

FREEDOM AND CONFINEMENT
IN MODERNITY

KAFKA'S CAGES

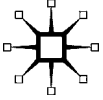
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CHAPTER FIVE
"THE FALL IS THE PROOF OF
OUR FREEDOM": MEDIATED
FREEDOM IN KAFKA

Dimitris Vardoulakis

The Primacy of Imprisonment

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas proffers a radical critique of philosophy from the ancient Greeks to Martin Heidegger. This consists in questioning the assumption that philosophy starts with the question, "*ti esti*" or "what is." The question of existence inevitably leads to totality, that is, to a structure that eliminates difference because it seeks to subsume alterity to the subject's representations. According to the tradition that asks "what is?" the ideal of human fulfilment is freedom. Conversely, Levinas proposes a sense of imprisonment that is more primary than freedom. The suspicion against freedom and the attempt to find a productive sense of imprisonment bind Levinas to Kafka.¹ A complex sense of imprisonment traverses Kafka's works, from Gregor Samsa's confinement in his room in the *Metamorphosis*, to the land-surveyor's entrapment in the village seeking access to the castle, to Josef K.'s generalized imprisonment in a city where everyone judges him as guilty in the *Trial*. By focussing on imprisonment, Kafka converses with philosophy, if not directly, at least on a conceptual level that engages polemically with the idea that freedom is the goal of human existence.

Two points are indispensable in grasping the primacy of imprisonment. First, the opposition to freedom will be profoundly misunderstood if imprisonment is confined to the empirical. According to Levinas, it is the presence of the Other, as a formal structure, that makes it impossible to assert one's freedom. Or, as he puts it in *Totality and Infinity*, "My freedom does not have the last word; I am not alone."² The Other is more primary than the subject's existence. Hence, the recognition of an unsurpassable alterity incompletes every attempt to totalize knowledge. The radical

critique of ontology and epistemology entails the ethicopolitical conclusion that the Other imprisons the subject: “The *moral* relation with the Master who judges me subtends the freedom of my adherence to the true.”³ The Other masters the I, imprisonment is more primary than freedom. “[The Other] reveals himself in his lordship.”⁴ So, the sense of mastery or lordship of the Other is not a straightforward imprisonment. The Other limits the self. But Levinas is not referring to specific prisons, these are not particular limits. It is, rather, that the Other necessitates a sense of limitation, delimitation, or imprisonment. But unlike a “real” prison, the limits here are not brick and mortar walls. The limits, rather, figure as the presentation of the otherness of the Other. The limits are porous or permeable.

Second, the sense of imprisonment that arises from the Other’s mastery does not entail the complete eradication of freedom.⁵ Levinas, rather, evades a humanist or logocentric sense of freedom, which is characterized by opposing freedom to imprisonment, by positioning freedom as completely separate to imprisonment. “My freedom is . . . challenged by a Master who can invest it,” promises Levinas, envisioning this investment as a different form of relation, one that is implied in ontology even if it is not usually recognized as such.⁶ As an illustration, Levinas refers to Gyges, a shepherd who, according to Plato, discovered a ring that made him invisible, and used this power to kill the king, marry the queen, and install himself in the throne.⁷ “Gyges position involve[s] the impunity of being alone,” that is, the sovereign illusion of a subject that is free from being judged, as if it were limitless, as if it were the impersonation of justice.⁸ Such a freedom is “an-archic,” that is, without a law, groundless and unable to lead to discourse—it is silent.⁹ Yet it still presupposes alterity: “The silent world is a world that comes to us from the Other. . . . This silence is not a simple absence of speech; speech lies in the depths of silence like a laughter perfidiously held back.”¹⁰ The real absence of freedom consists in the idea that one can be free. This is an imprisonment in the illusion that one can be free alone, invisible to others like Gyges. Conversely, it is possible to seek a freedom *from* such a sense of freedom. This is a freedom that is always conditioned, mediated, limited—it is never an absolute freedom, it is always a freedom from or an “exit” as the ape says in Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy.” It manifests itself as laughter in the face of the illusion of limitless freedom, or its obverse, a steadfastly limited imprisonment. Thus laughter is the effect through which the two aspects of the primacy of imprisonment—mediated freedom and the porous limits of imprisonment—are presented.

Such a laughter that destroys the egoist sense of freedom reverberates throughout Kafka’s works. Laughter is an effect of the humanist conceptualization of a complete separation between freedom and imprisonment—that

is, an effect of understanding freedom as limitless and hence of denying the primacy of imprisonment. This explains the different instances and types of imprisonment in Kafka's writings. All these Kafka cages are required in order to present the "an-archic" freedom in Levinas' sense, that is, a freedom that harbors the illusion that it is the opposite of imprisonment. This separation is graphically presented in "The Nature Theatre of Oklahoma," the last chapter of *Amerika*. This is a unique moment in Kafka's work. When Karl Rossmann arrives at the Nature Theatre, he seems to achieve absolute freedom—indeed, this is the single scene in Kafka approximating redemption or an admission to heaven. For such an absolute freedom to be represented, Karl Rossmann had to arrive to America like a convict in a penal colony, quickly to be rejected by his uncle, and then to be ensnared in one situation after another. From this gigantic prison that spans the continent, Karl Rossmann escaped to the Nature Theatre where everyone was absolutely free—one could even choose the name they could join under, and Karl Rossmann decided to join as "Negro" (A 1962, 286/2002, 409).¹¹ So, even though the Nature Theatre may appear as an exception in Kafka's work, it is conceptually indispensable for an understanding of its dialectical opposite, absolute imprisonment. This has also been observed by Walter Benjamin:

"I imitated because I was looking for an exit, and for no other reason," said the ape in his "Report to an Academy." This sentence also holds the key for the place of the actors of the Nature Theatre. "Right here" they must be congratulated, since they are allowed to play *themselves*, they are freed from imitation. If there is in Kafka something like a contrast between damnation and salvation, it has to be searched for entirely on the contrast between the world theatre and the Nature Theatre.¹²

If there is a possibility of salvation in Kafka, this can only happen because his characters find themselves engaged. An absolute, "an-archic" freedom requires a "fallen" world—what Walter Benjamin calls the "world theatre" that in his essay on Kafka is described as dominated by the holders of power and mythic law.¹³

And yet the scene of salvation represented by the Nature Theatre with its complete lack of restrictions or limits is not without irony. A laughter about the ontological possibility of such a free state is larking perfidiously. After the completion of the recruitment for the Nature Theatre and a festive meal, the new recruits take the train to Oklahoma completely unencumbered, without even any luggage (A 1962, 296/2002, 416). On the carriage, Karl Rossmann is initially excited with his friend Giacomo, riding "carefree [*sorgenlos*]" across America (296/416). Soon, however, their conversation dries up and the interaction with the other passengers, also

actors of the Nature Theatre, becomes uninteresting. Suddenly, the landscape outside appears captivating:

Everything that went on in the little compartment...remained unnoticed in front of what one could see outside [*Alles was sich in dem kleinen... Coupé ereignete, verging vor dem was draußen zu sehen war*].... [B]road mountain streams appeared, rolling in great waves down on the foothills and drawing with them a thousand foaming wavelets, plunging underneath the bridges over which the train rushed; and they were so near that the breath of coldness rising from them chilled the skin of one's face [*der Hauch ihrer Kühle das Gesicht erschauern machte*]. (297–8/ 418–9; translation modified)

These are the last words of the chapter on the Nature Theatre as well as the conclusion of the novel. Without forewarning, a single sentence announces that the members of the Nature Theatre, those who have been liberated and have reached absolute freedom, appear boring, while the landscape outside becomes fascinating. Even more emphatically, the final metaphor of the text referring to the stones' breath suggests that the mountains are animated whereas the actors are petrified, they are frozen in a kind of rigor mortis. Whence the unexpected petrification of the newly freed actors? As it will be argued, this reversal is crucial in Kafka's presentation of the primacy of imprisonment over freedom. For the moment, it suffices to note that Kafka is making a similar point to Levinas. A sense of freedom presupposes a sense of imprisonment. From that point of view, absolute freedom and absolute imprisonment cannot sustain their separation. Instead, they transpire to be the obverse sides of the same coin. They both lead to the same result: a loss of embodiment, the eradication of singularity.¹⁴ Gyges' invisibility and the actors' petrification belong to the same ontological category.¹⁵

As already intimated, laughter in Kafka is an effect of the complete separation of freedom and imprisonment—in other words, an effect of the denying mediated freedom and imprisonment's porosity. But this also means that the complete separation of freedom and imprisonment is necessary for laughter to figure. The various cages of *Amerika* are *not* liquidated in the absolute or "an-archic" freedom of the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma. Such a freedom is an illusion. The new recruits of the Nature Theatre are no more free than stones, inanimate matter for which the question of freedom cannot even arise. Their freedom leads to silence, to invisibility—and Kafka mischievously laughs with them as he turns his gaze to the animated nature outside the train window. It is this laughter, as it will be argued, that allows for a recuperation of the singularity and embodiment that the Kafka characters lose in their search for freedom.

The destruction of limitless or absolute freedom in Kafka's works does not merely require a demonstration of the philosophical weight of Kafka's prose, as if a political message were separable from the literary work.¹⁶ It rather requires to show, firstly, that imprisonment is more primary than freedom in Kafka, while noting that this does not eliminate freedom but radically reworks it so that freedom and imprisonment are not governed by a relation of absolute separation. It requires, secondly, to show how the primacy of imprisonment makes possible a notion of embodiment so that the singularity of the subject is not squandered in the promise of a future redemption nor in the illusion that one is already precluded from such freedom. It requires, finally, to identify the effect of the primacy of imprisonment—an effect that is discernible in Kafka's laughter and it is the literary quality of his work, and hence can only be discovered through a close reading.

For such a close reading, the texts chosen are "A Report to An Academy" and "A Fasting Artist." This is not an arbitrary choice. They both present the separation of freedom and imprisonment, which is necessary for laughter to figure in such a way as to present the primacy of imprisonment. The separation of freedom and imprisonment moves in opposite directions in the two short stories. Whereas in "A Report to An Academy" the ape is imprisoned seeking freedom, in "A Hunger Artist" the artist feels free in his cage while abstaining from nutrition only for this freedom to dissolve in a sense of imprisonment. Nevertheless, despite the different directions of the relation between freedom and imprisonment in the two short stories, it will be instructive to discover that they both lead to disembodiment and the loss of singularity. The laughter in the face of this loss will figure as the effect of the separation of freedom and imprisonment, thereby asserting the primacy of imprisonment and the affirmation that singularity cannot be eliminated.

Regaining the Power to Say "One"

"A Report to an Academy" relates the story of an ape, Red Peter, who is captured in Africa, transported by boat to Europe and who relinquishes his animal nature in order to escape the cage where he is held as captive. Starting from a sense of absolute imprisonment, an idealized freedom is presupposed. Freedom and imprisonment are completely separated. Such a presupposition of freedom is, however, nothing but a ratiocination, or the operation of reason, characteristic of the human. The animal can only achieve freedom, if it already thinks as a human. It can only escape to the human nature, if it is already trapped in human nature, imprisoned in a nature other than its own. This creates a double movement throughout

“A Report to an Academy.” Initially, imprisonment is seen as a deplorable state from which the ape seeks to escape. The ideal toward which the ape strives is freedom. But the second movement reveals that this striving is already a human characteristic, so that in striving for freedom the ape is already trapped in a different nature, resulting in the loss of the ape’s embodiment.

The title, “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie,” registers this double movement. It does so through the ambivalence of whether the “ein” and “eine” are indefinite articles or numerical adjectives. Is it “*a*” report to “*an*” academy, or “*one*” report to “*one*” academy, or “*one*” report to “*an*” academy, or “*a*” report to “*one*” academy? An animal can only desire something specific, while the human can yearn for abstract ideals such as freedom. Just as a dog could only say “I want this one bone in front of me,” the transcendence of animality can be indicated by the ability to say “I want a something” not necessarily now, but as a general, abstract proposition. So long as Red Peter speaks in numerical adjectives, he remains tied to the animal desire that is linked to the here and now. His escape from the cage has not been accomplished. The movement of the short story is from the adjectives to the indefinite articles that show the human capacity for abstract thought and ratiocination. Red Peter’s report wants to suggest that he no longer says “one” report to “one” academy, but rather “a” report to “an” academy. And yet, the use of the indefinite article means that Red Peter is engaged in a nature that is not his own, he is trapped in human nature. There is, on the one hand, the desire to escape from imprisonment in order to find freedom, but, on the other hand, the fulfilment of that desire presupposes the entrapment in a different nature, which is an even more pervasive or sinister form of imprisonment than the cage Red Peter had found himself in. It is more pervasive or sinister because Red Peter thereby loses his embodiment, he is trapped in the abstraction of the indefinite, he puts himself in the cage of reason. Kafka traces this movement throughout the short story and ultimately shatters this cage through the figuration of laughter.

The pivotal term around which the whole report is structured is “Ausweg,” meaning exit or way out. As Red Peter explains, when he found himself trapped in the cage on the ship’s deck, he realized that he needed to copy the manners of his human captors in order to join them outside the cage. Thus the imitation was not an end in itself. “There was no attraction for me [*es verlockte mich nicht*] in imitating human beings; I imitated them because I was looking for an exit [*einen Ausweg suchte*] and for no other reason” (RA 1995, 257/2002, 311; translation modified). Red Peter says that it was not alluring to him—he had no uncontrollable, animal desire—to imitate the humans. His only goal was to find an exit. “No, freedom was not what I wanted [*Nein, Freiheit wollte ich nicht*].

Only an exit: right or left, or in any direction. . . . To get out, to get out! [*Weiterkommen, weiterkommen!*]” (253–4/305; translation modified). Even though Red Peter says that “I did not think it out in this human way [*Ich rechnete nicht so menschlich*],” still the structure of the sentences that describe his conception of the exit unmistakably indicate that in his cage he was already thinking like a human (255/307). It is not only that he is searching for *an* exit, any kind of exit, an exit with an indefinite article, nor is it not only that he can conceptualize the play-acting of being human as the means to the goal of achieving such an abstract exit that suggest he has already been calculating like a rational human.¹⁷ Further, this exit is conceived as a “weiterkommen,” that is, as a movement away from the cage but also as a progress, as a bettering of one’s state through calculation. Thus, Red Peter can only assert that he was looking for *an* exit so long as he was already human in some way. There is an absolute separation between the animal and the human that corresponds to the absolute separation between imprisonment and freedom—the ape is locked up in the cage while the humans are free outside. Red Peter strives to become human in order to find himself in the space of freedom outside the cage. He thereby renounces his singular being in the world. His being is now an imitation, a calculated hypocrisy.

At the same time, in a remarkable passage, Red Peter denies that this hypocrisy, necessary so as to appear as—so as to *be*—human and to escape the cage, leads to anything that resembles human freedom. Although he steps outside the cage to join the humans, his exit and human freedom are categorically different:

I fear that perhaps one does not quite understand [*man nicht genau versteht*] what I mean by “exit.” I use the expression in its fullest and most popular sense. I deliberately do not use the word “freedom.” I do not mean the great feeling [*große Gefühl*] of freedom on all sides. As an ape, perhaps, I knew that [*Als Affe kannte ich es vielleicht*], and I have met men who yearn for it. But for my part I desired such freedom neither then nor now. (RA 1995, 253/2002, 304)

He rejects explicitly the “great feeling” of limitless, unconditioned freedom—“freedom on all sides.” That’s the freedom desired by mankind but experienced concretely by apedom. Even though Red Peter can grasp what a human in the abstract (“*man*”) can or cannot understand, his rejection of that great feeling differentiates him from the humans. But this is not merely to assert that the sense of freedom is different for humans and apes. It further enacts a *reversal* whereby the exit that the ape is searching for appears more primary than the freedom the humans are yearning for. In other words, the reversal halts the oscillation of the two

movements—human or animal, free or captured—that can be found in “A Report to an Academy.”

This reversal is configured as laughter. Red Peter continues immediately after the previous citation:

In passing: may I say that all too often men are betrayed by the word freedom. And as freedom is counted among the most sublime feelings, so the corresponding disillusionment can be also sublime. In variety theatres I have often watched, before my turn came on, a couple of acrobats performing on trapezes high in the roof. They swung themselves, they rocked to and fro, they sprang into the air, they floated into each other's arms, one hung by the hair from the teeth of the other. “And that too is human freedom,” I thought, “self-controlled movement.” What a mockery of holy Mother Nature! Were the apes to see such a spectacle, no theatre walls could stand the shock of their laughter. (RA 1995, 253/2002, 304–5)

The apes' laughter is directed against the humans. Red Peter says that the humans' idea of freedom—that is, the idea of freedom of those whose manner of thinking he has adopted in order to find his exit—is laughable. This is a laughter that Red Peter directs against Kafka as well—or, maybe Kafka directs that laughter against his fellow humans—given that the scene described by the ape resembles the scene from the short story “Up in the Gallery.” Even though Kafka often uses scenes from the circus or variety theaters, still this resemblance is significant given that “Up in the Gallery” was published as the third story in the collection *A Country Doctor* that also contains “A Report to an Academy” as its concluding story. The two-paragraph story presents two different scenes of acrobatics, one of abjection and the other of exaggerated sublimity, that deeply affect a spectator. An ape could never be affected like that because it does not yearn for such lofty or great feelings of freedom on all sides. If there is such a freedom, the animal has already tasted it. Limitless freedom is a concrete reality for the ape. Therefore, it finds the human attempts at grasping such a freedom idealizations and futile, even ludicrous. So, even though Red Peter can only look for an exit if he is—and the “is” is ontologically strong here—already a human, his rejection of freedom indicates a position that is more primary than the human, or, more accurately, a position that is more primary than the human understood as completely separate from the animal, and human freedom as completely separate from imprisonment. The ape's exit requires the passage through the human but is, at the same time, the enactment of a reversal figuring as the laughter that destroys the illusion that governs the human ideal of freedom.

Deleuze and Guattari arrive at a similar conclusion about the laughter in Kafka: “Only two principles are necessary to accord with Kafka. He is

an author who laughs with a profound joy, a *joie de vivre*, in spite of, or because of, his clownish declarations that he offers like a trap or a circus. And from one end to the other, he is a political author, a prophet of the future world."¹⁸ Kafka's laughter and the political import of his writings are inextricable. Deleuze and Guattari explicitly address this connection in "A Report to an Academy" as a line of flight: "for Kafka, the animal essence is the way out, the line of escape, even if it takes place in place, in a cage. *A line of escape and not freedom.*"¹⁹ This line of escape or exit is indeed a freedom irreducible to an idealized notion of freedom that is positioned as solely human as well as completely separated from imprisonment. But the idea of the reversal expressed as Kafka's laughter can be better articulated by slightly reformulating Deleuze and Guattari's assertion about Red Peter: the animal essence is the way out, the line of escape (not simply "even if" but more emphatically) *only because* it takes place in place, in a cage. In other words, the ape has to be captive in order to search for the exit. The ape has to traverse the separation of freedom and imprisonment as well as the separation of the human and the animal, it has to pronounce the humanizing indefinite articles—"a" report to "an" academy. The ape has to humanize itself and thereby lose its singularity and embodiment, lose its animality.²⁰ Only by going through this terrain that allows for a conception of an idealized freedom, or what Levinas calls "an-archic" freedom, is it possible to show that there is something more primary, namely, a freedom understood as *Ausweg*. This exit or way out is not absolute, it is not unconditioned. In fact, it can only be an exit *from*, a way out *from*—a freedom *from*. Without the cage, such a sense of mediated or conditioned freedom is impossible. When the reversal is registered in the form of laughter, the ape can reclaim the numerical adjective—"one" report to "one" academy. But regaining the capacity to say "one" no longer refers to a single entity standing on its own. Starting from within the cage, the ape pronounces the indefinite article "a," it passes through the human, it includes the other. So, the ability to revert back to the "one" also asserts that imprisonment is more primary than freedom.

The Other's Laughter

The term "Hungerkünstler" was not unusual in Kafka's days. As Peter Payer has shown, hunger artists performing exhibitions were common in Central Europe.²¹ The most famous of these exhibition hunger artists was Giovanni Succi, whose career was the direct inspiration for Kafka's short story.²² The successor of these exhibition artists is David Blaine, who, in September 2003, enclosed himself in a transparent cage next to the Thames and abstained from food for forty-four days. Alongside the

exhibition artists, fasting has a venerable history in religion. The religious significance of severe food deprivation is profound.²³ For instance, the Orthodox Hesychast movement of the fourteenth century used techniques that included fasting in order to achieve *theosis* or deification.²⁴ There are, of course, physiological reasons why fasting leads to visions.²⁵ Regardless, those who can sustain themselves without nutrition for a long period of time exercise an unmistakable fascination. Whether they are thought to experience a vision of the divine, or whether their exhibition has a “pulling” power, the hunger or fasting artist is regarded as moving beyond the humanly possible, and consequently as a venerable individual endowed with special powers. Kafka’s Hungerkünstler treads on the line between the exhibition hunger artist and the fasting saint.²⁶ What is absent in Kafka’s story is the fascinated gaze of others on the Hungerkünstler. Instead, it is the artiste himself who exhibits an unwavering self-belief in his practice—in his greatness—all the while remaining oblivious both to whether he is performing a religious or commercial function, or whether this is recognized by others. He regards himself as most free when he is alone in his cage, unhindered in his abstinence.

Even though the cage with the iron bars is a common object in “A Report to a Academy” and in “A Hunger Artist,” still it functions in different ways. In the former, the cage indicates a sense of absolute imprisonment from which the ape seeks to escape. In the latter, the cage is *the* site of freedom for the artiste. The hunger artist is happy in his cage, “paying no attention to anyone or anything” (HA 1995, 268/2002, 334). And his “happiest moment [*am glücklichsten*]” was when those watching him overnight to make sure that he ate nothing were served “an enormous breakfast” in the morning (269/336). This instils in him a sense of superiority. It is as if he is apart from his fellow men. He is the only one who is happy and free in his cage. Indeed, he is so separated from the others that, in reality, he is “the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast” (270/337). Thus, although “A Report to an Academy” presents the cage as enforcing complete imprisonment, and “A Hunger Artist” as leading to freedom and happiness, still the two share an important common characteristic: both require a clear-cut separation between freedom and imprisonment. As already shown, it was that separation that characterized the humanist tradition that sought the fulfilment of human existence in freedom. As Levinas argued, however, the fulfilment of this ideal can only lead to the loneliness and silence of “an-archic” freedom. The hunger artist fulfils this image—his freedom belongs to the same category as the invisibility of Gyges and the petrification of the actors of the Nature Theatre.

Through Levinas’ description of the presupposition of the Other in “an-archic” freedom, it was possible to argue for the primacy of imprisonment

over freedom. Absolute freedom can never be actualized because it is impossible to sustain the separation between freedom and imprisonment. The border collapses through the intervention of the others. This effect is registered in this short story through the commercial aspect of fasting: "The longest period of fasting was fixed by the impresario at forty days, beyond that term he was not allowed to go, not even in great cities, and there was good reason for it, too. Experience had proved that for about forty days the interest of the public could be stimulated by a steadily increasing pressure of advertisement, but after that the town began to lose interest" (HA 1995, 270/2002, 337–8). As an exhibition artiste, his freedom is conditioned by the audience's interest. This exasperates the hunger artist. "He had held out for a long time, an illimitably long time, why stop now, when he was in his best fasting form, or rather, not yet in his best fasting form?" (271/338–9). He wanted his fasting to be "beyond what is possible to conceive [*ins Unbegreifliche*]" since his fasting abilities were limitless (*denn für seine Fähigkeit zu hungern fühlte er keine Grenzen*) (271/339). It is this desire toward the inconceivable and the limitless that, on the one hand, separates him from the other humans, raising him to a higher physicospiritual level, and, on the other hand, impedes him from fully enjoying his status given the externally imposed commercial restrictions.

The waning of public interest in exhibitions of fasting was, consequently, a relief for the hunger artist. The public represent an other that figures merely as a constraint, a contingent limitation. Seeking a contract with the circus that allowed him to fast indefinitely, the artist thought that he was on his way to greatness. It was immaterial that the circus management did not put him at the centerstage of the orchestra, since ultimately his quest was not commercial but spiritual: he wanted to fast beyond the limits of reason. The scene of freedom that takes place in the circus recalls "Up in the Gallery" as well as the reference to the acrobats in "A Report to an Academy." In both these cases, the sublime, great feeling of freedom is represented in the orchestra. This, of course, would have provoked the boisterous laughter of the apes. But the hunger artist's mission was no longer to exhibit his achievement for all to see. Instead, it was a personal quest, and the audience going past his cage on the way to the menagerie was only an added bonus. The hunger artist was left there to fast alone, without hindrances, without limits.

And yet, the Kafkaesque laughter can again be heard, and it is once more the effect of the absolute freedom, the effect of the separation between freedom and imprisonment. A long time passes and the hunger artist is forgotten. One day, the circus personnel notice the cage. Poking in the straw, they discover the hunger artist's emaciated body and they ask him surprised whether he is still fasting. With hardly any strength left, the

hunger artist whispers: “Forgive me, everybody” (HA 1995, 276/2002, 348). This is not a message to the onlookers. It is, rather, a soliloquy. The hunger artist admits to himself that he has failed to achieve a feat that is beyond human reason and that transcends the limits of fallen human existence. This failure is *not* due to his imminent demise. Rather, it is because “I have to fast, I can’t help it . . . because I couldn’t find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else” (277/348–9). It is not merely the death following this admission that robs the hunger artist of his embodiment. He had lost his body long before that. The reason is that, instead of a spiritual quest that would have allowed him to transcend the other humans and reach a higher level of happiness and freedom, in fact the hunger artist was determined by a baser instinct—revulsion for food. Even though he presents fasting as a higher human quality, he is in fact trapped in an animalist desire—a desire that says “I don’t want this *one* food, nor this *one*, and so on.” His fulfilment of complete freedom was the loss of his human body in the body of the animal, the other that can never be spiritually enlightened and free. The reversal that was discovered in “A Report to an Academy” operates here as well. The hunger artist’s greatest moment of liberation was in fact his most profound moment of submission. The hunger artist is neither a performer, nor someone who fasts for religious transcendence. Instead, he is someone who has lost this human embodiment in the other, the animal body, a body like the panther’s, who occupies the cage after the hunger artist’s death.

The laughter in “A Hunger Artist” is different from the laughter in “A Report to an Academy.” The ape’s laughter consists in that it has traversed human freedom, escaped from the cage, and regained its embodiment in being able to say “one” again. The initial position within imprisonment allowed him to return there after it destroyed the human illusion that imprisonment is completely separate from freedom. The hunger artist, on the contrary, starts from a position of freedom. His cage is his paradise, the equivalent of the stage of the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma. And, like the actors of the Nature Theatre, the hunger artist has no means of escaping. His actions to enhance his freedom in fact push him further into a state of disembodiment, the loss of his singularity in the inconceivable and the limitless. Unlike the ape, the hunger artist does not have a chance, because the prison of freedom is stronger than the prison of an actual cage. Correspondingly, the laughter in the two stories is different. In “A Report to an Academy,” the reversal leads back to imprisonment, albeit changed, an imprisonment that is more primary than freedom. Consequently, the laughter there is mischievous, exuberant, celebratory—this is a *joyous* laughter and it is a *joyous* reversal.²⁷ In “A Hunger Artist,” the reversal does

not lead back to the cage and the illusion of spiritual freedom. Instead, it leads to the other, the animal that is excluded as unspiritual, as unworthy of the grand quest that the artiste sets for himself. It is through the other that laughter figures:

The panther was missing nothing. The food he liked was brought him without hesitation by the attendants; he did not seem to miss his freedom even once [*nicht einmal die Freiheit schien er zu vermissen*]; his noble body, furnished almost to bursting point with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it too [*dieser edle . . . Körper schien auch die Freiheit mit sich herumzutragen*]; somewhere in his jaws it seemed to lurk; and the joy of life [*die Freude am Leben*] streamed with such ardent passion from his throat that for the onlookers it was not easy to stand the shock of it. (HA 1995, 277/2002, 349; translation modified)

The freedom of the panther consists in being content within its own “noble body.” The freedom that it holds in its jaw is also a smile at the previous occupant of the cage, whose body was held captive by an illusion of freedom. Just as in the end of *Amerika* that which by definition lacks freedom, the inanimate matter, the stone, is suddenly animate and it is as if it grins to the petrified actors of the Nature Theatre, similarly also here it is the other—the animal that is content in its own body so long as the body is fed—that grins to the hunger artist. The laughter that results from an initial position of freedom is more delicate, less discernible, because Kafka cannot find here the redeeming quality of reverting back to the cage. This is a *lugubrious* laughter since the reversal does not lead back to singularity.²⁸ Still, even though the hunger artist fails to gain his singularity, the laughter is still related to it, since it is registered on the face of the panther in a cage, where freedom is neither missed nor absent. This is the laughter of the Other that the hunger artist sought to suppress but did not manage to.

Effect as Means

The primacy of imprisonment appears in Kafka as an effect. *Discursively*, the effect is the establishment of the primacy of imprisonment over freedom. This entails that Kafka rejects two related positions. First, that imprisonment can be reduced to the empirical and hence given steadfast limits—for instance, the walls of the cage that the ape is placed in. Second, that freedom can be limitless—for instance, the freedom of restrictions for the actors of the Nature Theatre or the unhindered fasting of the hunger artist. To put this the other way, the primacy of imprisonment establishes, first, that the borders of imprisonment are

porous—the ape is not freed when it steps outside the cage—and, second, that freedom is conditioned or mediated, it is always a freedom *from*—for instance, freedom from the entrapment of the ape in human nature or the freedom of the panther from the unrestricted freedom of the hunger artist. Discursively, these two perspectives from which the primacy of imprisonment can be understood could be summed up by saying that they designate the freedom *from* humanist freedom. This is a mediated or conditioned freedom.

Textually, the effect is the laughter that arises as a response to humanist freedom. Denying the primacy of imprisonment entails that imprisonment and freedom are seen as opposites that are completely separate. However, this separation cannot be sustained. The ape is not free when he starts acting out as a human, nor is the hunger artist free when he enacts his instinctual revulsion to food. Kafka's texts sustain for as long as possible the illusion that freedom and imprisonment can be separated. As a result, the laughter in his texts is easily overlooked. But to notice that laughter is to recognize the political significance of his writings. In other words, it is to recognize that the textuality of Kafka's prose is inextricable from the discursive issue of the primacy of imprisonment.

The question then arises: If the primacy of imprisonment, both discursively and textually, is enacted as an effect, then, what's the cause of that effect? It is here that Kafka provides a Spinozist answer in the dialogues that were recorded by Janouch:

“Accident is the name one gives to the coincidence of events, of which one does not know the causation. But there is no world without causation. Therefore in the world there are no accidents, but only here...” Kafka touched his forehead with his left hand. “Accidents only exist in our heads, in our limited perceptions. They are the reflection of the limits of our knowledge. The struggle against chance is always a struggle against ourselves, which we can never entirely win.”²⁹

Just like Spinoza, Kafka proposes a certain determinism by saying that there are no accidents. But the main point is, rather, that, just as accidents are “in our heads” so is also the chain of causes and effects. Final causality is merely a human fiction. Conversely, to “struggle against chance” means to struggle against the egoism of the self that looks for final causes—causes whose aim is, for instance, to lead to “an-archic” freedom. The cause for Kafka, as for Spinoza, is immanent, that is, it is only present in its effects that consist in the struggle against the self's representations.³⁰ In other words, the primacy of imprisonment is ungrounded. It is not even a concept to the extent that it cannot be fully defined. Instead, it appears only as the destruction of its opposite—as the destruction of limitless freedom.

And yet, this destruction is productive, since it gives rise to freedom *from* the humanist notion of freedom.

The productive aspect of the primacy of imprisonment entails that the effect figures as a means. It is the discursive means whereby mediated freedom arises and the literary means that structures the textuality of Kafka's works. At this point, the notion of the reversal attains its full significance. The reversal is crucial for two reasons. First, it allows for—it is the means for—the unfolding of the relations of the primacy of imprisonment as an effect. These are formal relations, they concern ways that freedom and imprisonment relate to each other. They are relations between neither existent entities nor concepts. It is the *task of criticism* to unfold these relations and the relations are potentially singular to every text—or, rather, to every critical reading of the text. Two such types of relations have been discussed, and many more could be discovered through a textual analysis of Kafka's short stories. The first reversal discussed above showed that the ape imprisoned within the cage could find an exit only so long as it was already a human and hence already joined the men outside his cage. But this humanization of the ape is reversed through the way that the ape laughs at the illusion of unlimited freedom. The second reversal started in the same setting—a cage—but from a different position, since the hunger artist is contending to be happy and free in his cage. In fact, however, the hunger artist was trapped in an instinctual revulsion that made a mockery of his spiritual quest for limitless freedom. The laughter here is registered through the panther who replaces the hunger artist in the cage and who is truly happy and content in its own body, it feels free so long as it is well-fed. The first aspect of the reversal, then, allows for an interaction between the discursive and the textual elements of the text so that the text becomes a story—it acquires a meaning.

Second, the reversal allows for—it is a means of—the *possibility of judgement*. Judgement depends upon the presupposition of the Other, or recognizing the primacy of imprisonment. This depends on whether singularity has been attained. In the case of the ape, for instance, the starting point of imprisonment enabled Red Peter to traverse the position of the human and its imprisonment in limitless freedom in order to regain the power to say “one.” That power consisted in finding again his own singularity. Conversely, the hunger artist was lost in the limitless space of freedom as he envisaged it alone in his cage. He shunned the baser drives, such as the commercial aspect of his exhibitions, in favor of a spiritual quest. At the end, however, it was only the panther who retained its embodiment in the cage and who could grin for the fate of the cage's previous occupant. A final but significant note is required here. The reversal can allow for judgement about whether singularity is retained because the judgement

is related to the effect of the primacy of imprisonment. As such, singularity or embodiment cannot possibly be understood either as a collapse to the empirical—that's the notion of imprisonment as limited—nor as an abstraction—that's the notion of limitless freedom. Singularity is the way that the empirical and the limitless are held in a productive and yet unresolvable suspension. They are mediated, they condition each other, they are formed *from* the possibility that neither usurps the other. Thus, the possibility of judgment and singularity are tied up with mediated freedom.

Kafka was fully aware of the power of the reversal in general and of its importance for the development of a notion of freedom in particular. For instance, in the *Conversations*, Kafka says to Janouch: "Men can act otherwise. The Fall is the proof of their freedom."³¹ Kafka does not believe in salvation—or, more accurately, he deconstructs the idea that there is a limitless freedom where one can be free alone. Rather, freedom can take place only within the fallen world, the world where the individual is imprisoned within his or her own body. It is possible to talk about freedom only by asserting this primacy of imprisonment in the world. This is a thought that cannot possibly be reduced to an existential pessimism without defacing it, as it is also shown from its corollary: "Anyone who grasps life completely has no fear of dying. The fear of death is merely the result of an unfulfilled life. It is a symptom of betrayal."³² This recalls Spinoza again, Proposition 67 of Part IV of the *Ethics*: "A free man thinks death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death." Freedom is understood in contrast to both the actual fact of empirical death and the fear of a death that would have spurred the establishment of the space without fear, a space of absolute freedom. Freedom is the attainment of singularity so long as freedom is understood as mediated by this dual impossibility—an impossibility that figures in Kafka's cages.

Notes

1. For another attempt to bring Kafka in conversation with Levinas, see Laura Stahman, "Franz Kafka's 'The Burrow' as Model of Ipeity in Levinasian Theory," *Mosaic*, 37.3 (2004): 19–32.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 101.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. The fear that the privileging of alterity would make freedom disappear is recorded in the philosophical tradition as the accusation of determinism against Spinoza. Despite Levinas' seeming dismissal of Spinoza, they share a lot in common as Hent de Vries has shown in "Levinas, Spinoza, and the Theologico-Political Meaning of Scripture," in eds. Hent de Vries and

- Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 232–48. See also the last section of the present chapter for parallels between Kafka and Spinoza.
6. Levinas, 101.
 7. Cf. Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 359d–360a. For an account for the two most famous but very different versions of the Gyges story, see Gabriel Danzig, “Rhetoric and the Ring: Herodotus and Plato on the Story of Gyges as a Politically Expedient Tale,” *Greece & Rome*, 55.2 (2008): 169–92.
 8. Levinas, 90.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. *Ibid.*, 91.
 11. Alexis de Tocqueville, in a well-known passage, describes American sovereignty as a space of absolute freedom similar to the Nature Theatre: “[Americans] govern themselves, so weak and restricted is the part left to the administration, so much does the administration feel its popular origin and obey the power from which it emanates. The people rule the American political world as God rules the universe. They are the cause and the end of all things; everything arises from them and everything is absorbed by them.” *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), p. 97.
 12. Walter Benjamin, “[Notes on Kafka],” *Gesammelte Schriften* eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M: Suhrkamp, 1991), 2.3: 1262. For a discussion of how this idea operates in Benjamin’s essay on Kafka, see my *The Doppelgänger: Literature’s Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), ch. 5.
 13. Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death,” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2001), volume 2, 794–818.
 14. Heinz Politzer suggests that at the end of the *Amerika* Karl Rossmann “has lost his name and will never more be heard of.” Politzer then goes on to link this idea of the original title of the novel, *Der Verschollene*: “From now on the nameless one will be what he always was in Kafka’s mind, *Der Verschollene*.” (Politzer, *Franz Kafka: Parable and Paradox* [Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1966], 162.)
 15. One could possibly ask the following question here: How far does actually the similarity between Kafka and Levinas go, given that Levinas would understand the Other only as human? The question essentially asks whether Levinas’ notion of the ethical actually remains trapped in humanism. It can be argued, however, that it is a profound misunderstanding of Levinas to ask whether the Other is human or nonhuman. Instead, the Other is the “Jewish” challenge to the “Greek” question of existence. Therefore, one should not try to define the Other as such and thereby ontologize or totalize it—one cannot ask whether the Other is human or nonhuman—but one should rather seek to explore the formal relations that arise when the “Jew” and the “Greek” come face to face. Cf. Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Allan Bass

- (London: Routledge, 2002), 97–192. Although I cannot examine these issues in any detail here, the implicit argument is that such a notion of relationality is really what binds Kafka and Levinas.
16. This is what Theodor Adorno calls the “deadly aesthetic error”: “Kafka’s works protected themselves against the deadly aesthetic error of equating the philosophy that an author pumps into a work with its metaphysical substance. Were this so, the work of art would be stillborn: it would exhaust itself in what it says and would not unfold itself in time. To guard against this short-circuit, which jumps directly to the significance intended by the work, the first rule is: take everything literally; cover up nothing with concepts invoked from above. Kafka’s authority is textual.” (“Notes on Kafka,” in eds. Samuel and Shierry Weber, *Prisms* [London: Neville Spearman, 1967], 247.) As I will argue, Kafka’s textual authority figures as laughter.
 17. In other words, the notion of play-acting effects the separation between the animal and the human, since it is only humans who are meant to have hypocritical abilities.
 18. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 41.
 19. Deleuze and Guattari, 35.
 20. Marthe Robert provides illuminating insights on Kafka’s humour by departing from a comparison with *Don Quixote* in *The Old and the New: From Don Quixote to Kafka*, trans. Carol Cosman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). Robert argues that “quixotism” is the drive to relate literature to the real, the correlation of work and life that characterizes modernity. She further identifies the connection between humour and imitation as one of the way that this quixotism is carried out: “Like those insects who protect themselves against their nearest and strongest enemies by a mimetic ruse, quixotism apes the manner, tone, and gestures of its anonymous adversary, whose indifferent, self-interested or simply lazy conformity it perceives on all sides.” Robert compares Cervantes’s creation to Kafka’s land-surveyor in *The Castle*, but this description of imitation is even more apt to Red Peter. The ape’s imitation is related to life so long as freedom is an issue that has to do with “our” world. Robert continues: “Here, however, the tactic of simulation is not only a defensive consideration, it is a formidable weapon.” (Ibid., 27.) Imitation exposes that which is imitated and ultimately dismantles or deconstruct it. Red Peter imitates the human desire for freedom in order to show its absurdity. But this absurdity can only be demonstrated if the ape imitates the humans, if the ape appears to have humanized itself.
 21. According to Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth, in 1926 there were six simultaneous performances by hunger artists in Berlin. (*From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls: The History of Self-Starvation* [New York: New York University Press, 1994], 88.) See also Peter Payer, *Hungerkünstler in Wien. Eine verschwundene Attraktion (1896–1926)* (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 2002).
 22. See Astrid Lange-Kirchheim, “Nachrichten vom italienischen Hungerkünstler Giovanni Succi: Neue Materialien zu Kafkas *Hungerkünstler*,” *Freiburger literaturpsychologische Gespräche: Jahrbuch für Literatur und Psychoanalyse* 18 (1999): 315–40.

23. See Vandereycken and Deth, *From Fasting Saints to Anorexic Girls*, 14–32; for the Jewish tradition specifically, see Eliezier Diamond, *Holy Men and Hunger Artists: Fasting and Asceticism in Rabbinic Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
24. For Gregory Palamas, the major defender of Hesychasm, see John Meyendorff's classic *A Study of Gregory Palamas* (Bedfordshire: Faith Press, 1974, 2nd ed.). For a description of the techniques of the movement, see Kalistos of Diokleia, "Praying with the Body: The Hesychast Method and non-Christian Parallels," *Sobornost*, 14.2 (1993): 6–35.
25. Aldus Huxley, for instance, provides an explanation why extreme fasting came to be associated with mystical experiences: "By reducing the amount of available sugar, fasting lowers the brain's biological efficiency and so makes possible the entry into consciousness of material possessing no survival value. Moreover, by causing a vitamin deficiency, it removes from the blood that known inhibitor of visions, nicotinic acid. Another inhibitor of visionary experience is ordinary, everyday, perceptual experience. Experimental psychologists have found that, if you confine a man to a 'restricted environment,' where there is no light, no sound, nothing to smell and, if you put him in a tepid bath, only one, almost imperceptible thing to touch, the victim will very soon start 'seeing things,' 'hearing things,' and having strange bodily sensations. Milarepa, in his Himalayan cavern, and the anchorites of the Thebaid followed essentially the same procedure and got essentially the same results. A thousand pictures of the Temptations of St. Anthony bear witness to the effectiveness of restricted diet and restricted environment." (Aldus Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* [London: Penguin, 1959], 74, and cf. 118–9.)
26. Contrary to the Muirs' translation, Kafka never talks of a "professional" hunger artist.
27. This is not to say, of course, that every instance when the starting point is imprisonment would necessarily lead to this joyous reversal. A case in point is Josef K. in *The Trial*. Josef K. has his chance to let the joyous laughter reverberate at the end of the dialogue with the priest in the Cathedral. However, he fails to grasp the comical implications of concluding the conversation by saying "Die Lüge wird zur Weltordnung gemacht." I develop this argument in my contribution to the volume *Kafka and Philosophy*, edited by Brendan Moran and Carlo Salzani (forthcoming). But the point is that a typology of laughter in Kafka is not exhausted in the distinction between a joyous and what I will call in a moment lugubrious laughter. See also note 28.
28. As I indicated in note 27, the typology of laughter in Kafka is not exhausted in the distinction between a joyous and a lugubrious laughter. There is a third, major category that I cannot discuss here in detail but I would like, nevertheless, to outline briefly. It is characterized by a hysterical or surface laughter that is reminiscent of farce. One of the best examples of this laughter are the histrionics of the soldier and the condemned man "In the Penal Colony." In general (although this point needs a careful reading of Kafka's texts), this kind of laughter is only associated with secondary characters. That's why Walter Benjamin is correct in this essay on Kafka to indicate that the secondary characters are outside the nexus of the world of law and the

Nature Theatre. Again, I hope to provide an analysis of this type of laughter in a later text.

An important work on this topic is Felix Weltsch's *Religion und Humor in Leben und Werk Kafkas* (Berlin: Herbig, 1957). Weltsch, who knew Kafka personally, stresses the importance of humor in understanding Kafka's work. Weltsch provides very astute analyses while remembering that humor was part of Kafka's personality. But there is a significant difference with the approach taken here. Weltsch identifies only one type of humour in Kafka. This is a serious humor that is related to religion ("es ist einer ernster Humor und deshalb gerade kann er in Kafkas Schaffen mir Religion verknüpft werden") (Weltsch, 79). The difference with the present approach is highlighted if one considers Weltsch's interpretation of the humour in "A Hunger Artist." For Weltsch, the humour consists in the chaotic string of reasons proffered for the fasting—as entertainment, as business, as means to admiration—which are resolved in the final explanation that the artiste was disgusted by food. According to Weltsch, this explanation reorders the crazy chaos of different reasons (Weltsch, 79). Such an interpretation sees the work as a self-subsisting entity, whose only connection to the "outside" is the notion of unity, that is, the religious impulse. Conversely, the interpretation of humor proposed here locates laughter and the connection to the "outside" in the way that unity—such as the unity of the ideal of freedom—is shattered. Whereas for Weltsch Kafka's humour consists in the reconstitution of a totality, for the present interpretation laughter is the effect of totality's impossibility.

29. Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka* (London: Derek Verschoyle, 1953), 55. I am quoting from Janouch's volume despite the doubts about their provenance. It is fascinating that in the conversations Kafka functions in a certain sense as Janouch's Other. From that point of view, the issue of whether the conversations are accurate transcripts is of secondary importance. I am also noting that the citations are to the first edition, but they can all be found in the second edition as well.
30. Cf. Kiarina A. Kordela, *\$urplus: Spinoza, Lacan* (New York: SUNY, 2007).
31. Janouch, 65.
32. *Ibid.*, 74.