LITTLE-KNOWN DOCUMENTS

The "Man-Eater" Variant to "A Hunger-Artist"

FRANZ KAFKA

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION BY C. F. S. CREASY

Introduction

Despite Franz Kafka's final wish that his unpublished writings be destroyed, they endure. His fragmentary novels began appearing just after his death—edited into deceptive coherence by Max Brod—becoming central to one of the world's most scrutinized oeuvres. Partly in response to the vagaries of this posthumous career, compositional and publication histories have grown essential to Kafka scholarship. And given the recent legal disputes over a cache of hitherto unknown manuscripts, it is clear that in Kafka, the relation between the published and the unpublished is a crux.[1] Presented here is a 1924 manuscript fragment that deepens this crux, further emphasizing how self-metabolizing a process Kafka's work is. The so-called "Menschenfresser" ("cannibal" or "man-eater") fragment is a variant episode of the published story "Ein Hungerkünstler" ("A Hunger-Artist"). That tale concerns a sideshow performer whose trick is starving, a spectacle that gradually loses its appeal until, neglected and alone, the performer wastes away to nothing and is replaced by a voracious panther. With this intriguing addendum to one of Kafka's most popular works, what Judith Butler calls his "poetics of non-arrival" emerges simultaneously as a conceptual matter and a dilemma of the material text ("Who Owns Kafka?" 5).

Composed sometime between January and March 1924, the variant refracts the themes and textual condition of "A Hunger-Artist," which first appeared in *Die neue Rundschau* in October 1922 before its publication in the eponymous collection in August 1924. Kafka worked on the collection's galleys until his death in June, when Brod's editorial reinvention of the author began. His shepherding of *A Hunger-Artist* to press led to *The Trial*'s publication by the same house—Verlag Die Schmiede—eight months later. In a sense, then, the variant's parent text already straddles the divide between authorial corpus and posthumously curated oeuvre.

"A Hunger-Artist" is sometimes marshalled to support the commonplace that, following Kafka's own conviction, opposes the cohesive purity of his stories to the digressive incompleteness of his

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novels. However, the story's own integrity may be more apparent than real.[2] This is the quandary presented by the "man-eater" fragment, written for but omitted from the 1924 volume. In the variant, the hunger-artist is visited by a stranger who turns out to be a forgotten friend—and a man-eater. This man-eater jogs the hunger-artist's memory, recalling their childhood games and particularly how the hunger-artist used to braid his hair. The subtly eroticized episode ends with an image of this "tropical," "wild" red hair, evoking Nietzschean "superhuman cravings" and "powers," while drawing on exoticist associations of albinism and cannibalism. Thus, the figure complements the story's tropical panther (as counterpoint to the protagonist's ascetic will-to-art as self-annihilation), providing food for thought to critics—of Kafka and modernism generally, but also those interested in Nietzschean influence, colonial discourses, queer studies, disability studies, and genetic criticism.[3]

Beyond its interest as another "lost writing,"[4] the fragment's textual status demands a fuller engagement than it has received since Malcolm Pasley brought it to light in 1966.[5] Pasley asserts that one of the "conversation slips" Kafka used to communicate in his final days, reading "Ein Drittel aus der Mitte gestrichen" ("A third struck out of the middle"; *Briefe* 486; my trans.), refers to the fragment, indicating its compositional location and authorial rejection. Both points, however, are conjectural. However, the idea that the fragment belonged to the story's third paragraph, at the height of the protagonist's renown, does not accord with the evidence. It might belong later: the episode occurs when "attendance" had grown "meager" and mentions details consistent with the story's final part. Perhaps it goes near the fifth paragraph, before the protagonist leaves his "Impresario" for a circus job ("Ein Hungerkünstler" 343)? Ultimately the fragment's presumptive location is a matter of speculation, especially because it begins midsentence and ends abruptly.

Unlike better-known fragments such as the alternative endings to "In the Penal Colony" or variants of "A Report to an Academy,"[6] which were absent from publications that Kafka lived to see to press, the "man-eater" fragment cannot be conclusively designated as either an authorially rejected paratext or an authorially legitimated text. If "A third struck out of the middle" refers to the variant at all, its purport remains indeterminate: it might be an instruction to delete or, equally credibly, a corrective to an erroneous deletion. Perhaps the man-eater was indeed meant to figure in the volume. The philological quandary, then, is summed up in a phrase from the text itself: we do not "know for certain what rouse[s] [our] suspicion, there [are] many grounds for it, if you like, but also nothing." Nothing except the passage itself and the ineliminable possibility that Kafka intended it to appear in the edition of the story published in *A Hunger-Artist*.

Thus, by a series of accidents equally beyond Kafka's control and our critical adjudication, the "man-eater" fragment persists as a disjunct complement to "A Hunger-Artist," neither authorially ratified nor invalidated. This situation might be called Kafkaesque. Or, better: the variant's contingent perdurance embodies the paradoxes Kafka's writings impose, in both their substance and their textual history. And this—beyond the fodder it offers to critical interpretation, literary aesthetics, and textual studies—enjoins us to read it, in what Walter Benjamin would have called its quantum "complementary" relation to the published work (326).

Notes

1. See Butler, "Who"; Balint.

2. Kafka described *Amerika* as "in kleinen Stücken mehr aneinander als ineinander gearbeitet" ("worked in small pieces, more stuck together than woven into one another"; Letter to Max Brod; my trans.). *The Castle*, he writes, is "jämmerliches Zeug, öde Strickstrumpfarbeit, mechanisch gestückelte, kleinliche Bastelei" ("miserable junk, barren knitting work, mechanically patched, petty bricolage"; Letter to Hans Mardersteig 507; my trans.). This attitude tinges the critical heritage diffusely. For instance, Gray influentially asserts, "Wholes are what Kafka could never achieve except in the short story, the vignette or prose-poem, or the aphorism. None of his novels are complete" (4). Greenberg is more cautious: "In all of Kafka's work there is

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a struggle to achieve unity. . . . He achieves it . . . in any number of shorter pieces—'A Hunger Artist' is a notable instance," but "the first thing criticism seemed obliged to say, when it looked at his . . . three unfinished novels . . . was that it was hopelessly lacking in unity" (122, 147). See also Pascal 105.

3. See Caygill, *Kafka*; Gosetti-Ferencei; North; Thompson; Zilcosky. For a bibliography of recent work on colonial discourses and related issues in Kafka, see Dürbek and Dunker.

4. See Butler's measured critique of the 2020 collection *The Lost Writings* ("Lost").

5. It appears in the fifteen-volume *Kritische Ausgabe*. An editorial note confirms Pasley's dating, speculating that "möglicherweise dachte Kafka zunächst daran, diese Geschichte—die dann unvollendet liegenblieb—als eine Art Pendant zur 'Hungerkünstler'–Geschichte diesem Erzählungenband einzufügen" ("perhaps Kafka initially considered inserting this story—which at the time lay unfinished—as a sort of counterpart to the 'Hunger-Artist' story of this collection"; *Nachgelassene Schriften* 149; my trans.).

6. See Caygill, "Kafka's Exit."

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. . . behavior was suspicious, confronted him at once.[1] Although the man shoved him indignantly aside and went on, nonetheless—since this attraction was extremely meticulously arranged and even in all his superhuman feats the hunger-artist in fact required ample protection—there were several employees just at hand on every side, who now very energetically blocked the man's way. However, they did not know for certain what roused their suspicion, there were many grounds for it, if you like, but also nothing. The most suspicious thing, although really only suspicious in a childish sort of way, was the visitor's red hair and the peculiarity of not removing his hat—something, however, that many others in the enormous hall also refrained from doing. But below the hat in two or three places tiny braids woven with raffia peeked out, leaving it to be supposed that the whole mighty abundance of hair underneath the big hat was worked up in this certainly very peculiar—

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but, from the hall employees' perspective, nevertheless harmless—fashion. Be that as it may, they had in any event come together now in a sort of defense formation and would not have abandoned it had not the man, who for an instant seemed tempted to chase them all off with a few blows, changed his mind and, raising a hand out of the circle closing in around him, called out to the hunger-artist: "Hello, little one,[2] good morning!" This did the trick. Everyone turned around toward the hunger-artist and the stranger again had a few more steps freed up for him. But the hunger-artist lifted his head infinitely slowly out of the half-slumber in which he always found himself when attendance at the hall was meager, appeared to gradually recognize the stranger, made an uncertain hand movement—which at least could have been interpreted as a cue to the hall attendants to free up the stranger's path—and suffered his approach with head once more bowed. "An armchair, here!" the stranger demanded of the now definitively subjugated employees, who hastened to place the armchair right up against the bars for him, a privilege otherwise granted only in exceptional cases to distinguished personages. Of course the Impresario, the boss, was not yet here and it was therefore relatively easy for the stranger to take command. Anyhow he now sat absolutely as close as possible to the hunger-artist and actually had the gall to grab himself a piece of straw from out of the cage—indeed prompting the ushers to recommence an advance that, after the first steps, however, they once more abandoned—and lightly tickle the chin of the hunger-artist, who seemed after all not to have fully awoken and was again drowsing. "Now," he said, "will you not wake up a bit when there's a visitor?" This was rather rough dealing, although one could see that the man was making an obviously futile, persistent effort to treat the hunger-artist tenderly, after the manner of a father or a friend. This was especially clear as he now gave a smiling nod to the hunger-artist, by this point fully awake and anxiously looking on with his large black eyes. "Yes," he said, "It is I, the old, the well-meaning—to you and perhaps merely to you alone—man-eater.[3] I want to pay you a little visit, revive myself a bit in your sight, give the nerves a bit of a rest from the vexing[4] public." "You're a man-eater, a cannibal?" asked the hunger-artist and pressed his hand against his forehead, as though he were seeking to recollect something. "You've forgotten me?" the man-eater said, somewhat offended and still more puzzled than offended, "Can it be possible? You no longer remember how we played with one another? How my red hair delighted you? How you wove and tressed it into little braids? Similar to these?" And he took off his hat and the hair streamed forth as though living, as though in a tropical luxuriance, partly braided, partly in its wild native condition. His head was mighty, but the mass of hair was as large as if it belonged to some yet mightier head, underneath it the head appeared small. Yet this lent nothing ridiculous to the sight, it was instead appalling, it was as though this superhuman hair betokened likewise superhuman cravings and the powers to realize them.

Translator's Notes

I would like to thank Stanley Corngold for his comments on my translation.

1. The extant fragment begins midsentence; the subject of this clause is most likely a guard or other employee like those mentioned in the second sentence. The direct object "him" refers to the stranger.

2. In the manuscript, Kafka initially wrote "Pedro," before emending this to "little one" ("Kleiner").

3. While "Menschenfresser" can mean "cannibal" in a broad sense, I translate it literally for several reasons: in order to preserve the parallelism with "hunger-artist" ("Hungerkünstler"), to foreground the subjacent eroticism of this encounter, and perhaps most importantly, to foreground the analogy between the man-eater and the panther of the published story, since the term is used regularly to refer both to figures in fairy tales and to predatory animals that eat humans. My translation gives it as "cannibal" only in the hunger-artist's subsequent question, in order to stress the hunger-artist's confused nonrecognition of his friend, which is indicated by the indefinite article (in distinction to the man-eater's own use of the definite article).

4. At this point in the manuscript Kafka struck out the phrase "and yet perpetually tantalizing" ("und doch ewig verlockenden").

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