dependent on the external authority of the literary establishment embodied by the editor. In the first three chapters of the book, the narrator willingly subscribes to a system of values that are defined and delimited by this establishment, values he has internalized to the point where they appear to be his own deepest wish. Based on this idea, I would argue that what may be called the narrator's "cheap happiness" refers to the fleeting pleasure derived from pursuing goals that are not fundamentally his own. It is the happiness resulting from a desire to please others, and hence has no value beyond the "cheap" satisfaction of social and material ambition.

Furthermore, in light of the original distinction between "cheap happiness" and "noble suffering", the idea of cheap happiness also suggests a kind of happiness that revolves around money, yet represents only an arbitrary value; and that encompasses the broader themes of the narrator's poverty and unprofitable occupation. It also appears to be a kind of happiness that does not involve suffering or effort and should be despised, which would help to explain the narrator's aristocratic attitude, along with his moments of intense shame and self-loathing at his own base instincts. For instance, after being chased out of the guesthouse by his indignant landlady, who showers him with curses on the street, the narrator is interrupted by a messenger who suddenly appears with an envelope containing ten kroner. The narrator asks where the envelope is from, and is told by the messenger: "...it was

a lady who gave it to me” (*H*, 187). Still reeling from a fit of blind rage, the narrator throws the envelope in the landlady’s face before wordlessly departing the scene. Mulling over the situation afterwards, he realizes the money had been his last chance at redemption, and debates asking for it back again:

No, no, no, there was no end to my degradation! Not even vis-à-vis her had I been able to maintain a respectable posture; I was sinking, sinking everywhere I turned, sinking to my knees, to my middle, going down in infamy never to come up again, never! That beat everything! To accept ten kroner of alms money without being able to throw it back at the secret donor, to scramble for pennies with both hands wherever they were offered, hang on to them, use them to pay the rent despite my own innermost repugnance! (*H*, 189)

The narrator’s pursuit of literary success appears a noble aim at the outset, making his suffering appear admirable given the apparent desirability of such a cultivated end. What the narrator’s suffering in fact reveals is the paradoxical position of a writer struggling under conditions of modernity, who must compromise his “noble” sentiments and embrace a materialistic outlook in his effort to sell his work to a publisher. For instance, after finishing an article in Part One, he states: “I had no intention of undertaking such a special piece of work for nothing”, and follows with an accurate appraisal of the finished piece at “ten kroner” (*H*, 31). Yet he also seeks to distance himself from such money-grubbing by presenting himself as a promising author capable of “a stroke of genius” (*H*, 51), the paragon of spontaneous creative achievement and semi-divine “inspiration”.

As a consequence, what occurs during the final, climactic sequences of the narrative is what I would refer to as the narrator’s truly “noble” suffering, which is not suffering that results from his failure to attain the goals that are deemed legitimate and desirable by society, but rather a form of suffering that results from his unburdening himself of all that the social order demands of him: namely to be pious, truthful, and a promoter of society’s cultural values.

### 3.4 “Noble suffering”

During the final passages of the novel, the narrator is truly on the verge of physical collapse and convinced that he is “about to go under” (*H*, 187), at which point he draws upon his last reserves of strength and turns his fury against his perceived tormentors. This time, however, it is not only God and society that are the objects of his wrath, as he even rejects the existence of reality itself:

A cart rolled slowly by. I see there are potatoes in the cart, but out of rage, from sheer obstinacy, I take it into my head to say they weren’t potatoes at all, they were cabbages, and I swore horribly that they were cabbages. I heard quite well what I said, and I swore wilfully time after time, upholding this lie

just to have droll satisfaction of committing downright perjury. Drunk with this unprecedented sin, I raised three fingers and swore with quivering lips in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost that they were cabbages. (H, 188)

By denying the reality of the world as it appears to him, the narrator calls into question the correlation of morality and language, insofar as lying is a form of "sin" against the world perceived through his senses.<sup>67</sup> In the decisive moment leading up to his act of "downright perjury", the narrator does not cling to hope or consolation provided by conventional wisdom or religious belief. He grapples instead with the profound questions of reality and existence in his own mind, and by his act of "perjury" subsequently frees himself of the need to pursue truth in an unstable, Godless world seemingly devoid of certainty and spiritual meaning.

This sequence can be read as an act of creative empowerment similar to the scene in the jail cell discussed earlier on, as the narrator momentarily frees himself from the false stability that language and its meaning create. He questions the notion of an ordered universe where language helps to build up the edifices of knowledge that, through time and convention, eventually become accepted as truth.

This crisis also leads to the resolution of what may be deemed the story's main conflict, that between the concept of living as a socially integrated citizen under narrowly defined social conventions and moral and religious beliefs on the one hand, versus a spontaneous, autonomous existence that negates the social order and thereby embraces suffering and hunger, as well as self-contradiction and moral ambiguity, on the other. The narrator's situation suggests that the life of a truly autonomous artist is all but incompatible with the social order, though the issue remains unresolved as to whether his perseverance in the face of constant hardship and suffering is a sign of moral integrity and an almost superhuman endurance, or the behaviour of an immature, self-absorbed writer who cannot reconcile the reality of his situation with his theological doubts and overreaching ambition. At the end of the story, the narrator is presented with a choice: either he

67 Auster, for instance, points out in his reading of this sequence that "in the realm of language the lie has the same relationship to truth that evil has to good in the realm of morals" (Auster 1992, 16). Auster's reading clearly draws upon Nietzsche, and I would also argue that certain sequences in *Hunger* reflect ideas presented in "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense", where Nietzsche states: "The liar uses the valid designations, the words, to make the unreal appear as real; he says, for example, 'I am rich,' when the word 'poor' would be the correct designation of his situation. He abuses the fixed conventions by arbitrary changes or even by reversals of the names. When he does this in a self-serving way damaging to others, then society will no longer trust him but exclude him. Thereby men do not flee from being deceived as much as from being damaged by deception: what they hate at this stage is basically not the deception but the bad, hostile consequences of certain kinds of deceptions. In a similarly limited way man wants the truth: he desires the agreeable life-preserving consequences of truth, but he is indifferent to pure knowledge, which has no consequences; he is even hostile to possibly damaging and destructive truths. And, moreover, what about these conventions of language? Are they really the products of knowledge, of the sense of truth? Do the designations and the things coincide? Is language the adequate expression of all realities?" (Nietzsche 1971, 45)

abandons his literary pretensions or he faces execration and the life of an outcast. The narrator chooses the latter, and though he makes one last-ditch attempt at finishing his manuscript, a play titled "The Sign of the Cross," he can no longer deceive himself. The words simply will not come, so he breaks his pencil, destroys his manuscript, and declares his resignation to the passers-by: "Ladies, and gentlemen, I'm lost!" (*H*, 190). After a brief interlude, the narrator makes good on his claim, as he signs aboard a Russian ship and sails out of the story.

The narrator thus ends his ordeal not by starving to death, as in the stories by Melville or Kafka discussed earlier on, but in self-exile, a decidedly less romantic and more pragmatic path to take. Some critics have read the end of the novel as a form of defeat for the narrator, though on this matter I would side with McFarlane, who maintains that

this new attitude is the result not of any diminution of his will power nor any falling-off in his standards but to a change—a refinement he might well claim—in his moral outlook. He no longer shares the standards of the masses; he has, through experience, won the knowledge of his own uniqueness and with it come into possession of a unique and individual moral code. The aristocratic pride that initially marked him off from other men by sustaining him where others, in similarly extreme conditions, would have succumbed is later intensified; and by acting as previously he would not have acted, he distinguishes himself yet again and on an even higher plane from what he himself was earlier and from those few others like him. (McFarlane 1956, 578)

The narrator ends the story by negating the very impulse that drove him on in the first place, as his final act of self-destruction is to demolish the very foundations upon which his social identity and literary aspirations were built. Hamsun's narrator thus embodies the judgement proclaimed by Dostoevsky's underground man insofar as the latter asserts that there is no purpose in self-creation, that it is essentially a futile, pointless exercise, as "an intelligent nineteenth-century man must be, is morally bound to be, an essentially characterless creature; and a man of character, a man of action—an essentially limited creature" (Dostoevsky [1864] 1974, 3). Hamsun's narrator does not succeed in becoming anything: he is "neither spiteful nor kind, neither a rascal nor an honest man, neither hero nor an insect" (Dostoevsky [1864] 1974, 3f.).

The narrator's "noble suffering" thus anticipates an idea that will later be asserted by writers of the 20th century, namely that individuals are free to choose their own path through life even it means facing suffering and anguish alone. While the narrator's destructiveness resembles an anarchic impulse and an inclination toward rebellion, he does not rebel in a way that disturbs the placid surface of the world around him. His rebellion is internal, it is a revolution or usurpation of his own habits of thought, and the catalyst that drives this inner revolt is hunger. To go hungry may in fact be one of the only acts of free will he has left, and if he cannot change the world, he is determined to at least change his perception of the world, and in that he succeeds—failure as a writer is the price he pays for his success.



#### 4. Hunger and Self-Fashioning in Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*)

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all. (AH, 135)

The closing lines of Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) offer not so much an ending as a beginning; the words that Wright sent marching into the darkness became works such as *Uncle Tom's Children*, *Native Son*, and *Black Boy* itself, a work that established Wright's reputation and became one of the most widely read autobiographies in American literature.<sup>68</sup> *Black Boy* is the fulfilment of Wright's promise to become a writer, but it is also, as its subtitle states, "A Record of Childhood and Youth", an account of his early experiences of hunger and want that became synonymous with his desire for independence and a better, fairer world. Wright's autobiography has been read and discussed as, among other things, a work of literary naturalism, a sociological study into the effects of poverty and racism, and a carefully constructed self-portrait of the black artist as a young man. Almost seventy years since its publication, *Black Boy* still divides opinion, and the aim of this chapter is not simply to weigh in on this debate as to what kind of work *Black Boy* actually is, but also to discuss the way in which hunger is bound up with the monumental act of self-creation that forms the main subject matter of Wright's book.

Wright was born on a Mississippi plantation near Natchez on 4 September 1908, and died in Paris, France, on 28 November 1960. The success of his novel *Native Son* and later of *Black Boy* brought him fame and financial security, though as Jerry W. Ward, Jr. points out, Wright's long and distinguished career as a writer only serves to confirm the fact that the hungers of the mind and spirit are implacable; like Cross Damon, the hero of Wright's existentialist novel *The Outsider*, Wright

68 As Albert E. Stone points out in his essay "After *Black Boy* and *Dusk of Dawn*", the year 1945 established autobiography "as one of the richest, most revealing modes of black expression in present day America" (Stone 1993, 171). Wright had originally written the complete story under the heading *Black Confessions* in 1943, and then changed the title to *American Hunger* before handing it over to his agent at the end of that year. The original manuscript was split into two parts: the first fourteen chapters, grouped under the title "Part One: Southern Night", recorded his childhood in Mississippi; the last six, grouped under the title "Part Two: The Horror and the Glory", dealt with his life in Chicago. Harper and Brothers accepted the entire manuscript for publication in 1944, but the Book-of-the-Month Club expressed an interest only in the first part of the book and Wright agreed to cut out the final six chapters. He decided on *Black Boy* as a title for the shortened version, and its subsequent distribution to over 325,000 members of the Club, as well as the largely favourable reviews that followed, helped to secure its place in literary history. The second part of the story was then published in separate magazine articles under the unitary heading "I tried to be a Communist", and when it was posthumously published in a complete collection in 1977 it was given the title *American Hunger*. It was not until 1991 that the entire book was published under the name *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*).



"longed to be existentially free, ultimately responsible for the 'self' he endeavoured to create through the act of writing" (Ward 1995, 96). As an intellectual autobiography, *Black Boy* enables the reader to gain some insight into the "intrusive self" in Wright's later works, as his childhood experiences laid the foundation for his lifelong struggle against racism, poverty, and their detrimental effects on the mind and body of the individual. Ward maintains that Wright makes us "think about how our lives are shaped by law and custom, by ethnic encounters and interracial negotiations, by desire and psychological defeat and intrepidity" (Ward 1995, 99). *Black Boy* also challenges the stereotypical notions of North and South, as the events of "Southern Night" (set mainly in Mississippi and Memphis) and those of "The Horror and the Glory" (set in Chicago) show that there is no respite, no transcendence in regional differences. The book offers a humanistic image of renewal through the hunger for life and the desire for self-improvement in order to fashion an identity that is in keeping with one's own views of the world and humanity. Wright suggests that those like himself living on the fringes of mainstream culture and society, shut off from those institutions that encourage intellectual pursuits and personal development, must search inward to find the resources with which to negotiate a path through life alone.

For Wright's narrator, hunger became one such resource, though it was also a source of shame and suffering, the secret burden he carried with him from his childhood days on the streets of Memphis and Jackson to his life as an aspiring intellectual in Chicago. References to hunger occur frequently in *Black Boy*; as Charles Lee points out in his essay "Black Hunger" (1945), the book "reduces itself to a series of gnawing hungers, hunger for food, for friendship, for love, for normality, for security, for the things of spirit and mind, in the end, in near-madness and dreams, for a totally different existence" (Lee 1995, 65). Out of this catalogue of hungers, it is the very last—the hunger for a "totally different existence"—that will be my main concern here, as this is arguably the direction in which Wright's hunger, desire, and yearning ultimately lead. The role of hunger in the ontological process of self-making described in the book is a central one, and is echoed throughout the tradition of African American autobiography, of which the writing of Frederick Douglass is an outstanding example.<sup>69</sup> It is also relevant in the context of Wright's later interest in the philosophy and writing of French existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>70</sup>

69 See for instance Herbert Leibowitz's essay "Arise, Ye Pris'ners of Starvation': Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and *American Hunger*", in which he discusses the tradition of African American autobiography as a way of speaking out against the horrors of slavery and racism, which "offer remarkable portraits of men and women under siege who create dynamic identities despite social handicaps that would have stopped less resolute persons in their tracks" (Leibowitz 1993, 328).

70 In his essay "Richard Wright and the French Existentialists", Michel Fabre looks at the relevance of existentialist ideas in the work that Wright produced during the period spanning roughly from 1946 to 1953, that is, from after the publication of *Black Boy* through to the years when *The Outsider* was taking shape. Fabre addresses what he describes as the "over-emphasis" given to the French school of existentialism as opposed to the German school or to pre-existentialists like Dostoevsky

Hunger and the concept of self-fashioning are strongly interwoven throughout the various episodes that make up the narrative of *Black Boy*, as Wright often expresses the desire and intention to *become* something, first and foremost a free individual, who is at liberty to speak, think, and act as he chooses. This involves a conscious, deliberate decision on behalf of the narrator, and thereby challenges the notion that identity is shaped as a result of external forces or according to biology or to a cosmic plan that he has no knowledge of or access to. As a physical state, hunger constantly influences the narrator's perception of reality, insofar as it forms a point of departure between thought and action; it is a means by which he is able to order and structure his responses to outside stimuli in terms of time and place. Hunger thus gives the narrator's thoughts and sensations immediacy, creating a thematic framework that helps to bind the book's various episodes into a coherent, linear narrative.

Hence hunger occurs in two main ways in *Black Boy*: the first is the physical kind that is caused by poverty and want and by external events and social forces beyond the narrator's immediate control, such as the break-up of his parent's marriage, his mother's illness, or his own inability to find employment due to the colour of his skin. Hunger thus takes on a central role in the narrator's life similar to that in works such as Nelson Algren's *Somebody in Boots*, where it becomes a debilitating force that threatens to overwhelm and defeat the individual (see Jones 2008, 133). This kind of hunger has been addressed as a topic by those who have opted to focus on the sociological as well as on the naturalistic elements of Wright's autobiography.<sup>71</sup> The second kind of hunger is the metaphorical kind that conveys a sense of longing or yearning that grows more pronounced as Wright's narrator matures, a hunger that becomes equated with his desire for knowledge and his insatiable appetite for literature. In this regard Wright's hunger may be viewed as a catalyst that moves him on a path to becoming a writer, and the way Wright's autodidact narrator channels his hunger into bootstrapping energy invites comparison with works such as Doug-

and Nietzsche; he documents the exchanges between Wright, Sartre, and de Beauvoir, and examines Wright's correspondence to his friends Dorothy Norman and Ralph Ellison, in which Wright professes his admiration for the French writers. Wright's contact with French existentialism came at an important time in his career, as he had grown disillusioned both with the consumerism and materialism of American life after having broken his ties with the American Communist Party and to an extent with the principles and perspectives of Marxism, which meant his subsequent writing was "without the sustenance and burden of an ideology" (Fabre 1995, 111). Fabre's essay is a helpful resource as it clearly relates the convergence of existentialist ideas with those presented in *The Outsider*, but also with the political ideas Wright expressed in *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. Fabre perceives that these earlier novels "already express an existential vision of life, couched in Dostoevskyan terms, which is closely linked with the oppressed, traumatic, and precarious aspects of the Afro-American experience" (Fabre 1995, 111).

71 Gavin Jones discusses the link between Wright's hunger and his impoverished circumstances in *American Hungers*, published in 2008, where he situates *Black Boy* within the wider discourse of poverty in the U.S. by addressing its two dominant paradigms, those of race and class. Jones uses this sociological context in order to frame his reading of *Black Boy*, where he argues that only by examining the wider link between poverty and hunger can we start to answer the question "of how Wright transcends a dominant environment that seems so absolute in its power to destroy consciousness and social agency" (Jones 2008, 133).

lass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* or published lecture "Self Made Men". However, a more modern and contemporary take on the idea of self-fashioning, as well as on Wright's break with Communism in "The Horror and the Glory", can be found in his fascination with the French existentialists, for whom the idea of self-creation through independent thought and action was a key principle.<sup>72</sup>

The main issue concerning hunger and the creation of the self in *Black Boy* therefore rests on the conflict between what James Olney refers to as "the assumptions, the pre-conceptions, and the preoccupations of a culture [that] will determine to a very great extent the shape of the story that individual members of that culture tell about themselves and their lives" (Olney 1993, 214) and the emerging personality that strives to preserve its individuality by raging against everything that culture stands for. Wright describes his transition from his tense life in the South to his growing awareness of the depths of his own inner moods and feelings in Chicago in terms of a retreat into isolation and watchfulness from which he observes events unfolding around him: "Having no claims on others, I bent the way the wind blew, rendering unto my environment that which was my environment's, and rendering unto myself that which I felt was mine" (AH, 24). The crux of this particular debate therefore lies in distinguishing between *Black Boy* as a memoir, a collection of "real" experiences that address critical social and political issues, and as a painstakingly fashioned work of art, where the polemical outbursts of a mature artist mingle with the recollected impressions of a sensitive mind that is both the subject and object of Wright's story.

#### 4.1 Wright's naturalism

As a first-person account of the horrors of racism and poverty and of their effects on black culture, Wright's autobiography has endured its fair share of criticism.

72 "What do we mean by saying that existence precedes essence? We mean that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world, and defines himself afterwards [...]. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism" (Sartre 1980, 28): the essence of Sartre's argument put forward in *Existentialism and Humanism* is that individuals ultimately bear responsibility for the creation of their identity, which means that they are totally free to become what they desire. Hence the term "self-fashioning" as an ontological undertaking seems by definition to draw upon the idea that "the future of man is man", or that "man is nothing else but his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfils himself" (Sartre 1957, 32). What Sartre calls "inter-subjectivity", on the other hand, is encompassed by the following assertion: "in discovering my inner being, I discover the other person as well" (1957, 36). Hence the awareness and understanding of others is indispensable to knowing and understanding oneself. This would imply that identity is both something internal (as we all possess a certain degree of self-knowledge) and something external to us, as we measure and define ourselves in relation to other individuals and society. This raises the question as to whether the narrator's self-fashioning in *Black Boy* arises from an individualistic desire for recognition that is couched in the struggle for literary success, or whether Wright's introverted narrator ultimately strives to effect some form of positive change in his environment and the people around him.

As Charles Lee maintains, *Black Boy* cannot be reduced to an exhibitionist desire to lay bare painful memories of hunger and suffering and thus expose the personality of the sufferer, as it is written "in the interest of a cause, a cause greater than self and worthy of the sacrifice of soul's peace and privacy, the cause of human dignity, in this particular case the cause of the American Negro" (Lee 1995, 65). Wright's efforts to address the cause of the American Negro were not, however, always met with praise by his contemporaries. Orville Prescott, writing in the *New York Times* in 1945, argued that as a work of naturalism, Wright's autobiography owes its shock value to the author's "excessive determination to omit nothing, to emphasize mere filth." The "filth" that Wright describes emerges from a "lack of artistic discrimination and selectivity" (Prescott 1995, 64). For Prescott, the author of such a bleak picture of hunger, poverty, and racism cannot have added to or embellished his account, but can merely have distorted the facts to appear worse than they really are. According to Prescott, it seems Wright's intention was to use shock tactics in order to provoke pity and anger, suggesting that *Black Boy*, for all its merits, "is not the work of an objective artist or of an open mind" (Prescott 1995, 63).

One of the main issues that confounds critics of *Black Boy* is that of recognizing where fact gives way to fiction and distinguishing between recollections of real events and the intermingling of Wright's lyrical style with the documentary analyses that form a running commentary during a number of the book's episodes. Numerous commentators have addressed these discrepancies; for instance, Charles T. Davis argued in his essay "From Experience to Eloquence: Richard Wright's *Black Boy* as Art" that in order to gain a more complete picture of Wright's achievement in turning his life into art, the reader must be aware of Wright's careful editing and selecting certain events by placing emphasis on certain experiences or people while omitting others.<sup>73</sup> Wright's aim was to offer a clear view of the figure he is trying to present, that of the solitary, aspiring artist surviving in the face of formidable odds. Davis argues that the narrator of *Black Boy* in fact has three voices that help to shape this figure: the first and simplest recounts events with clarity and a measure of objectivity, as Wright shows his childhood mind taking shape through his response to certain experiences, which were mainly negative and traumatic, and as the reader follows him through an increasingly hostile and violent world. Though numerous examples could be chosen, this simple, objective voice is used to great effect in the opening paragraph of "Southern Night", which introduces many of the themes that are examined during the course of the book,

73 Davis' argument thus counters the claim made by Prescott and others that Wright's autobiography lacked "artistic discrimination", as Davis provides a detailed study of various omissions in the text, for example the surprising absence of sex in an account of boyhood and adolescence, the omission of friendships Wright struck up in school and of the positive influence of teachers, and the exaggeratedly negative portrayal of Wright's relatives, such as Aunt Addie and Uncle Tom (Davis 1993, 142–145).

particularly the suppression of Wright's spontaneous impulses, and the images of whiteness that inspire both curiosity and dread:

All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still, warning me that I must make no noise. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient [...]. I crossed restlessly to the window and pushed back the fluffy white curtains—which I had been forbidden to touch—and looked yearningly out into the empty street. I was dreaming of running and playing and shouting, but the vivid image of Granny's old, white, wrinkled, grim face, framed by a halo of tumbling black hair, lying upon a huge feather pillow, made me afraid. (*BB*, 1)

The second voice is the more lyrical one through which the reader can perceive Wright's artistic sensibilities taking shape. The narrator's sensitivity to the natural world and to the emotional responses that they inspire is conveyed in his accounts of his earliest experiences and of the strange, absurd, and often violent form they take in his mind. In one of the early sequences of the first chapter, Wright compiles a list of his intuitive reactions to the world around him, which hint at the vibrant beauty of rural life in Mississippi:

Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue. And the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meaning. There was the wonder I felt when I first saw a brace of mountainlike, spotted, black and white horses clopping down a dusty road through clouds of powdered clay. (*BB*, 5)

Wright's first recollections of hunger and thirst are also related through this lyrical voice, which conveys his responses to vivid, sensual impressions, such as the sight of sugar cane being crushed or "the cloudy notion of hunger when [he] breathed the odour of new-cut, bleeding grass" (*BB*, 7). The physical sensations of hunger, fear, and pain, captured by an active, inquisitive mind, are related through a poetic voice that has been painstakingly cultivated. As Davis maintains, Wright's talent lies in his "compulsion to make symbols of the details of his everyday experience" (Davis 1993, 150), and with regard to Wright's treatment of hunger the real and the symbolic often merge seamlessly, so that biographical incidents take on a wider significance when placed within the thematic context of the book. This can be seen, for example, during the scene in the first part of "Southern Night" when Wright observes his mother bringing food to the white family she works for:

Watching the white people eat would make my empty stomach churn and I would grow vaguely angry. Why could I not eat when I was hungry? Why did I always have to wait until others were through? I could not understand why some people had enough food and others did not. (*BB*, 18)

His indignation at the fact that the members of the white family, not he, should be allowed to eat foreshadows the visceral experiences of racial inequality that surface time and again in *Black Boy*. The narrator's instinctive translation of sense

experience into literary images indicates the potential Wright would later fulfil as a novelist, though it also presages what Davis refers to as his “detachment, the feeling of being different from others”: “He maintains under pressure his status as an alien, so ultimately he will be free to exercise the imagination that faces the cold world” (Davis 1993, 148). Even at a young age, Wright's experience of suffering invoked an attitude toward life that would endure into adulthood, and he nourished that attitude by seeking areas of life where suffering was the norm. His response to suffering was not immediate pity or empathy, but a longing and willingness to burrow to its roots, to fathom its causes and effects. Wright recounts that by the age of twelve, he had developed “an attitude toward life that was to endure, that was to make me seek those areas of living that would keep it alive, that was to make me skeptical of everything while seeking everything, tolerant of all and yet critical” (BB, 99).

Davis identifies the third voice used by the narrator as “didactic”, as it offers the reader explanatory asides that deal with larger, more profound questions, such as “the strange, warped and perverted relationship between white and black, old and young, and man and woman, and [the] effects of social and economic systems and ideologies” (Davis 1993, 147). Wright's experiences of poverty and racism quickened his desire to explore the depths of his own feelings in order to grasp the profounder questions that confronted him and others, and these experiences later kindled his interest in literary naturalism:

It made me want to drive coldly to the heart of every question and lay it open to the core of suffering I knew I would find there. It made me love burrowing into psychology, into realistic and naturalistic fiction and art, into those whirlpools of politics that had the power to claim the whole of men's souls. It directed my loyalties to the side of men in rebellion; it made me love talk that sought answers to questions that could help nobody, that could only keep alive in me that enthralling sense of wonder and awe in the face of the drama of human feeling which is hidden by the external drama of life. (BB, 99)

The constant interplay between the narrator's subjective discourse and his objective commentary creates a complex, multi-faceted text that resists conventional readings in strictly biographical or sociological terms. The idea that *Black Boy* is a work of naturalism that deals with the suffering brought on by poverty and racism also complicates any reading of the story as an elaborate attempt at self-fashioning. As Yoshinubu Hakutani points out in “Creation of the Self in Richard Wright's *Black Boy*”, a literary naturalist “is expected to establish a milieu taken from life and, into it, project characters who then act in accordance with that milieu. The naturalist must record, without comment or interpretation, what actually happens” (Hakutani 1995, 71). As Hakutani points out, the problem is that if Wright had written himself into the story as a fictional persona, he would be more concerned with the outer events taking place in the milieu that he imagined, and less preoccupied with his own point of view. Thus if *Black Boy* were a work of

naturalism, it would be populated with fictional characters and events, not with figures from Wright's past, however distorted or different from the actual figures in Wright's life.<sup>74</sup> This would in turn suggest that all the characters in *Black Boy* are in fact only relevant to the extent that they interact with the first-person narrator telling the story. Hakutani's conclusion, however, is different:

the most important distinction *Black Boy* bears as autobiography is Wright's intention to use his young self as a mask. The attitudes and sentiments expressed by the young Wright are not totally his own but represent the responses of those he called the "voiceless Negro boys of the South." (Hakutani 1995, 72)

Hakutani points out that the narrator of *Black Boy* resembles Biggar Thomas in *Native Son* in that he does not possess a single identity, but rather appears as a "composite portrait" (Hakutani 1995, 72), an amalgamation of many different characters and voices. Hence if Wright aspires to be a spokesman for the voiceless black youths he had known during his life in the South, he must remain detached and objective in his analysis of others and himself. Where Hakutani's argument runs into difficulties, however, is in trying to decipher Wright's intention; though Hakutani claims that *Black Boy* is not intended as a sociological study, the book is convincing precisely for the way it analyses social problems and presents solutions to the issues examined. Wright's aim, according to Hakutani, was to assess the way black life in the South was affected and moulded by its environment, as he was "concerned with the specific social forces in the environment of a black boy: white racism, black society, and his own family" (Hakutani 1995, 72).

There has been a level of scepticism surrounding Wright's painting so bleak a picture of Southern life, which has been viewed as a way to emphasize and dramatize the emergence of the self in the face of adversity. In "Richard Wright Looks Back", W.E.B. Du Bois argued that Wright is only interested in himself, and that "the suffering of others is put down simply as a measure of his own suffering and resentment" (Hakutani 1995, 67). Hakutani, on the other hand, attributes this dramatization to Wright's optimism, in that if his life were representative of the other "voiceless black boys", it was "to indicate that they too are capable of self-creation" (Hakutani 1995, 75). Hakutani maintains that despite the social forces at work and the corrosive effects of racism on Wright's developing personality, he had not turned out in the manner expected of him, he had not become "the patient, humorous, subservient black man of the white myth" (Hakutani 1995, 75). Wright expresses sentiments to similar effect during an argument with the aptly named Uncle Tom: "And now a strange uncle who felt that I was impolite was going to

74 Albert E. Stone pointed out that "what commands assent as 'true' is not everything which has happened to an individual, but rather those events, relations, ideas, and feelings which in retrospect reveal significance by forming parts of a pattern or shape to life. The discovered design is the central truth of all autobiography." The historically focused memoir and the novelized private confession were, according to Stone, what constituted the two main forms in modern African American autobiographical writing and were still relevant in the late 1970s (Stone 1993, 176).



teach me to act as I had seen the backward black boys act on the plantations, was going to teach me to grin, hang my head, and mumble apologetically when I was spoken to" (*BB*, 158). Wright evidently sought not only to create an identity for himself that was different to what his family and both black and white society expected it to be, but to fashion an image of himself that was a direct challenge to the social forces arrayed against him. Not only was conflict actively sought, it was to an extent inevitable.

The white world that Wright is confronted with grows gradually more hostile and dominant as he grows older, as he comes to depend on working for whites in order to provide for himself and his family. Wright perceives the mould that has been cast for him by observing the manner with which other black boys negotiate their relationships with whites:

I began to marvel at how smoothly the black boys acted out the roles that the white race had mapped out for them. Most of them were not conscious of living a special, separate, stunted way of life. Yet I know that in some period of their growing up—a period that they had no doubt forgotten—there had been developed in them a delicate, sensitive controlling mechanism that shut off their minds and emotions from all the white race had said was taboo. (*BB*, 198)

Much of the hunger, poverty, and injustice that seemed to define Wright's embattled life in the South appears an inevitable result of having to earn a living while navigating the precarious colour line and of his failure to comply with the rules that govern the racial divide. Wright had to fight his way from the beginning, had to work hard at jobs he disliked or face starvation: "I had to work because I had to eat" (*BB*, 196). Wright makes it clear that his life depended on his ability to stifle his true thoughts and feelings behind a mask of obedience. After his anxiety and awkwardness lead to him being fired from a job in a drugstore, he perceives the following:

I had begun coping with the white world too late. I could not make subservience an automatic part of my behaviour. I had to feel and think out each tiny item of racial experience in light of the whole race problem, and to each item I brought the whole of my life. (*BB*, 198)

Wright understands that living in the South does not mean living as a human being, but means eating, sleeping, and working as a black man in a predominantly white world. The exchange between Richard Wright and a Northern Yankee offers an example where hunger, racial politics, and the deep desire to escape emerge from the narrator's thoughts into the "real" world of complex human relations that shape the events he describes:

"Tell me boy, are you hungry?"

I stared at him. He had spoken one word that touched the very soul of me, but I could not talk to him, could not let him know that I was starving myself to go north. I did not trust him. But my face did not change its expression.

"Oh, no, sir," I said, managing a smile.



I was hungry and he knew it; but he was a white man and I felt that if I told him I was hungry I would have been revealing something shameful.

"Boy, I can see the hunger in your face and eyes."

[...] I avoided him after that. Whenever I saw him I felt in a queer way that he was my enemy, for he knew how I felt and the safety of my life in the South depended upon how well I concealed from all whites what I felt. (*BB*, 233)

*Black Boy* is not only concerned with the triumph of the individual over an overwhelming pressure to conform; rather, Wright seeks to show how individual growth and development could be, and often was, thwarted by these same forces. Despite the mounting pressures placed upon him by both white and black communities, he refused to succumb, as submission is equated with an image of selfhood that is external, constructed by society and not by the individual. What further distinguishes *Black Boy* from other works of literary naturalism is that the hero is wholly estranged and isolated from his surroundings, whether on the one hand from his own community on account of his sensitivity and intellect or on the other hand from society itself, dominated by whites, because of the colour of his skin.

There has been criticism that Wright's vision of black life in "Southern Night" was shaped by generalizations not solely regarding the dehumanizing and alienating effect of racial tension between whites and blacks, but also regarding the inadequate relationships Wright experienced in the black community. During an aside in Chapter 2, Wright recalls the following: "After I had outlived the shocks of childhood, after the habit of reflection had been born in me, I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes..." (*BB*, 35). Du Bois maintained that Wright's limited experience of black life disqualified him from making such broad statements, as the world containing such racial hatred as Wright depicts is too harsh and too "overdrawn" to be convincing. If anything, it is Wright's *Native Son* that has been judged the more successful work of art, as the literary convention of the novel allows for such a coldly impersonal tone, and *Black Boy* suffers artistically as its highly personal subject matter is dealt with in a similarly detached, objective manner. For Du Bois, Wright's recollections appeared devoid of sympathy, and even as a boy Wright remains a cool, detached observer of the suffering of others. As Wright later explains in "The Horror and the Glory", this was intentional on his part, as his interest in sociology, politics, and psychology was a way of gaining a better understanding of the world around him, in order to flesh out his early literary endeavours:

But something was missing in my imaginative efforts; my flights of imagination were too subjective, too lacking in reference to social action. I hungered for a grasp of the framework of contemporary living, for a knowledge of the forms of life about me, for eyes to see the bony structures of personality, for theories to light up the shadows of conduct. (*AH*, 26)

Wright's interest in sociology also prefigures his association with various literary circles and affiliation with the Communist Party in Chicago. Du Bois, however, based his critique on the fact that the introverted narrator is so wrapped up in his

own misery that he appears “interested in himself, is self-centred to the exclusion of everybody and everything else” (Du Bois 1995, 67).

If one were to base the concept of the narrator's developing personality on Du Bois' critique that he cannot fully identify with those around him, then Wright's apparent lack of empathy appears the cause rather than a symptom of his struggle to keep his sense of himself as an individual intact. This issue becomes particularly relevant given that much of the narration is made up of his reactions to the world he describes. Olney, for instance, reads Wright's narrator in terms of “the highly individual and individualistic, inturned and self-centred, self-centering nature [...] of Western autobiography” (Olney 1993, 213). Olney argues that *Black Boy* is an example of what he calls “autoautography”, in that Wright seeks to distance himself from the unhappy events of his childhood, while at the same time defining his concept of self by his resistance to the coercive and often violent attempts by the community to mould and shape his personality. These attempts at coercion take the form of imperatives to on the one hand obey his elders, where the punishment for defiance is beating and exclusion, and on the other hand accept the rules of the white world, where the pressure is far greater and the punishment more severe: “The penalty of death awaited me if I made a false move and I wondered if it was worthwhile to make any move at all” (*BB*, 173). Where the white world remains enigmatic and alien, part of a larger design that governs the fundamental aspects of his life, the threat from the black community is more personal and immediate; it is the “enemy”, the “tribe” that seeks to overpower him and actively subject him to its will. When he lets his guard down, being “so starved of association with people” that he becomes, for a few months at least, “an optimist” (*BB*, 151), he falls prey to the pious intentions of his family who seek to coerce him into being baptized and thus into entering their religious community. Before being led to the preacher, Wright recognizes that: “We young men had been trapped by the community, the tribe in which we lived and were a part. The tribe, for its own safety was asking us to be one with it” (*BB*, 154). The cynicism and guilt Wright experiences at acquiescing to the will of the community lead to what Olney describes as

his feeling that he has violated—or has allowed the community to violate—his private, individual, isolate self: his *real* self, not his social self [...] which only he knows and only he could know and which his autobiography—in certain ways his autoautography—is dedicated to realizing for Wright and his readers alike. (Olney 1993, 223)

One way that Wright seeks to keep this private, personal self inviolate is through hunger. Hunger not only offers a form of ascetic denial of the otherness of the outside world in the form of food, but also becomes a secret burden he alone must bear and will continue to carry down the lonely path he treads:

Again and again I vowed that someday I would end this hunger of mine, this apartness, this eternal difference; and I did not suspect that I would never

get intimately into their lives, that I was doomed to live with them but not of them, that I had my own strange and separate road, a road which in later years would make them wonder how I had come to tread it. (*BB*, 126)

Hunger differentiates Wright from his peers, his family, and society in general. While others may, through poverty or misfortune, feel its effects, he alone can understand the significance of *his* hunger, as it grows from material lack to spiritual appetite for greater knowledge and awareness.

#### 4.2 The grim, hostile stranger

In *Black Boy*, hunger influences the pattern of the narrator's thoughts and experiences and takes on an increasingly complex significance as the narrative develops. Hunger is intimately bound up with the pivotal moments in Wright's life, such as his broken relationship with his father, his awakening consciousness of his own individuality while living in an orphanage, his friendships at school, his growing love of reading and books, and his obsessive desire to escape life in the South, leading finally to his awakening sense of community among the poor and dispossessed on the streets of Chicago. Hunger infiltrates his mind, colouring his perception of people and events; it influences his behaviour to the extent that he develops peculiar eating habits and cravings for unusual food, and it makes its influence felt in the way he attempts to ward off pangs of hunger by stealing and hoarding food in secret places. It affects his physique, as the malnutrition he suffers as a boy persists into adulthood, hindering him from finding work and negatively influencing his moods and emotions, making him nervous, restless, and spiteful.

Wright's first experience of hunger as a sensation beyond the common pangs of appetite occurs early on, and his lack of understanding as to its causes leads to his awareness of the breakdown of his parents' marriage. As Wright's hunger grows more acute, it undergoes a transformation from a daily companion to an omnipresent, sinister antagonist:

Hunger stole upon me so slowly that at first I was not aware of what hunger really meant. Hunger had always been more or less at my elbow when I played, but now I began to wake up at night to find hunger standing at my bedside, staring at me gauntly. The hunger I had known before this had been no grim, hostile stranger; it had been a normal hunger that had made me beg constantly for bread, and when I ate a crust or two I was satisfied. But this new hunger baffled me, scared me, made me angry and insistent. (*BB*, 12)

When Wright nags his mother for food, she reveals that there is nothing to eat as his father has deserted them. The family's livelihood had depended on Nathan Wright's income, and once he left the family, poverty and want were left in his place: "As the days slid past the image of my father became associated with my pangs of hunger, and whenever I felt hunger I thought of him with deep biological bitterness" (*BB*, 14).

Though Wright grows up hating his father, he comes to understand that his father's failure to adapt to life in the city was a result of his being the victim of forces outside and beyond his understanding or control.<sup>75</sup> On seeing his father on a Mississippi plantation some twenty-five years later, he feels nothing but pity for the man he once feared and despised, as he recognizes the same forces of repression and subjugation at play that he experienced in his own life, as both he and his father were "part of a huge, implacable, elemental design toward which hate was futile" (*BB*, 170). His father had always been a "black peasant", who had tried to make his way in the city and failed and who remained shackled to the one simple form of living he had known throughout his life: "As a creature of the earth, he endured, hearty, whole, seemingly indestructible, with no regrets and no hopes" (*BB*, 33). Wright perceives that, despite their physical similarities that made them kin, "we were forever strangers, speaking a different language, living on vastly distant planes of reality" (*BB*, 32). The distance between father and son is derived from Nathan's lack of hunger and ambition compared to Richard's striving to succeed in the city where his father had failed, in order to reach the "alien and undreamed-of shores of knowing" (*BB*, 33) that were tantamount to fulfilling his dreams of becoming a writer. It is Wright's hunger that sets him on a path far beyond the narrow horizons of his father, as hunger becomes a crucial expression of his yearning for a life outside the South and a painful struggle that develops into an obsessive drive toward self-creation.

Before embarking on his own path through life, Wright must first contend with the immediate consequences of his parents' divorce and his father's refusal to pay child support. Wright's mother, Ella, falls ill and is unable to pay the rent, and the mother and her two sons are evicted from their apartment. Ella reluctantly places her children in the care of an orphanage, where Wright's hunger continues unabated. Life in the orphanage is hard, characterized by a hostile atmosphere, nervousness, and intrigue. Sometimes, after having had to pull grass by hand after a meagre breakfast, his hunger grows so intense that he nearly loses consciousness:

75 The estrangement and divorce of Wright's parents were partly the result of the father's affair with another woman, yet Wright's recollections bring to light more complex historical and social issues. In support of this complexity, Jones recalls the work of black sociologists, such as E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States*, showing that the "purported problems of the black community, in particular the so-called disorganization of its family life, were not the results of racial inferiority but responses to the after-effects of slavery and the social pressures of urbanization" (Jones 2008, 131). Richard Pells points out that this stance reflected the psychological and sociological ideas of the time insofar as "the emotions and attitudes of individuals were irrevocably conditioned by the norms and institutions of their society" (quoted from Jones 2008, 131). As Jones (2008, 131f.) puts it, "the problem was that the racial pressures [...] were all one way. Black culture becomes a reaction to white racism at the same time as white models of the middle-class family become the norms against which blacks are judged 'pathological'. The pressure to blame poverty on the internal cultural values of the poor, found in the era's representation of rural whites, was especially intense where African American were concerned because it punctuated even the sociological thought that sought to save blacks from racist accusations."

Many mornings I was too weak from hunger to pull the grass; I would grow dizzy and my mind would become blank and I would find myself, after an interval of unconsciousness, upon my hands and knees, my head whirling, my eyes staring in bleak astonishment at the green grass, wondering where I was, feeling that I was emerging from a dream... (BB, 27)

Hunger encroaches on the narrator's thoughts to the point where it loosens his grip on reality, thereby echoing the effects of hunger related by Hamsun's narrator in *Hunger*, where the mind of the protagonist appears wildly disorientated, at times even poised at the edge of an abyss that threatens to swallow him at any moment. Wright's hunger and fear also fuel his imagination, heightening his awareness of and sensitivity to people and the events transpiring around him. The favouritism shown by Miss Simon, the governess, only heightens his distrust:

I began to be aware of myself as a distinct personality striving against others. I held myself in, afraid to act or speak until I was sure of my surroundings, feeling most of the time that I was suspended over a void. My imagination soared; I dreamed of running away. Each morning I vowed I would leave the next morning, but the next morning always found me afraid. (BB, 28)

Wright's growing sense of individuality comes as a reaction against the negative emotions evoked by the institution responsible for his upbringing. The episode reaches a nadir when Miss Simon offers to adopt him; the threat that she poses in stifling Wright's burgeoning autonomy finally motivates him to run away, effectively ending his stint at the orphanage. After a failed attempt by his mother to elicit help from Nathan, Wright again shows his budding defiance by refusing his father's offer to care for him: "I'm hungry now", I told him. "But I won't stay with you" (BB, 31). Even at a young age, Wright's desire to escape his restrictive environment, coupled with his anger and guilt at accepting charity from those he hates, is the driving force behind his emergent self-assertiveness.

Wright's awareness of the link between his hunger and his growing sense of his individuality is evident early on in the book, though his sense of being different from his friends at school is based less on his personality than on his poverty. He feels isolated and alienated from his peers by the conditions of his home life, where he and his family live "just on the borders of actual starvation" (BB, 125), a state of affairs he is at pains to conceal from his friends. Though he becomes acutely conscious of the tension that pervades every form of social interaction between whites and blacks in the South, he is also aware that his home life sets him apart even from other black children: "my mush-and-lard-gravy poverty had cut me off from the normal processes of the lives of black boys my own age" (BB, 174). Wright's awareness of the link between his physical hunger and his growing sense of himself as an individual is emphasized by his relations to his friends: "I was reserved with the girls and boys at school, seeking their company but never letting them guess how much I was being kept out of the world in which they lived" (BB, 125). While his school friends devour loaves of bread with sardines at lunchtime, Wright's lack of

money reduces him to a distant, hungry spectator. He lies when asked whether he would join in their meal, telling them: “Aw, I’m not hungry at noon, ever” (BB, 125). His impoverished circumstances enforce his apartness, though the differences he perceives between himself and his fellows run deeper than his inability to feed himself in the same manner as his peers.

As he is forced to adapt to the role of an outsider, it is made clear that in order to survive physically, he must starve intellectually as a consequence. He feels that society’s intangible restrictions are reflected in the poor standard of the education it provides, which offers little hope for future success “I was beginning to dream the dreams that the state had said were wrong, that the schools had said were taboo” (BB, 170). He also anticipates the more severe consequences of being denied the equality and freedom that he needs to grow as an individual: “Already my personality was lopsided; my knowledge of feeling was far greater than my knowledge of fact” (BB, 121). Both hunger and self-fashioning are equated with the desire to transcend the limitations imposed by his immediate environment and to change the very substance and conditions of his life:

I know now what being a Negro meant. I could endure the hunger. I had learned to live with hate. But to feel that there were feelings denied me, that the very breath of life was beyond my reach, that more than anything hurt, wounded me. I had a new hunger. (BB, 252f.)

During the middle and later chapters of “Southern Night”, Wright increasingly equates his hunger with his growing desire to acquire knowledge of the world around him. In order to spend time roaming and talking with his friends, he has to forfeit going home to his evening meal: “To starve in order to learn about my environment was irrational, but so were my hungers” (BB, 126). The notion that Wright’s hunger is a condition for his awareness of his environment to develop is confirmed when he takes a job delivering newspapers, a job that provides both a steady income and reading material in the form of serialized popular fiction such as Zane Grey’s *Riders of the Purple Sage*. The fact that the newspaper he sells turns out to be racist propaganda published by the Ku Klux Klan illustrates that to acquire a means of satisfying both bodily hunger and his growing appetite for literature, Wright must be complicit in propagating the values of Jim Crow ideology under which he himself suffers. Through such episodes Wright comes to realize that Southern society is structured in such a way that wholehearted submission to the white establishment is his only means of surviving, let alone prospering. The satisfaction of his hunger depends on Wright’s ability to acquiesce and submit, and yet at the same time hunger becomes an implicit factor in his burgeoning rebelliousness: “I could submit and live the life of a genial slave, but that was impossible. All of my life had shaped me to live by my own feelings and thoughts” (BB, 255). Through his acceptance of hunger as an implicit part of his intellectual development, Wright reverses the standard equation of nourishment with wisdom, which states that only in the well-nourished body can the mind fully

develop. As Jones points out, in doing so Wright “thus revers[es] the equation of bread and knowledge central to Douglass’ *Narrative* and to Western intellectual tradition more generally.”<sup>76</sup>

### 4.3 Hunger, reading, and the self-made man

Hunger in *Black Boy* is not just a marginal condition that is the by-product of Wright’s poverty: it also becomes a driving force out of which Wright’s literary impulses emerge. The social and intellectual impoverishment of his surroundings deepens his ambitions to improve himself, while the awareness of his own ignorance only sharpens his hunger for books and the effect they produce:

The plots and stories in the novels did not interest me so much as the point of view revealed. I gave myself over to each novel without reserve, without trying to criticize it; it was enough for me to see and feel something different. And for me, everything was something different. Reading was like a drug, a dope. The novels created moods in which I lived for days. But I could not conquer my sense of guilt, my feeling that the white men around me knew that I was changing, that I had begun to regard them differently. (*BB*, 252)

Reading provides more than a means of escape into pleasant stories or fantasies, it offers a way of re-evaluating the ideas and values he had been taught to believe, of stepping outside his immediate reality and developing the capacity to wonder, question, and doubt the dominant narratives of the society he has grown up with. Davis, for instance, perceived the “neat form of inversion” which is bound up with the development of Wright’s artistic talents, in that “those qualities supporting and sustaining the growing boy’s imagination are just those preventing a successful adjustment to life in the South” (Davis 1993, 148). Even at a young age, Wright is forced to lead a double life; in order to live and feed himself Wright must

76 Jones refers here to Douglass’ account of how a slaveholder’s cruelty could be measured by how hungry he kept his slaves and observation that the master’s control over the supply of food epitomized the utter subjection of slaves to their master’s whim. Hunger was “deeply rooted in slave consciousness [...] For Douglass, hunger represents the ultimate cruelty of slavery because it emphasizes the slave’s total subjection, his inability to control his own food supply; bondage signifies a natural condition of hunger for a slave, while freedom means to feed rather than be fed upon” (Jones 2008, 133). The cruelty of slaveholders with regard to starving their slaves is mentioned a number of times in Douglass’ *Narrative*, where he recalls that “a great many times have we poor creatures been nearly perishing with hunger, when food in abundance lay mouldering in the safe and smoke-house, and our pious mistress was aware of the fact; and yet that mistress and her husband would kneel every morning, and pray that God would bless them in basket and store!” (Douglass 2013, Chapter IX). Douglass draws attention to the hypocrisy of social and religious institutions that encouraged social cohesion and moral behaviour yet masked systemic abuses beneath a veneer of pious morality. Wright’s recollections in *Black Boy* suggest that the politics of racial segregation, widespread poverty, and intimidation of the black population by whites enabled conditions similar to slavery to endure during the Jim Crow era in the South.



compromise and accept the demands placed upon him by his family, his peers, and the whites that employ him. Yet the only way he may make that existence at all bearable is by rejecting, or at least momentarily escaping, these demands by nourishing his appetite for books. His first real contact with stories occurs as a small boy when he asks Ella, a schoolteacher, to recount the tale of *Bluebeard and his Seven Wives*:

As her words fell upon my new ears, I endowed them with a reality that welled up from somewhere within me. [...] The tale made the world around me be, throb, live. As she spoke, reality changed, the look of things altered, and the world became peopled with magical presences. My sense of life deepened and the feel of things was different, somehow. Enchanted and enthralled, I stopped her constantly to ask for details. My imagination blazed. The sensations the story aroused in me were never to leave me. (BB, 37)

The depth of his emotional response may be attributed as much to the material and intellectual deficiency that surrounds him as to Ella's talent for narration. The violent interruption by Wright's grandmother—"You stop that, you evil gal!" she shouted. "I want none of that Devil's stuff in my house!" (BB, 36)—suggests that the intensity of the story's appeal is only made possible through an environment that sustains such absolute contrasts.

Wright's growing consciousness of the power of words, his hunger for books and the access to the world of knowledge they contain become his only viable means of changing his immediate circumstances. What is remarkable about Wright's response to the poverty of his physical and emotional life is that his ever-present fear does not weigh him down or grind him into submission. His need makes him resourceful, and later on Wright exhibits his talent for manipulating language when he obtains a library card from a sympathetic white man, Mr. Falk, and forges a note in order to borrow books from a segregated library in Memphis. His success in doing so reveals his ability to undermine the discourse of the dominant white culture and appropriate its codes for his own ends:

That afternoon I addressed myself to forging a note [...]. *Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy*—I used the word 'nigger' to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note—*have some books by H.L. Mencken?* I forged the white man's name. (BB, 248)

Not only does Wright show initiative through his forgery, he knowingly adopts the racist idiom of Southern whites in order to improve his chances of success. Ward remarked that this particular passage "ensured that readers could not avoid confronting what is endemic in a closed society, for he re-enacts a situation quite familiar in a slave narrative, borrowing a generic convention that tells in brief compass the profound insights and aspirations of the oppressed" (Ward 1995, 98). Wright chooses books by authors that shock and enthrall him; recalling his first time reading H.L. Mencken he writes: "I pictured the man as a raging



demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weakness of people, mocking God, authority" (*BB*, 250). Though frustrated at his own attempts at serious writing, Wright diligently reads in the hope of improving himself, to one day transcend the barrenness of his cultural life by forming his own language with which to fashion thoughts and feelings into a weapon to serve his purpose:

Could words be used as weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? No. It frightened me. I read on and what amazed me was not what he said, but how on earth anybody had the courage to say it. (*BB*, 250)

Wright's hesitation is understandable given the debilitating psychological effects of the racial violence that occurs around him. When Wright hears of a friend's brother having been shot for allegedly having an affair with a white prostitute, he dwells on the insidious effects such events have:

The things that influenced my conduct as a Negro did not have to happen to me directly; I needed but to hear of them to feel their full effects in the deepest layers of my consciousness. Indeed, the white brutality that I had not seen was a more effective control of my behavior than that which I knew. The actual experience would have let me see the realistic outlines of what was really happening, but as long as it remained something terrible and yet remote, something whose horror and blood might descend upon me at any moment, I was compelled to give my entire imagination over to it, an act which blocked the springs of thought and feeling in me, creating a sense of distance between me and the world in which I lived. (*BB*, 173)

Wright's curiosity and intelligence often put him in danger and force him through traumatic situations that resonate through every fibre of his being. These situations had already begun to arise in his home life, as the adults responsible for his upbringing had themselves been raised in a society where failure to acknowledge the dominant white social order was not permitted and hence demanded of Wright the same obedient, subservient attitude as they had themselves internalized. The fact that the harshest punishments meted out to him for his various transgressions came from the hands of his own family, such as the severe beating administered by his mother for setting fire to the family home, shows how cycles of violence and oppression came to permeate every layer of Wright's physical and emotional life, as well as that of the black community.

One of the most insidious forms of racism was that blacks were regarded as intellectually inferior to whites. Wright's frequent arguments with his relatives, as well as his inability to keep jobs for any length of time, came as a result of his inability to hide his active, inquisitive mind behind the mask of dumb obedience that was required of him. Any sign of independent thought or self-awareness was ruthlessly stamped out, and Wright reflects on the fact that whites apparently

preferred blacks that lied, cheated, and stole to those that were conscious of their self-worth:

The southern whites would rather have had Negroes who stole work for them than Negroes who knew, however dimly, the worth of their own humanity. Hence, whites placed a premium on black deceit; they encouraged irresponsibility; and their rewards were bestowed upon us blacks in the degree that we could make them feel safe and superior. (*BB*, 202)

Wright perceives the pressure placed on Negroes to speak and act in a way that reaffirms the status quo. In contrast to the clownish, capricious lies told by Hamsun's narrator in *Hunger*, in *Black Boy* deceitfulness is not a demonstration of rebelliousness or non-conformity, rather it is a form of self-debasement, an expression of the futility of trying to effect positive social change through open, legitimate means. Wright's talent for manipulating language emerges from his sense of the power and precariousness of words. Despite his uneasiness at his own untruthfulness, he tells lies in order to keep his most intimate thoughts from being uncovered; he lies out of sheer self-preservation, as a way of keeping his inner life intact: "A white censor was standing over me and, like dreams forming a curtain for the safety of sleep, so did my lies form a screen of safety for my living moments" (*BB*, 258).

The omnipresent "white censor" is also discernible in the social taboos that restrict discourse between blacks and whites to a handful of subjects, as those topics white men are willing to discuss revolve principally around sex and religion. Hakutani points out that "they were the subjects that did not require positive knowledge or self-assertion on the part of the black man" (Hakutani 1995, 73). Sex, provided it was not interracial, was considered acceptable as it was purely biological, "and like religion it would not call for the will power of the individual" (Hakutani 1995, 73). The negative example of his father, coupled with his own poverty-induced asceticism, had enabled Wright to avoid the same temptations as his father of alcohol and sex; this avoidance granted him a measure of self-respect in the face of a dehumanizing system that encouraged dissolute behaviour. Though blacks were physically free, the system of racial oppression under Jim Crow meant that their speech and movement were closely watched and thereby restricted; though Wright learns to choose his words in order to avoid danger, he often runs into trouble through his inability to control his body language. As his friend Griggs points out, his recalcitrance is plain to see: "'There it is, *now!* It's in your face. You won't let people tell you things'" (*BB*, 185). Wright's acute sensitivity makes any word or gesture appear potentially disastrous, though the more he is forced to repress the objects of his dreams and yearnings, the stronger and more desirable they become.

One of the expressions of these suppressed desires comes in the form of his first story, *The Voodoo of Hell's Half-Acre*. The anti-intellectualism Wright encounters among his friends and family after its publication in a local magazine is revealing: "Had I been conscious of the full extent I was pushing against the current of my

environment, I would have been frightened altogether out of my attempts at writing" (*BB*, 169). Wright's growing desire to become a writer appears so far removed from the aspirations of his peers as to seem implausible: "The mood out of which a story was written was the most alien thing conceivable to them" (*BB*, 168). Not only would his becoming a writer mean taking up a profession that was reserved for whites, it would also mean overcoming the psychologically debilitating effects of hunger, fear, and hatred. To do so required an immense act of will; as Jones points out, the poverty of Wright's life forms "the empty kernel from which all desire, and thus all imaginative creativity and intellectual understanding emerge" (Jones 2008, 139). Jones goes on to argue that *Black Boy* abounds with references to positive desires, which ultimately arise from a sense of physical or intellectual lack or deficiency in his environment:

Hunger here seems to refer to human incompleteness in a broad epistemological, even spiritual sense; a metaphysical lack that resonates with a Judeo-Christian perception of man as a creature of need not plenitude, and that becomes readily expressed in words that are themselves a sign of a basic absence within us all. (Jones 2008, 144)

Jones argues, however, that treating hunger and poverty as a catalyst that propels Wright to extraordinary achievement "carries the danger of nebulizing the issue as a specific one of social injustice by blending it instead into a limitless desire that marks us all as 'poor' creatures in search of impossible fulfilment" (Jones 2008, 141). To Jones' assessment of the issue of so-called "limitless" desire and fulfilment may be added the ambiguous ideal of American freedom of opportunity, which on the surface appears conducive to the concept of self-fashioning yet historically is marked by the lack of equal opportunities afforded to those marginalized by the white Christian majority in the United States.

For example, Prescott declared in his review of the book that the success of *Black Boy* "entitles Mr. Wright to an honored rank among that traditionally American select group, the 'self-made man'" (Prescott 1995, 63). In his published lecture titled "Self-Made Men" that appeared in 1872, Frederick Douglass defined that select group as "what man, as a whole, is; what he has been; what he aspires to be, and what, by a wise and vigorous cultivation of his faculties, he may yet become."<sup>77</sup> Though very much rooted in late 19th-century notions of rugged individualism and Douglass' own experience of slavery, his creed was arguably that of America itself—it upheld freedom of opportunity, social mobility, and the merits of hard work. Each individual's goal should be to labour toward improving the youthful vision of a diverse and differing nation, particularly with regard to the legacy of slavery and the injustice suffered by African Americans:

<sup>77</sup> All quotations are taken from the online resource *Self-Made Men: The Frederick Douglass Papers at the Library of Congress*.

It is not fair play to start the Negro out in life, from nothing and with nothing, while others start with the advantage of a thousand years behind them. He should be measured, not by the heights others have obtained, but from the depths from which he has come. (Douglass [1895] undated)

Poverty and racism are too great a hindrance to be shrugged off lightly, though Douglass insists that hardships can be overcome, that through hard work any desirable goal can be attained. The defining characteristic of the self-made man is his ability to rise from obscurity and from unfavourable circumstances through his hunger for knowledge and willingness to improve himself, thereby altering the course of his life for the better. Such a state of affairs, Douglass argues, can only be beneficial to society as a whole and improve the life of each member individually. Society and the state, for their part, exist to safeguard individual liberty and maintain basic equality of opportunity.<sup>78</sup> The difference between the self-made man and the rest should only be his desire and hunger, as a man must come through hardship in order to succeed:

What is true in the world of matter, is equally true in the world of the mind. Without culture there can be no growth; without exertion, no acquisition; without friction, no polish; without labor, no knowledge; without action, no progress and without conflict, no victory. (Douglass [1895] undated)

In this sense *Black Boy* follows in the tradition laid down by Douglass, as *Black Boy* offers a case study of a black writer's struggle to fashion an identity that transcends social status, birth, or formal education. Once Wright has a firm grasp of the precariousness of his position as a poor, maladjusted black youth, he intuitively acts in a manner amenable to his ambition to leave the South; he is willing to work hard and even break the law in order to succeed where others failed. For instance, when he agrees to swindle his white employers by re-selling theatre tickets, he rationalizes his actions to the point where he claims to be acting out of a sense of social injustice rather than from purely personal gain:

I gave him a pledge of my honesty, feeling absolutely no qualms about what I intended to do. He was white, and I could never do to him what he and his kind had done to me. Therefore, I reasoned, stealing was not a violation of my ethics, but of his; I felt that things were rigged in his favor and any action I took to circumvent his scheme of life was justified. Yet I had not convinced myself. (*BB*, 205)

As he makes clear early on in the book, both his doubts and convictions are derived from an innate sense of his own self-worth and potentiality, rather than

78 The role of society in creating a stable environment for the individual to prosper was strongly contested by the proponents of *laissez-faire* capitalism in the 20th century, particularly through the influence of Ayn Rand and her circle. In her philosophical novel *The Fountainhead*, published in 1943, Rand explored the concept of self-creation to its irrational end; her protagonist, the architect Howard Roark, ends up destroying that which he cannot control.

from received knowledge or tradition: "Anything seemed possible, likely, feasible, because I wanted everything to be possible" (*BB*, 70). Wright must fashion his own moral code from an intuitive sense of right or wrong, and build an image of his future self from the wreckage of his past experiences. Placed within the context of the self-made man described by Douglass, *Black Boy* can thus be regarded as a literary account of the friction caused by an aspiring individual striving against a system that imposes uniformity of thought and behaviour on both oppressor and oppressed, where both sides enact and embody the culture of violence, fear, and racial hatred on which the Jim Crow laws of the South were based.

Wright attributes his dreams of escaping to the North and becoming a writer to the early books he read, though these books reveal as much about the ideals of the culture he is striving toward than about his own quest for personal fulfilment:

I had, of course, read my Horatio Alger stories, pulp stories, and I knew my Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford series from cover to cover, though I had sense enough not to hope to get rich; even to my naïve imagination that possibility was too remote. I knew that I lived in a country in which the aspirations of black people were limited, marked off. Yet I felt I had to go somewhere and do something to redeem my being alive. (*BB*, 169)

Wright's early immersion in the fables of free-market capitalism suggests that he must first grasp the wider context of his own predicament in the society he lives in before formulating any definite plans for change. Wright also points to the inherent weakness in the conventional rags-to-riches story in that the prejudice he suffered as a Negro could not be transferred onto their typically white male protagonists. Wright perceives that becoming rich in the manner depicted by Alger or Chester was inconceivable to someone in his position, which suggests that belief in the freedom of opportunity ascribed to the system of free-market capitalism was misguided, given that it did not apply to traditionally marginalized groups such as women and minorities, who were not fully included in the system in the first place (see Jones 2008, 138). This idea becomes increasingly prominent given the wider context of the American myth of self-making and Wright's uneasy relationship with Communism, which later becomes a dominant theme in "The Horror and the Glory" where he comes to realize that life in Chicago is not the paradise of equality and liberty he first expected:

Like any other American, I dreamed of going into business and making money; I dreamed of working for a firm that would allow me to advance until I reached an important position [...] Yet I knew—with that part of my mind the whites had given me—that none of my dreams was possible. Then I would hate myself for allowing my mind to dwell on the unattainable. (*AH*, 7)

The painful lessons learned living in the South enabled him to envisage a life of equality and independence that is only possible by escaping an environment openly hostile to his existence, though he acknowledges that his personality had

been irreversibly shaped by the life he was leaving: "Color hate defined the place of black life as below that of white life; and the black man, responding to the same dreams as the white man, strove to bury within his heart his awareness of this difference because it made him lonely and afraid" (*AH*, 7). His loneliness would not only persist, but also intensify upon reaching the desolate urban sprawl of Chicago, which forces him to address not only his own plight but also that of America as a nation.

#### 4.4 Wright's *American Hunger*

Wright's search for meaning or fulfilment in the North points to the incompleteness of human existence beyond materialistic desire or need. Wright's confused searching ultimately leads to the realization that deeper satisfaction cannot be found in keeping with a concept of human life that is defined by the constant struggle to fulfil superficial wants and requirements imposed on the individual by society, regardless of whether these superficial desires are physical or intellectual: "To solve this tangle of balked emotion, I loaded the empty part of the ship of my personality with fantasies of ambition to keep it from toppling into the sea of senselessness" (*AH*, 7). Wright's fiercely indrawn nature and retreat into books and writing is eventually disrupted by national events that alter the course of his life in Chicago.

Wright's feelings of loneliness and anguish on the one hand are a reaction to his physical environment, in that his childhood in the rural South had left him unprepared for the industrialized "machine city" (*AH*, 2) he now calls home, and on the other hand are derived from his sense of being cut off from the kind of future he envisaged: "I wanted a life in which there was a constant oneness of feeling with others, in which the basic emotions of life were shared, in which common memory formed a common past, in which collective hope reflected a national future" (*AH*, 20). Wright reveals that for Negroes life in Chicago is in some ways worse than it was in the South, as at least those who stayed behind accepted their position under white hegemony and had a sense of where they belonged in the wider scheme of things:

I had elected, in my fevered search for honorable adjustment to the American scene, not to submit and in doing so I had embraced the daily horror of anxiety, of tension, of eternal disquiet. I could now sympathize with—though I could never bring myself to approve—those tortured blacks who had given up and had gone to their white tormentors and had said: "Kick me, if that's all there is for me; kick me and let me feel at home, let me have peace!" (*AH*, 6)

Despite the bustle of the city's crowded streets and the cramped apartment he shares with his mother, his brother, and Aunt Maggie, Wright's feelings of loneliness and isolation continue unabated, as he feels misunderstood by his employers,

family, and relatives. Wright strives to maintain at least an outward show of tranquillity, keeping his feelings of anxiety and estrangement hidden behind "a deadpan mask of general friendliness" (AH, 20). He continues to read voraciously, and keeps no real friends to speak of, only mingling with acquaintances: "I had developed a self-sufficiency that kept me distant from others, emotionally and psychologically" (AH, 20). His attitude to life reflects the same pattern adopted during the hard years in the South, though rather than keeping his true feelings hidden out of fear of violence, he instead buried himself in books and writing as a way of expressing himself without "fear of rude rebuff or searing reprisal" (AH, 21). For Wright, reading and writing are not simply a reprieve from his daily troubles and anxieties; they offer his only hope for a meaningful existence.

Some critics have seen in the anguish and isolation of Wright's narrator in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* certain parallels with the work of European artists and thinkers at the time. Hakutani for instance suggests that "without mental companionship to rely on [...] [Wright's narrator] withdrew and turned inward like the anti-hero of an existentialist novel. In his recoil he had once again discovered that the revelation of all truths must come through the action and anguish of the self" (Hakutani 1995, 77). Fabre reveals that many of the ideas Wright espoused were being voiced in existentialist circles at the time, echoed particularly in their pessimistic view of modern European society at the end of the Second World War. For Wright, the conclusion of the war by the dropping of the atom bomb had only confirmed his belief that "mankind must move to a humane, intelligent path of action or be removed from the planet" and that unity between man and man was no longer a vague, utopian longing but a matter of "life and death" (Hakutani 1995, 112).

The French existentialists were similarly preoccupied with the survival of society through the return of human values and morality in the face of the dehumanizing and alienating effects of modern capitalism. For instance, in the *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir was highly critical of the kind of artificial happiness gained through mass consumption, where by satiating his desires man is denied the capacity to transcend them. If Wright believed, as Sartre did, that certain circumstances allow a man "to create himself out of nothing" (Fabre 1995, 114), then Wright's leaving the South at the end of *Black Boy* may be construed as a second chance, the possibility of fulfilling his youthful vision of a moral and dignified life through escape and renewal.

Wright's idealistic notions of life in the North are further challenged by the corruption and materialism that characterizes life in the big city, as his job selling insurance policies to poor black housewives suggests a system where exploitation was the rule: "I did not like it, but there was only one thing I could do to keep from being party to it: I could quit and starve. But I did not feel that being honest was worth the price of starvation" (AH, 36). Though Wright harbours relatively humble ambitions of finding a job and feeding his family, even these appear thwarted when he fails the weight examination for a clerical job at the postal service: "Was



I always to hang on the fringes of life? What I wanted was truly modest, and yet my past, my diet, my hunger, had snatched it from before my eyes" (*AH*, 23). At this point, Wright's frustration is not yet directed against the system and its rules, rather they confirm his pessimistic rejection of the materialism he perceives in the world:

To me, my losing was only another manifestation of that queer, material way of American living that computed everything in terms of the concrete: weight, color, race, fur coats, radios, electric refrigerators, cars, money ... It seemed that I simply could not fit into a materialistic life. (*AH*, 23)

The racism prevalent in the South has been replaced with the horror of the individual being crushed under the weight of a soulless, materialistic society. In a letter to Dorothy Norman written in 1948, Wright decries the effects of mass consumerism that had come to define life in America and that reduced mankind to "animals" that can be satisfied by consumption: "A world will be built in which everybody will get enough to eat and full stomachs will be equated with contentment and freedom, and those who will say they are not happy under such a regime will be guilty of treason."<sup>79</sup> Wright had already lamented the superficial goals and ambitions of those he met in Chicago, as he had first become aware of the difference between himself and others when speaking with the white waitresses at a diner where he worked: "All my life I had done nothing but feel and cultivate my feelings; all their lives they had done nothing but strive for petty goals, the material prizes of American life" (*AH*, 13). He perceives the same cultural deficiency in the black community, that it is the cultivation of his thoughts and feelings and desire to enrich his inner life through literature that causes his feelings of estrangement from those around him. He defends the time he spends writing and reading from the queries of his Aunt Maggie:

And I knew my words sounded wild and foolish in my environment, where reading was almost unknown, where the highest item of value was a dime or dollar, an apartment or a job; where, if one aspired at all, it was to be a doctor or lawyer, a shopkeeper or politician. [...] I had no sense of being inferior or superior to the people about me; I merely felt that they had no chance to learn to live differently. I never criticized them or praised them, yet they felt in my neutrality a deeper rejection of them than if I had cursed them. (*AH*, 21)

The stock market crash of 1929 is a turning point in Wright's life in Chicago, as it marks the beginning of a new phase where he gives up his neutrality and re-adjusts his values from those of a cynical outsider to those of a political activist, one who is willing use his literary talents to address the pressing issues of his day and age. It is around this time that Wright begins to associate with intellectual circles like the

<sup>79</sup> See Richard Wright's "Two Letters to Dorothy Norman", "Art and Action", *Twice a Year*, 78 (quoted from Fabre 1995, 116).



Garveyites, becomes a member of the John Reed Club, and hears of the American Communist Party's efforts at organizing the city's swelling ranks of the poor and unemployed. As he roams the South Side in search of work, he is confronted with signs of black revolt, though he at first remains sceptical about the effectiveness of their revolutionary sentiments: "I liked their courage, but doubted their wisdom" (AH, 37). He remains unconvinced by those black Communists who imitate the speech and mannerisms of their European counterparts, arguing that this has a debilitating effect on those who lack the education or intellect to understand the views they are espousing. Wright believes that their radicalism actually hampers their acceptance of new thoughts and ideas, making them more ignorant than before they started: "Communism, instead of making them leap forward with fire in their hearts to become masters of ideas and life, had frozen them at an even lower level of ignorance than had been theirs before they met Communism" (AH, 39). Though he is willing to accept the Communist worldview, he believes the world envisioned by the majority of Communists is too simple to be believed in. While Wright feels that the rejection of the world is the first necessary step toward a creative life, the Communists do not fully understand the world that they are rejecting: "For them there was no yesterday or tomorrow, only the living moment of today; their only task was to annihilate the enemy that confronted them in any manner possible" (AH, 40).

Wright's break with Communism, which makes up the later part of the book, results from his sense that Marxism failed to give full treatment to the individual personality. He felt that his hard-fought for independence, which bred the self-reliance and ambition to further his career as a writer, ran contrary to socialist ideals of the class struggle and victimization: "It was my way of thinking and feeling that they feared. [...] Writing had to be done in loneliness and Communism had declared war upon human loneliness" (AH, 123). Wright's denunciation of the American Communists' adoption of the authoritarian methods of the Russian Bolsheviks in many ways echoes the humanist philosophy of Frederick Douglass.<sup>80</sup> Wright believed that blind acceptance of authority creates an absurd reality that contradicts the American ideal of a society based on reason and progress:

But there existed in the Western world an element that baffled and frightened the Communist party: the prevalence of self-achieved literacy. [...] The heritage of free thought—which no man could escape if he read at all—the spirit of the Protestant ethic which one suckled, figuratively, with one's mother's milk, that self-generating energy that made a man feel, whether he realized it or not, that he had to work and redeem himself through his own acts, all this was forbidden, taboo. And yet this was the essence of that cultural heritage which the Communist party had sworn to carry forward, whole and intact, into the future. (AH, 120)

80 For an in-depth discussion of Douglass's views on race relations and humanism in the United States, see Waldo E. Martin, Jr.'s *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Martin 1984, 92).

Wright sees a further contradiction in his observation that those Communists who viewed the hardships he had suffered as having inflicted irreparable harm to his character were themselves “truncated and impoverished by the oppression they had suffered long before they had ever heard of Communism” (*AH*, 125). Wright felt that those who claimed to have a sympathetic understanding of the poor and oppressed were unable to overcome their trauma as he had done. Wright perceived that the party’s ideological bickering and constant infighting meant that the Communists were unable to fulfil their promise of ushering in a better, more equal society. In an earlier passage, he recognized that it was imperative that African Americans should find a solution to their own problems but that in order to do so they must first start to address those of America as a nation:

Could the Negro ever possess himself, learn to know what had happened to him in relation to the aspirations of Western society? It seemed to me that for the Negro to try and save himself he would have to forget himself and try to save a confused, materialistic nation from its own drift toward self-destruction. Could the Negro accomplish this miracle? Could he take up his bed and walk? (*AH*, 41)

Wright’s first engagement with politics had taken place during the earlier chapters of the book in the form of a job rounding up votes for the Republican Party, though he quickly realized that the fraudulent practice of buying votes and influence peddling rendered the democratic process a farce. As the economic crisis deepens he and his family are pushed ever deeper into poverty, and the spectre of hunger again intrudes into his life. After being told by his mother that there is no food in the house, he is resigned to ask for relief at the Cook County Bureau of Public Welfare. This decision marks a low point for Wright, as he acknowledges that he has so far failed in the city given that he has not yet achieved what he had set out to do. Begging for bread from the state was tantamount to a public confession of his hunger, though while waiting at the office he observes those around him speaking to their neighbours, telling their lives and stories:

Before this they had lived as individuals, each somewhat afraid of the other, each seeking his own pleasure, each staunch in that degree of Americanism that had been allowed him. But now life had tossed them together, and they were learning to know the sentiments of their neighbours for the first time; their talking was enabling them to sense the collectivity of their lives, and some of their fear was passing. (*AH*, 43)

Wright argues that when individuals cease to feel isolated in their separate lives and are driven together through shared hunger and common experience, revolutionary ideas may begin to take hold. Wright does not foresee a revolution actually occurring, however, as the “people now knew that the past had betrayed them, had cast them out; but they did not know what the future would be like, did not know what they wanted” (*AH*, 43). Wright believed that the failings of the ruling class

made them incapable of holding on to power, as they were unable to perceive the growing disillusionment of the people: "Had they understood what was happening, they never would have allowed millions of perplexed and defeated people to sit together for long hours and talk, for out of their talk was rising a new realization of life" (AH, 44). For Wright, the encounter at the relief station had the effect of an awakening: "The day I begged bread from the city officials was the day that showed me I was not alone in my loneliness, society had cast millions of others with me" (AH, 44).

Wright is drawn to the realization that real revolutionary sentiment is not expressed through those that seek to obtain wealth or defend property through force, as these people merely conform to the values of the capitalist system under which they live. Wright's sense of solidarity with the other unemployed people at the Welfare office is proof of the unity that shared hunger and misfortune can bring about, and it shows that despite severe hardship and the detrimental effects of poverty and material lack, people could emerge with a stronger grasp of the irrationality and limitations of the system under which they suffered. The real danger to the established order comes from those who begin to think differently, to formulate their own ideas as to the meaning of social justice and equality: "The millions that I would fear are those who do not dream of the prizes the nation holds forth, for it is in them, though they do not know it, that a revolution has taken place and is biding its time to translate itself into a new and strange way of life" (AH, 45).

The story of Wright's life told in *Black Boy* and *American Hunger* relates in visceral terms how an aspiring black artist first suffers and then overcomes the horrors of racism and poverty in order to embrace the dark void of his own longings and hunger. The bleak picture that emerges is of a world seemingly too narrow, too filled with suffering and anguish for a sensitive, artistic mind to flourish, where hunger, violence, and potential ruin threaten at every turn. Yet in the face of such adversity, Wright's narrator remains willing to embrace hunger and isolation in order to pursue and finally fulfil his dreams of becoming a writer, to create and fashion himself according to his own ideas and desires. With those words that Wright sent marching into the darkness that "create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all", Wright cast a penetrating gaze at the hunger and oppression that still linger under the gleaming surface of modern American life. In a world plagued by contradictions, false hopes, and persistent hatred, Richard Wright's *Black Boy* remains a beacon to those left gazing into the deepening gloom of the 21st century.

## Conclusion

This study into hunger and modern writing has endeavoured to show the relevance and versatility of hunger as a theme in the works of Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright. It has argued that hunger is important not only for these selected writers, but also in the way it is deeply involved with concepts of modernity and modern literature. It should therefore complement not only other critical studies that offer biographical or formal approaches to these authors, but also discussions of hunger that address literary works from a scientific or medical viewpoint. When viewed together, the cultural and scientific approaches to hunger can offer a complete view of the way hunger is bound up with a writer's role in modern society.

Future studies that address hunger and modern writing can benefit from a focused and structured approach to these subjects, particularly given the fact that hunger is examined in a wide range of disciplines. The present study has demonstrated how writers both reflect upon and are influenced by antagonistic attitudes to modernity insofar as they either resist or submit to the pressures of values and social conventions perceived as cruel or indifferent. It has addressed the ongoing debate regarding the concept of the modern author, a creative individual who strives for independence of thought and action yet remains subject to the rules and conventions defined by society. By focusing specifically on the relevance of hunger in each respective text, the present study has contributed to the work undertaken by previous critics and shown that there is a way of viewing and examining these texts that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

To summarize briefly, Chapter 1 examined how Melville draws upon two aspects of hunger, that of appetite and absence, in his portrayal of the scriveners on Wall Street while supporting the idea that *Bartleby* exhibits an artistic temperament. In Chapter 2, I discussed the link between modernist art and the alienation of the individual in Kafka's writing and how hunger is bound up with both the physical decline and the spiritual withdrawal of his heroes that culminate in their death from starvation. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated the significance of hunger for Hamsun's narrator with regard to his self-destructive tendencies, and I showed how his rejection of society and his willingness to act against his own self-interest may be read as an expression of Hamsun adopting an anti-modern stance comparable to that of Dostoevsky's. In Chapter 4, I discussed how hunger is bound up in Wright's text with self-fashioning, which is an important theme in the narrative and which is also relevant to an appreciation of the book as an intellectual autobiography. All four chapters relate how perceptions and experiences of hunger may alter reality in the narrative and how hunger impacts and transforms the substance and conditions of the protagonists' lives.

In the past, studies on hunger and authorship have tended to discuss hunger in pathological terms, as shown by the frequent references to critical sources on eating disorders throughout this book. A possible reason for this could be that it is tempting to approach an author or character as a case study for analysis; while

there have been many valuable insights gained from this approach, I feel that it is more constructive to address hunger as a literary theme rather than a symptom exhibited by the author or protagonist. A potential problem with psychoanalytical readings of the former kind is that they presuppose an awareness of psychoanalysis and of the subconscious on behalf of the author and tend to base their analysis on an incomplete picture of an author or text based on the writing and documents available. Retrospectively labelling a writer or his or her creation "anorexic" or "bulimic" makes a kind of assumption that texts such as Melville's "Bartleby", for instance, arguably do not support. The present study thus offers an alternative, as it focuses on the formal and thematic elements of the selected texts and how these coincide with the literary milieu and critical discourse surrounding the epoch in which a given author has come to be associated.

The works of Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright can thus be directly linked with the conflicting concepts of modernity and of its consequences for the individual and the author, and hunger can itself be read both as a symbol of a materialist, capitalist modernity and as a potential cure for its incumbent ills of greed and indifference. Hunger, insofar as it is understood as a form of asceticism, can act as a corrective for excessive pragmatism and concerns with materialist and monetary values at the expense of self-reflection, creativity, and spontaneity. This corrective can be perceived as negative insofar as the protagonists of these works have refused to obey or comply with a dominant social order, which can result in a form of denial that destabilizes the foundations upon which social identity is built. It thus contributes to the wider discourse of modern writing as resisting the drive toward social progress, not by direct opposition or by contributing nothing to human knowledge and understanding, but rather by providing different points of view from which the negative aspects of modernity can be perceived and addressed. This book has examined the inconsistencies and contradictions of conceptualizing hunger as both desire and absence of desire, as both a creative and a destructive force, and has shown how they relate to the broader conflicts relating to the writer's role in modern society.

I have also discussed the comparatively recent perception of art and literature as a commodity, how it has further exacerbated the ambiguous and precarious position of the writer, and how art itself might be viewed as a redemptive space that ultimately proves illusory. Having positioned hunger within the context of a discourse on modernity, I would also maintain that hunger is too broad and complex a subject to be reduced to a single line of approach. What remains constant in the four works chosen, however, is that even though each text shows a very different figure who has his own particular reason for starvation, all these reasons are based to a greater or lesser degree on an impulse to write, to remove oneself from the social norm, and to assert individuality in the face of uniformity. Hunger can lead to isolation, not only spiritually and intellectually, but physically as well. This ties in with a central development in the position of the writer under conditions of modernity, which has seen a marked shift toward the artist's increasing

withdrawal from the mainstream, and the way hunger is treated in key modernist texts provides an emphatic indication of the extent of this development. The starving writers in these narratives place themselves outside the cycle of desire and consumption that modern capitalist societies encourage and cultivate; whether it is *Bartleby's* refusal to work and his retreat into "dead-wall reveries" or Richard Wright's rejection of the materialism of American life he finds in Chicago, hunger is bound up with a sense of the spiritual poverty and limitations of urban life and with the need to preserve and cultivate the world within. This suggests that by embracing and understanding the depths and limits of hunger, an individual can explore one of the few potential avenues of free will available to mankind—a view supported by the discussion of these selected texts. It also demonstrates that hunger can empower the individual, and reminds readers that by exerting control over their appetite and desire, they may direct the course of their own lives through the choices they make.

A prospective field of study still lies ahead for examining the relevance of hunger for our postmodern, post-materialist age, and I hope that this book can offer a useful source of comparison, and even insight, for further research. The increasingly complex interaction between technology and the body, as well as rapid advances in the study of how the mind functions, offers a broad horizon of possibility for the study of hunger in literature. Above all, I have tried to show how great authors of the past can still address the present by means of their work, and perhaps even lead to a better understanding of suffering, need, and desire in the future.



# Abbreviations and Works Cited

## List of Abbreviations

- AH = Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (1977)  
B = Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (2013)  
BB = Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (2008)  
DW = Franz Kafka, *Die Verwandlung* (2000)  
EH = Franz Kafka, "Ein Hungerkünstler" (2000)  
H = Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (1996)

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Hunger is a contentious theme in modernist literature, and this study addresses its relevance in the works of four major American and European writers. Taking an in-depth look at works by Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright, it argues that hunger is deeply involved with concepts of modernity and modern literature. Exploring how it is bound up with the writer's role in modern society this study draws on two conflicting and complex views of hunger: the first is material, relating to the body as a physical entity that has a material existence in reality. Hunger, in this sense, is a physiological process that affects the body as a result of the need for food, the lack of which can lead to discomfort, listlessness, and eventually death. The second view is that of hunger as an appetite of the mind, the kind of hunger for immaterial things that is associated with an individual's desire for a new form of knowledge, sentiment, or a different way of perceiving the reality of the world. By discussing the selected authors' conceptualization of hunger as both desire and absence of desire, or as both a creative and a destructive force, it examines how it has influenced literary representations of modern life. This study then offers a focused approach to a broad field of inquiry and presents analyses that address a variety of critical perspectives on hunger and modern literature.

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