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ART AS RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT: KAFKA'S DEBT TO KIERKEGAARDIAN IDEAS AND THEIR IMPACT ON HIS LATE STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Although Kafka's reception of Kierkegaardian ideas has received much critical attention the critics have so far paid little heed to similarities between Kierkegaard's religious and Kafka's aesthetic views. My intention in the following is to show that in spite of Kafka's critical remarks on his philosophy, Kierkegaard's definition of a religious person influenced his description of the artist's existence in *Erstes Leid* (1922), *Ein Hungerkünstler* (1922) and *Josefine, die Sängerin oder das Volk der Mäuse* (1924). In these stories Kafka turns Kierkegaard's ideas about spiritual inwardness and passionate attitude towards religious life into artistic inwardness and passionate attitude towards art. He also describes how devotion that these artists feel towards their art leads to their solitude and how their lives reflect suffering, doubt and despair which is similar to Kierkegaard's description of religious suffering. Kafka's critical remarks on Kierkegaard's philosophy should therefore be understood as a clear rejection of Kierkegaard's Protestant theology, although these same ideas gave him inspiration to formulate his views on the artist's existence.

Kafka's relationship with Kierkegaard has been a source of constant controversy in Kafka criticism during the recent decades. The most obvious similarities between them have certainly been found in their biographies. Both Kierkegaard and Kafka suffered in their childhood from their authoritarian fathers, suffering of which Kierkegaard writes in his journals and Kafka in his *Brief an den Vater*. During their lifetimes they had similar difficulties in forming stable relationships with women and neither of them married or had children. Kierkegaard writes about his tragic relationship with young Regina Olsen in fictional form in several of his works and describes the inner conflicts which this separation caused him. Kafka's attempts to marry Felice Bauer and to form close relationships with other women, particularly with Julia Wohryzek and Milena Jesenská, failed and left him with the damaged feeling that he was unable to form a marital relationship, something he often regretted in his diaries and letters.

A more controversial picture of Kafka's and Kierkegaard's relationship has emerged among critics when they have attempted to define Kierkegaard's possible influence on Kafka's fiction. Max Brod emphasised in his 'Nachwort' to the first edition of *Das Schloss* (1926) Kierkegaard's enormous influence on Kafka when writing this novel. According to Brod the Amalia-Sortini episode in the novel is 'ein Parallelstück zu Kierkegaards Buch' *Furcht und Zittern*, a book which 'Kafka sehr geliebt, oft gelesen und

in vielen Briefen tiefsinnig kommentiert hat'.[1] Critics who wrote during this early wave of Kafka-Kierkegaard debate often drew heavily on Brod's opinion and emphasised the similarities between Kafka's and Kierkegaard's views.[2] A somewhat more diverse discussion on Kafka and Kierkegaard started among the French existentialists in the 1940s who, as Marthe Robert has pointed out, looked for Kierkegaardian ideas in Kafka's fiction as a source of inspiration for their existentialist philosophy.[3] Particularly Camus's essay 'L'espoir et l'absurde dans l'oeuvre de Franz Kafka', first published in 1942, reveals that Kafka was considered as a mediator between Kierkegaard's early existentialist philosophy and French existentialism in many crucial concepts of existentialist thought.[4] In contrast to these early critics who emphasised Kierkegaard's influence on Kafka, the critics from the 1950s onwards started increasingly to look for differences between their views. Although the critics still usually acknowledged Kierkegaard's inspiration for Kafka, they often aimed to show how different Kafka's approach to religious, philosophical and stylistic matters was from that of Kierkegaard.[5] Since the 1970s this discussion has gone in two directions. Many recent critics have suggested that Kierkegaard was a more or less irrelevant figure for Kafka, whereas some other critics have started to analyse more deeply than before the extent to which Kafka might have chosen Kierkegaardian ideas and assimilated them into his views.[6] Although the latter have therefore begun to suspect that Kierkegaard's influence on Kafka is much more indirect than previously belived, the extent of this influence on Kafka's fiction still remains largely undiscovered. My aim in this article is to contribute to the latter critical tradition and to show how Kierkegaardian ideas influenced Kafka in his late stories. To start with I will go back to Kafka's remarks on Kierkegaard in his personal statements. After having surveyed Kafka's often contradictory remarks on his philosophy I will analyse how Kierkegaardian ideas gave him inspiration to formulate his views about the artist's existence.

[1] Max Brod, *Nachwort*, in Franz Kafka, *Das Schloss*, Munich 1926, pp. 500–1.

[2] Among others, Herbert Tauber, *Franz Kafka. An Interpretation of his Works*, London 1948, pp. 138–42; and John Kelly, 'Franz Kafka's Trial and the Theology of Crises', *The Southern Review*, 5 (1940), 766–84.

[3] Marthe Robert, 'Kafka in Frankreich', *Akzente*, 13 (1966), 317.

[4] Albert Camus, 'L'espoir et l'absurde dans l'oeuvre de Franz Kafka', in *Oeuvres Complètes d'Albert Camus*, ed. Roger Grenier, Paris 1983, pp. 241–52.

[5] Among others, Fritz Schaufelberger, 'Kafka und Kierkegaard', *Reformatio*, 7–8 (1959), 379–400, 451–6; Brian Edwards, 'Kafka and Kierkegaard: A Reassessment', *GLL*, 20 (1966–7), 218–35; and Wiebrecht Ries, *Transzendenz als Terror: Eine religionsgeschichtliche Studie über Franz Kafka*, Heidelberg 1977.

[6] Fritz Billeter, *Das Dichterische bei Kafka und Kierkegaard: Ein typologischer Vergleich*, Winterthur 1965; Wolfgang Lange, 'Über Kafkas Kierkegaard-Lektüre und einige damit zusammenhängende Gegenstände', *DVjs*, 60 (1986), 286–308; and Richard Sheppard, 'Kafka, Kierkegaard and the K's: Theology, Psychology and Fiction', *Journal of Literature and Theology*, 5 (1991), 277–96.

KAFKA'S COMMENTS ON KIERKEGAARD

Judging by Kafka's remarks in his letters and diaries his preoccupation with Kierkegaard went through two phases. First, around the years 1913–16 Kafka was interested in Kierkegaard's personal life and looked for parallels between Kierkegaard's difficulties with Regina Olsen and those that he himself was experiencing at that time with Felice. After having read in 1913 a collection of Kierkegaard's diaries, *Das Buch des Richters*, where Kierkegaard confesses his painful intellectual and physical difficulties with his fiancée, Kafka feels the relationship to be so similar to his own with Felice that he writes: 'Er bestätigt mich wie ein Freund' (T 578).[7] More important for my present topic than Kafka's early remarks on Kierkegaard's personal life are his remarks on Kierkegaard's philosophy in the correspondence with Max Brod between November 1917 and March 1918. At this time Kafka was on sick-leave in Zürau after the diagnosis of acute tuberculosis in September of the same year. Kafka's first reference to Kierkegaard in October 1917 as 'ein Stern, aber über einer mir fast unzugänglichen Gegend' (Br, 190),[8] reveals his lack of familiarity with Kierkegaard's philosophy, with which, however, he soon became familiar in the coming months in Zürau where he read *Entweder-Oder*, *Furcht und Zittern*, and *Wiederholung*. His first reading of *Entweder-Oder* results, however, in disappointment and in his letter to Brod towards the end of January he suggests that *Entweder-Oder* should be read only 'in der Weise, dass man wenigstens eine Spur wirklicher Überlegenheit über sie hat' (Br2, 228).[9] From this letter onwards Kierkegaard becomes a major topic of discussion between Kafka and Brod. In his letter of 20 January 1918 Brod compares Kierkegaard's and Kafka's personal decisions not to marry from a religious point of view. He suggests that Kierkegaard's decision not to marry reflected his negative Christianity whereas Kafka's similar decision was based on his positive Judaism and Brod doubts 'sollte das auf den Gegensatz christlich-jüdisch hinauslaufen?'(Br2, 238). In his response, Kafka criticises Brod's opinion of Kierkegaard's negative Christianity and defends Kierkegaard's interpretation of the Abraham legend as presented in *Furcht und Zittern*. He maintains that, in contrast to Brod's view, Kierkegaard's religiosity is extremely positive when he portrays Abraham as somebody whose trust in God is so vast that he is willing to sacrifice his son Isaac, knowing that God will give him back: 'Aber negativ kann man ihn gewiss weder hier noch dort nennen, in "Furcht und Zittern" (das du jetzt lesen solltest) geht seine

[7] References in this form are to Franz Kafka, *Tagebücher in der Fassung der Handschrift*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch, Michael Müller and Malcolm Pasley, Frankfurt a.M. 1990.
[8] References in this form are to Franz Kafka, *Briefe* 1904–1924, ed. Max Brod, Frankfurt a.M. 1989.
[9] References in this form are to Max Brod and Franz Kafka, *Eine Freundschaft. Briefwechsel*, ed. Malcolm Pasley, Frankfurt a.M. 1989.

Positivität ins Ungeheuerliche und macht erst vor einem gewöhnlichen Steuereinnehmer halt' (Br2, 240).

In the succeeding letter to Kafka on 19 March Brod suggests further that Kierkegaard's resigned Christianity leads to misunderstandings about the role of the religious person in life. He stresses that Kierkegaard's conception of God differentiates between religion and physicality in contrast to the Jewish God who 'kann eventuell mit Sinnlichkeit parallel gehen' (Br2, 244). Kafka's response to Brod's letter reveals his further interest in Kierkegaard's ideas about the religious person. When defending Kierkegaard, Kafka suggests that Kierkegaard's concept of God is not negative but eludes any definition: 'das Verhältnis zum Göttlichen entzieht sich zunächst für Kierkegaard jeder fremden Beurteilung' (Br2, 247). Kafka maintains that in Kierkegaard's philosophy the religious state of a human being is not decided in this life but only after death ('eine Frage des jüngsten Gerichtes') so that his present religious state cannot be determined. The religious person finds himself in constant opposition to the world since his religiosity constantly looks for ways to express itself:

> Nun will sich allerdings das religiöse Verhältnis offenbaren, kann das aber nicht in dieser Welt, darum muss der strebende Mensch sich gegen die Welt stellen, um das Göttliche in sich zu retten oder, was das gleiche ist, das Göttliche stellt ihn gegen die Welt, um sich zu retten. (Br2, 248)

Judging by his remarks on Kierkegaard, Kafka grew interested in Kierkegaard's conception of the religious person and defended it against Brod's critical views. A very different picture of Kafka's approach to Kierkegaard emerges when we look at some other remarks on the Abraham figure, which he wrote from Zürau. In often very sarcastic terms Kafka describes Abraham merely as a greedy character who is not in harmony with his spiritual world. He maintains that the everyday world, 'die vergängliche Welt' (N2, 102),[10] is not enough for Abraham but he also does not have the capacity to enter the realm of spirit and he therefore remains stuck with his material possessions, in his 'Möbelwagen', on the way there. In his later letter to Robert Klopstock, written in June 1921, Kafka further questions, often in a very imaginative way, the basic assumptions of Kierkegaard's Abraham legend and concludes that the legend belongs to 'alte Geschichten, nicht mehr der Rede wert' (Br 333).

Kafka's comments on Kierkegaard's religious person are obviously very contradictory. In his letters to Brod he expresses his fascination for Kierkegaard's portrayal of the religious person, whereas his further comments reveal his disbelief in these same ideas. I would therefore suggest that although Kafka was fascinated by the qualities which Kierkegaard gave to the religious person, his originality and divine powers, he remained distant

[10] References in this form are to Franz Kafka, *Nachgelassene Schriften und Fragmente II*, ed. Jost Schillemeit, Frankfurt a.M. 1992.

from the basis of Kierkegaard's religious ideas, his Protestantism. I intend to show in what follows that although Kafka remained detached from Kierkegaard's Christianity, he drew inspiration from Kierkegaard's description of the religious person with regard to his own views about the artist's existence.

PARALLELS BETWEEN KAFKA'S AND KIERKEGAARD'S VIEWS

In his personal remarks Kafka throughout his life emphasised the importance of literature to him. As early as in 1913 the thirty-year-old Kafka wrote that his job was 'unerträglich' since it kept him away from writing, 'meinem einzigen Beruf' (T 579). His further statement, in which he emphasised that 'ich nichts anderes bin als Literatur und nichts anderes sein kann und will' (T 579), indicates how consciously he chose literature to be the most important part of his life. This decision only strengthened when he was reflecting upon his possible marriage to Felice. He wrote in the letter to Felice's father in February 1913, in which he explained his difficulties about marrying, that literature was such an essential part of him that if he were separated from it his entire existence would lose its meaning. 'Mein ganzes Wesen ist auf Literatur gerichtet, die Richtung habe ich bis zu meinem 30sten Jahr genau festgehalten, wenn ich sie einmal verlasse, lebe ich eben nicht mehr' (BrF, 456).[11] Kafka's firmness in choosing literature and writing to be the most important part of his life resembles Kierkegaard's definition of a choice in spiritual development. In *Entweder-Oder* Kierkegaard distinguished three modes of existence, the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious, and defines these modes in terms of making the right choice. In the lowest mode of existence, the aesthetic mode, the human being lives 'ins Blaue hinein', in the state of 'Entweder-Oder' where he explores all the possibilities of life without committing himself to any binding decisions about it. By contrast, in the ethical state a human being consciously wills his own development and has undertaken a binding decision about his life. As a result, his actions are no longer determined by outer circumstances like those of an aesthetic individual. When entering the highest state, the religious state, a human being makes the most significant choice possible, since in the religious state he chooses himself, his true and essential self. Kierkegaard emphasises that the person who is to achieve the religious state has to be able to experience despair and to withdraw from the temporal world. He stresses that religious withdrawal does not mean mere passive surrender to existence but a state in which a person actively renounces temporal matters with a view to eternity. When describing the religious state, moreover, Kierkegaard suggests that the precondition for this state is the suspension of ethical norms. He

[11] References in this form are to Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Felice und andere Korrespondenz aus der Verlobungszeit*, ed. Erich Heller and Jürgen Born, Frankfurt a.M. 1967.

recalls that Abraham was only able to perform his 'leap of faith' after having sacrificed the ethical norms upon which his life had depended, i.e. his duties as husband and father.

Kafka's decision to write made him drop everything else in his life. He recalled ironically in his diary as early as January 1912 that when he devoted himself to literature he deprived himself of 'die Freuden des Geschlechtes, des Essens, des Trinkens, des philosophischen Nachdenkens, der Musik', and that he soon 'magerte nach allen diesen Richtungen ab' (T431). When he rejected everything else in his life, writing began to acquire deep value in Kafka's spiritual development. In the following aphorism, written in 1917, Kafka equates writing with praying: 'Schreiben als Form des Gebetes' (N2, 354), which implies that for him writing was as essential a part of his spiritual development as religious life was for Kierkegaard. When discussing this spiritual development Kafka introduced his concept of 'das Unzerstörbare' which refers to the hidden and unbroken spiritual core of a person which allows a person to live and find spiritual satisfaction in life: 'Der Mensch kann nicht leben ohne ein dauerndes Vertrauen zu etwas Unzerstörbarem in sich, wobei sowohl das Unzerstörbare als auch das Vertrauen ihm dauernd verborgen bleiben können' (N2, 124). Kafka maintained that 'das Unzerstörbare' is something which is possessed by every single individual and is simultaneously shared by all mankind: 'Das Unzerstörbare ist eines: jeder einzelne ist es und gleichzeitig ist es allen gemeinsam, daher die beispiellos untrennbare Verbindung der Menschen' *(ibid.)*. Kafka stated that one way of misunderstanding 'das Unzerstörbare' is to believe in a personal God: 'Eine der Ausdrucksmöglichkeiten dieses Verborgen-Bleibens ist ein Glaube an einen persönlichen Gott' (*ibid.*). Since Kafka himself did not possess a belief in a personal God, it is quite likely that for him spirituality did not find expression in any religious categories but in the aesthetic realm, through literature and writing. As for Kierkegaard, Kafka's devotion to the aesthetic life meant not only the renunciation of worldly life, but sometimes even conscious destruction of oneself and therefore suffering in the world. Kafka emphasised this suffering as an essential part of writing in the following diary entry, written in June 1913, in which he states that, when writing, his aim is to liberate his creative potential and, if necessary, even voluntarily destroy himself in the process: 'Die ungeheuere Welt, die ich im Kopf habe. Aber wie mich befreien und sie befreien, ohne zu zerreissen. Und tausendmal lieber zerreissen, als sie in mir zurückhalten oder begraben. Dazu bin ich ja hier' (T 562). Kafka's view of the artist's life also resembles Kierkegaard's definition of the religious person as being outside ethical life. In the letter to Brod in July 1922, he defined his writing as 'ein süsser wunderbarer Lohn für Teufelsdienst' (Br2, 377). Through his writing Kafka was able to approach dark, unconscious powers within himself of which he would otherwise remain unaware. Kafka further emphasised the writer's irrational powers by describing him as a 'Sündenbock' of mankind who allows other people to enjoy sin innocently. He

described how, through writing, the writer 'erlaubt den Menschen, eine Sünde schuldlos zu geniessen, fast schuldlos' (Br2, 380).

Kafka's remarks have indicated close parallels between Kierkegaard's religious views and his own view of the artist's existence. In the subsequent part of this article I intend to analyse how Kafka's understanding of Kierkegaard's religious person influenced his portrayal of the artist's life in his last stories.

KAFKA'S DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTIST IN *ERSTES LEID* (1922), *EIN HUNGERKÜNSTLER* (1922) AND *JOSEFINE, DIE SÄNGERIN ODER DAS VOLK DER MÄUSE* (1924)

In those stories which Kafka wrote within the two last years of his life he describes artists who have devoted their lives to their art. The protagonist of *Erstes Leid* is a trapeze artist who has devoted himself to this art so entirely than when engaged by a company he stays on his trapeze throughout the day and night. When practising his art, the trapeze artist achieves a silent and hidden state resembling Kierkegaardian inwardness in which other people and outer circumstances have ceased to have any meaning for him:

> Sonst blieb es um ihn still; nachdenklich sah nur manchmal irgendein Angestellter, der sich etwa am Nachmittag in das leere Theater verirrte, in die dem Blick sich fast entziehende Höhe empor, wo der Trapezkünstler, ohne wissen zu können, dass jemand ihn beobachtete, seine Künste trieb oder ruhte. (D 317)[12]

The protagonist of *Ein Hungerkünstler* is an equally passionate starver who lives only for those weeks during which he stays in his small cage 'bleich, im schwarzen Trikot, mit mächtig vortretenden Rippen' (D334). In his cage he communicates at times with his public but these moments are soon followed by the hunger artist's withdrawal into solitude:

> . . . dann aber wieder ganz in sich selbst versank, um niemanden sich kümmerte, nicht einmal um den für ihn so wichtigen Schlag der Uhr, die das einzige Möbelstück des Käfigs war, sondern nur vor sich hinsah mit fast geschlossenen Augen und hie und da aus einem winzigen Gläschen Wasser nippte, um sich die Lippen zu feuchten. (*ibid.*)

The protagonist of Kafka's last story, *Josefine, die Sängerin oder das Volk der Mäuse*, is a singing female mouse who surpasses the earlier protagonists in her passion for her art. While singing, Josefine is able to forget her physical surroundings so entirely that it is as if she had died away:

[12] References in this form are to Franz Kafka, *Drucke zu Lebzeiten*, ed. Wolf Kittler, Hans-Gerd Koch and Gerhard Neumann, Frankfurt a.M. 1994.

> wie sie ihre Lippe kräuselt, zwischen den niedlichen Vorderzähnen die Luft ausstösst, in Bewunderung der Töne, die sie selbst hervorbringt, erstirbt und dieses Hinsinken benützt, um sich zu neuer, ihr immer unverständlicher werdender Leistung anzufeuern. (*ibid.*, 366)

These short moments of absorption, 'Hinsinken', always encourage her to achieve better results and give her strength to overcome difficulties and obstacles which she confronts. Her passion for her art is limitless and she shows her deep devotion by always putting her artistic ambition higher and, as the narrator reveals, 'wäre es in ihrer Macht, sie würde ihn noch höher hängen'(*ibid.*, 372).

When describing the deep involvement that these artists have in their art, Kafka simultaneously shows how their devotion places them outside the social world. Similar to the religious person in Kierkegaard's philosophy, these artists often find themselves in opposition to their surroundings and they suffer in their wordly life and look for solitude. The trapeze artist's longing for solitude is so intense that he insists on staying on his own, high up on the trapeze, when others are performing. As the narrator reveals, 'sein menschlicher Verkehr war eingeschränkt' (*ibid.*, 318) and his only social contact, except for that with his impresario, is with his servants and a few colleagues who occasionally visit him on the trapeze. His need for solitude is so absolute that when he is forced to leave his trapeze and to travel to other cities to perform, the artist demands to travel during the night, to use the fastest car available and when travelling by train to sleep high up in the luggage-rack in order to avoid the painful contact with the outside world. In spite of these concessions, his contact with the world is, as the impresario reveals, 'für die Nerven des Trapezkünstlers zerstörend' (*ibid.*, 319). The starvation artist's devotion to his art has similarly alienated him from life in the world. His only social contact is with the guards who observe him during those long weeks which he spends without food. The guards frequently consider him a fool and suspect him of cheating while fasting, although those initiated into the art of starving know how groundless this suspicion was, since the starvation artist would never eat, even if forced, 'die Ehre seiner Kunst verbot es' (*ibid.*, 341). The mental state of the starvation artist is therefore often unbalanced, and doubt and despair are mingled with passionate devotion. He spends most of his time in 'trüber Laune' and behaves 'zum Schrecken aller wie ein Tier' in his cage (*ibid.*). Josefine's situation among her people, the mouse nation, is equally solitary. Although the mice are fascinated by her song, which succeeds in capturing 'etwas von verlorenem, nie wieder aufzufindendem Glück' (*ibid.*, 366) of this nation, the value of her singing is constantly doubted. The narrator even asks if her song should be called singing or mere squeaking: 'Ist es denn überhaupt Gesang? Ist es vielleicht doch nur ein Pfeifen?' (*ibid.*, 351). When the value of her song is doubted, Josefine shows her superiority by 'ein freches, hochmütiges Lächeln' (*ibid.*, 354) which causes further irritation among her people. The narrator also

implies that there is an organised opposition to Josefine among her people which aims at devaluing her singing and depriving her of the privileges that she has succeeded in achieving. The public's dissatisfaction with her privileges increases towards the end of the story when they begin to demand that Josefine should participate more actively in the daily work of her people. At this point the narrator refers to Josefine's position by addressing it as if in explicitly Kierkegaardian terms. When describing Josefine's exceptional place in society, the narrator maintains that Josefine seems to be outside the law, beyond ethical norms and codes that govern the life of her people. His description of Josefine's position closely resembles Kierkegaard's definition of the religious person as being outside ethical life:

> Daraus könnte man schliessen, dass Josefine fast ausserhalb des Gesetzes steht, dass sie tun darf, was sie will, selbst wenn es die Gesamtheit gefährdet, und dass ihr alles verziehen wird. Wenn dies so wäre, dann würden auch Josefines Ansprüche völlig verständlich, ja, man könnte gewissermassen in dieser Freiheit, die ihr das Volk geben würde, in diesem ausserordentlichen, niemand sonst gewährten, die Gesetze eigentlich widerlegenden Geschenk ein Eingeständnis dessen sehen, dass das Volk Josefine, wie sie es behauptet, nicht versteht, ohnmächtig ihre Kunst anstaunt, sich ihrer nicht würdig fühlt, dieses Leid, das es Josefine tut, durch eine geradezu verzweifelte Leistung auszugleichen strebt und, so wie ihre Kunst ausserhalb seines Fassungsvermögens ist, auch ihre Person und deren Wünsche ausserhalb seiner Befehlsgewalt stellt. (*ibid.*, 368)

Kafka's further description of these artists reveals, however, even closer resemblances to Kierkegaard's definition of the religious person. The deep involvement that these artists feel with their art not only places them outside ethical life but tends to disintegrate their finite lives. Towards the end of *Erstes Leid* the trapeze artist loses his vital contact with the outside world, that is, with his impresario, and falls into a state of despair from which he does not find a way out. During one of his strenuous trips he begins to demand a second trapeze for his performances, and, although the impresario succeeds in consoling the artist, he wonders whether the artist's anxiety may threaten his whole existence:

> Wenn ihn einmal solche Gedanken zu quälen begannen, konnten sie je gänzlich aufhören? Mussten sie sich nicht immerfort steigern? Waren sie nicht existenzbedrohend? Und wirklich glaubte der Impresario zu sehn, wie jetzt im scheinbar ruhigen Schlaf, in welchem das Weinen beendet hatte, die ersten Falten auf des Trapezkünstlers glatter Kinderstirn sich einzuzeichnen begannen. (*ibid.*, 321)

This brief incident at the end of the story implies that the trapeze artist may no longer be able to form a renewed relationship with his art but that he remains in a desperate state, as the wrinkles on his forehead sym-

bolically suggest. Kafka's description of the starvation artist in *Ein Hungerkünstler* resembles Kierkegaardian ideas in this respect even more closely. Towards the end of the story the public gradually loses interest in his art and eventually he is removed to a circus where he has to continue starving among animal cages. After having been removed to the circus, the starvation artist no longer even tries to attract the attention of his public but is pleased to be left on his own, staring absent-mindedly into the far distance:

> In der ersten Zeit hatte er die Vorstellungspausen kaum erwarten können; entzückt hatte er der sich heranwälzenden Menge entgegengesehen, bis er sich nur zu bald – auch die hartnäckigste, fast bewusste Selbsttäuschung hielt den Erfahrungen nicht stand – davon überzeugte, dass es zumeist der Absicht nach, immer wieder, ausnahmslos, lauter Stallbesucher waren. Und dieser Anblick von der Ferne blieb noch immer der schönste. (*ibid.*, 345).

After having been deprived of the chance to continue his art, the starvation artist also loses his belief in his art himself. Towards the end of the story he demands that he should not be admired for his art and confesses that he had been starving only because he could not find 'die Speise . . . , die mir schmeckt. Hätte ich sie gefunden, glaube mir, ich hätte kein Aufsehen gemacht und mich vollgegessen wie du und alle' (*ibid.*, 349).

Much of the critical discussion concerning this story has sought to define the starvation art and the historical time described in the story. It would be tempting to see starvation art as a symbol of modern art, as has been suggested by Frederick Krotz and Gerhard Kurz in their interpretations of the story. Krotz has compared Kafka's story to several other modern works and suggests that Kafka's description of art in this story resembles the ambition of modern art to attain a new transcendence.[13] Kurz, on the other hand, suggests that Kafka has undertaken an ideological criticism of the modern artist in this story by stressing his pathological sides.[14] Kurz fails therefore to see the value of the hunger artist's unique performance, and although Krotz succeeds in relating hunger art to modernist ideas about art he nevertheless fails to explain why the art of fasting had been so popular earlier. It seems therefore that the starvation art refers not to something radically new but, on the contrary, to something ancient which the public of the story is confronted with and wants to reject. Some earlier critics of the story have taken this into account in their interpretations of the story. As early as 1936 Harry Steinhauer suggested that the change described in the story reflects a cultural change in which religion loses its meaning.[15] He maintains that the hunger artist is therefore comparable to an ascetic saint who is confronted by an age without religion. Kafka's last protagonist, Josefine, seems to suffer an end just as tragic as those of the trapeze artist and the starvation artist, since

[13] Frederick Krotz, 'Franz Kafka: Ein Hungerkünstler', *Modern Austrian Literature*, 5 (1972), 104–14.
[14] Gerhard Kurz, *Traum-Schrecken: Kafkas literarische Existenzanalyse*, Stuttgart 1980, p. 79.
[15] Harry Steinhauer, 'Hungering Artist', in *Die Deutsche Novelle 1880-1933*, New York 1936, pp. 28–43.

towards the end of the story the narrator refers not only to her disappearance but also to her death. But a closer analysis of the narrator shows that his revelations about Josefine's fate are not necessarily true, since we cannot infer Josefine's entire story from the narrator's remarks, which throughout the story are very contradictory. Michael Dentan has earlier suggested that the narrator's attitude towards Josefine expresses his inability to approach the artistic realm, but when carefully analysed it seems that some of his remarks even show a conscious wish to devalue her art.[16] The narrator becomes more ambivalent towards the end of the story when he starts to describe critically Josefine's demands to be free of the daily work of her people. He describes Josefine as unrealistic and childish by blaming her for her privileges, but throughout this negative description he often slips into a positive characterisation of Josefine. When portraying Josefine as somebody who aims for boundless admiration, the narrator also admits that admiration itself means nothing to her and that her demands are always caused by an inner logic: 'Wenn sie etwas fordert, so wird sie nicht durch äussere Dinge, sondern durch innere Folgerichtigkeit dazu gebracht' (*ibid.*, 372). Walter H. Sokel has offered an explanation for the narrator's ambivalence and pointed to the exceptional status of this narrator within Kafka's entire work. Sokel suggests that the narrator belongs to the declining power of the mouse nation and that in contrast to Kafka's earlier works, where power structures were always seen through the perspective of the weak protagonist, here the heroine is seen through the eyes of the declining power.[17] Most earlier critics of the story have not, however, paid attention to this narrative possibility but have instead assumed that the narrator is reliable. James Rolleston calls him a 'skeptical narrator' whose 'efforts to extract a permanent meaning from the text are equally frustrated by the heroine's sheer quirkiness'.[18] And Roy Pascal maintains that the narrator is 'a medium that must be transparent and utterly valuable'.[19] In contrast to earlier critics, this analysis has revealed that the narrator's comments about Josefine should be addressed with scepticism and, in fact, we doubt whether his revelations about Josefine's character and particularly about her death at the end of the story are true. The narrator's unintentional revelations point out, on the contrary, that Josefine possesses an endlessly resolute attitude towards her art and it is therefore difficult to imagine that Josefine would have completely given up her singing and no reason is given for Josefine's sudden death. In contrast, the narrator always emphasises Josefine's vitality by saying that 'für sie gibt es kein Altern und keine Schwächen ihrer Stimme' (*ibid.*, 372). Kafka's Josefine in his last story differs thus from his earl-

[16] Michael Dentan, *Humour et création littéraire dans l'oeuvre de Kafka*, Geneva/Paris 1961, pp. 154–5.
[17] Walter H. Sokel, *Franz Kafka: Tragik und Ironie: Zur Struktur seiner Kunst*, Munich/ Vienna 1964, p. 576: 'Wir sehen die Macht nicht mehr durch die zweifelnden Augen des Ich-Helden, sondern die Macht ist uns durch einen ihrer sinnierenden Teilhaber zugänglich.'
[18] James Rolleston, *Kafka's Narrative Theater*, University Park, Pa./ London 1974, pp. 131–32, 136–7.
[19] Roy Pascal, *Kafka's Narrators: A Study of his Stories and Sketches*, Cambridge 1982, p. 220.

ier artists since she is able to resist the disintegrating effect of her surroundings.

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Kafka's late artists – the trapeze artist, the hunger artist and Josefine – resemble Kierkegaard's 'religious person' in many respects. They are in possession of powers which allow them to devote themselves to the aesthetic life. The choice which places art beyond everything else in their lives closely resembles Kierkegaard's definition of a choice through which a person may gain a higher validity for the self. But perhaps Kafka's view of the artist's existence is most similar to Kierkegaard's definition of religious life when he describes the difficulties these artists confront in their worldly lives. Their devotion to art places them outside the profane world to which they are frequently in opposition, and the artists spend their lives in Kierkegaardian melancholy. When describing artists in these stories, which he wrote towards the end of his life, Kafka must have thought of his own experiences as an artist, upon which he reflected in his letters and diaries throughout his life. Kafka's view of the artist's life in these stories brings further evidence about the subject's experience of modernity. As Harvie Ferguson has suggested in his study *Melancholy and Modernity*, melancholy has emerged as the most characteristic trait of modern existence: in modernity melancholy came to mean the general sense of 'cosmic dislocation, the feeling of being alone in a void, of isolation in the face of the double infinity of external and internal space'.[20] Kafka's comments on his writing have revealed that art was for him a means of preserving his spiritual integrity in life and that Kierkegaard's example was crucial for him when making his decision to concentrate on writing. Kafka's devotion to literature allowed him to resist the disintegrating effect of modernity and to remain in creative touch with 'das Unzerstörbare', with the most hidden and therefore undamaged part of his personality.

[20] Harvie Ferguson, *Melancholy and the Critique of Modernity: Soren Kierkegaard's Religious Psychology*, London/New York 1995, p. 17.