

The Relationship of the Artist and Society in the Works of Franz Kafka

Michael Stoler
Expository Writing 18
13 December 1985
Alex Johnson
Final Paper

A prominent, repeated pattern in the works of Franz Kafka is the presence of an artist figure who is alienated from society and suffers as a result. But the theme of the stories is of society's need for such a figure, and the great contributions he is capable of making to it. Some of the stories in which this pattern shows most clearly, and in which this theme is most clearly expressed, include "The Metamorphosis," "A Hunger Artist," "Investigations of a Dog," and "Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse Folk." They illustrate Kafka's fascinating obsession and the meaning behind it.

The stories have strong similarities of structure, plot, and imagery. There is an artist, who is alienated from society; he is different, and misunderstood. Yet he expects society's attention, and may receive some, but not usually in the form he would like. He becomes dissatisfied with his treatment and attempts to make some protest. But society is unyielding, and only ignores him more. He sinks deeper in dissatisfaction, and often, pain. Finally, something has to give. The artist must either renounce art, or renounce life, though in doing so, he may have some small effect on society.

"A Hunger Artist" concerns a professional faster, a man who, isolated in a cage, starves himself for the public's entertainment. He receives a certain amount of attention: "the whole town took a lively interest in the hunger artist,"(188) though they cannot understand his fasting. "Just try to explain to anyone the art of fasting."(199) So they do not give him what he wants either in attention ("the town began to lose interest after forty days of his fast,"(191) or in appreciation (they think him "out for publicity" or "some kind of cheat."(191)) He therefore becomes more and more dissatisfied with society, even as society becomes more and more tired of him: "the interest in professional fasting markedly diminishes."(188) He transfers to a circus, there to "fast as he liked,"(196) as the crowd forgets him, sweeping past to other attractions. He finally withers and dies, but just before, he comes to a realization and explains himself, begging "forgiveness" for wanting them "to admire his fasting." It does not merit admiration; he only avoided eating because he "couldn't find the food he liked."(200) He is replaced by his complete opposite, a panther, who "seemed to carry freedom with it." The people flock to see it. (201)

The same motifs are repeated in "Investigations of a Dog." The fully sentient dog who is the main character and narrator is "in distant isolation"(203) from the canine community. He goes about asking questions of other dogs, on one principal line of inquiry: the origin of dogs' food. To others, this is something utterly unimportant. Unable, by some bizarre blindness, to see the human providers, they believe their food appears as long as they "water the ground" and perform certain ritual dances. They misinterpret the curious dog as merely hungrily begging for food, and are willing to share theirs. But they will not answer his questions, and "favor him" (217) only to "divert him," and so he becomes dissatisfied with his fellows. He then tries various experiments, to see if food still appears without the various steps considered necessary to bring it. It still does,

as others have found out before. So he desperately tries something else, fasting, withdrawing, not seeking after his food, to let it pursue him. This fast nearly kills him, leaving him "twisted with pangs of hunger."(246) But society takes no notice, leaving him "totally alone." He would "die less of hunger than of neglect."(248) He finally ends his fast with the visit of a hunting hound who makes him realize the uselessness of his researches, that he should instead "prize freedom above all else."(255)

In "Josephine the Singer, or The Mouse Folk", the title character has the ability to encourage and unify great groups of mice by her singing, which may only be "piping." Yet she is the "sole exception"(305) who has any musical sense, and "wholly withdrawn and living in her song."(310) "She has long learned not to expect real understanding," (308) and complains about attention too. The mouse folk flock to her concerts, but "with the best will in the world [they] cannot assemble as quickly as she wants."(311) Furthermore, "she does not want mere admiration; she wants to be admired in exactly the way she prescribes."(322) She finally demands, and is refused, exemption from taxing work. So she begins to remonstrate, "cutting short her grace notes if her petition were not granted."(325) The other mice do not notice and still refuse. She finally disappears, as the narrator, a member of the society, speculates on her effect on it, tending, but not entirely able, to dismiss it.

In "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa, a harried, overworked salesman, is "transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect."(19) Once he finally realizes what has occurred, which takes a relatively long time, and involves a lot of useless effort on his part, he retreats to his room and spends most of the rest of the story there. His family do not realize that beneath the insect exterior, there is still a human interior, and they see his every act as a threat: "no entreaty was understood," and neither are his "good intentions."(39,40) So they are no more eager that he come out of his room. They still feed him, but not as he would like. That "he had not eaten ... gradually occurred more and more often."(47) But when he tries to indicate his preference, they again fear him and chase him back to his room. As time goes by, they occupy themselves less and less with him, "Who could find time to bother about Gregor more than was absolutely needful?"(67) So he stops eating, and gradually withers away, eventually dying amid the filth of his room, and being simply disposed of, "seen to."(87) The family, however, experience a sort of rebirth.

What, in all these stories, causes the alienation of the artist? Obviously, he is "different." But in what way? Art may make one animal, as for Gregor. Only as an insect does he begin to love music.(49,76) To apply his artistic hobby, fretwork, he makes a curious choice, a picture of a woman being engulfed by her furs.(19) Certainly, his appearance makes his acceptance impossible: his family encourage him to come out until he is horribly visible.(34) The hunger artist also undergoes a transformation to the bestial. He lives in a pile of straw, in a cage, the bars of which he will sometimes "shake like a wild animal."(194) At the circus, he is placed near the menagerie. However, this characteristic is more an illustration of alienation than a reason for it, and cannot be applied to the dog and Josephine, animals within animal societies. What truly separates the artist is in his mind.

All Kafka's artists simply see the world differently. The two "transformed" characters would of course, have different perspectives from inside their "nonhuman" bodies, and from inside their captivity in cage or room. But Kafka suggests in another, more internal way, their different "frames of reference." Gregor, after all, has just made one, and "You'll see it in a minute"(29) his mother tells the clerk; it will instantly set Gregor apart. He holds to it more closely than to any other article his mother attempts to remove from his room.(60) When the

hunger artist is in the circus, the advertising "placards made a frame for the cage and announced what was inside it"(192): someone different, set apart. The dog credits his separation to an "incident of his youth," an encounter with seven singing dogs, whose music opens to him a new world.(205-213) Josephine is the only member of her society who has an appreciation of music.(305) Even this will serve to set her view apart from that of the rest of society.

The artists' different viewpoint are shown by their perceptions of the most ordinary things. They live in societies preoccupied with just getting along. The mice, for example, can rarely "shake off the cares of daily life," and prize "a certain practical cunning."(305) But the artists transcend the ordinary, and see something more in it. They make art out of daily life. "It is a peculiarity of dogs to be always asking questions,"(229) but while others do not expect anything to come of their questioning, only silence (223), the hero-dog seeks the increase of knowledge.(220-1) He puts the most mundane question, the origin of dogs' food, under scrutiny as no one else has before. Josephine's singing is "nothing out of the ordinary ...perhaps just a piping,"(306) "and piping is [the] people's daily speech."(319) But she sees something more in it; "she denies any connection between her art and ordinary piping."(308) More than that, "every trifle ... incites her to heighten the effectiveness of her song."(309) She makes art out of insignificant incidents. The hunger artist has similarly made art out of the routine activity of starvation. And Gregor devotes great attention (and the author great space) to the simple acts of getting up, turning around, and moving, virtually "making a ceremonial performance out of doing the usual thing."("Josephine," 307) Kafka's point in this is that by taking a different view of the ordinary, by making it into an art, the artist alienates himself from the society of people who do not see anything in it.

And, unfortunately, society tends to misunderstand those who are different. Often, this is not society's fault: the artists do not fully understand themselves. Though Gregor notices his transformation immediately ("he could see his domelike brown belly,"(19)) he cannot seem to comprehend the effect this will have on him. He is still preoccupied with getting to work on time and explaining his difficulties to the chief clerk. His failure to adjust mentally to his change of form is matched by his failure to adjust to it physically. "Still unaware of his powers of movement" (38), he cannot control his body. This makes it even more difficult for his family not to misinterpret him, and not to think his gestures threatening. The hunger artist is confused about his own motives. True, he is devoted to his art. "The honor of his profession forbade him to swallow the smallest morsel of food." (189) He loves to show that "he was fasting as not one of them could fast,"(190) and is angry at having to stop before he can set great records, feeling "cheated of fame."(192) But if he is fasting just to please the public, why does he continue even after it has become apparent that he has lost his audience for good?(199) Does he instead obey some internal law, and "have to fast, because he couldn't find the food he liked?"(200) He himself did not understand his motives, and is it thus any wonder that "no one who had no feeling for [the art of fasting] cannot be made to understand it?"(199) As society tends to judge the hunger artist harshly, as a cheat, the Samsas' maid thinks Gregor is "pretending to be in the sulks"(83) when he is actually dead. Society tends to assume the worst about the artist, and the artist cannot provide a satisfactory, coherent alternative explanation due to his own confusion.

The artist's own confusion also leads him to make impossible demands on society, and to be disappointed when they are not fulfilled. Gregor is very particular about the kind of food he will eat, often eating none at all, since "he was not hungry,"(70), and about from whom he will accept attention in general, often isolating himself entirely from his family, or only accepting attention when provided by his sister. Yet he is jealous of the lodgers who do receive food and

attention, "I'm hungry enough how these lodgers are stuffing themselves while I am dying of starvation,"(73) and "filled with rage at the way they are neglecting him." The hunger artist complains of never receiving the food he wanted, and rails against the way that the public neglects him. But when he had its attention, he did not want it; it was not the type of admiration, of attention that pleased him. For "he alone knew how easy it was to fast,"(191) and so has trouble accepting any glory for it. The dog, "in the midst of his pain felt a longing to go on fasting,"(247) and cannot make up his mind whether he wants to die or not. As for Josephine, if she "believes that it is she who protects the people,"(313) why does she so want to be protected by them? That the difference in viewpoint peculiar to the artist usually entails a confused or even wrong view of oneself and others is another misfortune Kafka attributes to the artist. When society faces someone who does not know what he wants, or cannot communicate what he wants (as is also sometimes a problem), it cannot even try to give it to him. And if the artist is strongly dependent on receiving what he wants, as Kafka's are, then they will suffer.

Given this adversarial relationship, it is surprising that the artist should be able to serve society so extensively. But he can, and his alienation is crucial to it. Kafka's theme is that society needs someone to be different, and the artist fulfills this need. Josephine is perhaps the best example. Her role, and the role of her singing-which-may-not-be-singing, is to unite the people, but against herself, by setting herself off from them. "We admire in her what we do not at all admire in ourselves."(308) Any competition to her, such as from a child who spontaneously pipes up at her concert, even "though it would have been impossible to define the difference," is "hissed and whistled down."(309) "To comprehend her art it is necessary to see her,"(307) by herself on stage, saying something "Josephine alone and no one else can enable us to hear."(306) Hearing her, the mice are "sunk in the feeling of the mass." They draw unity from their collective contrast with her. They are not her "enemies"("she has no enemies"(322)) only her "opponents."(310) Yet she can become a scapegoat. She is "responsible ... when [her] large gatherings have been unexpectedly flushed by the enemy."(320) They do not notice any change in her singing when she begins to protest because it is not important what she sings, only that she sing, and thus set herself apart from them. In fact, her passing will not even be noticed. "Was her actual piping notably louder than the memory of it will be?"(328) The people will be able to unify themselves against her memory just as well as they did against her.

The same is true of the dog. Society may refuse to answer his questions, and not like them themselves, but "it was because I asked questions that they did not want to drive me away,"(217) and instead treated him well. The other dogs attain unity, cohesiveness, through their questions and the silence that comes in reply. The questioner is needed simply as someone whom, everyone can agree, one must not answer. The hunger artist also gives society something to which to contrast itself. Alone in his cage, he reassures those who see him of what they are not. Finally, Gregor Samsa's transformation unifies his family against him. They begin to draw together, and to understand their situation. One of the father's first acts is to "explain the family's financial position and prospects,"(48) "the first cheerful information that Gregor had heard." True, they must all go to work, but at first at least, this is good for them. The father, who had "grown rather fat and become sluggish,"(51), who "could not really rise to his feet,"(62) now appears "in fine shape ... dressed in a smart blue uniform."(63) However, they soon become like the old Gregor, too obsessed with work and getting by. The father stubbornly stays up at night the same way Gregor would, as his mother describes to the clerk.(28) The family becomes subservient to the lodgers, catering to their every patronizing need, just as Gregor had been forced to bow down before the chief clerk. Since Gregor's transformation was the outcome of his

gradually more dehumanizing life, we can see the impending danger to his family. Throughout the story, Gregor has tried to "help the family bear the inconvenience," (44) or continue his role of financial supporter, "to take the family's affairs in order again just as he used to do."(69) But for this, he will have to make one final sacrifice.

Kafka's artists have already sacrificed their positions in society in order to help it. Now they will have to give up their lives. Because he intrudes before the lodgers, they give their notice, and so he causes the family to decide he must go, and to neglect him completely, leading to his death. But with his death, his family revives. They fire the haughty maid, spurn the haughty lodgers. "They left the apartment together, more than they had done for months,"(88) having at last achieved unity. They realize their prospects and future "were not at all bad." But most importantly, perhaps, they notice their daughter had "bloomed into a pretty girl with a good figure." "At the end of their journey," Gregor's ordeal, which they have shared, "their daughter sprang to her feet first and stretched her young body," enjoying her vigor and freedom. Gregor had always wanted to free his family, economically (21) and had a "secret plan,"(49) to help his sister, whom he loved above all the others. Through his transformation, but specially through its ending, he has.

The intention of the other endings is to say the same. In "A Hunger Artist," the panther that replaces the artist is the best illustration of his statement that others should not admire his fasting. They do admire the panther, even though it is difficult "to stand the shock of it."(201) They appreciate his "freedom," his "joy of life," because of the contrast provided by the artist, made possible by his suffering and death. Josephine's protests only heightened her importance, by giving the public more against which to unify. "The important thing, both in the people's refusal and in Josephine's petition, is not the action itself, but the stony, impenetrable front."(323) With her disappearance the people will "continue on their way," "a self-confident mass in perfect equilibrium."(327) Her life's work has been consummated. Only the dog seems to have little additional effect on society. But he survives his suffering, and goes back to his pre-fast life, in which he is alienated, yet "still treated with respect,"(203) He is not finished, there will still be a "next time" for him.(225) The only realization his suffering produces, to "prize freedom above all else," though not unlike those imparted to society by the others, is only for himself. One's contribution to society is in direct proportion to one's suffering. He simply has not suffered enough for any significance.

Thus, for Kafka, the suffering of the artist was inevitable. Because of his dissimilarity to the rest of the world, because he perceived it differently, and because he, really, did not understand the inner reasons that made for his view, he became alienated from society. Society shares the blame: a certain amount of their misunderstanding of the artist can be pardoned, as he was not easily understandable, but society actually wanted to have the alienated around, because they give it a sense of its own identity, of cohesion that would lack without someone with whom to contrast. The artist is bound to suffer, in order to help society, and he can only help more by suffering more. It is a sad position for the artist, doomed to suffering and loneliness. But it is the way Kafka perceived it, and the most prevalent pattern in his works.