

## First-Person and Second-Generation Perspectives on Starvation in Kafka's "Ein Hungerkünstler"

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### Abstract

An important claim made for second-generation accounts of cognition is that they help solve the problem of dualism, which arguably remains unchallenged in much literary criticism. Kafka's short story "Ein Hungerkünstler" (A Hunger Artist) is about a profoundly embodied experience of (unsuccessfully) denying embodiment: fasting to death. With this text's cognitive realism as my focal point, I use insights from second-generation cognitive science (which acknowledges the embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended nature of human cognition), including studies of eating disorders and starvation, to provide purchase on two traditional literary-critical concerns: thematic interpretation and paradox. I also suggest that a first-person perspective which acknowledges the complexities of individual real-world embodiment may sometimes enrich cognitive literary studies. This combined first-person and second-generation methodology can help us recognise that for the real people who read our scholarship and learn from us, the dangers of dualism are ethically as well as interpretively profound.

### 1. Hunger and anorexia

Funnily enough, Kafka's story "Ein Hungerkünstler" has no hunger in it. Once I noticed it, I found this really quite weird, although it's very easy to read the whole text multiple times and not notice it at all. As far as I'm aware, no one else who's written about this text has noticed this absence (or considered it noteworthy), and maybe I noticed it only because I suffered from anorexia for ten years, and for ten years was hungry, so that it feels deeply strange to me to read a story about a man starving himself to death and apparently never feeling hungry at all. The kind of sensitivity created by my personal history might sometimes be a biasing liability when analysing literary texts, but I think it may also sometimes be an asset, and more generally may point towards a new way of doing cognitive criticism. Specifically in this case, the observation about there being a gap where one might reasonably expect hunger can unlock a new understanding of the story.

Most interpretations of "Ein Hungerkünstler" see the act of not eating as standing in for something else: an artistic attitude, for example, or a moral stance. In what follows, I'll draw on Peter Lamarque's tripartite distinction between explication (clarifying localised textual meaning), elucidation (exploring the narrative world of the text), and interpretation (appraising the thematic meaning of the work) to argue that ethically and textually sensitive critical practice should do justice to the first two of these three stages before proceeding to the third. In this respect, second-generation cognitive criticism conforms to the more general principles set out by Lamarque; what he – and I – see as the tenets of any responsible critical engagement with a text also happen to be furthered by this particular cognitive approach. Specifically, I hope to show that the act of "Hungern" (fasting) which is this text's primary subject matter contains abundant meanings and effects within it, on the level of elucidation, and that these can be illuminated by a cognitive understanding of the central paradox of the text: the ongoing act of "Hungern" without, apparently, any feeling of "Hunger". Although the current discussion will primarily be arguing for and against ways of reading texts like Kafka's rather than offering a detailed close reading, an analysis of cognitive realism could certainly also dovetail with and enrich the analysis of textual features like narrative perspective and reader-response features like mental imagery.

The framework for this argument will consist of a second-generation strand – a critical perspective informed by a basic understanding of how the cognitive realities of fasting are shaped by the physiology of fasting – and a first-person strand, drawing on my experience of anorexia nervosa. The connective point between the two will be the concept of "cognitive realism", the correspondence between textual

evocations of a specific aspect of cognition and how this aspect of cognition is understood in current cognitive science (Troscianko, “Cognitive Realism and Memory”). I’ll show how cognitive realism and its relation to folk-psychological intuitions, which are often if not usually at odds with the cognitive realities, can be a source of hypotheses about how readers (including professional readers) may respond to a given text. A scientifically grounded understanding of cognition allows us to make informed claims not just about how cognitive realities connect with textual features, but also about how folk psychology (people’s intuitive understanding of how their minds work) diverges systematically from those realities, and may yield its own set of readerly expectations and hence responses. This approach differs from the field known as “reader-response studies” in that readers are conceived of as flesh-and-blood beings with actual minds susceptible to scientific exploration, rather than primarily as textual incarnations (Troscianko, *Kafka’s Cognitive Realism* 10-11). Naturally, in one sense folk-psychological intuitions always form part of the psychological state to which they refer, and by distinguishing between the two I don’t suggest that folk psychology should or can be evacuated from the analysis of lived experience. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify systematic deviations of folk psychology from the cognitive capacities and characteristics that underlie it (Chabris and Simons), such that distinguishing between the two enhances our analytic purchase on cognitive questions; after all, how our minds work is not exclusively how we think they work. Here the matter of history arises too: on the whole people’s understanding of their own minds and bodies is fairly unchanging, and certainly resistant to scientific advances (Churchland 74-76), but in the realm of body image a significant shift has occurred in the last century or so towards a widespread, historically atypical valuation of thinness. However, this shift had certainly been initiated by the early 1920s, when “Ein Hungerkünstler” was first published, so in both respects I assume that the folk psychology of Kafka’s era can be considered broadly equivalent to that of today’s readers (Bordo 185). On the scientific side of the historical question, although second-generation cognitive science is a recent development, I will be working on the assumption that 1) the insights into the embodied nature of human cognition on which I draw in this argument are relatively close to the empirical realities – certainly more so than the dualist positions which precede them; and 2) these insights into non-dualism are not a historical novelty, but have much in common with ways of thinking about minds and bodies that predated a Cartesian understanding of mind-body dualism. The embodied perspective which I espouse is therefore not an inherently “presentist” notion; nor, therefore, are pre-21<sup>st</sup>-century texts less suited to analysis in terms of cognitive realism thus configured than texts that happen to be written in the “second-generation” era.

So let’s go back to the gap where I expected hunger to be. Maybe many readers don’t actually expect it. Because the hunger artist “voluntarily” starves himself as anorexics do, he has often been diagnosed with anorexia (e.g. by Ellmann, Fichter, Medeiros, and West), and a commonly held belief about anorexia is that to be anorexic is to feel no hunger. This notion is supported by the etymology (the Latin “anorexia” derives from the Greek privative prefix “an” and “oregein”, to reach after, desire), as well as by the clinical history: one of the first formal applications of the term in a clinical context invoked absence of appetite as anorexia’s defining feature, stating that “[t]he want of appetite is, I believe, due to a morbid mental state” (Gull 25). The current *OED* definition also takes this absence as given: anorexia is “a condition marked by emaciation, etc., in which loss of appetite results from severe emotional disturbance”.<sup>1</sup> In the vast majority of cases, anorexia is in fact characterised not by a uniform lack of appetite but by the more or less constant denial of appetite (e.g. Failler), but this denial is so universal that the folk-psychological understanding is very likely to involve an assumption of drastically reduced or non-existent appetite. In *Wasted*, perhaps the most famous eating-disorder memoir ever published, Marya Hornbacher describes how the beginning of her illness was learning to deny hunger: “Not hungry, I’d say. [...] I’m on a diet, I say. [...] Well, I wasn’t hungry *anyway*. [...] I push my plate away, say loudly, I’m full” (10-12). Anorexia is about denying one’s appetite both to other people (“no thanks, I’m not hungry”) and to oneself (“I do *not* need to eat now”), and, in most cases, about revelling in the illusion of self-control achieved by experiencing hunger and not acting on it. In the clinical literature, “denying”, “ignoring”, and “suppressing” hunger are offered as one possible explanation for anorexics’ apparent lack of hunger (Vandereycken). To judge from a large sample of anecdotal evidence

<sup>1</sup> “anorexia, n.”. *OED Online*. September 2013. Oxford University Press.  
<<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/8080?redirectedFrom=anorexia&>>.

in the form of comments posted to my *Psychology Today* blog (also called *A Hunger Artist*), denied, ignored, and suppressed hunger seems overwhelmingly the norm, with an inability to feel it very much the exception, other than in prolonged periods of total starvation (see below). As Christopher Fairburn states, “Generally there is no true ‘anorexia’ (loss of appetite) as such” (13).

So does this mean that Kafka’s hunger artist can’t be anorexic, since there’s no indication in the text that he has any hunger to suppress? In respects other than hunger, the hunger artist’s state of body and mind certainly fits the anorexic profile (Fairburn) very well: the hunger artist, like the anorexic, is physically weak (susceptible to fainting) and has disturbed sleep; is depressed and denies his depression, overlaying it with a superficial cheerfulness; is obsessed with fasting and tired and deflated at the end of fasting; feels nausea at the thought of food and anger at the suggestion that fasting might be having negative effects on him; and shifts the goalposts in his fasting, so that the lifelong goal of the forty-day fast, as soon as it’s achieved, becomes meaningless and immediately has to be outdone. All this, then, seems very much like anorexia – but what about the absent hunger?

## 2. Hunger, anorexia, and starvation

At this point we need to go back to bodily basics. A key second-generation insight here is that anorexia can be much more closely aligned with starvation than we might think: whether the under-eating is voluntary or involuntary, and whether the result is culturally labelled a “mental illness” or a physical affliction, the psychology, like the physiology, are similar to the point of being in many respects indistinguishable. Eating too little to maintain a healthy bodyweight is indeed one of the diagnostic criteria for anorexia (DSM-V), the others being an “Intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat” or, as in the hunger artist’s case, “persistent behavior that interferes with weight gain, even though at a significantly low weight”, as well as “Disturbance in the way in which one’s body weight or shape is experienced, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or persistent lack of recognition of the seriousness of the current low body weight”. The hunger artist’s mental state is certainly characterised by disturbance in his experience of his own body and lack of recognition of the damage being done to him by not eating, and all these features can, as I’ll explain, derive simply from the fact of being underweight. This isn’t to say that anorexia is identical to fasting, or more broadly that the mental reduces completely to the physical – and certainly not that mental states don’t exist; here I’m simply building one of the basic claims of second-generation cognitive science, which is that the feedback loops between the two are continuous and powerful, and therefore that knowing about the physiology can yield insights into the psychology, as well as vice versa. One specific insight that would otherwise be inaccessible relates to the question of hunger. The hunger artist’s fasting is total – he eats nothing at all during his fasts – and, as I hinted in the previous section, there’s a crucial difference between total starvation and semi-starvation, precisely when it comes to hunger: the metabolic shift to ketosis which occurs when one stops eating completely (or stops eating carbohydrates) also stops hunger, while the reintroduction of “even a small amount of carbohydrate can block ketone production and rekindle hunger” (Sullivan). This distinction gives us insight into why the hunger artist’s state fits the diagnosis of anorexia in every way except the experience of hunger: semi- and total starvation are psychologically and physically very similar except in that respect. And although anorexia often involves extended periods of total starvation, during which the associated euphoria and absence of hunger may help to reinforce the “addiction” to anorexia, if the illness continues for years, it’s necessarily based on semi-starvation.

So, if we now ask whether the story can be considered specifically a cognitively realistic evocation of total starvation, what can we conclude? The absence of hunger is now explained, but other absences arise to take its place, at the two ends of the experiential spectrum between pleasure and pain. There’s none of the euphoria and sense of power and specialness caused by the stimulation of the serotonin receptors in an analgesic response to (extreme or terminal) starvation. The hunger artist’s strongest positive feelings are the pleasure of watching his guards eat the breakfast he’s bought for them and of

sitting in the straw, the enthusiasm he feels at the thought of amazing the world with his feats of fasting, and his delighted anticipation of his audience, but none of these comes close to the visceral elation that (at least some of the time) accompanies not-eating. There is also no evocation of any physical complications of death by starvation, like infection or pressure ulcers, heart arrhythmia and its symptoms, or ultimately the trauma of circulatory collapse. What we have here, then, is a curiously flattened evocation of this embodied experience of dying, and this may have important consequences for how the text is read, specifically as regards readers' automatic filling of textual gaps without even noticing they're there.

In particular, the absence of any evocation of the messy physical realities of death by starvation may encourage critical readings which insist on the "purity" of the hunger artist's fasting, such as that the hunger artist's "refusal to compromise the sovereignty of his present desire for pure self-control ultimately denies the welfare, indeed the existence, of his future self" (West 38-39). This observation is broadly accurate insofar as the refusal to stop fasting kills the hunger artist in the end. It's problematic, however, in that the association of starvation with purity and self-control bears no relation to the physical realities of starving to death. It also belies the psychological reality that someone starving him/herself "voluntarily" to death is not exercising self-control but is, rather, under the control of a potentially fatal set of interlinked psychophysiological factors, which I'll outline in the following section: starving oneself to death is the epitome of an act that looks like self-control but is in fact complete loss of control. In this sense, Robin West's reading could be seen as falling victim to precisely the set of value judgements that the anorexic him/herself subscribes to: "The hunger addiction of anorexics may well have hormonal elements (as in the endorphin-fuelled 'hunger high'), and these contribute to buttressing its central position in the value system that is built up around it (hunger = self-denial, strength, power, purity, specialness, etc.), and thence to strengthening the behavioural web of habits that preserve it" (Troscianko, "Anorexia and *The Diet Delusion*"). Sociocultural factors no doubt tend to further encourage critics' equations of not-eating, self-control, purity, and so on, but I suggest that the fact that the text offers no substantial counter-prompts in the form of a gruesome description of an unpleasant death increases the likelihood of their being made. On the other hand, the absence of euphoria means that there's no very substantial positive prompt to, and certainly no actual validation of, the association of fasting with something transcendent. The absence of any substantial textual basis for a "transcendent" reading, though, may simply be outweighed by the other factors tending to encourage it, not least the title and repeated epithet "Hungerkünstler" itself, which have too often been assumed to override all the other textual evidence against admirable artistry – partly, I think, because they open up attractive possibilities for identifying paradoxes and automatically filling unnoticed gaps.

### 3. Hunger, artistry, and gaps

Arguably all cognitive engagement with all literary texts (Ingarden) and indeed all language (Sperber and Wilson) involves filling gaps, although there may be some textual characteristics that make gap-filling unnecessary (Troscianko, *Kafka's Cognitive Realism*) or impossible (Phelan). Kafka always leaves a great deal unsaid, and it's very tempting to try to fill the gaps in "Ein Hungerkünstler", with varying degrees of readerly self-awareness. A recurring pattern in the critical reception of the text, as of Kafka's fictions in general, has been to expect things in the text and consequently to see them there, and in "Ein Hungerkünstler" hunger is one of the central gaps filled before it's even noticed. Thus Paul Medeiros states that the hunger artist, "in his voluntary denial of any form of consumption [...] approximates the actual behavior of anorexics", and that he manifests a "determination to prove his superiority through his control of appetite" (20). But there's no indication in the story that the hunger artist has any appetite to control. Nor, incidentally, is there any indication that the hunger artist starves in order to prove his superiority – but I'll come back later to the imposition of this kind of value judgement on the act of fasting.

The other half of the gap opened up by the "hunger artist" epithet, namely the blank space where we might expect some tangible artistic production, is filled just as eagerly. Maud Ellmann, for instance,

formulates a simplistic response to the text prompted primarily by the term “hunger artist”, saying that he “has to starve in order to perfect the work of art” (59). But nowhere else in the text is there any suggestion that what he’s doing can be considered authentically artistic: he creates nothing, certainly nothing of value, there’s no indication that the spectacle of fasting is authentically artistic in any way, and there’s no progression from less to more “perfect”; the comment is therefore, in my view, unfounded and unilluminating. Harry Steinhauer also points out that this kind of reading is flawed in that there simply is no work of art in the text (37-8), but how he chooses instead to fill the gaps in the text’s “meaning” is far more deeply flawed, imposing even less justified interpretive conclusions on a text which seems barely to invite, let alone to validate, them. His statements about the text include the following (41-3):

A good man (that is, a noble ideal) is destroyed; nothing worthwhile takes his place

The ascetic man is the man with higher tastes; here is his strength and the cause of his unpopularity with the low-tasters

[E]xhibitions are an essential part of the faster’s performance; how else can he demonstrate the beauty of his way of life?

He does not exhibit for these corrupt souls, but for the pure children, who may one day restore fasting to its former glory

[The hunger artist is] a man who is all spirit and no flesh – and surely we can all admire such a man as a seven days’ wonder

The inappropriateness of imposing this set of value-laden interpretations on Kafka’s text is breathtaking. Nobility and idealism, strength and high-low imagery, corruption and purity, beauty, glory, and a seven days’ wonder as prompt to admiration – nowhere are any of these themes present in the text. (What there is amounts to a possible intertextual connection with Wilhelm Raabe’s *Der Hungerpastor*, and a few biblical references like the forty-day fast.) . The linguistic and narrative levels are precisely what encourage thematic interpretations, but a critical response to a text’s prompts to interpret should, I think, analyse how they work rather than respond unreflectively to one or other of them – that is, assess the text’s multiple invitations to substantive interpretation rather than eagerly accepting one of them as if it were the only one, or indeed pretty much inventing an invitation that appeals for other reasons. Given that all reading involves active meaning-making, there’s naturally a continuum between these readerly strategies (see Caracciolo, this issue), and the point at which we decide that an elucidation has become an interpretation or an interpretation has strayed too far from what the text justifies can be hard to pin down, but at some point we may get the uneasy sense that the text has become overly incidental to its interpretation. This is certainly the case with Steinhauer’s reading, as with so many critical responses to this story. Readers’ individual histories, attitudes, predispositions, and interests inevitably shape how they engage with a textually evoked experience, and exploring those variations in engagement must be part of a first-person and second-generation criticism. However, that target experience does exist as linguistically evoked in the text: it isn’t infinitely malleable. That this fact seems to be ignored is what makes readings like Steinhauer’s, despite their aesthetic and psychological interest, deeply problematic.

Inventing invitations to interpret or responding to them uncritically is, furthermore, in most cases an essentially dualist way of reading literature, saying, in effect, that what’s given in the text on the experiential level is more or less irrelevant to the text’s real import, that the embodied experiences of the fictional characters can be discounted because of a “message” that matters more than they do. In this kind of interpretation, mind not only matters more than matter, but is an excuse for ignoring or distorting it. In clearer-cut cases of allegory, parable, and fable, where a one-to-one correspondence between the fictional events/characters and a meta-level is more obviously being aimed at, this approach is more justified, but with more complex texts it over-simplifies and distorts. Note that I’m not at all trying to argue that interpretation should be avoided; this would be dualist too, implying that the narrative world can’t yield thematic meaning. In literary studies in general, though, and Kafka studies in particular, the prevailing tendency is for interpretive leaps to be inadequately grounded in textual

(linguistic and narrative) specifics, so my aim is to redress the balance a little. While in cognitive science dualism has long been something of a dirty word, it's alive and well in literary studies. Yet by evoking the animal-like nature of the faster (“[er begann] wie ein Tier an dem Gitter zu rütteln”, [he began] to rattle the bars like an animal, 341), his emaciation (“der Leib war ausgehöhlt”, his body was hollowed out, 340), his physical weakness (he sat in an “ohnmachtähnliche[r] Halbschlaf”, a half-sleep, like fainting, 340), his nausea (339, see p. 7 below) and depression (constantly “in trüber Laune”, in a cheerless mood, 341), and all the other manifestations of the continual and omnipresent interrelations of mind and body, even while omitting the goriest details of the terminal stages, the text contradicts the dualist elevation of mind over body, and specifically the association of not eating with purity, strength, goodness, and all the rest.

The text clearly conveys the fact that the body can't be starved without the brain being starved too, and that the mind is nothing but the interaction of brain, body, and environment, so that transcendence by this route, even if it were being sought, could never be forthcoming. However, this doesn't stop Ellmann, too, from extracting a neatly dualist message from the story: “The moral seems to be that it is not by food that we survive but by the gaze of others; and it is impossible to live by hunger unless we can be seen or represent doing so [...]. Even though the anorectic body seems to represent a radical negation of the other, it still depends on the other as spectator in order to be *read* as representative of anything at all” (17). Ellmann's emphasis on representing and reading makes the main point of the text (linguistic) representation, which will always appeal to the literary critic. There's an interesting point lurking in here about the importance of intersubjectivity – one which would build on the textual details rather than belying them – but as it stands, this can't be seen as an adequate summing-up of the text, which makes it perfectly clear that food is what we live by, and which of course doesn't mention hunger at all. Interpretations like this are unfaithful to both the embodied experience evoked in the text and the embodied experiences that happen in the real world outside the text. Although we might demand more from a critical reading than fidelity to the narrative/experiential level of the text, we *should* demand it as a basic minimum, remembering that most non-professional readers probably read books for experiences, not for meanings, and that even if an elucidation of a text like ‘it is by food that we survive’ seems trivial, this triviality is in fact the basis of readers' responses to a cognitively realistic set of contingencies in the fictional world. We can derive non-trivial interpretations about human nature according to Kafka from this statement if we want to, but we must derive them from it and not from more appealingly abstracted alternatives. We must also try to resist the appeal of interpretations which, like Ellmann's posited relationship with “the other”, can be left uninterrogated because they have the hermetically elegant ring of paradox about them.

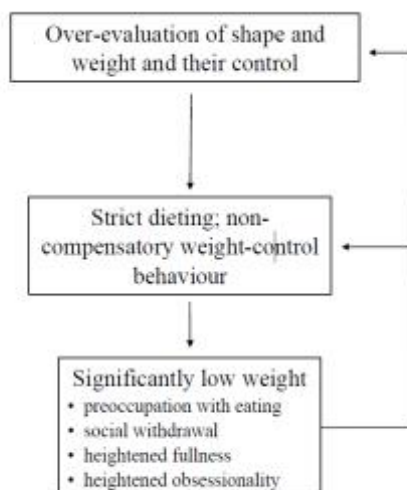
#### 4. Hunger, artistry, and paradox

One of the most persistent features of professional and non-professional readers' reception of Kafka is the perception of his texts as paradoxical, whether in form, content, or effect. Indeed, an early edition of a selection of Kafka's writings was introduced with a remark on paradox as the essence of Kafka: “This collection of brief parables and arresting paradoxes – extracted from novel and story, notebook and letter – is almost an epitome of Kafka” (jacket blurb). Ordinary readers describe the experience of reading Kafka as full of contradictory dualities and define the term “Kafkaesque” in terms of paradox (Troscianko, *Kafka's Cognitive Realism* 33-36), and in the critical literature Heinz Politzer's *Parable and Paradox*, for instance, suggests that Kafka's writing is defined by the interaction between these two elements, the “paradox” of human existence being the “message” of his “parables”, while Gerhard Neumann describes Kafka's works in terms of “gleitendes Paradox” (sliding paradox) and Jürgen Kobs characterises their structure as a “paradoxe[r] Zirkel” (paradoxical circle, 14). The difference between the two groups is that while the ordinary readers usually talk about paradoxical effects as part of experiences of reading Kafka's texts, prompted by the textually evoked experiences (“within all that fear and tension, you have to chuckle a little bit, actually”, *Kafka's Cognitive Realism* 161), the literary critics often take the paradoxes way beyond what Kafka's texts justify, and even beyond the reach of the experiential: Anthony Thorlby, for instance, remarks that Kafka “gained an absolutely clear

understanding of the fact that [the nature of language] is ultimately unintelligible. This paradox, like the paradoxes and parables of which Kafka himself was so fond, only makes sense in metaphysical terms” (133). Critics seem to want paradoxes of meaning, whether or not they’re adequately grounded in the texts, while other readers are often happy with paradoxical experiences that may or may not lead to fuller interpretations. Here I want to show how a first-person and second-generation approach allows us to reconceptualise the dualist paradoxes as existing within the textual evocation of embodied experience, and how this doesn’t deny or collapse the paradoxes, but renaturalises them.

The hunger artist’s state is defined by many of anorexia’s paradoxes (Lask and Frampton): he feels nausea at the thought of eating though he’s starving to death, he combines apparent invincibility with obvious weakness and exhaustion, he finds the sights and sounds of other people (and other animals) eating at once fascinating and nauseating, and other people are the whole point of his spectacle of fasting (he fasts for other people and finds it easier when people are watching him) but also not the point at all (he cares far more about his fasting records than anyone else does, and although his self-denial is initially praised, others soon lose interest in his “achievements”). These paradoxes don’t require anything mysterious to explain them: like all the other symptoms of anorexia, they derive directly and comprehensibly from the physiology of starvation. But explaining them in this way doesn’t lessen their paradoxical force; if anything, it heightens it, but relocates it within the natural realm. Paradox is too often in literary studies used as a way of avoiding explaining things properly, but if we reconceive of paradox as that which is counterintuitive but fully explicable, we can do more justice to literary texts and the real-world experiences they evoke and induce.

Many of the insights yielded by second-generation cognitive science (broadly conceived) are paradoxical in the sense of being counterintuitive to folk psychology, and this is true not least in the realm of eating disorders. In folk psychology, anorexia is a mysterious result of psychological or physiological trauma or oddity, but profound changes in character and mental health can occur through the mediation of feedback loops which rapidly establish themselves between the physiological and the psychological. These are well understood in the cognitive-behavioural literature, which I see as fundamentally “second-generation” in its exploration of the inherent interconnectedness of the physiological and the psychological.



(Fairburn 21, with permission)

The cycle can start at any point – with the over-evaluation, the dietary restriction, or the low weight – and once it’s begun it becomes self-sustaining as depicted here. The hunger artist is preoccupied with hypothetical eating and yet feels nausea at the very idea: “[er] sollte sich nun hoch und lang aufrichten und zu dem Essen gehn, das ihm schon allein in der Vorstellung Übelkeiten verursachte” (now [he] was supposed to stand up straight and tall and go and eat – which made him feel nauseous just to think of it,

339). These preoccupations and sensations are just what someone severely underweight for any reason may often feel at the thought of eating – me aged sixteen, for example: “Tom [my father] just came up and said (it’s only quarter to six) that we’re about to have dinner – more of that beetroot soup. The very idea makes me go hot and shaky and sick. But I *have* to try to eat it... I can’t work. I’m just sitting here shaking. My stomach feels like quivering jelly. Just *don’t think* about eating, then maybe you’ll be able to do it all right” (27.11.1998). Physiologically, nausea at the thought of eating, and nausea or heightened feelings of fullness during the act of eating is easily explained in severe malnutrition – the slowed metabolism, contracted stomach, and hormonal imbalance caused by malnutrition make eating difficult even as the body’s need for food make thoughts about it more constant and more obsessively repetitive – but this doesn’t diminish the paradox in an experiential sense. Identifying these cognitive realities as the location of the paradox allows us to see more clearly the source of some of the text’s unsettlingly counterintuitive force. Readers of the text are likely to feel the unsettled response even if they don’t identify the cognitive realism from which it derives – though they may do so, or may at least realise that there’s a discrepancy between what the text gives and what they expect.

The evocation of such paradoxical cognitive (psychophysiological) states is thus, from a second-generation cognitive perspective, perfectly comprehensible, and this holds true for a paradox that has often been seen as unifying or even explaining the whole text. Medeiros concludes that the story “hinges on a paradox and the resulting aporia”, namely “the confession made by the Hunger Artist, just before he expires, that he never ate ‘because [he] could not find the food that [he] liked’” (20). Medeiros sees this as paradoxical because it contradicts any claim to artistic talent and questions the whole foundation for the hunger artist’s existence, but he then resolves the paradox by saying that in fact it’s all part of the same “total denial of consumption” and therefore “a final affirmation, in negative terms, of the Hunger Artist’s project all along” (ibid.). Because Medeiros associates this “project” with the proof of superiority through control of appetite, this supposed resolution of the paradox depends on invoking things that aren’t actually in the text. The “confession” can be read more accurately as a counterintuitive paradox of embodied cognition: an illustration of the fact that when voluntarily starving oneself (as when starved against one’s will), eating is actually what matters most. The hunger artist declares that he could do nothing but fast, “weil ich nicht die Speise finden konnte, die mir schmeckt. Hätte ich sie gefunden, glaube mir, ich hätte kein Aufsehen gemacht und mich vollgeessen wie du und alle” (I couldn’t find a food which tasted good to me. If had found that, believe me, I would not have made a spectacle of myself and would have eaten to my heart’s content, like you and everyone else, 349). This has usually been taken at face value as the hunger artist’s existential insight into his own condition as fundamentally distinct from the rest of humanity, and thus as the key to the text’s thematic meaning (hunger artist as superior artist figure, etc.), but what I said earlier about the reality of anorexia as involving less absence of hunger than denial of hunger may prompt us to read this statement as, in effect, a paraphrase of the constant anorexic mantra “I’m not hungry”. In particular, anorexia is typically characterised by the refusal to “waste” eating on food or a context for eating that’s less than perfect: the sufferer structures his or her whole life around the creation of a “guiltless ecstasy of perfectly orchestrated food”, and can be “reduced rapidly to cursing rage or tears if anything at all should interrupt this sequence of events, this ascending arc to brief happiness” (Troscianko, “Dying by Inches”; see also Keys et al. 832-33). In the context of a state in which it’s far better not to eat than to eat imperfectly, the hunger artist’s statement could be interpreted as a completely typical anorexic statement like “why would I eat if it doesn’t taste amazing?” We can then reconfigure the paradox: eating is the whole point of starving oneself. From a second-generation perspective, this is explicable in that starvation reduces cognitive flexibility, as preoccupation with food and related (and unrelated) repetitive or obsessive behaviours take over (Keys et al. 833-37; see also Russell et al.), such that sources of pleasure other than food and ways of eating which depart from a narrow and rigid set of criteria become difficult to conceive of. The cognitive realism of Kafka’s text in this regard is likely to be compelling, because it taps into how things actually work in embodied human minds, but also counterintuitive, because folk psychology is so often so fundamentally dualist, and that may be part of what makes these lines so lastingly tantalising. The paradox isn’t devalued, but is made cognitively meaningful in the context of both the experience evoked in the text and the experiences of the reader in response to the text and in the real world.

## 5. Why all this matters

It matters that we read and interpret literary texts as precisely and as revealingly as we can, and an interpretation which starts with explication and elucidation and builds on them carefully will be more precise and more revealing than one which forgets the first steps because it's intent on a fixed meaning hidden behind the text. It matters even more, however, that as academics we think, write, and teach in an ethically responsible way. If anyone – whether student, career academic, or other interested party – ever reads what we write or listens to what we say, then what we say and write has consequences, and these should be taken seriously. Students and scholars of literature, just like everyone else, are susceptible to the social pressures which especially in industrialised societies make it easier for eating disorders to take hold and more difficult to escape from. Anderson begins his article on “Anorexia and Modernism” with an anecdote about a formerly anorexic student who shied away from writing about food in Camus’ *L’Etranger* because of a “desire to address a safe or ‘clean’ topic, to avoid getting her hands dirty with a topic which, although the student was no longer anorexic, implicated her own subjective history (her own ‘body’) in the writing process” (28). He reports that the rest of the class, all of whom either had personal experience of an eating disorder or knew someone who suffered from one, were also uncomfortable with the theme of food, and while this kind of discomfort can’t be eliminated, it could be greatly reduced by making literary criticism into a discipline that, as a general rule, does engage with these things, because they matter as much as does the symbolism of light, the “clean” fallback topic of Anderson’s student.

The first-person issue comes in here in combination with the second-generation one. Anderson’s student avoided drawing personally inflected conclusions from her textual observations: “Personal, unproved assertions about the text would have exposed her to potential criticism, whereas a mere description of Camus’s words would keep her out of danger, invisible” (28). These anxieties contain an interesting pair of interlinked assumptions: firstly, that implicating one’s own history equals making unproved assertions, and secondly that keeping oneself invisible keeps one out of danger. I’ve tried in this article to argue that unproved and indeed unprovable assertions about texts are *less* likely when we take an approach informed by second-generation cognitive-scientific insights about mind and body, including insights that incorporate an experiential, and a personally experiential, element. These observations are of a more reliable subjectivity than singular interpretations which are inherently subjective but don’t acknowledge or work with that subjectivity. And secondly, of course, being invisible in illness is the opposite of being out of danger, and in anorexia particularly, the desire for invisibility is often fatal. It’s our responsibility, when we write about texts that deal with eating disorders, or depression, or alcoholism, or all sorts of less conspicuous forms of mental and physical disorder or idiosyncrasy, to teach and write carefully, questioning our mind-over-matter fallback positions and ensuring we don’t keep making invisibility seem the best option for those suffering from or susceptible to any of the many disorders of embodied cognition – which is all of us.

So when we talk about texts, and especially texts that include as distinctively “pathological” a dimension as “Ein Hungerkünstler” does, second-generation and first-person perspectives can, I think, have ethical as well as interpretive benefits. If we base our interpretations on sensitive engagement with the experiences of, in this case, the embodied starvation which the text evokes with a revealing cognitive realism, we are more likely both to think and talk more responsibly about eating disorders and to interpret this and other texts that deal with eating disorders more perceptively. The cognitive realism which may impart to readers, professional and otherwise, a deepened, counterintuitive understanding of the phenomenology of starvation can also yield a heightened ethical awareness of non-dualist starvation in the real world.

In general terms, then, the approach to literary study which I’m advocating here has three main constituents. Firstly, it involves the decision to acknowledge and explore, in a textually sensitive manner, the connections between the minds of readers and fictional characters, with an alertness to how the fictional minds might affect readers’ responses. Secondly, it requires a “second-generation”

understanding of those minds, real and fictional, as embodied (and embedded and enactive), with its significant consequences for how we understand experiential and interpretive responses in and outside the text. And thirdly, it demands a willingness to engage, where appropriate, with first-person testimony that offers an individual angle on generalisations about cognition, and brings the outside world forcefully into literary analysis. All three may go some way towards breaking dualism's stranglehold and, more importantly, towards making literary studies acknowledge and act on the fact that even textual criticism can have real effects on real readers.

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## **Bio**

Emily T. Troscianko is a Junior Research Fellow in Modern Languages (French and German) at St John's College, Oxford, and is interested in what makes literary texts seem realistic. Her doctorate and first monograph (*Kafka's Cognitive Realism*, Routledge 2014) explore Kafka's works in terms of their "cognitive realism" in the realms of enactive perception and emotion. Her research applies cognitive-scientific findings and theories directly to the analysis of textual features and readers' potential interactions with them, and has recently also explored the roles of memory in Flaubert and Proust. The current article represents the start of a new medical-humanities project combining literary analysis with scientific insights and first-person testimony, and insisting on the importance of an embodied and non-dualist understanding of mental illness (specifically eating disorders) in literature and the real world. Emily is also gradually working out good ways of doing experiments on and with literature and real readers.