

# Starving for their Art

Hunger, Modernism and Aesthetics  
in Samuel Beckett,  
Paul Auster  
and J. M. Coetzee

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for Grandma, who loved books  
and Thérèse, who loves food,  
and for their children, my parents, Cath and Evan,  
who, in passing these loves on to me,  
made this thesis possible

*Abstract*

As literary modernism was emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of its most important figures and precursors began to talk about their own writing as a kind of starvation. My doctoral thesis considers the reasons for and development of this previously little-explored trope, arguing that hunger becomes a focal point for modernism's complex relationship to aesthetic autonomy. I identify a specific tradition of writers, beginning in the nineteenth century with proto-modernists such as Melville and Rimbaud, flourishing in the pivotal figures of Knut Hamsun, Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, and expiring with modernist-influenced contemporary writers such as Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee. Although these writers are avid readers and devoted disciples of one another, mine is the first study to read them alongside one another as a coherent literary tradition. Reading them in this way, I am able to trace the development of the 'art of hunger' as a locus for a crisis in aesthetic autonomy that spans the twentieth century.

I develop this line of argument in two phases. In the first, I trace the emergence of an art of hunger out of modernist engagements with philosophical aesthetics and its notions of aesthetic autonomy. Readings of the "art of hunger" in Herman Melville, Arthur Rimbaud, Knut Hamsun, Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett's post-war work reveal that starvation carries autonomy to an extreme and hyper-literal endpoint, revealing both its desirability as an aesthetic ideal and the impossibility of art's complete autonomy from the body, the market or the social dimensions of language.

In the second phase, I consider how this trope has animated later twentieth-century engagements with modernism. For authors writing in the aftermath of modernism, hunger provides a way of considering new complications to aesthetic autonomy in the light of both their debt to modernism and their specific historical circumstances. In this light, I consider three different extensions of the modernist art of hunger: its absorption into high formalism in Beckett's late prose; its collapse in the face of an emerging concern with the social in Paul Auster; and its transformation into an ethical aesthetics of food taboos, restriction and asceticism in J. M. Coetzee.

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## *List of Abbreviations*

### Works by Beckett

<i>D</i>	<i>Disjecta</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>Trilogy</i>
<i>DW</i>	<i>The Grove Centenary Edition, Volume III: Dramatic Works</i>
<i>HII</i>	<i>How It Is</i>
<i>NO</i>	<i>Nohow On</i>

### Works by Auster

<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems</i>
<i>AH</i>	<i>The Art of Hunger</i>
<i>IS</i>	<i>The Invention of Solitude</i>
<i>NYT</i>	<i>The New York Trilogy</i>
<i>ICLT</i>	<i>In the Country of Last Things</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Moon Palace</i>

### Works by Coetzee

<i>DP</i>	<i>Doubling the Point</i>
<i>MK</i>	<i>Life and Times of Michael K</i>
<i>LA</i>	<i>The Lives of Animals</i>
<i>EC</i>	<i>Elizabeth Costello</i>

### Other Texts

<i>Rim.</i>	Arthur Rimbaud, <i>Complete Works, Selected Letter: A Bilingual Edition</i>
<i>H</i>	Knut Hamsun, <i>Hunger</i>
<i>CSS</i>	Franz Kafka, <i>The Complete Short Stories</i>

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## *Introduction*

# The Aesthetics of Hunger

IN THE SUMMER OF 1971, a young artist and philosophy student named Adrian Piper staged an unusual piece of performance art. For two months, she lived alone in her apartment. She fasted. She read Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. She photographed herself "to make sure I was still there."<sup>1</sup> She recorded herself on tape reading passages from Kant aloud. A decade later, she wrote up her experiences and published them in *High Performance* and, subsequently, as part of her selected writings on art. This piece raises a number of fascinating questions. Why present a fast as a piece of performance art? What is the significance of solitude? What is the relationship between the experience of fasting and the artefacts—the photographs, the tape recordings, the text—that chronicle and reflect upon it? And what does Kant have to do with anything? Above all, it presents us with the problem of how to understand art in relation to hunger.

This thesis argues that the answers to these questions tell us something important about the development and legacy of a certain strand of modernist thought and literary practice. To be sure, Piper's answers are unlikely to be identical to those of the writers that I discuss in the pages that follow: she is working in a different medium and a different tradition, and is a far more orthodox Kantian than anyone I will be centrally concerned with. Nonetheless, Piper approaches a problem with a long philosophical and literary heritage. Indeed, the very fact that a piece of performance art can be imagined as participating in the literary tradition to which I will soon turn already signals a transformation within accepted aesthetic divisions.

The tradition of hunger art has its roots in modernism. Even a cursory glance through the annals of literary modernism reveals a surprising proliferation of starving figures. From Rimbaud's "Fêtes de la faim" to Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," from the French surrealists' self-portrayal as starving artists to the parallel gesture of the American "lost generation," modernism is emaciated and underfed. It bristles with malnourished

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<sup>1</sup> Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight*, vol. 1: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968–1992 (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1996), 55.

authors. If the trope of the starving artist cannot be said to be entirely new in this period, the uses to which it is put certainly are. These writers are striking for the extent to which they think through hunger as an aesthetic gesture, using it as the foundation for a reconceptualisation of aesthetics and a renewal of the possibilities of the literary arts. It is my argument that hunger in modernism is often taken as a trope for aesthetics; that (at least one form of) modernist aesthetics is so intimately bound up with starvation that we can yoke the terms together and fold them into one another with an “of” that places them in a relation of mutual self-government.

As Piper’s performance implies, though, an “art of hunger” cannot be said to either begin or end with modernism. To the extent that it is basically aesthetic in its orientation, it has its roots in aesthetic philosophy and particularly the Kantian and post-Kantian tradition that has been both most influential for modernism and, in its later manifestations, most influenced by it. Moreover, the reformulation of art in light of hunger and of hunger in light of art that emerges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has repercussions well into the post-war and contemporary periods. While this thesis begins with modernism, its primary focus might better be understood as lying with modernism’s afterlives. The art of hunger is, at base, a modernist problematic, but its implications continue to be worked at and worked over by contemporary writers writing in modernism’s wake. In the late work of Samuel Beckett, as well as the writing of Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, hunger becomes a site for testing this modernist problematic against new ideas, new forms of writing, and new historical circumstances.

The hunger that is at stake in what I refer to (following Auster) as this “art of hunger” is governed neither by taste nor by appetite. It is not a ravenous hunger that effaces the palate, but nor is it the Enlightenment refinement of hunger into taste that elevates desire to discrimination. It has less to do with consumption than with the deferral of or resistance to consumption. It is not desire, but an absence of desire, a form of revelry in the cognate experiences of privation, rejection, disgust and starvation. In this sense, it provides both a corrective to a conceptualisation of aesthetics that has for centuries been founded on a metaphor of taste, and a new aesthetic mode founded on a schema of experiential starvation.

The term “hunger” is a surprisingly multivalent one. I have often found myself using it to describe two, essentially opposite experiences, and this confusion permeates the use of this and related terms across many of the writers and thinkers that I deal with. “Hunger” encapsulates both the desire for food and the state of being without food. If these modes seem initially congruous, and are often given interchangeably in dictionary definitions, it is worth noting that the absence in the latter definition in no way necessarily implies the desire in the former. On the contrary, being without food may just as easily be a product of—or give rise to—a certain indifference towards the object itself. This possibility is central to many of these writers and I wish to insist, from the outset, that the emphasis falls on the state of being without food rather than the response—desire or otherwise—to which this state gives rise.

Hunger is perhaps not the most obvious place to begin for an argument that claims to be aesthetic in its orientation—particularly not, when I qualify my definition of hunger to exclude its more blandly metaphorical dimensions: I am concerned here with literal, not metaphorical hunger; with a lack of food, not a generalised lack. If my account develops a problematically metaphorical or figurative dimension, it will always be expounded by analogy to the literal experience of going without food. Hunger in this restricted sense, then—hunger as starvation—poses some problems for our notions of aesthetics. There is nothing beautiful about starvation. If we are to elucidate an aesthetic of hunger, it is unclear to what extent we can hope that art will retain any clear connection with beauty. Moreover, to the extent that it begins and ends with the body, hunger seems to cut off that movement into a rarefied realm with which aesthetics is ordinarily associated. It is at once too personal and too universal to belong to that restricted, refined, culturally powerful range of experience that we are inclined to conceptualise as aesthetic. There are other problems, too. There is something uncomfortable, at face value, about using starvation—one of the great social ills across most of human history—to elucidate something like aesthetics, so often understood as detached and abstracted, “above” the ordinary concerns of everyday life. We do not, after all, want to forget that hunger is, at base, an experience of profound misery. Unlike taste, hunger is not obviously delightful or delicious.

But it is precisely the ways in which starvation seems un-aesthetic on its surface, the ways in which linking starvation to aesthetics seems problematic, that make it so useful

to our broader understanding of aesthetics. If an “aesthetics of hunger” is not to be a simple dead-end, a crippling contradiction in terms—and this thesis is concerned above all with charting various authors’ attempts to defend an art of hunger from just such a fate—then it will require a reappraisal of aesthetics itself. Isobel Armstrong, in her *The Radical Aesthetic*, argues for the need for just such a reappraisal. She demonstrates the extent to which popular and theoretical understandings of “aesthetics” (those most closely connected to the metaphor of taste) are premised on a post-Kantian definition of the term that configures the aesthetic as unitary, rarefied, and exclusive. In such conceptualisations, the aesthetic is, she argues “marked with a ‘no entry’ sign.”<sup>2</sup> As such, it leads theorists, from Terry Eagleton to Jacques Derrida, to reject aesthetics in favour of heterogeneity, difference, inclusion. Armstrong, however, maintains that this dichotomy between aesthetics and heterogeneity is false, and argues instead for an alternate mode, founded on play rather than transcendence, that would recuperate the category of the aesthetic for the radical, the heterogeneous, and the inclusive. This is a productive and provocative call, and one that I hope will be taken up in detail elsewhere. Nonetheless, as we will see, the aesthetics developed here does not fully satisfy the programme that Armstrong proposes (and it is perhaps no surprise that, against the feminist hopes that she holds out at the end of her study, the authors examined here are, without exception, men with more or less difficult relationships to women). An aesthetics of hunger hesitates uncertainly between an openness to heterogeneity and an insistence on the exclusivity of its aesthetic. Moreover, it is a matter of the deadly serious, transforming art into a question of life and death, in which suffering features prominently, and play and pleasure are, at best, likely to arise only in the form of mania and short-lived euphoria.

Hunger in the modernist period inserts itself into debates about aesthetic autonomy, which derive from Kantian and post-Kantian theories of the aesthetic. Hunger has a complex relationship to this notion: even as it functions as a figure for a radical autonomy, so absolute that it refuses all reliance on food, society or even linguistic reference, it is fatally compromised by the reliance it reveals on literary markets and on their own fragile physical bodies. Using hunger as a focal point allows me therefore to signal a certain hesitation at the heart of modernism’s aspiration towards aesthetic

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<sup>2</sup> Isobel Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 13.

autonomy while at the same time insisting that the aspiration towards it, as well as the failure of this aspiration, are both integral to modernist aesthetics.

The emergence of the tradition of hunger art is roughly contemporaneous with the emergence of Euro-American modernism and indeed often takes us to key texts in this broader tradition. Indeed, I suggest that the art of hunger, as I am conceptualising it in these pages, is a specifically modernist form of art but *not* that it should therefore be understood as coextensive with modernism. On the contrary, the art of hunger represents a single and important tradition within modernism, which responds to modernist concerns in an idiosyncratic manner.

This introduction traces the pre-history of the relationship between art and hunger, following the vagaries of eating's connection to aesthetic philosophy. It follows the development of an aesthetic tradition that, in opposition to eighteenth-century British taste philosophy, pits art against eating in its establishment of a domain of autonomous aesthetic experience, independent of the body and its demands. This broadly post-Kantian tradition, encompassing Kant himself, Schopenhauer, Hegel and Adorno, does not itself elevate hunger as an important figure. Nonetheless, it establishes the terms that, I suggest, will indirectly become central to modernist attempts to link art to hunger. This chapter also considers the competing claims of Nietzsche, whose disdain for the "emaciated" modern artist provides the first, highly negative attempt to suggest a link between modern aesthetics and starvation.

## I. Eating as Art's Opposite in German Idealist Aesthetics

The trope that ties hunger to art in the modernist period and beyond must be understood as arising from, and engaged in an on-going dialogue with, a tradition of aesthetics that repeatedly defines art in relation to eating. This tradition reaches an important and definitive culmination in eighteenth-century British taste philosophy, in which the concept of aesthetic taste was initially developed through analogy to literal or bodily taste.<sup>3</sup> Although in many respects a problematic one, this analogy formed the foundation upon which the aesthetic understanding of taste was developed. Hume, for instance, draws upon "the great resemblance between mental and bodily taste" to derive a definition of the all-important "delicacy of imagination" from a story, taken from *Don*

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<sup>3</sup> For a much more detailed account of this philosophical tradition, and its impact on British Romanticism, see Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

*Quixote*, about the ability of Sancho Panza's relatives to distinguish faint overtones of metal or leather in a barrel of wine.<sup>4</sup> The very foundation of this definition rests on the assumption that aesthetic taste can be considered almost as bodily taste applied to a different object. It takes place in the context of a broad assumption that aesthetics is principally a question of sensation—that is, that it is phenomenological, and acts on the body.

In this context, Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* represents an important shift, exiling food from the realm of art and beauty in his quest for a properly 'disinterested' aesthetics. Writing out of and against this British tradition, Kant retains the concept of taste as the faculty by which aesthetic judgements are passed, but draws a bright line between its aesthetic and bodily manifestations.<sup>5</sup> In fact, this distinction becomes the foundation upon which Kant builds one of the most distinctive and influential aspects of his theory of aesthetics, that of the disinterestedness of the aesthetic. For Kant, "*Taste* is the faculty of judging an object or a mode of representation by means of a delight or aversion *apart from any interest*. The object of such a delight is called *beautiful*."<sup>6</sup> Kant develops this definition of the aesthetic by arguing that the beautiful is devoid of both sensory interest in the agreeable, and conceptual interest in the good. If Hume and other taste philosophers could derive properties of aesthetic taste by exploring its analogy with bodily taste, Kant here performs precisely the opposite gesture, taking eating and physical taste as one of the paradigmatic examples of the agreeable, and developing his notion of aesthetic taste through its renunciation of just this category. Thus, Kant uses "a dish that stimulates the sense of taste with spices and other condiments" as his example of that which is agreeable but not good, and illustrates the inherently particular nature of the agreeable by observing that the profession, "Canary-wine is agreeable" always implies only, "It is agreeable *to me*."<sup>7</sup> In fact, while the good requires finer distinctions on certain points, the agreeable—with the pleasures of dining as its principal manifestation—is neither disinterested, nor universal, nor purposive without purpose, nor necessary, failing on each of Kant's four definitions of the beautiful and standing therefore for everything

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<sup>4</sup> David Hume, *Four Dissertations*, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (London: printed for A. Millar, 1757), 216–217.

<sup>5</sup> Kant uses the German term *Geschmack*, which retains the double sense of the English. He makes only one, rather disingenuous, reflection on the derivation of the word in its aesthetic sense, observing that bodily and aesthetic taste both require singular judgements, not derivable from general principles. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 114–115.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 39–40, 43.

that he seeks to exclude from the category of the aesthetic. The Kantian notion of the autonomy of the aesthetic insists, from the outset, on a distinction between aesthetics and eating.

It might seem that such a consistent repudiation of eating positions Kant as the source of precisely the “aesthetic of hunger” proclaimed by my title. Such a neat identification is, unfortunately, too hasty. The rejection of eating is not meant as a rejection of food as such so much as it is a rejection of the whole realm of bodily experience and desire that maintains the subject in an interested relation to the physical world. Kant makes this explicit, placing hunger in direct opposition to all kinds of taste, in a rare elision between physical and mental taste:

... everyone says: Hunger is the best sauce; and people with a healthy appetite relish everything, so long as it is something they can eat. Such delight, consequently, gives no indication of taste having anything to do with choice. Only when people’s needs have been satisfied can we tell who among the crowd has taste or not.<sup>8</sup>

For Kant, hunger and appetite are almost synonymous, the former serving less as eating’s opposite than as its prelude. As such, hunger for Kant is an almost paradigmatic instance of interest, an experience of investment so strong that it erases everything outside itself. Kant’s use of the term “hunger” here clearly leans heavily on the end of the definitional spectrum that equates hunger with a desire for food, rather than a mere absence of it. This object-directed hunger is, for Kant, as far from his understanding of aesthetic autonomy as is the actual consumption of that object.

If the autonomy of the aesthetic—and later, specifically of art—has proved enormously influential for post-Kantian philosophers, artists and audiences, this influence has always carried within it the implicit distinction between eating and aesthetics. Writing in the wake of Kant, aesthetic philosophers have had constant recourse to this image in their attempts to (re-)establish art’s autonomy. Where Kant is interested in the subjective processes that allow us to make aesthetic judgements, understood broadly to include not only artistic but also and primarily natural beauty, Hegel’s aesthetics shifts the focus to the nature of art itself. For Hegel, art is a particular expression of *Geist* and therefore “has the vocation of revealing *the truth* in the form of

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 42.

sensuous artistic shape.”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, like Kant, Hegel opposes this truth-embodying sensuous shape to “purely sensuous apprehension,” where the latter has much in common with the Kantian category of the agreeable. For Hegel, art is opposed to desire which he defines as an “appetitive relation to the outer world.” Echoing and extending Kant’s profession that the aesthetic must be divorced from any interest in an object’s actual existence, Hegel emphasises that:

desire requires for itself not merely the superficial appearance of external things, but themselves in their concrete sensuous existence. Mere pictures of the wood that it wants to use, or of the animals that it wants to eat, would be of no service to desire.<sup>10</sup>

Here Hegel draws an explicit distinction between real object capable of inciting desire and (mimetic) art which, deferring the object’s actual existence, also defers its relation to desire. Here, as in Kant, eating returns as one of the key examples of such desire. In fact, as Hegel’s editor, Michael Inwood, explains in his commentary, Hegel’s arguments in this section seem “more appropriate to the desire to eat than to e.g. sexual desire,” suggesting that Hegel’s conception of the desire that he posits as antithetical to art takes the desire for food as its exemplary and informing instance.<sup>11</sup> While for Hegel the determining feature of art is its sensuous embodiment of truth, it is clear that this sensuousness remains opposed, as in Kant, to bodies that eat or that desire to eat.

Arthur Schopenhauer, Hegel’s rival and fellow post-Kantian Idealist, adopts an even stricter and more thoroughgoing view of the separation of art and appetite. For Schopenhauer, the true value of art lies in its suspension of the will, which he sees as the desiring property that motivates and corrupts all (phenomenal) existence and is the source of all suffering. Art, because it presents Ideas, which, like the Platonic idea or Kantian thing-in-itself, constitute the true nature of the world, divorced from the impulses of the will, allows us to temporarily still the will. The desire to eat is, of course, one of the principal manifestations of what Schopenhauer at one point calls the “hungry will,” and he makes extensive use of examples drawn from the domain of food and eating.<sup>12</sup> Following a claim that has its origins in Kant, he argues that, “Odours, however,

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<sup>9</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Inwood, trans. Bernard Bosanquet (London: Penguin, 1993), 61.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, vol. 1 (New York: Dover Publications, 1969), 154.

are always pleasant or unpleasant, and tastes even more so. Thus the last two are most closely related to the will,” and goes on to contrast the pleasures derived from them with those that arise from the properly aesthetic.<sup>13</sup> In these respects, Schopenhauer conforms to the now familiar tropes that distinguish the aesthetic from the edible, while increasing their significance to his system of aesthetics. In his definition of the charming—a rough analogue to the Kantian agreeable, which marks the point at which the aesthetic passes into the unaesthetic or merely agreeable—Schopenhauer extends this exclusion to specifically prohibit the depiction of food in art:

The one species [of the charming], a very low one, is found in the still life painting of the Dutch, when they err by depicting edible objects. By their deceptive appearance these necessarily excite the appetite, and this is just a stimulation of the will which puts an end to any aesthetic contemplation of the object.<sup>14</sup>

Schopenhauer, radicalising the exclusion of eating from the aesthetic, insists that anything that might give rise to even the *thought* of eating compromises proper aesthetic detachment, stirs the will, and thus undermines art’s true function.

Despite his firm rejection of hunger that is oriented towards an object, Schopenhauer, alone among the idealists, reserves an important place for self-starvation. In the fourth book of *The World as Will and as Representation*, Schopenhauer sets out his ethics, which are supposed to achieve what Schopenhauer’s aesthetics cannot—a permanent renunciation of the will, in place of the temporary reprieve offered by art. Here, he advocates an asceticism whose aim “is to serve as a constant mortification of the will, so that satisfaction of desires, the sweets of life, may not again stir the will, of which self-knowledge has conceived a horror,” a practice that finds one of its highest expressions in the renunciation of even the will to eat.<sup>15</sup> If this achieves similar goals to that of Schopenhauer’s aesthetics, however, he is careful to keep his embrace of an asceticism capable of acting on the body separate, both structurally and conceptually, from his aesthetic rejection of eating.

The reasons for this are readily apparent, and derive from the Idealists’ shared conception of aesthetic autonomy: aesthetics, for Schopenhauer, as for Kant and Hegel,

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1:200.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 1:207–208.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 1:381–382.

is a purely mental phenomenon. This is the source of its strength as a site for the Kantian play of faculties, Hegelian revelation of truth, and Schopenhauerian suspension of the will. It also means, however, that the price of this autonomy is its exile from the everyday life of either artist or spectator, as well as from the realms of bodily experience and sensation. Art, in such a model, can have as little to do with hunger as with eating, for both are experiences that must be lived out from within a body, and which therefore necessarily violate the relegation of the aesthetic to the mental, on which its autonomy is constructed. This is why, when Kant finally turns to consider art at the end of his discussion of aesthetic judgement, metaphors of food suddenly reappear. Kant praises poetry in particular for its “using of play to provide food for the understanding” and its offering of “food for thought.”<sup>16</sup> Kant, in other words, rejects not eating as such, but eating as a bodily fact; once art has been located within its special mental realm, once it is established that food can function *only* as metaphor, then the need for the mind to receive its mental nourishments can be entertained.

An art of hunger that founds itself on this tradition is perhaps not impossible, especially given writers’ often shaky fidelity to philosophical rigour. Such an art, however, necessarily involves a certain misreading or parody of the opposition between eating and aesthetics developed in these writers, an attempt to reinscribe aesthetic autonomy in precisely the realm from which it is excluded. This project simultaneously exaggerates aesthetic autonomy to an extreme, expanding its purview beyond anything envisaged by these aestheticians, and casts its very foundations into doubt, by denying the separation of mind and body on which such claims to aesthetic autonomy are founded. This ambivalence will be crucial to my thesis, for while none of these philosophers seems prepared to embrace an art of hunger as such, they together constitute a tradition whose influence on modernist art and aesthetics, and therefore whose importance to the literary tradition under discussion here, has been immense. In different ways, each of these thinkers has articulated and pioneered some of modernism’s key premises: Kant’s model of autonomous formalism is key to many modernist models of art; Hegel’s claim that modern art had reached or passed a critical endpoint is an early expression of the sense of crisis that pervades modernism; and Schopenhauer offers an alternate articulation of the central importance of art, and a new valuation of the ultimate importance of music,

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<sup>16</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 150, 156.

that was influential throughout the nineteenth-century and beyond.<sup>17</sup> As we will see, several of these philosophers have been particularly important to some of the key writers of the tradition of hunger art. More generally, however, their ideas, and the model of aesthetic autonomy that they embrace, pervade the modernist period and underpin much of its artistic production.<sup>18</sup> In other words, regardless of their personal interest in philosophy, it is this tradition of aesthetics—and not primarily that of, for instance, the earlier eighteenth-century taste philosophers—that the writers in this thesis are writing out of and against.

## II. Nietzsche: The Emaciated Modern

Despite his clear debt to both Kant and Hegel in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche sits somewhat oddly against the tradition laid out above. Like the Idealists, his aesthetics have been central to the development of the aesthetic thought of many modernist writers. Unlike them, however, he places relatively little value on the concept of aesthetic autonomy, and has correspondingly little interest in the opposition of art and eating upon which such autonomy is founded. Nietzsche is, however, the first of these philosophers to cast modern art in terms of starvation, and in this sense he is an important figure in this discussion. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, he turns to this analogy repeatedly in his scathing condemnations of what has gone wrong with art since the demise of Greek tragedy:

“Tragedy is dead! And along with her, poetry itself has perished. Away, away with you pale, emaciated epigones! Away to Hades so that there you can for once eat your fill on the crumbs of the masters of a previous age!”<sup>19</sup>

The playwrights of late Greek drama, described as “emaciated epigones,” emerge as figures and creators of a derivative and failed art. Starving, they appear as beggars whose crime seems to be not, as in Kant, their excess of hunger, so much as their inability to feed themselves.

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<sup>17</sup> On Schopenhauer’s influence on modern literature, see David E. Wellbery, *Schopenhauers Bedeutung für die Moderne Literatur* (München: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Robert Pippin goes further, arguing that Kant was the “first thoroughgoing ‘philosophical modernist’” and that the post-Kantian German tradition as a whole is characteristically modernist in its attempts to grapple with the “deepest assumption in modernity’s self-understanding (the assertion of autonomy)”: Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 11, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 62.

Nietzsche transfers this image to embrace a condemnation of modern art, lamenting of his own contemporary German culture:

Our art reveals this universal distress: it is in vain that one relies on all the great productive periods and natures for models to imitate . . . : he still remains eternally hungry, the weak and joyless ‘critic’, the Alexandrian man, who is basically a wretched librarian and proofreader blinded by book dust and printer’s errors.<sup>20</sup>

Transposed to the modern age, the starving artist remains a figure of the derivative, a scholar held in thrall to his predecessors. Nietzsche seems to flag a failure in Kant’s metaphor of poetry as food for thought, an inability to find nourishment in wide reading. But there is something distinctly out of place, in this scholarly realm, in Nietzsche’s emphasis on the modern artist’s hunger, and its oddness seems to point towards the missing realm of Dionysian feasting—the realm of embodied experience—that Nietzsche believes this sad figure lacks. Hunger becomes an inability to delight in one’s body, but also—and this is fatal for Nietzsche—a cause of the “weakness” that is evoked in the following clause, a “weakness” that, like the hunger itself, seems to hesitate between a physical and a moral failing.

This connection between starvation and a scholarly distance that enervates and produces derivative works holds, for Nietzsche, for the whole of our myth-deprived world:

Let us ask ourselves if the feverish and so uncanny agitation of this culture is anything other than the starving man’s craven grasping and snatching for food—and who would want to give something more to such a culture, which remains unsatisfied by all that it devours and whose touch habitually transforms the strongest, healthiest food into ‘history and criticism’?<sup>21</sup>

Once again, although perhaps more explicitly, the transmutation that turns the Nietzschean “food” of myth and culture into “history and criticism” marks a failure to properly consume this metaphorical sustenance, a kind of basic misreading that fails to see its capacity for incorporation rather than mere interpretation. Our tendency to hold myth at a distance, to regard it as an object of study rather than a constitutive element of our identity, is a kind of category error for Nietzsche; it is as unlikely to satiate modern culture as if we were to spend an evening scrutinising a meal, only to walk away

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 123.

complaining of hunger. Nietzsche's terms echo one of Schopenhauer's favourite descriptions of the will as "like the alms that keep the beggar alive today so that he may starve again tomorrow."<sup>22</sup> But for Nietzsche this insatiable hunger is not, as in Schopenhauer, a basic truth of the structure of existence; instead, it is the direct consequence of a modern inability to recognise "food" for what it is.

Nietzsche is the first philosopher in the Idealist tradition to equate emaciation with modern art and culture, in a formulation that will become important to a certain tradition of modernist writers. As we have seen, the terms in which he casts this analogy are indebted to the Idealist tradition of Kant and Schopenhauer. His innovation is to historicise their accounts (as Hegel had done before him), casting starvation as something peculiar to both a mode of thought, which he calls Alexandrian or Socratic; and to a broader historical epoch, which, with its roots in late Greece, seems to find its fullest expression in modernity.

Nonetheless, Nietzsche's use of this image is rather different to the way it will be employed by writers of the period. Importantly, his account of starvation is purely metaphorical, turning on a repudiation of the Kantian formula of art as food for thought. In this sense, although his broader aesthetics embraces a far more embodied model than the Idealist tradition, starvation remains confined to a mental realm. Indeed, this is, to a certain degree, the point of the Nietzschean image: it evokes an art and a culture that are stripped of a direct and vital connection to the realm of authentic, lived experience; this implication does not necessarily hold in the image's translation to literature. Nietzsche's formulation does nonetheless raise many of the issues that are key to the modernist art of hunger: an ambivalence about the mind/body divide; a difficulty with metaphor and with the rarefaction of experience; a disavowed concern with literary genealogy; and an immersion in a world stripped of myth and of any sense of aesthetics as a transcendent, communal or spiritual experience. The writers in the tradition that follows might then be described as offering an anti-Nietzschean vision of modernist aesthetics, one which seeks to work with or promote, rather than denigrate, the figure of starvation as a figure of the modern.

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<sup>22</sup> Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 1:390. A similar version of this image also appears on p. 196.

### III. Modernist Aesthetics Against Culinary Art

Modernism itself, of course, has its own theories of the relationship between food and aesthetics. In his 1884 essay “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James dismisses those readers whose aesthetic taste too closely resembles its literal counterpart, complaining that, “The ‘ending’ of a novel is, for many persons, like that of a good dinner, a course of dessert and ices, and the artist in fiction is regarded as a sort of meddling doctor who forbids agreeable aftertastes.”<sup>23</sup> For James, the rejection of eating functions not simply as a rejection of art’s submission to desire, but also as a suspicion of a whole attitude towards art that assumes that pleasure is the goal of aesthetic experience. This statement stands as one of the earliest manifestations of an emerging modernist distaste for a mode of gustatory art. For as the nineteenth century drew to a close, an emerging modernist aesthetics began drawing on the Idealist opposition between art and eating, to imply not only the suspension of desire but its active frustration, in a new championing of an art that, unfamiliar and difficult, holds itself at a distance from readers.

Theorists writing in the aftermath of modernism have tended to extend this opposition from a rejection of pleasure to an active embrace of difficulty and resistance in art, a position that bears the clear marks of literary modernism’s valuation of difficulty.<sup>24</sup> Arguably, it is Theodor Adorno who puts this distinction to perhaps its most important and interesting use in the twentieth century. Adorno’s deployment of this theme begins not with aesthetics but with the culture industry which, unlike art and the aesthetic, is culture understood as fully consumable, easily digested, and, as a result, entirely complicit in the workings of capitalism. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and his co-author Max Horkheimer cast this cultural apparatus in an explicit relationship to literal hunger:

... this bloated pleasure apparatus [i.e., the culture industry] adds no dignity to man’s lives. The idea of “fully exploiting” available technological resources and the facilities for aesthetic mass consumption is part of the economic system which refuses to exploit resources to abolish hunger.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Henry James, “The Art of Fiction,” in *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 2010), 747.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Hans Robert Jauss’ rejection of “‘culinary’ or entertainment art” as being too comfortable and readily assimilable for a reader: Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1982), 25.

<sup>25</sup> Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1989), 139.

For Adorno and Horkheimer, the products of the culture industry are “consumable” in a way that acts as a direct substitute for the genuinely consumable food that would alleviate hunger. Mass culture therefore, by offering an *ersatz* mode of consumption, serves the interests of capitalism, which seeks to promote consumption without being forced to satisfy hunger.

The metaphor of an all too consumable mass culture gathers together several of the qualities that Adorno finds concerning in the culture industry: not only its complicity with capitalist consumption, but also something intrinsic to these cultural products themselves. As he writes scathingly in “The Schema of Mass Culture”:

The pre-digested quality of the product prevails, justifies itself and establishes itself all the more firmly in so far as it constantly refers to those who cannot digest anything not already pre-digested. It is baby-food: permanent self-reflection upon the infantile compulsion towards the repetition of needs which it creates in the first place.<sup>26</sup>

In this account, mass culture is problematic, not only because it functions as a distraction from the true inequalities of the system, but because it is itself too easily consumed, and therefore intrinsically detrimental to those who consume it. Because it offers no roughage, no resistance, mass culture has an infantilising effect on its audiences. It limits their ability to “digest” things for themselves, their ability to analyse and to confront new texts. Moreover, it has an insidiously self-perpetuating quality, producing the very needs to which it responds, and producing audiences who are incapable of confronting any kind of cultural product that demands more of them than the easy pleasures of mass culture.

In this context, art for Adorno becomes the cultural product that provides the antidote to passive consumption, a cultural product that cannot be easily digested and whose resistance to easy digestion must be rigorously defended. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno explicitly follows Kant in his redeployment of the schism between art and eating, observing that, “Kant was the first to achieve the insight, never since forgotten, that aesthetic comportment is free from immediate desire; he snatched art away from that

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<sup>26</sup> Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), 67.

avaricious philistinism that always wants to touch it and taste it.”<sup>27</sup> Adorno’s interpretation of this Kantian principle is less purely divorced from interest than Kant would prefer, and he goes on to criticise Kant’s failure to see this lack of interest as only one phase of a movement within art itself: “If it is more than mere indifference, the Kantian ‘without interest’ must be shadowed by the wildest interest, and there is much to be said for the idea that the dignity of artworks depends on the intensity from which they are wrested.”<sup>28</sup> This ambivalence reflects Adorno’s complex position on aesthetic autonomy, pivotal to his sense of the social function of art, which allows art to hold itself apart from society without fully disengaging from it.<sup>29</sup>

It is therefore easy to understand why Adorno should hold so firmly to the account of disinterest in which food is precisely the opposite of art, condemning those who are “convinced by expressions like ‘a feast for the ears.’”<sup>30</sup> Considering the decline of the “sensuously pleasing” in art, Adorno points to a resistance to consumption inherent in modern art: “the absorption of resistant material and themes opposes the culinary consumption of art even if, given the general ideological tendency to integrate everything that resists integration, consumption undertakes to swallow everything up whole, however repulsive it might seem.”<sup>31</sup> Modern art’s function, perilous and not at all guaranteed of success, seems to resist such a swallowing of culture. The repudiation of art as food in Adorno combines elements of a (modified) Kantian autonomy with the new modernist emphasis on an unfamiliarity or difficulty capable of challenging audiences. Adorno, though, remains more keenly aware than the Idealists of the extent to which the rejection of the culinary, the agreeable or the desiring is always compromised by countervailing tendencies and by the perniciousness of capitalist consumption. This subtlety is part of Adorno’s originality; his other innovation lies in the Marxist inflection to his analysis, in which the consumption of food is elided with consumption more generally, allowing its rejection to stand for art’s critical stance towards capitalist commodity culture.

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<sup>27</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> Louis Althusser’s position on aesthetics is similar in this respect to Adorno’s. Althusser argues that, “What art makes us *see*, and therefore gives to us in the form of ‘*seeing*’, ‘*perceiving*’ and ‘*feeling*’ (which is not the form of *knowing*), is the *ideology* from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it *alludes*”: Louis Althusser, “A Letter on Art in Reply to André Daspre,” in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 222. His emphasis.

<sup>30</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 15.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

Where all previous systems of aesthetics reject eating only to absolve art entirely from the material realm, Adorno is the first in this tradition to embrace, with characteristic ambivalence, an ascetic art: “The bourgeoisie,” he writes, “want art voluptuous and life ascetic; the reverse would be better.”<sup>32</sup> To be sure, this is not exactly an embrace of starvation and even if it were, formulations such as this one seem to insist on the metaphorical nature of such an art, in that this “asceticism” remains separate from any direct relation to life. Nonetheless, it takes the renunciation of eating further down the path towards hunger than we have seen, and it represents an important revision of the Schopenhauerian effort to keep asceticism and aesthetics separate. The materialism of Adorno’s Marxism no doubt plays some part in this willingness to admit of the ascetic; more immediately influential, however, is Adorno’s admiration for Kafka and Beckett, who are held up in *Aesthetic Theory* and elsewhere as two of the towering figures of modern literature, important precisely for their apparently “ascetic” art. This exchange—from German Idealism, through modernist literature and back to a figure like Adorno who draws on each in light of the other—not only encapsulates a constantly evolving sense of how art might relate to hunger, but also reflects the dialogic relationship between literature and philosophy that underpins the development and articulation of an art of hunger.

#### IV. Modernist Hunger Artists in Theory and Criticism

This philosophical tradition foreshadows a connection between hunger and aesthetics, which I argue in subsequent chapters becomes an animating concern for modernism and modernist-influenced contemporary writing. Although not widely studied, this is a connection that has been approached in various ways by other critics. There is a small but productive body of literature that addresses itself towards self-starvation in its various forms, often with a specific interest in the relation between this form of hunger and textuality, literature, or art. The most important and interesting book in this body of work is Maud Ellmann’s wide-ranging 1993 study, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment*. In an analysis that stretches from old Irish law, through modernism, critical theory and contemporary popular culture, and which takes as its two central examples the 1981 Irish Republican hunger strikes and Richardson’s 1748 novel *Clarissa*, Ellmann argues that writing and hunger—specifically, self-starvation—are intimately

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 16.

interconnected. Offering an interpretation of hunger as a form of lack, Ellmann elucidates a complex relationship between hunger and writing, arguing that “language and the body are locked in a struggle of attrition, in which the word is ultimately bound to triumph while the flesh is doomed to be undone.” Nonetheless, she continues, this is not a simple logic of sacrifice, “For writing voids the mind of words just as starving voids the body of its flesh, and both express the yearning for an unimaginable destitution. We do not starve to write but *write to starve*: and we starve in order to affirm the supremacy of lack, and to extend the ravenous dominion of the night.”<sup>33</sup> Ellmann develops her account through an analysis of the relationship between eating and sociality and, by extension, starving and solitude, in which writing functions as a way of re-establishing a relationship to the world, and concludes with a discussion of the relationship between starvation and imprisonment.

In all these respects, my thesis is deeply indebted to Ellmann’s analysis and insights. Like her, I am concerned with a relation between starvation, writing and solitude that seems to me to arise from the very logic of the practice of self-starvation itself. Nonetheless, this thesis has a fundamentally different orientation than Ellmann’s wide-ranging study, and produces quite different results. Most simply, where Ellmann’s work is interested in the relationship between starvation and writing, I am interested in the relation between starvation and aesthetics, a difference that ultimately produces a distinctive set of problems about the specificity of art and the relation of starvation’s isolation to aesthetic autonomy. Moreover, where Ellmann’s work is theoretical in the true sense, in its attempt to develop a general theory of hunger’s relationship to writing, my thesis is more properly literary critical-historical and genealogical, seeking to establish the existence of a tradition that deploys this relationship in a specific and evolving way. As a consequence, Ellmann’s study incorporates and makes claims on behalf of a far wider range of texts, combining acts of self-starvation that are explicitly political with those that are aesthetic, performance-oriented or unmotivated. The findings of my research imply that, while the relationship that Ellmann identifies persists across these works, in those that I describe as constituting an “art of hunger,” the relationship between writing and starving is attenuated and complicated. A substantial reason for this is surely the fact that, in the writers I consider, there is often no obvious desire for social impact or political salience. As a result, the impulse to overcome hunger’s solitude with

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<sup>33</sup> Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London: Virago Press, 1993), 27.

words is diminished and the desire for hunger to signify is put into question.

Nonetheless, the aesthetic and hermeneutic fascination that such acts entail seems to constantly pull hunger back into the thrall of language, both in the production of the texts themselves and in their reinterpretations in works of subsequent theory, philosophy and literary criticism. Ellmann's work might then be considered to expound a general logic that the authors of the texts I consider here subvert and expand upon, to transform this relationship between starving and writing into a specific but self-defeating form of art.

Historically, one of the most influential ways of conceptualising self-starvation has been with reference to gender. Anorexia nervosa and other modes of female self-starvation have attracted the sustained attention of feminist scholars, who describe this form of hunger as a response to patriarchal power structures.<sup>34</sup> In this context, the fact that the tradition I deal with is an exclusively male one is of significant interest. Leslie Heywood's 1996 *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* is perhaps the study that comes closest to mine in its focus on the relationship between primarily male "high modernist" writers and anorexia. Heywood finds in these high modernists a misogynist "anorexic logic," understood as "the set of assumptions ... that values mind over body, thin over fat, white over black, masculine over feminine, individual over community."<sup>35</sup> Here, as elsewhere, however, the characteristically dour outlook of so many of my writers seems to make it difficult to concur with a logic of "privileging": while many of these writers certainly toy uncomfortably with the boundaries of misogyny (Hamsun is perhaps the worst offender, but it is a theme that runs throughout the works

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<sup>34</sup> For a key work in this literature, see Susan Bordo's analysis of anorexia nervosa as a mode of doomed resistance to patriarchy. Isabelle Meuret follows Ellmann in asserting a relationship between anorexia and literature, and seeks to explore how this relationship "becomes flesh." Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal study of nineteenth-century women's writing names anorexia as an exemplary form of "dis-ease," which in turn is tied both to women's oppression, and to the need to negotiate this in women's writing. Anna Krugovoy Silver offers a more detailed examination of this relationship between anorexia, gender and writing in nineteenth-century fiction, arguing that this gendering emerged alongside anorexia's identification as a disease, and tracing the relationship between eating habits and gender in the Victorian period. Vandereycken and Deth locate this in an even longer perspective, reading anorexic women as the most recent manifestation of a centuries-old association between starvation and femininity: Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Isabelle Meuret, *Writing Size Zero: Figuring Anorexia in Contemporary World Literatures* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2007), 53; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* (London: Athlone Press, 1994).

<sup>35</sup> Leslie Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), xii.

considered in this thesis), it is in no way clear that this involves a concomitant privileging of masculinity. On the contrary, the male body, as well as traditionally masculine characteristics such as reason, productivity, and the mind, are the primary victims and the primary targets of this self-starvation.

This does not fully answer the question, though, of why, for instance, this is a thesis about Melville and Beckett, but not about Emily Dickinson and Simone Weil. But the weight of a cultural logic and a long history of equating self-starvation with femininity means that female acts of hunger read quite differently in our society, and are, for better or worse, automatically inscribed within a series of highly gendered discourses. In the first place, this means that female self-starvation, even at its most isolated, is always social and always signifies. As a result, the equation of hunger with autonomy operates quite differently when the person starving is a woman. It is significant, in this context, that both Auster and Coetzee speak through women—Anna Blume and Elizabeth Costello respectively—at precisely the moment that their arts of hunger strive to become social and meaningful. A man who starves himself is not, of course, free of gender, but he confounds it, adopting a feminised position that in these writers often tends towards the misogynist and, by virtue of its vehement rejection of the social, usually denies actual women any space from which to speak. The result, for the writers considered here, is that the art of hunger implies the construction of a new mode of masculinity that is at once feminised and self-sufficient. This has clear aesthetic implications, for it rejects both masculine tropes of production and feminine tropes of reproduction, in place of a self-referential art located in a neutered masculine body.

It is clear from this discussion that the art of hunger as I conceive of it is an art that seeks grounding in the body. In this, I am unusual in studies of self-starvation. Both Heywood and Ellmann share an underlying claim that hunger constitutes a form of disembodiment, which has its compensation in a shift to a more abstract dimension of mind, language, or reason. There is a reciprocity in this exchange that has something of the ascetic about it, in Geoffrey Galt Harpham's "loose sense" of the term—"any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification"<sup>36</sup>—although this analogy is far neater in Heywood's case than in Ellmann's, where the question of empowerment or gratification remains more open, less certain. It is even more explicit—

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<sup>36</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), xiii.

and less satisfied—in Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson’s *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs: An Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism*, whose central claim is that “there is a deep connection between melancholy and hunger for another food, a feverish, insatiable hunger, like that of a weasel sucking eggs,” which sees one of its highest expressions in the starvation of Kafka, Giacometti, or Swedish poet Gunnar Ekelöf.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, acts of self-starvation must necessarily be read against a cultural background in which asceticism, as Harpham’s book shows, has a pervasive, structuring influence. Nonetheless, the authors in my study cast doubt both on the viability of the term “self-denial,” when dealing with characters whose privations have often indeterminate origins, and who seem curiously deprived of will; and on the feasibility of a proper trade-off for this suffering, in circumstances where the suffering itself seems to undermine any possibility of transcendence, be it religious, linguistic, or rational. In fact, these authors seem to offer a model of asceticism stripped of its emancipatory power and of any possibility of disembodiment. Where an aesthetic asceticism would hold starvation and art in a reciprocal relationship, such that the more one starves, the more capable one is of attaining to the higher states necessary to produce art, these writers strive impossibly to collapse that distance, to produce an art that is identical with the act of starvation.

Although no scholarship has considered starvation in this light, the frustration of transcendence in twentieth-century and modernist literature has been the subject of a number of important studies. In this context, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s *Art of Impoverishment*, a study of the frustration and opacity of Beckett, Rothko and Resnais, is a central work.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, Simon Critchley’s *Very Little ... Almost Nothing* explores death and nihilism in literature and philosophy, including Heidegger, Blanchot, Cavell and Beckett, discussing problems of meaninglessness in the absence of a religious guarantee of truth.<sup>39</sup> My work is indebted to these analyses of the aesthetics of impoverishment and death, but seeks to return their themes to the body. Moreover, while these writers discuss what might be called a “perimodernism” of works that cluster around modernism without actively partaking of it—Bersani and Dutoit go so far as to oppose the writers

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<sup>37</sup> Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs: An Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2008), 170.

<sup>38</sup> Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>39</sup> Simon Critchley, *Very Little ... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2004).

they deal with here to “real” modernists like Joyce—I argue in Chapter 1 that this art has an important position in modernism proper, with repercussions beyond it.

As Critchley states, to fully come to terms with these questions involves engaging in a dialogue between literature and philosophy. In this regard, Denise Gigante’s study of Romanticism’s relationship to both eighteenth-century taste philosophy and discourse on aesthetic taste more generally, has been a model text, and it stands, methodologically and conceptually, as an important backdrop to this thesis.<sup>40</sup> In a separate article, Gigante extends her claims about taste’s deployment in literature into the modernist period, arguing that for Keats, Beckett and Sartre, nausea is used as a reaction to and rejection of older forms of taste aesthetics.<sup>41</sup> Michel Delville advances a related argument, suggesting that twentieth-century avant-gardes discover a renewed interest in (literal) taste, food and eating, in reaction to the Kantian-Hegelian reification of aesthetics.<sup>42</sup> There is much to these claims, and I return in particular to the relationship between nausea and aesthetics in my discussion of Beckett in Chapter 2. In this thesis, however, I emphasise hunger in place of nausea or eating, as embodying a far more complicated response to, and model for, aesthetic production.

A number of excellent recent studies have sought to contextualise starvation and self-starvation within broader institutional and political contexts. Patrick Anderson’s 2010 *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance and the Morbidity of Resistance* pioneers this trend, offering a performance studies-oriented analysis of self-starvation in a variety of clinical, artistic and carceral institutions. For Anderson, “self-starvation stages the event of *subjectivation*: the production of political subjectivity in the context of subordination to larger institutional and ideological domains.”<sup>43</sup> Parama Roy’s *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* reads Indian and Indian diasporic experiences of eating, starvation and self-starvation within the politics of colonialism and its postcolonial and globalised aftermaths.<sup>44</sup> Both these incisive studies reveal the extent and the various ways in which even apparently solitary acts of starvation can have wider political meanings.

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<sup>40</sup> Gigante, *Taste*.

<sup>41</sup> Denise Gigante, “The Endgame of Taste: Keats, Sartre, Beckett,” in *Cultures of Taste/Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism*, ed. Timothy Morton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 183–201.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Delville, *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> Patrick Anderson, *So Much Wasted: Hunger, Performance, and the Morbidity of Resistance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Parama Roy, *Alimentary Tracts: Appetites, Aversions, and the Postcolonial* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

One of the on-going themes of this thesis is the tension between an art of hunger as the triumph of aesthetic autonomy, and its various inscriptions in a range of institutions and political debates, from literary market forces in the modernist period, through to Coetzee's negotiation of the politics of apartheid-era South Africa and the institutions of contemporary intellectual discourse.

The pages that follow argue that hunger has been seized upon by an influential tradition of modernist writers, and examine both the development of this relationship as a way of articulating a specifically modernist approach to aesthetics, and the attempts by later twentieth-century writers to come to terms with the legacies contained here. In my first chapter, I trace the development of literary attempts to portray hunger as a model for art, through key works by Herman Melville, in his short story 'Bartleby'; Arthur Rimbaud, in his poetry; Knut Hamsun, in his novel *Hunger*; and Franz Kafka. Mapping out their various contributions to the development of this trope, this section elucidates the general shape and principal characteristics of an art of hunger. Although its practices often resemble asceticism, I argue that this art no longer recognises the possibility of a transcendent axis that would guarantee the value of suffering by offering a spiritual reward.

The philosophical and literary traditions described above in the introduction, and subsequently in the first chapter form the basis of and source material for a modernist art of hunger. These traditions therefore lay the foundations for the full elaboration of this aesthetic approach, in all its complexities, in the post-war work of Samuel Beckett, which I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3. I argue that Beckett's appropriation of this tradition provides the fullest attempt to realise this basically failed aesthetic thought and artistic practice in a body of work—and to embrace that failure as constitutive of the art that results. In Chapter 2, I argue Beckett's post-war writing takes hunger as one of the central figures for an aesthetics that seeks to embrace a Schopenhauerian indifference and a severing of the artist from his object. This reaches a crisis point in *The Unnamable*, however, where starvation is replaced by force-feeding and regurgitation, in a traumatic display of language's inability to achieve the perfect hermeticism towards which his art aspired. Chapter 3 traces Beckett's attempt to persevere with an art of hunger beyond this failure. In his early plays and in his 1961 novel *How It Is*, Beckett seeks to

reconceptualise hunger as social and relational, ultimately producing a self-consuming mode of starvation that animates *How It Is*. By the *Nobow On* trilogy, especially *Worstward Ho*, hunger has been absorbed into the figure of a self-devouring text, characterised by extreme formalism and the textualisation of starvation.

Paul Auster is one of the first writers to follow in Beckett's footsteps and in his early work formulates a theory of an "art of hunger" that derives directly from his reading of Hamsun, Kafka, and Beckett. For Auster, this art articulates a relationship to modernism and a desire for a language that will be perfectly commensurate with the world, a set of goals that he pursues in his early poetry. Chapter 4 discusses Auster's development of an art of hunger, whose own crisis comes with *The Invention of Solitude*, in which hunger's association with opacity and a resistance to interpretation accrues social and personal costs in his relationship with his father. When Auster begins publishing novels in the mid-1980s, this problem comes to the fore. Chapter 5 explores his early novelistic attempts to resolve the tension between Auster's Bakhtinian social theory of the novel and his solipsistic conception of the art of hunger, before he ultimately abandons the latter in favour of the former.

The art of hunger's social ramifications assume a new urgency when they are relocated to late apartheid-era South Africa, as J. M. Coetzee does in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Chapter 6 examines the difficulties and tensions involved in this transposition, arguing that this novel uses Michael K's hunger as a site for negotiating the very different connotations of starvation within, on the one hand, the modernist literary tradition with which he affiliates himself, and, on the other, the postcolonial African context in which he lives. Focusing particularly on *Elizabeth Costello*, Chapter 7 elaborates Coetzee's "art of the food taboo," a modified form of the art of hunger which emphasises an ethics of embodied empathy as central to his late aesthetics.

## A Modernist Art of Hunger

We saw in the previous chapter that each of the key aesthetic philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche—opens the way for an art of hunger, before immediately retracting the possibility in the assertion that hunger is inimical to “true” art. This double movement raises a number of concerns. First, it originates with the positing of artistic autonomy as central to the status of art, and with this autonomy’s definition as a repudiation of art’s relationship to need, to desire and to embodiment. Second, its presence seems to persistently inquire as to the status of metaphor and analogy in the discourse of aesthetics, a question that is raised as urgently by the “art of hunger” of my title as it is by Kant’s “food for thought” or Nietzsche’s man starved of myth. Third, it raises insistent questions about the “consumption” of texts, as both a question of literary genealogy and aesthetic appreciation. Finally, with Nietzsche, it becomes central to the question of what modern art is and how it is to be understood, defined and appreciated.

The narrative of the starving writer is a central one to the modernist tradition. Nonetheless, my interest in the conjunction of art and hunger should not be mistaken for a broad claim about modernism *as such* (unlike Leslie Heywood, I do not believe that modernism is animated by an “anorexic logic”); rather, the concerns articulated by “hunger artists” and their art of hunger offer a specific response to more general modernist concerns. The tradition that I seek to establish here is principally a European and American one, passing through Herman Melville, Arthur Rimbaud, Knut Hamsun, Franz Kafka, Antonin Artaud, Henry Miller, Ernest Hemingway and French surrealism. It is also primarily male. Many of these writers have undertaken projects that are irreconcilable to each other; nonetheless, they—together with Beckett, Auster and Coetzee—can be thought of as a tradition in the dual sense that they tend both to read each other and to be read together in retrospect. They are also, in many cases—particularly those of Melville, Hamsun, Kafka and Beckett—notable for their knowledge

of and engagement with the German philosophical tradition outlined in the introduction. This tradition offers an alternative to both the Joycean appetitive modernism that embraces gluttony and the feast; and the Bloomsbury modernism of tasteful dinner parties. A brief tour of these modernist articulations of an art of hunger will offer us a starting point for understanding the set of aesthetic ideas and practices that coalesce around this notion, and that provide the foundation for Beckett, Auster and Coetzee's various approaches to an art of hunger.

Why is the starving artist such an important figure for modernism? A significant part of the answer lies in hunger's status as the physical manifestation of a socioeconomic reality and the embodied origin of aesthetic experience. The starving artist embodies one of modernism's central tensions, between the demands of an increasingly professionalised literary marketplace on the one hand, and a newly serious call for the autonomy of art on the other.<sup>45</sup> While considerable work in the new modernist studies has discussed this tension, the prospect of penury has always hovered just off-stage for these scholars.<sup>46</sup> Given these studies' firm emphasis on the most successful modernists, as well as the ease with which the starving artist slips into precisely the figure of the heroic autonomous artist that these studies seek to demystify, this lacuna is understandable. Nonetheless, I want to insist that the spectre of hunger and physical deprivation that accompanies commercial failure is as much a feature of the material circumstances of modernism's production as are those successful efforts at marketing, commercial publishing, the finding of patronage and the creation of modernist celebrity that have been so successfully elucidated by recent studies in this area.

Moreover, because the starving artist is the figure that stays *with* this modernist contradiction, that embodies some of the tensions between aesthetic autonomy and literary professionalization, it offers a site at which the operations of these pressures can be explored in their *aesthetic* manifestations. By focusing on the aesthetics of some of the foundational texts of the modernist starving artist tradition, I hope to show one way in

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<sup>45</sup> “[Modernists’] dilemma was rooted in an ideological contradiction between art and money that pervaded their culture, as it continues to dominate our own. This contradiction posed the Romantic ideal of the writer as genius who expressed an inviolable inner vision without regard for its rhetorical effect or market value against a new definition of the author as professional who earned a living by writing.” Joyce Piell Wexler, *Who Paid for Modernism? Art, Money, and the Fiction of Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), xii.

<sup>46</sup> See for example, Joyce Wexler's silence on actual starving artists in her chapter on that topic, or Lawrence Rainey's fleeting nod towards Pound's penury: *Ibid.*, 1–20; Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 15.

which modernist form and modernist aesthetics develop in response to the messy inter-implication of aesthetic ideal and financial reality in this period. At the same time, starvation is as much an embodied state as it is the product of economic deprivation. If the existence of starving artists shows up commercial autonomy as an impossible and self-destructive aspiration, it is equally unforbearing of the notion that modernism achieves any kind of writerly divorce from the body. On the contrary, its simultaneous effects on body and mind implicate the artist's corporeality in the production of the aesthetic. This should hardly surprise us—studies of embodiment, sensation and perception have, after all, been one of the most important trends in recent work on modernism. Nonetheless, much work on the commercial materialism of modernism ignores the other materialism of the body—and vice versa. At the same time, the much older tradition of aesthetic autonomy refuses the “interest” produced by desire and sensation at least as firmly as it refuses the “interest” of commercial entanglements and art for cash. The starving artist offers a useful corrective to all three schools of thought. It manifests itself at the point where the imbrication of commercial and embodied existence is most apparent, and posits a form of aesthetic autonomy that derives from and quickly feeds back into the twin interests of bodily and financial need.

### *A. Towards a Canon of Hunger Artists: Four Case Studies*

#### I. Melville: *Bartleby* and the Ends of Writing

Melville's 1853 short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* provides one of the key proto-modernist articulations of starvation. Although not explicitly concerned with aesthetics as such—in contrast to many of the later writers in this tradition—Melville's story offers one of the key statements of a starvation that sits outside of social or religious models. Bartleby is a law-copyist or scrivener, the former employee of the story's narrator, and the story consists of the lawyer's account of Bartleby's strange and slow withdrawal from life. With a mounting absolutism, Bartleby refuses to do as instructed: he refuses to compare documents, to run errands, to answer questions about himself and finally to copy at all, each time responding to requests with the opaque but immovable formula: “I would prefer not to.” Finally, he refuses to be fired, and refuses to leave the lawyer's office, even after the lawyer himself moves out in desperation. He is eventually taken to prison, where his final words—“I would prefer not to dine today ...

It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners”<sup>47</sup>—foreshadow his apparent death from starvation some days later. Despite the lack of direct references to art, there are a number of good reasons to read this story as fundamentally concerned with aesthetic production. First, Bartleby, as a copyist, is already a kind of writer, albeit in a strictly professionalised vein. More significantly, as Leo Marx has shown at length, there are a number of reasons to believe that this story is “a parable having to do with Melville’s own fate as a writer.”<sup>48</sup> As both an alter ego for the literary Melville and a commercial writer with no aesthetic aspirations, Bartleby is suspended in the abyss between the aesthetic and the commercial, and his doomed refusal acquires its hopelessness from his attempt to pull away from the commercial structures towards something more autonomous, more aesthetic.

This new model of literature derives from a fundamental perversion of Kantian aesthetic autonomy, its expansion from the properly aesthetic into life as such. Bartleby approaches life as though hoping to find there only beauty. He is interested by neither the agreeable nor the good, disengaged from sensory desires but devoid of concepts, feigning purposiveness but deprived of a purpose. And yet, there is no indication that Bartleby actually *finds* beauty. He adopts the posture of aesthetic contemplation, but, failing to find a proper object, his disinterest morphs into indifference, as Adorno predicted.<sup>49</sup> His actions, characterised by a negation of preference—that central mode of the Kantian agreeable—signal a kind of readiness for aesthetic experience that never eventuates. If this is the case, his starvation at the story’s end is nothing more than the logical culmination of a basic category error, the attempt to read aesthetic autonomy in terms of the subject’s everyday life. The denial of eating that was an almost incidental point of differentiation for Kant’s analysis of aesthetic judgement becomes a fatal endpoint in its over-literal application to human life. Bartleby makes of his own life that disinterested, autonomous and unconceptual experience that is the Kantian aesthetic, and in so doing, fails to coincide with the aesthetic.

And yet, there is no question that Bartleby is a profoundly fascinating character. If Bartleby fails to become a proper spectator of art, he nonetheless seems to acquire a

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<sup>47</sup> Herman Melville, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (Hoboken: Melville House Publishing, 2006), 61.

<sup>48</sup> Leo Marx, “Melville’s Parable of the Walls,” *Sewanee Review* 61, no. 4 (Autumn 1953): 603.

<sup>49</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 13.

status somewhere between the object of a profound ethical impulse (itself independent of either personal interest or conceptualised goodness, operating instead with the compulsion of blind responsibility), and the object of a quasi-aesthetic response. What seems to fascinate both the lawyer, and the enormous number of writers, philosophers, theorists and readers who have analysed *Bartleby* since, is the sheer incomprehensibility of Bartleby's actions. As the lawyer professes at the beginning of the story, "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable," a fact that he laments as "an irreparable loss to literature," in that it prevents him from writing a full biography of this odd man.<sup>50</sup> But of course, Bartleby is anything *but* an irreparable loss to literature: he is, on the contrary, one of its animating figures. In fact, the lawyer makes it clear that he has chosen to write about Bartleby over his many other scrivener employees, precisely because of his strangeness, because of the baffling nature of his story. In doing so, he offers a rebuke to a model of literature as a kind of (fictionalised) biography, a story of believable and fleshed-out characters, and privileges an alternative model, which seems to hover on the brink of effacing the central character entirely.

This incomprehensibility is one of the defining characteristics of the art of hunger. It is worth pausing here to observe that an association between hunger and a baffling opacity can be read against a long tradition that draws the inverse association, linking eating to understanding. In an interview with Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, Jacques Derrida draws attention to this association, claiming that "this relationship between understanding and eating is in no way specific to a given current in the thought of the West, but can more accurately be regarded as a cultural *a priori*."<sup>51</sup> The word "rumination," which literally means to chew—as in to chew one's cud, a common medieval metaphor for understanding and reflecting on the word of God—but figuratively means to ponder, stands as an enduring linguistic trace of the strength of this association. In this context, the connection of hunger to incomprehensibility has a certain logic, which is reinforced by hunger's referral of the sufferer to the stubborn material fact of his or her body in all its opacity, and by the very real psychological effects of starvation, which attack the mind's ability to process information.

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<sup>50</sup> Melville, *Bartleby*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, "An Interview with Jacques Derrida on the Limits of Digestion," *E-Flux Journal*, no. 2 (January 2009): 2; Derrida's coinage of the term "carno-phallogocentricism," in an interview on "eating well" with Jean-Luc Nancy should also be read in this light: Jean-Luc Nancy, "Eating Well, or the Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes After the Subject?*, ed. Jean-Luc Nancy, Eduardo Cadava, and Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell (New York; London: Routledge, 1991).

Placing *Bartleby* as the first iteration of an art of hunger promises to give the entire tradition a decidedly political cast, for Bartleby has an impressive history as a favourite emblem of political transformation for many contemporary theorists. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri hold Bartleby up as “the beginning of a liberatory politics,” although they go on to caution that “it is only the beginning. . . . Beyond simple refusal, or as part of that refusal, we need also to construct . . . a new community.”<sup>52</sup> Slavoj Žižek radicalises this position, arguing that Bartleby represents not a preliminary refusal, but the whole goal of political activity, that his “I would prefer not to” is “a kind of *arabe*, the underlying principle that sustains the entire movement [of resistance]; far from ‘overcoming’ it, the subsequent work of construction, rather, gives body to it.”<sup>53</sup> In a somewhat different way, Gilles Deleuze too moves from a discussion of the “formula” “I would prefer not to” to a hope for a kind of political redemption. For Deleuze, Bartleby is a redemptive figure who embodies the full promise of the American revolution as a project for the realisation of a “community of celibates.”<sup>54</sup> Giorgio Agamben’s treatment of Bartleby also seeks to accord him a similar political function, to hold him up as a “paradigm” for the “coming community.”<sup>55</sup> For Agamben, however, Bartleby’s paradigmatic political status derives not from his attitude of *refusal*, but rather from his embodiment of *potentiality*: “As a scribe who has stopped writing, Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality.”<sup>56</sup> For Agamben, Bartleby’s privileged status arises from the fact that his gesture of refusal allows both his potential-to-be and, crucially, his potential-not-to-be to be preserved intact, rather than destroying either one in actuality.

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 204.

<sup>53</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 382; see also Julian Murphet’s Žižekian reading of Bartleby, which explicitly connects this radical mode of resistance to Bartleby’s “happy refusal to stabilise into anything resembling a sense”: Julian Murphet, “On Refusal,” in *The Politics and Aesthetics of Refusal*, ed. Caroline Hamilton et al. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), x.

<sup>54</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), 89.

<sup>55</sup> Bartleby is discussed in a chapter of the same name in Agamben’s *The Coming Community*: Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 35–38; for an account of Bartleby’s status as a paradigm of the titular coming community, see Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 156–57.

<sup>56</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Daniel Heller Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 253–54.

What all these readings share is a privileging of the figure of Bartleby as a step towards or an example of a new political configuration, coupled with an almost exclusive emphasis on what Deleuze calls Bartleby's "formula"—"I would prefer not to"—as the paradigmatic expression of this refusal. But it's not at all clear what relation an art of hunger might have to the political prerogative claimed for this formula. We might be tempted, in fact, to read hunger as rather what gets *forgotten* in these readings of Bartleby as a figure of revolution, resistance, new political formulations and "coming communities." Despite Žižek's repeated calls for a politics that would "give body" to the "I would prefer not to," Bartleby himself *already* gives body to this formula—a body that starves to death. There seems to be a kind of tension between the liberatory possibilities held out for the isolated and verbalised act of resistance, or for the formula that suspends the realisation of actuality in the prolongation of potentiality, and the narrative trajectory in which their repetition inscribes a movement towards a solitary death. This death, moreover, holds an aesthetic, a hermeneutic, even an ethical fascination, but it leaves the social and political structures against which it is taken to act wholly untroubled. My point is not to hold these political readings to account for Bartleby's death, or to suggest that it makes political readings pointless.<sup>57</sup> Rather, I want to suggest that the narrativised body (Bartleby starving to death in his cell) and the declamatory statement ("I would prefer not to") each have their own logic, and that the former offers a kind of completion or perfection of the latter that strips it of its political efficacy at precisely the moment it reaches its most radical form. In other words, I want to suggest that Bartleby's politics, such as they are, follow the same self-foreclosing logic as the hunger artist's art. In this sense, and like this art, they must be understood on a model of failure, strictly speaking—but "failure" in the ambiguous sense that Walter Benjamin will later insist that Kafka is a failed artist: failure that remains brilliant, compelling, successful on something other than its own terms (with the added proviso that, given the crisis of will that pervades these texts, it is never clear what precisely "its own terms" might be). In this sense, Bartleby can be read as both the champion and the failure of the aesthetics of Rancière or Adorno, who both in their various ways seek to stage a rapprochement

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<sup>57</sup> Indeed, some of these writers make serious attempts to account for this trajectory. Hardt and Negri's assertion that Bartleby can be read only as a preliminary, and one that is fundamentally "empty," takes the futility of the gesture as a serious impediment. Deleuze, on the other hand, sees his death as a Christlike gesture of self-sacrifice in the face of the failure of the American ideal, and thereby turns the politics into a kind of theology—a gesture that we see repeated in an intriguingly different form in Coetzee's late work.

between politics and aesthetics by seizing on the political potential of aesthetic autonomy.

## II. Rimbaud: The Poetics of Delirious Hunger

If *Bartleby* hints at the shape that an art of hunger might take, Arthur Rimbaud offers an alternate model for it, linking starvation to the act of creation. Rimbaud's model of an art of hunger differs from Melville's in several respects. Crucially, Rimbaud replaces Bartleby's sense of the starving spectator/art object with a new emphasis on the writer as the figure who starves. He also shifts the tone dramatically, replacing Bartleby's disconcerting lack of affect with a tumultuous, almost Dionysian revelry in a shocking, violent art. Rimbaud's hallucinatory farewell to poetry, *A Season in Hell* (1873) opens with an implied connection between starvation and the writing of poetry. The opening lines frame both Rimbaud's poetry and the period of his life that it dominated as an exile from a mythical banquet. Poetry is associated with a hunger that has a double source in both his being locked out of the banquet, and in the loss of appetite that seems to arise alongside it. But if poetry derives from hunger, such hunger is framed as the result of his encounter with Beauty, who he finds "embittered," precipitating a spirit of generalised revolt. This revolt plunges the speaker into delirium, punctuated by odd moments that mime eating while preserving his hunger, as in his hunting of abstractions ("On every form of joy ... I pounced stealthily like a wild animal") and his "eating" of death itself ("I call to my executioners to let me bite the ends of their guns").<sup>58</sup> Rejecting beauty on grounds of poor taste, Rimbaud seems to use a mode of aestheticised hunger as a way of accessing a different order of experience. At the same time, it also profoundly alters the writer and therefore his art, as he makes clear in a closing dedication to "you who like in a writer an absence of descriptive or discursive [*instructives*] faculties" (Rim., 265). This art of hunger has neither a mimetic nor a moral function.

If this is, as seems likely, to be read as an account of his art, then its closest aesthetic correlative is perhaps Nietzsche's almost perfectly contemporaneous account of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which reveals the "hidden substratum of suffering and knowledge" that the Apollonian mode of beautiful moderation obscures.<sup>59</sup> A seductive aesthetic mode that takes intoxication as its model, the Dionysian is characterised by

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<sup>58</sup> Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works, Selected Letters: A Bilingual Edition*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 265 (hereafter cited in text as Rim.).

<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 32.

excess and immersion. In this sense, its violent playfulness and all-consuming attraction reappear in Rimbaud, but, where the Dionysian in Nietzsche is associated with feasts and banquets, for Rimbaud it is figured as the exclusion from this celebratory consumption and tied instead to hunger and exile. This departure points up the crucial difference between Nietzschean formulations of the Dionysian in art and Rimbaudian formulations of an art of hunger. While Nietzsche's model engenders a sense of the communal, and is immersive precisely in its attack on the individuality of the participants and their reabsorption into a community, Rimbaud's brings the individual to a personal crisis in his alienation from community.

Nietzsche's figure of the starving modern artist thus assumes a far more radical guise in Rimbaud's formulation, steering closer to his own preferred art form than to the "emaciated epigone" of Nietzsche's contempt. Where Nietzsche's starved poet begs for scraps from his literary ancestors, Rimbaud's starves (and thirsts) precisely out of his refusal to accept such inheritances. Thus in his 1872 poem "Comédie de la soif" ("Comedy of Thirst"), Rimbaud prefers to go thirsty, rejecting in three successive sections the country drinks (dry wine, cider, milk, tea and coffee) of his parents, the liquid imagery of stock poetic diction offered by the Spirit and the fashionable café alcohols of his friends. His thirst becomes a rejection of all contexts, and of all familial, literary and social inheritances. As in *Une Saison en enfer*, Rimbaud instead proposes to drink death, replying to his parents, freshly returned from the cemetery, that he will "drink all the urns dry!" (Rim., 175). Replying to the Spirit, he casts his thirst as "a mouthless, intimate hydra / Who destroys and afflicts" (Rim., 177), a figure of destructive insatiability who, mouthless, does not possess even the basic anatomy that would permit it to quench its thirst. The final lines of the poem identify his thirst with animals in various states of vulnerability—with fluttering pigeons, game, water animals, enslaved animals and the "last butterflies"—before concluding with a plea for self-annihilation as a merging with the natural landscape (Rim., 179). His thirst is therefore figured as both profoundly novel in its refusal of all human supports and its stubborn break with familial and literary genealogies, and yet intrinsically natural, a merging not with a community—as in Nietzsche's Dionysian art—but with nature at the point of death.

But it is Rimbaud's poem 'Fêtes de la faim', also written in 1872, which offers the fullest exploration of the aesthetic and verbal possibilities of hunger:

Ma faim, Anne, Anne,  
Fuis sur ton âne.

Si j'ai du *goût*, ce n'est guères  
Que pour la terre et les pierres  
Dinn! dinn! dinn! dinn! Mangeons l'air,  
Le roc, les charbons, le fer

Mes faims, tournez. Paissez, faims,  
Le pré des sons!  
Attirez le gai venin  
Des liserons; (Rim., 194)

My hunger, Anne, Anne,  
Flee on your donkey.

If I have any *taste*, it is for hardly  
Anything but earth and stones  
Dinn! dinn! dinn! dinn! Let us eat air,  
Rock, coal, iron

My hungers, turn about. Graze, hungers,  
On the meadow of bran!  
Suck the bright poison  
Of the bindweed; (Rim., 195)

This poem operates according to sonic rather than semantic principles. In the French, "faim" (hunger), "Anne" and "âne" (donkey) are connected not so much by sense as by sound. It functions, therefore, as if Anne is produced by her very assonance with *faim*, and the donkey likewise summoned for the sake of rhyme. The same is true of the rest of the poem, where sound often seems to be the organising logic. If the link between art and hunger serves to obscure meaning, as we saw in *Bartleby*, it is also for Rimbaud tied to an increased interest in the materiality of language, in what language sounds like, what it feels like in the mouth. This is confirmed by insistent punning on language and food in these lines. The call, for instance, to "Graze, hungers, on the meadow of bran!" in the third stanza puns in the French on *sons*, which means both bran and sounds. It implies that hunger is nourished by, that it lives on, the forms of language, on its sounds and its shapes. This emphasis on the sound of language gives it a kind of irreducibility, as in

*Bartleby*, forcing us to dwell on the surface of language, where words can be grazed on, but not digested.

Rimbaud makes of the poetic vocation a kind of exceptionalism that allows him to subsist on food of a different order: to live on air, rocks, sounds. As in his disgust over Beauty's bitterness in *Une Saison en enfer*, this poetic exceptionalism derives from a perversion of taste. The italicisation of the word "taste" in the second stanza, draws attention to its double meaning as an aesthetic and bodily experience. Already, this breaches a crucial Kantian distinction between aesthetic and bodily taste, in which the pun implicit in the term is always downplayed, always effaced. That this taste immediately becomes consumption in the second half of the stanza sullies its aesthetic potential still further, plunging it deeply into the realm of Kantian interest. And yet, to eat air and stones can hardly be conceptualised as a success on the Kantian plane of the agreeable. As a basically unsatisfying approach to the satisfaction of hunger, eating the inedible perverts Kantian disinterest into its opposite, into an attempt to take an interest in what is uninteresting, what cannot hold interest. It seems to create a fourth category beyond the tripartite division of the agreeable, the good and the beautiful, in which interest equivocates or disinterest inheres in the object rather than the experience. It makes the quintessential act of interest in the agreeable—the act of eating—into a gesture of absolute disinterest; in the process, it fashions an art that, denied access to the disembodied, abstracted "play of the faculties" of the Kantian aesthetic, is no longer beautiful in the Kantian sense. Instead, Rimbaud's poetry plays with a full range of sensory, emotional, fabulous and formal effects, using hunger as a figure for an aesthetic that opens out toward the excluded realm of the Nietzschean Dionysian, without the latter's communal potential.

As with *Bartleby*, however, there is a caveat on Rimbaud's attempts at aesthetic innovation, for Rimbaud is one of the most famous embodiments of poetic exhaustion. The poet who gave up poetry before his twenty-first birthday, he is a figure of precocious brilliance and modern disillusionment. David Berry links this abandonment of poetry more or less directly to the insatiability of his (figurative) hunger, writing that, "his poetic system, hardly having discovered and digested new verbal foods, still demands different sustenance, a continuing process of creativity of which the poet

eventually grows tired.”<sup>60</sup> Whether such a direct causality can be attributed remains, perhaps, to be seen; it is certainly true, though, that the trope of hunger expresses a basic instability within his aesthetic, leading him at turns to desire death and a return to a pre-linguistic banquet. As with *Bartleby*, the art of hunger is linked to the cessation of writing, and its viability as an aesthetic mode is constantly called into question.

### III. Hamsun: The Psychophysiology of the Art of Hunger

Knut Hamsun’s semi-autobiographical novel *Hunger* (*Sult*) offers the next major statement of an art of hunger. First published in 1890, it is often credited as an early instance of stream-of-consciousness narration and one of the first examples of modernist literature and, in particular, of modernist psychological narration. Although relatively neglected today, during his lifetime Hamsun was a central figure in European modernism, an exemplary embodiment of modernist autonomy, and one of the most important influences on those who took up the mantle of writerly starvation after him. In 1929, for his seventieth birthday, he was presented with two *Festschrift* whose lists of contributors read like a role-call of key figures in European modernism: André Gide, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, Robert Musil, Stefan Zweig, Maxim Gorky—even Albert Einstein. Hamsun’s biographer reports on the German volume’s tone: “For the contributors he stands as the great example of the unyielding and uncompromising artist, indifferent to misunderstanding, one who sacrificed everything for his art, and won the victory.”<sup>61</sup> Hamsun, in other words, was feted by his contemporaries and heirs as the living embodiment of the modernist ideal of aesthetic autonomy—a position that *Hunger* no doubt contributed to in some significant measure.

Despite Hamsun’s admirers’ emphasis on his exemplary autonomy, the vision of the artist presented in *Hunger* is much closer to the starving artist sketched at the outset of this chapter: a figure suspended in the contradiction between the commercial and the literary. As Paul Auster writes in an introduction to the novel, “he must eat in order to write. But if he does not write, he will not eat. And if he cannot eat, he cannot write. He cannot write.”<sup>62</sup> The problem here is not simple writer’s block, but the marked mental decay that accompanies the protagonist’s starvation. In a market where writing is

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<sup>60</sup> David Berry, “Thematics of Hunger and Thirst in Rimbaud’s Poetry,” *Romance Studies* 15, no. 2 (1997): 87.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Ferguson, *Enigma: The Life of Knut Hamsun* (London: Hutchinson, 1987), 300.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Auster, “Introduction: The Art of Hunger,” in *Hunger*, by Knut Hamsun (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006), viii.

transformed immediately into income, the protagonist's body becomes the mediator between market forces and aesthetic production, keeping the two yoked together in the devastating logic by which no writing means no food but no food means no writing. In this sense, *Hunger* is a story not of exemplary aesthetic autonomy but of the impossibility of anything resembling such autonomy in a world of embodied subjects who depend upon income from writing for survival.

Everything the protagonist of *Hunger* writes, he writes in hope of selling. His subject matter ranges far beyond the strictly "aesthetic," taking in a treatise on philosophical consciousness and an essay on "crimes of the future"—very few of which ever come to fruition. When he does finally produce something, his appraisal collapses the aesthetic into the economic:

I'm agog with surprise seeing one good thing after another, telling myself that it is the best thing I have ever read. Elated with a sense of fulfilment and puffed up with joy, I feel on top of the world. I weigh the piece in my hand and appraise it on the spot at five kroner, by a rough estimate.<sup>63</sup>

In a manoeuvre that is typical of the novel, aesthetic appreciation is quickly transformed into an appreciation of the stubbornly material aspects of the text—the physical weight of the manuscript—and then translated again into an appraisal of financial value. *Hunger* yokes aesthetic value together with the materialism of both bodies and markets.

If this process compromises aesthetic autonomy—as it must—it nonetheless does not succeed in banishing autonomy as an ideal. On the contrary, the physical hunger that stands as the central fact and primary motive of the text seems to produce a deformed sense of textual autonomy that eventually collapses into its opposite. This presents most clearly in Hamsun's invention of words, depicted as a refusal of all externally imposed systems of signification. Spending the night in a police cell for vagrancy, the protagonist suddenly has a kind of revelation:

I imagined I had found a new word. I sit up in bed and say, It doesn't exist in the language, I have invented it—*Kubooa*. ...

With the oddest jumps in my line of thought, I try to ascertain the meaning of my new word. It didn't have to mean either God or amusement park, and who had said it should mean cattle show? I clench my fist angrily and repeat once

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<sup>63</sup> Knut Hamsun, *Hunger* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2006), 34–35 (hereafter cited in text as *H*).

more, Who said that it shall mean cattle show? ... It wasn't difficult to make sense of such a word. (*H*, 75)

Trapped within a body whose autonomy directly impedes his ability to write, Hamsun's narrator vehemently asserts the word's autonomy from any hermeneutic impositions, staking it out as a privileged site of autonomy with a paranoia that undermines its own seriousness and viability.

This passage has held great interest for Russian formalist thinkers. Roman Jakobson cites it as “a *signans* with a zero *signatum*,” an account that, as far as it goes, is clearly accurate.<sup>64</sup> Such a reading, however, leaves the final line of the above passage somewhat impenetrable: how can it be “not difficult to make sense of such a word,” if its signified remains stubbornly ungraspable? Moreover, it disrupts the continuity between this episode and an earlier one, in which the narrator comes face-to-face with a young woman whom he has been following: “I stand there looking her straight in the eye, and immediately a name comes to me, one I had never heard before, a name with a nervous, gliding sound: Ylajali” (*H*, 13). This earlier scene features an analogous linguistic invention, but in this case the invented word clearly names the young woman whose gaze seems to provoke its utterance.<sup>65</sup> Jakobson's theory is of no use here, where the *signatum* is no longer zero.

In an article on what he calls “trans-sensible language,” Viktor Shklovsky offers a related but somewhat richer perspective on this question, citing both the Ylajali and *Kuboa* passages as examples of “‘words’ without concept and content that serve to express pure emotion.”<sup>66</sup> Shklovsky's analysis agrees with Jakobson insofar as a word “without concept or content” can also be described, in somewhat different terminology, as a signifier without a signified. But he goes beyond the latter in insisting that this signified-less signifier nonetheless bears some kind of intrinsic quality, which he calls, rather unclearly, “pure emotion.” Such “pure emotion” offers a way into understanding the “sense” that Hamsun's narrator claims to find so easily in this content-less word. Moreover, Shklovsky speculates that such content is central to poetry itself, writing:

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<sup>64</sup> Roman Jakobson, *Selected Writings 2: Word and Language* (Le Hague: Mouton, 1971), 269.

<sup>65</sup> This is confirmed by the narrator's use of this word to address the woman when she reappears in Part 3, and finally as a proper noun to refer to her in her absence. See for example, Hamsun, *Hunger*, 132, 138, 139, 150.

<sup>66</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, “On Poetry and Trans-Sense Language,” trans. Gerald Janecek and Peter Mayer, *October* 34 (Autumn 1985): 9.

verse also often appears in the poet's soul in the form of sound patches not formed into words. ... The poet does not decide to speak a "trans-sensible word"; usually the trans-sensibility conceals itself under the mask of some often-deceptive apparent content so that poets themselves have to admit that they do not understand the content of their own verses.<sup>67</sup>

By privileging the contentless sounds of "trans-sense language" over the concepts and content to which they eventually become attached, Shklovsky's account of poetry produces a radicalised Kantian aesthetics that goes far beyond Kant himself. If Kant's aesthetics is founded in a divorce from the concept, this radicalisation would worry over the "concepts" that are an inevitable part of language as such, understood as something like the Saussurean signified—an expanded definition of "concept" that clearly takes us beyond Kant's original meaning. Shklovsky's trans-sense language "solves" this problem, by locating the aesthetic qualities of poetry in a language without concept, language that, by preceding concept, becomes purely aestheticized. It promises a form of meaning that would belong to an aesthetic sphere stripped of even the most basic reliance on pre-existing hermeneutic systems: an almost parodically severe application of aesthetic autonomy.

What Shklovsky perhaps misses here is the private nature this language for Hamsun, the sense in which it seems to imply not a shared, if indistinct public emotion but the language of a mind speaking only to itself. This makes Hamsun's iteration of the trans-sensible one that places the disintegrating author in the centre of the aesthetic picture, as both audience and artist, and makes his starvation and associated isolation the pivot in its production. Recalling Rimbaud's self-generating rhymes in "Fête de la faim," this language, for Hamsun, is rooted firmly in the author's starving body, as its origin, its site of enactment, and, in some sense, its only possible referent. In this sense, they spring not from a separate aesthetic sphere, but from a murkier zone whereby the aesthetic can be imagined as a byproduct of extreme bodily break-down. Even this body itself is not autonomous, but is instead produced by the writer's encounter with a commercialised literary sphere that rejects him. In this sense, the exclusion of Hamsun's starving artist from the market *produces* this extreme mode of literary autonomy—and not vice versa. Unlike Bartleby, Hamsun's starving artist does not starve because he stands proudly apart from the market; nonetheless, because he starves, he inaugurates an ambiguously

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 16.

autonomous aesthetic sphere that, under examination, reveals itself to be founded in both the body and the market.

The quest for linguistic autonomy described in the *Kubooa* and *Ylajali* passages belongs to a broader rejection of semantic and hermeneutic ties to systems of thought, embodied most starkly in the behaviour of the protagonist. While searching for a pencil with which to write, he is suddenly “seized by a strange desire” and driven “by a fanciful whim” to follow two sisters that he encounters on the street and taunt them with nonsensical questions (*H*, 13). He repeatedly lies “without any ulterior motive,” explaining only that, “My thoughts fluttered about in disarray and gave me more fanciful notions than I could handle” (*H*, 72). Such inexplicable actions have often been read as explorations of what J. W. McFarlane in an influential early article calls “inner motive,” linking Hamsun to Freud as pioneers in “speculation about the ways of the unconscious mind.”<sup>68</sup> Such readings, however, go beyond what the text itself strictly describes, inferring the necessity of an unconscious mind from the sheer irrationality and lack of motivation discernible in the protagonist’s actions. In fact, without precluding such interpretations, Hamsun’s novel offers nothing from which such an organising principle—however irrational—can be inferred. Instead, Hamsun’s protagonist operates as a radically autonomous author-figure, independent of all externally imposed or devised systems of interpretation, of all concept, ideology and metanarrative. If this autonomy threatens his coherence as a subject, it also produces flights of fancy that bear a striking similarity to precisely the unprovoked and unprincipled falsehood that is the stuff of fiction. As with *Kubooa* and *Ylajali*, the starved body produces an autonomy whose effects resemble—but are not identical to—the literary.

One reason why these forms of linguistic and fictive invention never become literature in their own right is that they are incapable of resolving into narrative, form or structure. In fact, one of the principal effects of the protagonist’s unmotivated irrationality is an impression of discontinuity and dispersal that underpins the novel, a byproduct of the weakening of any coherent underlying pattern, including narrative. The protagonist’s subjectivity loses its coherence in a series of self-contradictory gestures, thoughts and actions marked only by their apparent lack of motivation. He loses track of himself from moment to moment, becoming at points so absorbed in a simple question that “I forget

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<sup>68</sup> J. W. McFarlane, “The Whisper of the Blood: A Study of Knut Hamsun’s Early Novels,” *PMLA* 71, no. 4 (1956): 565, 563.

where I am and stand like a solitary buoy in the middle of the ocean, surrounded on all sides by surging roaring waves” (*H*, 43). His thoughts compete with each other without resolving into focus or action, his actions occur without apparent thought, animated by, as Nicholas Royle writes, “a ghostly irony that is a power of interruption, discontinuity, non-presence.”<sup>69</sup> Interspersed with these unmotivated actions and the tumults of thought that accompany them are various intensely observed sense-impressions, the constant pains and distractions of a body dying of starvation and exhaustion, and periods of complete disassociation, intense lethargy, or dazed stupor. This succession substitutes for both plot and character, producing a “kaleidoscopic literary texture” that follows the randomly shifting attention of the narrator-author.<sup>70</sup>

If this formal and subjective dispersal succeeds in holding together—and it seems to, in that despite everything we retain a surprisingly coherent sense of the character and of what is happening in the novel—we might well ask what this principle of coherence could be that is not plot, meaning, or the unconscious. Sverre Lyngstad perceptively suggests that “what holds the hero together is nothing but his emaciated body, which to a large extent determines the behavior of his mind,” a useful claim which requires some important qualifications.<sup>71</sup> The “emaciated body” as an object of observation, whose chest, back, and shoulders are constantly aching, which is plagued by nausea and dizziness, is itself an element in the flow of sense-impressions that constitute the novel, and there is little to suggest that it ought to be privileged over anything else registered here. Moreover, when the protagonist is forced to confront his own appearance, usually by way of the reactions of those people he encounters on the street, he experiences his body as something surprisingly and intensely alien to himself (“I must be just incredibly thin ...” he speculates in response to one such reaction, “What, exactly, did I look like?” [*H*, 100]). The “body” that constitutes some kind of binding force and organising principle, therefore, is not the body as seen, represented, or directly perceived, but something more like the body as experienced in its response to hunger, or even simply hunger as lived. It would also need to include both the “emaciated body” (the body that the narrator presents to the world) and the deranged mind as interrelated facets of this starving body. The emphasis here must fall on the present participle, both as the index of the experience that the body undergoes, and as a mark of its ongoing present tense, for it

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<sup>69</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 216.

<sup>70</sup> Sverre Lyngstad, *Knut Hamsun, Novelist: A Critical Assessment* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 7.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

is, in practical terms, this sense of a perpetual present (that is nonetheless not experience as *presence*) that propels what narrative there is. This body, in a sense, stands in for the meaning that hunger seems to write out, but does so, not as the empty signified of Jakobson's model, but as a personalised form of the oddly ambiguous site of "pure emotion" of Shklovsky's trans-sense language.

*Hunger* in fact operates according to a strong identification between the novel as artefact and the experience of starving sketched above. The limits of the text are identical with the periods in which the protagonist is starving. Conversely, phases during which he is relatively well-fed are excised from the text, their absences marked by the section breaks that divide the novel into four parts. This is an art of hunger in a literal sense, a novel not produced by or metaphorically modelled on starvation, but rather one in which the art is fully coextensive with the hunger that is its source and its content. As such, a kind of perilous identification is established here between the starving body and the text: body rendered as coextensive with text. Curiously, what this looks like in Hamsun's novel is something like proto-stream of consciousness, a sense that we are not so much inside the narrator's skin as inside his head.<sup>72</sup> This blurs the line between mind and body, locating the literary or the aesthetic at the somewhat tortured point at which they vanish into each other, or—perhaps—at which their basic interconnection is exposed in a state of collapse.

This equation of literary text with a starving mind-body composite is underscored and complicated by the unusual nature of *Hunger*'s narration. Told in the first person throughout, the narrative voice shifts almost at random—sometimes even within a single sentence—between present and past tense.<sup>73</sup> As several critics have noted, the key effect of this technique is to reduce the narrator to "only an abstract narrative function," and thereby to render "neutral(ized)" the relationship between narrating self and experiencing self.<sup>74</sup> Put another way, what we lose here is the retrospectivity of the narration, the point beyond the text from which the text is produced. Instead, the narrator constantly merges

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<sup>72</sup> For an extensive discussion of *Hunger*'s relation to stream-of-consciousness narration and to modernist narrative techniques more generally, see Martin Humpál, *The Roots of Modernist Narrative: Knut Hamsun's Novels* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1998).

<sup>73</sup> Examples of this technique can be found throughout the novel, but see, for instance, the *Kuboa* passage quoted above.

<sup>74</sup> Humpál, *Modernist Narrative*, 57–58; see also Alber et al.'s claim that "the narrating and narrative parts of the consciousness are conflated": Jan Alber et al., "Unnatural Narrative, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models," *Narrative* 18, no. 2 (May 2010): 123.

with—and then separates itself out from—the all-encompassing experience of the starving body. As such, the sense of a straight-forward identification between this starving body and the text is no longer fully possible, for the past tense constantly reinscribes the distance between them. There remains something in the experience of starvation that fails to coincide with its transformation into text, and yet they seem to move inexorably towards each other, to tempt some kind of identification. This is no doubt the point at which that problematic “of” that unites and holds apart the terms of my discussion—the art *of* hunger, the aesthetics *of* starvation—sees its full, difficult realisation as a pivot point that vacillates between simple identification, metaphor for form, and description of content.

Here we see an initial instance of the modernist claim that, as Samuel Beckett wrote of Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, “form *is* content, content *is* form ... His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*.”<sup>75</sup> Such claims have historically served as a variation on claims to aesthetic autonomy: by assimilating content to form, they privilege the text’s internal aesthetic features over its connection to the world beyond the text, imagining the literary text as a special kind of autonomous and internally coherent artefact that only appears to refer beyond itself. Hamsun’s partial identification of body with text creates the illusion of an autonomous and self-referential aesthetic product, but this illusion is disrupted by both the incoherent and partial nature of the identification and, perhaps more profoundly, by the way in which the body has been thematised. Because, as we have seen, the starving body is a product, not of form or of aesthetic exigency but of the pressures of a commercialised literary marketplace, the analogy between body and text has the effect of inserting the text—and therefore the aesthetic—into this socioeconomic dynamic, even as it strives to produce the autonomous identification of form with content.

This dynamic is complicated still further by the semi-autobiographical (another partial identification) nature of *Hunger*. As has been well documented, the novel is based on the author’s experiences at the very outset of his writing career.<sup>76</sup> In this light, the lack of retrospectivity and the repeated collapse of the narrating “I” as an independent, external

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<sup>75</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 27 (hereafter cited in text as *D*).

<sup>76</sup> For biographical sources of *Hunger*, see Ingar Sletten Kolloen, *Knut Hamsun: Dreamer and Dissident*, trans. Deborah Dawkin and Erik Skuggevik (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 17–19, 37; Ferguson, *Enigma*, 36, 39–40, 68.

voice assumes a new significance. Not only does it tend toward a collapse of starving body into text and vice versa, it also folds the author himself equally ambiguously into this mix, drawing him into but holding him separate from his own past starvation, his writing of this starvation, and its semi-fictionalisation in the novel. The author therefore is neither dead, neatly excised from the text, nor the origin of and authority on it, but something between the two, slipping into and out of identification with both the text and the life on which the text draws.

In aesthetic terms, the protagonist-author's function is an ambiguous one. Most strikingly, he is stripped of his role as the creative origin of the text. In fact, creation as an act is all but erased from this novel. It is literally absent, in that the protagonist cannot write and does not write. But creation is also absent on a narratological level, in that the shift of narrative tense which risks erasing the narrator as a separate voice distinct from his starving past self, also erases the moment of writing or speaking that is the narratological surrogate for the novel's own creation. What we encounter here is, therefore, a kind of uncreated art, not revealed or formed but suffered.

If the author is no longer a creator, however, he is not entirely excluded from the realm of the aesthetic. Instead, the starving author-protagonist of *Hunger*, like *Bartleby*, becomes the privileged aesthetic spectator. I quote two key examples, from Parts 1 and 2 respectively:

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 toward me. (*H*, 22)

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 ... (*H*, 88)

In a novel that is more typically characterised by the protagonist's alienation from both himself and the world around him, these passages are highly unusual for the sense of integration they achieve between the protagonist and his shoe or the music he hears. These moments are experienced and represented—quite explicitly in the second

passage—as profoundly aesthetic, and even the first passage, whose subject is not obviously aesthetic in any way, describes the feeling in terms of music. The experience described here is in fact strikingly reminiscent of a Schopenhauerian aesthetics, in the sense of integration and momentary, static relief from the world’s demands and needs that the aesthetic experience provides, in the conviction that the ideal author has privileged access to aesthetic experience, and even in the privileging of music as the archetypal aesthetic form.<sup>77</sup> Where Hamsun differs from Schopenhauer is that, true to the former’s rejection of concept, the aesthetic in Hamsun does not seem to rely upon any great insight into the true nature of the shoe or the music. Moreover, while Schopenhauer is clear that only certain, properly aesthetic objects can provoke this aesthetic response, Hamsun’s protagonist is remarkably indiscriminating. In fact, the source of the feeling seems to be not the object’s great aesthetic value, but the experience of hunger itself (“What whims one’s feelings give rise to when one is starving!”), seen here as a heightened state of aesthetic receptivity.

Taking these different elements together, it becomes clear that *Hunger* performs a substantial rethinking of the relationship between author, art object, aesthetic reception, and the process of creation. In the absence of creation, the terms of the artist-art object-observer triad lose their structure. The artist-protagonist, no longer understood as the creative will that drives the process of artistic creation, ensures his centrality by becoming the observer *par excellence* and being partially identified with the art object. The result is not a perfectly autonomous art, but an art that toys with, stages, exalts and repudiates autonomy. Hamsun emphatically does not abandon the aesthetic as a special category of experience. On the contrary, by slipping between all three positions of the aesthetic—art object, observer, artist—Hamsun posits this experience as self-contained, even hermetic, embodying an exaggerated autonomy that, as we have seen, is firmly and paradoxically embedded in its world.

The question that this leaves open, however, is what becomes of the audience in such a hermetic conceptualisation of art. Hamsun vacillated over the question of *Hunger*’s intended audience, following the familiar modernist hesitation between a broad public

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<sup>77</sup> We know that Hamsun was heavily influenced by Schopenhauer: McFarlane, “Whisper of the Blood,” 564.

and an elite readership.<sup>78</sup> Neither of these alternatives, however, can be said to constitute the kind of hermetic, private literature that we see in *Hunger*'s own representation of the aesthetic. Instead, the incompleteness of the identification between author and text emerges as a space within which Hamsun can position himself at once inside and outside of the market: producing an art that is simultaneously hermetic and written for an audience.

Nonetheless, even the hermeticism internal to *Hunger* faces towards an audience. In fact, the internal dynamics of the novel offer their own theory of authorial engagement with an audience, which is at once less optimistic and less conventional than Hamsun's own reflections. Despite the protagonist's apparently extreme isolation, he never loses his ability to read the public's reactions and even to understand and identify with their positions. He constantly measures himself against standards of morality, and attempts to locate himself within a community. In his actions, however, he reneges on precisely the conventions that underpin such social cohesion, lying gratuitously, stealing, and refusing even to acknowledge basic linguistic consensus (see for example *H*, 212). There is a profound sense of rage, which runs through a certain strand of modernism, that underpins this separation from community, and that sees its expression in an insistent desire to shock. Lying outrageously to a stranger early in the novel, the protagonist complains:

His composure bored me. How did this disgusting, blind old fool dare play around with the foreign name I had invented, as if it was just an ordinary name you could see on any huckster's sign in town! (*H*, 28)

In such passages, the narrator bridles against both the "composure" of tasteful appreciation that finds its expression in good-natured indifference, and the trivialisation of invention that treats it as merely true. He seeks instead to provoke and outrage, to be recognised in his bizarreness—and his creativity.

Despite the protagonist's desire to have a profound effect on the public, however, the latter is much more successful at affecting the protagonist than vice versa. If rage is one

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<sup>78</sup> Peter Sjølyst-Jackson explains that Hamsun initially aimed to write for a broad public in 1888, but by 1890 had decided that he addressed only a "culturally sophisticated and select group of people": Peter Sjølyst-Jackson, *Troubling Legacies: Migration, Modernism and Fascism in the Case of Knut Hamsun* (London; New York: Continuum, 2010), 27.

of the primary emotions associated with interpersonal encounters in *Hunger*, shame is the other. In a typical scene, after being refused five øre by a shopkeeper, the narrator writes:

I dragged myself out, sick with hunger and hot with shame. . . . I'd kept upright in such hard times, and now all of a sudden I had lowered myself to the crassest sort of panhandling. This one day had brutalised my mind through and through, spattered my heart with shamelessness. (*H*, 104)

In fact, “sick with hunger” and “hot with shame” are two different perspectives, two conflicting responses. The first, as we have seen, tends towards a kind of hermeticism; the second implies a special kind of sociality. The nature of that sociality becomes apparent in the sentences that follow, in which the protagonist sees himself as if from the outside, raging against his own destitution with the admonishing voice of a disapproving parent.

Recent work on shame offers a way of reconciling the sociality of shame with the hermeticism of hunger in these passages. For Emmanuel Levinas, in an early essay translated as *On Escape*, shame is the experience of being “riveted to oneself, the radical impossibility of fleeing oneself to hide from oneself.”<sup>79</sup> Giorgio Agamben glosses and expands this claim in *Remnants of Auschwitz*, arguing that, “In shame, the subject has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as subject.”<sup>80</sup> Agamben’s reading of shame, in other words, would imply that it is the point at which the hermetic collapse precipitated by hunger is reconstituted in the desubjectified subject. But for Agamben, this is an entirely internal process, devoid of social content; in this sense, Agamben’s shame is almost as hermetic as Hamsun’s hunger. Eric Santner’s reading of Agamben and Levinas returns this analysis to a confrontation with the other. He asks us to attend (following Lacan) to the “extimate” nature of shame: that is, the fact that “shame pertains not merely to the body but to an uncanny, somehow material, excess experienced as both intimate and foreign to oneself . . . What is impossible to assume is not an intimacy that is already constituted but one that is, if I may put it that way, ex-cited into existence by the very summons that ostensibly turns us toward it.”<sup>81</sup> Santner’s insistence on shame as forcing not only a self-recognition but the constitution of a self in and by the experience of confrontation with

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<sup>79</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 64.

<sup>80</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone, 1999), 105–06.

<sup>81</sup> Eric Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 23–24.

something other than oneself is helpful in understanding the social nature of shame in *Hunger*. The protagonist's shame arises not only from a recognition of his own disintegration, which would simply replicate hunger's hermeticism, but also from the confrontation with social censure, which transforms the hermeticism of hunger into a more social event. This confrontation entails not just a shift of perspective, not just the recognition of how the "man on the street" might react to him, but his self-constitution through and against this external perspective, as one which binds the disintegration into a subject at the same time that it exacerbates and is implicated in the very act of disintegration.

From the perspective of the author-protagonist, then, confrontations with the public in his starving state produce an ashamed subjectification through desubjectification, an identity through dispersal, which bears significantly on *Hunger's* aesthetics of dispersal. As we have seen, hunger produces a formal narrative that disintegrates, only to be reconstituted in and through the lived experience of the starving body. This analysis shows the obverse of that claim: the starving body coalescing into an incoherent subject through the confrontation with an audience that provokes the starving narrator to experience shame. In other words, this incoherent unity arises not as an autogenetic principle of autonomy but out of the *assertion* of autonomy in the face of a sceptical, indifferent, mocking or outraged public. If the lived experience of the starved body provides one half of the text's formal unity (such as it is), it is only half. The text also holds together under the pressures and antagonisms provoked both by this body's display before a public and by the transformation of the experience of starvation into a text for publication, a text for and against an audience whose attitude, as Hamsun's correspondence implies, was a source of active and shifting concern for the author.

The tradition of the modernist starving artist that Hamsun's text brings to one of its fullest early expressions is modernist precisely because of its complex and compromised status as a figure for aesthetic autonomy. Implicated in but excluded from the literary marketplace, refusing but subject to bodily need, displayed before a public that it openly repudiates but does not ignore, this figure offers a forum for the exploration of a tension that is inherent to the modernist ideal of aesthetic autonomy. For Hamsun, the consequences of this ideal's embodiment in the starving artist are formally and conceptually radical, leading to new novelistic strategies and a re-evaluation of the central

categories of aesthetic theory. In this, he resembles and builds upon earlier representations of hunger in Melville and Rimbaud, realising both the former's autonomy from commercial demands and the latter's from linguistic denotation. At the same time, though, Hamsun's autonomy is more clearly compromised than that of either of these earlier writers, bringing an art of hunger to one of its fullest manifestations at the same moment that it exposes its untenability as a means of achieving full autonomy.

#### IV. Kafka: Atrophying in All Directions

One of Hamsun's most important heirs is Franz Kafka, whose lifelong enthusiasm for Hamsun's works was no doubt an important influence on his own development of an art of hunger.<sup>82</sup> If Hamsun's novel contains some of the most important and developed early explorations of what this conjunction of hunger and aesthetics might entail, it is nonetheless Kafka who investigated this relationship in the most sustained manner, and in the form which has come down to us as one of the most significant and canonical statements of such an art.

Kafka retained an interest in the coupling of art with some form of abstinence from food throughout his career and across a number of letters, diary entries, stories and novellas. As early as a 3 January 1912 diary entry, Kafka casts writing as a kind of wasting:

When it became clear in my organism that writing was the most productive direction for my being to take, everything rushed in that direction and left empty all those abilities which were directed towards the joys of sex, eating, drinking, philosophical reflection, and above all music. I atrophied [abmagern] in all these directions.<sup>83</sup>

For Kafka, starvation emerges as a necessary precursor to writing, while writing itself has a kind of whittling, emaciating effect on the author. The writer starves, grows thin,

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<sup>82</sup> Kafka was probably first introduced to Hamsun by Max Brod, who read the Norwegian enthusiastically as a schoolboy. Kafka himself seems to have been quite enthusiastic about Hamsun, and continued reading him throughout his life. I have, however, not been able to find any direct evidence that Kafka read *Hunger*, although it seems most likely. See: Peter-André Alt, *Franz Kafka: Der Ewige Sohn* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2005), 114, 144, 361, 504, 537; Hartmut Binder, *Kafka-Handbuch*, vol. 1: Der Mensch und Seine Zeit (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1979), 264; Roger Hermes et al., *Franz Kafka: Eine Chronik* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 1999), 35, 49, 162; references to Hamsun in Kafka's *Diaries*, extending over the period from 1911 to 1919, support the suggestion that Kafka retained an active and lifelong interest in the Norwegian writer: Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1910-1923*, ed. Max Brod, trans. Joseph Kresh and Martin Greenberg (New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 36, 55, 60, 390–91.

<sup>83</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, 163; for the German original, see Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher 1909-1912* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1990), 264–65.

atrophies, almost by definition: to be a writer is to starve. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this passage, however, is the curious agentless formulation of his “atrophy.” Sometimes over-translated as “diet,”<sup>84</sup> *abmagern* contains none of the intentionality implied by this English translation, instead signifying the act of growing thin or becoming emaciated in the absence of any specified agent. It is something that happens *to* the subject of the sentence.<sup>85</sup> This passivity in the absence of an agent is a recurring theme in accounts that link hunger to art, one we have already explored in *Bartleby’s* fascinating passivity, and, in a different way, in Hamsun’s removal of the artist’s will as the foundation of aesthetic experience and artistic creation.

Despite Kafka’s apparent abdication of intentionality, it is nonetheless true that this passage is more traditional in its configuration of hunger’s relationship to writing than the earlier descriptions of starvation that we have examined. Kafka’s diary entry figures hunger as a by-product of devotion and writing as a discipline that requires asceticism to achieve its fullest flowering. Hunger here is not the model for art, but a side effect of it. As in Kant, a disinterest in food enables a movement to the higher realm of the aesthetic, and the two modes of experience—hunger and art, the body and the aesthetic—are thereby strictly separated. This movement is ascetic in the traditional sense, in a way that Rimbaud and Hamsun can hardly be imagined to be, and like religious forms of asceticism, the suffering of the physical realm is guaranteed and redeemed by a transcendent goal or endpoint towards which the suffering is directed—in this case, art, rather than God. In this context, Kafka’s abdication of the will is importantly different from Hamsun’s: whereas in the latter, the will is eclipsed and overtaken by physical suffering, in the early Kafka it appears as a sign of both the compelling force of art and the overwhelming self-surrender of the artist before it.

A similar relation between aesthetics and hunger appears in “The Metamorphosis” (1915), in which Gregor Samsa’s transformation into a bug is accompanied by a gradual withering of his appetite, until he finally dies of starvation at the novella’s end. Watching

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<sup>84</sup> This translation seems to originate in an article by Mark Anderson, and is then taken up by other writers including Leslie Heywood and Isabelle Meuret: Mark Anderson, “Anorexia and Modernism, or How I Learned to Diet in All Directions,” *Discourse* 11, no. 1 (89 1988): 32; Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 71; Meuret, *Writing Size Zero*, 105.

<sup>85</sup> Leslie Heywood, whose account of anorexia and modernism has only Kafka in common with my selection of writers, frames her discussion of him around this over-translation, and uses it as the basis to argue for the centrality, not of hunger, but of anorexia as such, to Kafka’s writings. I want to hold anorexia apart from this discussion, as a specific and pathologised form of hunger whose mechanics are often, I believe, widely divergent from those of the writers I consider: Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger*, 71.

his family and their lodgers eat their dinner one evening, Gregor sadly notes their difference from him:

he could always distinguish the sound of their masticating teeth, as if this were a sign to Gregor that one needed teeth in order to eat, and that with toothless jaws even of the finest make one could do nothing. “I’m hungry enough,” said Gregor sadly to himself, “but not for that kind of food. How these lodgers are stuffing themselves, and here am I dying of starvation!”<sup>86</sup>

Gregor’s attempt to explain his inability to eat morphs into a taxonomy, in which the animal kingdom is divided between the toothed and the toothless. In so doing, Gregor breaks from a millennia-old tradition that takes what Aristotle calls “nutritive life”—which includes the ability to eat and to reproduce—as the basic form of life that unites all living things, including not only the whole animal kingdom, but also all plants.<sup>87</sup> Gregor’s taxonomy places himself—and, in what may be merely an unexpected side effect, huge swathes of the animal kingdom and the entirety of the vegetable—beyond the reach of nutritive life, while equating the humanity he has lost with this quintessentially animalistic, even vegetative, mode of life. But if Gregor no longer shares with the rest of “life” the possibility of eating, he is nonetheless not spared from the biological need to eat. His state of “dying of starvation” (the German merely reads “ich komme um”—“I perish”; the qualification that he dies *of starvation* is an over-translation by the Muirs)<sup>88</sup> is therefore the state of his impossible inclusion-exclusion from the animal kingdom of which the human lodgers and his un-metamorphosed family stand as the primary representatives.

At the crux of this dilemma is Gregor’s claim that he is “hungry enough [Ich habe ja Appetit] ... but not for that kind of food.”<sup>89</sup> Kafka himself offers a reply to this lament only pages later, when Gregor’s sister begins playing her violin for the first time since his transformation. The insect is profoundly moved by the music:

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<sup>86</sup> Franz Kafka, *The Complete Short Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (London: Vintage, 2005), 129 (hereafter cited in text as *CS*).

<sup>87</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima: Books II and III*, trans. D. W. Hamlyn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 14–15; for an account of Aristotle’s various definitions of life, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 13–14.

<sup>88</sup> Franz Kafka, *Die Erzählungen*, ed. Roger Hermes (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2008), 147.

<sup>89</sup> Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson take this claim as evidence of Kafka’s desire for transcendence: Birnbaum and Olsson, *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs*, 90.

Was he an animal, that music had such an effect upon him [da ihn Musik so begriff]? He felt as if the way were opening before him to the unknown nourishment he craved. (*CSS*, 130-31)

Gregor's experience recalls the protagonist from *Hunger*, who finds himself "caught up in these notes, dissolved into a tune," suggesting that starvation, for Kafka as for Hamsun, opens the way to a more profound mode of aesthetic experience. But for Kafka, this aesthetic experience is explicitly recast as a form of substitute nourishment. Literalising the Kantian metaphor of art as "food for thought," Kafka offers a fleeting and necessarily unfulfilled glimpse of an art that would serve as both food for thought and food for the body, an aesthetic experience equivalent to the spiritual one of fasting girls from medieval to Victorian times, whose faith was supposed to allow them to outlive eating.<sup>90</sup> The Schopenhauerian redemption of the Hamsun passage is compromised by such a formulation, which seems to recast art as a new object for the will, even if such an experience continues to involve a certain depersonalisation within the ecstatic state that it promotes. In fact, the German original, which the Muirs translate as "that music had such an effect upon him," reads literally, "that the music so understood him," entailing not only the grammatical and figurative placement of Gregor as the object of music's effects (which the Muir translation retains), but also a curious sense that the music is the rational agent, not only effecting but actually somehow coming to *know* Gregor. The aesthetic experience that Gregor achieves is therefore something like the experience of being "read" or "understood" by an impersonal force. This is matched by a symmetrical ignorance on Gregor's part before the "unknown nourishment." In an inversion of an exceptionally long and important tradition of aesthetics that aligns art with truth (of which Hegel and Schopenhauer are both important proponents), Gregor becomes the truth-statement that the music understands, and is promised a reciprocal but as yet unknown "nourishment" in return. *Hunger* remains allied to an aesthetics of incomprehension and unknowability, but, in a gesture that echoes Heidegger's development of an aesthetics born from the strife between the openness of world and the closedness of earth, from disconcealedness of being and concealedness, the aesthetic becomes capable of knowing and opening the path to the unknown.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Vandereycken and Deth, *Fasting Saints*.

<sup>91</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 47-48.

In a further complication, this passage also returns to the problematic status of Gregor's animality (and, by extension, to the lodgers' and his family's humanity). Simultaneously taking up by overturning a traditional gesture that would locate art as one of the defining characteristics of humanity, Gregor, the giant bug, is the only "person" who seems capable of responding to the music in a genuinely aesthetic way. The result seems to be an almost comic crisis of identity—"Was he an animal?"—for a character whose entire situation in this novella is determined by precisely his inability to *stop* being an animal. If the very posing of this question preserves more or less intact the presumption that animality and aesthetics are basically opposed, the scene itself—the enraptured bug and the indifferent human audience—seems to refute the parallel claim that humanity and art are somehow at one. Instead, the ability to respond to the work of art seems to situate itself in the indeterminate space between human and animal that Gregor himself, the man-turned-bug, inhabits.<sup>92</sup>

Giorgio Agamben, in his essay *The Open: Man and Animal*, provides an account of this space that casts it precisely in terms of a Heideggerian conflict between openness and closedness that, rather than separating men from animals (as Heidegger would have it), runs directly through the centre of our definition of humanity. Agamben approaches this Kafkaesque location of art at the juncture of human and animal by way of a rather cryptic invocation of "The Origin of the Work of Art":

The relation between man and animal, between world and environment, seems to evoke that intimate strife (*Streit*) between world and earth which, according to Heidegger, is at issue in the work of art. In both cases, there seems to be present a single paradigm which presses together an openness and a closedness.<sup>93</sup>

Agamben understands this relationship as a structural analogy, rooted by their shared tension between openness and closedness, and in fact devotes relatively little attention to the analogy, turning almost immediately to introduce the political dimensions of this strife. For Kafka, on the other hand, this relationship is literalised and foregrounded, the aesthetic repeatedly reverberating in precisely the space between man and animal.

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<sup>92</sup> Similarly, "Josephine the Mouse Singer" (*CSS*, 360-76), Kafka's last story, situates music as the proper remit of the ambiguously animal, both in that Josephine's ability to sing seems to situate her as somehow outside her proper place within her species, and in the sense that the mouse people themselves, never identified as such, belong to that uncanny realm that Walter Benjamin refers to when he observes that, "It is possible to read Kafka's animal stories for quite a while without realizing that they are not about human beings at all": *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 122.

<sup>93</sup> Agamben, *The Open*, 71.

What of hunger in all of this? On the one hand, it is located in a space of indetermination between human and animal, in that self-starvation brings to the fore precisely that “nutritive life” that humanity shares in common with all living things, but brings it to the fore only in order to renounce it or to fail it. Only an animal (or a plant) starves, but only a human starves in the presence of food: the self-starving Gregor experiences himself at simultaneously his most human and his most animal. In this sense, hunger and art both act upon or even produce the same kind of subject. Moreover, there is a sense—magnified somewhat by the echoes of Hamsun—that hunger, by producing such a subject, might in fact prepare the way for a deepened and exaggerated aesthetic experience. In this context, the promise that art holds out of becoming a substitute nourishment is somewhat problematic, as true nourishment would seem to threaten to close off precisely that aesthetic experience through which nourishment can be obtained. It is therefore worth attending to the many qualifications in Kafka’s claim that music can act as nourishment. He first underscores the figurative or imagined quality of such nourishment by marking it explicitly as analogy (“as if”), and then further defers the possibility of such nourishment by stating, not that it *leads to* it, but merely that it “opens the way.” Read another way, then, this passage testifies not so much to the promise of art as food, but rather to art as the instantiation of a perpetually prolonged hunger.

Already, this reading of “The Metamorphosis” drifts away from the 1912 diary entry, in that it seems to threaten the reciprocity with which art can stand in for food. A 1921 diary entry offers a far sterner—and far less esoteric—rebuke to the younger Kafka’s aesthetic asceticism:

There may be a purpose lurking behind the fact that I never learned to do anything useful and—the two are connected—have allowed myself to become a physical wreck. I did not want to be distracted, did not want to be distracted by the pleasures life has to give a useful and healthy man. As if illness and despair were not just as much of a distraction!

There are several ways in which I could complete this thought and so reach a happy conclusion for myself, but don’t dare, and don’t believe—at least today, and most of the time as well—that a happy solution exists.<sup>94</sup>

Excoriating himself for his earlier asceticism, Kafka seems to have reached the same realisation as Hamsun: the suffering of starvation, far from serving as the germ of

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<sup>94</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, 392–393.

inspiration, is more often a serious impediment to literary creation. We are faced with a further expression of the problem that has plagued Bartleby, Rimbaud, and Hamsun's protagonist in turn: an art born of hunger is an art that goes unwritten. Similarly, far from achieving disembodiment, a starving body is as present and as "distracting" as a sated one. The artist therefore always lives out a compromised autonomy, never entirely free from the "distraction" of his embodied life. The fact that Kafka did of course write, and wrote some of the twentieth-century's most important and brilliant works, should not however allow us to forget that, as Benjamin writes, "To do justice to the figure of Kafka in its purity and its peculiar beauty one must never lose sight of one thing: it is the purity and beauty of a failure."<sup>95</sup> The second paragraph of this diary entry allows us to see one way in which such a failure was played out, with Kafka resolutely refusing to redeem his suffering, in perhaps the most important reversal from the 1912 entry. Art here no longer stands over and above Kafka's suffering, as its redemption, its transcendental value, or its "happy solution."

"A Hunger Artist" is Kafka's exploration of this revised approach to the aesthetic, repositioning the "distraction" of hunger as central to a new mode of art founded on the display of the starving artist as celebrity. First published in 1922, "A Hunger Artist" is the story of a man who fasts for a living, as a spectacle to entertain crowds at public fairs and similar events (a real phenomenon in late nineteenth-century Europe), until his fast falls out of fashion and he starves himself to death. Kafka's hunger artist perfects the imperfect identification of Hamsun's protagonist with his art, by describing an artist for whom the experience of starving is identical to the production of art. By making the artist's experience indistinguishable from the art-object, Kafka can go considerably further than Hamsun, for whom the intrusion of the process of narration constantly interferes with the completeness of the identification. Kafka, however, achieves this by describing an art that has no textual or objective dimension, an art that leaves no trace and assumes no independent existence; his hunger artist is not and cannot be an author, although he is very often read as a figure for one. On the surface, and particularly given that the hunger artist is "the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast" (*CSS*, 270), this would seem to complete the imperfect hermeticism of Hamsun's protagonist. His cryptic deathbed explanation for his self-starvation—"I couldn't find the food I liked" (*CSS*, 277)—reinforces this suspicion by expressing the attitude of aesthetic

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<sup>95</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 144–45.

disinterest on which aesthetic autonomy is based. Like Bartleby, the hunger artist renounces preference and consumption in a gesture of indifference that produces the “wildest interest”—at least temporarily—in its audience. In his contempt for his audience, his self-contained art and his attitude of indifference, Kafka’s hunger artist is a caricature of aesthetic autonomy, replicating it without ever attaining to the beautiful.

I say a caricature because it is equally clear that while the hunger artist seeks autonomy, he is, far more than Hamsun’s protagonist, fully and explicitly embedded within a marketplace whose machinations not only sustain him but determine key aspects of his art. Where starvation in Hamsun is a result of his failure to enter the market, in Kafka it is precisely the means by which he participates in it. His art, therefore, becomes not what he produces but how he displays himself. In this sense, Kafka describes a shift from the starving artist as author to the hunger artist as spectacle—or, as we might equally say, the hunger artist as celebrity. The hunger artist’s display of autonomy becomes just that: a display for the benefit of a paying public, within the institutional contexts that support it.

The commercial context reveals the hunger artist’s closed aesthetic system to be essentially insufficient, for in “A Hunger Artist”—far more so than in *Hunger*—the audience functions as an indispensable source of legitimation. Perhaps more importantly, the audience for Kafka is necessary precisely insofar as it sullies and renders impure the hunger artist’s fast. It is only in the compromise that the audience forces on the hunger artist—the limitation of the fast to forty days, a period determined by the crowd’s attention span—that the hunger artist is able to repeatedly renew an imperfect fast rather than starve himself to death, as he ultimately does without the control of the audience. The imperfection forced upon his art by the crowd’s short attention span prevents it from perfecting itself in death. This points, of course, to the perilous line walked by hunger artists in their attempt to practice an art that enfolds death but cannot outlast it. At the same time, it posits a distant, uncomprehending, interested but also somehow indifferent spectatorship as the bulwark erected against such death. As in *Hunger*, the public is read as a hostile force whose very hostility is constitutive of the protagonist’s art. Unlike *Hunger*, though, the audience’s interest is understood not as a bourgeois enforcement of morals, but as a mass fascination with the abject and the disgusting.

The audience's restraining role is never understood as a form of interpretation or decoding. The public restrains the artist not, as in Hamsun, by engaging with him in all the complex ways and within all the moral and interpretive systems that produce the shame of *Hunger*, but simply through the unreflective act of enthusiastic observation and the institutional system that this erects around him. In this sense, the art performed by the hunger artist must be understood as anti-metaphorical and anti-symbolic, in that it never stands for anything else, not even the artist himself, who coincides perfectly with the work of art. The problem of metaphor is in fact one that Kafka himself poses in a diary entry from 6 December 1921, a month and a half after the entry renouncing asceticism and only months before "A Hunger Artist" was written:

From a letter: 'During this dreary winter I warm myself by it.' Metaphors are one among many things which makes me despair of writing. Writing's lack of independence of the world, its dependence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove; it is even dependent on the poor old human being warming himself by the stove. All these are independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, cannot live in itself, is a joke and a despair.<sup>96</sup>

The despair over metaphor as emblematic of the compromised independence of language mirrors the desire for a radical autonomy, extending to language's autonomy from reference, that we saw in both Hamsun and Rimbaud. It seems to find a natural answer in an art that would be nothing other than what it is, a supremely literal art: that of the hunger artist, whose art is the fast and no more—not its meaning, not its allegorical form, not its metaphorical content.

For many critics of Kafka, from Adorno to Deleuze and Guattari to Frederic Jameson, the anti-metaphorical impulse chimes with what is widely taken as Kafka's resistance to interpretation or the primacy of the literal in his work.<sup>97</sup> But if Kafka's problem with metaphor is not, in fact, interpretation as such, but the lack of independence of the world, the lack of something amounting to an internal, self-generating principle on which

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<sup>96</sup> Kafka, *Diaries*, 397–98.

<sup>97</sup> Adorno argues that in Kafka "Only fidelity to the letter, not oriented to understanding, can be of help"; Deleuze and Guattari describe this crisis as moving towards a "skeleton of sense," which they imply is obliquely connected to starving; Jameson argues that only the initial situation, not its unfolding, is available for interpretation. All of these readings have their roots in some form in Walter Benjamin's seminal account of Kafka's stories as parables without a doctrine: Theodor Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), 246; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 19–21; Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), 101–02; Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 122.

writing could be based, then it is not at all clear that the hunger artist, for all his lack of metaphor, has overcome this problem. As we have seen, the hunger artist, bound ambivalently to his audience, fails to achieve this independence or, rather, in approaching true independence, he fails to live. More significantly, Kafka's hunger artist is "uninterpretable" and devoid of metaphor only insofar as he is a spectacle. Not only does his audience keep him and his art alive, it also provides precisely the mode of "reading" required to guarantee the art's literalness, and thus its independence. In becoming a celebrity, Kafka's hunger artist is not simply selling a dream of autonomous art embodied in an ascetic author; he also enters into an institutional sphere that insulates him from the metaphorisation that he resiles from in language.

Moreover, to the extent that this resistance to metaphor involves substituting text, language or literature for the literalness of the body, it runs up against the very simple objection that Kafka's hunger artist is *already* writing. As such, he is "dependent" on the world in ways that my reading has so far taken for granted, but which apparently made Kafka despair: he is tied to Kafka and thus to his diaries; to history and thus to historical figures like Giovanni Succi, the real hunger artist on whom Kafka's story may have been based; and to interpretation, and thus to precisely the kind of quasi-allegorical reading that allows us to take the hunger artist as a figure for the writer. Reading Kafka's aesthetics out of "A Hunger Artist," we are already plunged back into the problem of metaphor, forced to produce a metaphorical reading of a purportedly anti-metaphorical art. This dilemma replays Kafka's despair over language—a despair that reveals itself, like the parabolic nature of his own parables, in search of a solution that will exhaust it, but incapable of finding this respite.

The final twist of "A Hunger Artist"—the titular character's posthumous replacement with a magnificent panther—offers to absolve us of this dilemma. The panther is presented as a perfect counterpoint to the hunger artist, free of his contradictions and complaints. He eats without reflection or doubt, and "carr[ies] freedom around with [his body] too; somewhere in his jaws it seemed to lurk; and the joy of life streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it" (CSS, 277). Where the hunger artist's mouth lay unused, the panther's is mythologised as the source of freedom, passion and life itself. In response, the crowd is fascinated, despite the shock of the confrontation with pure unbridled life: "they braced

themselves, crowded around the cage, and did not want ever to move away” (*CSS*, 277). Where the unimpeded hunger artist—“strictly speaking, only an impediment on the way to the menagerie” (*CSS*, 276)—was literally positioned in the indeterminate zone between humans and animals, the panther, as the fully animal, allows the audience to gaze upon the perfection of the life that they partake of but stand separate from. In his complete self-sufficiency and indifference to his audience, the panther is in some sense more fully autonomous than the hunger artist ever was. Jameson reads this ending as a “final upswing,” the replacement of the hunger artist’s “feebleness, guilt and failure with the vibrancy of sheer life.”<sup>98</sup> The problem, of course, is that the price of the upswing, the price of life itself, would seem to be the abandonment of the very possibility of art; the panther, in being properly autonomous, is no longer properly aesthetic.

“A Hunger Artist” uses the trope of the starving artist to stage the contradictions inherent in modernism’s relationship to the market and its exultation of autonomy. Nonetheless, it concludes by implying that abandoning such contradictions—and perhaps even such suffering—would mean abandoning the category of the aesthetic entirely, a possibility that, despite Jameson’s positive spin, is neither endorsed nor rejected by the text itself. Staying with the contradictions, on the other hand, produces an art that is barely recognisable as such, one which has replaced the art object with the spectacle of artistic suffering. Kafka’s story can be read against the emerging significance of modernist celebrity as a special category of authorial self-fashioning that presents itself as independent of market demands, even as it emerges as a direct response to them.<sup>99</sup> In this context, “A Hunger Artist” can be read as a vicious parody of the possibilities of such autonomy, as well as an exploration of the aesthetic ramifications of this development. Kafka’s late story therefore brings itself firmly into the tradition developed by Melville, Rimbaud and Hamsun, eschewing the ascetic reciprocity of the 1912 diary entry. At the same time, “A Hunger Artist” moves beyond earlier manifestations of the art of hunger, presenting a more performative and process-oriented version of art that eclipses writing entirely, and one that more explicitly incorporates the author as spectacle.

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<sup>98</sup> Jameson, *The Modernist Papers*, 111.

<sup>99</sup> For more on modernist celebrity and attendant self-fashioning, see Jonathan Goldman, *Modernism Is the Literature of Celebrity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011); Aaron Jaffe, *Modernism and the Culture of Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

## *B. And On: The Art of Hunger in the Heart of Modernism*

These four writers—Melville, Rimbaud, Hamsun and Kafka—have allowed me to trace the foundations of an art of hunger as it emerges alongside the development of early modernism. Together, they present hunger as an expression of aesthetic autonomy that seeks to locate the writer and his art outside financial, physical, social and even referential constraints, even as it repeatedly shows up the impossibility of achieving this goal. In many respects, the works discussed above are unrivalled as the most important and most explicit statements of the relationship between aesthetics and starvation in the modernist period. Nonetheless, their influence and the pre-eminence of an art of hunger as an available mode of modernist writing persists throughout the modernist period. This section briefly outlines some of the key points of reception of the art of hunger by modernist and early twentieth-century avant-garde writers. In many cases, these later writers offer developments or modifications of key aspects of the artistic approach demarcated by the art of hunger. At times, they also offer an important bridge between early statements of this art and the post-World War II writers that I will turn to in the body of my thesis. In all cases, they reveal the on-going fascination of this trope for modernist writers.

## V. American Expatriates in Paris: Hunger as Aesthetic Clarity

The “lost generation” of American expatriate modernism offers perhaps the most iconic of modernist starving artists, writers whose self-mythologisation turns heavily on the experience of Paris as a place of impoverished liberty in which privation is intermingled with aesthetic and sexual novelty. This promotion of themselves as starving authorial celebrities is supported by an embrace of the concerns of the art of hunger and particularly the equation of starvation with aesthetic revelation. Both aspects of the lost generation’s hunger art grow directly out of an engagement with Hamsun. Ernest Hemingway, for example, is described in Robert Ferguson’s biography of Hamsun as having “apprenticed himself to” the Norwegian and paraphrases Hemingway’s acknowledgement to Hamsun’s publisher that “Hamsun was one of the writers to whom he was most deeply indebted.”<sup>100</sup> Similarly, Henry Miller has claimed that “from the

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<sup>100</sup> Ferguson, *Enigma*, 29.

standpoint of writing, the way of writing, the style, and so on, hardly anyone knows that it was Knut Hamsun who was my—the man I was trying to model myself upon.”<sup>101</sup>

Ernest Hemingway’s memoir of this period, *A Moveable Feast* (1964) recounts the aesthetic experience of hunger with characteristic lucidity:<sup>102</sup>

all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty and hollow-hungry. I learned to understand Cézanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry. I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted; but I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat.<sup>103</sup>

Hemingway takes literally the Kantian rejection of food’s connection to the aesthetic, and exaggerates it to the point that hunger is cast as a privileged state of aesthetic receptivity, the ideal state in which to regard art. It offers him a kind of clarity, a claim we have already encountered in Hamsun and will see again in Henry Miller. This clarity is both visual, as though the quality of vision is altered by the experience of starvation, and cognitive, allowing Hemingway to see directly into the artwork’s origin or structure, to “see truly how he made landscapes.” Moreover, hunger collapses the distinction between artist and spectator, not only granting the starving viewer a privileged access to the artist’s mind but also projecting the viewer’s own hunger onto him. If the work of art, defined by its production on the one side and its consumption on the other, holds artist and viewer apart, Hemingway’s hunger, like Hamsun’s, undoes that binary by offering an identity in common. For Hemingway, this point of identity—uniquely among the writers I look at here—inaugurates a genealogy and even a community of starving artists, not by undoing the asociality of hunger but by creating something akin to the “community of celibates” that Deleuze detects in *Bartleby*. These aesthetic developments transform Hemingway’s famously stripped-back writing style, as his disciplined prose erupts, rather uncharacteristically, into the alliterative and assonant “belly-empty and hollow-hungry.”

Hemingway’s depiction of hunger as a moment of artistic clarity has its forerunner in *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), Henry Miller’s iconic account of “lost generation” Paris. In a novel

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<sup>101</sup> Henry Miller, *Conversations with Henry Miller*, ed. Frank L. Kersnowski and Alice Hughes (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 35.

<sup>102</sup> The Vintage edition that I use gives the date of first UK publication, somewhat inexplicably, as 1936, although all other sources indicate that it was edited and published posthumously. Given that he died in 1961, I follow the US edition’s date of 1964 as being more plausible.

<sup>103</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London: Arrow Books, 2000), 39.

plagued by its narrator's constant lack of food, Miller's chaotic, ecstatic narrative dwells on his experience of attending a concert hungry:

Even before the music begins there is that bored look on people's faces. A polite form of self-imposed torture, the concert. ... My mind is curiously alert; it's as though my skull had a thousand mirrors inside it. My nerves are taut, vibrant! The notes are like glass balls dancing on a million jets of water. I've never been to a concert before on such an empty belly. Nothing escapes me, not even the tiniest pin falling. It's as though I had no clothes on and every pore of my body was a window and all the windows open and the light flooding my gizzards.... How long this lasts I have no idea; I have lost all sense of time and place.<sup>104</sup>

Miller sets himself against a backdrop of genteel boredom, singling himself out as uniquely attuned to the subtleties of the music. Once again, this heightened and exceptional aesthetic sensitivity is cast as a direct product of his starvation. Miller renders this sensation more profoundly embodied than Hemingway allows and, as in Hamsun's novel, folds a variety of physiological, emotional and mental responses into the aesthetic, until the experience becomes almost ecstatic. But if it is ecstasy, it is nonetheless profoundly lacking in any form of transcendence, cast as a rapturous communion with the world around him. This transparency reflects back on the spectator, casting him as naked: a double exposure that emphasises both his unmediated receptivity and his inappropriate self-exposure.

In some respects, however, both Hemingway and Miller represent a domestication of Hamsun's account. Where Hamsun's hunger produced random moments of aesthetic appreciation divorced from the object to the extent that he could find this clarity and ecstasy in a pair of shoes or the music of a barrel organ, both Miller and Hemingway return this experience to the realm of pre-sanctioned art. As such, while Hamsun's moments of aesthetic clarity marked him as radically lacking in taste, by most definitions, Miller and Hemingway represent hunger as transforming them into exemplary men of taste. This is made explicit in Miller, in which the profundity of his own reaction to the music is sharply contrasted to the boredom of the other spectators for whom art is nothing more than "a polite form of self-imposed torture." Against all expectations, Miller emerges here as profoundly tasteful, the only person present who can *feel* the importance of art, rather than simply identify it as such.

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<sup>104</sup> Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), 74.

Hunger is an important part of this self-identification as exceptional, allowing Hemingway and Miller not only to achieve a heightened aesthetic appreciation, but also to cultivate this as one aspect of the celebrity of the starving artist. Both Miller and Hemingway's novels are more explicitly autobiographical than those of their predecessors in the art of hunger tradition, and both serve to establish their authors as modernist celebrities. Like Kafka's hunger artist, whose fame and art were indistinguishable and were both founded on his capacity for starvation, Hemingway and Miller fashion themselves as exemplary artists because starving artists, placing a mythology of starvation at the centre of their historico-literary personae. In so doing, they simultaneously emphasise their autonomy from market forces, conventional aesthetics and social pressures, and foreground their investment in their transgressive bodies, making a true celebrity of the embodied, semi-autonomous artist that is the hallmark of the art of hunger.

## VI. Surrealism: 'The Great Hunger that Gave Birth to the Hallucinations'

In 1920s Paris, it was not only Americans but also European surrealists who, too poor to eat, explored the connection between hunger and art. Like the "lost generation" writers, the surrealists also draw on Hamsun, although they learn vastly different lessons from him. For the surrealists, hunger was a means, not to achieve aesthetic clarity, but to gain access to the altered states of mind that would furnish them with the material for their explorations of the unconscious. For these writers, as perhaps implicitly for Hemingway and Miller, the appeal of hunger is precisely the irrational states of mind that it gives rise to. Starving, the artist is stripped of the burdens of rational consciousness and delivered over to some other, more aesthetically interesting, state of mind. In this sense, the surrealists take Rimbaud, for whom hunger offered a kind of sensory rearrangement, in a new and more highly psychologised direction.

In his first Surrealist manifesto, André Breton evokes Hamsun in proposing hunger as a possible cause for the state of mind that gives rise to automatic writing. At the end of a long paragraph describing the experience of this new form of writing, Breton writes parenthetically:

(Knut Hamsum [sic] ascribes this sort of revelation to which I had been subjected as deriving from hunger, and he may not be wrong. (The fact is I did

not eat every day during that period of my life). Most certainly the manifestations that he describes in these terms are clearly the same.<sup>105</sup>

Breton then quotes at length from Hamsun's account of a rare burst of inspiration, during which he describes writing feverishly, "as if possessed."<sup>106</sup> The surrealist takes as assumed the close relationship between aesthetics and the artist that Hamsun develops in a somewhat different vein. For him, the interest of hunger lies in its potential to give rise to a kind of "revelation," understood as at once aesthetic and psychological. The body, in this sense, is granted only an incidental status in relation to the creation of the work of art, and in its place the unconscious becomes particularly important.

The coupling of hunger and aesthetics persists elsewhere in surrealism. Joan Miró speaks at length about his experiences of poverty and privation in Paris of the 1920s. In an account given to Jacques Dupin in 1977, he writes of his time living in the rue Blomet in 1921-27: "I ate little and badly. I have already said that during this period hunger gave me hallucinations, and the hallucinations gave me ideas for paintings."<sup>107</sup> With more certainty than Breton, Miró connects starvation to hallucination—rather than the inspiration necessary for automatic writing—and this to his own artistic practice. Perhaps the most famous painting to come out of this period is the 1924-25 *Harlequin's Carnival*, of which he writes, "For the *Harlequin Carnival* I did many drawings based on hallucinations that had been brought on by my hunger."<sup>108</sup> Miró also used this experience, and the painting that resulted from it, for a Surrealist text, written in French in 1939, which recalls Breton's associative writing in its style. Both these writers seek to decouple art from the constraints of the rational mind and the social and artistic conventions that accompany it. Like Hamsun and Rimbaud in particular, their art achieves formal innovation through the psychological and physiological side effects of hunger.

## VII. Artaud: The *Force Vivante* of Hunger

Former surrealist Antonin Artaud, in the 1939 preface to *Theatre and Its Double*, seeks to force this surrealist interest in hunger's psychological force into an engagement with the

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<sup>105</sup> André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism (1924)," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 33-34.

<sup>106</sup> Hamsun, *Hunger*, 34; for the full passage quoted by Breton, see pp. 33-34.

<sup>107</sup> Joan Miró, *Joan Miró: Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Margit Rowell, trans. Paul Auster and Patricia Mathews (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 103.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

audience. The theatre of cruelty, Artaud's theory of theatre, which receives its fullest articulation in *Theatre and Its Double*, aims to force the audience into a direct, active relationship with the play they are watching. Rejecting language in favour of loud noises, actions, and gestures, his theatre is "cruel" in the sense that it supposedly forces the audience to confront reality directly. Artaud opens his preface to this work with a discussion of the relation between culture and hunger:

Before speaking further about culture, I must remark that the world is hungry and not concerned with culture, and that the attempt to orient toward culture thoughts turned only toward hunger is a purely artificial expedient.

What is more important, it seems to me, is not so much to defend a culture whose existence has never kept a man from going hungry, as to extract, from what is called culture, ideas whose compelling force [*force vivante*] is identical with that of hunger.

... if it is important for us to eat first of all, it is even more important for us not to waste in the sole concern for eating our simple power of being hungry.<sup>109</sup>

Artaud develops an extremely complex relation between culture and hunger that repeats many of the earlier hunger artist's difficulties with identification and differentiation. Hunger initially emerges, in Kantian fashion, as that which is opposed to culture, the need that turns the public's face from artistic and cultural production to its own immediate concerns. But Artaud's solution is not to first appease hunger, but rather to turn hunger's power to culture's ends, to harness this force in order to exceed itself. In contrast with the deathliness that has haunted earlier instances of the art of hunger, Artaud portrays this power of hunger as a "force vivante"—literally, a living or lively power—and ties it to a drive to live that allows him to move smoothly (more smoothly in the French than in the English, where a semi-colon has been added that implies a separation between the terms) from the need to live, to the need to believe in what makes us live, to the need to believe that something makes us live. This movement seems to tie hunger (which satisfies the first) back to culture (which satisfies the second and third) as separated no longer by a gulf but now only by a metonymic shift. The difficulties of the identification and mutual self-destruction of art and hunger that have been central to my discussion are therefore transformed into a question of life as such.

Artaud elaborates on the power of hunger to act on its audience—a concern we have already encountered in Hamsun and Kafka. For him, the compelling horror that

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<sup>109</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richard (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 7; for the French, see Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et Son Double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 11–12.

animated and underpinned the public's reaction to Hamsun's protagonist or Kafka's hunger artist becomes the ideal mode of interaction between culture and the public. But Artaud transforms this relationship, insisting that the public should not witness an act of starvation but experience it, not as an abstract and enervated desire for culture, but as an all-consuming, immediate need, a *force vivante*, that allows us to understand culture as—literally?—a matter of life and death.

Starvation emerges, then, as a kind of misapplication of aesthetic autonomy, or more precisely, a pushing of aesthetic autonomy to its furthest limit. At this limit, Kantian disinterest loses its specificity as the marker of a relationship between observing subject and aesthetic object, and instead proliferates through all aspects of the artist-artwork-audience relationship and through all aspects of the artist's life. Autonomy, in other words, achieves a kind of experiential hegemony, colonising all aspects of existence. It produces an insistence on a radical autonomy of form: the word's autonomy from meaning; the body's autonomy from food; the self's autonomy from community; the writer's autonomy from the market. The model that emerges is a kind of quest for an aesthetic mode of being. But in order to understand this as plausibly aesthetic, these artists necessarily must re-read—or misread—the main traditions of aesthetic philosophy. This art of hunger asks us to take autonomy, in the strict sense of aesthetic disinterest and the creation of a specialised zone of aesthetic experience, as essential, but the ideal (i.e. mental) nature of such autonomy as contingent. It asks us to follow Nietzsche in understanding art as embodied, but to resile from the prospect that such embodiment should produce community. It has the form of a parody of aesthetic philosophy, but one which is enacted in deadly earnest.

It is, moreover, a model of aesthetics that stages its own defeat. As aesthetic autonomy is absorbed into the domain of life, it loses its ability to confine itself to a single realm, the very demand on which this autonomy was premised. The aesthetic is divorced from its domain of the beautiful and of disinterested pleasure, and instead immersed in the torments of suffering, the body in pain, and the slow encroachment of death on life. As

such, this autonomy undoes itself at precisely the point it aspires towards its highest manifestations. The art of hunger becomes an art of failure.<sup>110</sup>

The art of hunger operates between two poles: an absolute and arbitrary imperative, and the impossibility of its realisation, and it is in this sense that Beckett offers one of the most thoroughgoing attempts at the realisation of such an art. Indeed, in the chapters that follow, these genealogies provide the background against which all three of my central authors construct their own accounts of starvation. Both the philosophical and the literary traditions outlined here are vital sources for Beckett, Auster, and Coetzee, and by positioning them within it, I argue for the persistence of an art of hunger, conceived on modernist principles, in the post-World War II period. The problems of such a realisation, the difficulties it entails, and the political, ethical and aesthetic opportunities opened by the attempt—even the failed attempt—will therefore be the subject of this thesis.

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<sup>110</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between artistic impoverishment and an aesthetic commitment to failure, see Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*.

## Tastelessness, Penury and Vomit: Post-War Beckett

If the modernists discussed in the previous chapter set the stage for an art of hunger grounded in a failed demand for absolute aesthetic autonomy, it is Samuel Beckett who provides the fullest exploration of the possibilities and impossibilities of such an art. Beckett's engagement with hunger as a trope for art is not only more sustained than that of any previous writer (with the possible exception of Kafka), it is also more keenly aware of the impasses to which such an art tends. The history of his engagement therefore breaks into two major phases, which I explore in this chapter and the next: the first, which is the principal concern of this chapter, establishes an art of hunger as an unrealisable ideal for art, tracing its development from *Molloy*, through its most complete realisation in the "Three Dialogues" (1949) to its collapse in *The Unnamable*; the second, which I turn to in Chapter 3, seeks ways of retaining the radical autonomy of an art of hunger without falling prey to the desperate disgust generated by this art's failure, in writings from *Waiting for Godot* to the late prose of the 1980s.

If hunger can form the basis of an aesthetic, Beckett is the obvious artist of such an art. There are superficial reasons that may bring him immediately to mind here. His *œuvre* is unusually overpopulated with starving characters, particularly in the major texts of the post-war years where almost without exception every one of his principal characters subsists on the brink of starvation, in sharp contrast to his generally well-fed pre-war characters and his barely human late ones. In *Waiting for Godot*, only Pozzo is genuinely well-fed; Lucky, Vladimir, and Estragon can only beg for his left-overs and trade an ever-diminishing stock of root vegetables. The characters of *Endgame* are similarly deprived, inhabiting a world of gradual depletion, in which there are no more sugar-plums, no more pap, and no more pain-killers. The characters of the post-war novels are similarly starved. In *Molloy*, the title character famously sucks stones to pass the time and to "forget his hunger, forget his thirst," while Moran, Molloy's 'other half', gradually loses

his hearty appetite over the course of the novel, reduced to his double's lack of taste and lack of appetite. The expiring protagonist of *Malone Dies* survives on a bowl of soup once every two or three days, until even this meager diet disappears in the latter half of the novel.

At the same time, Beckett's work has proven unusually amenable to aesthetic analysis, even as the term and practice have fallen from grace in the discipline in general in recent years. Confronted with a writer who, on the one hand, seems to be constantly nudging up against the edge of art, and, on the other, systematically effaces all ties to the world, until all we are left with is the art or anti-art of the text itself, critics have repeatedly had recourse to aesthetics as a way of explaining Beckett's work. The compulsion has manifested in studies as explicitly aesthetic in their orientation as Daniel Albright's *Beckett and Aesthetics*, which argues that Beckett's aesthetics consists in systematically undermining the media within which he works, and Evelyn Grossman's *L'Esthétique de Beckett*, which argues that Beckett's is an "aesthetic of death" or, perhaps more accurately, "a writing that makes death come alive."<sup>111</sup> This interest in Beckett's aesthetics is also manifest in the burgeoning field of criticism exploring the connections between Beckett's work and music or the visual arts.<sup>112</sup>

There is an early indication that these two elements—the prominence of starvation and the compulsive interest of Beckett's aesthetics—may be more closely interlinked than they at first appear. It is a commonplace of Beckett criticism for the widespread privation experienced by his characters to be read as a textual or stylistic concern as well as a thematic one. Terry Eagleton is concurring with a majority view, and a common metaphor, when he speaks of Beckett's "anorexic texts", formed from "Starved words, gaunt bodies and sterile landscapes."<sup>113</sup> This rhetorical movement by which literal starvation becomes textual emaciation is everywhere in Beckett criticism, from casual popular accounts to serious scholarly works, and it seems to imply a surprisingly under-

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<sup>111</sup> Evelyn Grossman, *L'Esthétique de Beckett* (Paris: Sedes, 1998), 23 et passim, 123, my translations; Daniel Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>112</sup> Both Albright's and Grossman's books are based substantially around analogies to music and painting respectively. Other important books that reflect growing critical interest in this issue include Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*; Mary Bryden, *Samuel Beckett and Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Lois Oppenheim, ed., *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts, and Non-Print Media* (New York: Garland, 1999); Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>113</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Edible Ecriture," *Times Higher Education*, 1997, <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=104281&sectioncode=26>.

examined intuition that Beckett's hunger is not simply a subject *for* his art but is somehow also *in* it. As Evelyne Grossman argues, the *Trilogy* in particular initiates a process by which bodily decomposition becomes textual decomposition: "To write *decomposition*, in order to merge with the dust of words, the atom of sublimated matter: this movement is inaugurated with the *Trilogy*."<sup>114</sup> The slipperiness of the line between thematic and formal concerns in Beckett's work thus enables starved bodies to become "starved words" and "anorexic texts", and, ultimately, allows this movement to give rise to an aesthetic rooted in the language and experience of starvation.

Beckett's engagement with hunger comes out of a social and literary context replete with writers of the art of hunger tradition. Living and working in Paris throughout the 1930s and onwards, he moved in similar circles to many of the writers discussed in the previous chapter.<sup>115</sup> He was introduced to Hemingway by Sylvia Beach; was published by the Olympia Press, a new imprint of the Obelisk Press that produced Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*; met Breton and translated various of his works; and shared several mutual friends and acquaintances with Artaud through his dealings with the theatre, most notably Roger Blin, a friend of Artaud's who directed the first Paris production of *En attendant Godot*.<sup>116</sup> His attitude towards both the Surrealists and the "lost generation" writers was known to be cool, principally because neither seemed to show sufficient enthusiasm for Joyce, who was still Beckett's major idol at this point.<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, steeped as he was throughout the 1930s in the bilingual Parisian literary scene in which the ripples of the art of hunger were still making themselves felt, these various contacts remain a potential source for his post-war turn to this trope.

Perhaps the most critically important connection to the writers of the preceding chapter is Kafka, with whom Beckett has been repeatedly but ambivalently linked by

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<sup>114</sup> Grossman, *L'esthétique de Beckett*, 46, my translation.

<sup>115</sup> Important critical work has located Beckett in this milieu. See for example Ihab Habib Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Knopf, 1968); Evelyne Grossman, *La Défiguration : Artaud - Beckett - Michaux* (Paris: Minuit, 2004).

<sup>116</sup> On meeting Hemingway: Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 1, 1929-1940*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 580; James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 254; on Miller and the Obelisk Press: Mark Nixon, *Publishing Samuel Beckett* (London: British Library, 2011), 100; Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 357; on meetings with and translations of Breton: Beckett, *Letters: Vol. 1*, 135, 169; on mutual friends with Artaud: Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 2, 1941-1956*, ed. George Craig et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 147, 698.

<sup>117</sup> On Hemingway's and the Surrealists' lack of enthusiasm in this regard see Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 113, 254.

scholars and critics. As early as 1951, Maurice Nadeau compared them to each other, in essays that Beckett refers to in a letter of 1954.<sup>118</sup> Later, Adorno takes Beckett and Kafka as his principal examples of an aesthetic philosophy that, as we have seen, bears the traces of the art of hunger. Among Beckett's own literary heirs, as we shall see in the chapters on Auster and, especially, Coetzee, Beckett and Kafka seem to strike a similar chord and often serve as key touchstones for a single writer. Nonetheless, Beckett's own familiarity with Kafka is somewhat less clear. As Mark Nixon observes, Beckett's reading of Kafka can be established post-1945, although they were both published in *transition* in the 1930s and it is possible that he read some of his short fiction at that point.<sup>119</sup> In an interview with Israel Shenker for the *New York Times* in 1956, Beckett appears to downplay his knowledge of the German writer, confessing only to "seriously" reading *The Castle* and insisting on their distance from each other: whereas in Kafka, he writes, "the consternation is in the form. In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form. At the end of my work, there's nothing but dust."<sup>120</sup> In a letter two years earlier, however, he refers to the same reading with less defensive dismissal of Kafka's proximity to his own work, confessing of *The Castle*, "I felt at home, too much so—perhaps that is what stopped me from reading on."<sup>121</sup> If his relationship to Kafka was ambivalent during the 1950s, however, there is evidence that he retained a strong interest in the German writer right up until the 1980s: in 1982, James Knowlson has Beckett "spen[ding] much of his time reading Kafka" and quoting from Kafka's diaries in a letter later that year.<sup>122</sup> While there is no direct evidence here that Beckett read either *The Metamorphosis* or "A Hunger Artist," it is very possible that he read both or either among his reading of the short fiction. Moreover, as we have seen, important statements of Kafka's art of hunger are found in the diaries, which we can state with some certainty that Beckett read, although we are unable to establish the earliest date at which he did so.

Of most immediate importance, however, may be Beckett's engagement with Rimbaud, of whom he claimed in 1931, "I have been reading nothing but Rimbaud" and whose

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<sup>118</sup> Beckett, *Letters: Vol. 2*, 462.

<sup>119</sup> Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936-1937* (London: Continuum, 2011), 50.

<sup>120</sup> Israel Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters: A Portrait of Samuel Beckett, Author of the Puzzling 'Waiting for Godot,'" *New York Times*, May 6, 1956, 129.

<sup>121</sup> Beckett, *Letters: Vol. 2*, 464.

<sup>122</sup> Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 599, 601.

poem *Le bateau ivre* he translated in 1932.<sup>123</sup> In 1932, he counts Rimbaud among writers that, opposed to Mallarmé's Jesuitical tendencies, offer "the integrity of a pendu's emission of semen, ... the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the world."<sup>124</sup> This striking image locates Rimbaud and his fellow writers in a half-world of autonomic bodily responses, producing an art that, like the art of hunger, is equated with the embodiment of life as it passes into death. By 1948, in a series of letters to Georges Duthuit that would form the basis of his "Three Dialogues," which I argue below constitutes Beckett's major statement of an art of hunger, he returns to Rimbaud, quoting from *Illuminations* before remarking, "it is hard to believe that poetry and self-devouring, ever-reducing thought [une pensée autophage et maigrissante] can even exist."<sup>125</sup> The 1932 characterisation of Rimbaud's as an art on the point of death returns here cast explicitly as an art of hunger, at once self-consuming and losing weight (the "maigrissante" of the French here recalls the "abmagern" of Kafka's ideal art). Although the tone implies that Beckett already despairs of this mode of art in post-war France, it establishes a direct connection between Rimbaud's "pensée autophage et maigrissante" and the art of hunger that emerges in the "Three Dialogues."

Despite coming into contact with representatives from this tradition as early as the 1930s, however, hunger does not emerge as an important theme in Beckett's writing until after World War II. There are, I think, two major spurs to this turn to hunger. The first is his slow drift away from Joyce's formative influence on his writing, which was realised most definitively after 1945 and is often linked to a "revelation" he is said to have had in Foxrock in 1945 while visiting his mother after the war. In an interview with James Knowlson, Beckett describes the effects of this vision:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Beckett, *Letters: Vol. 1*, 73; the translation was first published in 1976 as Arthur Rimbaud, *The Drunken Boat: A Translation of Arthur Rimbaud's Poem Le Bateau Ivre*, ed. James Knowlson and Felix Leakey, trans. Samuel Beckett (Reading: Whiteknights Press, 1976).

<sup>124</sup> Beckett, *Letters: Vol. 1*, 134–35.

<sup>125</sup> Beckett, *Letters: Vol. 2*, 86.

<sup>126</sup> Quoted in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 319.

Joyce's additive aesthetic might be characterised as gluttonous, as consuming and all-consuming, and Beckett's early work, still heavily influenced by Joyce, follows a similar path. Beckett's development of an aesthetic out of hunger can therefore be seen as part of his rejection of Joyce's appetitive modernism. It opens a space for the younger writer to explore his affinities to the anti-Joycean Parisian writers of the 1930s, whose writing provides a concrete formulation for his art of impoverishment and subtraction.

The other major reason for hunger's emergence in Beckett's post-war writing was undoubtedly also the war itself, which forced him to become intimately acquainted with the everyday realities of deprivation and malnutrition. From the early stages of World War II, France suffered serious rationing and food shortages, with ration cards beginning in 1940 below the recommended daily intake of calories and falling dramatically over the course of the war.<sup>127</sup> At the same time, food shortages and poverty meant that people were not always able to access even these meagre portions. James Knowlson confirms that Beckett was not exempt from the day-to-day struggle for sustenance, for, although there was a thriving black market in illegal food, Beckett would very rarely have had enough money to buy the food that was sold on it at grossly inflated prices.<sup>128</sup> Although Beckett and Suzanne Déchevaux-Dumesnil's flight to Roussillon in 1942 allowed them to escape the worst of the rationing and food shortages in Paris, Knowlson reports that on his return to Ireland after the war, "Beckett arrived in Foxrock looking emaciated," and was described by a cousin as having an uncharacteristically enthusiastic appetite, a common reaction to being re-fed after periods of malnourishment.<sup>129</sup> After the war, Beckett's experiences as a Red Cross volunteer in a hospital at Saint-Lô would have exposed him to people suffering more acutely from starvation.<sup>130</sup> Meanwhile, rationing continued in France until 1949 and Beckett and Suzanne spent the late 1940s in financial destitution, often struggling to find enough to eat.

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<sup>127</sup> When rationing was first introduced in 1940, ration cards for healthy adults not undertaking manual labour allowed 1800 calories a day, already below the general recommended daily intakes of 2000 calories for women and 2500 for men. As the war continued, they quickly fell, and at one point rations were as low as 900 calories per day. See Shannon L. Fogg, *The Politics of Everyday Life in Vichy France: Foreigners, Undesirables, and Strangers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 5–6.

<sup>128</sup> Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 277–78.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>130</sup> For a full account of Beckett's experiences in Saint-Lô, see *ibid.*, 313–18; for an account of how these and other wartime experiences informed Beckett's post-war writing, see Marjorie Perloff, "In Love with Hiding": Samuel Beckett's War," *Iowa Review* 35, no. 1 (2005): 76–103.

These experiences have left sometimes explicit traces on Beckett's work, as in *En attendant Godot's* evocation of Beckett's stay in Roussillon during World War II, where Vladimir insists, "Nous avons fait les vendages, tiens, chez un nommé Bonnelly, à Roussillon."<sup>131</sup> This recollection appears as a veiled memory of a period of constant food shortages, during which the farmers for whom Beckett and Suzanne worked—including one called Bonnelly for whom they did indeed pick grapes—were often their primary or only source of food. It seems plausible that this prolonged experience of impoverishment and privation, still on-going during the late 1940s when Beckett was writing many of his key texts, would leave its traces on the aesthetics of hunger that was emerging in his writing at this time.

Nonetheless, the incorporation of his wartime experience poses some problems. Unlike Hamsun and Kafka, Beckett's experience of starvation was a general experience shared with almost everyone on the European continent. Where the earlier writers, therefore, could forge a direct link between the experience of starvation and the production of art, Beckett's growing post-war interest in hunger initially presents itself in the starving figures of Molloy, Moran and Malone, ageing bums whose writing, while sometimes integral to their characters, is only incidentally related to their starvation. Beckett's art of hunger is therefore one that must develop in the absence of a starving artist figure to provide a logical bridge between the representation of starvation and the aesthetics of hunger. Beckett adopts a double solution to this problem in the texts of the post-war period, creating, on the one hand, starving characters and, on the other, a highly abstract, quite figurative elucidation of an art of hunger that is often divorced from an actual subject, or that places the starving subject in question.

## I. Towards Tastelessness: From *Murphy* to *Molloy*

The emerging function of Beckett's new interest in hunger can be seen in the shifting function of permutations and lists, one of Beckett's characteristic narratorial modes, as it evolves from his first major work, *Murphy* (1938), through the wartime *Watt*, finally concluding with *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, the first two books of his *Trilogy*. Such an account will necessarily be somewhat schematic; nonetheless, it provides a useful way of approaching the substantive shift in Beckett's attitude towards eating that takes place in

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<sup>131</sup> This line does not appear in the English translation. Samuel Beckett, *En Attendant Godot* (Paris: Minuit, 1952), 86.

the aftermath of the war. While there is a proliferation of starving characters in the post-war works, examining permutation instead of characterisation allows me to think this development specifically in relation to the changing aesthetics of Beckett's writing. Such scenes have, in fact, already formed the basis for a number of examinations of Beckett's aesthetics, perhaps most notably in Gilles Deleuze's reading of such permutations and lists as *langue I*, the first in what he considers a series of attempts by Beckett to exhaust language.<sup>132</sup> Valuable and insightful as Deleuze's reading is, I want to suggest that this mode of permutation is not homogenous but instead reveals a certain evolution in his aesthetic ideals during the 1930s and 1940s, away from an abortive taste and towards an art of hunger.

Beckett's early descriptions of food, such as the wait for a perfectly "ripe" egg in "Whoroscope" or Belacqua's painstaking preparation of his lunch in "Dante and the Lobster," tend to privilege careful—if parodic or disgusting—discrimination.<sup>133</sup> This attitude persists in *Murphy*, where the treatment of permutation is bound to a hierarchy of taste and preference that disappears in later works. The well-known "biscuit scene" provides an excellent illustration of this dynamic. Murphy, lunching in a park, considers the five biscuits that he habitually eats after lunch: "a Ginger, an Osborne, a Digestive, a Petit Beurre and one anonymous." With a preference for the Ginger and a distaste for the anonymous, he despairs of the "paltry six" permutations available to him with the remaining three biscuits and dreams of conquering his preferences and aversions so as to access the full range of possible combinations. Finally,

Overcome by these perspectives Murphy fell forward on his face in the grass, beside those biscuits of which it could be said as truly as of the stars, that one differed from another, but of which he could not partake in their fullness until he had learnt not to prefer any one to any other.<sup>134</sup>

In many respects, this passage, like *Bartleby's* "I would prefer not to," can be read as a parody of the aesthetic aspiration to indifference. Murphy's conviction that only through complete indifference can he truly appreciate his biscuits "in their fullness" strongly echoes the emphasis from Kant to Schopenhauer on disinterested appreciation as the motor of the aesthetic. But this echo is clearly misplaced: not only is Murphy tragically

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<sup>132</sup> Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 156.

<sup>133</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Seán Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 42; Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 3–14.

<sup>134</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (Montreuil: Calder, 1938), 57.

unable to rid himself of his love of the Ginger and his suspicion of the anonymous, he has chosen the wrong object entirely. For Kant, food is not aesthetic, taste and smell are the most intrinsically interested of the senses, and the pleasures of eating are paradigmatic examples of the “agreeable.” Even before the problem is devastatingly solved by a small dog who eats everything but the Ginger while Murphy is occupied in conversation, it is difficult to imagine a successful resolution to the dilemma, precisely because the act itself is so fundamentally interested in nature. Instead, mathematical permutation seems to step in as an attempt to impose disinterested form on interested matter. In fact, this scene reveals *Murphy*’s representation of indifference in miniature, reflecting a distinctly Schopenhauerian desire for absolute indifference that would extend beyond the aesthetic to all aspects of life, coupled with the constant bitter disappointment of this goal.

If *Murphy*’s permutations are constantly compromised by taste, *Watt*’s are compromised instead by appetite. This most permutational and accumulative of Beckett’s novels insistently links eating to such modes. From the character of Mary who “ate all day ... I mean that at no moment during this period was Mary’s mouth more than half empty, or if you prefer, less than half full,”<sup>135</sup> to the soup that Watt cooks for his master Mr Knott, “a dish that contained foods of various kinds, such as soup of various kinds, fish, eggs, game, poultry, meat[,] cheese, fruit, all of various kinds, and of course bread and butter, and it contained also ...” (and so forth in this vein),<sup>136</sup> *Watt*’s engagement with food repeatedly gives on to lengthy lists and systems for consumption. If Murphy dreamed of a release from taste that would allow the full range of permutation to open before him, *Watt* seems to offer just such an escape. These passages present consumption unrestrained by preference or discrimination, to the point that, as in the description of Watt’s soup, they are often less permutational than accumulative. Devoid of the strictures of taste, they move towards Joycean addition.

It is not until the post-war works that permutation becomes harnessed as a strategy for food refusal and the prolongation of hunger, freeing it from both the limitations of taste and the accumulative tendencies of the Joycean aesthetic that Beckett is, by this point, decisively moving beyond. Comparing *Molloy*’s famous “sucking stones” passage with permutational eating in the earlier novels makes this development clear. The stones in

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<sup>135</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1953), 54.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

question are small pebbles that the eponymous Molloy collects in order to suck on them, and which bring himself up against a permutative dilemma that parallels Murphy's. For Molloy, the problem is to organise a system of rotation of the sixteen stones through his four pockets in such a way that he can be certain to suck every one of the stones in turn. The description of the various systems that he devises in his attempt to achieve this takes some six pages in my edition of the novels. Unconstrained by Murphy's preferences or Watt's appetites, Molloy's sucking stones offer a "full" permutation that, far from preparing the ground for eating, indefinitely defers it: "A little pebble in your mouth, round and smooth, appeases, soothes, makes you forget your hunger, forget your thirst."<sup>137</sup> The limitless permutative capacities are made possible because Molloy, unlike Murphy, is entirely indifferent to the objects before him, "For they all tasted exactly the same"—and, indeed, this indifference is so profound that the scene culminates with Molloy simply disposing of all the stones but one, "which of course I soon lost, or threw away, or gave away, or swallowed" (*T*, 74). Taken as a whole, the sucking stones passage aligns full permutation with the suspension of hunger via a mode of indifference that moves outwards from an indifference to the particular solution, to an indifference to a particular object, to an indifference to the presence of any object at all. It is this latter refusal of the object as such that will animate Beckett's aesthetics in the "Three Dialogues" and beyond.

But this indifference to the existence of the object has another aspect. In the opening lines of this passage, Beckett introduces the set of solutions with the line, "I had say sixteen stones" (*T*, 69). This "say" changes everything: it makes the whole scene hypothetical and recasts the number of stones—precisely what is essential to the series of permutations around the number sixteen that follows—as arbitrary and perhaps not even real. This means that the whole scene must be understood in two ways: it is at once a "bodily need," as Molloy asserts towards the end of the passage, and a purely abstract mental game.<sup>138</sup> In this sense, it constitutes a form of play in the sense that Schiller uses it in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*—an act that unifies the sensorial with the formal-ideal to produce the aesthetic. Moreover, it achieves this by assuming a profound indifference to the existence of the object itself: the question of the stones' existence—or at least the number of such stones that exist—is no longer a pressing one for Molloy.

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<sup>137</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1959), 26 (hereafter cited in text as *T*).

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

Molloy's sucking stones might then be understood as constituting Beckett's first move towards the aesthetic of hunger, a mode which already emerges as marked by an absolute indifference towards the object and a set of formal, permutative gestures capable of deferring consumption in order to create a space in which the object is present but effaced, bodily but abstract. In its emphasis on an indifferent mode of play that, suspending the object, aspires towards autonomy, and in its coupling of the materialism of stones in the mouth with the rejection of food and the abstraction of the aesthetic, the sucking stones has its place within the tradition of hunger artists explored in the previous chapter.

## II. The "Ultimate Penury": The "Three Dialogues"

The aesthetic mode pioneered by the sucking stones reaches its fullest expression in Beckett's 1949 "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit." As one of Beckett's relatively rare pronouncements on aesthetics and the source for many of his most famous statements on art and artistic production, these dialogues are omnipresent in critical accounts of Beckett's aesthetics. Nonetheless, the "Three Dialogues" is a fragmented, frustrating little piece, whose influence is not matched by any kind of clarity. Initially published in *Transition* in 1949, it is a mock Socratic dialogue between two characters, B. and D. B. is a surrogate for Beckett himself, while D. represents his close friend, the art critic Georges Duthuit, who is given a credit as co-author of the Dialogues. The piece is based on conversations and exchanges—including letters published in the most recent volume of Beckett's letters—between Beckett and Duthuit.

The new art that B. attributes in the "Dialogues" to Bram van Velde is implicitly the art to which Beckett himself aspires. Midway through B.'s account of van Velde, D. chastises B., "Try and bear in mind that the subject under discussion is not yourself" (D, 144), and it is clear from the letters that Beckett himself sees his discussion of van Velde as bearing closely on his own work, warning Duthuit at one point to "bear in mind that I who hardly ever talk about myself talk about little else."<sup>139</sup> If this opens the way to read the "Three Dialogues" as manifesto, Beckett also makes such an interpretation problematic. Critical work on the "Three Dialogues," from Andrew Gibson's description of its "tragic ethics," to David Cunningham's analogy between Beckett's argument and Maurice Blanchot's discussion of the question, agrees overwhelmingly on the centrality

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<sup>139</sup> Beckett, *Letters: Vol. 2*, 141.

of pre-destined failure to its structure and its aesthetic position.<sup>140</sup> The “Three Dialogues” themselves reinforces this refusal of closure, culminating in an exasperating final line in which B. acknowledges, “Yes, yes, I am mistaken, I am mistaken” (*D*, 149). This ambivalent in-built failure highlights the intrinsic difficulty in reading the “Three Dialogues” as any kind of straightforward profession on Beckett’s aesthetics. What emerges instead is an aesthetic position whose impossibility and eventual failure is built into its very structure. It constitutes, therefore, a strategy for engaging with aesthetics without speaking as a philosopher or an aesthetician, and enacts an aesthetic that even at its most manifesto-like remains one of praxis and not of theory.

The art that Beckett espouses in this text is characterised by its failure to express, by its lack of an object, and by its enthusiastic embrace of—rather than doomed struggle against—these two conditions. In lieu of Tal Coat’s habit of “pretending to be able”, Beckett prefers:

The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express. (*D*, 139)

Beckett here systematically renounces art’s object and its manner. Without the power or desire to express, Beckett’s artist is denied both the outward-facing interiority that, linking self to world, propels art into existence, and the possibility of an object capable of being expressed. It is an attack, therefore, on the whole structure of artistic creation as a mediation between creating subject and represented world. What remains is a residual compulsion towards expression that renders these impossibilities visible and catches the artist in a perpetual bind, forcing him to constantly enact a paradox.

This questioning of expression as the basis for art implies a broader rejection of an aesthetics founded on the eighteenth-century notion of taste. Denise Gigante, in an excellent study of taste aesthetics, argues that, in the eighteenth century, expression became an arbiter of taste. Like taste itself, this relationship was premised on an analogy to biological functions that undergoes a process of refinement and sublimation: “Those physicians who judged humans by their physiological evacuation found a counterpoint in

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<sup>140</sup> Andrew Gibson, “‘Three Dialogues’ and Beckett’s Tragic Ethics,” *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui* 13 (2003): 53; David Cunningham, “Ex Minimis: Greenberg, Modernism and Beckett’s ‘Three Dialogues,’” *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd’hui* 13 (2003): 39.

eighteenth-century taste philosophers who judged the person of taste by what he or she expressed in the form of discourse or poetry.”<sup>141</sup> Expression is the byproduct—perhaps even the waste product—of taste, the outcome of a process of aesthetic digestion. Beckett’s denial of an aesthetics of expression and expressivity, therefore, severs the link between taste and artistic production, and posits instead a “tasteless” art.

The model of aesthetic taste arose in the eighteenth century and, as we saw in the introduction, found its most canonical expressions in Hume, Kant and their contemporaries. By the twentieth century, this model of aesthetic taste had become entrenched as a standard conceptualisation of aesthetics. “[S]ituated at the intersection of appetite and manners,” taste situates itself between the social and the personal, between spontaneous instinct and disciplined discretion.<sup>142</sup> Privileging pleasure, it offers “a way out of abstraction and into a robust sensibility”, a bridge between cognition and embodied sensation.<sup>143</sup> Undermining expression, Beckett rejects the “statement of a compromise” (*D*, 138) that he attributes to Tal Coat and other painters who he sees as subscribing to this model—a compromise that had become virtually synonymous with the category of the aesthetic. In a letter from June 1949, Beckett suggests that Italian painters, Matisse and Tal Coat are characterised as all wanting “more. More of what? Not beauty, nor truth . . . but more of a relation: self–the rest, which once expressed itself in terms of beauty and truth.”<sup>144</sup> Beckett, in rejecting in principle an art founded on this relation, makes it clear that he also rejects both beauty and truth, the two central categories of aesthetic thought, as mere expressions of this impossible relation. D.’s response—“But that is a violently extreme and personal point of view” (*D*, 139)—underscores both the radicalness of B.’s hollowing-out of expression, and the violence that it does to an aesthetics that has carved out a middle ground between the social and the personal.

That starvation would step in where taste was exiled makes a kind of intuitive sense, reinforced by the fact that an “art without an object” seems to embody the very structure of hunger, which is itself produced through the absence of the object and the severing of the self–world relation. The “Three Dialogues” foregrounds this analogy, with language

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<sup>141</sup> Gigante, *Taste*, 12–13.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>144</sup> Beckett, *Letters: Vol. 2*, 165.

that insistently describes Beckett's aesthetics in terms of food and hunger. Elaborating on the strained relation between object and artist, he argues:

But if the occasion appears as an unstable term of relation, the artist, who is the other term, is hardly less so, thanks to his warren of modes and attitudes. The objections to this dualist view of the creative process are unconvincing. Two things are established, however precariously: the aliment, from fruits on plates to low mathematics and self-commiseration, and its manner of dispatch. All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself, as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds us to. (*D*, 144-45)

What interests me here is the explicitness with which the object is cast as "aliment", reinforced by the literal aliment of "fruits on plates," his first example of an artist's object. As with expression, Beckett's art is not deprived of an object in the sense that this "aliment" is erased, but rather in the sense that the artist's relation to it is disrupted. The artist in Beckett's art is starved of his aliment. This represents a more abstract and absolute formulation of the unwilling rejection that characterises Melville's *Bartleby*. Unlike characters from the previous chapter, from *Bartleby* to Kafka's hunger artist, however, Beckett does not allow this new art to become synonymous with the (artist's) starved body. By raising it to a level of abstraction and metaphor, his art of hunger situates itself, with Molloy's sucking stones, in the space between bodily need and mental game.

The description of art's object as "aliment" allows us to locate Beckett's aesthetics in relation to the aesthetic philosophy of Schopenhauer, a philosopher who holds a signal role in Beckett's intellectual development.<sup>145</sup> Framing the artist's occasion as his "aliment," B. implicitly compares the creation of art to the desire to eat, one of Schopenhauer's most basic and often-repeated examples of the will-to-live. In fact, food is such an overriding stimulator of the will that Schopenhauer denies that "edible objects" can ever constitute valid art, arguing that "By their deceptive appearance these necessarily excite the appetite, and this is just a stimulation of the will which puts an end

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<sup>145</sup> In a 1937 letter to Thomas McGreevey, Beckett identifies Schopenhauer as "one of the ones that mattered most to me": Beckett, *Letters: Vol. 1*, 550; for details of Beckett's reading of Schopenhauer in 1930 and again in 1937, see Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 122, 248-49; the most comprehensive study of Beckett's relationship to Schopenhauer, which makes a persuasive case for the philosopher's on-going influence on Beckett's writing is Ulrich Pothast, *The Metaphysical Vision: Arthur Schopenhauer's Philosophy of Art and Life and Samuel Beckett's Own Way to Make Use of It* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008).

to any aesthetic contemplation of the object.”<sup>146</sup> He pointedly, however, excludes painted fruit from this critique, and it is telling that for B., art as “aliment” begins precisely where it stops for Schopenhauer, with “fruits on plates.” B., in other words, seems to expand Schopenhauer’s category of the “charming”—that which excites the will and therefore annuls aesthetic contemplation—to include all art with an occasion, all art founded on a relation between self and world, on the grounds that all such art is motivated by and bound to the will. This reading is reinforced in the following sentence by B.’s suggestion that the relation between artist and occasion is plagued by a sense “of inadequacy, of existence.” Existence points us to the will-to-live that B. apparently sees simmering within art; inadequacy, similarly, can be read as a reproach to Schopenhauer’s belief that art provides us access to the Idea, which he often refers to as “the adequate objectification of the will.” If the relation between artist and object offers only inadequacy, it follows that art never attains the knowledge of the Idea that is the necessary prerequisite for its privileged exemption from willing. Beckett, then, implies not only that Schopenhauer’s aesthetics are too upbeat in principle, but that the history of art has always been mired in the banality of the will. Contra Schopenhauer, Beckett’s view of art in the “Dialogues” is as full of striving and willing as the world itself.

If Beckett rejects Schopenhauer’s aesthetics, however, the suggestion that an ideal art is a starved art, one which breaks the relation between artist and aliment, ensures that he does not entirely abandon Schopenhauer. Instead, Beckett’s aesthetics radicalise Schopenhauer’s along Schopenhauerian lines. Where art for the German philosopher offers a temporary respite from the omnipresent misery of the will, his ultimate solution is not aesthetic but ascetic, the deliberate denial of the will-to-live through the repeated denial of the will’s objects and desires. This culminates for Schopenhauer in “the complete denial of the will ... [to] the degree where even the necessary will to maintain the vegetative life of the body, by the assimilation of nourishment, ceases to exist”: self-starvation as the highest mode of asceticism and the ultimate stilling of the will.<sup>147</sup> Traces of this attitude can be detected in Beckett’s earlier post-war works, most notably in *Eleutheria*, in which the protagonist refuses to kill himself by taking a pill, but concludes the play by literally turning his back on food.<sup>148</sup> Malone’s ever-diminishing diet serves a similar function, contributing to his general tending-towards-death without evincing any

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<sup>146</sup> Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 1:207–08.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:401.

<sup>148</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Eleutheria*, trans. Barbara Wright (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 167–70.

clear evidence of a will to die as such. In this context, when Beckett suggests in the “Three Dialogues” that an ideal art is one that breaks the dependence of artist on aliment, he is proposing an aesthetics that, while shunning Schopenhauer’s views on art, seeks to import his ascetic solution into the aesthetic domain.

One of the clearest statements of this ascetic aesthetics comes the page before the discussion of the artist’s aliment:

All have turned wisely tail, before the ultimate penury, back to the mere misery where destitute virtuous mothers may steal stale bread for their starving brats. There is more than a difference of degree between being short, short of the world, short of self, and being without these commodities. The one is a predicament, the other not. (*D*, 143)

B.’s “destitute mother” evokes Schopenhauer’s favourite image of the pointlessness of the will, as “alms that keep the beggar alive today so that he may starve again tomorrow.”<sup>149</sup> This echo, coupled with Schopenhauer’s insistence that procreation is the ultimate affirmation of the will-to-live, casts the mother as the very embodiment of the misery brought about by the will. In contrast, the “ultimate penury” takes us out of the domain of will and poverty, and into the domain of asceticism, which Schopenhauer describes as “voluntary and intentional poverty ... it is to serve as a constant mortification of the will, so that satisfaction of desires, the sweets of life, may not again stir the will.”<sup>150</sup> This ascetic cannot, in any reasonable way, be described as “short of” anything, because he no longer has any desire for the “sweets of life.” He is simply and absolutely without them, and without the will to acquire them. In this sense, Schopenhauer’s ascetic attains what B. here refers to as the “ultimate penury”—ultimate in the sense that the artist-ascetic not only gives up self, world and occasion, but also gives up even the quest for them. No longer “short of the world, short of self”, this new artist is simply without these commodities; there is no longer the obligation to work towards a re-creation or expansion of the world and the self in art, to find new ways of accommodating them and resuscitating them. Instead, the artist’s only option is to work towards a new art without world, without self, without object. Where Schopenhauer’s aesthetics showed us a truer form of the world and therefore retained their relation to it, Beckett’s insist on severing all relation and therefore on producing an art whose “ultimate penury” is also a severe and extreme form of aesthetic autonomy. In this sense,

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<sup>149</sup> Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 1:196, 390.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:381–82.

Beckett's engagement with Schopenhauer and his resultant aesthetic of hunger is considerably more extreme than that of earlier writers, such as Hamsun, who have followed this path. Where Hamsun was content to replicate Schopenhauer's aesthetics and simply link this temporary suspension of the will to the tumultuous state of hunger, Beckett insists on an absolute but impossible deployment of the pessimistic philosopher.

The example of the mother and her starving children as icons of a more limited penury forces us to make an important qualification to our use of the term "hunger." It is self-evident that these miserable figures are hungry, and yet they are explicitly excluded from what we are terming Beckett's aesthetics of hunger. This exclusion highlights Beckett's insistence on a hunger that fully severs relation by removing all traces of will and desire. The mother and her children are excluded because their hunger fails to become absolute, to become abstract; or, to put it another way, because their hunger retains its object. If we are not concerned here with hunger in its quotidian senses as a synonym for desire or for lack, it is because both these potential synonyms drag hunger back into the thrall of the object. This is also the sense in which I distinguish my use of the term hunger from that of, for instance, P. J. Murphy in his otherwise incisive and useful *Reconstructing Beckett: Language for Being in Samuel Beckett's Fiction*. In this study, Murphy makes a point of repeatedly evoking—without ever fully interrogating—the rhetoric of hunger, using the term almost exclusively as a direct, albeit perhaps more "Beckettian," synonym for desire. Thus, Murphy's Beckett hungers for transcendence, for negation, for being, for expression, and for silence, alongside the image of the "hungering authorial eye", stalking its prey.<sup>151</sup> "Hunger" in this usage is positioned in direct opposition to Beckett's aspiration towards the removal of the object.

In the sense that I am using it, Beckett's aesthetic of hunger comes closer to Elaine Scarry's definition of pain as "exceptional in the whole fabric of psychic, somatic, and perceptual state for being the only one that has no object" than it does to Murphy's generalised "hungering for."<sup>152</sup> But it is also distinct from Scarry's own definition of hunger: whereas she sees hunger as always "hunger for  $\xi$ ", the term as we are using it here is defined precisely by the absence of any relation to  $\xi$ .<sup>153</sup> She does qualify this

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<sup>151</sup> P J Murphy, *Reconstructing Beckett: Language for Being in Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 5, 28, 29, 54, 63, 105.

<sup>152</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 161.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

statement, arguing that pain and imagination represent the limits of, on the one hand, complete absence of the object and, on the other, absolute immersion in the object; all other states, therefore, exist between them and are capable of approaching these extremes. She contends that, “A state of consciousness other than pain—such as hunger or desire—will, if deprived of its object, begin to approach the neighborhood of pain, as in acute, unsatisfied hunger or prolonged, objectless longing.”<sup>154</sup> While there are important similarities between pain and hunger, and while pain in Beckett does sometimes fulfill the imaginative function that Scarry attributes to it, I want to retain a sense of the specificity of these two states, and perhaps even of the different kinds of art that they produce. Hunger’s capacity to aspire towards a state of objectlessness is crucial to Beckett’s use of the concept in the “Three Dialogues.” Pain, which is by definition deprived of an object, loses this sense of striving towards and therefore loses the capacity to fail. Beckett’s art, in the final analysis, is concerned with the (often unsuccessful) *process* of divesting itself of the object, rather than the static state of being without it. It requires the oscillation between the object that imposes itself and the state of pure objectlessness that is implied in Beckett’s constant rhetoric of failure in the “Three Dialogues,” and which emerges most clearly in the trajectory of the *Trilogy*.

### III. “The stories it spews, like gobbets in vomit”: *The Unnamable*

The “Three Dialogues” intimates that the art of hunger is synonymous with failure, but it is not until *The Unnamable*, the final novel of Beckett’s post-war *Trilogy*, that the feasibility of stripping a literary art of its object is really interrogated. The results are traumatic. *The Unnamable* depicts the critical point at which the tasteless indifference and denial of the object promoted by the “Three Dialogues” collapse under the insistent obtrusion of language, character, and story-telling. Nonetheless, the art of hunger persists as the ideal to which the novel aspires: the protagonist would like nothing more than the peaceful state of objectless hunger, the “ultimate penury” of the “Three Dialogues.” But this ideal fast is broken by a violent intrusion of words and fictions, which the novel persistently figures as force-feeding. In response, the Unnamable—the novel’s amorphous, probably inhuman “narrator” and “protagonist”—seeks to expel these unwelcome morsels in an act of disgusted vomit that strives to avoid digestion, and thus consumption. Vomit and disgust, therefore, become the final, desperate line of defence, as the art of hunger is violated by the force-feeding of language. This is not the first time that we have

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 166.

encountered the connection between vomit or force-feeding and starvation: in *Hunger*, the protagonist often regurgitates what little food he eats, and in “A Hunger Artist,” the title character experiences the compulsory breaking of his fast as a kind of force-feeding. *The Unnamable’s* treatment of these themes, though, is the first to make the dynamics of disgust, vomit and force-feeding central to the text’s aesthetics, rather than merely interruptions of it.

As we have already seen, the *Trilogy* begins in a rather different vein. *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, the novels that precede *The Unnamable*, are characterised by a pervasive starvation, coupled with attempts to embrace the denial of the object—the height of which, I have argued, comes in *Molloy’s* “sucking stones” passage. The characters’ lack of food never drives them to desperation; instead, it is greeted with resignation, with mild pleasure, or with an indifference that is motivated by a simultaneous lack of taste and lack of appetite. They may be “short” of food, rather than “without” it, as the “Three Dialogues” would prefer, but they act as though they may as well go without, and in this sense they embrace the spirit of ascetic indifference that characterises the “art of hunger.” Such an attitude, however, proves unstable even within these early novels, collapsing at regular intervals into moments of gluttony and disgust. Moreover, as the *Trilogy* progresses, it becomes increasingly apparent that this indifference relies heavily on holding objectless hunger largely distinct from language and fiction—in other words, from literature.

In fact far from synthesising writing and starvation into a literature of hunger, all three novels of the *Trilogy* persistently tie stories to swallowing, employing a surprisingly stable metaphor that undergoes a radical transformation of affect over the course of the three novels. *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* offer relatively benevolent, even enthusiastic, perspectives on this image. Molloy, for instance, writes, “I’ve disbelieved only too much in my long life, now I swallow everything, greedily” (*T*, 13). For him, swallowing stories, even untrue stories, is an exercise in credulity that he finds relaxing, even enticing. Swallowing here is believing, and his greed reflects an indiscriminate, enthusiastic embrace of the reality of everything, at the point where he no longer feels the need to actively resist the world beyond himself.

Malone’s experience of this metaphor in the second novel is more ambivalent, introducing a note of doubt that is absent from Molloy’s eager gluttony. Malone dreams of creating “a little creature in my image”:

And seeing what a poor thing I have made, or how like myself, I shall eat it. Then be alone a long time, unhappy, not knowing what my prayer should be nor to whom. (*T*, 226)

For Malone, eating his characters is a way of erasing his own creations by re-incorporating them into his body. Whereas Molloy seems to be ingesting the world—or at least the rest of the world’s fictions—Malone is concerned only with what he himself has created, with different iterations of himself. His dream of a creature “to hold in my arms” (*T*, 226) is a firm statement of the tangibility of these unequivocally fictional creations, implying the irrelevance of Molloy’s categories of belief and disbelief to these creatures. If Molloy embraces the world in his swallowing of stories, Malone erases it. Where Molloy’s metaphor seems to evoke the old trope of eating as incorporation of the world, Malone’s leaves him entirely alone, stripped of the iterations of self that substituted for others, reducing his constellation of characters back to the single point of its origins. The shift from questions of belief to questions of invention might be read as a shift to a more fully fictive world. If so, it is significant that, in this movement towards literature, Molloy’s greedy enthusiasm is already dissolving into Malone’s post-digestive unhappiness.

*The Unnamable* shifts this perspective, incorporating aspects of both these predecessors, but shifting into a register of violation and disgust that is in many ways antithetical to both Molloy’s greed and Malone’s melancholy. Calling upon his preferred trope of swallowing stories as force-feeding, the Unnamable writes:

... the inestimable gift of life had been rammed down my gullet. But what they were most determined for me to swallow was my fellow-creatures. In this they were without mercy. (*T*, 300)

Forced to eat his “fellow-creatures”—a category to which both Molloy and Malone, along with Moran and various other characters from these and previous novels, seem to belong—the Unnamable mimics both Molloy swallowing the stories of others, and Malone feasting on his own creations, for these “fellow-creatures” have ambiguous genealogies that may or may not originate with the Unnamable himself. To this is added the Unnamable’s figuring of birth as itself a kind of force-feeding, of life being “rammed down my gullet.” The Unnamable, then, is animated by the very process of force-feeding that rendered Molloy credulous and Malone alone. Where the earlier characters acquired

only defining characteristics through eating, the Unnamable acquires both life and narrative in this way. In this sense, forced eating—the unwanted insistence of the object, an act that involves the endless compromise of the Unnamable’s aesthetic and bodily autonomy—is central to the Unnamable as character, but also to *The Unnamable* as text. Beckett’s dream of an art without an object is confronted, in these passages, with the reality of literature’s need for objects in the form of characters (both the “life” of the Unnamable and that of the “fellow creatures”) and their stories, and with the inherently dependent nature of language, which seems to undermine all striving towards literary autonomy. Unlike Molloy and Malone, the Unnamable is acutely conscious of this problem, and rebels against it. His consumption of creatures and stories is violently involuntary: he alone locates volition outside of himself, in the mysterious “they” whose identities are never revealed.

This violation produces a tangible sense of disgust towards all those unwanted stories that the Unnamable has been forced to swallow. The disgusted reaction to the obtruding object returns us, via Kant, to the problem of taste and tastelessness. The *Critique of Judgement* brackets disgust as that which “alone is incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight”: the one mode of ugliness that can never be made aesthetic. He explains this in terms which evoke the Unnamable’s struggle, arguing that, in disgust, “the object is represented as insisting, as it were, upon our enjoying it, while we violently resist it.”<sup>155</sup> Kant’s insistent object and his violent resistance are mimicked in the Unnamable’s force-feeding, in the insistence of everything that has been “rammed down my gullet” despite the narrator’s violent resistance. In “Economimesis,” his deconstruction of the *Critique of Judgement*, Derrida glosses this passage:

By limitlessly violating our enjoyment, without granting it any determining limit, [vomit] abolishes representative distance—beauty too—and prevents mourning. It irresistibly forces one to consume, but without allowing any chance for idealisation... By forcing enjoyment, it suspends the suspense of non-consummation, which accompanies pleasure that is bound up with representation [*Vorstellung*], pleasure bound to discourse, to the poetic in its highest form.<sup>156</sup>

This Kantian vomit disgusts, like the life and characters that are forced down the Unnamable’s gullet, because it abolishes the distance that keeps the consumer from the

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<sup>155</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 141.

<sup>156</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” *Diacritics* 11, no. 2 (1981): 22.

consumed. The object therefore can never be “mourned”—a goal of Beckett’s aesthetics in “La Peinture de l’empêchement” (*D*, 135)—because, as Isobel Armstrong explains, it represents “what one will not and cannot assimilate,” and therefore what cannot, as in mourning, be renounced.<sup>157</sup> The enforced consumption “suspends the suspense of non-consummation” and violates the aesthetic need for distance, thereby becoming unrepresentable, even, to use Derrida’s wonderfully fortuitous phrase, “unnameable.”<sup>158</sup> Beckett’s Unnamable participates in this dynamic of forced consumption, and as in Kant, the violence of force-feeding is experienced as disgust. The Unnamable carries this logic to an extreme, suggesting that life itself—never chosen, and never able to be experienced in the “suspense of non-consummation”—is inherently disgusting. Unable to assimilate either life or storytelling, the Unnamable is the disgusted flipside of Beckett’s “ultimate penury”, constantly encountering the object’s obtrusion and never able to resist it.

In Beckett, as in Derrida’s reading of Kant, this experience of disgust is intimately bound up with vomit. As the Unnamable laments somewhat later in the text:

It’s a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can’t bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I’ll fix their gibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case, not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets in vomit. My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, are more than they reckoned with. (*T*, 327)

This passage is one of several that develop the tropes of force-feeding and regurgitation as the basis of the Unnamable’s struggle with both the mysterious “they” and with language itself. Repeating the same violent image of force-feeding—to ram down one’s gullet—that appeared in his account of being given life, it counters it with the potential for resistance in the form of vomiting. The problem, however, is that once the words have been fed to him, his options are already limited. If he “swallows” the words like Molloy swallows stories or Malone his characters, he will be forced to assimilate them and to accept them as his own—both to believe them, as Molloy does, and to accept that they are *of* him, as Malone does. If he “vomits” them back up, however, the peculiar

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<sup>157</sup> Armstrong, *The Radical Aesthetic*, 49.

<sup>158</sup> Derrida, “Economimesis,” 22; Derrida, of course, had a complicated relationship to Samuel Beckett, refusing to write on him while maintaining that “This is an author to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close.” It is therefore quite possible that, as Richard Begam has argued, his fondness for the term “unnameable” is actually a mark of the Irishman’s influence on the Frenchman’s thinking, rather than simply a fortuitous coincidence: Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1991), 60; Richard Begam, “Splitting the Différance: Beckett, Derrida and the Unnamable,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 38, no. 4 (1992): 873–892.

nature of language ensures that he will be forced to speak: not so much to incorporate “their” stories as to testify to them. Because he can only ever speak in someone else’s language, the autonomy of an objectless art breaks down at the point where it seeks to become word.

His capacity for resistance, then, is limited only to a mechanics of vomiting that precedes digestion, ensuring that the words escape him in every sense of the phrase, leaving him before he has time to understand them. This process is successful to the extent that it preserves inviolate some part of himself, resisting the violation of his shadowy masters. But it has the effect of splitting the already diminished character between the speaking part which becomes an “it” as in the phrase “the stories it spews”—both (more?) inhuman, and alienated from the “real” Unnamable—and the uncomprehending part who continues to claim his incomprehension in the first person: “My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting...” This imposed language is so disgusting that it forces the expulsion not only of the words themselves, in a vicious parody of expression, but even of those parts of the Unnamable’s amorphous composition that are responsible for pronouncing or repeating them. As Maurice Blanchot writes in his review of the first French edition of the novel, “*L’Innommable* is, precisely, experience lived under the threat of the impersonal, approaching a neutral speech that speaks to itself alone.”<sup>159</sup> Two years later, in *The Space of Literature*, he reprises this theme in some detail, albeit without reference to Beckett’s novel:

The third person substituting for the “I”: such is the solitude that comes to the writer on account of the work. It does not denote objective disinterestedness, creative detachment.... The third person is myself become no one, my interlocutor turned alien; it is my no longer being able, where I am, to address myself and the inability of whoever addresses me to say “I”; it is his not being himself.<sup>160</sup>

If Blanchot is correct, the Unnamable’s act of vomiting would seem to open a space where absolute isolation is produced by an impersonality that makes it impossible to inhabit the position of either subject or object. But Blanchot’s Unnamable is not quite there: he is only “under threat of” and “approaching” this state. For what this plays down is the oscillation in *The Unnamable* between the “I” and the “He” or “it”, between

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<sup>159</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “Où Maintenant? Qui Maintenant?,” *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française*, 1953, 681, my translation.

<sup>160</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 28.

the personal and the impersonal. The Unnamable is not quite a character, but nor is he only language. The abstraction of Blanchot's impersonality, which approaches pure language, is constantly countered by the obtrusively embodied language of the Unnamable's encounter with language.

Unsurprisingly, the metaphor of speaking as vomiting has important implications for the status of the text, and for its broader relation to a tradition of aesthetic thought. Given that the text of *The Unnamable* consists exclusively of the Unnamable's own words, the entire novel is merely the title character's "vomit." We are confronted with a novel, in other words, that describes itself according to the same experience that Derrida takes as the epitome of disgust.<sup>161</sup> It is not the Unnamable that is most disgusting—the Unnamable whose act of vomiting is "less disgusting than vomit in so far as [it implies] an activity, some initiative whereby the subject can at least still mimic mastery or dream it in auto-affectation."<sup>162</sup> Rather, that which is truly disgusting is the text itself, which seems therefore to be claiming for itself some kind of impressively anti-aesthetic status. As the expulsion of language from the mouth, speaking-as-vomiting parodies Kantian expression. This word-vomit assumes expression's form, while recasting it as literally and figuratively tasteless, and divorcing it from the authentic connection to the speaking subject that is integral to the proper operation of expression. Simulating expression while equating it with disgust, Beckett—like Derrida—disrupts Kant's exclusion of disgust from his aesthetics, placing it instead at the centre of this aesthetic system.

If we were to insist on following a Kantian aesthetics, it might broadly be said that Beckett's entire novelistic project is anti-aesthetic in this sense. For Kant, it is precisely disgust's unrepresentability that disqualifies it from the beautiful, and from art in general, the fact that "the artificial representation of the object is no longer distinguishable from the nature of the object itself in our sensation, and so it cannot possibly be regarded as beautiful."<sup>163</sup> But as Beckett approvingly claims of Joyce's *Work in Progress*, in a statement that is widely taken as a declaration of his own aesthetics, "His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*" (D, 27). For Beckett, the erasure of the distance that separates nature from art and thus enables beauty is held up as a goal for art. Indeed, this

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<sup>161</sup> "Vomit leads its form to this whole system, beginning with its specific parergonal overflow. It must therefore be shown that the scheme of vomiting, as the experience of disgust, is not merely one excluded term among others": Derrida, "Economimesis," 21.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 141.

praise of Joyce can be read as prefiguring the “Three Dialogues,” in which the admiration for a writing that is “not *about* something” anticipates his post-war praise for the “ultimate penury” of an art that has no object and no occasion. But disgust is merely a temporary, defensive position for Beckett’s art. His goal of an art in which “form *is* content” and the penury is ultimate go beyond even the equation of represented and perceived objects of Kantian disgust, for Beckett’s aesthetic aims would do away with the object entirely. In this sense, Beckett goes beyond both Kant, for whom the object is a given, and Derrida, for whom the deconstruction of Kant’s project is an end in itself. Neither of these thinkers imagine an aesthetics of hunger in the sense that Beckett has envisaged—*as* aesthetic. Tragically for the Unnamable, though, even this envisaging of such an art in the theoretical and painterly context of the “Three Dialogues” falters when brought up against the insistent obtrusion of language and stories. The failure of *The Unnamable* drags Beckett’s art back into the thrall of Kant, transforming it from the art of hunger that would go beyond Kant’s imaginings, to the trauma of force-feeding and vomit that is merely the disavowed flipside of Kantian taste. Above all, it reveals that, however far Beckett’s aesthetics are from Kant, they remain united in their impulse towards aesthetic autonomy.

Under such circumstances, the expulsion of stories is a necessary but desperate defence, and as the novel progresses, the metaphor of speaking as vomiting expands to include the related trope of speaking as defecating. As the novel draws to its close, the Unnamable exclaims:

I’ll let down my trousers and shit stories on them, stories, photographs, records, sites, lights, gods and fellow-creatures, the daily round and common task, observing all the while, Be born, dear friends, be born, enter my arse, you’ll just love my colic pains, it won’t take long, I’ve the bloody flux. (*T*, 383-84)

This explosive diarrhea clearly echoes the explosive vomit of “the stories it spews,” and, like the earlier image, it figures the text, its world, and an apparently random selection of other record-keeping devices as bodily excretion. Like vomit, this diarrhea ensures the rapid expulsion of the stories that the Unnamable so desperately resists. It promises that, if the object cannot be done away with completely, it will at least be expelled, in a gesture that grasps towards an art of hunger in which such stories will no longer be shat or vomited, but will simply not intrude. The excrement described in this passage is, however, not only vomit-like in its act of expulsion; like vomit, this word-shit also seems

to avoid passing through the stomach. The Unnamable's invitation to that which he will expel—"enter my arse"—implies a diarrhea that evades digestion by entering and exiting by the same hole. Moran's eminently reasonable question—"How can you hope to shit ... if you've nothing in your stomach?" (*T*, 119)—seems to have been superseded in a novel in which the Unnamable can describe himself as having a "light diet, shit well tolerated" (*T*, 380). With this new figure, the Unnamable therefore avoids both the association with taste and thus the whole field of Kantian aesthetics that plagues the figure of vomit, and the problem of being first forced to digest the stories, which horrifies him in the act of eating. It allows Beckett to retain the scatological impulse that he and his characters have long cherished, while breaking the cycle of "dish and pot" (*T*, 185) that makes eating necessary as the precondition of excreting. If Derrida is correct that "What is absolutely foreclosed [in Kantian aesthetics] is not vomit, but the possibility of a vicariousness of vomit, of its replacement by anything else," then the Unnamable's verbal diarrhea, in its capacity to imitate and step in for "the stories it spews," allows Beckett, finally, provisionally, to move beyond Kant.<sup>164</sup>

Beckett's post-war work both establishes hunger as central to his aesthetic strategy, and points to the self-defeating nature of an art founded on the model of hunger. The starved aesthetic that emerges from the "Three Dialogues" is founded on this tension. The dialogues embrace an art without an object founded on the analogy of hunger, while framing the discussion in a rhetoric of defeat, failure, and self-contradiction that erases all positive statements as they appear. If the "Three Dialogues" set the terms of this aesthetic, the *Trilogy* gropes towards its complicated, paradoxical realisation. Although failure is built into its structure, the *Trilogy* does not spell the end of the art of hunger. On the contrary, it both offers up hunger as ideally connected to art, and stages the difficulty of approaching such an art in a medium in which language and fiction are experienced as force-fed objects. The figures of vomit and of excrement emerge as provisional attempts to expel these objects and therefore preserve inviolate the aesthetic fast of the "Dialogues." Where vomit, however, expresses and embodies disgust, rendering it both traumatic and Kantian, the Unnamable's unconsuming excrement displaces the system away from the mouth, the centre of taste and of speech, and offers the possibility of expelling these stories and characters without being reduced to a parody of expression.

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<sup>164</sup> Derrida, "Economimesis," 25.

## Self-Consuming Form: Beckett's Late, Starved Prose

In the years and works that follow *The Unnamable*, hunger continues to function as an important motif, but one whose elaboration becomes a testament to both the haunting persistence of *The Unnamable's* dilemma and the various ways in which Beckett has sought to move beyond or dwell within this impasse. In some respects, these last two alternatives—move beyond or dwell within—represent a false dichotomy, for Beckett's treatment of hunger increasingly seeks to overcome the dead-end of *The Unnamable* by moving ever more firmly into the language that was the original source of the difficulty.

Hunger in these works takes on two new qualities, which emerge from and develop upon the dynamics described in *The Unnamable*. First, hunger in Beckett's late prose is relational: initially—from *Waiting for Godot* through to *How It Is*—in the sense of defining and demarcating interpersonal relationships; from *How It Is* on, in the sense of expressing a predatory relationship, often between the narratorial voice/eye and the inert and passive body being described. Second, hunger increasingly becomes a linguistic phenomenon, following Kant's reintroduction of art as "food for thought" to deploy a range of metaphors that tie hunger to a linguistic or aesthetic substitute. Understanding how this emergent predatory hunger interacts with its increasing textualisation will be the central focus of this chapter.

### I. Socialising Hunger: *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*

The pervasive feature of hunger to this point in my analysis, from Melville, Hamsun and Kafka through to Beckett's post-war prose, has been its radically isolating effect. Starvation in Beckett's *Trilogy* is linked to the experience of being cut off from the world, isolated from family (Moran only starves when Jacques abandons him), from morality (both Moran and Molloy kill a man without remorse), even from humanity (Malone refuses to acknowledge his affinity with the "species" of his visitor). Autonomy in these

works proliferates across levels of fictionality, requiring not just the artwork's lack of reliance on the world, but the characters' own autonomy within the storyworld. Hamsun's *Hunger* and Kafka's "A Hunger Artist," applying this logic to their artist characters, transform autonomous isolation into an aesthetic principle: one of the key ways in which hunger in these writers reconfigures the artist/artwork relationship is in its misplaced devolution of autonomy onto the individual creator.

Both *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are plagued by food shortages but, rather than leading to a protagonist's radical isolation, they produce self-contained micro-societies whose dynamics and limits are defined by shared privation. In *Waiting for Godot*, this manifests first and perhaps most memorably in Vladimir and Estragon's conversations about turnips, carrots and, later, radishes:

ESTRAGON I'm hungry!  
 VLADIMIR Do you want a carrot?  
 ESTRAGON Is that all there is?  
 VLADIMIR I might have some turnips.  
 ESTRAGON Give me a carrot. [*Vladimir rummages in his pockets, takes out a turnip and gives it to Estragon who takes a bit out of it. Angriily.*] It's a turnip!  
 VLADIMIR Oh pardon! I could have sworn it was a carrot. [*He rummages again in his pockets, finds nothing but turnips.*] All that's turnips. [*He rummages.*] You must have eaten the last. [*He rummages.*] Wait, I have it. [*He brings out a carrot and gives it to Estragon.*]  
 [...]
 VLADIMIR How's the carrot?  
 ESTRAGON It's a carrot.  
 VLADIMIR So much the better, so much the better. [*Pause.*] What was it you wanted to know?  
 ESTRAGON I've forgotten. [*Chews.*] That's what annoys me. [*He looks at the carrot appreciatively, dangles it between finger and thumb.*] I'll never forget this carrot.<sup>165</sup>

Given its contemporaneity with the novels of the *Trilogy*, this scene is striking in its move away from the objectless, indifferent hunger of the prose. Instead, the humour and the rhythm of the scene rely heavily on a subtle modulation between strongly held preference and undifferentiated homogeneity. Gogo's vehement refusal to eat turnips is set against Didi's apparent inability to distinguish them from carrots. Gogo is happy to assert in almost the same breath that the carrot is "a carrot," apparently indistinguishable from any other, and that it is also unforgettable. Such manoeuvres produce two major

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<sup>165</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Grove Centenary Edition: Volume III, Dramatic Works*, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 14 (hereafter cited in text as *DW*).

divergences from the hunger of the prose, signalling both the return of the object, however impoverished, and the return of preference, taste and discrimination, however arbitrary and contingent.

Unlike the careful counting and arranging of biscuits in *Murphy*, however, the staging of taste and preference in *Godot* is never a private affair (one might, in fact, question whether privacy is even an available concept for Didi and Gogo). Instead it is inherently social, structuring and regulating relationships and dialogue and providing the motivation for the clown-like exchange of turnips for carrots and for Didi's comic scramble through his coat. Far from isolating the characters in their private world of starvation, in *Godot* hunger and taste work hand-in-hand to create an occasion for the social. Moreover, in the context of the play, the sociality that they create is as formal as it is thematic, producing the rhythms for which *Godot* is known.<sup>166</sup>

A later scene, where Gogo begs for Pozzo's left-overs, clarifies this dynamic. By inserting themselves into Pozzo and Lucky's asymmetrical master-slave relationship, Didi and Gogo experience the sharing of food as the structuring dynamic of a hierarchical social world. Gogo, desperate to pick over Pozzo's discarded bones, is directed to seek Lucky's approval first: "in theory the bones go to the carrier" (*DW*, 21). Evoking a discourse of rights and entitlements that seems slightly obscene when applied to food scraps, Pozzo orchestrates a spectacle of pleading and relinquishment between his servant and Gogo. With Pozzo and Lucky's entrance, exchanges of food come to structure a stratified and hierarchical mini-society. As Allison Carruth argues, this was not merely theoretical in the France of the 1940s, where rations and food shortages were a persistent reality: "The dissimilarity between Estragon's and Pozzo's meals is so stark as to border on a caricature of social disparities during the period."<sup>167</sup> In a society in which food shortages persisted, Beckett stages a play in which the distribution of limited nutriment produces a theatre of social relations.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> It should, however, be noted that hunger is not privileged in this regard: it is simply one occasion among many.

<sup>167</sup> Allison Carruth, "War Rations and the Food Politics of Late Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 16, no. 4 (2009): 790.

<sup>168</sup> In fact, many critics have used food as the pivot on which to link *Waiting for Godot* to contemporary and historical social relations. James Knowlson, for instance, sees the turnips as reflective of Beckett and Suzanne's privation during World War II: Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 278; Andrew Gibson, in contrast, links the turnips to a cultural memory of the Irish Famine: Andrew Gibson, "Afterword: 'the Skull the Skull the Skull in Connemara': Beckett, Ireland, and Elsewhere," in *Beckett and Ireland*, ed. Seán Kennedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 190; for a more general account of *Godot* in

If, as Beckett has claimed at various times, *Waiting for Godot* was written as a respite from the exigencies and the pressures of writing the *Trilogy*, one way of conceiving of this respite might be as a retreat from the impossible labour of attempting to achieve the “ultimate penury” espoused by the “Three Dialogues.”<sup>169</sup> *Godot* clearly offers an alternate form of hunger, one which no longer attempts to banish the object or sever its relation with the subject. This reintroduction of the object allows various modes of relation to proliferate and become, if not central, then certainly structural: not only the subject’s desiring relation to the object, but also the interpersonal relations that the food object mediates and produces, and the hierarchical relation of object to other objects within this series (turnips to carrots; carrots, implicitly, to chicken bones). These various relations not only change the nature of hunger espoused by the protagonists, they transform the texture of the play itself, permitting exchanges, bargains, discussions and empty conversations, and the clowning physical comedy that accompanies them.

If *Godot* reintroduces relation, *Endgame* makes it both vicious and textual, preparing the way for its transformation in the late prose. Rejecting the absolutist art of hunger of the “Three Dialogues,” Hamm’s story resurrects the dialogues’ excluded figure of the “mere misery where destitute virtuous mothers may steal stale bread for their starving brats” (*D*, 143). In Hamm’s monologue, the mothers become fathers and they beg rather than steal, but the central figure of a desperate parent in search of “bread for his brat” remains—as does the vicious contempt with which they are treated (*DW*, 129). Hamm responds to the plea not with a (doomed) turn towards the ultimate penury but with an expression of the futility of all such gestures: “Use your head, can’t you, use your head, you’re on earth, there’s no cure for that!” (*DW*, 129). Both the scene and Hamm’s exasperated response are strikingly Schopenhauerian, recalling as in the “Three Dialogues” the German’s favourite image of the pointlessness of the will as “alms that keep the beggar alive today so that he may starve again tomorrow.”<sup>170</sup> Read in such a context, Hamm’s response takes the endless renewability of hunger as that which is fundamentally incurable in human life, as, in some sense, the essence of being on earth. But whereas “Three Dialogues” turns away from this fact in disgust, pleading instead for an “ultimate

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relation to World War II, which nonetheless still emphasises the link to food shortages, see Perloff, “Beckett’s War,” 80–88.

<sup>169</sup> Anthony Cronin quotes Beckett on this shift from the *Trilogy* to *Godot*. *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997), 390.

<sup>170</sup> Schopenhauer, *WWR*, 1:390, 196.

penury” that would surpass and redeem it, *Endgame* seems prepared to remain with this dismal reality. More than remain with it: Hamm takes this as the content for his “chronicle,” producing a quasi-literature not out of “ultimate penury” but, quite literally, out of the “mere misery” that sends a parent in search of “bread for his brat.”

The yoking of hunger to the interpersonal is intensified in the action of the play itself, in which the now paralysed and blind Hamm is locked in a situation of mutual dependence with Clov, who is mobile but lacks the code to the food cupboard:

HAMM	I'll give you nothing more to eat.
CLOV	Then we'll die.
HAMM	I'll give you just enough to keep you from dying. You'll be hungry all the time.
CLOV	Then we won't die. ( <i>DW</i> , 95)

The shift from Hamm’s “you” to Clov’s “we” reveals the basic interdependence that underpins Hamm and Clov’s relationship, the seamlessness with which the fate of either one of them is doomed to become the fate of both. Stanley Cavell, disputing that Hamm’s first statement is a threat, claims, “there are no more threats. It is a plain statement and Clov makes the inference; then Hamm negates the statement and Clov negates the conclusion. It is an exercise in pure logic; a spiritual exercise.”<sup>171</sup> Cavell is correct to a point, but of course other conclusions besides the one that has been presented could as easily have followed from Hamm’s statement. Clov’s “pure logic” is remarkable for its erasure of the individual and of the content of individual experience—“You’ll be hungry all the time”—in favour of a shared determination of life or death. The “pure logic” of this exchange binds Hamm and Clov’s fate inescapably together.

This sociality is grimmer and more inexorable than the one found in *Waiting for Godot*, where joy still attaches to eating and where Didi and Gogo, at least, exhibit the kind of vaguely affectionate companionship that is unimaginable in *Endgame*. Only Nagg and Nell really approach Didi and Gogo’s reciprocity, but although Nagg’s requests for food always include Nell (“One for me and one for—” [*DW*, 126]), they are repeatedly met with Nell’s silence or Hamm’s silencing. The relatively equal exchange of food between Didi and Gogo is suspended or aborted in *Endgame*. If these characters are bound

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<sup>171</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 126.

together by their shared privation, it is not in relations of mutuality but of vicious exploitation, hierarchy and aborted exchange. This state of affairs, however, only amplifies their co-dependence: as Adorno writes, “Even the outlines of Hamm and Clov are one line; they are denied the individuation of a tidily independent monad. They cannot live without each other.”<sup>172</sup> This last statement should be taken at its most literal: without each other, both Hamm and Clov will starve to death.

This maddening and enticing literalness is integral to the language of *Endgame*, a point made separately by both Cavell and Adorno in their otherwise very different readings of the play.<sup>173</sup> As Adorno’s analogy to Kafka reminds us, the literal has long been associated with starvation in modernist work, constituting the principal mode of the art of hunger for writers like Kafka. But if *Endgame*’s language relies on a perverse literality, the presence of food (perhaps predictably) complicates the literal by demanding repeatedly that language serve as a substitute for food. One could make this point in relation to Hamm and Clov’s exchanges, whose sharp awareness of a mutual dependence underwritten by the threat of starvation is at odds with the fact that neither Hamm nor Clov is ever seen actually eating anything. Their conversation, with its verbal threats of starvation, seems to stand in for the actual consumption of food that is understood to bind them together.

In contrast to *Godot*, where turnips, carrots, radishes, chicken and wine all appear and are consumed on stage, the circuits of food exchange in *Endgame* are purely hypothetical, purely linguistic. The only foodstuff to appear on stage is the biscuit given to Nagg (and refused by Nell), but even this appears as an inadequate and somewhat inedible substitute for the pap that was initially called for. More cruelly, Hamm procures an audience for his story by promising Nagg a sugar-plum, only to reveal, having completed his narration, that of course, “There are no more sugar-plums!” Nagg responds, resignedly:

Turkish Delight, for example, which no longer exists, we all know that, there is nothing in the world I love more. And one day I’ll ask you for some, in return for a kindness, and you’ll promise it to me. (*DW*, 132)

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<sup>172</sup> Theodor Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” trans. Michael T. Jones, *New German Critique* 26 (1982): 144.

<sup>173</sup> Cavell emphasises the “hidden literality” of Beckett’s language; Adorno sees Nagg and Nell’s trashcan-bound existence as an instance of “tak[ing] the conversational phrase literally, as in Kafka”: Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 119; Adorno, “*Endgame*,” 142.

Nagg's speech professes a fundamental ambivalence about the existence of Turkish Delight, moving without pause from establishing its non-existence, to speaking of it in the present tense as though it were "in the world," to implicitly acknowledging his own complicity in Hamm's deception. Neither sugar-plums nor Turkish Delight are successfully literalised by language, but their spectral presence in the play produces them out of a fictional exchange that renders their presence a purely linguistic artefact. In other words, their textual presence becomes an unsatisfying substitute for food itself, which simultaneously binds the characters together and ensures that their relationship is marred by the cruelty and the non-consummation of unfulfillable promises and perpetual starvation. In this sense, *Endgame* anticipates the combination of text-as-food with vicious sociality that marks the later prose.

## II. Hunger, Torture, Text: *How It Is*

Beckett's 1961 "novel" *Comment c'est*, published in its English translation as *How It Is* in 1964, marks the first fully accomplished manifestation of this new approach to an art of hunger. Unpunctuated but divided into short paragraphs and three main sections—"before Pim with Pim after Pim"—it describes an unnamed speaker's journey through the mud to find a companion, Pim, who he subsequently tortures into speech. Or perhaps doesn't, given that the novel implodes in the final lines, in a typical Beckettian move, denying the existence of everything except the mud and the speaker himself. This odd text—odd even within Beckett's *oeuvre*—represents his first sustained piece of prose since *The Unnamable* and the last until the comparatively slight *Nohow On* trilogy of *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho* in the 1980s.

As in so many of Beckett's post-war texts, starvation and food shortages are a persistent concern in *How It Is*. The speaker, like all inhabitants of this demi-world, drags with him a sack containing tins of food (mostly tinned fish, although there is at least one indication that some may contain cherries or olives) and a can-opener with which to open the tins. These objects, in a world in which objects are rare, are prized possessions and dominate large swathes of the text.<sup>174</sup> Although there is no obvious way of restocking the tins, this does not appear to pose a problem to the speaker: "my tins all

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<sup>174</sup> It is telling, in this sense, that Ruby Cohn's very early essay on *Comment c'est* is dominated by discussion of the connotations of sack, cord, can and can-opener: Ruby Cohn, "Comment C'est: De Quoi Rire," *The French Review* 35, no. 6 (1962): 563–69.

sorts dwindling but not so fast as appetite.”<sup>175</sup> In fact, the lack of appetite is a constant refrain, beginning as early as the second page where the observation “no appetite” is accompanied by the reassuring claim, more explicit in the English, “no need to worry I won’t die I’ll never die of hunger” (*HIII*, 8).<sup>176</sup> In part two “with Pim,” the speaker’s consumption of food dwindles further, while Pim himself refuses to eat and claims under questioning never to have eaten.

In lieu of eating, both Pim and the speaker drink the mud that surrounds them and through which they crawl. This action has a somewhat ambiguous relationship to the otherwise diminishing appetite that punctuates the text. Although it obviously constitutes some form of consumption, the “question is it nourishing” (*HIII*, 28) is never fully answered, leaving open the issue of whether the mud rises to the level of food. The beginning of part two brings a further complication, with “a supposition if this so-called mud were nothing more than all our shit” (*HIII*, 52). If that were the case, it would seem not only to answer the question of nourishment in the negative, but to place the drinking of mud at the heart of a closed and circular system of eating one’s own shit that parodies without properly replicating the act of food consumption.<sup>177</sup> As we shall see, this circularity, which echoes but radically extends and renders self-sustaining the closed systems of the plays, will become central to the aesthetic strategy of Beckett’s late prose.

Drinking the mud, however, has an aesthetic that is not entirely assimilable to the closed system that otherwise emerges in *How It Is*. This act produces a series of “images” or “vistas” which proliferate in part one.<sup>178</sup> As projections of the imagination and as sharply defined, highly visual compositions, these “vistas” have a clear aesthetic quality. Tied to memory, this aesthetic retains a tenuous, almost parodic connection to the human (“thirst abating humanity regained”), even as its capacity to offer glimpses of the

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<sup>175</sup> Samuel Beckett, *How It Is* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 17 (hereafter cited in text as *HIII*).

<sup>176</sup> The French reads “inappétence ... allons j’en ai j’en aurai toujours pour un moment” - roughly, “I have I will always have a moment left” - which omits both the direct reference to death and its overt connection to hunger: Samuel Beckett, *Comment C’est* (Paris: Minuit, 1961), 11.

<sup>177</sup> The interest in scatology, waste, excess and its relation to the unassimilable, as well as the closed nature of a system that is capable of incorporating even its own shit, are strongly reminiscent of the work of Georges Bataille. Although I unfortunately do not have space to elaborate on this link, it has been discussed elsewhere, particularly in relation to Beckett’s *Trilogy* and *Fin de Partie*. See for example: Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Bataille, Beckett, Blanchot: From the Impossible to the Unknowing,” *Journal of Beckett Studies* 21, no. 1 (2012): 56–64; Peter Fifield, “‘Accursed Progenitor!’: *Fin de Partie* and Georges Bataille,” *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 22 (2010): 107–121.

<sup>178</sup> “sometimes in this position a fine image”; “I fill my mouth with it that can happen too it’s another of my resources last a moment with that and question if swallowed would it nourish and opening of vistas they are good moments”: Beckett, *How It Is*, 27, 28.

world “above in the light”—often interpreted as memories of the speaker’s past life—implies its production of a partial view of a subject. As Jonathan Boulter has argued, they “instantiate a fairly clear and readable conventional ‘life’,” in contrast to the life lived in the mud.<sup>179</sup> They therefore permit both a kind of proto-art and a proto-subject, neither of which can be fully assimilated into the world of the mud that forms the core of the text. At the same time, the images are, in many cases, quite obviously drawn from Beckett’s own past—as Hugh Kenner notes, one even describes a scene of a young Beckett kneeling before his mother, which appears in a photograph that Beckett allowed to be reproduced several times in his lifetime.<sup>180</sup> As such, the act of drinking the mud establishes two initial, quite different aesthetic modes: a visually oriented one, produced by drinking, focused around images, and capable of producing a subject; and the mud itself, a tactile and aural mode, implicated in a fading of the subject.

Back in the mud, the tins remain the key to nourishment. Nonetheless, despite its centrality, many otherwise excellent critics of *How It Is* have struggled to account for—or perhaps even to notice—the importance of food to the text. Most strikingly, John Pilling and James Knowlson read the tins as film canisters despite their being clearly described as containing food not film, while Leslie Hill attributes to the tinned fish and the can-opener “an air of gratuitous irrelevance.”<sup>181</sup> Both these critics struggle to find a place for food and starvation within readings that emphasise either images linked to a mode of asceticism (Pilling and Knowlson) or performative textuality (Hill) as central to the novel.

In an interesting sense, though, their emphasis on the irrelevance of the tins, or (in the former case) on the ease with which they can be assimilated into a mode of representation is extremely telling, for the shortages of food in *How It Is* are immediately supplemented by a growing insistence that quasi-textual artefacts can serve as an adequate substitute, that words too can nourish. This substitutive logic first appears in part two, where the speaker’s torture of Pim allows him to “drink the screams” (*HII*, 53). The trope of drinking or eating sound recurs repeatedly through the text: listening to Pim’s watch ticking, the speaker “drink[s] it for a moment” (*HII*, 58) and later “drink[s]

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<sup>179</sup> Jonathan Boulter, “‘A Word from Me and I Am Again’: Repetition and Suffering in Samuel Beckett’s *How It Is*,” *LIT: Literature Interpretation Theory* 9, no. 1 (1998): 90.

<sup>180</sup> Hugh Kenner, *A Reader’s Guide to Samuel Beckett* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973), 140.

<sup>181</sup> James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (London: Calder, 1979), 64, 65; Leslie Hill, *Beckett’s Fiction: In Different Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 138.

deep of the seconds delicious moments and vistas” (*HIII*, 59); he “gorge[s] on [Pim’s] fables” (*HIII*, 62); and twice at different moments the English refers to “food for thought” (*HIII*, 14, 91).<sup>182</sup> The aesthetic provides an important connecting thread for these various images. The reference to “vistas” links drinking sound to drinking mud, and implies that both have the capacity to produce the aestheticised visions discussed above. The phrase “food for thought” provides another such link, echoing Kant’s account of the nourishment for the understanding that he attributes to poetry.<sup>183</sup>

By the end of part three, this principle of sound as food has been formulated as a general rule:

for the likes of us and no matter how we are recounted there is more nourishment in a cry nay a sigh torn from one whose only good is silence or in speech extorted from one at last delivered from its use than sardines can ever offer (*HIII*, 143)

The claim that the screams are nourishing makes them more sustaining than the mud (“question is it nourishing” [*HIII*, 28]), and inserts the cries into the food economy of *How It Is*, where they seem to stand in as a viable mode of sustenance, despite the obvious reality that anyone who lives only on screams is inevitably dead or dying of starvation. This sense is reinforced by the fact that the passage places the scream-fed characters in an ambiguous ontological space, emphasising their existence as “recounted”—or, in other words, textual—beings while alluding to the possibility of an existence that, invariable across various accounts, is not fully bound to language. Screams, in other words, stand in for food but only for creatures who might already be text.

It is tempting to read this passage as establishing a closed circuit of self-sustaining textuality, following the closed circuit of nourishment produced by eating the mud-as-shit, but it must be emphasised that the crucial element here is less the signifying nature

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<sup>182</sup> The French—“matière à réflexion”—retains the materiality but not necessarily the sense of consumption: Beckett, *Comment C’est*, 17, 112.

<sup>183</sup> “The poet’s promise, on the contrary, is a modest one, and a mere play with ideas is all he holds out to us, but he accomplishes something worthy of being made a serious business, namely, the using of play to provide food for the understanding, and the giving life to its concepts by means of the imagination”: Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, 150; the German original also uses this metaphor: “Der Dichter dagegen verspricht wenig und kündigt ein bloßes Spiel mit Ideen an, leistet aber etwas, das eines Geschäftes würdig ist, nämlich dem Verstande spielend Nahrung zu verschaffen und seinen Begriffen durch Einbildungskraft Leben zu geben”: Immanuel Kant, *Kritik Der Urteils kraft* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1954), 177.

of the sounds—they span “cry,” “sigh” and “speech”—than their extortion from silence. In other words, it is not so much language or text that provides this sustenance, but the rupturing of silence in pain that, in *How It Is*, comes only from violent sociality, however provisional the alterity of the other (for we must remember the threatened collapse of Pim and his screams back into the narrator’s imagining).<sup>184</sup> Pim, according to Ruby Cohn, “is the can opened by this instrument [the can-opener], and his words are the sustenance that is disgorged.”<sup>185</sup> Central to this formulation is the presence of the other, and it represents a radicalisation of the food-mediated sociality of *Godot* and *Endgame*, and the closed system of social relations that this engenders: in *How It Is*, that closed system becomes self-sustaining insofar as the speaker can feed off the verbalised suffering of his companion. The characters are not locked together in a doomed relation of mutual dependence, but in a newly predatory relation of mutual (given the fact that the process is cyclical and that all will serve as tormentor and tormented) exploitation.

One way of figuring this self-sustaining system of language-as-food is to consider the text itself as a process of digestion. Cohn alludes to this possibility in a passing reference to the text’s “peristaltic” rhythms, but it is Daniela Caselli who most fully develops a reading of “the ‘top to bottom’ digestive circularity of the text, in which shit and vomit are food and nourishment,” resulting ultimately in the claim that “The text is the process of digestion: it feeds, regurgitates and expels language as matter and matter as language.”<sup>186</sup> Caselli’s reading is astute, drawing both the eating of mud and the drinking of screams into a single system that accounts for the self-enclosed circularity of the text and its ambivalence around questions of language and matter. I want to hold onto these insights, without fully succumbing to the temptation of the neatness of either system or metaphor.

One reason for this reservation is that the metaphor of the digestive text, while compelling, tells only half the story. The other half returns us squarely to the art of hunger and to the shrinking appetites with which we began. While the repetitive rhythms

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<sup>184</sup> Bersani and Dutoit include a long discussion of sociality in *How It Is*, emphasising its centrality for understanding this text. This is underscored by their publication of their discussion of this text under the heading “Beckett’s Sociability” just prior to the publication of *Arts of Impoverishment*: Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, 55–65; Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, “Beckett’s Sociability,” *Raritan* 12, no. 1 (1992): 1–19.

<sup>185</sup> Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 238.

<sup>186</sup> Cohn, “Comment C’est,” 564; Daniela Caselli, *Beckett’s Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 169, 176.

of the text may well suggest peristalsis, its commentary on them takes us in a somewhat different direction. Reflecting on his own language, the speaker observes “I talk like him I do we’re talking of me like him little blurts midget grammar” (*HIII*, 76). This “midget grammar,” I suggest, can be understood only in the context of the speaker’s own body, which we hear earlier weighs “four stone five stone” (*HIII*, 39). The connection between this physical slightness, which might already imply starvation, and both a lack of food and an overall shrinking of the body is made explicit towards the beginning of part one, where the speaker projects himself into the increasingly tin-less future:

centuries I can see me quite tiny the same as now more or less only tinier quite tiny no more objects no more food and I live the air sustains me the mud I live on (*HIII*, 17)

The implication of this passage is clearly that the speaker’s shrinking frame is linked to his shrinking diet, ultimately tending towards an ever-tinier version of himself capable of living off mud alone. If this is the case, then the “midget grammar” that characterises the uniform speech of the mud-bound is presumably by extension a speech produced by their own starvation.

The “midget grammar” translates the “grammaire d’oiseau” (bird grammar) of the French, which clearly loses the connection to the protagonist’s slight stature. Nonetheless, birds have a strong idiomatic connection to small appetites, both in the English expression “to eat like a bird” and in the French versions, “manger comme un oiseau” or “comme un moineau” (literally, to eat like a bird or like a sparrow) and “avoir l’appétit d’un oiseau” (to have the appetite of a bird). Moreover, this is a connection that Beckett had already exploited extensively in the *Trilogy*, where we hear that Molloy “ate like a thrush” (*T*, 53), that Moran’s chickens are refusing to eat (*T*, 101), that Malone has “all sorts of birds” at his window which come “asking for food ... I never give them anything” (*T*, 185), and that Macmann overhears “the dreadful cries of the gulls that evening assembles, in paroxysms of hunger, round the outflow of the sewers” (*T*, 230). In this context, the “grammaire d’oiseau” of the French, like the “midget grammar” of the English, creates a clear link between the waning of appetite and the grammar of the text.

If this is the case, then *How It Is/Comment c’est* offers itself as Beckett’s first real attempt to bring hunger together with aesthetic or textual concerns. Significantly, it achieves this

rapprochement not by abstaining from all consumption and retreating into a resolute hermeticism, as seemed the likely outcome of the texts of the late 1940s, but instead by limiting eating and drinking to a series of self-referential, non-nutritive acts, including the eating of one's own shit and the drinking of another's screams. In this sense, Caselli is right to insist on the text's digestive tendencies. But if the text digests, it digests nothing, for the words, screams and refuse that it ingests are all either pre-digested or immaterial.

As we might imagine, this has significant ramifications for the status of the aesthetics of hunger as it emerged in Beckett's earlier writing. Where the "Three Dialogues" praised the prospect of an "ultimate penury" that would sever the artist from his occasion to produce an art devoid of object, *How It Is* improvises a proxy for this system that still allows art, speech, even language to go on. Relation, like eating, re-emerges in *How It Is* as fundamental to the aesthetic artefact, but because it is ultimately self-referential and self-enclosed it puts its very relationality into question. The circularity of the digestive process blurs the line between a relation with an other, a relation with or within the self, and a self-contained, self-sustaining monad devoid of all relation. The traces of this ambivalence are felt within the text in the uncertain ontology of everything beyond the speaker himself and the mud that produces the circularity of the system. *How It Is* insists on both the presence of Pim and other objects of relation, and their ultimate collapse back into the unitary subject. By doing so, it allows the aesthetic possibilities of relationality to remain provisional but vital.

The closed system of *How It Is* might be understood as an attempt to preserve the radical autonomy of "Three Dialogues," without either succumbing to the inevitable paralysis of hermeticism, or, as in *The Unnamable*, being overcome with disgust at the impossibility of the purely hermetic. Instead, *How It is* stages autonomy as self-consumption, producing an endless cycle that is autonomous in the sense of not permitting the intrusion of objects that are not also the subject or the expulsion of waste that might become its own entity. So complete is the autonomy of *How It Is* that even the author is denied a status beyond the text, instead casting his own production as a subject as a textual effect of the autobiographical images that are produced out of the mud and thus out of the internal logic of the text itself.

Self-consumption is how *How It Is* manages to move so decisively beyond (or around) the disgust of *The Unnamable*, an affect that is remarkably absent in the later text. This is all the more notable given that *How It Is* is not only punctuated with “digusting” scenes of shit and vomit, but also employs precisely the ventriloquised narrative voice that *The Unnamable* cast as force-feeding and found so repulsive. The narrator of *How It Is* repeatedly refers to his speech as citation: the very first paragraph reads, “how it was I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it” (HII, 7), and the text returns frequently to the refrains “I quote” and “I say it as I hear it.” This not only marks the speech as the possibly coerced adoption of a foreign voice—the ventriloquism that the disgusted Unnamable transforms into vomit—it also takes that ventriloquism as constitutive of the text itself. If this does not give rise to disgust, it is because the text’s logic ensures that the “foreignness” of the quoted voice is only provisional. Central to the collapse, at the novel’s end, of all textual features back into the single voice is the denial of the quoted voice entirely: “my voice yes mine yes not another’s no mine alone yes sure yes” (HII, 146). Both Kant’s account of disgust and *The Unnamable*’s disgusted reaction to the force-fed voice take the disgusting object to be another capable of “obtruding” itself on a disgusted subject. *How It Is*, in contrast, by casting the otherness of the object into doubt, stages the scene of disgust without experiencing it.

In the *Trilogy*, the presence of disgust was significant because it revealed not only the insistence of an object, but the end of indifference and the return to a strongly held, if entirely negative, regime of preference and discrimination. In *How It Is*, this indifference returns, appearing early in the novel in relation to food:

the fingers deceived the mouth resigned to an olive and given a cherry but no preference no searching not even for a language meet for me meet for here no more searching (HII, 17)

If this professed lack of preference is familiar to us in relation to food (think of the indifference that habitually attends encounters with food in *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*), the shift from a lack of culinary discrimination to a lack of linguistic discrimination is certainly new. Significantly, it seems to modify Beckett’s early, modernist equation of form and content, refusing to fit language to character or setting (the French—“ni un langage à ma mesure à la mesure d’ici”—similarly emphasises fit between language and content). One way of understanding this shift is to return to a later expansion on the “I

say it as I hear it” refrain: “say what you hear see what you say say you see it” (*Hill*, 105). If vision is produced by language and specifically by the dictating voice, then it no longer makes sense to speak of a language “meet for me meet for here.” On the contrary, it is language that produces the “me” and the “here” and in this sense the “meetness” of the linguistic choices is a matter of indifference. Form is not dictated by content but the reverse: Beckett’s late indifference emerges as a mode of high formalism.

This indifference can be felt in the text’s distinctive form. Both *How It Is* and *Comment c’est* are entirely unpunctuated, with small phrasal sense units instead organising meaning. As Hill observes, these units, while not devoid of sense, do tend to omit “hierarchical relations between clauses or phrases.”<sup>187</sup> The result is a text composed of a highly simplified grammar whose key feature is a relative sameness of individual components, and whose interpretability relies heavily on recapitulation, repetition and recombination. The grammar of *How It Is* therefore starts to feel remarkably similar to the permutations and combinations that characterise descriptions of, for example, Molloy’s sucking stones—permutations that, in their lack of preference, their lack of hierarchy, and their deferral of consumption, I have already associated with the emergence of an art of hunger. In *How It Is*, this non-hierarchical, indifferent permutational mode becomes the decisive textual feature, inscribing the art of hunger at the level of form. That part three is devoted almost entirely to establishing and then negating the mud-bound world of the text as an enormous permutational chain of being underscores the centrality of permutation to *How It Is*, as well as its tendency to produce textual situations as a side effect of formal modes.

The parsing of these units relies on their organisation according, in part, to verbal rhythms, and as a result, the production of meaning requires the reader to speak the text or imagine it spoken. Given the significance of the motif of citation to the text’s indifferent narrative voice, this necessary verbalisation implicates the reader from the outset in the processes of proliferation and collapse of narrative and textual voices. The reader of the text becomes another iteration of the voice that “say[s] it as I hear it.” This is of course a voice whose very independence is, as we have seen, cast into question, and in this context, Hill’s suggestion that “It is almost as though *Comment c’est* wants to do

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<sup>187</sup> Hill, *In Different Words*, 136.

without a reader” is apposite.<sup>188</sup> This strategy, however, produces a formal manifestation of a problem that has plagued writers of the art of hunger since its outset. Both Hamsun and Kafka sought to exclude the reader or observer from their process of artistic production and ended by instead folding this response into the art object. Beckett reiterates this solipsistic art that requires an active reader, but does so, not at the level of the spectacle of the malnourished body, but through the text’s form, through the spectacle of its “midget grammar.” In this way, the reader, newly implicated in the autonomous text, compromises the text’s autonomy even as the text itself seeks to erase the reader by reproducing it as one of its own voices.

*How It Is* therefore marks the first comprehensive formal embodiment of the art of hunger, the first attempt to consider what a starving text, rather than a text’s representation of a starving body, would look like. By reconceiving aesthetic autonomy to permit a self-consuming relationality, and aesthetic indifference as a pervasive characteristic of the texts, *How It Is* is able to offer a response to the impasse of *The Unnamable* that ends not in an art of hunger conceived as radical silence, as the end of all language, but an art of hunger torn violently from the silence of an imagined companion and embodied in the text’s very form. It produces aesthetic autonomy as formalism and self-consumption, the ultimate collapse of the text into a single voice whose very grammar is governed by the logic of non-consumption.

The result, as we have seen time and again in this thesis, is an aesthetic that takes us to the very edge of aesthetics. Maurice Blanchot, in *The Infinite Conversation* describes *How It Is* as a text that voids aesthetic judgement, assigning it to:

a category of works that go unrecognized more through praise than through disparagement: to deprecate them is to come into contact with the force of refusal that has rendered them present and also with the remoteness that gives them their measure. If the strongest attraction, the deepest concern could be expressed through indifference, then indifference would indicate to what level these lead.<sup>189</sup>

In effect, Blanchot is suggesting that *How It Is* refuses aesthetic judgement by embodying an excess of the very principle on which that judgement was, for Kant, supposed to be

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>189</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 328.

founded. This strong mode of indifference—not merely a Kantian disinterest that allows true distinctions to be made, but a pervasive and, in fact, profoundly affective indifference—could be understood as the aesthetic mode of the art of hunger.

*How It Is* in fact offers two interrelated and, in the context of this text, mutually supporting approaches to an art of hunger. The first, the production of the text and its world as a closed system that consumes itself, substitutes self-consumption for true starvation and thereby emphasises autonomy as the supreme goal of the art of hunger. This mode has a genealogy that can be traced through the plays and it emphasises the inescapability, even desirability of social relations, even if imagined, and of consumption, if only of words. The second, centred around the refusal of preference, judgement and consumption at a thematic and formal level, more clearly continues earlier traditions of the art of hunger and particularly those found in Beckett's own novels of the 1940s. It emphasises indifference as the operative element of the art of hunger and continues earlier permutational modes of achieving this. In *How It Is*, these two modes constitute two largely integrated systems, despite occasional points where a certain feature, interpretable in either mode, risks pitting them against each other, as in, for example, the availability of textual repetition as an example of both peristalsis and thus the text's self-digestion, and permutational deferral and thus the text's self-starvation.

### III. Gnawing On: *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*

*How It is* is the last prose text by Beckett to feature what we might call “inhabited” bodies, that is, bodies that declare their relation to a subject, or that exhibit clear features of agency or consciousness. When Coetzee dismisses these late texts as “disembodied” and its voices as “post-mortem,” he is clearly not speaking of an absence of bodies in these later works, for they are nothing if not littered with human forms.<sup>190</sup> Instead, he is protesting the severance of human form from voice, vision, mind, all the ordinary vestiges of humanity. Whereas *How It Is* offers a speaker with a body and a companion who can be tortured into speech, these apparently self-evident features become increasingly rare in Beckett's later works. In their place, we are offered textualised voices without obvious body and inert or automated bodies with no capacity for speech and only the most vestigial traces of life. This situation poses an obvious difficulty for

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<sup>190</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, ed. David Atwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 23 (hereafter cited in text as *DP*).

continuing to think about hunger, for it seems unfathomable that these bodies, largely inanimate and lacking an “inside” in any sense of the term, should be bound to the ordinary human need to eat. Nonetheless, while it is true that accounts of eating and professions of hunger are radically diminished in the late prose works, there remains a surprising persistence of tropes related to starvation and consumption, far beyond the point where it seems possible to imagine the semi-animate bodies that populate the texts eating, living or dying. As we will see, this is particularly true of *Worstward Ho* (1983), Beckett’s last major contribution to prose fiction.

*Worstward Ho* is preceded by *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the second installment of *Nobow On*, published in 1981 in both the original French (as *Mal vu mal dit*) and Beckett’s English translation. Where *Company*, the first book of the so-called ‘second trilogy’ has only limited interest in food or starvation, *Ill Seen Ill Said* makes a paradoxical mode of satiation one of its central categories, in both a continuation of *How It Is*’s dynamics of self-consumption and an anticipation of the “gnawing” of *Worstward Ho*. For *Ill Seen Ill Said*, this takes the form of a predatory visual relationship: the text describes a spectral woman pursued by an eye that seeks to fix her in its gaze and that she repeatedly evades by unexpected disappearances and unpredictable returns.

The predatory has a long history in Beckett’s late work. There are faint intimations of it in the torture scenes of *How It Is*, but it is in works of the early 1960s that preying emerges as an explicit preoccupation. Beckett’s 1964 film *Film* pioneers this mode, in its depiction of a frantic Buster Keaton running desperately from the pursuit of the camera’s gaze. This film inaugurates a link between preying and seeing, or what Beckett in his 1965 short prose piece “Imagination Dead Imagine” calls the “eye of prey.”<sup>191</sup> The gaze that pursues the old woman of *Ill Seen Ill Said* continues this tradition of predatory vision as a central category for Beckett. Preying is of course intimately connected to sight, as expressions like “eagle-eyed” imply. Traditionally, though, these expressions take the eye as a tool that facilitates the act of preying; Beckett’s “eye of prey,” in contrast, makes it the agent, implying that the eye itself is a kind of predator. Preying, of course, must be understood as a kind of prelude to eating one’s prey, an action directed toward eating, toward consumption, without having yet achieved it. In this context, the “eye of prey” offers a visual correlate to the aural act of “drinking the screams” that we saw in *How It*

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<sup>191</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 185.

*Is*, in that it seems to prepare the way for the sense of sight (like the sense of hearing in the earlier text) to merge into the sense of taste. Beckett therefore threatens to merge what Kant classified as the objective, mediate senses, those most suited to the aesthetic, into taste, a subjective, immediate one. Nonetheless, unlike *How It Is*, the “eye of prey” can only threaten this, for it suspends the act of consumption in perpetual pursuit.

It is in this context that *Ill Seen Ill Said* forges a connection between the act of eating or satiation and the process of disappearance, as in a paragraph midway through the novella that painstakingly describes the spectral woman eating—surprising not least of all because we have already been told she is dead—before she abruptly disappears, with her spoon poised to leave her bowl of slop. As it approaches its conclusion, this connection is strengthened by an emerging association between the interjection “Enough”—a word that both in English and in the French “Assez” can be used to express culinary satiation—and disappearance. The speaker terminates a description of a faintly changed smile with “Enough. Away” and exclaims some pages later:

Enough. Quicker. Quick see how all in keeping with the chair. Minimally less. No more. Well on the way to inexistence. As to zero the infinite.<sup>192</sup>

“Enough” in *Ill Seen Ill Said* signifies a point at which the voice can turn from the object at hand towards vanishing and reduction. In a context where eating is clearly no longer life-sustaining (for there is no more life to sustain), Beckett seems to be transforming satiation into a mode of completion that can lead to the text’s final disappearance.

These intimations reach their fullest conclusion in the text’s closing lines, where textual self-consumption emerges as the merciful end point:

First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness. (*NO*, 86)

This oddly subject-less act of “devouring” seems to imagine the text as the self-consuming remains of its own consumption, an impossibly circular situation that somehow accomplishes an act of total erasure through eating. This is, then, the final

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<sup>192</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Nobow On: Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), 82 (hereafter cited in text as *NO*).

achievement both of *How It Is* as a process of self-digestion and of earlier passages in *Ill Seen Ill Said* that describe satiation, gluttony or eating as a mode of disappearance. The final lines are strongly reminiscent of Schopenhauer's nihilistic conclusion to the *World as Will and Representation*, pointing to the desired achievement of a state of nothing in which everything, even the will, will finally be silent. Where Schopenhauer imagines this state coming about by progressively more severe acts of asceticism, always with the goal of renouncing or silencing the will as the animating feature of all, the Beckett of *Ill Seen Ill Said* seems to do precisely the opposite, taking eating—one of the great manifestations of the will—as the primary agent of asceticism. In this respect, the absence of the devouring subject is crucial, because it allows Beckett to portray this final erasure as unwilled, as if it were merely the result of the will's own desire or own impulse turning violently in on itself. Beckett's final act of consumption, which can only be a mode of ideal eating, makes the satiation of "basta" indistinguishable from the emptiness of the void. In this sense, by effacing the subject and by textualising food, self-devouring in Beckett's late works comes to produce comparable results to hunger in the "Three Dialogues" and in Schopenhauer.

*Worstward Ho*, the final book in the *Nobow On* trilogy, can usefully be read against this backdrop of neo-Schopenhauerian devouring. Like much of Beckett's prose after *Endgame*, this short, cryptic late work recasts consumption and its opposites as subjectless and purely textual phenomena, now entirely divorced from even the spectral acts of eating in *Ill Seen Ill Said*. Only four paragraphs in to *Worstward Ho*, we have this confirmed for us:

First the body. No. First the place. No. First both. Now either. Now the other. Sick of the either try the other. Sick of it back sick of the either. So on. Somehow on. Till sick of both. Throw up and go. Where neither. Till sick of there. Throw up and back... Fail worse again. Still worse again. Till sick for good. Throw up for good. Go for good. (*NO*, 90)

This repeated process of "sick of" leading to "throw up" turns on the quasi-literalisation of the idiom "sick of," as though it could literally cause one to vomit. But, as in the devouring that concludes *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the act of throwing up has no clear subject. Instead, the act of vomiting can only be conceptualised as a textual response to a linguistic feature, an entirely disembodied and depersonalised action. In this context, it is notable that the body here, far from being the vomiting subject, is actually the object of

this agentless action, reduced to the textual effect of a textual event. For this reason, the disgust whose diminishment we observed in *How It Is* is further dissipated here, and the vomit that caused such intense desperation in *The Unnamable* becomes merely one in a set of textual variables designed—as in *How It Is*—to reinforce indifference.

Nonetheless, as in *How It Is*, the formal indifference of *Worstward Ho* is not fully realised in the text as a whole, which, like the earlier text, pursues a range of strategies for approaching the art of hunger. In *Worstward Ho*, perhaps the most noticeable is the return of “preying” as a category. To the term’s existing ambivalence—as noted above, it is both preparatory to eating and capable of endlessly deferring the act of consumption—is added a characteristic syntactic ambiguity, which muddies the question of agency. “Preying” appears in *Worstward Ho* in connection to each of the text’s three “shades”: first the “one”, in the guise of the bones, later revealed as an old woman; then the “twain,” a couple comprised of old man and young boy seen in these passages to be walking without apparent movement; finally the “skull” and then its “stare.” The first two appearances of the term make it unclear whether the predator is shade or voice:

First say the bones. On back to them. Preying since first said on foresaid remains.  
(NO, 96)

That said on back to try worse say the plodding twain. Preying since last worse  
on foresaid remains. But what not on them preying? What seen? What said?  
What of all seen and said not on them preying? (NO, 105)

The refrain “Preying on foresaid remains” could refer equally to an action performed by the shades, or to the operation of the text itself, returning to “prey” on first the bones then the twain. The ambiguity, a function of the absence of a clearly defined subject, allows “preying” to tend towards a general state of affairs until, at the end of the second quotation, this generalisation becomes explicit and preying becomes the province of “all seen and said.”

Such a worldview is openly Schopenhauerian, but whereas *Ill Seen Ill Said* concludes with Schopenhauer’s reimagined nirvana, *Worstward Ho* instead reflects his bleak portrayal of a world animated entirely by an endlessly striving will. A long passage on “longing” offers another variation on this Schopenhauerian theme:

Longing the so-said mind long lost to longing. The so-missaid. So far so-missaid. Dint of long longing lost to longing. Long vain longing. And longing still. Faintly longing still. Faintly vainly longing still. For fainter still. For faintest. Faintly vainly longing for the least of longing. Unlessenable least of longing. Unstillable vain last of longing still.

Longing that all go. Dim go. Void go. Longing go. Vain longing that vain longing go. (NO, 109)

This passage seems to experiment with linguistic tricks to annihilate longing: first, by punning on “still” as a token of both longing’s prolongation and its end; then, by reducing longing to nothing, making it ever “fainter”; finally, by turning longing against itself in the “longing” that “longing go,” a variation on the self-consumption that has proved moderately successful in earlier texts. In each case, however, the attempt to still longing fails, as marked by the introduction of “vain” into each formulation. Longing may never be consummated, but it is also incurable, a perfect manifestation of the Schopenhauerian will and singularly resistant to the “worsening” that is the text’s central impetus.

To the extent that hunger can be assimilated to a mode of longing or of preying, it is clearly implicated in the central problem of *Worstward Ho*. Nonetheless, this is a very different mode of hunger to the objectless penury advocated in the “Three Dialogues.” The latter offers hunger as a suspension of Schopenhauer’s incessant willing, whereas the longing and preying in *Worstward Ho* are ceaseless precisely because they seem to be animated by a will. But while they do not constitute the perfect severance of subject from object, neither longing nor preying in this text can be understood as defining a straightforward relation between subject and object. These texts instead present longing and preying as abstract principles of relation, making relationality possible without making it necessarily manifest.

The problem of *Worstward Ho*, then, is that whatever indifference, whatever nausea, whatever permutation the text seeks to introduce, longing and preying persist. Worse, in many cases they clearly motivate precisely the combinatorial textual modes that I have been associating with indifference. In this context, where neither indifference (the denial of all relation) nor nausea (the refusal of an enforced relation) can successfully still longing or suspend preying, Beckett is forced to adopt a new and provisional strategy, one based on a modified and suspended mode of self-consumption:

All always faintly preying. Worse for naught. Worser for naught. No less than when but bad all always faintly preying. Gnawing.

Gnawing to be gone. Less no good. Worse no good. Only one good. Gone. Gone for good. Till then gnaw on. All gnaw on. To be gone. (*NO*, 112)

In the wake of the despair of realising that preying too is unstillable, that even the process of worsening is to no avail, this passage modulates “preying” to “gnawing.” Taken literally, gnawing represents an advance on preying, moving closer to the actual act of consumption that is preying’s goal. Nonetheless, gnawing is not exactly eating, for it implies both an interminability and a refusal of consumption or digestion that are antithetical to true eating. Taken figuratively, gnawing has a whole other set of connotations that may place it closer to longing, for it suggests a persistent desire whose consummation is in doubt. Moreover, like longing and preying, gnawing is intransitive and Beckett exploits this combination of present participle and intransitivity to efface the subject and muddy the nature of the object.

Gnawing, however, has one clear advantage over both longing and preying: while the latter both leave the undefined object intact and untouched until the moment of consummation, gnawing is an operation that works on the object, slowly wearing it away. In this sense, it is a form of chewing that suspends ingestion, “eating up” the object without “eating” it. Thus, the phrase “Gnawing to be gone”—or, later, “gnawing to be naught” (*NO*, 115)—has an ambiguity that the other verbs lack: it may mean either “desiring that the object be gone,” or “gnawing in order to make the object be gone.” Gnawing therefore includes both hopelessly willed relationality and an operation capable of destroying that relation in the same (non-consuming) gesture. At the same time, though, gnawing can never achieve “naught” or “gone,” precisely because it can wear down but never fully erase. Gnawing, in other words and despite the protestations in the above passage, is a form of will-driven worsening.

In its progression from preying and longing to gnawing, *Worstward Ho* seems to move abortively towards the sudden act of self-consumption that brought *Ill Seen Ill Said* to a close. But *Worstward Ho* ends quite differently, not in self-consumption but in a sudden moment of satiated distancing—“Enough. Sudden enough. Sudden all far”—that seems to finally suspend the inexorable process of worsening, leading at last to the “Nohow

less. Nohow worse. Nohow naught. Nohow on” prophesied in the opening (*NO*, 116). Instead of consuming itself until all that is left is void, *Worstward Ho* surrenders the naught in favour of a suspension of all movement and progress, even a progress towards the worst. In so doing, it renounces gnawing, preying and longing as terms, and finally achieves the “still.”

Nonetheless, just as *How It Is* does not erase itself by its closing claim that there is only the speaker, alone in the mud, *Worstward Ho* as a text is animated not by this final stasis but by the impossible struggle to reach it. In this sense, Peter Poiana’s claim that this ending implies “a conception of art as the maintenance of distance” could not be further from the truth: distance in Beckett does not constitute art so much as brings it successfully to a close.<sup>193</sup> What remains for us is not the distance that ends art but the worsening that is its substance—a worsening that, I think, with Bersani and Dutoit, is also a gnawing: “The ‘say on’ of *Worstward Ho* is a ‘gnawing on’; it eats at what it refers to.”<sup>194</sup> This is an operation that works in and through language and form, both through repetitions and recapitulations, which function here not as an indifferent permutation but as a restless attempt to wear away the semantic surface of the words themselves, and through the syntactical ambiguities and puns that I have analysed above. Gnawing is language’s attempt to undo language, the text’s attempt to worsen its world.

This gnawing, as I have observed, is not exactly self-consumption. Where *How It Is* portrayed a world that could fully integrate waste into its system, *Worstward Ho*’s gnawing always leaves an indigestible remnant, an “unlessenable least.” *Worstward Ho* strives to be less object than process, less unlessenable least than interminable lessening towards least.<sup>195</sup> This is true not only of the operations that it performs, but of the operations that it asks the reader to perform. In contrast to *How It Is* where the permutational language increased the transparency and readability of the text, in *Worstward Ho*, the permutations actively obscure meaning, making sentences increasingly difficult to parse. To decode the text, therefore, requires our own readerly gnawing, a process of endless reading and re-reading, parsing and reparsing, not on a given “unlessenable least” but towards a presumed “least” of transparent meaning. The text, in this sense, does insist forcefully on

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<sup>193</sup> Peter Poiana, “The On-Tology of Beckett’s *Nohow On*,” *SubStance* 38, no. 2 (2009): 151.

<sup>194</sup> Bersani and Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment*, 83.

<sup>195</sup> In this sense, I am inclined to agree with Shane Weller’s caution against fully identifying such a remnant with the text itself: *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (London: Legenda, 2005), 194.

its own material and semantic existence, but as a process of gnawing, not as final state guarding against nihilism.

Since Alain Badiou's enormously influential essay "Being, Existence, Thought," which reads this novella "as a short, philosophical treatise, as a treatment in shorthand of the question of being," *Worstward Ho* has been persistently read as a metaphysical account of being and non-being.<sup>196</sup> While these readings, particularly Badiou's own, are often dazzlingly brilliant, they tend to assume almost the opposite of what I have claimed above, largely overlooking the text's form and even its linguistic operations in favour of an extensive decoding of the text's images as philosophical symbols. In some sense, these fine decodings constitute their own gnawing on *Worstward Ho*, but their philosophical claims to truth make this process largely invisible.

This is most startlingly apparent in Badiou's own reading, which uses not Beckett's original and allegedly untranslatable English text but Edith Fournier's French translation.<sup>197</sup> His justification for this is precisely that *Worstward Ho* is sufficiently philosophical that the text need not matter, although he acknowledges that "What we will lose in this operation—which I called the 'rhythm'—is the figure of scansion."<sup>198</sup> The question, I think, is whether this is an acceptable sacrifice. Badiou's position turns on an implied separability between form and content which, while no doubt questionable in all works of literature (as Badiou's own emphasis on the "immanence" of meaning in the work of art would imply<sup>199</sup>), is particularly problematic in a text like *Worstward Ho*. If this novella is untranslatable, this is because it consists entirely of a set of linguistic operations of language on language—and more specifically, of the English language on the English language. Its "rhythm"—the puns, the repetitions, the music of the text—are an integral component, if not the constituent component, of the gnawing that I take to be the central motor of this text. By treating this least transparent and most performative of texts as though it were a straightforward piece of philosophical prose, Badiou misses, I think, the centrality and the ambivalence of the process of gnawing. This is, I would

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<sup>196</sup> Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 90; also reprinted in Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, ed. Alberto Toscano and Nina Power (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2003), 79–112; for philosophical readings of *Worstward Ho* after Badiou see Andrew Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 220–28; Anthony Uhlmann, "Worstward Ho, Parmenides, Badiou and the Limit," *Journal of Beckett Studies* 20, no. 1 (2011): 78–95; Poiana, "On-Tology."

<sup>197</sup> On *Worstward Ho*'s alleged untranslatability see Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 601, 742.

<sup>198</sup> Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 90.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

hazard, a key reason for Andrew Gibson's perceptive complaint that "Badiou cannot see how far Beckett *shades* or nuances his thought," for the shading, what Gibson calls the "possibility of *simultaneous* hesitation," is all in the form.<sup>200</sup>

*Worstward Ho* constitutes Beckett's final major experiment with an art of hunger, one which reveals both vestigial traces and significant modifications of the various manoeuvres and strategies since *The Unnamable*. It accomplishes the slow move towards the textualisation of eating by offering a text in which bodies do not eat but language gnaws, and therefore embodies the formalist approach to hunger that has dominated Beckett's writing since *How It Is*. Similarly, as has increasingly been the case for Beckett, this suspended consumption is a question of relation. Where limited food mediated interpersonal relationships in *Waiting for Godot* and, more viciously, *Endgame*, this cruel relationality became a textual concern capable of nourishing the other in *How It Is*. In *Worstward Ho*, the interpersonal—along with the personal—has all but disappeared, but the problem of relation still inheres in the late gnawing and still operates in a purely textual medium. As the continued sense of despair and desperation implies, this final experiment is not exactly a solution for Beckett, except in the most provisional sense. Instead, he seems to have resigned himself to the inescapability of preying, longing and gnawing, as necessary side effects of his Schopenhauerian worldview.

Beckett's late work therefore responds to *The Unnamable's* impasse in two interrelated ways: by retreating to an increasing formalism, in which hunger and eating are increasingly indistinguishable; and by accepting the impossibility of a full retreat from relationality and instead striving to make it self-defeating and purely linguistic. Neither Paul Auster nor J. M. Coetzee is willing to follow Beckett down this path, rejecting above all the high formalism and the retreat into textuality that his late work embodies. For both Auster and Coetzee, the problem of relation will, in various guises, emerge as one of the key stumbling blocks to the full realisation of an art of hunger. In this sense, although Beckett's late work (unlike his earlier texts) cannot be said to provide a template for or even necessarily an influence on the subsequent writers in this thesis, it offers a clear statement of some of the problems they will face. Perhaps just as importantly, it offers what both Auster and Coetzee take as a cautionary tale of how not to answer these challenges.

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<sup>200</sup> Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou*, 226, 224.

## Preying on Stones: Hunger, Hermeticism, and Genealogy in Auster's Early Work

The tradition that begins with Melville, passes through Rimbaud, Hamsun and Kafka and reaches its climax and crisis with Beckett has, up to this point, been an essentially modernist one. It has repeatedly used hunger as a way of thinking through the possibilities and limitations of a modernist aesthetic founded in autonomy and indifference. Central to this strategy is a conceptualisation of hunger as opposed to literary and cultural genealogies, to inheritance and to pre-existing systems and structures of thought: an art of hunger as an art that “makes it new” in characteristically modernist fashion. From Rimbaud’s “soif” that refuses the conventionalised drinks of friends, family and literary forebears, to Beckett’s insistence on the radical novelty of Bram van Velde’s art, the art of hunger has implied not only isolation but a fierce rhetorical resistance to genealogy and influence, despite the readily identifiable links that allow us to speak of these writers as constituting a “tradition.” With the emergence of a new generation of writers for whom modernism constitutes an important literary inheritance but one that belongs decisively to an earlier generation, this aspect of the art of hunger comes under pressure. In the writing of Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, both born in the 1940s as modernism proper was exhausting itself in Beckett’s post-war work, hunger becomes a way of processing these writers’ debts to modernism, of working through the possibilities of aesthetic autonomy in a direct and explicit dialogue with the giants of this tradition.

Paul Auster is no doubt one of the most important interpreters and advocates of this late twentieth-century engagement with the modernist art of hunger. From the beginning of his writing career, he formed a personal canon from writers as central to this tradition as Hamsun, Kafka, Beckett and, to a lesser extent, Rimbaud. The significance to Auster of these writers and their engagement with hunger is apparent in the fact that his volume of collected essays, written during the 1970s and collected in 1992, is entitled *The Art of*

*Hunger*, a title it shares with the first essay in the collection and with Auster's *Masters* thesis, both dating from 1970 and both centrally concerned with Hamsun's *Hunger*. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, hunger features as a central theme across Auster's essays, poetry, memoirs and novels, offering the occasion to work through his relationship to modernism in light of anxieties about language's correspondence to reality.<sup>201</sup> It encapsulates Auster's desire for the collapse of the distinction between word and thing, for a writing that would no longer be subject to the slippery deferrals of postmodern and poststructuralist anxieties about language. If this echoes earlier instances of hunger, such as Kafka's rejection of metaphor or Beckett's search for an art without occasion, it does so in a new context in which anxieties about language are coming to supersede attention to the aesthetic proper. In this context, Auster's concern with aesthetic autonomy becomes folded into a desire to halt the endless deferral of meaning.<sup>202</sup> Unlike earlier writers, he hopes to halt it, not in a materialism that would strip language of meaning, reference or interpretation, but in an ideal union of language and world that would produce absolute meaning and perfect reference without the need for interpretation.

Like Hamsun, the French surrealists, and the American "lost generation," Auster's hunger arises initially as a side effect of the writer's marginal economic status. In a later memoir, he recalls the 1970s as a period of "constant, grinding, almost suffocating lack of money that poisoned my soul and kept me in a state of never-ending panic."<sup>203</sup> The period of his most intense interest in starvation, not coincidentally, corresponds almost perfectly with these years of poverty, split between France and America. His interest in hunger flags during the 1980s as his fortunes improve before disappearing almost entirely around 1990. Nonetheless, the starving artist narrative is surprisingly absent in his writing from this time, achieving its fullest articulation in a memoir entitled *Hand to Mouth* that dates from 1997 and bears little resemblance, formally or stylistically, to the

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<sup>201</sup> Auster's critics have acknowledged the centrality of hunger to his work, linking it to "a state of being without the contingent" and to "a craving for logos, for a rational world": Scott A. Dimovitz, "Public Personae and the Private I: De-Compositional Ontology in Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 3 (2006): 626; Ilana Shiloh, *Paul Auster and the Postmodern Quest: On the Road to Nowhere* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 51.

<sup>202</sup> As early as the late 1960s and 1970s, Auster's knowledge of emerging trends in French theory was current, if somewhat focused on the generation immediately before post-structuralism. He cites Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*, first translated into English in 1968, in his 1970 MA thesis, which in turn was supervised by Edward Said. While living in France in the early 1970s, he translated Maurice Blanchot and Edmond Jabès, the latter of whom became friends with Auster and an important influence on Derrida. His interest in deconstruction as such, however, seems to have been slight.

<sup>203</sup> Paul Auster, *Hand to Mouth: A Chronicle of Early Failure* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 3.

more hermetic, experimental poetry and prose of the years that it describes. *Hand to Mouth* has a coherence and is animated by a stable subjectivity that is elusive in Auster's earliest work. In contrast, Auster's early accounts of starvation, like those of Beckett, are rarely connected in an explicit or narrativised way with writers or artists, and while his biography makes it possible to reconstruct this period in terms of the starving artist narrative, his writing in these early years shares much in common with Beckett's treatment of hunger as an abstract, textual phenomenon.

Hunger seems, however, to have played a very different role in Auster's development than it did in Beckett's. Where Beckett turned to hunger mid-career, at a moment when he was searching for a new way of writing, and continued to toy with its implications for the full length of his career, Auster embraced it vigorously as a young writer, using it as a way of establishing his early aesthetic principles, before abandoning it almost entirely in his later works. While hunger allowed Beckett to call into question the aesthetic strategies of Joyce's gluttonous modernism, for Auster, it was more a mark of his literary debts, particularly to Knut Hamsun, than it was a way of shedding the past. Auster's treatment of hunger is, therefore, far more intertextual and far more mediated than Beckett's; it has a history that Beckett's hunger strikingly lacks. In this sense, where Beckett's hunger increasingly becomes text, Auster's functions at least as significantly as intertext.<sup>204</sup>

The intertextual mode clearly pulls away from the strict autonomy of the modernist hunger artists, but it does so in order to educate itself in precisely this self-sufficiency. This ambivalent relation to autonomy is characteristic of Auster's early work, which hesitates between hermeticism and relation far more persistently than any previous work (even Beckett's late relationality seeks to institute relation as a means to hermeticism). Even in his dense and inscrutable poetry, Auster's imagery oscillates between the stone, a figure for a self-enclosed suspension of eating, and the predator, an image for a relational hunger that produces the poet's relation to the world, establishing a hesitation that characterises his early work up to *The Invention of Solitude*, and which will be the focus of this chapter. The concern with reality and representation becomes more pressing in his fictional prose, complicated, as I discuss in Chapter 5, by Auster's conceptualisation of the novel as an inherently social form, necessitating a gradual move away from hunger.

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<sup>204</sup> On Auster's intertextuality, see Aliko Varvogli, *The World That Is the Book: Paul Auster's Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001), 18; Christian Moraru, *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 77.

## I. “The Art of Hunger”: Auster’s Aesthetic Theory

Auster’s interest in hunger can be traced back at least as far as 1970, the year he completed his MA thesis on “The Art of Hunger” in Hamsun, Kafka, Céline and Beckett, publishing the work on Hamsun as a separate article. These essays offer one of the earliest formulations of Auster’s aesthetic project, one that explicitly locates hunger as central to his ideas about art and that implicitly casts Auster as the latest, most self-conscious of the hunger artists. In an interview in 1989-90, Auster describes his literary journalism as a whole as “an opportunity to articulate some of my ideas about writing and literature, to map out some kind of aesthetic position.”<sup>205</sup> The aesthetic position that emerges from the two “Art of Hunger” studies is explicitly modernist in its choice of subject, but reads these modernist writers through a lens that today feels conventionally postmodern, finding in them the collapse of stable linguistic reference, the fracturing of the self, and the end of what Auster cannot yet call metanarratives.

Auster’s isolation of a tradition that passes through Hamsun, Kafka, Céline and Beckett takes European modernism as its principle terrain in his engagement with hunger. Like Beckett in the “Three Dialogues,” Auster praises this art for its aesthetic innovation: “Something new is happening here, some new thought about the nature of art is being proposed in *Hunger*” (*AH*, 18). But Van Velde’s novelty, operating in a wholly different medium, in no way compromises Beckett’s own. Instead, it points towards a set of aesthetic principles whose translation into literature provided Beckett with the opportunity for a related but defiantly innovative literary practice. Auster, in contrast, is writing about a novel that was published 80 years earlier. If Hamsun’s art is new, anything that Auster produces on the basis of this aesthetic can no longer lay convincing claim to such a title. The novelty that Auster finds in the art of hunger serves not as a path to his own innovation but as a mark of his debts, a mark of his heirs, a mark of precisely the way in which Auster is located within a tradition of writing that is almost a century old when he discovers it.

The characteristics of this tradition, as Auster defines them, are largely familiar to us from the preceding chapters. In his Masters thesis, which links a discussion of literal

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<sup>205</sup> Paul Auster, *The Art of Hunger: Essay, Prefaces, Interviews and The Red Notebook, Expanded Edition* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 293 (hereafter cited in text as *AH*).

hunger in *Hamsun* to a more abstract aesthetic position that he traces through Céline and Beckett, the art of hunger is characterised by an ethical and cosmological nihilism that is linked to a collapse of total form and the emergence of formlessness. If, as Auster argues, the “union of the aesthetic and the ethical is, to a large degree, dependent on social stability,” the art of hunger represents the separation of aesthetics from ethics at the moment when stable social systems collapse.<sup>206</sup> Religion is one of the obvious casualties of this collapse—and Auster is at pains to distinguish the starvation of the art of hunger from that found in the religious fast—but Auster’s hunger also undoes the stability of the self and of linguistic reference. Even when hunger itself fades from view, as it does in his discussions of Céline and Beckett, this confluence of formlessness, nihilism and the schism of aesthetics and ethics are held together under the banner of Auster’s “art of hunger.”

In light of critical work that persistently links Auster to postmodernism, this collapse of metanarratives and disintegration of stable linguistic reference reads like a postmodern return to modernist literature.<sup>207</sup> Auster identifies a set of anxieties about religion and social cohesion that stretch back at least as far as the nineteenth-century, and tempers them with a new interest in modernist form and postmodern linguistic instability. In this model, the role of the aesthetic, at least insofar as it manifests in the art of hunger, is to chronicle and embody this crisis. In *Hamsun*, for instance, the novel concludes when “Language, identity, and the religious order have fallen apart; the edge of the void has been reached.”<sup>208</sup> Auster is explicit in describing this as instigating a revolution in aesthetics. He rejects theories of the aesthetic that take art as expressive of truth, arguing of Céline that, “The illusion of Western art, the double lie that presents itself in the guise of truth, is finally jettisoned, and replaced by the simple, single, straight-forward lie. For the lie is the only means by which survival is possible.”<sup>209</sup> At the same time, it seems clear that beauty is no longer a guiding principle in this mode. Instead, Auster’s art of hunger is based on a sense of postmodern crisis that pervades not only aesthetics but also

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<sup>206</sup> Paul Auster, “The Art of Hunger,” MA thesis. TS with holograph notes (Columbia University, May 1970), 16, Box 10, Folder 1, Paul Auster Archive, 1963-1995 Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>207</sup> On Auster’s postmodernism, see for example Dennis Barone, “Introduction: Paul Auster and the Postmodern Novel,” in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 1–26; Christopher Donovan, *Postmodern Counternarratives: Irony and Audience in the Novels of Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Charles Johnson, and Tim O’Brien* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Brendan Martin, *Paul Auster’s Postmodernity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008); for the argument that Auster rejects postmodernism, see Dimovitz, “Public Personae.”

<sup>208</sup> Auster, “The Art of Hunger,” 39.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

religion, subjectivity and language, enshrining this collapse as a formal principle by way of the modernist equation of form with content.

One of the best illustrations of this coalescence of modernism and postmodernism comes in Auster's notion of literary "openness," a term he uses to contrast Hamsun with other modernists:

Between the closed universe of a novel by Flaubert or Joyce and the openness of Hamsun's *Hunger* there is a world of difference... The notion of the perfect work, each part in harmony with the whole, the consummately ordered work created in a world without order, like it or not, demonstrates a belief in the ability of the mind to transcend the disorderliness of existence. The open work, on the other hand, does away with such gestures of hope, imitating nothing more than the process by which hope is abandoned. No matter how intense its struggle for order, it will always fail to achieve it.<sup>210</sup>

Openness is, in this sense, the form of the art of hunger, but it is, as Auster makes clear, a form with clear philosophical implications. It reflects a destabilisation that manifests at the level of form. In the margins, an unidentified hand, possibly that of Edward Said, directs Auster to "see Eco's book *Opera aperta*." Although it is not clear whether Auster followed up on this suggestion, the connection is suggestive, for Eco's foundational work of post-structuralism describes the "open work" in terms that do in fact bear a striking similarity to Auster's "art of hunger." Writing of Kafka, Eco argues:

The work remains inexhaustible insofar as it is "open," because in it an ordered world based on universally acknowledged laws is being replaced by a world based on ambiguity, both in the negative sense that directional centers are missing and in a positive sense, because values and dogma are constantly being placed in question.<sup>211</sup>

The resemblance to Auster's description of Hamsun's *Hunger* as an "open work" is unmistakable, despite the fact that where Auster places Joyce among the "closed writers," Eco cites *Finnegans Wake* as an example of openness. The affinity is telling, for it locates Auster's early aesthetics within the cultural and intellectual context of an early post-structuralism emerging in dialogue with modernism.

Auster nonetheless breaks from both his modernist heirs and his post-structuralist contemporaries on several key points. For Eco, the open work is characterised by its

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 20–21.

<sup>211</sup> Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 9.

“openness” towards an audience. In it, “the author offers the interpreter, the performer, the addressee a work *to be completed*.”<sup>212</sup> This emphasis is strikingly absent in Auster’s thesis. In fact, Auster’s reading of Hamsun effectively ignores the protagonist’s various encounters with other people, which I read in Chapter 1 as offering the basis for a theory of reception, and instead repeatedly emphasises the hunger artist’s solipsism and his isolation as central to the art of hunger. If Eco’s work is open above all to its readers, Auster’s returns insistently to the author. Thus, where Eco’s “open work” prepares the way for Barthes’ “text” and, through this, his famous claim that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the Author,” Auster holds firmly to the centrality of the author and the irrelevance of the reader.<sup>213</sup>

The author’s death has always been yet-to-be-realised in the art of hunger, however, and in this sense Auster is consistent with his predecessors. Where Auster differs is in his indifference to the reader—in contrast to even the antagonistic, co-dependent relationships that I identified in Hamsun and Kafka—and in his insistence on the author, not just as a central figure, but as one whose will drives the art that he produces. Auster writes of Hamsun that, “He does not want to succeed. He wants to fail” (*AH*, 18), a formulation that, at first glance, seems almost unbearably Beckettian. But Beckett’s B. espouses an art that is entirely unwilled, even in its failure. For him, “van Velde is the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail” (*D*, 145). This failure is not chosen, not wanted, but inherent in the nature of art itself. Van Velde’s heroism is not his desire for failure but his passivity in the face of its inevitability. Auster’s Hamsun, in contrast, is given an intentionality and a creative impetus that is absent in Beckett’s version: he does not merely accept failure, he actively wills it: “he *wants to fail*.” Indeed, Auster’s account of Hamsun’s novel makes much of the protagonist’s active choice to starve: he is “wag[ing] a hunger strike against himself” (*AH*, 12) and “refusing to live the life he has been given” (*AH*, 13). This enshrining of authorial intention within the failed art of hunger reveals Auster’s sense of this art as basically personal, founded in the author and his crisis. In so doing, Auster’s art of hunger breaks decisively with the Schopenhauerian imprint found in both Hamsun and Beckett. The result for Auster is “an art that is indistinguishable from the life of the artist who makes it” (*AH*, 18), in which “The radical subjectivity of the narrator effectively eliminates the basic concerns of the traditional novel” (*AH*, 10).

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<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>213</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), 148.

In refusing to surrender the central position of the author, Auster moves away from Beckett's insistence on an art of hunger that would sever artist from aliment, subject from object. Instead, he espouses a writer who becomes "both subject and object of his own experiment" (*AH* 12), enshrining authorial self-reflexivity at the heart of this new art of hunger. In the paragraph following his profession of Hamsun's will to failure, Auster describes the Norwegian's novel as "an art that is the direct expression of the effort to express itself." Once again, this line seems to recall B.'s famous argument in the "Three Dialogues," in favour of "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*D* 139). But where Beckett seeks expression's negation, Auster merely turns it back on itself, surveying not the ruins, but the process of art. This brings Auster's art of hunger closer to the self-consuming works of Beckett's later writing, but unlike them "expression," and thus the author, are at the centre of this movement.

Much of Auster's early career might be read as an attempt first to recreate, then to come to terms with the legacy of this mode of art. That hunger remains a live aesthetic concern throughout the 1970s is evident in his frequent recourse to a language of hunger in his literary journalism. Auster speaks of "the hunger for utopia" in Laura Riding's work (*AH*, 22), says of Kafka that, "Whatever is given to him, he will refuse ... He will refuse, the better to hunger for what he has denied himself" (*AH*, 25), argues at length that Louis Wolfson offers proof of "a fundamental connection between speaking and eating" (*AH*, 32), comments on Kafka's "insatiable hunger to surpass himself" and suggests that in Kafka, "to succeed in his art meant to consume himself as a human being" (*AH*, 135). Auster also frequently selects and discusses quotations that relate directly to hunger, even where this relation is not directly relevant to the argument at hand, as in quotations of Charles Reznikoff on a poem's being made of "hunger, silence, and sweat" (*AH*, 46), Hugo Ball on asceticism's affinity with art (*AH*, 61), and the depletion of Mercier and Camier's supplies from cakes to stones (*AH*, 88). At the same time, his poetry and unpublished fiction drafts reveal extensive references to hunger, indicating that its centrality in shaping his aesthetics translated into a thematic preoccupation. This is unsurprising, given the intensity of Auster's self-reflexive preoccupation with the nature of writing during these early years, a preoccupation that,

as we have seen, accords perfectly with the emergence of hunger in his writing in this period. The remainder of this chapter therefore traces Auster's development of an art of hunger through his poetry and *The Invention of Solitude*, his first memoir.

## II. Stones and Vultures: The Imagery of Hunger in the Poetry

Between 1970 and 1979, Auster was a poet. His poems, although little known and little read, constitute a vital part of his *œuvre*, and are engaged in a complex dialogue with his later writing. More than simply anticipating the novels, they work out some of Auster's key preoccupations on their own terms, often offering strategies and solutions that are particular to their genre. Like the "art of hunger" that he articulated so thoroughly at the outset of his poetic career, Auster's poetry is characterised by a tendency towards solipsism and a desire for an art that would overcome language's insufficiency and the world's disintegration, in what Auster will later refer to as the poetry's "quest for ... univocal expression" (*AH*, 296). Making manifest the art of hunger's self-reflexiveness, the poetry is animated by a meta-language that seems to constantly withdraw from an engagement with the world into anxiety about the possibility of engagement with the world. In the process, it explicitly textualises its objects, transforming world into language and manipulating objects as if they were words, in a strategy that parallels the textualised hunger of Beckett's late writing. In fact, the only aspect of the earlier "art of hunger" that Auster abandons in the poetry is the emphasis on the body as a stabilising force and a guarantee of the author, preferring instead an increasingly abstract, increasingly stripped-down, increasingly "pure" language.

Hunger in this work is intimately bound up with the problems of writing that plague and sometimes obscure Auster's poetics. Marked by intense abstraction, it develops across a network of related images, including stones, prey, predators, deserts, bones, and hunger itself. These images develop around two opposing poles: on one hand, hunger as craving, dramatised in the predator/prey relationship; on the other, hunger as abstinence, represented by the widespread use of stones and deserts, images of self-referential self-sufficiency that deny the need for food or the possibility of consumption and that incorporate Auster's dream of a writing that is identical with its object. This hesitation places Auster's poetry in dialogue with Beckett's post-war aesthetics, torn between an aspiration to writing without an object and the impossibility of achieving this within the

realm of language.<sup>214</sup> But rather than aspiring towards Beckettian objectlessness, Auster seems to genuinely hesitate between these two poles, both of which gesture towards his impossible desire for an ideal, unmediated form of representation.

Hunger emerges as a clearly demarcated concept in *Unearth*, Auster's second collection of poetry, dated 1970-72. This collection is cryptic and abstract, a series of twenty-five numbered but untitled poems that stand as the first statements of many of Auster's key preoccupations. The fifth poem expounds upon some of the difficulties around hunger and eating that motivate Auster in these early years:

Night, as though tasted  
within. And of us, each lie  
the tongue would know  
when it draws back and sinks  
into its poison.  
We would sleep, side by side  
with such hunger, and from the fruit  
we war with, become the name  
of what we name.<sup>215</sup>

The hunger at the centre of this passage is surrounded on all sides by implications of eating that never really resolve into a properly consummated consumption. Each of these elements—tasting, tongues and fruit—which together constitute the archetypal moment of taste and of eating, are held carefully apart, their relationship implied but suspended. In the meantime, language is poured into the gaps: taste becomes metaphor, the tongue tastes words, and fruit transforms “us” into “the name / of what we name.” Eating opens the way for language, so long as it is not consummated; it shadows speech, mimics speech, but is never present within it.

The image of the fruit adds a further dimension to this analysis. Evocative of Eden and the Fall, “the fruit / we war with” is one manifestation of an association between language and a quasi-Biblical Fall that is a pervasive trope in Auster's early work. This idea first appears as early as 1967, when Auster was only twenty-one, in entry nine of his

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<sup>214</sup> Although the *Nobow On* trilogy was not written until after Auster stopped writing poetry, his Masters thesis discusses *How It Is* in some detail and a college essay on Beckett from the 1960s reveals his extensive knowledge of all Beckett's published writing, including texts that had not yet been translated into English: Auster, “The Art of Hunger”; Paul Auster, “College Essays: Explications: The Third Poem of *Quatre Poèmes*,” TS, 67 1966, Box 79, Folder 2, Paul Auster Archive, 1963-1995 Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>215</sup> Paul Auster, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2004), 41 (hereafter cited in text as *CP*).

“Notes from a Composition Book,” which are collected with the poetry, where Auster writes, “The fall of man ... is a question of language conquering experience: the fall of the world into the word, experience descending from the eye to the mouth” (*CP*, 204). This image, which also appears in Auster’s MA thesis and in a 1974 essay on Louis Wolfson,<sup>216</sup> serves usefully as a gloss on *Unearth*’s claim that “from the fruit / we war with, [we] become the name / of what we name.” Read against this youthful note, Auster seems to suggest that the fruit we war with—the Edenic fruit of knowledge that tempts Adam and Eve and whose consumption precipitates their Fall—actively produces language. While Adam and Eve were granted the right to name all things in the Garden of Eden, in Auster’s reading, it is not until they eat the fruit that they *become* these names—in other words, that they enter into a mode of existence fully determined by language, an existence of words rather than things. Eating, therefore, precipitates the split between word and thing that so tortures Auster in this poetry. If eating is conspicuous in its absence in the above poem, it is not because it is opposed to language or writing in general; on the contrary, Auster omits the act of eating because it evokes precisely the ordinary, flawed language that his poetry is idealistically working to rid itself of.

Hunger, however, is not simply the opposite of eating. In the lines above, it literally and figuratively precedes eating. It, too, seems capable of opening onto a flawed language, even of motivating it. And yet, this relationship is circular. Auster writes later in poem 21 of the same collection: “My voice turns back / to the hunger it gives birth to...” (*CP*, 57): while hunger may anticipate the Fall that produces a language stripped of its transparent relationship to the world, it is also born in the act of speaking, emerging as a craving for precisely that perfect language that eating has destroyed. In both cases, hunger functions as a kind of motivation, a way of directing action or movement. And yet, in both cases, it is curiously externalised and objectified. In poem 5, the “side by side /with” of the lines “We would sleep, side by side / with such hunger” implies both that they sleep with hunger—that they possess this hunger as they sleep—and that they sleep alongside hunger, as though their hunger were a third person, an additional companion. Similarly, in poem 21, the description of the voice “turning back” to hunger and “giving birth” to it places the hunger outside the voice, as an independent, externalised, objectified presence, distinct from the voice and, presumably, from the speaker. This

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<sup>216</sup> Auster, “The Art of Hunger,” 33; Auster, *Art of Hunger*, 33.

dismemberment is characteristic of Auster's conceptualisation of the self in these poems, but it also leaves hunger ambivalently oriented towards an object. While it is sometimes motivated by the object (most often in the form of the world itself), just as often the compulsive force of hunger seems to turn back on the subject, compelling the subject towards the hunger rather than towards the object itself.

Hunger is, therefore, an integral but conflicted foundation for literature in Auster. His hunger is self-regarding and capable of becoming an end unto itself, while eating is positioned as both the foundation of language and its corruption. Hunger in such circumstances functions as a foundation for a literary practice that aspires not (as in Beckett) to do away with the object, but to become identical with that object: it represents an aspiration to a prelapsarian purity of language, a moment in which Adam and Eve abstained from the fruit, or dwelt perpetually in their unconsummated desire for it. At the same time, it evokes the imminence of that Fall, of that moment in which eating will no longer be suspended, and language will separate itself out from the world. It is both an unrealisable goal for literature and the eternal repetition of its failure.

This ambivalence is captured in the bifurcation between stones and predators, two of the central images of Auster's poetry, which both evoke hunger but pull it in opposite directions. The relationship between predators and hunger is perhaps most obvious, pointing to a ravenous hunger that pursues its object. This set of images appears very early in Auster's poetry. His first collection of poems, *Spokes*, is preoccupied with the creation of predators, with the line "between dog and wolf" (*CP*, 23). As Auster writes later in this collection, turning the predator image from wolves to birds:

Between the sparrow and the bird without name:  
its prey.

Light escapes through the interval. (*CP*, 28)

Or, in a later restatement of the theme in the same collection:

from the sparrow  
To the bird without name, the interval  
Is prey (*CP*, 30)

Throughout *Spokes*, Auster seems preoccupied with this distinction between the animal (sparrow, dog) and its more predatory counterpart. Distinguishing between sparrow and “bird without name,” he locates the difference in the “prey,” the object of the predator’s hunger. This addition, which pulls the animal’s centre of definition from the self-contained to the external, defining the predator through reference to its goal, has an odd effect on the bird, transforming it from “sparrow” to “bird without name,” from the particular to the unnamable. In the process of becoming predatory, of orienting itself towards a prey, the bird seems to slip out of language, to lose its name. Unlike the sleeping couple who “become the name / of what we name,” whose (anticipated) eating forces them into language, the hunger of the predatory bird forces it to sacrifice its own position in language in order to be absorbed into a relationship with its object.

In the course of the poetry, this “bird without name” takes on a range of predatory and scavenging guises, transforming into hawks, crows, gulls, and vultures, often elucidating the connection between the ravenous bird and language in more detail. Poem 24 of *Unearth*, for instance, expands upon the theme through the image of the vulture:

Till vulture  
is the word  
that gluts this offal, night  
will be your prey. (CP 60)

As is often the case in Auster’s poetry, the concrete noun here—the vulture—is almost immediately turned into text, through its projected transformation into “the word.” This is a common strategy in Auster’s poetry, where the anxiety about the gap between world and language provokes an attempt to bridge this gap by blurring the distinction between them by treating objects in the world as linguistic artefacts, and words as concrete objects or forces in the world.

This passage is quite clearly engaged in a dialogue with Beckett’s early poem “The Vulture,” first published as part of the collection *Echo’s Bones* in 1935. A brief comparison between the two authors’ vultures may help to clarify some of the complexities of Auster’s poem. The complete text of Beckett’s poem reads:

dragging his hunger though the sky  
of my shell of sky and earth

stooping to the prone who must  
soon take up their life and walk

mocked by a tissue that may not serve  
till hunger earth and sky be offal<sup>217</sup>

Like Auster's, Beckett's vulture slips into and out of fictionality. The first stanza locates the bird inside the poet's skull, explicitly casting it as a figment of his imagination, whose imagined backdrop encompasses "sky and earth." The final stanza returns to this formulation, with a set of lines whose evocation of "offal" and whose "Till"-based syntax are both taken up again in Auster's reformulation of Beckett's image. The final line anticipates the transformation of "earth and sky" into offal, turning the vulture's world into its prey. It implies that consumption cannot take place—that tissue cannot serve the vulture—until such time as the vulture's entire world and even the hunger that drives it are all transformed into its prey. Given that the vulture seems to be both an imagined creature and a figure for the imagination, this predatory relationship to both its hunger and its world speaks to the imagination's gluttonous and at times cannibalistic consumption of its world, a figure that anticipates both Auster's poetry and Beckett's own late work on the devouring eye.

Auster's vulture expands on this theme by offering a provisional solution to the dilemma, with the closing lines: "night / will be your prey," replacing Beckett's all-encompassing "hunger earth and sky" with a more limited and more specific "night." To understand the significance of this "night," it helps to read these lines in context. They are the closing lines of a poem that is obsessively concerned with "the eye / that bled such brightness," "an eye, / and then one more." Indeed, as many of Auster's critics have noted, the eye is a key trope in his poetry, and plays a central role in his developing ideas about the function of poetry. As Pierre-Yves Soucy argues:

This simple presence of the world and of all that constitutes it is, for this poet, the recognition of a "pure *en-soi* of things," which the gaze relentlessly pursues, not for itself, but in order to create the foundations of a new language that aims to grasp this presence in its most radical nakedness.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Beckett, *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, 5.

<sup>218</sup> Pierre-Yves Soucy, "L'Œil et Le Mur: Sur La Poésie de Paul Auster," *Le Courrier Du Center International d'Études Poétiques*, no. 221 (March 1999): 33 My translation.

The eye's relentless pursuit of external reality assumes a violent, predatory aspect in Auster's poetry, recalling Beckett's "eye of prey." It has an intuitive, synecdochal relationship to birds of prey, and, in this context, the specific transformation of the "bird without name" into a vulture in this poem evokes the "vulture eye" that drives the protagonist of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" to murder.<sup>219</sup> The trope of the vulture therefore acquires an intimate connection with the related trope of the eye; and at the same time, these twinned images assume a threatening, even maddening undertone. Indeed, as Auster writes in earlier poems, "To see is this other torture" (*CP*, 31), and to be a poet is "To carry the burden / of eyes" (*CP*, 50). Night, therefore, is an antidote to this pain of seeing, a time of deadened sight. For the poem's unspecified "you" to take night as "your prey," is to turn the seeking, predatory eyes to their own destruction. Like Beckett's vulture that seeks to turn its own hunger to offal, or like Auster's own development of a circular relationship between hunger and its subject, this image expresses hunger as a potentially self-destructive or even cannibalistic impulse, a powerful force from which the poet seeks respite. It returns to the connection between hunger and self-reflexiveness and recasts it, not as a tautology capable of moving towards autonomy, but as a vicious attack on oneself, in the mode of Beckett's late self-consumption.

Alongside this image of hunger as a craving, desirous force that pulls the subject outside himself in his pursuit of a satisfactory language, the image of the stone develops as a counter-weight to a hunger that turns outwards. The stone, perhaps the most pervasive image in Auster's poetry, is a crucial trope that encapsulates a stubborn resistance to any kind of dialogue with the outside world. Unlike the predatory birds and their ilk, references to which peter out by the mid-1970s, the stone remains a key trope throughout Auster's poetic career and beyond, and even pervades the translations from various French poets, which Auster includes as a postscript to his *Collected Poems*. Critics agree on the centrality of the stone to Auster's theory of his own writing. For Marc Chénétier, it is the productively resistant force against which the writer defines his project, an emblem of the world's stubborn impenetrability. He argues that Auster's poetry is a "saxifrage," a flower that grows in rocks, consisting in an attempt to write despite and among the stubborn impermeability of the real.<sup>220</sup> Anne Troester concurs,

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<sup>219</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Selected Tales*, ed. David van Leer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 193.

<sup>220</sup> Marc Chénétier, "'Un Lieu Flagrant et Nul' : La Poésie de Paul Auster," in *L'Œuvre de Paul Auster : Approches et Lectures Plurielles*, ed. Annick Duperray (Grenoble: Actes Sud / Université de Provence, 1995), 260.

writing that the stone represents “the irreducible element which refers to nothing but itself,” and is therefore tied to Auster’s “attempt to find one word which would precisely express a given situation.”<sup>221</sup> James Peacock, in a recent essay on the poems, expands slightly on these perspectives, suggesting that it “stand[s] variously for material fragments, the impermeability of language and resistance to interpretation.”<sup>222</sup> In each of these critical accounts, the stone appears as a figure of the irreducible—uninterpretable, inaccessible, real—whose incarnation hesitates between world and representation, between language and reality, manifesting Auster’s ideal of a poetics that would reconcile these poles.

Alongside this reading, which is largely borne out by the poetry, we must also recall the strong allusive resonances of the stone. From Rimbaud’s “Fêtes de la faim,” which declares, “If I have any *taste*, it is for hardly / Anything but earth and stones” (“Si j’ai du *goût*, ce n’est guères / que pour la terre et les pierres”), to Beckett’s sucking stones in *Molloy*, stones are located at the centre of the art of hunger. In fact, Auster himself writes on the link between stones, hunger and writing in a 1975 essay on Beckett’s *Mercier and Camier*, entitled “From Cakes to Stones: A Note on Beckett’s French.” In this essay, he praises the movement between French and English in Beckett, describing it as the process whereby “Everything has been pared down to a minimum” (*AH*, 88). Quoting a passage from *Mercier and Camier* in which a character complains, “You’ll spoil him . . . Yesterday cakes, today sandwiches, tomorrow crusts, and Thursday stones” (quoted in *AH*, 88), Auster draws attention to stones as the endpoint of consumption for Beckett, an endpoint with clear aesthetic implications: “We move from cakes to stones, and from page to page Beckett builds a world out of almost nothing” (*AH*, 89). In this essay, then, Auster draws attention to stones as a trope for hunger, while inflecting this connection with a literary significance that is focused around a paring-back that Auster praises across a range of poets and other writers in *The Art of Hunger*.

While the stone itself stands in for a lack of distance between language and reality, it simultaneously opens onto a proliferation of literary references that seems to pull in precisely the opposite direction, privileging not the limiting of the word to its one irreducible meaning, but the proliferation of meanings across texts and their various

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<sup>221</sup> Anne Troester, “Beyond This Point, Everything Turns to Prose: Paul Auster’s Writing between Poetry and Prose,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 47, no. 4 (2002): 529.

<sup>222</sup> James Peacock, “Unearthing Paul Auster’s Poetry,” *Orbis Litterarum* 64, no. 5 (2009): 416.

connotations. Like hunger and the vulture, the stone's silent location in a tradition interferes with its explicit development as a force for language that would have no history, that would be only what it is. Even this figure of consummate autonomy is haunted by its literary doubles, which transform it into a single entry in a family tree, rather than the perfectly self-enclosed, self-referential figure that it aspires to be.

While this intertextual haunting is not explicitly acknowledged in the poems that develop the stone's hermeticism, they are nonetheless profoundly interested in the movement by which the self-contained stone passes into language. In *Unearth*, Auster describes the development from "one stone touched / to the next stone / named"—the passing of the stone, emblem of reality, from experience into language—as "earth-hood: the inaccessible / ember" (*CP*, 50). If the inaccessibility of stone is paramount and paradigmatic, it is an inaccessibility informed by an approach towards death. Or as Auster writes in "Viaticum," a poem from *Wall-Writing* (1971-75):

You will not blame the stones,  
or look to yourself  
beyond the stones, and say  
you did not long for them  
before your face had turned to stone. (*CP*, 76)

Before concluding that this process,

    lead[s] you  
... closer  
to the second  
and brighter terror  
of living in your death, and speaking  
the stone  
you will become. (*CP*, 76)

In a poem whose title evokes the eating of death—a viaticum is the Roman Catholic term for the administration of the Eucharist as part of last rites—the stone is a placeholder for the still impenetrability of impending death. And yet, as is so often the case in Auster's poetry, the stone appears not to be insulated in its hermeticism, but rather to be animated, if not exactly explicated, through its existence in language. The poem opens with a negated, projected future in which the interlocutor's face has already "turned to stone"—opens, then, in anticipation of a time of stones and of death, marked by an assimilation of self into stone. And yet, by the ending, this focus has pulled back to

the moment of the viaticum itself, to a renewed focus on the very moment of anticipation, as a point of “living in your death”, a moment in which the stone is not yet lived but merely “spoken.” This process of “speaking / the stone / you will become” strips the stone of its inertness, its stillness, by turning it into speech. At the same time, the speech seeks to preserve the stone’s cryptic hermeticism and absolute simplicity, even as its transformation into language makes it available as a series of intertextual echoes that compromise its irreducible thingness. The stone stands, therefore, for both death and the obsolescence of reference through the impossible completion of the art of hunger in a prelapsarian state. In this sense, it marks the unrealised development of the art of hunger into an aesthetic mode that would seek to marry aesthetic autonomy to a notion of art as the revelation of truth. This impossible aesthetic union promises a literature whose disclosure of truth is so absolute that it becomes identical with the thing it speaks and thus fully autonomous in the manner of the impenetrable stone.

The stone’s relationship to language therefore charts both the desire for transparent expression and the process whereby this becomes a literary ideal. As early as *Spokes*, the connection between language and the stone is anticipated in the claim that “Speech could not cobble the swamp” (*CP*, 24), in which the negation of language’s capacity to act on the world sits alongside the metaphor that transforms “speech” into stones. By *Unearth*, this elision has developed into a bolder and more explicit statement of a clear alliance between language and stones:

From the first step, our voice  
is in league  
with the stones of the field. (*CP*, 40)

Here language is embodied in “our voice,” the poetic opening of a singular voice onto shared ownership that reflects an ideal of the poet as a voice for community. This voice, emerging in coalition with “the stones of the field,” grasps therefore towards an alliance that would overcome the schism between language and the world. By *Disappearances*, this alliance has resolved into a metaphorical interchange, described as “a language of stones” (*CP*, 107) and, later, in a poem called “Riding Eastward” in the 1976-77 collection *Fragments from Cold*, “your fathomless / alphabet of stones” (*CP*, 127). These later descriptions tie stones more firmly to language, going so far as to imply that they in fact constitute their own language, their own alphabet.

To the extent that the stone is, through Rimbaud and Beckett, inextricably linked to hunger, it reveals a fundamental ambivalence within the latter trope, which splits here between the predatory or object-directed hunger of vultures and wolves (Beckett's "mere misery where destitute virtuous mothers may steal stale bread for their starving brats") and the self-contained starvation implied by the stone that is simultaneously that which does not eat and that which cannot be digested (Beckett's "ultimate penury"). Many of Auster's accounts of the stone draw this opposition out, often pitting the stone against hunger in a struggle that underscores Beckett's claim that the difference between these poles is "more than a difference of degree." Thus, in the second poem of *Unearth*, Auster writes of:

one  
stone, splitting with the famine  
inside us (*CP*, 38)

The violence of a hunger that can split stone points to both the potency of hunger as a force in Auster's writing, and the antagonism that pits this force against the quiet self-sufficiency of the stone, bringing his two figures for hunger into conflict. But if these forces are potentially at odds with one another, they are not inevitably so, and by the final poems of *Unearth*, this relationship has been recast in different terms:

My voice turns back  
to the hunger it gives birth to,  
coupling with stones  
that jut from red walls: the heart  
gnaws, but cannot know  
its plunder; the flayed tongue  
rasps. (*CP*, 57)

The relationship between hunger and the stone in this passage is completely devoid of the implicit antagonism of stone-splitting hunger. Instead, the poet's voice emerges from the interchange between hunger and stones, simultaneously "turning back" to its own self-generating hunger and "coupling with stones," as though these acts are interchangeable or, at the least, as though they are joined together under the auspices of their mutual production of and in the poet's voice. The results of this relationship are explored after the colon: "the heart / gnaws but cannot know / its plunder." The yearning, motivating force of hunger emerges in the heart's "gnawing"; the stone's inscrutability in its incapacity to "know" its object. Bringing hunger into dialogue with

stones, therefore, seems to produce a kind of blind impulse, a force that, even as it turns outwards, turns only towards the “thingness” of stone.

### III. “A Man Without Appetites”: *The Invention of Solitude*

By the late 1970s, however, Auster had begun to erase the traces of hunger from his poetry. Drafts of the poems collected as *Facing the Music*, dating from 1978 and 1979, show a methodical attempt to move away from the vocabulary associated with it in his earlier poems: in one poem, “hawk” is erased and replaced with “bird”; in another, “loss” replaces “hunger.”<sup>223</sup> This erasure of hunger coincides with Auster’s move away from poetry as a genre. *Facing the Music* is his last collection of poems and heavily thematises his increasing discontent with the genre. Given the close connection between many aspects of the poetry and the “art of hunger” as articulated in his early writing on Hamsun, Beckett and Céline, the erasure of hunger in the late poems can be read as a mark of his dissatisfaction with the direction of his poetry and with poetry as a mode more generally, a dissatisfaction driven by the disembodied, hermetic qualities of the art of hunger.

This malaise can be detected in a reversal of Auster’s use of the language of openness and closedness in literary texts. As we saw above, Auster’s MA thesis argues that the “art of hunger” produces an “open work” marked by the disintegration of form and the collapse of order. The polysemous formal games of the poetry can certainly be read in this light, and such an interpretation would be consistent with the claim I have been making that the poetry represents a first attempt at a realisation of the art of hunger. But when Auster later reflects on his move away from poetry, the imagery has been reversed. In an interview with Joseph Mallia in 1987, he remarks that his lyrics “were very dense, especially in the beginning—coiled in on themselves like fists—but over the years they gradually began to open up, until I finally felt that they were heading in the direction of narrative” (*AH* 265). Two years later, he uses the same language in another interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory. In response to a question about the evolution of his poetry during the 1970s, he comments, “It was beginning to change, beginning to open up. I had started out by writing poems that resembled clenched fists; they were short and dense and obscure, as compact and hermetic as Delphic oracles” (*AH* 293).

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<sup>223</sup> Paul Auster, “Poem of the Last Words, Search for a Definition, and Others [‘Obituary in the Present Tense’, ‘Zeroing In’],” TS & copies, corrected, n.d., Box 65, Folder 1, Paul Auster Archive, 1963-1995 Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

What might have been described as an open polysemy in the poetry is instead cast as closed obscurity and denseness. The shift seems to have two motivating forces: on the one hand, an increased skepticism about the hermeticism of the art of hunger, and certainly about its compatibility with a truly “open” art; on the other, an entirely new association between narrative and openness that seems to reject the formlessness and the disintegration of plot that Auster praised in Hamsun. Openness still remains a goal for Auster, but it has shifted away from a formal and linguistic mode with a loose affiliation to post-structuralist textuality and towards one which seems to imply a new engagement with other people and the world beyond the writer, an engagement that takes the form of narrative. The question of whether such a mode is compatible with the art of hunger is the subject of my next chapter.

Between the poetry and the novels is Auster’s 1982 memoir *The Invention of Solitude*, his first full-length piece of prose. While foreshadowing the turn to narrative, *The Invention of Solitude* remains invested in the dynamics of the relationship between hunger and the stone, dramatising this tension through the relationship between Auster and his father. In so doing, *The Invention of Solitude* locates the art of hunger in the conflict between solipsism and filiation, a position that echoes its initial emergence out of the unresolved tension between the hermeticism of the aesthetic and its association with his literary forefathers. In fact, there is clear evidence that this interest in paternity, which seems to emerge with *The Invention of Solitude*, would ultimately provide the theoretical lens through which Auster retrospectively conceptualised his relationship to writers of the art of hunger and particularly to Beckett. In an extract from an interview with James Knowlson, Auster says of his relationship to Beckett, “I had to turn my back on him. It is Harold Bloom who spoke about the ‘anxiety of influence’ and in a way you have to kill off your father in order to do your own work.”<sup>224</sup> For Auster, the question of literary intertexts had by this point clearly been assimilated into a question of literary paternity.<sup>225</sup> Although the desire for a language of the real that motivates the poetry and that is so closely associated with the stone does not disappear in this new formulation, it seems to be superseded, or at least to be joined, by a new openness to reciprocity, sociality, and filiation.

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<sup>224</sup> Paul Auster, “Extract of Interview, Enclosed with Letter from James Knowlson to Paul Auster,” September 1, 2004, Box 88, Folder 2, Paul Auster Archive, 1999-2005 Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

<sup>225</sup> This offers another way in which Auster would distance himself definitively from Barthes, for whom the work, his less preferred form, “is caught up in a process of filiation”: Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, 160.

In both the poetry and *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster's father emerges as the human embodiment of the stubborn, inscrutable and uninterpretable stone. In the poem "S. A. 1911-1979," written on the occasion of his father's death, Auster writes:

To say no more  
than the truth of it: men die, the world fails, the words  
  
have no meaning. And therefore to ask  
only for words.

Stone wall. Stone heart. Flesh and blood. (CP 144)

The stone's reappearance here, at this moment of profound personal grief, reinscribes the image's earlier associations. Most obviously, the stone here evokes death. More subtly, it retains its sense of impenetrability, of impassability, of inexpressibility. This association attaches both to the brute fact of death and to the person of the father himself, and it is this personalisation of the trope of the stone that is new in this poem. The phrase "Stone heart" underscores this transformation, linking the stone for the first time to a set of affective concerns that overlay the mainly epistemological anxieties of its earlier appearances. The stone here is not just unreadable but also uncaring. Its unknowability is mapped onto Auster's own difficult relation with a father he felt he barely knew. Equally significant is that even here, the apparent impassiveness of the stone retains its paradoxical function as a spur to writing, a spur to literature: because the "words have no meaning," Auster "ask[s] only for words." The uncaring stone, like the inexpressible stone, is at once the impossibility of and the impulse towards literature. In a near-final typescript draft of this poem, the opening lines read, "From loss. And from the hunger / That marauds the mind."<sup>226</sup> This earlier version—which differs from the final only in that "the hunger" is replaced with "such loss," a change marked in a holograph emendation—makes it clear that this impulse towards the expression of the inexpressible reprises the earlier conflict between stone and hunger.

This relationship—in fact, even this imagery—recurs in *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster's first full-length piece of prose to be published under his own name. This fragmentary memoir, centrally concerned with Auster's relationship to his father and with issues of

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<sup>226</sup> Auster, "Poem of the Last Words, Search for a Definition, and Others ['Obituary in the Present Tense', 'Zeroing In']:"

paternity more generally, holds a central place in Auster's oeuvre. Often read as the ur-text of Auster's later writing, it has been described by Dennis Barone as "Auster's chosen and invented mythology, as the first cause of all his subsequent works," and by William Dow as "signal[ing] the problematic and paradigm of his later work."<sup>227</sup> Certainly, its key concerns of paternity, contingency, the writer's room, memory, and writing itself have been ongoing preoccupations for Auster throughout his career, although—as Barone himself cautions—it is certainly possible to make too much of this apparent continuity and in so doing overlook the evolution of the writer's work, as well as the perhaps equally critical place of Auster's essays and poetry as constituting complementary aspects of this "chosen and invented mythology."

*The Invention of Solitude* is divided into two parts: "Portrait of an Invisible Man," written in the aftermath of his father's death, is an attempt to come to terms with his difficult relationship with his father; "The Book of Memory," written after his divorce and consequent separation from his young son, assumes a more introspective tone and a more experimental form. The terms in which Auster describes his father in *The Invention of Solitude* seem to consciously evoke his description in "S.A. 1911-1979" as the quintessential stone. His father is described as living alone, "opaquely, as if immune to the world. He did not seem to be a man occupying space, but rather a block of impenetrable space in the form of a man. The world bounced off him, shattered against him, at times adhered to him—but it never got through."<sup>228</sup> This sense of his father as a "block," as a physical presence marked by immovability and impenetrability, returns us to Auster's earlier description of his father as "Stone wall. Stone heart." He is constantly figured as a man who abstains from the world, locked inside himself, accessible only as surface, as a hard, impenetrable exterior whose depths, if they exist, remain inaccessible. This figuration turns on what Auster describes as his father's lack of appetite:

He did not smoke, he did not drink. No hunger for sensual pleasures, no thirst for intellectual pleasures. Books bored him, and it was the rare movie or play that did not put him to sleep... A man without appetites. You felt that nothing could ever intrude on him, that he had no need of anything the world had to offer. (*IS*, 17)

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<sup>227</sup> Barone, "Introduction," 14; William Dow, "Paul Auster's Invention of Solitude: Glimmers in a Reach to Authenticity," *Critique* 39, no. 3 (1998): 271.

<sup>228</sup> Paul Auster, *The Invention of Solitude* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), 7 (hereafter cited in text as *IS*).

If Auster's father remains locked within himself, stone-like, it is precisely because of the stone's tendency to abstinence, to asceticism, its refusal of food and by extension, its refusal of all external supports. This radical and hermetic self-sufficiency is experienced as a kind of monstrosity by Auster, a fact that makes his father unlovable, that draws him out of circulation.

In striking contrast, Auster presents himself as perpetually hungering after the father. Only two pages after his paragraph-long disquisition on his father's lack of appetite, Auster confesses, "You do not stop hungering after your father's love, even after you are grown up" (*IS*, 19). And soon after, in an account of his relationship with his father, he writes, "Earliest memory: his absence" (*IS*, 20), followed in the next paragraph by, "Later memories: a craving" (*IS*, 21). If Auster figures his father on the model of the stone, devoid of appetite, he figures himself in terms of a hunger that drives and propels him, pushing him constantly after an absence that, in its very inaccessibility, promises only to prolong the hunger. As Marc Chénétier writes, in language strongly evocative of Auster's images of predators from his poetry, the *Invention of Solitude* concerns a subject "who stalks the real with powerless words," pointing both to the prolongation of hunger and to its pursuit of a reality that has so often been figured as stone.<sup>229</sup> Derek Rubin takes this argument further, arguing that, in the memoir, "Hunger, both as the source of yearning and as its object, is clearly ... the prime source of all value."<sup>230</sup> In Rubin's argument, Auster's literary endeavour is premised almost entirely on this prolongation of hunger, on its elevation to an insatiable motivating principle that is supported by the very unseizability of its quarry: the unknowability of his father to his son and, layered on this, the inexpressibility of the real through language.

Despite Auster's concerted effort to write of his father, to prevent "his entire life" from "vanish[ing] along with him," "The Portrait of an Invisible Man" leaves surprisingly little trace of the man it is charged with describing. It speaks around him—of his son's childhood memories, of his own father's murder, of the house and the objects with which he surrounded himself—but the father himself, the man whose portrait is being drawn, remains stubbornly absent. We finish with a sense, not of the man, but of his

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<sup>229</sup> Marc Chénétier, "Paul Auster's Pseudonymous World," in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 37.

<sup>230</sup> Derek Rubin, "The Hunger Must Be Preserved at All Costs: A Reading of *The Invention of Solitude*," in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 60–70.

son's incomprehension of him. In this sense, he is less a character than an occasion for writing; less a person than an absence that language can chase after. It is, in other words, precisely this dynamic between the father's hungerless impenetrability and the son's desperate craving that produces *The Invention of Solitude*, that is the precondition for this kind of literary writing. Satisfied hunger may provide something to write *about*, but in *The Invention of Solitude* and—implicitly—in the poetry, it is only the hunger that is left open that can provide the initial impetus for writing.

Against the backdrop of this complicated father/son dynamic, the second part of *The Invention of Solitude* introduces another, quasi-paternal relationship that is also described in terms of hunger and nourishment. This relationship, between the autobiographical Auster-surrogate A., the principal character and implied narrator of the “Book of Memory,” and his friend S., a French composer whose political missteps during the Nazi occupation left him a social and professional pariah within the French musical and cultural world. Auster describes this relationship in explicitly paternal terms, writing that “what drew him continually to these meetings with S. was that they allowed him to experience, for the first time, what it felt like to have a father” (*IS*, 92), followed immediately by a description of A.'s father as “a remote, almost absent figure,” an almost word-for-word repetition of his description throughout “Portrait of an Invisible Man.” The relationship that springs up between A. and S. reprises but inverts the terms of hunger and craving in which Auster describes his relationship with his own father:

S. and A. drew together out of a congruent want: the one for a son who would accept him as he was, the other for a father who would accept him as he was. For A., S. satisfied his paternal hunger through a curious combination of generosity and need. . . . If A.'s father, in his strange, self-enclosed manner of being in the world, had made A. feel superfluous to his life, as if nothing he did could ever have an effect on him, S., in his vulnerability and destitution, allowed A. to become necessary to him. A. brought food to him, supplied him with wine and cigarettes, made sure he did not starve—which was a true danger. For that was the point about S.: he never asked anyone for anything. (*IS*, 92)

A.'s relationship with S. is founded on the same metaphors of filial hunger as his relationship with his father, but in sharp contrast to his father's “lack of appetite,” S. has his own set of hungers—both metaphorically for a son, and also literally, for food. This reciprocal hunger seems in some way to satisfy Auster's cravings by the very congruency of their needs. Indeed, Auster's description of S.'s needs and appetites—and of Auster's capacity to satisfy them—places him as a precise inverse of his father, S.'s “wine and

cigarettes” counterbalancing Auster’s own father who “did not smoke” and “did not drink.”

## The Social Art of Hunger: Paul Auster and the Novel

If *The Invention of Solitude* opens the way for a more social aesthetic in Auster's work, it is the novels of the 1980s that seek to realise this new ambition. Between 1985 and 1989, Auster published five novels, increasingly scrutinising and rejecting the intensely self-enclosed writing of his youth. Auster gropes instead towards a writing that is decidedly social, embracing characters that are not reducible to their author and plots that are driven by encounters with other people. Central to the shift is Auster's emerging sense of the novel itself as an inherently social and polyvocal genre, opposed to the univocal hermeticism of lyric poetry. This development poses some complications for Auster's theorisation of the art of hunger. A defining characteristic of Auster's first formulation of the art of hunger is its solipsism, a feature that persists through his analysis of Hamsun, Kafka, Beckett and Céline in his thesis and early essays, the imagery of stones in the poetry, and the description of his father in the memoir. Hunger, in this sense, stands as that which destroys relation and violates the social. Translating it into a genre and an emerging worldview premised on the interpersonal is not an obvious step and, in fact, this chapter argues that for Auster it eventually proves an unsustainable one, which he ultimately abandons after *Moon Palace* (1989).

Auster is not the first writer in this tradition to seek a more social, less hermetic form for the art of hunger. As we saw in the previous chapter, his readings of Hamsun and Kafka in fact exaggerate the earlier writers' solipsism, ignoring the extent to which even these foundational texts, isolated as their protagonists may be, turn on a relation of refusal to the society in which they are embedded. More strikingly, as I argue in Chapter 3, Beckett's late work begins with a new interest in relation that, in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and *How It Is*, takes the form of an attempt to reconceptualise starvation in social or interpersonal terms. But neither of these precursors offers a particularly thoroughgoing model of hunger as a social phenomenon: for the earlier modernists, the emphasis falls heavily on the disjuncture, exclusion and refusal that animates the hunger

artists' encounters with other people, while in Beckett, the social nature of hunger only expands the remit of its hermeticism, producing whole systems that are self-enclosed and self-perpetuating. Auster borrows elements from both, but it is clear from early on that he is less interested in articulating hunger as a social phenomenon than in simply finding a place for it and its aesthetic potential within his newly social writing. One of the immediate results of this is a weakening of the earlier writers' interest in aesthetic autonomy, locating this quest for an autonomous art increasingly within social structures and plots. By *Moon Palace*, this trajectory recasts the art of hunger's autonomy as mental breakdown and collapse.

One of the ways in which Auster breaks most clearly from this tradition in his novels is in his treatment of their genre. Whereas earlier writers like Beckett, Rimbaud, Hamsun and Kafka subordinate genre to the exigencies of the art of hunger, Auster does the reverse, treating hunger and its aesthetic implications as elements within a larger generic structure. Stripping it of its role as an organising principle, Auster seeks to neutralise and socialise the solipsism of the art of hunger. His sense of the novel as a social genre has acknowledged affinities to Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of novelistic discourse. In an interview dated 1989-90, falling at the end of the period I examine in this chapter, Auster comments, "Of all the theories of the novel, Bakhtin's strikes me as the most brilliant, the one that comes closest to understanding the complexity and the magic of the form" (*AH* 297). For Bakhtin, the novel is unique among literary genres in its capacity to describe the contemporary and, alongside this, to capture the inherently social nature of living languages. This sociality is marked by a diversity of languages and the novel brings these varied languages into dialogue with each other:

These distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel.<sup>231</sup>

This account of the novel is difficult to reconcile with the art of hunger that emerges out of Auster's early works. Where Auster sought a pure language that would be perfectly commensurate with the world, Bakhtin's novel embraces the proliferation of languages and their messy interaction with each other. Where Auster's writing was solitary to the

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<sup>231</sup> M. M Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 263.

point of solipsism, Bakhtin's is social and dialogic, fundamentally opposed to the fractured individualism of the art of hunger.

In the same interview where Auster praises Bakhtin, he also reflects on his own development as a writer:

My poems were a quest for what I would call a uni-vocal expression ... They were concerned with essences, with bedrock beliefs, and their aim was always to achieve a purity and consistency of language. Prose, on the other hand, gives me a chance to articulate my conflicts and contradictions. Like everyone else, I am a multiple being, and I embody a whole range of attitudes and responses to the world ... Writing prose allows me to include all of these responses. (*AH*, 296-97)

The interviewer translates this description of multiple perspectives into one of multiple languages to draw out the link to Bakhtin, and it is clear that Auster's conceptualisation of the novel shares something in common with the Russian's notions of dialogism and heteroglossia. Nonetheless, if this description of prose writing is Bakhtinian, it is at least as strongly Whitmanesque, reading almost as a paraphrase of the famous lines from "Song of Myself":

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)<sup>232</sup>

What Whitman adds is a sense of the social as an elasticity of the personal, a sociality of multitudes that expands within and organises around the individual author. This is obviously not entirely congenial to Bakhtin's Marxist thought, but it does allow Auster to articulate a sense of his novels that retains a continuity with his earlier writing on the art of hunger, in which the novel can be at once social and solitary. At the same time, by embracing the proliferation of contradictory impulses and perspectives, it offers a model within which the art of hunger may have a place without being the determining principle, one in which it would—for the first time—co-exist with other aesthetic modes and other ways of writing.

This inclusiveness is not as straightforward as it may appear. As we saw in the previous chapter, the strong version of the art of hunger that Auster advances in his early writing is total and totalising, aspiring towards a perfect language that would, by definition,

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<sup>232</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass and Other Writings*, ed. Michael Moon (New York: Norton, 2002), 77.

supersede and exclude all others. Such an extreme position can be integrated into an eclectic text in two ways, both of which Auster employs at different points: either as an extreme state of mind that is by necessity repudiated by the text, or in an altered form that relaxes the totalising strictures of the aesthetic. He achieves the latter by shifting the aesthetic of hunger, defined in the art of hunger essay by its “formlessness,” to incorporate bricolage, collage and hallucinatory free association. This retains elements of the earlier art of hunger, but also makes space for both Bakhtinian dialogism and, more strongly, Whitmanesque multitudes. In the novels, the new aesthetics of hunger is more often described than practiced, found in characters’ behaviours and writing more than in the text of the novels themselves. In this sense, the art of hunger becomes a meta-art of hunger.

If the novel opens the way for a new conceptualisation of the aesthetic of hunger, it also allows him to rediscover his early claim that, in Hamsun and other writers of the art of hunger, “The world of art has been translated into the world of the body” (*AH*, 18). The abstraction of the poetry all but erased this dimension from his art of hunger during the 1970s, but it returns with his turn to prose. Discussing *White Spaces*, a short prose piece inspired by a dance performance that he credits with initiating the shift to prose writing, Auster sees “an attempt on my part to translate the experience of that dance performance into words” (*AH*, 295). Echoing the translation of body into art that he found in Hamsun, this passage locates the relation between embodiment and text at the origin of Auster’s narrative of himself as a writer of prose. It follows that his treatment of hunger in the novels of this period is always embodied, turning away from the abstraction of his own poetry and the textualisation of hunger of Beckett’s late work, and back towards its earlier more embodied manifestations in Hamsun and Kafka.

These shifts in Auster’s thinking about the art of hunger take place against the backdrop of these early novels’ complicated manuscript history. Although they were all published in the late 1980s, *The New York Trilogy* (1985-6), *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) and *Moon Palace* (1989) all have roots in drafts dating back to the 1960s. Scenes, characters, themes, ideas and imagery from these early writings are still recognisably present in the published works, but the overarching plots are lacking and the drafts combine elements from all three novels in ways that make clear their shared genesis. Hunger is a major theme even in these early drafts. This investigation of hunger is most

sustained in an untitled, undated manuscript whose holograph corrections resemble Auster's handwriting of the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>233</sup> This 47-page story clearly contains the genesis of many later accounts of hunger: a young man sells off his books to keep himself alive, as in *Moon Palace*; a protagonist called Quinn retreats into a room where food inexplicably appears, as in *The City of Glass*; characters scour the streets in search of rubbish, as in *In the Country of Last Things*; the passage ends with a rescue that clearly develops into Marco's rescue in *Moon Palace* but which also echoes the repeated acts of rescue that characterise Anna's experiences in *In The Country of Last Things*. If this manuscript is source material for later novels, however, it is also strongly marked by earlier writers in the art of hunger tradition. Hamsun can be detected in the connection between lying and starvation, in the protagonist's inability to ingest food, and in his reliance on and repudiation of the charity of others. The initial narrative situation, of a speaker alone in a room of unknown location, evokes Beckett's *Malone Dies*, and the style is notably derivative of Beckett's *Trilogy*. At the same time, the same style clearly provides a foundation both for Anna's narrative voice in *In the Country of Last Things* and, in parodic form, the demented younger Peter Stillman's crazed speech in *City of Glass*.

Read as a whole, this unpublished story makes it clear that Auster's treatment of hunger in prose, including its more social and embodied nature, has a long history, resulting from his reimagining of the art of hunger that he elaborates in his thesis and his sense of the possibility and limitations of prose as a form. There is, therefore, less a teleological development in Auster's writing of hunger over time than a movement between generic modes that were fixed surprisingly early. In fact, hunger in his work—both prose and poetry—overwhelmingly emerges in the very early years of his writing career, up to about the mid-1970s, when his personal experience of starvation and his influence by earlier hunger artists were at their most prominent. Although he continues to work through these ideas until the publication of *Moon Palace*, hunger never becomes a major theme in works that do not have their genesis in this critical early period. Its disappearance from his subsequent writing can therefore be understood in various ways, as both the coming to an end of a trope cast as an artefact of his literary youth, and as the discarding of a figure and an aesthetic that—as we will see in this chapter—Auster struggled to fully integrate into his conceptualisation of the novel.

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<sup>233</sup> See Paul Auster, Untitled TS with holograph corrections, n.d., Box 22, Folder 3, Paul Auster Archive, 1963-1995 Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

## I. “I Began to Lose My Grip”: *The New York Trilogy*

Hunger’s first novelistic appearance is in *The New York Trilogy*, where Quinn’s self-starvation is in many ways the pivotal event of the dénouement of *City of Glass*, the trilogy’s first novel. First published in 1985-86 as three separate novels—*City of Glass* (1985), *Ghosts* and *The Locked Room* (both 1986)—*The New York Trilogy* was collected under its current title in 1987. It consists of a series of three parallel narratives that the narrator of *The Locked Room* describes as all “finally the same story”, all loosely modeled on a detective narrative whose conclusion is repeatedly frustrated and finally left dangling. In many ways, these novels are a restatement of familiar Austerian themes, staying fairly closely within the poetic problematic defined in the 1970s. They are centrally concerned with the problem of language and its transparency, with the issue of how to represent the real, and with the inaccessibility and unknowability of other people.

The detective narratives that underpin all three novels, in fact, are best read in this light, as a way of translating the poetic interest in observation and in the unmediated representation of reality into fiction. Although critics have tended to focus on the absence of a dénouement or the frustration of resolution as the moment at which these detective stories are transformed into anti-detective stories, in reality the seeds of this frustration are present from the beginning.<sup>234</sup> None of the stories of *The New York Trilogy* actually contains any trace of that vital element of crime fiction: the crime itself. There is no solution, not because Auster is intent on frustrating us with his crafty postmodernism, but quite simply because there is nothing to solve. In fact, Auster’s interest in detective fiction is less epistemological than aesthetic. In the opening pages, describing Quinn’s own passion for detective stories, he writes, “What he liked about these books was their sense of plenitude and economy. In the good mystery, there is nothing wasted, no sentence, no word that is not significant.”<sup>235</sup> Detective fiction, in this account, appeals not so much as a set of logocentric impulses to be frustrated, but as a form that exercises the same discipline, the same careful self-sufficiency to which Auster’s poetry aspired. Detective fiction in this sense resembles a language of stones, clear and transparent in its engagement with the world. In tandem, the urge to read such novels is cast as the craving, gluttonous hunger that the stone so often gives rise to: “It was a kind of hunger

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<sup>234</sup> See, for example, Madeleine Sorapure, “The Detective and the Author: City of Glass,” in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 71–87; Anne M. Holzapfel, *The New York Trilogy: Whodunit?: Tracking the Structure of Paul Auster’s Anti-Detective Novels* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996).

<sup>235</sup> Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), 8 (hereafter cited in text as NYT).

that took hold of him, a craving for a special food, and he would not stop until he had eaten his fill” (8). The difference between these passages and the tense relationship between hunger and the stone in the poetry or the craving Auster and his appetite-less father in *The Invention of Solitude* is that here, satiation is possible. Quinn, unlike Auster the son or the poet, can “eat his fill.” If this is true of Quinn reading his detective novels, however, it is less true for the reader of *The New York Trilogy*. Readers of these novels are given the form of crime fiction, without the content—crime, clues, dénouement—that drives the plot and provides narrative satisfaction in more conventional detective fiction. Emptied out in this way, these novels resist their audience’s satiation.

But the detective narrative of these novels has another, less obvious function, arising from Auster’s conformity to the genre. With the excision of crime and dénouement, what is left of crime fiction is the process of detection itself and this consists, particularly in the first two novels, almost entirely of a process of close, even obsessive observation. Each of the assignments in the three novels weds the pursuit of the “tail job” (*NYT*, 29, 135) to the act of “watching” or “keeping an eye on,” pointing back to a similar dynamic in the poetry’s evocation of the bird of prey. In both cases, the purpose of this observation is its translation into language, its inscription in Quinn’s notebooks and Blue’s reports. The novels reflect a preoccupation with a process of observation that seeks out its subject in order to capture it in language. Detective fiction, in other words, allows Auster a way of translating the aspirations of the poetry—a craving for an unmediated relationship to reality that is expressed in a self-sufficient language of stones—into the realm of the novel.

The relationship between hunger and observation reaches its apex in Quinn’s self-starvation in *City of Glass*, a period of apparent madness in which the protagonist’s obsessive devotion to the processes of observation that constitute his “case” is taken to its extreme. This episode is Quinn’s last resort, his attempt to persist with the case in the wake of his prey’s disappearance and his realisation that the detective he is impersonating probably does not exist. Faced with the loss of the last remaining props of detective fiction, Quinn retreats into compulsive observation, staking out the younger Stillman’s apartment with an obsessiveness that leads him to shun shopping, eating, and sleeping for fear of missing the crucial climax. The hyper-detective stake-out and the rigour with which he refines his food intake and sleep patterns so that they asymptotically approach

nothing leads Quinn into a radical disconnection from the world. The overwhelming critical consensus on this episode takes Quinn's starvation as a kind of hyper-individualism that strives to expel the other, the contingent, and the external from its purview.<sup>236</sup> Such critics point not only to the structure of starvation itself, but to the disassociation that plagues Quinn in this period, to the point that he fails to hear that the older Stillman has committed suicide and that the case that he is so obsessively working on is therefore definitively closed. To cast this situation in the imagery of the poetry, this break with the world marks the point at which the externally directed hunger of the predator-prey or detective-culprit relationship is transformed into the self-regarding starvation of the stone. It represents the re-emergence, in crisis, of the solipsism of the earliest forms of the art of hunger.

With this transformation comes a marked shift in the aesthetic priorities of the novel, or at least of its central protagonist. The obsession with observation and linguistic transparency that characterised the more detective-driven opening of the novel is downgraded to a pretext or frame for an emerging aesthetic that espouses many of the principles outlined in Auster's readings of Hamsun. This shift is most clearly visible in the surprising and belated emergence of the novel's narrator. What had, for over one hundred pages, read as a simple omniscient narrator suddenly emerges as a character, at the precise moment when Quinn retreats to the alley to starve. The chapter opens with the confession that:

The account of this period is less full than the author would have liked.... Since this story is based entirely on facts, the author feels it his duty not to over step the bounds of the verifiable, to resist at all costs the perils of invention. (*NYT*, 113)

This "author", who unexpectedly steps forth from the shadows is forced to appear by Quinn's sudden demurral from their shared enterprise. The narrator goes on to explain that Quinn's red notebook, the source of the story to this point, has become "suspect," turning the language of detective fiction back on the detective. Quinn himself, he laments, "began to lose his grip." Quinn, in other words, falters here in his strict recording of "facts" and "the verifiable"—he turns his notebook to other uses, and in

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<sup>236</sup> See for example Dimovitz, "Public Personae," 626; William G. Little, *The Waste Fix: Seizures of the Sacred from Upton Sinclair to The Sopranos* (New York; London: Routledge, 2002), 80, 83; William G. Little, "Nothing to Go On: Paul Auster's 'City of Glass,'" *Contemporary Literature* 38, no. 1 (1997): 133–63; Catherine Quarré Roger, *Paul Auster, L'enchanteur Désenchanté : Le Monde, Le Moi et l'Autre Dans L'œuvre de Paul Auster* (Paris: Publibook, 2006), 56–57.

the process violates the silent agreement between “author” and source material that allowed the narrator to vanish, to become the disembodied eye to which Quinn aspires. This violation isolates Quinn not only practically in the world, but also formally in the text, drawing attention to his unknowability, to the regions of his life and his self that the author is forced to “pass over in silence.” In abandoning the narrator’s preferred system of transparent, observation-driven notetaking, Quinn assumes the status of Auster’s father in *The Invention of Solitude*, the “stone wall” of impenetrable alterity. He also, however, returns to the state of isolation, insanity and lying that characterises the art of hunger. This passage, in this sense, dramatises the tension between the art of hunger and the Austerian novel, their incommensurability as much as their cohabitation.

If Quinn abandons the “facts” that the narrator might find useful in constructing a narrative, however, even our slightly insane detective does not in fact retreat into the “perils of invention” against which the narrator so carefully guards himself. Instead, Quinn’s experience in the alley seems to be determined by a ruthless self-presence in which observation loses its target and the body becomes a central preoccupation. While he aspires to a disembodied state, in which he persists only as an ever-vigilant eye and an undistracted mind, the bulk of the short account of Quinn’s time in the alley is actually given over to accounts of his attempts to regulate his bodily functions. Similarly, his obsessive observation loses its focus. Instead, “He spent many hours looking up at the sky” (NYT 117), recording in apparently minute detail, over a full page—an entire fifth of the space given over to this episode—the movements of the clouds and the changing patterns of the sky. This passage represents a direct violation of the economy and the avoidance of waste for which Quinn praises detective novels. Instead, we are faced with an entirely redundant passage, by the novel’s internal standards. We are returned to a kind of observation for its own sake, a strict aestheticism. This is the first moment in the *Trilogy* where the instrumentalism of the detective’s notebook disappears in favour of an interest in the world for its own sake.

The immanence of this moment seems to tie Quinn explicitly and unavoidably to his immediate world. Even his dreams no longer grant him access to anything beyond direct experience, neither to the subconscious, nor to hidden parts of the mind or of himself, nor even to simple, meaningless invention. Instead, “His dreams during this period were few. When they did occur, they were strange: brief visions of the immediate—his hands,

his shoes, the brick wall beside him” (*NYT*, 115). Even Quinn’s dreams are resolutely literal, firmly rooted in his reality. Refusing the leap into symbolism or fabulation that characterises dreams, they instead mimic wakefulness in their scrupulously realistic visions of Quinn’s world. As such the line between observation and invention, between the conscious and unconscious mind, is dissolved in Quinn’s self-presence. But if this produces a stone-like impenetrability, it does so not through hermeticism but through a tautological relation to the world; Quinn’s hyper-observation moves beyond the art of hunger’s emphasis on autonomy by making his relation to objects in the world central to his self-enclosure.

This episode has its counterparts in the later books of *The New York Trilogy*, where the equivalent scenes reinforce both the association of hunger with unknowability and physicality, and the creeping sense that something in this aesthetic might not be easily reconciled to the novel form. Each novel follows a similar trajectory of increasingly dispirited investigation, culminating in a brief episode in which that investigation reaches a hyperbolic form, cast as a kind of madness, and followed by a cryptic aftermath that explains little. Quinn’s starvation provides us with that narrative fulcrum in *City of Glass*, and the equivalent episodes in the later two novels are therefore implicitly mapped onto it, formed from an analogy to hunger. In *Ghosts*, this scene comes as Quinn decides to break in to Black’s apartment, but faints as he steps into the room. This brief passage underscores many of the associations of hunger as it is discussed in Auster’s reading of Hamsun, particularly the sense of timelessness and loss of control, both experienced by Quinn. It also returns us to the question of disembodiment that Quinn’s sojourn in the alley raises: evoking, on the one hand, a mind/body split as though his head were “about to detach itself from his body and float away”<sup>237</sup>; and on the other, the vicious reassertion of the body, through the oppressive physicality of his response to entering the room. In the process, Blue apes death, “collapsing to the floor like a dead man” (*NYT*, 188). “Black[ing] out,” he is overcome by the image of the night, the same image that the vulture of Auster’s poetry sought out in its attempt to escape the oppression of sight. The result reads like a pastiche of Auster’s various engagements with hunger, a moment in which the absence of starvation does nothing to impede the reassertion of the art of

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<sup>237</sup> This image directly echoes a passage from Hamsun’s *Hunger*, which Auster quotes in his essay on the novel: “My head became light and floating, I could no longer feel its weight upon my shoulders.” Auster uses this to argue that “Hunger is the means by which this split takes place, the catalyst, so to speak, of altered consciousness”, and then goes on to note that, “We are not in the realm of ideas here. It is a physical state, brought into being under conditions of extreme duress”: Auster, *Art of Hunger*, 12.

hunger. And yet, like Quinn's five-page interlude in the alley, this passage is unexpectedly slight for such a central moment. Moreover, its central event is the loss of consciousness, a moment that—for a story fully focalised through its principal character—simply cannot be described. This passage, then, creates a blank spot in the novel that points to the difficulty of incorporating the “art of hunger”—timeless, plotless, self-contained, unknowable, and embodied to the exclusion of intellection—into the fabric of the novel.

*The Locked Room* offers a different kind of challenge to the art of hunger's translation to the novel. Here, the narrator's trip to Paris, a final attempt to find Fanshawe that degenerates into a sex- and alcohol-fuelled break down, parallels Quinn's starvation. The analogies between these scenes are signalled from the chapter's opening, with the narrator devoting the first paragraph of his account to a detailed description of Parisian clouds that clearly echoes Quinn's reveries on the New York sky. Once again, the trademark of this state is an immersion in the physical world, in tandem with a sense that, as the narrator remarks on arriving in Paris, “I felt my grip loosening” (NYT, 287), echoing Quinn “beg[inning] to lose his grip” and, more faintly, Blue “losing control.” These echoes are not coincidental: the narrator of this passage, like Quinn, is clearly starving throughout much of his stay in Paris, even as his time in Paris is motivated by the same obsessive but futile quest for perfect unmediated knowledge that drives Quinn's stake-out.

What the narrator actually discovers in Paris is not the antics of a fictional character, but the autobiography of his own author. The movie producer, for instance, who lives in a “monumental apartment” on the Avenue Henri Martin and who employs him to do “translation, script summaries, a little ghost-writing for my wife” (NYT, 288) is clearly a version of the same movie producer who is recorded living in a “vast Avenue Henri Martin apartment,” employing the young Auster to perform precisely these same tasks in *The Invention of Solitude* (64). Similarly, the house in the Var that Fanshawe's wealthy friends the Dedmons offer to both Fanshawe and the narrator is a clear reference to the house in the same region where Auster stayed with his then-wife Lydia Davis in the 1970s—although the ex-wife has been erased from the fictionalised version.<sup>238</sup> If Quinn

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<sup>238</sup> This period is described in Auster's most recent memoir and in Davis' short story, “St. Martin.” It is also mentioned in passing in an earlier memoir: Paul Auster, *Winter Journal* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 78–81; Lydia Davis, *The Collected Stories of Lydia Davis* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), 162–73; Auster, *Hand to Mouth*, 86.

repeats the anxieties of the poetry, the obsessive attempt to see perfectly and to see through language, the narrator of *The Locked Room* returns us to the concerns of *The Invention of Solitude*: the (auto-)biographical attempt to perfectly capture a life. Returning to Auster's life of the 1970s, to the formative moment of the art of hunger, this self-scrutinising trip underscores Auster's continued investment in the aesthetic goals and writing of an earlier time. And yet, the narrator, while retracing Fanshawe's steps, is neither Fanshawe nor Auster. His very presence introduces a degree of mediation that corrupts its subject matter: "In the end, it would probably not be wrong to say that everything was lost on me" (NYT, 288). *The Locked Room* might cast a backwards eye on the foundations of Auster's literary career, but it never lets us forget that it is just that: a backwards glance, a piece of nostalgia.

This self-reflexive autobiographical dimension can be read as a development of the art of hunger, which Auster describes in the Hamsun essay as "an art that is indistinguishable from the life of the artist who makes it" (AH, 18). It might also be read as part of a wider failure to make distinctions, which Auster associates with the art of hunger and which persists in *The Locked Room*:

The problem was that I could no longer make the right distinctions. This can never be that. Apples are not oranges, peaches are not plums. You feel the difference on your tongue, and then you know, as if inside yourself. But everything was beginning to have the same taste to me. I no longer felt hungry, I could not bring myself to eat. (NYT, 290)

This passage is striking for its seamless movement from a generalised ontological problem—the failure to make distinctions—to a specific failure of taste and, ultimately, of appetite, collapsing the ontological into the physical and making explicit the connection between language (insofar as it is a system of categories) and taste. It recalls both Molloy's famed lack of taste, and the narrator of *Hunger*'s violent profession that a cart full of potatoes contained "not potatoes at all, they were cabbages" (quoted in AH, 17). In Auster's analysis, Hamsun's passage points to the "equation of language and morals"; and it brings the protagonist to a critical endpoint, in which "There are only two possibilities left for the hero now: live or die; and he chooses to live." The drama of this conclusion seems unwarranted by the apparently petty situation that provokes it: although slightly insane, the insistence that potatoes are actually cabbages is hardly the worst of this particular protagonist's sins. For Auster, however, the importance of a

clarity of language, underwritten by taste, by the body's instinctive ability to differentiate between foodstuffs, is the writer's central preoccupation.

## II. The Famished City: *In The Country of Last Things*

If *The New York Trilogy* offers us a model of intensely individual hunger premised on an aesthetics of seeing clearly, Auster's next novel, *In the Country of Last Things* (1987) expands this concept in two major ways. It transforms hunger from an individual to a social phenomenon, depicting an entire city in which starvation is the driving force, the source of momentum that enables the city to carry on, while moving away from the equation of hunger with vision, towards an alternate art of hunger that is premised on an aesthetic of bricolage and collage, of making do.

The novel takes place in a grim and expiring city, described variously by critics as a dystopian future, a pastiche of the catastrophes of the twentieth-century, or a parody of contemporary society.<sup>239</sup> The nature of this city is such that starvation is an ordinary, inescapable fact of life. Food is scarce, hard to come by, and expensive, and all the inhabitants' lives are overwhelmingly devoted to finding enough to survive: "the people," Anna writes, "are insatiable: hunger is a curse that comes every day, and the stomach is a bottomless pit, a hole as big as the world."<sup>240</sup> This sense of hunger's constant, frustrating renewability is familiar from Quinn's complaints in *City of Glass*. Anna's experience, however, is never Quinn's intensely individual sense of isolation from the city. She speaks not of herself but of "the people." Even where the subject under discussion is more obviously her individual experience, she insistently generalises:

If not for my hunger, I wouldn't be able to go on. You must get used to doing with as little as you can. By wanting less, you are content with less, and the less you need, the better off you are. (*ICLT*, 2)

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<sup>239</sup> For the setting as a dystopic future, see Tim Woods, "Looking for Signs in the Air: Urban Space and the Postmodern in *In the Country of Last Things*," in *Beyond the Red Notebook: Essays on Paul Auster*, ed. Dennis Barone (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 112; Graeme Gilloch and Jane Kilby, "Trauma and Memory in the City: From Auster to Austerlitz," in *Urban Memory: History and Amnesia in the Modern City*, ed. Mark Crinson (London: Routledge, 2005), 8; as pastiche of twentieth century catastrophe, see Josh Cohen, "Desertions: Paul Auster, Edmond Jabès and the Writing of Auschwitz," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Languages Association* 33, no. 3 (2001-2000): 102; as parody of contemporary society, see Katharine Washburn, "A Book at the End of the World: Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14, no. 1 (1994): 63; and as synthesis of all three, see Clara Sarmiento, "The Angel in a Country of Last Things: Delillo, Auster, and the Post-Human Landscape," *Arcadia* 41, no. 1 (2006): 148.

<sup>240</sup> Paul Auster, *In the Country of Last Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 5 (hereafter cited in text as *ICLT*).

The first person “I” of the first sentence here immediately gives way to an impersonal “you,” as Anna’s experience is offered as a synecdoche for that of the city. Hunger here assumes an assimilating force, dragging the narrator out of individual experience into a collective one. The hunger that she experiences is everyone’s, an impersonal force that sets characters in motion and that drives the city. While hunger explicitly allows her to “go on,” this motivating function arises, somewhat inscrutably, not from its capacity to direct the sufferer towards food, but rather from a diminishment of needs and desires. It sets Anna in motion, and then immediately ensures that that motion is not directed towards anything.

This idea recalls Artaud’s comments about the need “to extract, from what is called culture, ideas whose compelling force is identical with that of hunger,” lines that Auster quotes as the epigraph to both his *Masters* thesis and the subsequent essay on Hamsun. As we saw in Chapter 1, for Artaud, hunger is not the individual torment of Hamsun’s narrator, but a social phenomenon that touches the whole world and in this sense, Anna’s world shares much in common with Artaud’s. For Artaud, however, the key point is to use this social nature of hunger to move from literal hunger to culture and aesthetics. If Anna does not seem to make this leap explicit, her language nonetheless places her in a lineage of Auster texts that are clearly aesthetic in their orientation. The emphasis on being content with less, for instance, recalls Auster’s essay on *Mercier and Camier* as “pared down to a minimum” (*AH*, 88). Similarly, the phrase “to go on” is inescapably Beckettian, and, in Beckett, is almost always associated with the persistence of speech and the obligation to express as in the famous closing words of *The Unnamable*: “You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (*T*, 418) or the opening lines of *Worstward Ho*, “On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on” (*NO*, 89). Like them, Anna’s going on is as textual as it is physical, driving not only her survival but the writing of the letter that constitutes the novel we are reading.

If the city is driven by an aesthetic of hunger, though, the manifestations of this drive vary enormously. *In the Country of Last Things* examines a number of different possible aesthetic responses to hunger, assessing their suitability as a response to the situation. The first such response involves outright fabulation:

Often you will overhear a group of people describing a meal in meticulous detail ... If the words can consume you, you will be able to forget your present hunger and enter what people call the “arena of sustaining nimbus.” There are even those who say there is nutritional value in these food talks. (*ICLT*, 9-10)

This passage offers us the art of hunger as mimesis, the perfect recreation of absent food as though it were present, the satiating of hunger by the creation of a feast, and in this sense it recalls the substitution of food for text in Beckett’s late work. This act inverts the relationship between eater and edible: in place of the speaker consuming food, the “words consume” the speaker, echoing the offal that “gluts” the vulture in *Unearth*. It grants language a powerful, ravenous capacity, in which the speaker is all but effaced. Anna rejects this solution on precisely these grounds: “I myself have no taste for it. I refuse to speak the language of ghosts” (*ICLT*, 10). This is a significant moment, a rejection of the textualisation of hunger that marks both Auster’s poetry and Beckett’s late work, on the grounds of this language’s spectrality, its lack of embodiment and lack of commitment. Instead, Anna embraces hunger as a courageous form of embodiment that confronts death directly.

A second response is presented by the Runners, a group who combine the Hamsunian impulse for the “world of art” to be “translated into the world of the body” (*AH*, 18) with the ascetic’s sense of discipline. This group puts its members through a “strict regimen of exercise and training, and a gradually reduced intake of food” (*ICLT*, 12) before sending them on a final run through the streets, ensuring that they run until they die. As Anna explains it:

By the time a member is ready to make his death run, he has simultaneously reached a point of ultimate strength and ultimate weakness. He can theoretically run forever, and at the same time his body has used up all its resources. (*ICLT*, 12)

Like Hamsun’s art, Anna sees the Runners as offering a kind of *ersatz* religion. Its rigours evoke Quinn’s fast, a kind of manic discipline that is designed to bring the faster to a final, perfected state. Unlike Quinn, however, the Runners accept that this state can only imply death, and have built this inevitable conclusion into their rituals, as its centrepiece. As such, the Runners’ actions are inherently self-defeating: they produce nothing but their own negation, embodying one of the animating contradictions of the art of hunger.

Anna offers a novel way out of this impasse. The first clue to this solution lies in her name, a reference to Kurt Schwitters's parodic 1919 love poem "An Anna Blume." The poem draws together found text and nonsensical phrases, weaving this haphazard mixture into something that resembles a love poem but pulls away constantly into absurdity. It introduced Anna Blume into Schwitter's work as a trope and character which, as Patricia McBride observes, Schwitters "recycled ... as a conceptual image, a linguistic pun, an emblem of poetic practice, and an ideogram in visual compositions."<sup>241</sup> Anna Blume, in other words, became a floating, perhaps empty, manifestation of various elements of Schwitters's artistic practice. Both the poem and the phrase "Anna Blume" are marked, above all, by their tendency to recycle or to be recycled, the fundamental characteristic of Schwitters's art of collage and arrangement that he dubbed "Merz." McBride observes that "What makes this practice notable is the extent to which the recycled materials remain fully recognizable as inserts, never completely losing their tie to the context from which they were extracted."<sup>242</sup> As such, Schwitters's art is an art of collage, in which the recycled objects' or phrases' histories remain present and therefore implicated in the work.

Anna Blume's strategy for survival in the city embraces precisely this aesthetic of recycling and reuse, of which her own name is a key example. On arrival in the city, she becomes an "object hunter," a special category of "scavenger." These terms evoke the birds of prey of the poetry, and in this sense, they are a mark of how far Auster has come from Beckett's dream of an objectless art. However, the function of this object-hunting is vastly different from the desire for a transparent connection to the world that the birds embodied. Anna explains the goal of the object hunter in these terms:

What another has seen fit to throw away, you must examine, dissect, and bring back to life. ... Everything falls apart, but not every part of every thing, at least not at the same time. The job is to zero in on these little islands of intactness, to imagine them joined to other such islands, and those islands to still others, and thus to create new archipelagoes of matter. You must salvage the salvageable and ignore the rest. (*ICLT*, 36)

Rejecting both mimetic invention and self-destructive asceticism, Anna settles on an aesthetic response to the mess that focuses on a principle of selection and arrangement, a

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<sup>241</sup> Patricia C. McBride, "The Game of Meaning: Collage, Montage, and Parody in Kurt Schwitters's Merz," *Modernism/Modernity* 14, no. 2 (2007): 22.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

goal of finding new uses and new contexts for that which remains. It offers an avenue for creativity in a world that is disintegrating and depleted, in a world that, like Quinn and Hamsun's narrator, seems to be starving itself to death. Indeed, although Anna rejects the version of Hamsun's art that Quinn espouses and that she finds in the runners, she embraces the sense of rearrangement and sorting implied by Hamsun's loss of clear referents and direct boundaries, by the "formlessness" that Auster attributed to the art of hunger.

But are Anna's aesthetics Auster's? Does Auster himself embrace this remaking of an art of hunger in the image of Schwitters's Dadaism? He certainly has in the past: *The Invention of Solitude*—and particularly "The Book of Memory"—is perhaps alone among Auster's writing in that it genuinely embraces collage, quotation, recycling and reuse on a formal level. *In The Country of Last Things* does not employ this kind of formal bricolage: it is a relatively coherently structured, almost entirely chronological account from a single perspective. However, the world of the city, even the structures that Auster claims he used to assemble it, seem to echo Schwitters's practices, if not the final result:

There are specific references to the Warsaw ghetto and the siege of Leningrad, but also to events taking place in the Third World today—not to speak of New York, which is rapidly turning into a Third World city before our eyes. The garbage system, which I describe at such great length in the novel, is loosely based on the present-day garbage system in Cairo. All in all, there's very little invented material in the book. The characters, yes, but not the circumstances. (AH 314)

The world, the "circumstances" of *In the Country of Last Things* are assembled from artefacts from the real world. To a large extent, the disorienting nature of the city, even its sense of being dystopic, seems to arise from all of these elements' incomplete removal from their original circumstances. They drag elements of their own nightmarish histories into the fictional world, and give the city the air of being oddly placeless, while simultaneously deeply historical.

And yet, Auster's description of the novel's sources draws attention to a central departure from this collage-like structure: Anna herself. In fact, *In the Country of Last Things* seems to develop on two levels: as the background, we have a Schwittersian collage, set in motion—but not, importantly, progressing—by the power of hunger; as the foreground, we have a fictive, coherent narrator, whose interaction with the world

and forward-drive transforms the novel from tableau to narrative, but who, by virtue of this, remains curiously formally isolated from hunger itself. Anna may be hungry, but only the city, only the background of this novel, has really been constructed according to the art of hunger that she herself advocates. The reason for this may well go back to Auster's insistence on the writer's coherence and centrality in "The Art of Hunger," against both Hamsun and Beckett: for Anna, too, is a writer, and, like all of Auster's writer-narrators, she cannot submit to the self-abnegation, the disintegration, implied by an active embrace of the art of hunger turned on herself. Moreover, to the extent that Auster's novels are fundamentally narrative-driven, such self-abnegation would seem self-defeating, removing as it does the possibility of narrative progression which, in Auster, seems isomorphic with the protagonist who "goes on."

Marjorie Perloff has argued that "the problem that came to obsess Modernism" is "whether poetry should be lyric or collage, meditation or encyclopedia, the still moment or the jagged fragment."<sup>243</sup> If this is the case, then Auster's art of hunger can be understood as oscillating between different modes of modernist poetics: the lyric, as explored in the poetry; the collage, as evoked in Anna's explorations in *In the Country of Last Things*. For Auster, both are tied to depletion and starvation, be it through the exigencies of the stone in the poetry or through the desperate attempts to fend off hunger that motivate Anna's scavenging. Auster's art of hunger remains, in this sense, a way of articulating a relationship to modernism, even as his shifting aesthetic priorities lead him to espouse an altogether different modernist tradition. Nonetheless, modernism's role here is significantly different from its status in his earlier work as a formative influence figured in genealogical or patrilinear terms. Instead, modernism is associated with the fragmented forms and strategic bricolage of the city, and the challenge seems to be not so much to make a space within the family tree of modernism, but to discover how to pick out a narrative from among its rubble. Auster's modernism, whether still moment or jagged fragment, is always static and always works to arrest narrative. Unable to conceive of a dynamic, social modernism, he finishes by opposing it to the novel. Even as Auster reaffiliates himself with alternate modernist traditions in order to find a way forward with the art of hunger, he is also, more clearly than ever before, seeking a way of moving beyond modernism and towards a more social, more narrative-driven form of the novel.

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<sup>243</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 23.

### III. “A Gathering Zero”: *Moon Palace*

Despite these limitations, *In the Country of Last Things* is unquestionably the most fully achieved of Auster’s attempts to reconcile the art of hunger with the novel, a feat made possible by its setting in a world where starvation is both social and individualised. *Moon Palace*, Auster’s next novel, resiles from this attempt, equating hunger with youthful misadventure and abandoning it permanently after the second chapter. In many ways, the opening chapters of *Moon Palace* should be read within *The New York Trilogy*’s series of rewritings of Quinn’s self-starvation. Like them, the opening scenes of this later novel depict a character, Marco, whose inexplicable, self-inflicted starvation is framed as a loss of control, whose life is completely undone by a pivotal act of privation, and whose means—physical, financial, mental, and even linguistic—gradually approach zero.

Nonetheless, *Moon Palace* does not attempt to resuscitate *The New York Trilogy*’s aspiration towards a faithful transcription of the world, preferring instead a formal experimentation with reality that is much closer to the collage of *In the Country of Last Things* or the Hamsunian art of hunger, to which it is often compared.<sup>244</sup> For Marco, reality shifts as a function of starvation: “In order to rise above my circumstances, I had to convince myself that I was no longer real, and the result was that all reality began to waver for me” (*MP*, 29).<sup>245</sup> Reality’s “wavering,” though, is less a loss of the world than a rearrangement of it:

One thought kept giving way to another, spiraling into ever larger masses of connectedness. The idea of voyaging into the unknown, for example, and the parallels between Columbus and the astronauts. The discovery of America as a failure to reach China; Chinese food and my empty stomach; thought, as in food for thought, and the head as a place of dream. I would think: the Apollo Project; Apollo, the god of music; University Victor and the Moon Men traveling out West. I would think: the West; the war against the Indians; the war in Vietnam, once called Indochina. (*MP*, 31-32)

This errant associative thought remains a defining characteristic of Marco’s period of starvation. Just before he is rescued by Kitty and Zimmer, he records, “endless, mutating visions that seemed to grow directly out of my burning skin. Nothing could hold its

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<sup>244</sup> Annick Duperray, *Paul Auster : Les Ambiguïtés de La Négation* (Paris: Belin, 2003), 86; Carsten Springer, *A Paul Auster Sourcebook* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001), 36; for critics who have linked Hamsun to the Trilogy, see: Donovan, *Postmodern Counternarratives*, 74; Shiloh, *Postmodern Quest*, 97.

<sup>245</sup> Paul Auster, *Moon Palace* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 29 (hereafter cited in text as *MP*).

shape in me” (*MP*, 68). If Auster’s art of hunger is a psychological art of formlessness, his depiction of Marco’s delusions gives us a formless psychology as a piece of art. If they bear some affinity to Hamsun, perhaps the strongest analogy is Miró’s starvation-provoked hallucinations, which he cites as the inspiration for the painting *Harlequin’s Carnival* and which he describes at length in a text translated by Auster.<sup>246</sup> In either case, starvation and its aesthetic products remain for Auster a modernist venture.

If observation organises the starvation of *The New York Trilogy*, and if collage is the aesthetic of *In the Country of Last Things*, in *Moon Palace* starvation is structured around aesthetic indiscriminability. Marco’s consumption of his uncle’s books is just as devoid of judgment as his arrangement of images and associations: “I plowed through everything with equal passion, devouring old works as hungrily as new” (*MP*, 22). This principle of tasteless consumption—and it is, crucially, figured as consumption here—recalls Molloy’s indifference in Beckett’s *Trilogy*. More explicitly than Molloy, however, Marco’s lack of taste is an aesthetic position, a direct affront to a Kantian aesthetics underpinned by taste and judgement. Born directly of hunger, this absence of taste, this failure to discriminate, promises a new set of aesthetic principles, founded on a play of images and ideas.

Such play, however, is not unmotivated in Auster. Auster’s first chain of associations, quoted above, is glossed later in the same paragraph:

the more I opened myself to these secret correspondences, the closer I felt to understanding some fundamental truth about the world. I ... felt a tremendous power surging through me, a gnostic joy that penetrated deep into the heart of things. (*MP*, 32)

This experience is revealed as being not just aesthetic but also quasi-spiritual, a way of acceding to some higher plane on which the inter-connectedness of things is made manifest. Marco holds onto this vague mysticism right to the very end, telling an army doctor, several weeks after his rescue, that “I thought that by abandoning myself to the chaos of the world, the world might ultimately reveal some secret harmony to me, some form or pattern that would help me to penetrate myself” (*MP*, 78). This reads as an almost willful misreading of Auster’s own argument in “The Art of Hunger,” particularly Auster’s quotation of Beckett’s claim that the purpose of art now is to “find a form that

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<sup>246</sup> Miró, *Selected Writings*, 164.

accommodates the mess.” Beckett’s idea of this form is, quite clearly, a purely artistic one; for Marco, however, it assumes a mystical overtone (“secret harmony”) that feeds a self-reflexivity (“help me to penetrate myself”), transforming Beckett’s artistic statement into a spiritualism that recalls both French symbolist poetry and popular self-help books. Auster’s privileging of the author, which we witnessed in “The Art of Hunger,” has morphed into an urge to totalisation, to know everything and understand everything, to contain everything within himself. Marco’s starvation has, in other words, become greedy.

In fact, the earliest drafts of *Moon Palace*, probably written while Auster was still an undergraduate at Columbia, link this impulse towards totalisation not to starvation but to obesity. In one draft, Nicholas Barber, an early version of Sol Barber, Marco’s father in the published text, and of the older Peter Stillman from *City of Glass*, discovers the writing of Henry Dutton. Like Henry Dark in *City of Glass* and like many of Auster’s speakers in his early poetry and essays, Dutton is obsessed with the tragedy of the Fall as a fall of language and the possibility of its redemption in a perfect language that erases the distance between word and object. Nicholas Barber, like Sol Barber, is morbidly obese, but in this early draft, Auster links this explicitly to a totalising desire for knowledge:

As with everything else he discovered that his means of access to Henry Dutton was through incorporating whatever lay in his path into his body, and like the monolithic glutton he perpetually tried to imitated, he shoveled it all into his mouth, and at regular intervals, he vomited them forth in the obscure utterances that defined his quest.<sup>247</sup>

Like a parody of *The Unnamable*, this early Barber eats and vomits knowledge in his quest for a total system of knowledge but this system of knowledge, which aspires to a perfect equivalence between world and word, is one that has just as insistently been tied to the art of hunger. Auster’s insatiable hunger—because it does not refuse the object—seems to have produced an art of hunger that is also an art of obesity. Nonetheless, there is an important difference to be drawn between Barber’s obesity and Marco’s starvation: where the latter is genuinely aesthetic, seeking “harmony” and “correspondences,” with their symbolist and musical connotations, the former is strictly epistemological, even

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<sup>247</sup> Paul Auster, “‘Bones in the Moon’ / ‘Bones Without Bodies’ / ‘No Bones’ / ‘Moon Burial’ / ‘Lunar Graveyard,’” red notebook with additional holograph pages, n.d., 26, Box 39, Paul Auster Archive, 1963-1995 Papers, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

scholarly (it is no coincidence that Sol Barber in the published *Moon Palace* is a scholar of literature). If Auster's art of hunger tends toward a fat art, it is not identical with it.

On some level, Auster himself seems to hold this kind of all-encompassing interconnection up as a goal for the novel. Both Fanshawe's successful novel *Neverland* and Benjamin Sachs's *The New Colossus* (from Auster's 1992 novel *Leviathan*) stand as exemplars of an ideal literary form, modelled on precisely these principles of inclusive association, of an accumulation of linked fragments that gives way to a coherent form.<sup>248</sup> Whereas the hunger of *The New York Trilogy* seems to harken back back to the aesthetics of poetry, that of *Moon Palace* has been positioned by Auster as a novelistic aesthetics. And yet, the novels he describes are entirely unlike the art of hunger novels of Hamsun, Céline and Beckett. In fact, they most closely resemble the modernist encyclopedism of James Joyce, the kind of writing that Beckett's art of hunger was clearly working against. In this sense, Auster's art of hunger, now indistinguishable from an aesthetics of gluttony, becomes its opposite in the novel. Moreover, while Auster writes *about* novels that obey this principle of totality, he himself writes no such thing. His novels function precisely because the fragments fail to resolve: connections are missed, coincidences unexplained, fragments unassimilated. His novels point to the absence of pattern.

This failure of totality is, in fact, built into Marco's experience of hunger. His sense of "gnostic joy," for instance, is immediately undercut by the very fact of starvation itself: "one morning I woke up and found that I was somewhere else: back in the world of fragments, back in the world of hunger and bare white walls" (*MP*, 32). This more mundane world is a crucial counterpoint to his holistic associative streams. It punctures them, but it also grounds them; it is both their necessary precondition, and the point at which they are revealed as overblown, parodic, and frankly ridiculous. Such a dynamic is a constant facet of his starvation. Later, in Central Park, he recounts his instability in just such oscillatory terms:

At one moment I was engaged in a philosophical quest, supremely confident that I was about to join the ranks of illuminati; at the next moment I was in tears, collapsing under the weight of my own anguish. (*MP*, 52-53)

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<sup>248</sup> See Paul Auster, *Leviathan* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 37.

Placed within the context of such emotional and mental instability, Marco's spiritual goals are revealed as the madness he suspected them of being. They are posited as illusion, as mythologising, as folly: as symptom, rather than revelation. In this sense, they reveal not a triumph of intellectual insight, not the mind's piercing through the deceptive veil of the world, but the mind's entanglement in the world. As Marco writes early in his fast, "the mind cannot win over matter, for once the mind is asked to do too much, it quickly shows itself to be matter as well" (*MP*, 29). This aesthetic is embodied, then, to the extent that even the most fanciful of its products—especially the most fanciful of its products—are actually the point of the mind's breakdown under the stresses of bodily privation. This distinguishes the art of hunger from the illusions of Barber's gluttonous will-to-knowledge, for it makes the failure of totalisation central to the aesthetic of the former. At the same time, though, it distances Auster's novelistic art of hunger from that of earlier writers, by making not autonomy but its collapse this art's distinguishing feature.

Even this more limited perspective, however, cannot really be said to reflect Auster's actual novelistic aesthetic. The aesthetic of hunger diverges from Auster's literary practice in two crucial ways: it is an art premised on isolation, at the moment when Auster's work is becoming increasingly interested in ethics and alterity; and it fails to provide a form, while Auster's novels insist on the centrality of narrative form. Like Auster's earlier characters, as well as those of his precursors in the art of hunger tradition, Marco experiences starvation as solitude. He starves alone, and when he does experience social life—such as when he intrudes on the brunch where he meets Kitty, or when he meets strangers in Central Park—he is invariably provided with food and allowed to feast contentedly. But this isolation is also an aesthetic quality:

My self-absorption was so intense that I could no longer see things for what they were: objects became thoughts, and everything was part of the drama being played out inside me. (*MP*, 53)

This is, of course, not new for Auster. The free and easy movement between words and things was, as we have seen, a staple of Auster's poetry. Moreover, this tendency to contain everything within the figure of the author is a tendency that we have observed not only in "The Art of Hunger" but also in Marco's own thought. Solitude is, in this sense, the necessary correlative to the totalising mysticism of Marco's delirium—which, here, reveals itself to be totalising only insofar as it is solipsistic. What is new here is a

sense of distance, of self-criticism. Where Auster could once happily name his first memoir *The Invention of Solitude*, apparently in tribute to precisely these self-generating, self-generated worlds, here the older Marco looks back on this youthful position with skepticism. The root of such an aesthetic is criticised as “intense” “self-absorption”; what it produces is not poetry but “drama.” The model of the solitary writer, intentionally divorcing himself from the world—the very model upon which the Hamsunian art of hunger is premised—is recast as a kind of adolescent self-indulgence that actively interferes with the real nature of things.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, the problem with solitude, and thus with hunger as a model for writing, is a function of the way that Auster conceptualises the novel. Auster’s novels never succumb to the complete surrender to a single individual’s consciousness that he praises in his essay on Hamsun. On the contrary, they are driven by his characters’ encounters and relationships. All three novels of the *New York Trilogy* begin with a summons from a stranger, and achieve their momentum through the pursuit of a target. The novel motivated by the search for an absent figure is pervasive (*In the Country of Last Things*, *Leviathan*, even *Timbuktu* follow this model). Others are organised entirely around the protagonist’s principal relationships: *In the Country of Last Things* achieves its plot momentum by Anna’s successive friendships or romances with Isabel, with Sam, and with Victoria; *Moon Palace* is structured around Marco’s various investments in his uncle, in Thomas Effing, and in Solomon Barber, with only a brief, hunger-plagued interlude of solitude. The interpersonal is, in short, central to Auster’s novelistic aesthetic. To the extent that hunger is a solitary enterprise—and in the model of both the stone and the Hamsunian art of hunger, as well as in its depictions in *The New York Trilogy* and *Moon Palace*, that is precisely what it is—hunger is capable only of defining anomalous moments, rather than the overall development, of the Austerian novel.

*Moon Palace*, more than any other of Auster’s novels, actively chooses the interpersonal and the social over the art of hunger, by having Kitty and Zimmer rescue Marco from near starvation. This act sets the novel proper in motion, and brackets Marco’s period of hunger as a period of youthful idiocy, for which Marco, recovering in his friend’s apartment, feels “nothing but remorse” (*MP*, 71). Marco’s repudiation of this period of starvation, however, has enormous implications for Auster’s work, for it also implies the repudiation of the art of hunger as Auster has so often understood it. This way of

experiencing hunger, which has underpinned Auster's aesthetic goals for almost two decades, is recast as juvenile and irresponsible, a selfish, cowardly and unrealistic way of engaging with the world. In this sense, as Kanae Uchiyama argues, hunger in *Moon Palace* becomes the first step in the development of an ethics, and, by moving beyond hunger, allows Auster to begin to attempt to take account of the other.<sup>249</sup>

If, on the one hand, the art of hunger fails to take account of alterity, on another level it seems too willing to accommodate it, too indiscriminate in its welcoming of random elements, and thus incapable of resolving into a coherent form. What seemed like dazzling experimentalism in Auster's reading of Hamsun, in fact poses a serious problem for the writer in his own novels. This hallucinatory shapelessness is simply unsustainable within the context of the novels that Auster is writing: novels premised on narrative that takes place in the domain of the social; on development over time and therefore presence in time; and on a chain of casual reactions, often pushing the boundaries of the coincidental, but nonetheless, by definition, linked together in some kind of orderly manner. In the hallucinatory state of starvation that Marco reaches in Central Park, order is provided only by the bounds of the self: the art of hunger, and with it Auster's debt to modernism as a whole, reveals itself as at once too heterogenous and too solipsistic.

The turn away from starvation in *Moon Palace* does not imply a turn towards gluttony or obesity: Sol Barber is as tragically isolated in his fatness as Marco was in his starvation. Instead, Auster privileges food as a social occasion, embracing the shared meal over the solitary fast as the centre piece of a new relationship to eating in his works—and this seems to become a permanent fixture. As late as 2009, Auster responds, in a series of letters with J. M. Coetzee, to the South African's desire to discuss food taboos with a kind of indifference. After referring to his own early work on hunger, he continues:

I found all your points well taken, am not inclined to dispute any of them, but we might want to consider the social function of food, the rituals of feast days (the same dishes served every year at Christmas, Thanksgiving, Passover), the very concept of a meal itself. ... Reading about Kafka's habit of eating alone, it struck me that most of us do not like to eat alone, that nearly everyone eats with others (couples, friends, families, children in school cafeterias) and that meals are generally an occasion for talk. Food goes into your mouth, words come out of it.<sup>250</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Kanae Uchiyama, "The Death of the Other: A Levinasian Reading of Paul Auster's *Moon Palace*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 1 (2008): 115–139.

<sup>250</sup> Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters, 2008-2011* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013), 117.

Auster's late interest in food is purely interpersonal, purely social, rejecting the isolation that he associates with both gluttonous obesity and the art of hunger. His two most recent novels bear this out, despite the fact that one returns to the terrain of his starved youth and the other is concerned with impoverished squatters: even in this most fertile ground for a late-career exploration of starvation, the absence of food is less important than the inventive, exciting, communal ways the characters create of sharing a meal in straitened times.

*Moon Palace* brings Auster's experimentation with an art of hunger definitively to a close. The confrontation between the novel as a social genre in dialogue with the world and the solipsism of the art of hunger produces a new aesthetic form, one founded in collage, bricolage and assemblage, in recycling and making do. This impoverished novelistic form moves the art of hunger away from its old aspiration towards autonomy, foregrounding its reliance on the objects, thoughts and images of the world. At the same time, the author and his surrogates (especially Marco) retain their privileged position and their radical isolation so long as they starve. If starvation is no longer an autonomous aesthetic mode, it retains its emphasis on the author-figure's creative autonomy, an autonomy that at its most extreme is indistinguishable from solipsism. If this tendency towards absolute self-enclosure can also be detected in Beckett's late, more socialised work—as well as in Hamsun, particularly as Auster reads him—it differs in Auster's rejection of Beckett's textualisation of eating, in favour of an embodied starvation and a rescue by others. Where Beckett's late art of hunger pushes the novel to its absolute limits of formal experimentation, Auster seeks to accommodate starvation within a genre that he conceptualises, with Bakhtin, as social and embodied. The accommodation, however, is temporary: Auster, alone among the primary writers in this thesis, loses interest in an art of hunger whose initial, radical formulation he never fully manages to move beyond or realise. Unable to make hunger social or ethical, he abandons it. As the casual refusal of Kafka in the letter to Coetzee implies, Auster's abandonment of hunger is also a move away from modernist solitude, towards a social form that he treats as inimical to modernism. As his correspondence with Coetzee implies, however, Auster's solution is not the only one. If a privileging of food's social function is irreconcilable with an art of hunger, Coetzee's writing reveals other possibilities for appropriating this

tradition in culturally and ethically meaningful ways that cleave more closely to modernism.

A Modernist in Starving Africa:  
J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*

If the exchange between Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee on the subject of food reflects how far Auster has gone in rejecting the art of hunger in favour of the social meal, it reveals something quite different about Coetzee's engagement with the tradition. For Coetzee, the interest is less food than food taboos, a set of practices that mobilises anthropological and cross-cultural comparisons, restriction and repression that is not outright refusal, and a religious or quasi-religious framework that determines and regulates the act of consumption. These letters capture Coetzee's on-going interest in the dynamics of food restriction that underpin the art of hunger. At the same time, they highlight new directions within it that his work introduces: a more global awareness of hunger's various significations in different Western and African contexts; an interest in transcendence and its frustration; and an emerging concern with an ethics of food consumption.

Like Auster, Coetzee is a contemporary writer whose work comes out of the modernist tradition that gave rise to the art of hunger, but whereas Auster's work is characterised by a passionate early engagement followed by complete abandonment, Coetzee's interest in hunger is less initially explicit but more long-lasting. Coetzee, more than any previous writer, subjects the traditions of the art of hunger to a series of mutations that seek to preserve the initial impetus towards aesthetic autonomy and ascetic restriction while exposing them to new contexts and new ideas. Central to Coetzee's transformation of the art of hunger is the effect of starvation's very different resonance in apartheid-era South Africa, where hunger can no longer function as the abstract and purely aesthetic phenomenon that it moves towards, particularly in Beckett's late prose and Auster's early works. This chapter explores the ways in which the meanings and exigencies of postcolonial food privation exert their pressure on Coetzee's modernist art of hunger, with particular attention to *Life and Times of Michael K*. At the same time, Coetzee

continues to advocate hunger as enabling a strategic withdrawal from social and political life, a theme that we have seen throughout this tradition from *Bartleby* to Beckett. Coetzee's withdrawal, as I intimate in the final pages of this chapter and take up more thoroughly in Chapter 7, is nonetheless not the blank refusal of *Bartleby*, the madness of *Hamsun*, or the high formalism of Beckett. Instead, Coetzee's emphasis not on refusal but on restriction and regulation introduces the possibility of ethics and even of a quasi-religiosity to his new formulations of hunger.

## I. Coetzee and Modernism

Even a cursory glance at the tables of contents of Coetzee's essay collections reveals the extent to which he is engaged with a Euro-American modernist tradition that, although considerably broader than the one I am interested in, incorporates most of the major figures of the modernist art of hunger. The central writers in this tradition for Coetzee are undoubtedly Kafka and Beckett, and it has become a critical commonplace to point to the significant influence that both have exerted over his work. As we shall see, novels like *Life and Times of Michael K*—with its Kafkaesque 'K' and a title character who, in his dereliction and deformity, could easily come from Beckett—epitomise such claims of influence. His critical writings offer confirmation of this prolonged engagement. Coetzee's doctoral dissertation, submitted at the University of Texas at Austin in 1969, is entitled "The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis"; as its title suggests, it focuses exclusively on Beckett's writing. He has also published many essays on both Kafka and Beckett, and cites them frequently as important precursors.

For Coetzee, however, this affiliation with Beckett and Kafka does not translate into the kind of engagement with modernist hunger that we saw in Paul Auster. Coetzee never directly addresses these writers' treatment of starvation. Instead of "A Hunger Artist," Coetzee's central essay on Kafka discusses "The Burrow." Similarly, while I have argued that starvation emerges as a motivating force in Beckett's work in the French-language works written after the end of World War II, Coetzee's thesis and most of his substantive published works deal with Beckett's English fiction up to and including *Watt*. At times, Coetzee's engagement with this tradition feels like a near miss, hovering around the edges without fully engaging with its substance. Nonetheless, it is clear that Coetzee has, in many ways, learned the modernist art of hunger from these writers. In what follows, I focus on Coetzee's various critical works on Beckett, as both most relevant to

the argument developed here, and the most substantive and sustained critical engagement with a single author in Coetzee's critical *œuvre*.

In its broad strokes, Coetzee's reading of Beckett coincides with the pervasive academic critical consensus. As he writes in 2005, summarising the *œuvre* as a whole:

[Beckett's] is a world of confined spaces or else bleak wastes, inhabited by asocial and indeed misanthropic monologuers helpless to terminate their monologue, tramps with failing bodies and never-sleeping minds condemned to a purgatorial treadmill on which they rehearse again and again the great themes of Western philosophy; a world that comes to us in the distinctive prose that Beckett, using French models in the main, though with Jonathan Swift whispering in his ear, was in the process of perfecting for himself.<sup>251</sup>

Everything that we would expect is here: the isolated protagonists, the logorrhea, the mind/body dualism, the philosophical overtones, the distinctive style, and the French tradition. This is a familiar Beckett, although it is worth underscoring that Coetzee's interest in Beckett seems to concentrate almost exclusively on his novels and prose fiction: Coetzee's Beckett is not the Beckett the world knows primarily as a dramatist.<sup>252</sup> More than this: it is a Beckett that would seem to reach his undeniable high point in the *Trilogy*, the moment of Beckett's career for which the above is the most apt description. Indeed, although so much of Coetzee's published work focuses on the English fiction, he readily acknowledges that "it can be fairly said that Beckett did not find himself as a writer until he switched to French and, in particular, until the years 1947-51, when in one of the great creative outpourings of modern times he wrote the prose fictions *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, the play *Waiting for Godot*, and the thirteen *Texts for Nothing*."<sup>253</sup> In fact, although hunger is never explicitly named here, it is, as we have seen, one of the key topoi that brings together the embodied, isolated, philosophical, and stylistic aspects of this moment in Beckett's writing career, and its presence can therefore be obliquely felt beneath this description.

Where Coetzee breaks from any simple assimilation into a Beckettian art of hunger is in his treatment of the late prose. As we have seen, Beckett's attempt to realise an art of

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<sup>251</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Inner Workings: Essays 2000-2005* (London: Vintage, 2008), 169–70.

<sup>252</sup> Coetzee writes a little dismissively of *Godot*: "In this [the interminable waiting] he seemed to define the mood of an age. But his range is wider than that, and his achievement far greater": J. M. Coetzee, "Introduction," in *The Grove Centenary Edition: Volume IV, Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism*, by Samuel Beckett, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Grove Press, 1996), xiv.

<sup>253</sup> Coetzee, *Inner Workings*, 169.

hunger after *The Unnamable* ultimately culminates in the minimal prose of his short fiction from the 1960s onwards. Coetzee finds this solution traumatically unacceptable (he concurs that *The Unnamable* represents a kind of crisis point or limit-case for Beckett's fiction) and is scathing in his account of the late prose, particularly that from the 1960s. In an interview with David Atwell in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee writes:

Beckett's later short fictions have never really held my attention. They are, quite literally, disembodied. ... The late pieces speak in post-mortem voices. I am not there yet. I am still interested in how the voice moves the body, moves in the body. (*DP*, 23)

Some fifteen years later, in the essay quoted above, he makes the point even more forcefully:

By the eleventh text [of *Texts for Nothing*], that quest for finality—hopeless, as we know and Beckett knows—is in the process of being absorbed into a kind of verbal music, and the fierce comic anguish that accompanies it is in the process of being aestheticized too. Such is the solution that Beckett seems to arrive at, a makeshift solution if ever there was one, to the question of what to do next.<sup>254</sup>

If we read these two quotations alongside each other, the contours of Coetzee's discomfort with Beckett's late prose become clear: these texts surrender, he seems to suggest, to a disembodied aestheticism. His sense that this should be read as “post-mortem” is particularly instructive in the context of our discussion. If, as I have argued, *The Unnamable* represents an attempt to bring a starving ideal into the text itself, then Coetzee's sense seems to be that Beckett permits it to go too far: like Kafka's hunger artist, Melville's Bartleby or Beckett's own Malone, he allows the starvation to conclude itself in death but then, unlike these characters, he goes on writing. For Coetzee, “disembodied aestheticism” is death, an art of hunger that has gone too far, becoming subsumed within text, as I argued in Chapter 3. It is only by reinserting the body—and a starving body is as much body as any other—that the “comic anguish” and the precious exchange between voice and body can be sustained.

This is underscored in an essay from 1973, republished in *Doubling the Point*, entitled “Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style”. Here he describes the development of Beckett's work from *The Unnamable* to *Lessness* as:

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 170.

toward a formalization or stylization of autodestruction: that is, as the text becomes *nothing but* a destructive commentary upon itself by the encapsulating consciousness, it retreats into the trap of an automatism of which the invariant mechanical repetitions of *Lessness* are the most extreme example to date. (*DP*, 45)

The emphasis on an autodestruction, the self-consumption of the text, locates this firmly within the remit of the developments I have claimed Beckett makes to the art of hunger, the subsumption of its strongest tendencies into the fabric of the text, but for Coetzee this mode of “autodestruction” is also an “automatism.”

Read in the context of Coetzee’s own work on Beckett, however, there is a fascinating irony. His rejection of Beckett’s late prose occurs in the course of answering a question about the appeal of the quantitative stylistics—itsself a highly mechanical approach—that underpins both his doctoral dissertation and many of his earliest articles. In the sentences preceding his dismissal of Beckett’s disembodied prose, we therefore find Coetzee reflecting on “the ideal of mathematical formalization” as the key attraction that held his interest in stylistic analysis (he records losing interest when the field turned towards “more pragmatic models”), and notes that “Beckett’s prose ... lent itself to formal analysis” (*DP*, 22-23). As this seems to imply, Coetzee’s readings of Beckett are precisely and most clearly described as highly formal—very similar, in many respects, to the kind of analysis one might imagine applying to the “verbal music” that he finds so unattractive in the late prose (and that Coetzee does in fact apply in a 1973 article on the mathematics of *Lessness*).<sup>255</sup>

Take, for example, Coetzee’s treatment, in his dissertation, of Beckett’s early short story “Dante and the Lobster,” which concludes with a famously distressing account of the act of boiling a lobster alive. This seems like precisely the kind of material that an older Coetzee would make much of, in relation to ethics, eating, and the relationship between humans and animals. His dissertation, however, takes a somewhat less interested approach. “‘Dante and the Lobster’ is a structure of ideas realised in words, some 4500 of them,” he writes, and quickly becomes mired in a discussion of the difficulty of ascertaining how far the text could stray from its original before it becomes another text

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<sup>255</sup> J. M. Coetzee, “Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness*: An Exercise in Decomposition,” *Computers and the Humanities* 7, no. 4 (1973): 195–98.

entirely.<sup>256</sup> This kind of analysis does away with precisely those elements—the comedy, the anguish, above all the *bodies*—that Coetzee finds most congenial and most central to his appreciation of Beckett before *The Unnamable*, in order to focus on what he recoils from in late Beckett: disembodied voices, verbal music, extreme formalism, and mechanical processes. At just the moment that Beckett was producing the texts that Coetzee finds most unsympathetic, most “posthumous,” Coetzee himself was toiling away on computer programmes that would render Beckett’s earlier, fleshier texts almost as “relentless” and “arid.”<sup>257</sup>

## II. Postcolonial Writing, Postcolonial Hunger

Hunger creates a point of tension between Coetzee’s modernist literary tendencies and his postcolonial historical situation, which complicates and animates his modernism. Coetzee explicitly aligns himself with a modernist art of hunger whose hallmark, as we have seen, is aesthetic autonomy, expressed most saliently as writerly isolation, withdrawal from the political and the social, and a (failed) insistence on the literal. This art of hunger sits problematically alongside the very real presence of widespread hunger in Coetzee’s South Africa, on the continent as a whole and throughout postcolonial nations. This privation, far from being isolated or individual, cuts across whole societies and is inextricably linked to political and geopolitical questions about local and global resource distribution. As Frantz Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, his influential 1961 call-to-arms, “The mass of the people struggle against the same poverty, flounder about making the same gestures and with their shrunken bellies outline what has been called the geography of hunger.”<sup>258</sup> Famine, poverty, and food shortages constitute the flashpoint that unites Fanon’s “starving masses” against “European opulence.”<sup>259</sup> More recent analyses of famine in developing countries continue to insist on its social and political dimensions, even as they shift focus away from the straightforward opposition between the West and the developing world. Amartya Sen’s influential work on famine, for instance, rejects the long-held view that “food availability decline” was responsible, arguing instead for an “entitlement approach”: “A person’s ability to command food ...

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<sup>256</sup> J. M. Coetzee, “The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis” (PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1969), 37.

<sup>257</sup> “But by the late 1960s that comic energy, with its power to surprise, had reduced itself to a relentless, arid self-laceration.” Coetzee here could as well be describing himself as Beckett: Coetzee, *Inner Workings*, 171.

<sup>258</sup> Fanon Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 96.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

depends on his entitlement relations that govern possession and use in that society.”<sup>260</sup> Sen’s analysis emphasises divisions at the national level while Fanon’s points to global inequalities, but for both the kinds of hunger most commonly experienced in ex-colonies and developing nations are inescapably social and political.

This situation, already dramatically at odds with the modernist art of hunger, gives rise to its own “aesthetic of hunger,” as Brazilian filmmaker Glauber Rocha has described his own aesthetic practice. While Rocha’s aesthetic retains modernism’s view of hunger as an immersive experience capable of transforming art, this transformation also has both a representative and a revolutionary political function in the Brazilian context. For Rocha, “Our originality lies in our hunger and our greatest misery is that this hunger is felt but not intellectually understood.” The aesthetics of hunger, as captured by Cinema Novo, seeks to remedy this, creating “an ongoing process of exploration that is ... freeing us from the debilitating delirium of hunger” while also embracing a violence that he describes as both “revolutionary” and “normal behaviour for the starving.”<sup>261</sup> Whereas the writers we have examined see hunger as a withdrawal from the political, Rocha, on the contrary, understands it as precisely the point at which art and politics meet.

This tendency to see starvation’s aesthetic potential as inextricable from its lived experience as a collective and political fact is as central to southern African literature as it is to Rocha’s Brazilian filmmaking. Nadine Gordimer’s short story “The Ultimate Safari” offers a brutal dramatisation of this situation, following a starving family as they search desperately for food within a safari park populated by animals that “ate, ate all the time” for the amusement of Western tourists.<sup>262</sup> The story, which ends with a televised interview in a refugee camp, pivots around an opposition between a starving African “we” and an often invisible Western eye exercising what Rocha called its gluttonous “taste for misery.” Other texts, like Dambudzo Marechera’s novella “House of Hunger,” offer a more complex picture of a society where hunger fractures relationships as much as it unites the community in a shared experience, anticipating Sen’s analysis. Nonetheless, even in Marechera’s profoundly psychological novella, starvation is never a fully private affair and still less one that permits the radical isolation imagined by writers

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<sup>260</sup> Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 154.

<sup>261</sup> Glauber Rocha, “An Esthetic of Hunger,” in *New Latin American Cinema*, ed. Michael T. Martin, trans. Burnes Hollyman and Randal Johnson (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1997), 60.

<sup>262</sup> Nadine Gordimer, “The Ultimate Safari,” in *Jump and Other Stories* (London: Bloomsbury, 1990), 38.

like Hamsun or Kafka. Even where starvation is open to being read as aberrant and singular, as in Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel *Nervous Conditions* where the middle-class protagonist Nyasha suffers from anorexia, it is compulsively diagnosed and self-diagnosed in political terms and through group identifications. Nyasha's relatives attribute her illness to her "Englishness," inscribing it within a geopolitical framework that opposes authentic "African" hunger to "English" mental illness, while the anorectic herself, at the climatic moment of her breakdown, launches into an impassioned anti-racist and anti-colonial diatribe that concludes with the proclamation "I won't grovel."<sup>263</sup> Even in the most individualist, most psychological—or most modernist—of these novels, hunger cannot avoid testifying to the socio-political conditions of which it is one of the most devastating results.

This is not exactly to concur with Fredric Jameson's infamous claim that "All third-world texts are necessarily ... allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*."<sup>264</sup> These representations of hunger may at times be capable of being read in terms of this Jamesonian national allegory, but this is not the primary sense in which hunger appears as a marker of a national and international situation. Hunger in these novels is social and political even before the moment of its allegorisation, as a widespread, all-too-literal affliction that results directly from inequalities on both global and local scales. It is first of all, and above all, a literal reality in the societies described, and one whose socio-political causes hardly need to be decoded on any figurative level. In this sense, I share Derek Attridge's concerns about the possibility of allegory's erasure of the literal and, in the context of postcolonial starvation, I worry that such an erasure is not only ethically and aesthetically suspect, as Attridge maintains, but that it also poses substantial problems for a politics that would pass over the urgency of suffering in its haste to decode its meaning.<sup>265</sup>

On the other hand, precisely because of the strength of this connection between economic inequalities and mass starvation—and because of the pervasiveness of the discussion about the "meaning" of such starvation in political terms—the starved body in such contexts almost inescapably signifies in excess of its literal reality. If not exactly

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<sup>263</sup> Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions* (Banbury: Ayebia Clarke, 2004), 207, 205.

<sup>264</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, no. 15 (1986): 69.

<sup>265</sup> Derek Attridge, *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 32–64.

allegory, the starved postcolonial body functions as a metonym or synecdoche for the inequalities that produce it. Once it is inscribed as meaning, however, there seems to be no limit to the figurative potential of hunger, and—in striking contrast to the discomfort with metaphor that we have been following through the European tradition of hunger artists—the works I have discussed above are notable for the exuberance with which metaphors of hunger and starvation proliferate. Hunger, in this way, moves beyond the political domain in which it also often originates, to infiltrate all aspects of society. In a sense, this figurative language has its own literal truth, pointing to the effect of pervasive starvation in determining and realigning all aspects of life and all facets of society. But it also reveals the extent to which hunger in a postcolonial context is placed under an enormous pressure to signify. This tendency has one of its most excessive expressions in the opening pages of Marechera’s “House of Hunger,” where hunger and starvation mutate into no less than eight separate extended metaphors in three pages, acting as figures for insanity, the law, violence, revolutionary impulses, and the prospects of Rhodesia’s disaffected black youth. It has its more respectable face in Doris Lessing’s 2007 Nobel Prize lecture, “A Hunger for Books,” where she repeatedly contrasts “that great hunger for education in Africa” with privileged English children’s apathy.<sup>266</sup> A politically and ethically responsible reading of such texts requires a doubling that holds on to both the literal and metaphorical dimensions of postcolonial starvation—both the suffering caused by hunger, its real effects in real (fictionalised) lives, and the many figurative layers and functions that it opens onto.

This tradition has an ambivalent relation to Coetzee and his writing. In many respects, there is no doubt that Coetzee is a postcolonial writer, in the sense that he writes from and engages with the issues of a postcolonial society. Nonetheless, as we shall see, Coetzee’s aesthetic allegiances lie as much—and perhaps more—with the Euro-American tradition whose treatment of hunger is so strikingly different to that found in much postcolonial literature: in fact, Coetzee himself repeatedly emphasises that his

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<sup>266</sup> The lecture was initially delivered, and subsequently published in the *Guardian*, under this title. The current version of the Nobel Prize site, however, has it retitled “On Not Winning the Nobel Prize.” There is a note on an earlier page that says “The Nobel Lecture has been changed according to the wishes of the author”: Doris Lessing, “On Not Winning the Nobel Prize,” *Nobelprize.org*, December 7, 2007, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/literature/laureates/2007/lessing-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2007/lessing-lecture_en.html); Doris Lessing, “A Hunger for Books,” *The Guardian*, December 8, 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/dec/08/nobelprize.classics>.

“intellectual allegiances are clearly European, not African.”<sup>267</sup> This chapter, and my work on Coetzee more generally, seeks to keep these two perspectives, the postcolonial and the modernist, equally in view, arguing that Coetzee’s writing pits them (perhaps unnecessarily) against each other and uses hunger as one way of staging a negotiation between these two frames of reference.

### III. Between Modernist and Postcolonial Hunger: *Life and Times of Michael K*

Coetzee’s fourth novel, *Life and Times of Michael K*, is and remains his most sustained engagement with the modernist tradition of the art of hunger. It also, as we will see, reveals Coetzee playing with and working in full consciousness of the competing demands and possibilities of a modernist literary heritage and a postcolonial historical situation. The availability and consumption of food is a constant problem in the novel, and throughout the latter half of the text, the eponymous Michael K starves constantly. The difficulty lies in deciding how to read K’s hunger, which frame to locate it within. Reading from within Coetzee’s “personal canon,” it is easy to see the echoes of Beckett and, particularly, of Kafka. The analogies to “A Hunger Artist” have not gone unremarked by critics. Patricia Merivale, for instance, argues that “As a ‘Hunger Artist,’ Michael K shapes his being by negating it, by living minimally, by accepting no food,” before drawing a distinction between Coetzee’s deployment of this position to make a “politico-economic” point and Kafka’s use of it to “existential” ends.<sup>268</sup> Patrick Hayes gives a more sophisticated reading of *Life and Times of Michael K* through “A Hunger Artist,” emphasising the similarities between the narrative voice in the two texts while leaving the question of starvation to one side.<sup>269</sup> These accounts are united by their conviction that Coetzee employs modernist intertexts and modernist literary devices, to an end that, in both cases, remains essentially modernist in its broad outlook, but acquires a new political inflection by virtue of Coetzee’s specific historical context.<sup>270</sup> They are able to make this argument by identifying a number of somewhat coded

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<sup>267</sup> J. M. Coetzee, “An Exclusive Interview with J. M. Coetzee,” *DN.se Kultur*, December 8, 2003, <http://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/an-exclusive-interview-with-j-m-coetzee>.

<sup>268</sup> Patricia Merivale, “Audible Palimpsests: Coetzee’s Kafka,” in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996), 160–61.

<sup>269</sup> Patrick Hayes, *J. M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics After Beckett* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 72–105.

<sup>270</sup> Hayes finds this political element in a narrative voice that he likens to “someone who has been appointed to write by a political committee”. He consider Coetzee’s ironic treatment of this voice to represent an oblique intervention into contemporary South African politics: *Ibid.*, 94.

references that are readily available to readers familiar with these intertexts. These references begin with the titular “K,” with its much commented-upon evocation of Kafka’s various characters who bear this name, and extend to less overt references, including a narrative voice that resembles that of Kafka and, of course, the very fact of apparently unmotivated starvation. These are the overt intertextual clues that would allow us to situate *Life and Times of Michael K* within the tradition with which this thesis is concerned.

Nonetheless, *Life and Times of Michael K* also includes a second, parallel set of references that allow a potentially quite different readership to frame this text within a postcolonial, rather than a modernist, context. In this sense, we can think of the understated marks of Michael’s race, such as his mother’s employment as a maid in Cape Town, or his entry on the charge sheet at Jakkalsdrif as “Michael Visagie—CM—40—NFA—Unemployed,” where the “CM” stands, in an apartheid South African context, for “Coloured Male.”<sup>271</sup> The novel’s setting functions similarly for a South African readership of the mid-1980s, for whom the novel’s locations would be immediately recognisable. Susan VanZanten Gallagher goes further, arguing that there was a sense of imminent civil war in apartheid South Africa, and that the novel therefore realises many of the worst fears of contemporary South Africans.<sup>272</sup> Occasional glancing nods to the war’s causes confirm its roots in apartheid, as when the head of Kenilworth affirms half-heartedly, “We are fighting this war ... so that minorities will have a say in their destinies,” a recycling of the talking points of the apartheid government that would be instantly recognisable to those familiar with contemporary South African politics (*MK*, 157). These references make *Michael K* available for political and historical readings that draw on and tie it to its immediate context. They make it possible to read K’s starvation within the tradition of postcolonial hunger outlined above, in which his lack of food can be read as both characteristic and symbolic of the situation of coloured and black South Africans.

Nadine Gordimer’s infamous review of *Life and Times of Michael K* for the *New York Review of Books* must be seen, in this context, as merely the most notorious response to these particular hints and signs. In this piece, among other things, Gordimer undertakes to explain the references to an international but perhaps presumptively American

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<sup>271</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage, 1998), 70 (hereafter cited in text as *MK*).

<sup>272</sup> Susan VanZanten Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee’s Fiction in Context* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 136–42.

audience. “His mother is a servant in Cape Town, which means he is a so-called coloured,” she explains. Laying a claim for the postcolonial as against the modernist, she writes parenthetically of the famous “K,” “the initial probably stands for Kotze or Koekemoer, and has no reference, nor need it have, to Kafka.”<sup>273</sup> Underlying these explications is an impulse to make Michael K’s submerged identity—and the socially engaged reading that this entails for Gordimer—available to an audience to whom these references may not necessarily make immediate sense. It allows her to read Michael K in precisely the terms outlined above:

Michael K is a real human being experiencing an individual body, but for some of us he will be the whole black people of South Africa, whatever gradation of color the South African Population Registration Act sorts them into; for some he will be the inmate of Auschwitz or Stalin’s camps. Others will see the split lip and strangled speech as the distortion of personality that South African race laws have effected, one way or another, in all of us who live here, black and white.<sup>274</sup>

Gordimer finds in Michael K the occasion for both the proliferation of hunger’s signification and the collectivising impulse that we have seen in postcolonial treatments of hunger. In fact, earlier in the review, she extends this collectivisation to Michael K’s hunger itself, describing him in the opening pages as “anybody’s refugee plodding predictably away from hunger and homelessness without much hope that these will not be waiting again at the end of the journey”—a description that could as well serve to describe the experience of her own characters in “Ultimate Safari.”<sup>275</sup>

Gordimer’s attempt to read *Life and Times of Michael K* within a South African perspective has not, by and large, been a popular one within Coetzee scholarship. Indeed, what little currency early readings of a South African Coetzee once had seems to have diminished further in recent years. Certainly, there are limitations to such a reading. For one thing, it seems difficult to read Coetzee on these terms without a certain disappointment, of the kind expressed by Gordimer’s own disenchanted final judgement: “so J. M. Coetzee has written a marvellous work that leaves nothing unsaid ... about what human beings do to fellow human beings in South Africa; but he does not recognise what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing,

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<sup>273</sup> Nadine Gordimer, “The Idea of Gardening,” *New York Review of Books*, February 2, 1984, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1984/feb/02/the-idea-of-gardening/> n.p.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

and believe they must do for themselves.”<sup>276</sup> While Coetzee makes Michael K available as a representative of a particular society within South Africa, he also insists on his social isolation. K might be made to represent the struggles and suffering of black South Africa—but he can never *participate* in that struggle or identify his suffering as shared. At the same time, because he stands outside of any particular society, K’s starvation becomes unmoored from its specific historical moment, expanding to become “anybody’s refugee,” a figure that may as well be a European concentration camp survivor as a persecuted black African. In this sense, even in Gordimer’s reading, K hesitates between his localisation in a specifically South African historical moment, and his generalisation into a universal figure of dereliction.

The association between hunger and Africa’s impoverished black majority can be traced through Coetzee’s writing, and particularly his fictionalised autobiographies, *Boyhood* (1997) and *Summertime* (2009), both of which are primarily set in South Africa. On meeting a young coloured boy in *Boyhood*, in one of his first and most explicit scenes of his encounter with the stark social and political implications of apartheid, he observes that the boy “is also Coloured, which means that he has no money, lives in an obscure hovel, goes hungry.”<sup>277</sup> In *Summertime*, we find an aphorism in one of John’s notebooks: “Africa: a place of starving masses with homicidal buffoons lording it over them.”<sup>278</sup> In both cases starvation is offered not merely as a characteristic but as one of the defining characteristics of an Africa and a subset of the African population that he can neither represent nor even really speak to. In *Summertime*, he echoes Fanon’s “starving masses” (although the expression is sufficiently common that it can hardly be identified as a direct allusion)—but from the outside. This coincidence is telling, for it identifies a difference from the treatment of hunger that we find in both modernist and postcolonial writing. Unlike the postcolonial image of starvation as a shared phenomenon, for Coetzee, hunger is something that happens to others. This is, above all, a reality of the South African situation: hunger is certainly pervasive, but not, of course, for white South Africans. On the other hand, and unlike his modernist precursors, hunger is not something that afflicts the individual. It remains collective as it was for Fanon, but becomes a collective experience from which Coetzee himself (and others like him) are carefully safeguarded. As such, where modernist hunger was concerned above all with a

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Boyhood: Scenes from Provincial Life* (London: Vintage, 1998), 61.

<sup>278</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Summertime* (London: Harvill Secker, 2009), 4.

relationship with the (disintegrating) self, and where postcolonial hunger remains concerned with the formation (and deformation) of a collective identity, for Coetzee hunger emerges in these texts as an encounter with a racialised other.

Nonetheless, there is an important proviso to this claim, for both of the above quotations are, in an important sense, to be read only in quotation marks. The former is the perspective of Coetzee's fictionalised boyhood, and is offered in the context of a memoir that has been widely noted for its unflinching account of the incidental racism that infected the attitudes of even well-intentioned white South Africans under apartheid. The latter comes from a similarly self-excoriating fictionalised memoir and is further complicated by the fact that this aphorism is of ambiguous provenance, capable of being read either as a paraphrase of his father's beliefs or a statement of his own. In this context, we should read this assignation of starvation as the lot of the other (the latter conceived as undifferentiated "mass") with a certain reserve, alert to the uncomfortable knowledge of the ease with which it can permit the dehumanisation of these "starving masses."

The modernist tendencies of *Life and Times of Michael K* complicate this relationship between starvation and alterity. This novel plays with a central ambivalence around the term "Other," which allows it to be read both within a postcolonial frame as a shorthand for the non-Western, non-European, non-white colonised subject against which the West has constructed itself,<sup>279</sup> and also, simultaneously, within a Western philosophical and later a deconstructive frame where Other designates a non-rationally and non-culturally marked not-Self.<sup>280</sup> This latter chimes with and has in some cases influenced the modernist interest in psychological narration and the unknowability of other consciousnesses. Michael K moves between these different constructions of otherness. As a "coloured" person, he is both racially and politically divorced from Coetzee's own experiences as a white person in South Africa and occupies the position of colonial/postcolonial "other" to the Western gaze. At the same time, as Attridge notes, the combination of a third person narrative voice, the past tense (unusual for Coetzee), and the intrusive flagging of Michael's thoughts with explicit tags like "He thought"

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<sup>279</sup> For example, "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also ... one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other": Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 1.

<sup>280</sup> There is, of course, significant cross-over between these traditions, with both tracing their roots to, for example, the Hegelian master/slave dialectic. Nonetheless, the turn of postcolonial theorisations towards Otherness as a collective and racial, rather than a strictly interpersonal, dynamic is a significant one.

together “allows Coetzee to sustain throughout the fiction the otherness of K’s responses: although we learn in moving detail of his thought-processes and emotions, we never feel that we have assimilated them to our own.”<sup>281</sup> Ato Quayson in fact finds these thought-processes so “other” that he diagnoses Michael K with autism.<sup>282</sup> This interest in the narratological representation of cognitive alterity places this text firmly within the philosophico-modernist tradition of otherness. Indeed, this sense of cognitive dislocation is familiar from earlier exemplars of the art of hunger, where characters are presented as stubbornly resistant to comprehension, opaque figures that no reader can ever fully know or understand. But by adding a racial element to this, in a context as racially charged as apartheid South Africa, this otherness mutates into a more explicitly ethical concern about the possibility of a privileged white intellectual speaking on behalf of the South African subaltern, echoing (or rather, anticipating) the concerns famously expressed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.<sup>283</sup> The impenetrable narrator ceases to be a mark of the author’s modernist alienation and becomes instead a mark of a particularly modernist-postcolonial anxiety about the ethical responsibility for and the impossibility of access to the other, understood as both the consciousness of other people, and the specifically racialised other.

Despite the African “starving masses” evoked by the racial dimension of Michael K’s hunger, he is fiercely opposed to any mode of collectivisation. He resists the possibility of disintegrating into an undifferentiated mass—which is also the possibility of uniting in collective political action—while emphasising a mode of otherness that reflects what Attridge would call an encounter with the other in his or her singularity or specificity. This withdrawal from collectivisation and from political commitment, this sense of isolation is, of course, familiar from the modernist tradition I have been tracing throughout this thesis. In fact, in many respects, *Life and Times of Michael K* conforms closely to the modernist art of hunger. Like other texts we have examined, *Michael K* develops a complex relationship between literary production, starvation, and aesthetic experience. Like the writers in this tradition, K’s starvation is oddly unmotivated:

All day he did not eat or feel any need to eat. ... Hunger was a sensation he did not feel and barely remembered. If he ate, eating what he could find, it was

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<sup>281</sup> Attridge, *Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 50.

<sup>282</sup> Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 155.

<sup>283</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313.

because he had not yet shaken off the belief that bodies that do not eat die. What food he ate meant nothing to him. It had no taste, or tasted like dust. (*MK*, 100-01)

By this point, Michael K's hunger is clearly not social in its origins or its experience. Instead, like Kafka's hunger artist, Melville's *Bartleby*, or Beckett's Molloy, Michael K stops eating because he simply, inexplicably, has lost his taste for food.<sup>284</sup>

In parallel to this emerging starvation is a resistance to narrative, a failure to speak. Like Hamsun's narrator, who cannot write, or like *Bartleby*, who seems to represent the end of biography, Michael K experiences his starvation as the inability to narrate his own story. In the Jakkalsdrif relocation camp, semi-starved, he is able to tell a partial and unsatisfactory version of his story, stumbling when he comes to talking about his mother's ashes: "Now I must speak about the ashes, thought K, so as to be complete, so as to have told the whole story. But he found the he could not, or could not yet" (*MK*, 79). The promise of a future in which he will be able to complete his narration remains in this passage, but in fact his ability to transform himself into text only falters more as his story, and his starvation, progress. After his return to the farm, he laments:

Always, when he tried to explain himself to himself, there remained a gap, a hole, a darkness before which his understanding balked, into which it was useless to pour words. The words were eaten up, the gap remained. His was always a story with a hole in it: a wrong story, always wrong. (*MK*, 110)

This experience of narrative failure, which is also figured as a failure of understanding, perhaps of self-understanding, is a familiar one in the context of the modernist art of hunger. Also familiar is the sense of surrendered agency that accompanies it. The passage in its entirety is notable for the absence of active dynamic verbs after "he tried to explain," relying instead on stative verbs and the passive. The agentless passive "The words were eaten up" is perhaps worthy of particular scrutiny in this regard, signalling as it does a kind of agentless consumption of language that recalls the closing lines of Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

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<sup>284</sup> A scene in Jakkalsdrif presents Michael K in terms that seem to echo Melville's description of *Bartleby* in gaol: "For a while they watched the skeletal figure that sat with its back to the wall rubbing its exposed calves; then together they bore K bodily into the yard, where he cringed from the brilliant sunlight, and motioned to another of the prisoners to give him food": Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, 70.

This difficulty of expression is exacerbated when Michael K enters Kenilworth and the narrative switches to the perspective of the medical officer. Here, Gert Buelens and Dominiek Hoens have observed, we enter a narrative situation that is eerily reminiscent, not of Kafka, but of the lawyer's narrative in "Bartleby."<sup>285</sup> Like this earlier figure of the baffled professional, Michael K's medical officer, who refers to the protagonist as "Michaels" throughout, exhibits a combination of well-meaning benevolence, fascination that borders on idolisation, and mute incomprehension in the face of the cryptic character. In a much-cited passage, he concludes:

Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it. (*MK*, 166)

This passage has served many commentators as a hermeneutic framework and its attraction, particularly at the height of Derridean deconstruction, seems clear. In some respects, in fact, this offers both an account of Michaels and, more generally, an account of the function of meaning in the art of hunger.

But read in context, this explication is in fact deeply ironic. Not only is the medical officer an unreliable narrator, precisely because of his impulse to over-read Michaels, but the context in which it appears is actually highly comical. The passage forms part of the medical officer's imagined encounter with Michaels after the latter's escape from Kenilworth, in which the medical officer tries to explain himself. In the lines before this final judgement, the situation descends into farce:

At this moment, I suspect, because such is your nature, you would break into a run. So I would have to run after you, ploughing as if through water through the thick grey sand, dodging the branches, calling out: "Your stay..." (*MK*, 166)

The image of Michaels literally running away from this sensitive, theoretically-informed interpretation of his situation is both hilarious and telling. Even this interpretation-as-uninterpretable provokes Michaels's fierce resistance, and his response is almost comically embodied—but also, as the medical officer imagines it, itself all too transparently interpretable. Even as Michaels's attempt to literally escape his endless interpretations undermines the medical officer's reading of the situation, the latter

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<sup>285</sup> Gert Buelens and Dominiek Hoens, "'Above and Beneath Classification': *Bartleby*, *Life and Times of Michael K*, and Syntagmatic Participation," *Diacritics* 37, no. 2–3 (2007): 164.

imagines this rejection by envisaging Michaels's body acting out a highly symbolic, highly interpretable action, which reinscribes him within the signifying system that the medical officer recognises he wants to escape from.

The inability to escape the pressures of unwanted interpretation is, once again, a familiar problem from earlier works in this tradition—it was particularly central to my discussion of Kafka—and Coetzee here allows the medical officer to assume the hermeneutic burden of a critic confronted with the art of hunger. Derek Attridge's *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* proposes one way out of this hermeneutical impasse, rejecting allegorical modes of reading—and this is explicitly what the doctor offers us—in favour of what he calls “literal reading.” For Attridge, *Life and Times of Michael K* typifies Coetzee's resistance to allegorical reading, both because “the work is full of detail far in excess of any allegorical reading” and, more importantly for Attridge, because it offers an “invitation to the reader to apprehend and follow in its twists and turns a consciousness unaffected by many of the main currents of modernity.”<sup>286</sup> This mode of “literal reading” echoes calls that we have already heard about how to read the “art of hunger,” such as Adorno's exhortation that in Kafka we must “take everything literally.”<sup>287</sup> While *Life and Times of Michael K* does, it seems to me, clearly embrace a literal reading and clearly satirise allegorical ones, I want to insist that allegorical readings of this and other texts in this tradition are not simply misreadings or errors of critical practice. Despite the way in which he is sometimes treated by critics, the medical officer and his narrative are not extraneous to the “real” third-person narrative of Michael K that surrounds it. His section is an integral part of the fabric of the text. The allegorical reading is made available by the text and, while pursuing such a reading whole-heartedly produces at best only a partial account of the text, ignoring it entirely is just as partial. Attridge acknowledges the possibility that “Allegory may thus be *staged* in literature.”<sup>288</sup> I want to insist, more forcefully, that the possibility of allegorical readings is as integral to the *Life and Times of Michael K* as is the possibility of the literal. The movement between the two—the failure of the literal as it slips into allegory, as much as the failure of the allegorical as it stubs its toe against the literal—is constitutive of the textual dynamics of this text, a text that, like so many of its predecessors, advocates an anti-metaphorical,

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<sup>286</sup> Attridge, *Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 49.

<sup>287</sup> Adorno, “Notes on Kafka,” 246.

<sup>288</sup> Attridge, *Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 61.

anti-allegorical art that never fully frees itself from the impulse to interpret itself as metaphor and allegory.

If this failed resistance to metaphor is pervasive in the art of hunger, Coetzee's innovation is that the failure by which Michael K and his hunger become allegory is, in an important sense, also the method by which they are returned to history. While allegorical readings of *Michael K* are, of course, not confined to the political, it is only through metaphor and allegory that Michael K can be made to meaningfully inhabit the South Africa in which his story is set, let alone the South Africa in which his story is written. Unlike many postcolonial accounts of hunger, there is no sense in which Michael K's starvation is literally bound to its context. As the novel progresses and his hunger becomes less a result of circumstance and more an act of refusal, it becomes ever more divorced from the socio-economic circumstances that blur the line between hunger as a symbol for oppression and hunger as the manifestation of oppression that we have seen in other postcolonial texts. At the same time, a "Coloured Male" starving in 1980s (or slightly later) South Africa cannot be fully stripped of its historical resonances. Hunger in *Life and Times of Michael K* becomes historical only by becoming metaphorical, a manoeuvre that the text seems to both mandate and resist. *Life and Times of Michael K*, therefore, fails like earlier attempts to realise an art of hunger fail; but in doing so, it introduces history, and sets the text oscillating between postcolonial and modernist frames of reference, between starvation as a literary historical artefact and starvation as a lived experience.

If this model of starvation as an encounter with the (modernist/philosophical) other gives rise unexpectedly to a historical consciousness, it is also inescapably ethical in the Levinasian sense on which Attridge's work is based. In fact, Levinas himself is explicit in his linking of hunger to the encounter with the Other. Drawing, as David Goldstein has shown, upon a pervasive trope of hunger and eating that runs throughout his *œuvre*, Levinas repeatedly connects hunger with the face-to-face encounter with the Other that constitutes the basis of his ethical system.<sup>289</sup> As he writes in *Totality and Infinity*, "The nakedness of the face is destituteness. To recognize the Other is to recognize a hunger.

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<sup>289</sup> See David Goldstein, "Emmanuel Levinas and the Ontology of Eating," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 10, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 34–44.

To recognize the Other is to give.”<sup>290</sup> Nonetheless, it is not immediately apparent how we are to understand this in relation to literature. Levinas himself is at best ambivalent about literature’s ethical potential, writing in “Reality and Its Shadow” that “Art then lets go of the prey for the shadow,” and that “There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague.”<sup>291</sup> For Levinas, the disengagement that literature holds out seems to actively resist the ethical imperative presented by the starving other. The Kantian model of a disinterested art that offers itself up as “food for thought” becomes a feast that allows us to divert our eyes from real starvation, a situation that, as the frustrated South African reaction to apartheid-era Coetzee implies, has the potential to present itself as particularly problematic on a continent where such widespread starvation is an everyday reality.

Levinas finds one solution for this, advocating a mode of criticism that “integrates the inhuman work of the artist into the human world.”<sup>292</sup> Attridge offers a somewhat different response, still rooted in the necessity for a responsible mode of reading, which shifts the terms of this relation from literature’s relationship to reality to the responsible reader’s ethical response to the literary work as Other. In *Singularity of Literature*, in many ways the companion volume to *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Literature*, Attridge writes that, “To respond to the demand of the literary work as the demand of the other is to attend to it as a unique event whose happening is a call, a challenge, an obligation: understand me, translate my untranslatability, learn me by heart and thus learn the otherness that inhabits the heart.”<sup>293</sup> As he argues in *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Literature*, Coetzee’s work is, for Attridge, particularly amenable to, even demanding of this mode of response.

Nonetheless, Coetzee’s treatment of hunger hesitates between these two ethical demands: on the one hand, literature’s need to represent the world and thus to represent the encounter with the other, and on the other, literature’s need to stage that encounter, even to offer an instance of it. Implicated in this hesitation is the ambivalence I have

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<sup>290</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979), 75.

<sup>291</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Reality and Its Shadow,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux, trans. Alphonso Lingis (London: Routledge, 2000), 126.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), 131.

highlighted around postcolonial and modernist-philosophical understandings of otherness. For Attridge, the Other that one encounters in the process of reading is necessarily the latter. But once it slips into the former—and we have seen that, particularly where hunger is concerned, it does this repeatedly—what is at stake can no longer simply be an encounter between text and reader (for these texts have no obvious race and the reader’s race is of course highly variable), but also an encounter with the “human world.” The difficulty over allegory in *Michael K*, then, must be read as concerned with a choice not only between aesthetic responses to a text but also between ethical modes, a choice between an encounter with two different kinds of Otherness. At the same time, the very coexistence of these alternative readings ensures that no choice is fully possible: these different modes of alterity constantly shade into each other.

While Coetzee’s aesthetic attempt to account for Michael K assumes an ethical dimension under the pressure of its postcolonial circumstances, Michael K’s own aesthetic experience of starvation functions quite differently, reintroducing an aspect of the art of hunger that had been largely submerged since Kafka’s earliest writing. The young Kafka, as we saw in Chapter 1, initially embraced an ascetic model of starvation as inversely related to writing, which he expressed in an early diary entry and of which traces remain as late as “Metamorphosis.” In the latter text, we remember Gregor professing that he is “hungry enough ... but not for that kind of food” (*CS*, 129), a sad lament that Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson reprised as the foundation of an argument about a modernist desire for transcendence, expressed through an inability to find the right food. Now, in *Life and Times of Michael K*, we find this sentiment echoed by the eponymous hero. In the hospital, Michael K “pushes away the feed bottle. ‘It’s not my kind of food’ is all he will say” (*MK*, 145). The medical officer, true to his impulse to somewhat melodramatic over-interpretation, underscores this muted implication of transcendence by reading it in almost comically religious terms:

Another thing I would like to know is what the food was that you ate in the wilderness that has made all other food tasteless to you.... Was it manna?... Is that why you will not eat camp food—because you have been spoiled forever by the taste of manna? (*MK*, 150-51)

This passage is extraordinary as one of the first times in this tradition that starvation has been explained in quasi-religious terms, in which a sustaining spiritual food replaces the physical food that is rejected or abandoned. Of course, as we have seen, the doctor’s

interpretations are highly suspect and not to be taken literally. Nonetheless, these religious overtones are sustained by the description of the food that Michael did in fact eat on the farm. As he prepares the first pumpkin, we are told:

Speaking the words he had been taught, directing them no longer upward but to the earth on which he knelt, he prayed: "For what we are about to receive make us truly thankful." With two wire skewers he turned the strips, and in mid-act felt his heart suddenly overflow with thankfulness. (*MK*, 113)

This is a less straightforward religious act than the one imagined by the doctor. If the implication in the first sentence is that the prayer is more rote repetition than spiritual act, the following sentence insists that he does in fact feel the thankfulness he has expressed. But to whom is he thankful? There is little indication that Michael K is a religious character, properly speaking, or that he has a god. Instead, by misdirecting his prayer to the ground, he seems to be embracing an atheistic or pantheistic spiritualism that centres on the earth. This is a largely unprecedented move that apparently brings the modernist art of hunger back into the orbit of the religious asceticism that is one of its precursors. But does it in fact do this? It is only the doctor at Kenilworth who links Michael K's starvation to a religious experience that seems to be not precisely what is happening here. Instead, we are presented in this passage with a moment of transcendence that transcends nothing, linked not to starvation but to eating.

This strikingly discordant sense of quasi-religious transcendence will clearly influence our reading of the following passage, which describes the actual eating of the pumpkin, rendered now as an almost sacramental meal:

He lifted the first strip to his mouth. Beneath the crisply charred skin the flesh was soft and juicy. He chewed with tears of joy in his eyes. The best, he thought, the very best pumpkin I have tasted. For the first time since he had arrived in the country he found pleasure in eating. The aftertaste of the first slice left his mouth aching with sensual delight. He moved the grid off the coal and took a second slice. His teeth bit through the crust into the soft hot pulp. Such pumpkin, he thought, such pumpkin I could eat every day of my life and never want anything else. (*MK*, 113-14)

With its combination of close sensual description and the protagonist's ecstatic reaction, this passage is strongly reminiscent of those moments of aesthetic ecstasy that punctuate Hamsun's *Hunger*, Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, and sections of *The New York Trilogy*. Even the religious overtones might be assimilable to this reading, especially if read against, for

example, the transcendent glimpse of truth that Schopenhauer attributes to the aesthetic. All this would be assimilable, except for the glaring fact that what provokes this moment of aesthetic bliss is not starvation but food.

While *Life and Times of Michael K* is in many respects a recognisable contribution to the art of hunger, and while it aligns an inexplicable starvation that resists allegorisation and metaphorisation with a failure to produce narrative that is also constitutive of the narrative itself, it also produces a counter-aesthetic linked to eating and an almost Romantic return to the earth. In retrospect, this is an aspect of the art of hunger that has always been present. Knut Hamsun completes *Hunger* and then makes his name writing novels of a rural Norwegian idyll. Molloy seems only to approach a subsistence diet when wandering the forest, living off the earth. Even Quinn in *The New York Trilogy* looks at the sky and yearns for its openness. Coetzee is, however, the first to foreground this Romanticism to such an extent.

One of the side effects of this is the establishment of an alternate model of creation in parallel to the de-creation of the art of hunger. Michael K is a gardener, both by profession and by vocation, and in this capacity, he creates despite his silence, despite his inability to formulate narrative. This creation is, however, not the anxious impotence of the masculine art of hunger, but a firmly maternal mode of reproduction. His pumpkins and melons are referred to as his “children”; he is their mother. After the guerrillas have passed through, he laments, “I am like a woman whose children have left the house, he thought: all that remains is to tidy up and listen to the silence. I would have liked to give them food, but all I fed were their donkeys” (MK, 111-12). At the same time that it is maternally generative, however, this mode of creation seems firmly opposed to genealogy. He celebrates, “How fortunate that I have no children ... how fortunate that I have no desire to father” and declares that “The worst mistake... would be to try to found a new house, a rival line, on his small beginnings out at the dam” (MK, 104). Contra the early Auster, he rejects a patrilineal model of descent in favour of the contingent generation of maternity. At the same time—and this is perhaps where the art of hunger and what Nadine Gordimer called “the idea of gardening” coincide—he aims above all to “live so that he leaves no trace of his living” (MK, 99). If this is a model of artistic production—and it may be, given the highly aestheticized response that he has to its products—it is an odd one, refusing the Kantian distinction between art and nature,

the ideal of an autonomous artist, and the promise of immortality or a life-beyond-death that art is supposed to hold out. But in all these respects, the model of vegetable gardening as art comes surprisingly close to that of hunger as art.

There is a temptation to see this as a “solution” to the art of hunger, a way out and a way forward. This is not what I am proposing. Michael K has pumpkins lined up all along the river when he is found by the police, but when he arrives at the hospital, the medical officer finds “every evidence of prolonged malnutrition” (*MK*, 129). Despite his later ruminations about the manna that has ruined Michael forever, the medical officer’s initial evidence implies that whatever aesthetic joy the pumpkins have produced, they were incapable of nourishing him. This is borne out by his experience on the farm where the process of tending the pumpkins seems to alleviate his desire to eat: “As he tended the seeds and watched and waited for the earth to bear food, his own need for food grew slighter and slighter” (*MK*, 101). Even after the pumpkins ripen, even after his first glorious meals of them, he still finds that, “He had no appetite; eating, picking up things and forcing them down his gullet into his body, seemed a strange activity” (*MK*, 119). The novel closes on a similarly dubious note of optimism, with Michael K dreaming of returning to the farm with an old man, where he imagines them living off teaspoons of water, pulled painstakingly from the broken dam. The novel concludes, “And in that way, he would say, one can live” (*MK*, 184)—but it is highly doubtful that one could actually live in that way. Gardening and the rural idyll become enfolded within the art of hunger, producing food whose primary function seems to be the aesthetic ecstasy that it produces rather than the nourishment it provides.

If this is the case, however, the art of hunger undergoes some significant shifts. Food is no longer its antithesis, and nor is taste in its literal sense. A new religious strain emerges that seems to collapse any possibility of transcendence or god into a mode of immanent ecstasy that resembles or approaches the aesthetic. The radical isolation and alienation of the modernist mode is tempered by a genuine connection to the earth, a connection that is described as a “cord” (*MK*, 109) that seems to tie not just Michael K, but humanity as a whole, to the earth. The result is perhaps no less failed than that of earlier arts of hunger, but it seems to hold out a mode of respite and introduce a note of quasi-religious optimism that has been strikingly absent from earlier accounts. The new relation to religion, as well as the transformations wrought by the ethical and political exigencies of

Coetzee's postcolonial situation, both prepare the way for what is Coetzee's most significant engagement with the modernist art of hunger: his attempt to render it ethical.

## The Art of the Food Taboo: J. M. Coetzee and Elizabeth Costello

It is clear from *Life and Times of Michael K* that the relation of hunger, particularly an art of hunger, to religiosity and to ethics is an important concern for Coetzee, one conditioned but not exhausted by the encounter he stages between modernism and apartheid-era South Africa. In his later work, Coetzee's exploration of this relation moves beyond this initial confrontation, becoming the foundation for significant revisions to his conceptualisation of aesthetics. The new aesthetics that emerges is perhaps better characterised as an art, not of outright starvation, but of food taboos, food restrictions and vegetarianism. It is based, like the art of hunger, on the arbitrary and perhaps unwilling refusal of food, but whereas the art of hunger is indiscriminate in this refusal, the art of the food taboo is founded on limited prohibitions that have their basis in an ethics of sympathy and relation, guaranteed by a quasi-religious and avowedly irrational recourse to the body. This new art has much in common with the art of hunger, preserving the centrality of embodied experience, the suspicion of metaphor and allegory, the isolation of the writer from society, and the privileging of a basically incomprehensible experience. Nonetheless, all these elements undergo a profound transformation in Coetzee's late work, as he moves away from the solipsism and rejection of ethics of his predecessors, towards failed relation, non-coincidence, and arbitrary ethical judgements.

We have already seen how *Life and Times of Michael K*, by distancing author and reader from the starving character and by introducing the element of race, has made the art of hunger a necessarily ethical one. This marks a dramatic shift from earlier manifestations where, from *Bartleby* to *Auster*, the art of hunger was the art of the rupture between ethics and aesthetics. This is decidedly not the case for Coetzee, either specifically in his treatment of hunger, or more generally in his writing as a whole: as he writes of Joseph

Brodsky, “Aesthetics ... is the mode of ethics.”<sup>294</sup> Similarly, reviewing Jorge Luis Borges’ *Collected Fictions*, Coetzee describes as “ethical” the “stylistic traces of a stoical self-control that stares back into the abyss of thought without the Gothic hysteria of a Poe,” a description that, somewhat surprisingly, closely approximates Auster’s violently anti-ethical “art of hunger.”<sup>295</sup>

Already, this ethics of writerly self-control occupies quite different territory from the ethics of *Michael K*, which turns around the problem of how one can ethically represent K’s multivalent alterity. In his later work, Coetzee’s ethics becomes more closely and explicitly bound up with his own writerly persona. In a discussion of Musil’s short story “Tonka,” he casts this writerly self-projection in explicitly ethical terms:

Neither giving in to jealousy, nor, by an act of will, conquering it, instead he turns himself into a character in the story of Herma/Tonka, and tries, through the distancing power which fiction allows, to become the person that, at an ethical level, he wants to be.<sup>296</sup>

Coetzee’s own self-projections have none of the wish fulfilment of Musil’s ideally ethical persona, but the capacity of “the distancing power of fiction” to produce a version of the self that is not identical to it continues to serve as the ground on which Coetzee explores ethical questions. It is a power, in fact, that he extends not only to works of fiction, like *Elizabeth Costello*, but also to his own memoirs, whose self-excoriating third-person portraits present a brutal image of a writer who is and is not the author. This interest in the self-as-other and the other-as-self reconfigures Coetzee’s earlier use of hunger to stage an encounter with an other, shifting the focus instead to his own idiosyncrasies and their relation to his fiction.

Central to this use of fiction to explore the author’s ethical status is Coetzee’s complex portrayal of his vegetarianism. This dietary restriction features as an arbitrary choice, beyond the realm of rational ethical judgement, which nonetheless has the force of ethics and is underpinned by a quasi-religious relation to the body and to others’ bodies.

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<sup>294</sup> The extent of critical interest in Coetzee’s ethics - spanning a collected volume entitled *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics*, Derek Attridge’s influential *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Literature*, and innumerable other articles, essays and monographs - is testament to its significance (if perhaps also to ethics’ critical vogue). See Anton Leist and Peter Singer, eds., *J. M. Coetzee and Ethics: Philosophical Perspectives on Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Attridge, *Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*; the Brodsky quotation appears in J. M. Coetzee, *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986-1999* (London: Vintage, 2002), 158.

<sup>295</sup> Coetzee, *Stranger Shores*, 173.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

Coetzee makes this food restriction a pivotal element of his self-construction as a writer, and in this sense continues the early modernist use of the starving artist trope as a tool for authorial self-projection that we saw deployed in Hamsun and (more knowingly) in Kafka. Nonetheless, Coetzee's use of this trope makes questions of ethics and of the author's relationship to others (including animals) central to his self-construction. It does so, though, without ceding his status as above all a writer of fiction. Instead, Coetzee's vegetarianism becomes, particularly in *Elizabeth Costello* and associated works, a site at which philosophical claims to truth that can only be propositional are pitted against a form of aesthetic experience that claims the authority of the body and the quasi-religious without investing in claims to truth.

## I. Starvation between Self and Other

J. M. Coetzee's second memoir, covering his years as a young aspiring writer in South Africa and England, ends with an image that disturbs the earlier sense that hunger is something that happens to the other. In these pages, the young John, working as a computer programmer in Bracknell, befriends a young Indian programmer called Ganapathy who, used to being fed first by his mother in India and then later by cafeterias and twenty-four-hour hamburger restaurants in America, is reduced, in England, to living almost entirely on bananas. Initially John presumes simple ineptitude: "Behold: in Bracknell, in the heart of the Home Counties, a man is starving because he is too incompetent to feed himself."<sup>297</sup> There is already a note of foreignness to this almost showman-like bombast that offers Ganapathy to the reader like a curiosity at a circus (the even more bathetic cousin of Kafka's hunger artist). This sense of otherness is compounded and cast in a more explicitly cultural light when the young Indian fails to arrive for a lunch invitation: "Is there something about the whole business that he has failed to understand, something Indian?" he wonders. "Does Ganapathy belong to a caste to which it is taboo to eat at the table of a Westerner?"<sup>298</sup> This situation, particularly Ganapathy's isolation from the collective identity to which his hunger nonetheless binds him, is very much as we have come to expect from Coetzee's treatment of hunger.

Less predictably, however, John's attempt to account for his friend's odd behaviour suddenly and unexpectedly morphs into a sense of identification with Ganapathy: "Like

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<sup>297</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Youth* (London: Vintage, 2003), 147.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

himself, Ganapathy is a spoiled, clever boy. Like himself, Ganapathy has run away from his mother and the smothering ease she offers.”<sup>299</sup> When he contemplates confiding in someone at their company about Ganapathy’s condition, he hesitates:

But how can International Computers be made to understand what ails Ganapathy? How can anyone in England understand what brings people from the far corners of the earth to die on a wet, miserable island which they detest and to which they have no ties?<sup>300</sup>

Unexpectedly, John finds himself describing his own situation, his own misery, in his attempt to account for Ganapathy’s starvation. This sense of identification does not reduce the otherness that attaches to hunger, for he underscores the incomprehensibility of this situation to the English. Hunger remains the situation of the other—the difference now is that John, the author-figure, no longer a white man in Africa but instead a colonial in England, has become that other.

The memoir ends with a passage that underscores the similarity between the starving Indian programmer and the unsuccessful South African writer:

At eighteen [John] might have been a poet. Now he is not a poet, not a writer, not an artist. He is a computer programmer ... He and Ganapathy are two sides of the same coin: Ganapathy starving not because he is cut off from Mother India but because he doesn’t eat properly, because despite his M.Sc. in computer science he doesn’t know about vitamins and minerals and amino acids; and he locked into an attenuating endgame, playing himself out, with each move, further into a corner and into defeat. One of these days the ambulance men will call at Ganapathy’s flat and bring him out on a stretcher with a sheet over his face. When they have fetched Ganapathy they might as well come and fetch him too.<sup>301</sup>

In an oblique way, this passage reaffirms the connection between starvation and the failed writer who does, in fact write (this is, after all, a memoir of sorts, although the third person elides that fact), by drawing an analogy between his failure to become a poet and Ganapathy’s starvation. No longer united by their shared status as citizens of England’s former colonies, but by their particular kinds of failure, they are thus no longer identified in their postcolonial otherness but in the fact that, read as two sides of the same coin, they return a composite image of the art of hunger. But this composite is as

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 147–48.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 168–69.

key as the identification: if John identifies with Ganapathy's starvation, he quite explicitly does not partake of it. Starving is *like* failing to write, but they do not coexist, the distance of the simile is never collapsed.

Nonetheless, John's identification with Ganapathy reveals an encroachment of starvation into the domain of the self. This is not so much an aberration as it is central to Coetzee's self-presentation as a writer. But in the process of this transformation, the nature of the hunger at stake becomes dramatically different, shifting from the widespread starvation of South Africa's black and coloured majority to the arbitrary restriction of Coetzee's writerly persona, with Ganapathy's incompetence representing a kind of midpoint between the two. This self-construction pervades Coetzee's writing, finding perhaps its fullest expression in *Summertime*, a fictionalised memoir told through a series of interviews with lovers, would-be lovers and friends. The brutal picture that emerges is of John Coetzee as a dour, sexless and neurotic man, whose awkwardness is often described in terms of a refusal to eat, or a failure to eat sufficiently. Julia, an early lover, recalls: "My first impressions? I found this new lover of mine bonier than my husband. *Doesn't get enough to eat*, I remember thinking. ... would I have to start dropping in on them with baskets of nourishing goodies?"<sup>302</sup> Returning to his father's family's farm, of which he has fond childhood memories (and which is described in *Boyhood*), his cousin Margot recalls his vegetarianism being the source of considerable suspicion.<sup>303</sup> Here, then, we are offered a mode of hunger that runs firmly counter to the mass starvation of the other seen earlier. Instead, Coetzee's self-construction offers us an uncomfortable, alienated self, for whom the minimal diet is a strictly personal matter, usually presented as a question of personality, or perhaps of personal failing. It relies heavily on a distancing of the writer from the written self through the ventriloquisation of the women in the writer's life, and makes starvation one of the sites of this estrangement. In this sense, it inscribes an awkward and unwilling food restriction at the centre of Coetzee's construction of himself as writer, presenting a satirical and anti-heroic portrait of the starving artist who, as in earlier accounts of this figure, both is and is not identifiable as the author himself.

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<sup>302</sup> Coetzee, *Summertime*, 37.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*, 93–94.

## II. “Meat Country”: Food Taboos and Vegetarianism

In contrast to Hamsun or Kafka, Coetzee’s malnourishment, however, is never a product of his status as writer or his relationship to the literary marketplace. Instead, as *Summertime* suggests, it is closely bound up with his vegetarianism, which in turn inscribes it within a late-twentieth-century desire for writers to present themselves as personalities and moral authorities in a range of extra-literary public forums, a situation with which Coetzee is clearly uncomfortable. This discomfort and the relationship of vegetarianism to his writerly persona are displayed most comprehensively in a 1995 essay entitled “Meat Country.” The essay, a discussion of vegetarianism and specifically of the experience of being a vegetarian in the US, notably refrains from advancing the expected moral or ethical justifications for what he clearly marks as his own dietary choice. Instead, Coetzee draws attention to the extent to which his vegetarianism is an isolating, even alienating personality quirk, which he refuses to generalise or glorify: his refusal to eat meat disrupts an anticipated dinner with university colleagues, who offer only “ribs first and then chicken ... There won’t be anything else.”<sup>304</sup>

The essay attempts to approach the relationship between vegetarianism and ethics in a context that is sceptical of philosophical argumentation and yet sharply aware of the anti-social nature of this choice, explicitly repudiating the prescriptive mode of ethics:

The question of whether we should eat meat is not a serious question. The “should” in the question is anomalous: bringing ‘should’ into contact with eating meat, as with bringing “should” into contact with sex, is like asking, “Should we be ourselves?” ... Asking whether human beings should eat meat is on the same level of logic as posing the question, “Should we have words?” We have words; the question is being posed in words; without words there would be no question.<sup>305</sup>

Coetzee’s argument effectively concedes the point to evolutionary anti-vegetarians who argue that eating meat is part of human nature, that we are at heart omnivorous animals and to deny this is to deny our nature or our condition. Just as using language to ask whether we “should” have language is fundamentally oxymoronic, so too is it impossible for an omnivorous animal to intelligibly argue against this biological impulse towards meat.

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<sup>304</sup> J. M. Coetzee, “Meat Country,” *Granta* 52 (1995): 45.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

And yet he is not prepared to concede that this fully resolves the issue: “despite the nonsensicality of the ‘should’ questions, there is something lurking here that will not go away.”<sup>306</sup> That something, it seems, is disgust, a basic sense of revulsion that he traces through the sanitised space of the American supermarket’s meat counter to the Book of Leviticus, where he concludes that in the eating of flesh, “a deep-seated resistance has to be overcome, a resistance which is intimately related to taboo and the horror to which food taboos give expression.”<sup>307</sup> This trope recurs later in *The Lives of Animals/Elizabeth Costello*, where Elizabeth, in response to Norma’s attempt to cast food taboos as merely cultural artefacts, responds, “There is disgust ... We may have got rid of the gods but we have not got rid of disgust, which is a version of religious horror.”<sup>308</sup> Or again, in a letter to Paul Auster from 2009: “A Westerner who sees an unfamiliar-looking carcass hanging in a Vietnamese roadside stall, and asks what it is, and is told it is a dog, feels a moment of authentic revulsion, I would guess, even nausea. To be told that his revulsion is culturally conditioned doesn’t mitigate it.”<sup>309</sup> Disgust, then, as a form of religious taboo: a rejection of meat that registers, without logic, philosophy or morality, simultaneously on body and soul (or on body *as* soul). To embrace this is to eschew a sense of the author as one who pronounces generalisable moral truths, in favour of a conception of him as one who faithfully registers bodily discomfort.

This disgust offers a point of contact between the religious language and a psychoanalytic interpretation of the author’s own neuroses. In the letter to Auster, Coetzee, raising the topic of food taboos, repeatedly invokes Freud and asks, “Is it really true that gustatorial pleasure is unanalysable, that it has no history, that it has no psychic dimension (no psychic dimension in the life of the individual subject)?”<sup>310</sup> In Freud’s writing, the work that most fully approaches this question in relation to food taboos is perhaps *Totem and Taboo*, which analyses the emergence of various taboos (including some on food) against what he claims to be the analogous modern phenomenon of obsessional neuroses, offering an analysis that is at once psychic and (quasi- or pseudo-)historical. Freud’s movement between the neurotic individual and the collective prohibition mirrors Coetzee’s interest in food taboos precisely, for it is clear from his letters and from “Meat Country” that Coetzee conceives of the food taboo as,

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<sup>306</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>308</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons* (London: Vintage, 2004), 87 (hereafter cited in text as *EC*).

<sup>309</sup> Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 113.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 112–3.

paradoxically, an individual, even isolating phenomenon. As Freud argues in *Totem and Taboo*, “neuroses are social structures; they endeavour to achieve by private means what is effected in society by collaborative effort.”<sup>311</sup> Coetzee’s interest seems to lie in precisely this transition from the social to the private or vice versa. In the typescript of the letters, he attaches to the letter to Auster an extract from Ernst Pawel’s decidedly Freudian biography of Kafka, drawing attention to the relation it identifies between Kafka’s food habits and Jewish dietary practice (this extract has been excised from the published text). The extract reads in part:

[Kafka’s] whole dietary regimen, however rational some of the original precepts, derived its obsessive drive from sources deep within lost memory and quickly proliferated into a system of compulsive rituals that replicated the talismanic function of Jewish dietary law ... Like his pious ancestors, he committed himself to the strict observance of ritual law, with one all-important difference: where the observance of *kashrut*, of traditional Jewish dietary laws, linked the individual to the community, the rituals evoked by Kafka effectively cut him off from it ...<sup>312</sup>

The Freudian psyche, therefore, allows Coetzee to conceptualise the food taboo—which is of course originally a community-defining gesture—as something quite opposite, a personal neurosis that works against community and that violates the easy exchange of the family dinner table. Coetzee rejects the anthropological explanation that “the taboo defines an in group as against an out group, and is thus a kind of glue holding the in group together” as “excessively abstract” for the lack of importance that it places on the actual content of the taboo.<sup>313</sup> His interest lies less in the dietary ban as “abstract” anthropological phenomenon, than in the Freudian move by which the anthropological can be brought into contact with the personal, the individual, and the neurotic.

For Freud, the development from the collective experience of the taboo to the individual experience of neurosis is implicitly inscribed within a geopolitical arrangement: taboos are the province of “primitive” tribes that persist only in colonised parts of the globe (he takes the Australian Aborigines, “the most backward and miserable savages” as his primary example here),<sup>314</sup> while neurosis and the individuals who experience it are “modern,” understood implicitly as Western. Coetzee’s views on food taboos complicate

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<sup>311</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950), 73.

<sup>312</sup> Ernst Pawel, *The Nightmare of Reason: A Life of Franz Kafka* (London: Harvill, 1984), 209; quoted in Paul Auster and J. M. Coetzee, “Here and Now: Letters, 2008-2011.” Typescript, n.d., 111–12.

<sup>313</sup> Auster and Coetzee, *Here and Now*, 113.

<sup>314</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 73.

the spatio-temporal and geopolitical perspective into which Freud inserts the collective/individual dichotomy. He concludes “Meat Country” with a story of his own that locates the eating of meat at the heart of the settler-colonial experience and the egalitarianism that attends it:

Europeans emigrated to the colonies for a host of reasons. Most vivid among these was the promise that there they could have meat whenever they wanted. ... Dietary habits took hold in early colonial times that would not thereafter be easily shaken off. Egalitarianism came before democracy, and egalitarianism meant an end of the stratification of society into those who hogged the supply of meat and those who had to stuff their stomachs with grains.<sup>315</sup>

Coetzee’s idiosyncratic, possibly neurotic vegetarianism emerges here as politically problematic: anti-egalitarian and elitist, but also, it would seem, anti-colonial. And yet, as he notes on the same page, “Africa is the last continent where poaching goes on on a grand scale”: if Coetzee refuses to align himself with his protein-seeking European forebears and their US settler cousins, he is equally alienated from the experience of the colonised on his own continent.<sup>316</sup> Eating meat is both at the heart of the colonial project and at the heart of resistance to it. Coetzee’s vegetarianism emerges as a perversion intelligible in the political realm only as gross irresponsibility. Like Michael K’s famished gardening and like his own rejection of ethical propositions and anthropological interpretations, his vegetarianism sets himself outside both the universal and the collective.

*Totem and Taboo* concludes with the invention of a myth that posits a primeval act of patricide and subsequent eating of the father by a band of his sons as “the beginning of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion.”<sup>317</sup> This event—which for Freud is closely linked to the prohibition on eating the totem animal—locates food taboos and morality as arising from a common cause, which is, for him, fundamentally Oedipal. Nonetheless, taboos and morality are not the same thing, for the former “differ from moral prohibitions in that they fall into no system that declares quite generally that certain abstinences must be observed and gives reasons for that necessity. Taboo prohibitions have no grounds and are of unknown origin.”<sup>318</sup> The notion that the food taboo, the obsessional neurosis, and morality itself have a common source despite

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<sup>315</sup> Coetzee, “Meat Country,” 52.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 142.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 18.

their different forms helps to explain Coetzee's sense that eating meat should strike us with the horror of a moral transgression, but without morality's "should," or its capacity for generalisation. The "horror to which food taboos give expression" in this reading would therefore be a basically psychic one. Such a reading sheds an important light on both the power of this reaction and its essentially idiosyncratic nature. What this Freudian frame leaves relatively untouched, however, is the insistent presence of religious language in Coetzee's invocation of food taboos, for if Freud distinguishes taboo from morality, he also distinguishes it from religion.<sup>319</sup>

### III. Confession, Asceticism and the Religious Foundation of the Food Taboo

A full understanding of the relation between religion and food taboos in Coetzee must pass through his 1985 essay "Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky," an essay that, in the final interview of *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee identifies as "pivotal" (*DP*, 391). This essay is an extended discussion of the difficulties of telling the truth about oneself in confessional autobiographical writing. The problem for Coetzee turns on a crisis that is necessarily implied by the notion of a secular confession. In a secular context, what gets lost for Coetzee is the possibility of absolution and, with it, the possibility of reaching a firm and definitive truth of oneself, guaranteed and absolved by an all-seeing god. The problem then becomes "the question ... of whether secular confession, for which there is an auditor or audience, fictional or real, but no confessor empowered to absolve, can ever lead to that *end of the chapter* whose attainment is the goal of confession" (*DP*, 253).

In some respects, the choice of Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata* as the novel that bookends this essay is an odd one in light of this emphasis on the secular. While it is true that Pozdnyshev's confession, made outside a religious context, is secular, the truth that he professes—a truth about the need for abstinence and an ascetic life—is underwritten by a religious context that Tolstoy makes explicit. Professing a staunch anti-marriage position, Tolstoy begins from the assumption that his position will be widely shared, "because these positions are the only inescapable conclusions to be drawn from the teachings of the Gospel, which we profess, or at least, albeit unconsciously, recognize as

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<sup>319</sup> "Taboo restrictions are distinct from religious or moral prohibitions": Ibid.

the foundation of our morality.”<sup>320</sup> If he acknowledges that this position is not as universally held as he had hoped, he nonetheless goes on to take this justification as the foundation of his subsequent discussion. But Coetzee’s account of what he describes as “Tolstoy’s truth” (*DP*, 255) is curiously silent on this point, describing Tolstoy’s instructions for a happy life in close detail but making no mention of the Christian message that dominates the second half of Tolstoy’s afterword. This is all the more striking because he is in fact deeply concerned with Tolstoy’s discussion of God in *A Confession* and because he is profoundly interested in the conclusion that he finds in Dostoevsky, namely that “True confession does not come from the sterile monologue of the self or from the dialogue of the self with its own self-doubt, but ... from faith and grace” (*DP*, 291).

What are we to make of this odd silence? It is not necessary for the argument to hold that Tolstoy’s reading of Pozdnyshev’s confession be unmotivated by religion—as we have seen, the function of religious conviction in secular confession is one of the pervasive concerns of the essay. What it does do, however, is retain Tolstoy’s and Pozdnyshev’s asceticism as secular, beyond the scope of a religious interpretation. In so doing, it expands the problem of secular confession—a problem, essentially, of arbitrariness, of the loss of a final arbiter who can underwrite the truth and purpose of the exercise and thus allow it to transcend itself in a grand spiritual gesture—to encompass asceticism. Stripped of a religious backing that would seem to require at least a different kind of reading, the ascetic imperative that Pozdnyshev identifies as the truth of his confession is attributed solely to Tolstoy’s own peculiarities. As such, it emerges as an arbitrary truth, “a (rash?) decision to *set down the truth*, finally, as though after a lifetime of exploring one [i.e., Tolstoy] had acquired the credentials, amassed the authority, to do so” (*DP*, 293).

This conclusion is, of course, quite different from the deferral to a religious authority that we find in Tolstoy. It does, however, establish a connection between asceticism and an arbitrary, irreligious decision that seems to reflect, if not Tolstoy’s sense of his own asceticism, then perhaps Coetzee’s sense of his. In fact, one way of conceptualising Coetzee’s portrayal of his vegetarianism and his refusals of food, his praise for Borges’ “stoical self-control” and his own highly disciplined writing style, is as a mode of

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<sup>320</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 167.

irreligious or secular asceticism. In *Doubling the Point*, he observes parenthetically, “I’m not so ascetic as to wish to dismiss narrative pleasure” (*DP*, 204), glancing obliquely at his relentless self-portrayal as a writer whose tendencies are basically ascetic and whose attitude towards pleasure is fundamentally suspicious. Nonetheless, as we have seen, this quasi-asceticism lacks the transcendent movement that would give it meaning, reducing it instead to a neurotic character trait. We see this in Coetzee’s persistent satirising of his restrictive food habits as something arbitrary and personal, a state much closer to the one he sees in Tolstoy (although not identical—whereas Coetzee emphasises Tolstoy’s decision, his own behaviour is often seen as unwilled, even unwanted) than the one Tolstoy himself offers. Unspoken, then, is a silent concern about what asceticism might look like, if it is not underpinned by a mode of transcendence. He concludes the interview accompanying “Confession and Double Thoughts” in *Doubling the Point* on an apparent note of regret: “As for grace, no, regrettably no: I am not Christian, or not yet” (*DP*, 250). Not Christian, but perhaps ascetic.

We can begin to get a sense of what the implications of this secular asceticism may be by developing an analogy to the secular confession that he discusses in this essay. Secular confession, as we have seen, has the problem of a lack of any structure of authorisation from above and thus of an undecidability, a constant movement of self-doubt and self-interrogation that can only be arrested by an arbitrary action, like the one Coetzee attributes to Tolstoy, or an act of grace, like the solution he finds in Dostoevsky. Asceticism seems to pose a similar problem, in that the act of wilful restriction only becomes meaningful as an act of devotion. This is the problem that turn Tolstoy towards Jesus as a guarantor. It is also, however, the problem that we see posed but not resolved again and again in Coetzee’s work, in, for instance, Michael K’s self-starvation, or in his own autobiographical self-presentation as pointlessly and distastefully ascetic.

Nonetheless, Coetzee offers a way out of this impasse in the interview that accompanies “Confession and Double Thoughts,” a way out of the endless doubling back of confession that seems, if anything, more pertinent to the parallel problem of secular asceticism:

If I look back over my own fiction, I see a simple (simple-minded?) standard erected. That standard is the body. Whatever else, the body is not “that which is not,” and the proof that it *is* is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt...

Not grace, then, but at least the body. Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons (I would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure), but for political reasons. (*DP*, 248)

If Coetzee cannot find the grace that would solve the problem of secular confession, he nonetheless finds the body, which acts itself as a kind of guarantee of truth. Secular asceticism has an obvious place in this picture, for asceticism—particularly hunger—*produces* the suffering body that it can then take as its own guarantee. Asceticism therefore becomes the ultimate marker of the literal, to the point of outright tautology: the suffering body that suffers in order to suffer, the starving body that starves in order to starve. His invocation of South Africa, however, complicates this picture, for it immediately draws this starving body out of the realm of the ascetic and into the realm of poverty and political inequality. In the same gesture, the body moves from the body of the self, of the person who feels the pain, to the body of the other, whose pain places demands upon the onlooker. The ascetic self and the starving other are elided without being equated, perpetuating Coetzee's characteristic ambivalence around the self/other distinction.

Asceticism has a long association with ethics. For Schopenhauer, as we have seen, asceticism represents the culmination of his ethical system and a quiet death by self-starvation the pinnacle of this asceticism. Geoffrey Galt Harpham, in an influential study of asceticism, generalises this principle, arguing that “the idea of ethics is inescapably ascetical.”<sup>321</sup> Nonetheless, it is not necessarily apparent that the inverse should also be true, that the ascetical should be inescapably ethical. Even Schopenhauer's relatively secular asceticism is ethical only in the sense that it represents a culmination of and a response to what he sees as the inherent source of evil, the omnipresence of the will. The merely ascetic gesture does not, in itself, rise to the level of ethics. As a discipline in service of nothing, Coetzee's asceticism constantly risks losing its ethical force.

Levinas, however, points to a way out of this impasse, and also tentatively suggests a way of bringing Coetzee's account of asceticism together with his account of the starving other. In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas writes, “To give, to-be-for-another, despite oneself, but in interrupting the for-oneself, is to take the bread out of one's own mouth, to

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<sup>321</sup> Harpham, *Ascetic Imperative*, xi.

nourish the hunger of another with one's own fasting."<sup>322</sup> Levinas—who, as we have seen, puts hunger at the foundation of his ethics—seems to suggest here an alternate model of ethical asceticism, one which responds not to a religious or philosophical imperative, as we have seen in Schopenhauer or Tolstoy, but which instead responds ascetically to the demands of the other. This is, as we have seen, not obviously present in Coetzee's account of his own asceticism or his representation of Michael K (whose own ethics are, I feel, at best ambiguous in nature). It is anticipated, however, in the sly shift to the suffering of the other in the above passage, and it comes to the fore in Coetzee's presentation of vegetarianism and asceticism in *Elizabeth Costello*.

#### IV. Elizabeth Costello's Failed Symposia

The publication of *Elizabeth Costello* was preceded by that of a companion text, *The Lives of Animals*. This earlier publication includes two of the central chapters (or "lessons") of *Elizabeth Costello*, alongside a series of responses from renowned academics, all of which had been presented as part of Yale's Tanner Lecture series. Like most of the texts eventually included in *Elizabeth Costello*, Coetzee's lectures offer an account of the eponymous Elizabeth Costello, a fictional writer, presenting her own set of lectures in a remarkably similar venue. As Stephen Mulhall notes, behind both the Tanner Lectures (and their recording in *The Lives of Animals*), and the fictional academic event at which Costello speaks, "one might detect in the background the Platonic ideal of the symposium, with its famous synthesis of physical and intellectual sustenance, hence its celebratory affirmation of such mutual acknowledgement of the life of the mind and the life of the body as the pinnacle of human culture."<sup>323</sup>

What Mulhall does not explicitly add, but what is surely plain to all readers of these texts, is that if these are symposia, they are failed symposia, representing not only a jarring series of miscommunications and frustratingly unsatisfying argumentation but also a series of awkward and unsettling failures to eat harmoniously together. Central to this latter difficulty is Costello's vegetarianism, which disrupts the family meal with her son and his wife and children the evening before the lecture, and which is the cause of anxiety and debate at the academic meal after it. In fact, these two elements are not

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<sup>322</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1991), 56.

<sup>323</sup> Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J. M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 58.

disconnected, for Costello's vegetarianism is also the subject of her lecture, which is centrally concerned with her profound revulsion at the contemporary human treatment of animals. In place of the Platonic ideal of a symposium, therefore, Coetzee's offers a series of unsatisfying disjunctures within and between questions of physical sustenance and intellectual argumentation.

In place of Plato's symposium, we might instead divine a relationship between food and thought that more closely resembles that of Hugo von Hofmannsthal's "Lord Chandos Letter," to which *Elizabeth Costello's* "Postscript" offers a kind of response. This foundational work of modernism, first published in 1902, takes the form of a letter to Francis Bacon by Lord Chandos, a fictional seventeenth-century nobleman. Seeking to explain why he has stopped writing, Lord Chandos recalls his past happiness:

To me then, there was no difference between drinking warm foaming milk which a touselled rustic at my hunting lodge had squeezed into a wooden bucket from the udder of a fine, mild-eyed cow, and drinking in sweet and frothy spiritual nourishment from an old book as I sat in the window seat of my study.<sup>324</sup>

This nostalgic vision of Chandos' lost ability to read strongly recalls that "celebratory affirmation of such mutual acknowledgement of the life of the mind and the life of the body" that Mulhall associates with the Platonic symposium. For Chandos, however, such an ideal synthesis of physical and intellectual nourishment is a thing of the past; now, "the abstract words which the tongue must enlist as a matter of course in order to bring out an opinion disintegrated in my mouth like rotten mushrooms."<sup>325</sup> In this fallen state, food and speech are brought together in the intimate proximity of analogy, only to collapse before they can serve as either nourishment or communication. The simultaneous disintegration of the pleasures of food and the possibility of language reflects a modernist despair at the impossibility of the double nourishment that serves as the foundation of Western philosophy, a collapse that Coetzee's Tanner Lectures seem to echo.

The Postscript to *Elizabeth Costello* offers a supplement to the "Lord Chandos Letter" in the form of a second letter, also addressed to Francis Bacon, but this time written by the Lady Elizabeth Chandos, who signs her letter "Elizabeth C." Lady Chandos writes

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<sup>324</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *The Lord Chandos Letter and Other Writings* (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), 120.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

both to offer further testimony about her husband's condition, and to testify to her own experience of what she calls her "raptures," which are similar to her husband's. This letter offers two major correctives to von Hofmannstahl's initial modernist project. First, as Mulhall notes, the Lady Chandos is far more self-aware than her husband, displaying a sharp consciousness of the paradox involved in their each writing such eloquent testaments to their inability to write.<sup>326</sup> Second, where Hofmannsthal's Lord Chandos, despite the epistolary form, is acutely conscious of his profound isolation, the addition of his wife's perspective reveals a kind of sociability to this solitude. In this sense, this letter mirrors Beckett's and Auster's sense of the art of hunger as necessarily modified by a social dimension, even if only in the failure of such sociality, as well as their self-conscious engagement with both problems of language and their modernist precursors. In doing so, Coetzee also emphasises that the simultaneous failure of physical and intellectual nourishment bemoaned by Lord Chandos is not an exclusively personal catastrophe but also has reverberations for others. It returns it, in other words, firmly to the scene of the failed symposia staged by Coetzee earlier in the novel.

The first and most immediately obvious sense in which *Elizabeth Costello* as a whole stages this failed symposium is in the particular kinds of difficulty that it poses for philosophy, the home discourse of the symposium. *Elizabeth Costello* strains at the edges of its genre, or perhaps more accurately, hesitates between two genres: the (philosophical) lecture and the (fictional, literary) novel. While, as we have seen, the tendency to push a genre to its limits has characterised many of the modernists in this tradition, Coetzee's hybridisation of the novel, and his use of it to intrude on conventionally philosophical terrain, is new to the art of hunger. In so doing, Coetzee is able to explicitly thematise his interrogation of the relationship between art and philosophy, which has been an on-going concern for these writers. More specifically, it allows him to explore the question of what claim art can lay to truth, a question that has been of central concern to post-Kantian philosophers like Schopenhauer and Hegel and more recent thinkers, from Heidegger to Badiou. His conclusion, as we shall see, is ambivalent, but, consistent with his rejection of the "should" in "Meat Country," it implies that the art of the food taboo rejects propositional truths.

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<sup>326</sup> Mulhall, *Wounded Animal*, 233.

The novel is composed of eight “lessons” in addition to the postscript discussed above, most of which are novelised accounts of the fictional Elizabeth Costello delivering a lecture. Each of these “lessons,” however, not only recounts the telling of a lecture but was itself, in its original form, delivered as a lecture by Coetzee in a variety of venues. The difficulty this structure poses is immediately apparent in the responses to the lectures collected in *The Lives of Animals*. Peter Singer, a philosopher known for his defence of animal rights, who offers in response a similarly fictionalised dialogue with his daughter, expresses his discomfort with the form: “Call me old-fashioned, then,” says the fictionalised Peter, “but I prefer to keep truth and fiction clearly separate. All I want to know is: how am I supposed to reply to this?”<sup>327</sup> Singer’s uncomfortable reaction dramatises one of the key difficulties of the *Elizabeth Costello* lectures: their slippage between argumentation and narrative, and the corresponding difficulty of knowing how to read and how to “reply to” that apparently philosophical argumentation. As Marjorie Garber observes in the same volume, “The effect is to insulate the warring ‘ideas’ (about animal rights, about consciousness, about death, about the family, about academia) against claims of authorship and authority.”<sup>328</sup> By placing the “truth” in quotation marks, Coetzee casts doubt upon the authority of the author’s (both Costello’s and his own) claims to express philosophical or moral truths.

The tendency of both these readings (and Garber’s is certainly more astute than Singer’s) is to draw attention to the “ideas” and their bracketing. A rather brilliant set of readings by philosophers, however, argues something quite different: that the framing device of the Tanner Lectures is itself a matter of some substance, and that it is therefore not to be taken as the kind of philosophy in inverted commas that the initial respondents assumed. Instead, Cora Diamond argues, Coetzee’s lectures “[present] a kind of woundedness or hauntedness, a terrible rawness of nerves” that she associates with what she calls a “difficulty of reality”: an experience that seems to reveal the incommensurability of thought with reality.<sup>329</sup> In this reading, the lectures are not the presentation of ideas but the presentation of suffering occasioned by a specific kind of failure of precisely the philosophical (and other) language that Costello both uses and repudiates. While Diamond’s emphasis, as a philosopher, is on what philosophy can learn

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<sup>327</sup> J. M. Coetzee et al., *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 86.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>329</sup> Cora Diamond, “The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy,” in *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 47.

from this failure, for Coetzee the more substantial point is that art provides a privileged avenue of access to this mode of experience that is not a truth in the propositional sense usually espoused by philosophy.

One of the side effects of Diamond's interpretation—which I take to be both more philosophically interesting and more faithful to the literary qualities of the lectures than those of the Tanner Lecture respondents—is that it throws the status of the ethical into question. From a certain perspective—say, that of Singer—Costello's lectures and therefore Coetzee's must be taken as advancing philosophical arguments about the ethics of our eating animals. From Diamond's perspective, however, what is wrong with these readings is precisely that they assume the lectures “can simply be taken to be concerned with a moral or ethical issue.”<sup>330</sup> That this is not straight-forwardly the case is suggested by the text itself. When, after the first lecture, the president of the college attempts to calm the fraught conversation about vegetarianism by suggesting that Costello's abstinence from meat “comes out of a moral conviction,” she responds enigmatically, “No I don't think so ... It comes out of a desire to save my soul” (*EC*, 88-89). To the extent that the ethical can be characterised by “convictions” or “beliefs”—and this is precisely the propositional mode of ethics commonly espoused by analytical philosophers like Singer—Elizabeth Costello seems to repudiate the ethical, in favour of a cryptically religious appeal to the soul. In this sense, she brings together the ethical scepticism of “Meat Country” with the desire for “grace” of “Confession and Double Thoughts.”

For a fuller understanding of how this antagonistic encounter between ethics and religion functions for Coetzee, we can turn to Søren Kierkegaard, a philosopher who, like Coetzee but unlike most thinkers, opposes ethics to religion.<sup>331</sup> In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard argues that the difficulty of the Abraham and Isaac story (what Diamond might call a difficulty of reality) lies in the opposition it stages between the religious and the ethical: “The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac.”<sup>332</sup> This contradiction, for Kierkegaard, is a paradox that cannot be mediated and becomes the

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<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>331</sup> Coetzee displays an early interest in Kierkegaard's theories of God and faith in a 1977 essay on Gerrit Achterberg: Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 74–75.

<sup>332</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985), 31.

source of the anguish that we must feel if we are to properly understand the story of Abraham. It is brought about by Abraham's personal relationship with God, for as Kierkegaard explains, "The ethical is the universal, and as the universal applies to everyone" but faith introduces a paradox, "that the single individual is higher than the universal," because "the single individual as the particular stands in an absolute relation to the absolute."<sup>333</sup> Bound in an experience with the absolute that is not universal, Abraham also cannot speak, for "The relief of speech is that it translates me into the universal" and Abraham's action is unintelligible and even evil according to universal standards.<sup>334</sup>

This structure gives us a way of understanding the religious tenor of Coetzee's discussion of animals, for it places the religious, not as the source of ethics (as we are often accustomed to see it), but as that which can annihilate the ethical and in so doing posits a mode of relation and of personal experience that has greater authority than the universal. It offers us, in other words, a way of understanding what Costello means when she justifies her vegetarianism by recourse to "disgust, which is a version of religious horror" (*EC*, 87). Kierkegaard's religious horror seems to be precisely the "anguish" (to use Kierkegaard's term) that Elizabeth Costello experiences, seized as she is by a form of non-propositional knowledge that resists expression as universal but which registers powerfully on her body and her soul. This proves itself a fundamentally isolating experience, for, as Kierkegaard writes, "if when I speak I cannot make myself understood, I do not speak even if I keep talking without stop day and night."<sup>335</sup> Like Abraham, language fails Costello, not because she conceals her actions (this would, for Kierkegaard, be the aesthetic mode), but because the quasi-religious disgust that she experiences, in resisting the universal, resists disclosure.<sup>336</sup> Costello's sense of religious horror, her isolation from community and her struggle to communicate therefore emerge as basically interrelated phenomena.

For Kierkegaard, this structure of inexpressible responsibility is what is meant by faith. Nonetheless, for all Coetzee's deployment of religious language, it is clear that he is not appealing to faith, as Kierkegaard would understand it. On the contrary, here, as in the

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<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 62, 63, 148.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>336</sup> For Kierkegaard, "The ethical is as such the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed": *Ibid.*, 98.

*Doubling the Point* interview that accompanies the confession essay, Coetzee at the last moment substitutes the body for religion, placing its excessive, undeniable and unjustifiable demands in the place where Kierkegaard places faith. The disgust that registers primarily on the body emerges as both the source of infinite demands and the isolating, inexpressible force that Kierkegaard attributes to faith in God. This demand has its most powerful manifestation in a prohibition on eating, a demand whose asymmetrical force is apparent in Costello's admission that she willingly wears leather, emphasising that the horror is less focused on the killing of animals (which may be an ethical aversion) than on their consumption (which registers that "religious horror" on the body). This substitution of body for faith gives a new force to the personal nature of Coetzee's discomfort with his own body in the memoirs, revealing it to be a response to an inexpressible and non-universal demand as much as it is a personal quirk or failing. In light of Kierkegaard's emphasis on faith as a singular individual's personal relationship to the absolute, Costello's and Coetzee's vegetarianism emerges as the strengthened personal: that which is both irreducibly particular and irresistibly absolute.

The risk that accompanies this understanding of disgust as an embodied and secularised form of "religious horror" is that it will become a system that, without Kierkegaard's God, is now entirely self-legislating, risking its own kind of hermeticism as well as the "relentless, arid self-laceration" that Coetzee finds so repulsive in Beckett's fiction of the 1960s.<sup>337</sup> But as we have seen, the body for Coetzee always slips into the other, be it the alienation from his own body in *Summertime*, or the slip from the authorising body to the African body in pain in the *Doubling the Point* interview. This is centrally the case with the "Lives of Animals" lectures, in which disgust at eating animals is underpinned and amplified by Costello's emphasis on the necessity of sympathy with the animal, which "allows us to share at times the being of another" (*EC*, 79). This sympathy, like disgust, is above all an embodied sensation, or as Costello says, "a matter—I emphasize—not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body" (*EC*, 96).

We might think here of Jacques Derrida's reading of *Fear and Trembling*, which generalises Kierkegaard's God with the claim that "God is the name of the absolute

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<sup>337</sup> Coetzee, "Introduction," xii.

other as other and as unique.”<sup>338</sup> In this reading, the faith described by Kierkegaard becomes the infinite responsibility provoked by the encounter with the other, an experience that places us squarely back in the territory of Levinasian ethics—and which Derrida repeatedly suggests may as easily be responsibility to an animal (“the animals that are even more other than my fellows”<sup>339</sup>) as to a human.<sup>340</sup> In the first place, this allows me to qualify the claim that Coetzee rejects ethics. As Levinas writes of Kierkegaard, “it is not at all certain that ethics is where he sees it. Ethics as consciousness of a responsibility toward others ... far from losing you in generality, singularizes you, poses you as a unique individual, as *I*.”<sup>341</sup> Similarly, Coetzee’s scepticism of the “should” and his disparagement of the language of contemporary ethics in the tradition of analytical philosophy represent precisely this and no more: a rejection of a particular mode or model of ethics, defined (with Kierkegaard) as the universal. Both Coetzee’s and Costello’s positions strike me as nonetheless carrying an ethical force, although not one amenable to expression as universal principle or philosophical concept. In his emphasis on ethics as a demand that is inescapable but which resists formalisation as universal principle, Coetzee is in accord with Derrida and Levinas. The Derridean reading of Kierkegaard also reminds us that for all three, the characteristic of this ethical mode is its establishment of a wildly asymmetrical mode of relationality, its refusal of the hermeticism that threatens the absolutely incommunicable.

Nonetheless, Coetzee’s ethics do not fit entirely comfortably within a Derridean frame. Where Derrida’s encounter with the other seems to operate on a level that is almost entirely disembodied (even languages can serve as this “absolute other” for Derrida<sup>342</sup>), Coetzee’s is possible only in and through the body. In fact, the body features twice in Costello’s vegetarianism, as both the site of the disgust that offers the higher law on which the prohibition against meat is based, and as the conduit or point of contact for the empathy that ensures that this law is also an encounter with the other. It is, in this sense, the bearer of both the ethical and the quasi-theological weight of these lectures (and Coetzee’s discussions of vegetarianism and food taboos more widely), as well as the

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<sup>338</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 68.

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>340</sup> Derrida elsewhere criticises Levinas for his refusal to acknowledge the animal as an other in this ethical sense: Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 105–18.

<sup>341</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Proper Names*, trans. Michael Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1996), 76; Derrida also quotes this passage in a footnote: Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 79 n6.

<sup>342</sup> Derrida, *Gift of Death*, 69.

point at which his ethics of alterity and asceticism meet. In this, it distances itself from Derrida's model of absolutely alterity, in favour of a messier and more contingent movement between self and other, mediated by the body.

For Costello, poetry is the privileged language of this embodied mediation. In the second of Costello's animal lectures, entitled "The Poet and the Animals," Elizabeth discusses Ted Hughes' poems "A Jaguar" and "Second Glance at a Jaguar":

With Hughes it is a matter—I emphasize—not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body. That is the kind of poetry I bring to your attention today: poetry that does not try to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead the record of an engagement with him. (*EC*, 96)

This kind of sympathy through the body locates the poet in an ambiguous relationship to the animal, somewhere between an "inhabiting" that seems to imply a collapse of the distance between the animal's body and the poet's, and an "engagement" that, for its very structure, would rely on the preservation of precisely that distance. As such, this mode of sympathy seems to hesitate between an identification that renders the animal a kind of "self", and an encounter with the other as irrevocably other. While the latter has a clear place within the Derridean ethical model, the former complicates it by placing the absoluteness of the alterity in doubt. We are back, here, with the identification-and-difference model of relation that we have already encountered in Coetzee's relationship to Ganapathy in *Youth*. It is as though the necessity of the self's response to the other—the ascetic response—compromises the other's very alterity.

Locating poetry as the mediating point—as well as the point of compromise—between the ascetic self and the absolute other already establishes a certain distance from Kierkegaard, for whom the encounter with God is by definition the unspeakable, and from Derrida, for whom literature is tied to the secret that preserves alterity. Poetry for Costello is the mode by which we can "inhabit" the body of the animal—but it is also, of course, one of the modes that most paradigmatically marks humanity's difference from animals. It is simultaneously, then, the point of contact with the other and the barrier that marks the full, irrecoverable distance between human and animal.

Part of this difficulty is the somewhat indirect relationship between literature and embodiment that Costello insists on. In an earlier lecture, she bristles at a claim by writer

and her one-time lover, Emmanuel Egudu, who argues that, “we African novelists can embody these qualities as no one else can because we have not lost touch with the body. The African novel, the true African novel, is an oral novel” (*EC*, 45). Elizabeth disagrees:

there is something about the talk she does not like, something to do with orality and the mystique of orality. Always, she thinks, the body that is insisted on, pushed forward, and the voice, dark essence of the body, welling up from within it. *Négritude*: she had thought Egudu would grow out of that pseudo-philosophy. (*EC*, 46)

This disavowal of the embodied African novel seems to reflect a doubt about the straight line that Egudu draws from (African) body through voice to literature. To accept such a line would make the embodiment of the novel consistent with the embodiment of the self—an identity between Egudu as embodied African writer and the embodied African novels that he produces. As we saw in the autobiographies, however, the relationship between self and body is never so straightforward for Coetzee—nor, it would seem, for Costello who shares her creator’s discomfort with her own body.

Later in the chapter, Elizabeth offers an alternate model of orality that relegates its literary dimension to evolutionary quirk. Beginning with an oblique reference to Poe’s *Pym*, she ponders:

Boatloads of dark islanders paddled out to meet him. They seemed ordinary folk *just like us* but when they smiled and showed their teeth the teeth were not white but black. It sent a shiver down his spine, and rightly so. The seas full of things that seem like us but are not. Sea-flowers that gape and devour. Eels, each a barbed maw with a gut hanging from it. Teeth are for tearing, the tongue is for churning the swill around: that is the truth of the oral. . . . Only by an ingenious economy, an accident of evolution, does the organ of ingestion sometimes get to be used for song. (*EC*, 54)

The mouth, far from the image of collectivised embodiment promoted by Egudu, here serves as a mark of the terrifying alterity of other cultures and other species. At the same time, however, her insistence on the mouth as the “organ of ingestion” establishes a point of cross-species contact that prefigures her later discussion of an empathy with animals founded in the body. The oral as eating therefore troubles the essentialist theory of collective identity that would link certain bodies to certain forms of speech, but in doing so she sidelines the categories of song and speech. Literature in this model is not

necessarily disembodied—it remains, after all, an evolutionary accident—but it no longer expresses a straightforward relationship to a bodily essence.

To understand the mode of embodiment that Costello associates with literature, we can turn to the Ted Hughes poems that, in Lesson 4, she holds up as a model of this embodied empathy with animals: “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar.” As she observes in her seminar, the poems reflect a poet’s attempt to understand the experience of the jaguar by describing its movement, to enter the jaguar’s experience as basically kinetic. What I find particularly striking about these poems, however, is the omnipresence of analogy, metaphor and simile in both. Barely a movement or body part appears in either of these poems without its being immediately analogised to something else: the jaguar’s eyes are “drills”, it moves “on a short fierce fuse”, it is no more caged than a visionary in a cell, “His stride is wildernesses of freedom.”<sup>343</sup> In the second poem, they proliferate further, the jaguar compared in turn to a cat, a “thick Aztec disemboweller,” a butterfly, a gangster, “heavy ovals” and someone “hurrying through the underworld.”<sup>344</sup> In each, the jaguar accumulates characteristics and movements of people, other animals, and even various machines; he becomes a hybrid beast, at once cyborg and anthropomorphised, even as—as Costello is right to note—the effort seems always to be toward the pure kinetic experience of the jaguar as animal. The result, it is clear, is nothing so simple as the absolute alterity of Kierkegaard before God or Derrida before the other. The demands may be infinite, but the jaguar in his specificity is graspable in language only through a series of analogies that undo precisely that particularity, inscribing the jaguar within other fields of reference and leaving him inextricably mired in the marks of the analogising self. As Elizabeth observes in the questions following this seminar, “when we divert the current of feeling that flows between ourself and the animal into words, we abstract it for ever from the animal” (*EC*, 96). The embodied engagement with the other that literature stages is therefore neither the result of a perfect continuity between the poet’s body and the poem, as Egudu suggests, nor a true encounter with an other in its ungraspable alterity, but an unresolved compromise between the two: a relation to the body of the other through the fabrications of the self.

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<sup>343</sup> Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 19–20.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, 151–52.

Although Costello compares Hughes' jaguars to Rilke's panthers, there is another clear precursor in the panther that replaces the hunger artist at the end of Kafka's story. Like Hughes' jaguar, Kafka's panther prances heedlessly within a cage before an enraptured crowd. Moreover, where Kafka's animal "seemed to carry freedom around with it too; somewhere in his jaws it seemed to lurk," in Hughes' poem, "His stride is wildernesses of freedom"; for both, the big cat's body contains a self-sufficient freedom that annuls the animal's imprisonment. These similarities seem to place Costello's theory of literature as a kind of successor to the art of hunger, a shift from the art of hunger's emphasis on the identity of starving body and emaciated text towards literature as an enraptured encounter with other modes of being that will—ideally, but somewhat obscurely—substitute the consuming body for a kinetic one and thereby halt the eating of animals (as both Costello and one of her questioners point out, however, it's not clear that Hughes' poetry has in any way diminished his desire to eat the animals he stares at). They seek, in other words, to institute an art of the food taboo, one capable of showing the animal in such a light that its consumption will become impossible, disgusting, a subject of Costello's "religious horror." These poems are read by Elizabeth as a kind of prohibition, registered on the body, against any eating of their subject matter.

Central to this shift is a subtle move away from the art of hunger's tortured refusal of metaphor towards an emphasis on its painful necessity as both inherent to language (which Kafka already acknowledges) and as indispensable for an encounter with the other (as Hughes' poetry seems to imply). Lady Chandos' letter at the end of the novel repeatedly underscores the centrality of analogy to communication, as well as its undesirability as a mode of speech, repeating similes in a series of distancing parenthetical comments: "*(like rotting boards* I say again, I cannot help myself, not if I am to bring home to you my distress and my husband's, *bring home* I say, where is home, where is home?)" (EC, 228) Analogies and figurative language are at once the repulsive marks of a language that refuses its own identity with itself and the necessary compromise that allows the Lady Chandos to make the leap from her desperate hermeticism to a relationship with the "you" that turns always upon the marked presence of the I who "say[s] again." Analogy, here as in Hughes, is relational not only in the sense that it relates elements to each other (words to rotting boards, in the example above), but in the sense that it establishes the writer's (imperfect, abortive, too abstract) relation to an other: to the addressee of the letter, to the animal subject of the poem. Like both

Beckett and Auster in their various ways, Coetzee seeks to push the hermetic autonomy of the art of hunger into the new terrain of relation. But where Beckett puts relation into the service of hermeticism and where Auster ultimately opposes relation to hunger, for Coetzee relation becomes the ground of the prohibition from which his art of the food taboo arises.

And yet, this relation is for Coetzee always abortive, always broken. If analogy holds out the promise of understanding the jaguar or of communicating with Francis Bacon, it is also the source of the most dramatic collapse of the promised symposium, in the form of Elizabeth's controversial comparison of the treatment of animals to the Holocaust. This analogy prompts a letter from poet Abraham Stern, which arrives immediately before and serves as a kind of preface to the seminar on Hughes' poetry, in which he explains his refusal to attend the previous evening's dinner on these grounds: "You misunderstand the nature of likenesses; I would even say you misunderstand wilfully, to the point of blasphemy" (*EC*, 94). The allusion to blasphemy is important, implying as it does a failure to understand the true nature of difference, of God's difference from man, and of man's from animals. Analogy offends because it fails to confront alterity as truly other, and in this failure all possibility of "breaking bread" is undone and the meal as a social occasion fractures under the pressure. This, then, is Coetzee's continuation of the art of hunger: not as an unattained ideal point of identity, but as a moment of social, cultural and linguistic disjuncture, the dissolution of the Platonic symposium or the rotten mushroom's disintegration in the mouth.

Where exactly does this leave art and aesthetics? It seems for a moment in Lesson 5—the lesson that follows the 'Lives of Animals' lectures and that involves Elizabeth travelling to South Africa to see her sister, a nun—that Costello may be striving to reclaim a Hellenistic model of aesthetic beauty. But this passionate defence of art as beauty dissolves by the end of her stay in Africa, in favour of a model of art as suffering. Attempting to understand a brief sexual encounter with a dying old man, she wonders:

what name would the Greeks give to such a spectacle? Not *eros*, certainly—too grotesque for that. *Agape*? Again, perhaps not. Does that mean the Greeks would have no word for it? Would one have to wait for the Christians to come along with the right word: *caritas*? (*EC*, 154)

With this elevation of the Christian model over the Greek, Elizabeth seems to retract her earlier impassioned plea against “the contempt that Christianity exhibits for the human body and therefore for man himself.” Or as she exclaims soon after:

I am asking what you, you yourself, have against beauty. Why should people not be able to look at a work of art and think to themselves, *That is what we as a species are capable of being, that is what I am capable of being*, rather than looking at it and thinking to themselves, *My God, I am going to die, I am going to be eaten by worms?* (EC, 139)

In the notion of *caritas*, Elizabeth rediscovers a kind of awe in the grotesque body and its mortality that promises to divert her conception of art away from Hellenistic beauty and towards something more like Coetzee’s authority of the suffering body.

The type of *caritas* in both this chapter and Christian thought is the “emaciated Christ” (EC, 134) that Joseph, a local carver, obsessively reproduces: the suffering body of the self-sacrificial God-become-man. The emaciation establishes a link not only to the starving masses of Africa that Elizabeth claims not to “have the stomach for” and whose Christianity Blanche, her sister, attributes to shared suffering, but also to Elizabeth herself, who suffers from a lack of appetite throughout her visit and who faints during mass on her last day. *Caritas* therefore brings the ethical model developed in Costello’s discussions of animals—a self-sacrificing empathy with others that, in Levinas’s formulation, “nourish[es] the hunger of another with one’s own fasting”—into a context that is at once aesthetic and religious.

Framed as an alternative to Hellenistic beauty, *caritas* generalises the art of the food taboo that emerged through Coetzee’s engagement with animals to an art of hunger, just as Costello herself loses all appetite. In fact, from her selective refusals in the “Lives of Animals” chapters, Elizabeth eats less and less discriminately as the novel progresses, until exiled and without appetite in a Kafkaesque purgatory in the final chapter she wonders, “Is a new career beginning to beckon: as one of the thin folk, the compulsive fasters, the hunger artists?” (EC, 215) By the time she reappears in *Slow Man*, she can confidently and accurately assure Paul, “I barely eat,” a statement designed to facilitate their relationship by minimising her imposition on his life.<sup>345</sup> If this represents in some sense—as the reference to “hunger artists” implies—a return to the modernist fold and

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<sup>345</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Vintage, 2005), 87.

an insistence on Coetzee's position within the modernist art of hunger that we have been tracing, it is also clear that this art of hunger involves a substantial rewriting of the tradition. Coetzee's late art of hunger retains the features of the art of the food taboo: it is at once relational and self-sacrificing, founded in a religious tradition that Coetzee translates from an act of faith into an experience of embodiment. It functions as a signal of the author's uncomfortable political naivety, but does not exempt him or her from the political and geopolitical pressures that weigh on these questions. It is, in other words, an art of hunger forced uncomfortably to establish relation, to acknowledge politics, to embody ethics.

The result is neither the triumph of the absolute—something that it feels the figures in this tradition, from *Bartleby* to Beckett to Auster have long been seeking—nor resignation to the failure of this goal. Instead, Coetzee substitutes the absolute for the contingent, placing the mortal body and its visceral disgust where Kierkegaard put God, the uncomfortable compromise between self and other where Derrida put deference to the absolute other. His art of hunger is not so much a failed aspiration for a perfect unity, as an awkward, contingent and ungainly attempt to open lines of communication. Without aesthetic beauty or philosophical truth, Coetzee offers an art that makes do and that in doing so seeks to become ethical. The provisionality of the solution is apparent in the fact that it is not even clear that he offers a solution: his authorial distance from Costello means that the very articulation of this aesthetics is itself suspended in the imperfect identity of self and other that it describes.

## *Conclusion*

# Hunger After Modernism

*You're organizing a dinner party of writers and can invite three authors, dead or alive. Who's coming?*

First I call Shakespeare. "Who else is coming?" Shakespeare asks. "Tolstoy," I answer. "I'm busy that night," Shakespeare says. Next I call Kafka, who agrees to come. "As long as you don't invite Tolstoy." "I already invited Tolstoy," I tell him. "But Kundera's coming. You like Milan. And you guys can speak Czech." "I speak German," Kafka corrects me.

When Tolstoy hears that Kundera's coming, he drops out. (Something about an old book review.) So finally I call Joyce, who's always available. When we get to the restaurant, Kafka wants a table in back. He's afraid of being recognized. Joyce, who's already plastered, says, "If anyone's going to be recognized, it's me." Kundera leans over and whispers in my ear, "People might recognize us too if we went around with a cane."

The waiter arrives. When he asks about food allergies, Kafka hands him a written list. Then he excuses himself to go to the bathroom.

—Jeffrey Eugenides<sup>346</sup>

It's a classic party game question: who do you invite to your imaginary dinner party? Who, in other words, do you choose to dine with, where dining stands as a ready shorthand for intellectual exchange? It is the pop culture, literary interview version of the Platonic symposium, that ideal melding of conversation and dining, to the point where the dinner itself can be forgotten. Eugenides' wit – and his modernist heritage – lies in his taking seriously the dinner party as dinner party, as a fractious combination of personalities over the fraught act of eating. It's no coincidence, I suspect, that whomever he would like to invite, the writers who actually show up are modernists and their heirs. Even Kafka's famously difficult eating habits have a place at the table. It speaks not just to the complicated status of eating, its ungainly foregrounding, for so many modernists, but also to contemporary literature's own difficult attempts to enter into a productive dialogue with this recalcitrant modernism. Hunger, for contemporary writers, is not a mark of absolute solipsism but of an awkward sociality, an attempt at negotiating with a

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<sup>346</sup> Jeffrey Eugenides, "By the Book," *The New York Times*, October 4, 2012, sec. Books / Sunday Book Review, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/07/books/review/jeffrey-eugenides-by-the-book.html>.

literary past of writers imagined as present. It reminds us that eating and not eating are not just culinary questions, but also social and aesthetic ones, and that recognising this fully returns the lived body to the centre of what we once thought were purely intellectual questions. In some ways, this thesis has been an attempt to think this unserious question seriously: if your ideal interlocutors don't eat, how do you host this ideal dinner party?

The problem of assembling a suitable party has been a complicated one. The art of hunger, I have insisted, is a specifically modernist art that is nonetheless neither coextensive with modernism nor confined to the modernist period. The modernists I discuss here may, for the most part, be included without controversy within such a categorisation, but they are also all notably peripheral to the main game of Anglo-American "high modernism," or even to those other major modernisms flourishing in, say, Germany and France in the early twentieth-century. In fact, none of the usual suspects grace these pages: there is no Joyce, Woolf, Yeats, Pound or Eliot among the hunger artists of modernism – not even a Marcel Proust or a Thomas Mann. Instead, the authors I discuss here stand recalcitrantly at modernism's edges, cut off geographically, historically and stylistically from the centre of the modernist action. The question then might be, in what sense is the art of hunger a modernist art? Or more simply, why should modernism care about this canonical sideshow?

As peripheral modernists, as exiles without a coterie, the hunger artists of my thesis are able to, perhaps are even forced to, adopt a unique position with respect to modernist thought. What they offer is a modernism pushed to its extremes. I've argued that hunger functions as a form of self-critique, a testing of the limits of modernist aesthetic autonomy as it is expanded beyond its initial province of the work of art or the aesthetic experience. Hunger is able to aid in this expansion because it represents a dream of autonomy and self-sufficiency that, while not aesthetic in its original form, can be yoked to the aesthetic, transformed into a trope for artistic autonomy. In this sense, the art of hunger is a hybrid art formed out of the improper conjunction of two great modernist dreams: the aspiration towards aesthetic autonomy, on the one hand; and the merging of art into life, on the other. As Peter Bürger suggests in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, these

two impulses are basically antithetical.<sup>347</sup> But while for Bürger the opposition between autonomy and the equation of art with life serves as the basis for a distinction between the avant-garde and what he calls aestheticism (often also called modernism<sup>348</sup>), these hunger artists reveal the contingency of just such an opposition. Instead, they experiment with making aesthetic autonomy an experience of everyday life and of social relations, by taking hunger – that most extreme assertion of individual autonomy – as their model for art.

This expansion of aesthetic autonomy produces deformed and failed versions of many of modernism's most widely recognised touchstones. For those who take difficulty as central to modernism, the art of hunger counters with anxieties about the inherently dependent nature of all referential language, tending at moments towards non-referentiality or the construction of private languages.<sup>349</sup> For those who prefer instead to read modernism as a fundamentally dissident moment in literary history, in what Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz identify as the dominant early reading of modernism, the art of hunger offers an undifferentiated resistance, an oppositionality that, with *Bartleby*, would simply “prefer not to” – but that, in the process, may lose its critical force.<sup>350</sup> For those who, with Fredric Jameson, are interested in “the great modernist thematics of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation,” the art of hunger marks one of the outer limits of such alienation as it tends inexorably towards solipsism – but also as it breaks down in the constantly enforced confrontation with societies and audiences that remain stubbornly integral to the practice of art.<sup>351</sup> For those who prefer instead the authorial self-abnegation of Eliot's poetic impersonality, the great modernist gesture of “surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done,” the art of hunger embodies the fulfillment of this gesture, an act of surrender so absolute that it becomes synonymous with the “work to be done” – but that, in doing so, also reasserts the centrality of the self-sacrificial author.<sup>352</sup> In each case, the art of hunger functions as the

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<sup>347</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.

<sup>348</sup> See, for example, Schulte-Sasse's critique of the Anglo-American equation of modernism and the avant-garde: Jochen Schulte-Sasse, “Foreword: Theory of Modernism versus Theory of the Avant-Garde,” in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, by Peter Bürger, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xv.

<sup>349</sup> On modernist difficulty, see Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>350</sup> Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New,” in *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 2–3.

<sup>351</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” *New Left Review* 146 (August 1984): 11.

<sup>352</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 22.

culmination and the negation of a grand modernist aspiration. It stands therefore as one of modernism's most extreme manifestations, but also as one of its great moments of deconstructive auto-critique.

If, on the one hand, this discussion pushes us towards a certain understanding of what modernism is, it also, on the other, provides a context for thinking about contemporary literature. Writing after 1945 – some would say, writing after about 1930 – has been plagued by a sense of belatedness. Whether we want to discuss such works as late modernist, postmodern, or postcolonial, the terms all imply a grappling with legacies and an orientation that locates the decisive moment in the first half of the twentieth century. At the same time, these categories – particularly postmodernism and postcolonialism – are often taken to imply a rupture of some sort, a clear break with what has gone before that necessitates this encounter with the past. Thinking about modernism's relationship to its post-war and contemporary heirs in a genealogical mode permits a more flexible understanding of the “post”-ness of Beckett's and Auster's postmodernisms and Coetzee's postcolonialism. It reveals both the debts that tie these writers to modernism and the transmutations forced by their historical moment and permitted by their own attempts to work through and, eventually, against the modernism that precedes them.

Modernism's complicated, ambivalent attitude to the category of the aesthetic continues to set the terms of contemporary debates about the status of art in society. Key aestheticians from the post-war period, from Theodor Adorno to Jacques Rancière, reach for modernist art and literature as readily as they reach for German aesthetic philosophy in their attempts to formulate and defend aesthetics. In public discourse, if aesthetic autonomy has, in some ways, come to be almost coextensive with the aesthetic, it has also come to be regarded with deep suspicion, provoking a public scepticism that casts a shadow over the fortunes of both art and aesthetics. In this context, understanding modernist aesthetics and the way it continues to be appropriated and reformulated in contemporary literature amounts to a consideration of the continued possibilities and problems of the aesthetic as a category for contemporary public discourse. It offers both a way of understanding aesthetics as a social and political category, as we find in Adorno and Rancière, and a sense of the problems inherent in this approach that might, as in Auster and Coetzee, spur us to think about what other possibilities aesthetics or aesthetic autonomy might offer.

Hunger has interested me as a site at which modernist aesthetic autonomy's implications assume a particularly grave weight, metaphorically, if not actually, making aesthetics into a question of life and death, even as it dramatically exposes the instability at the heart of this aspiration. In their various ways, Beckett, Auster and Coetzee all seek to stabilise this precarious relationship, reconstituting a viable aesthetics from their engagement with modernism. Transmuting outright hunger into Beckett's self-consumption or Coetzee's food taboo, or abandoning it entirely as Auster does, they each grasp towards an aesthetic mode that would rescue the aesthetic as a category. If for Beckett, this implies a high formalism, Auster and Coetzee push aesthetics in the direction of the social, the interpersonal and the ethical, seeking to reconcile these impulses with a modified form of aesthetic autonomy (although there is perhaps more to be said about the ethical potential of Beckett's form). Hunger in this sense offers a preliminary and tentative insight into the fate and possibilities of aesthetic autonomy at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as well as the fault lines with which it is riven from the outset.

There is another, related way of telling this story as the history of an encounter between literature and philosophy. Aesthetic autonomy is a concept that develops at the interface of these two domains (and doubtless many others, including the visual and performing arts, music, politics and sociology, which have largely and regrettably been beyond the scope of this thesis). Aesthetic philosophy, literary and art criticism, and works of literature and art all lay claim to the aesthetic as their object and their province, and each develops, implicitly or explicitly, a theory of aesthetics and sometimes of aesthetic autonomy that emerges out of a dialogue across the epistemological and generic differences that separate them. The possibility of an art of hunger emerges with German aesthetic philosophy, and is realised through modernist misreadings, exaggerations and parodies of that philosophical tradition. But the relationship is genuinely dialogic, with literary adaptations and developments of this aesthetic position feeding back into philosophical discourse, repatriated through readings of Beckett and Coetzee by philosophers as diverse as Blanchot, Adorno, Cavell, Badiou and Stephen Mulhall, to name just a few, even as Auster assimilates Blanchot and the post-structuralist moment to his own reading of the art of hunger.

This incessant and untidy back-and-forth constitutes aesthetics not only as an object for diverse regimes of knowledge, but also as the point where they speak to and condition each other. At times, as in Badiou's reading of Beckett or Coetzee's toying with philosophy in *Elizabeth Costello*, the exchange reaches a point where the distinction between literature and philosophy collapses. Locating Beckett, Auster and Coetzee in this back-and-forth, I've sought to find ways of talking about their "philosophical" nature, without reading them straightforwardly as philosophy. By considering them as participating in the evolution of aesthetics, a branch of philosophy that is forced to insist on the literary texts' difference from itself, I have been able to read their philosophical import as residing in those moments – of formalism, of lyricism, of narrative – where their literariness is most marked. In this sense, the genealogy that I trace – and the history of modernism's twentieth-century legacies more generally – must be understood as an interdisciplinary genealogy, a history not only of hunger artists, but also of ascetic philosophers.

Philosophy and literature will, of course, always find a point of contact in debates around the aesthetic, and an unusually intense one where literary writers develop a high degree of self-reflexiveness and self-awareness, as they do in both modernism and its late twentieth-century aftermath. The pairing of art with hunger, however, seems to have intensified this interrelationship. For many of the writers I deal with, the art of hunger stages aesthetics' intrusion on the domains of epistemology, ontology and ethics, from the epistemological crisis of *The Unnamable* to the ethical deliberations around vegetarianism in *Elizabeth Costello*. At the same time, it has consistently reaffirmed the Kantian claim that aesthetics refuses all concepts, and its epistemological, ontological and ethical interventions accordingly resist assimilation into philosophical systems that are, almost by definition, conceptual in their orientation. In this sense, the art of hunger gestures towards a paradox internal to aesthetic autonomy's status as a philosophical idea that locates aesthetics at the very edge of philosophical knowledge.

This thesis has been the story of these paradoxes, of the problems modernism creates for itself and its admirers in its double embrace of aesthetic autonomy on the one hand, and of the collapse of the line between art and life on the other. The art of hunger, as an art that strives simultaneously towards absolute autonomy and towards an identity between art and experience, is one way of figuring this tension, one way of playing out

these ambivalent and paradoxical questions about the status of art in modernist thought. No doubt there are others, some of which emerge in the later works of Auster and Coetzee, others of which, the products of different lineages, fall far beyond the scope of this thesis. All of them testify, though, to the extent to which modernist aesthetics remains both a problem and an inspiration for contemporary literature and contemporary thinking about literature. For all that the art of hunger emerges in its earliest articulations as a gesture of defiant isolation, its real province, by the end of the twentieth century, lies in the realm of tortured communication and fraught intellectual exchange, between modernism and contemporary literature, between literature and philosophy, and between individual authors. In this sense, the awkward sociality of a dinner party with Kafka or a symposium with a Coetzee surrogate might be the perfect figure for thinking through the contemporary legacy of the modernist art of hunger.

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