

NOTES AND REVIEWS

Getting into the Cage: A Note on Kafka's "A Hunger Artist"

Although Kate Flores, seeing "the irony of obliviousness" in "A Hunger Artist," has observed that the story is written "from the oblivious point of view of those inflicting the cruelty,"¹ the role of Kafka's narrator deserves further and fuller attention. Critical consensus suggests that the hunger artist, the narrator, and Kafka all hold the same view about the plight of the artist alienated from a society that is no longer interested in him; and, ultimately, this consensus makes society responsible for the artist's misery, a misery so complete that self-destruction becomes the only means of self-fulfillment. Such a view, it seems to me, is unwarrantedly indulgent, patronizing, and finally irresponsible; it reduces Kafka to a very pitiable creature who could not live with the pain of being misunderstood. Of course, the artist is misunderstood; and most artists in their sane and stable moments know the truth of Emerson's rather smug remark: "To be great is to be misunderstood." I submit that Kafka was no exception and that his art in "A Hunger Artist" explores a much more significant observation than has hitherto been accorded him on the function of art and the kinds of activity which it can and should generate.

The following passage from the story will serve as my point of departure:

Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being not only the record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record by a performance beyond human imagination, since he felt that there were no limits to his capacity for fasting? His public pretended to admire him so much, why should it have so little patience with him; if he could endure fasting longer, why shouldn't the public endure it? Besides, he was tired, he was comfortable sitting in the straw, and now he was supposed to lift himself to his full height and go down to a meal the very thought of which gave him a nausea that only the presence of the ladies kept him from betraying, and even that with an effort. And he looked up into the eyes of the ladies who were apparently so friendly and in reality so cruel, and shook his head, which felt too heavy on its strengthless neck.²

This passage could be used as evidence for Kafka's ironic distance and, hence, as a claim for the essential helplessness of the artist's circumstance. The phrase "apparently so friendly and in reality so cruel" could be extracted as Kafka's paradigm. One could yield to the Weltschmerz of the hunger artist shaking "his head, which felt too heavy on its strengthless neck." The story could be translated into a despairing sociological, religious, and/or metaphysical allegory; in fact most readers have done this. But Kafka may have preferred another

¹Kate Flores, "The Judgment," in *Franz Kafka Today*, eds. Angel Flores and Homer Swander (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1958), p. 20.

²Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer and trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 271. All subsequent references to "A Hunger Artist" will be from this edition.

reading, one which severs the assumed connection between author and narrator, making the narrator the primary consciousness and, in fact, the central character. The text encourages this possibility, beginning, as in the passage above, with the references to fame and the recurring terminology, throughout "A Hunger Artist," of prestige, success, status, and exhibition.

The narrator styles himself, for example, as an observer of "professional fasting" (p. 268); he describes the events as "thrilling performances" (p. 275) in which "the whole effect was heightened by torch flares" (p. 268); he speaks of "records" (p. 276), "rewards" (p. 276), the "art of fasting" (p. 276), and "fine placards" (p. 276); he details, almost too fastidiously, the responsibilities and maneuverings of "the impresario" (p. 272). If the narrator is detached, his "detachment" creates a very curious and problematical pattern. Out of context, his dilettantism could be construed as a pose, taken for the purpose of critique. The whole story, however, indicates that the narrator genuinely subscribes to this value system and considers himself one of the few "initiates" (p. 270) who can genuinely appreciate the hunger artist. Item: every group of people in the story is help up to scorn, ridicule, or sarcasm for their failure to be knowledgeable in the art of fasting or for their willingness to abandon themselves to impulse once the task of "watching" is over. No one except the narrator and the artist, it seems, is capable of understanding; for others, enlightenment is "quite impossible" (p. 268). Hence, the narrator refers to the need of "the masses" (p. 268) to be reassured; and he observes that "not every watcher, of course, was capable of understanding" (p. 269) why the artist "would never in any circumstances, not even under forcible compulsion, swallow the smallest morsel of food." (pp. 268-269) He is openly contemptuous of the "people who argued that this breakfast was an unfair attempt to bribe the watchers" (p. 269) and preens himself, at the expense of others, by mentioning conditions "hardly to be understood by well-fed people" (p. 272). The artist's misery, the narrator thinks, is caused by the public's insensitivity: "So he lived for many years, with small regular intervals of recuperation, in visible glory, honored by the world, yet in spite of that troubled in spirit, and all the more troubled because no one would take his trouble seriously" (p. 272).

But does *the narrator* actually take the artist "seriously"? Or is he the most extreme example in the story of a lack of seriousness? The latter alternative seems more tenable, particularly in view of the cognitive priorities that are revealed in the narrator's language. In almost every paragraph, we have evidence of a purely visual orientation and a purely visual perception of art; references to eyes and seeing almost become a signature. Additionally, we have the logic of "good reason" (p. 270) and the conclusions that "experience had proved" (p. 270), implying an analytical approach to reality and an attempt to explain art as if its essence could be grasped by recognizing the "premonitory symptoms" (p. 273) and finding the "profound causes" (p. 273). The narrator assumes that he, like the hunger artist, knows "the real situation" (p. 274); and at one point he actually flaunts his enlightened status: "To fight against this lack of understanding, against a whole world of nonunderstanding, was impossible" (p. 273). Or again, even more presumptuously: "Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting! Anyone who has no feeling for it cannot be made to understand" (p. 276). And throughout the story, of course, there is a clear-cut differentiation between the "I" as connoisseur and the bumbblings of the passersby with their "indifference and inborn malice" (p. 276).

Read in this way, Kafka's story is not an allegory with *cri de coeur* reverberations. It comes close, both in meaning and spirit, to Dylan Thomas's "In My Craft and Sullen Art." In that poem, Thomas tells us that he writes for

the “common wages” of lovers. He does not write for proud men, nor for those who think his art is a commodity, nor for those who praise his craft or art, but for those who are experientially affected by what he has to say, who understand why he is “sullen” and who respond to the situation by taking the griefs of the *ages* into their arms and loving *them*, thereby spending the “common wages” not on a work of art for the art’s sake but on the acts of love which Thomas’s art commends. It seems to me that Kafka is saying essentially the same thing about the writer’s concern for sufficient love among people and that he uses the narrator in “A Hunger Artist” to make essentially the same point he had made much earlier in his career in a letter to Oskar Pollack: “What we need are books that affect us like some really grievous misfortune, like the death of one whom we loved more than ourselves, as if we were banished to distant forests, away from everybody, like a suicide; a book must be the ax for the frozen sea within us. That is what I believe.”³ Only readers can provide the food that would satisfy the hunger artist, and that food is found in a selfless commitment to the human agony of the world—a total immersion and not merely a spectatorial adventure.

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³*I Am a Memory Come Alive: Autobiographical Writings by Franz Kafka*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer and trans. Gerald Onn (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 7.

“The Village Blacksmith” in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*

Satire almost always involves characters with symbolic names. George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* conforms to this tradition in satire. The Irish name of O’Brien, the Inner Party member, implies the breakdown of the traditional English class system; and the Jewish name of Goldstein, the officially despised counterrevolutionary, recalls the historical role of the Jew as political scapegoat. The name of Julia, with whom the protagonist Winston Smith has an adulterous affair, may evoke history’s most notorious Julia—the daughter of Augustus who, like Orwell’s Julia, was exiled and eventually killed for violating the puritanical sexual laws of a dictatorial state. The names of Winston Smith and his neighbor Parsons are also symbolic, and in a way that heightens and helps define the novel’s historical irony. Their names evoke figures of a pre-modern, rustic society celebrated in Longfellow’s poem “The Village Blacksmith,” the opening of which is parodied in a short song heard twice over the telecreens at the Chestnut Tree Café: “Under the spreading chestnut tree / I sold you and you sold me.”¹ Orwell’s Smith and Parsons have their historic and literary counterparts in the blacksmith and the parson of Longfellow’s poem.

“The Village Blacksmith”² is written in praise of the virtuous, hard-working blacksmith at the center of a humane, communal life. As described by

¹*Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 236, cf. p. 65. Subsequent page references to this edition appear hereafter in parentheses.

²See *Favorite Poems* (New York: Doubleday, 1947), pp. 372-73.