Chapter 1 reconstructs the canon that forms the basis of later writers' deployment of the art of hunger. It sketches the aesthetic framework of the art of hunger through four of its exemplary texts—Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist,” Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*, Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” and the poetry of Rimbaud—and locates these foundational writings in the context of their later redeployment by surrealist and “lost generation” writers. Reading these texts and authors both in their own moments and as they have been read by later writers and scholars, it seeks to derive the theory of art that later writers engage with when they redeploy the art of hunger in new contexts.

*Keywords:* modernism, hunger, aesthetic autonomy, Herman Melville, Arthur Rimbaud, Knut Hamsun, Franz Kafka
From the Lost Generation to surrealism, key figures of modernism imagine themselves as part of a growing constellation of starving artists, constructing a genealogy of hungry forebears into which they insert themselves. Henry Miller, for instance, imagines Arthur Rimbaud as an exemplary starving artist—“His energy is boundless, his will indomitable, his hunger insatiable….How well I understand his mania!”—before launching into a long reverie on his own experiences of hunger.1 “Sometimes,” concludes the American, seeking to underscore the parallels between himself and Rimbaud, “I think I was born hungry.”2 For Miller, Rimbaud’s anti-social hunger epitomizes his rakish independence from social norms and exigencies, and provides the link that binds Miller himself into the tradition of poètes maudits. Miller is far from alone among his generation of modernists in seeking to construct an aesthetic tradition that takes hunger as its defining experience. Ernest Hemingway, in his 1964 memoir of “Lost Generation” Paris, presents this milieu as perpetually short of food. Hunger binds his social world together, forming the basis on which he constructs artistic identifications: “I learned to understand Cézanne much better and to see truly how he made landscapes when I was hungry,” he writes. “I used to wonder if he were hungry too when he painted; but I thought possibly it was only that he had forgotten to eat.”3 Similarly, André Breton calls on starvation to guarantee his innovation of automatic writing, observing parenthetically that, “Knut Hamsun [sic] ascribes this sort of revelation to which I had been subjected as deriving from hunger, and he may not be wrong. (The fact is I did not eat every day during that period of my life).”4
The proliferation of starving artists in modernism is part of the period’s self-mythologization. Hunger offers a point of identification that allows these writers to construct a tradition out of earlier writers’ and artists’ attempts to imagine a position outside the social order and, most importantly, outside the market. Their starvation and their refusal of productive or profitable labor are the natural consequences of one another; as Miller says of Rimbaud, “It was from the moment he began to earn a living that his real difficulties set in.” Hunger is the inevitable consequence of their refusal of the market structures that provide the only obvious way of feeding themselves as artists. Far from being an impediment to their art, however, hunger gives these writers access to a state of heightened aesthetic experience. Hemingway can finally understand Cézanne’s artistry when he is hungry, and Breton speculates that hunger might have prompted his discovery of automatic writing, one of the major aesthetic breakthroughs of his career. Breton’s Hamsun experiences aesthetic revelations, and Hemingway’s Cézanne paints on an empty stomach. Rimbaud’s entire existence, in Miller’s account, is an aesthetic one, with hunger as one of its animating states. Miller himself, in *Tropic of Cancer*, records the experience of attending a concert on an “empty belly” as one of heightened aesthetic receptivity, “as though my skull had a thousand tiny mirrors inside it.” Placing them outside mass society and its market relations, hunger grants these writers access to an intensified form of aesthetic experience. The shared fact of their starvation makes them into artists, by giving them access to the sphere of the aesthetic.
These writers, in other words, use hunger to stake their claim to an autonomous art. In both the modernist period and the later twentieth-century mythos of modernism, aesthetic autonomy was understood first and foremost as art’s autonomy from the market. This definition provides us with one of the most familiar narratives of modernism, which takes it as a product of art’s anxiety about the growth of what Andreas Huyssen calls “an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture.” The impulse to read modernism as mass culture’s other—an impulse that stretches in different forms from Huyssen to Adorno to Bourdieu and beyond—has done more than anything else to cement the association between modernism and aesthetic autonomy. It has also been central to many of those thinkers, from Adorno to Nicholas Brown, who seek to imagine (modernist) aesthetic autonomy as a route to freedom, by understanding it as a state of resistance to or exemption from the exigencies of capitalist cultural production. Hunger for Hemingway, Miller, and Breton, and for their (p.35) versions of Rimbaud and Hamsun, dramatizes this anti-commercial, autonomous modernism. Placing them outside the market and mass culture in a way that gives them privileged access to the aesthetic, it becomes a shorthand for their status as autonomous modernist artists.
In the hands of writers like Miller, Hemingway, and Breton, starvation becomes a mark of their refusal to bow to social and economic necessity. The prestige that it offers grants them a position within a restricted community of like-minded aesthetes, be that Breton’s surrealist coterie or Hemingway and Miller’s expatriate milieu. In this sense, the starving artist is the exemplary personality of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “society of artists,” that limited social world that “offers the most favorable and comprehensive welcome to the audacities and transgressions that artists and writers introduce, not only into their works, but also into their existence (itself conceived as work of art).” To care so little for the approval of broader society that one is willing to starve is the most audacious, most transgressive of positions, and in its very extremity, it serves to dramatize their commitment to autonomy and to the social world in which that autonomy is prized. These writers fashion themselves as exemplars of what Bourdieu calls the “new social personality” from which “the invention of the pure aesthetic is inseparable.” This personality is “the great professional artist who combines, in a union as fragile as it is improbable, a sense of transgression and freedom from conformity with the rigor of an extremely strict discipline of living and of work.” Starvation, simultaneously dramatizing these writers’ commitment and their transgression, is a privileged marker of this personality.
The value of this position, as Bourdieu affirms, is not only that it creates a social context for ostensibly anti-social art, but also that its social milieu is able “to be its own market.” In this sense, the paradox of the modernist starving artist is that their exclusion from the general economy and broader society —what Bourdieu calls the “sub-field of large-scale [cultural] production”—is precisely what grants them legitimacy and even certain limited kinds of financial success within the “sub-field of restricted production” of the society of artists.

Indeed, two decades of work on modernism’s sociological and commercial aspects have dismantled the notion that modernist claims to autonomy can simply be taken at face value. Scholars such as Lawrence Rainey, Joyce Wexler, Aaron Jaffe, and Jonathan Goldman have shown that the binary division between modernism and mass culture belies the complex negotiations that modernists performed with the market. As Rainey argues, modernism might be best understood, not so much as a straightforward form of resistance to mass culture, but rather as “a strategy whereby the work of art invites and solicits its own commodification,” albeit seeking to become “a commodity of a special sort.” Rainey and Bourdieu, along with most of these other scholars of “material modernism,” imagine the specialness of the commodified modernist art object to lie in its embrace of a posture of autonomy, and its production of what Andrew Goldstone, following Bourdieu, calls a “relative autonomy” from social and economic structures.
Late modernists like Breton, Miller, and Hemingway therefore construct the starving artist as the persona that stages their commitment to relative autonomy. The stability of this position assumes, however, the existence of a society of artists who can provide “a form of social recognition for those who otherwise appear (that is, to other groups) as a challenge to common sense,” as well as a market to financially support the starving artist and to keep his poverty from culminating in his death. But while this sociable anti-socialness characterizes the later writers, it does not hold so straightforwardly for the earlier generation of hunger artists that they take as their models and from which they fashion their lineage of starving artists. For writers like Hamsun and Rimbaud, as well as other exemplary hunger artists like Kafka or Melville’s Bartleby, hunger dramatizes the precariousness of the attempt to achieve autonomy in the absence of a society of artists. In these earlier manifestations, starvation is the sign and product of the contradiction that lies at the heart of aesthetic autonomy, and the mark of its impossibility. It makes visible that which most versions of modernist autonomy efface and which the later starving artists glamorize: the impossibility of survival that does not involve selling oneself. In transplanting the starving artist to a more secure social environment, writers like Hemingway, Miller, and Breton retain hunger’s role as a figure for aesthetic autonomy, imagined as a form of social and economic exclusion, but they dampen the attentiveness to aesthetic autonomy’s internal contradictions.
I return in this chapter to the earlier writers of the art of hunger in order to excavate the complex relationship to aesthetic autonomy that underlies the more typified and stereotyped figure of the starving artist as imagined in surrealism, the Lost Generation, and other manifestations of coterie modernism. Although the works of these earlier writers are available for mythologization in ways that have been highly influential, the texts themselves barely envisage the intergenerational community or tradition that produces the mythos of the starving artist. Instead, they write from more avowedly marginal positions, and imagine hunger as a function of that marginality and social exclusion—an exclusion unredeemed by the emergence of a society of artists within which autonomy could become self-sustaining. As a result, these earlier writers more forcefully dramatize a principle that Bourdieu derives from his study of nineteenth-century France: that it is “money (inherited) that guarantees freedom with respect to money.”¹⁷ The hunger artists examined in this chapter, seeking to imagine an unprofitable art that is outside the market and without inherited wealth, end by imagining an art that cannot be free. In the figure of hunger, they trope the dilemma of aesthetic autonomy’s impoverished unfreedom.
This chapter sketches the aesthetic framework of the art of hunger through four of its exemplary texts: Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist,” Knut Hamsun’s *Hunger*, Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener*, and the poetry of Rimbaud. Through these texts, I draw out five principles that underlie this peculiar tradition. First, the art of hunger is an autonomous art without a society of artists and the market that this provides. As such, it dramatizes more directly and painfully than other accounts of modernist autonomy the tension between the aspiration to autonomy and the need to earn a living. Second, this exclusion from the market renders the artist a non-subject, a subject devoid of will, creating an opposition between aesthetic autonomy and the personal autonomy of the artist. Third, this unautonomous subjectivity is a gendered position, which entails a failed or marginalized masculinity. Fourth, the art of hunger, despite its position outside the market, does not produce a viable politics of resistance. Instead, its refusal breeds an anti-politics. Finally, the art of hunger refuses or disavows the freedom promised by transcendence. Instead, it aspires to become a literal art: an art of “absolute metaphor,” of performance, and of what Victor Schklovsky calls “trans-sensible language.”18 Running through these separate claims is a common thread that animates the tradition as a whole: the art of hunger imagines aesthetic autonomy as a form of social and economic exclusion, not in order to figure its freedom from social pressure, but to explore its unfreedom.
The chapter unfolds in a rough reverse chronological order, beginning with Kafka, who is located firmly within the modernist period, and working back through Hamsun, an early modernist, to Melville and Rimbaud, writers who are generally taken to predate modernism. The goal of this retrospective structure is to foreground the way in which the art of hunger emerges from a complex process of rereading and rewriting, which links the texts in multi-directional ways. On the one hand, earlier writers develop tropes that are then reprised, expanded, clarified, and reworked in later writing. But, as T. S. Eliot so famously reminds us in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” later writers also reshape the critical field, producing conditions that alter the reception of earlier texts and, in the cases of Rimbaud and Melville, allow them to be read as part of a tradition to which historically they do not necessarily belong. The starving artists with which I began this chapter are crucial to this bidirectional construction of a canon of hunger artists. They represent some of the first and most influential figures to construct a canon from these writers, by reading them alongside one another as part of their personal canons. But their readings are already rereadings, and they tend to operate by making the art of hunger more social, more heroic, and less unfree—repackaging it, effectively, as a kind of celebrity, available to be sold to a mass audience. This figure has been enormously influential—the starving artist remains a recognizable social personality to this day—and has made the art of hunger available as a figure both in the popular imagination, and in the private imaginaries of other writers, including those I examine in Chapters 2–4. This chapter seeks to understand the logic of the art of hunger, as distinct from the more market-oriented logic of the starving artist, by charting the constellation of ideas that emerge from the texts themselves, when read together as part of a tradition. To this end, it unfolds both retrospectively and accumulatively, mapping clusters of ideas that exfoliate out from the equation of aesthetic autonomy with unfreedom that lies at the heart of the tradition.

(p.39) 1. Autonomous Art And Exclusion From The Market: Kafka
Like later starving artists, the modernists at the center of this chapter understand hunger as a figure for aesthetic autonomy, using it to dramatize the experience of being excluded from the market. Kafka’s 1922 short story “A Hunger Artist” (Ein Hungerkünstler) is the central text of this tradition, a parable of the art of hunger whose framing of the relationship between art and hunger has shaped both the writing of later texts and the reading of earlier ones. At the heart of Kafka’s story is a deep anxiety about the relationship between art and the market, and a sustained interrogation of the possibility of autonomous art in a commercialized context. The eponymous hunger artist dramatizes this tension. As a professional faster, selling (via his impresario) the spectacle of his superhuman capacity to survive without food, he is a consummate figure of the changing cultural marketplace at the turn of the twentieth century. “Human skeletons” and hunger artists form part of the array of performers common at freak shows during the later years of the nineteenth century, and it is probable that this story derives from Kafka’s knowledge of such figures. As Agustí Nieto-Galan has noted, the emergence of such figures signals a shift in the cultural function of self-starvation. No longer a sign of religious or mystical election, it “progressively became a commodity in the urban marketplace which could be exploited for both amusement and profit.” Kafka’s protagonist belongs self-consciously (if, as we shall see, uncomfortably) to this world of commercialized self-starvation. From its first lines, the story positions the hunger artist’s popularity and profitability at the center of the tale, opening: “During these last decades the interest in professional fasting has markedly diminished. It used to pay very well to stage such great performances under one’s own management, but today that is quite impossible.” From the outset, the hunger artist is framed as a creature of the commercialized public sphere, whose position within this cultural marketplace is rapidly declining.
(p.40) Seen from this angle, hunger art is a form of mass culture, sustained and produced by the attention of the masses. But the fascination of the masses imposes a number of unacceptable constraints on the hunger artist’s art. Chafing against these limitations, he seems to dream of an autonomous art, an art that he could practice without being forced to submit to the whims of the masses. Above all, he rages against the way that public attention dictates the duration of his fast, which his impresario limits to forty days, because “after that the town began to lose interest, sympathetic support began notably to fall off.”

This limitation outrages the hunger artist, who “felt that there were no limits to his capacity for fasting,” and who dreams of the perfect fast he could perform were he not limited by public taste. Faced with the indignity of this limitation, and the humiliations of the rituals that surround the breaking of the fast, the hunger artist laments the “whole world of non-understanding” that confronts him in the uncomprehending masses and in the impresario’s framing of his art for the public.

The hunger artist, in this reading, dramatizes the contradiction between an absolutely autonomous art, unconstrained by the attitudes of the masses, and the need to sell art for an audience—the tension, that is, between high art and mass culture—that is so often taken to define modernism.
Where high art and aesthetic autonomy are conventionally linked to an all-consuming commitment to art, to the exclusion of any concern with audience, however, the hunger artist remains deeply anxious about his reception. His frustration with the masses is as much about the lack of recognition that they grant him as about the limitations they place on the purity of his art. His complaint against his forestalled fast turns on its denial of the glory to which he imagines himself entitled: “Why should he be cheated of the fame he would get for fasting longer, for being not only the record hunger artist of all time, which presumably he was already, but for beating his own record by a performance beyond human imagination?”

If the hunger artist fails to find satisfaction in making art for the masses, he finds even less in the years after public interest declines, where, relegated to a circus sideshow, he is able to fast without constraints. Here, free from the dictates of a market that has now abandoned him, he finds himself still dissatisfied: “the artist simply fasted on and on, as he had once dreamed of doing, and it was no trouble to him, just as he had always foretold, but no one counted the days, no one, not even the artist himself, knew what records he was already breaking, and his heart grew heavy.”

The purity of his art requires a form of recognition that is as unavailable to art that is fully autonomous from the market as it is to art that submits wholeheartedly to it.
In this sense, the hunger artist’s dream of autonomy is best understood on Bourdieu’s model: he aspires to the kind of autonomy guaranteed by a society of artists, a group who would provide both a market and a form of social recognition for his art, while allowing him to retain his distance from the masses. Early in the story, the narrator tells us that the practice of providing a coterie of watchers who would ensure that the hunger artist did not eat during his fast “was nothing but a formality, instituted to reassure the masses, for the initiates knew well enough that during his fast the artist would never in any circumstances, not even under forcible compulsion, swallow the smallest morsel of food; the honor of his profession [Kunst] forbade it.”26 The opposition between the masses, who demand an inauthentic spectacle of rigor and artistic honor, and the initiates, who, the hunger artist believes, truly understand the nature of the hunger artist’s art, mirrors Bourdieu’s opposition between the sub-fields of large-scale and restricted cultural production. But the tragedy of “A Hunger Artist” is that the story’s protagonist, who we later learn is “the sole completely satisfied spectator of his own fast,” never finds this audience of initiates. The watchers, either overly suspicious or resigned to his deceit, cannot understand or truly admire the hunger artist’s art. Nor can the impresario or the circus overseer, who both relate to his feats not on their own terms but simply as a more or less profitable commodity to sell on to the uncomprehending masses. Without a knowing coterie of initiates, the hunger artist’s autonomous art becomes a solipsistic, unrewarded, and ultimately fatal exercise. “A Hunger Artist” thus dramatizes the impossibility of an autonomous art that lacks the social context—the society of artists or the audience of initiates—to sustain its autonomy.
Readers of Kafka are likely to recognize this collapse of social context as part of the story that accompanies the reception of Kafka himself. As a German-speaking Czech Jew, Kafka’s ethnic, linguistic, and national marginality has been central to the way he has been read. Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of Kafka’s writing as an exemplary minor literature—“that which a minority constructs within a major language” and in which “language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization”—reflects his broader (p.42) reception as an idiosyncratic, isolated, and marginal writer.\(^{27}\) Kafka writes from a country whose literary community had, since the late nineteenth century, been reorienting itself towards Europe. As Katherine David Fox has argued, by “looking beyond the city’s traditional place at the centre of a Czech cultural system, [late nineteenth-century writers] relocated it to the periphery of a European one.”\(^{28}\) As the twentieth century dawned, the German-speaking Jews of this Czech outpost found themselves, as Scott Spector has shown, to be “decentred,” squeezed between “a burgeoning racialist völkisch ideology on the one side, and a Czech nationalism that was as antisemitic as it was anti-German on the other.”\(^{29}\) In fact, the common view of Kafka as marginal and without an immediate context for his writing is not entirely accurate. As Spector’s book shows, German-speaking Czech Jews did not belong to a straightforwardly minority culture and in fact had access to vibrant cultural and artistic circles. But whatever the truth of Kafka’s historical circumstances, his reception as part of world literature has detached him from his initial historical and social contexts, allowing him to circulate as a figure who, like his hunger artist, experiences the torments of an autonomous art that lacks a social context.
This sense of Kafka’s marginality is amplified by his writing, which tends to both emphasize and perform social exclusion. While the inextricability of the hunger artist’s art from the commercial context of its production is one reason for his failure to find an appropriate social context, the difficulty also lies in the nature of his art itself. By its nature, hunger makes an unsatisfying spectacle. Characterized only by an absence—by the refusal to eat over long periods of time—it is by definition unobservable. As the narrator informs us, suspicions like those of the watchers “were a necessary accompaniment to the profession of fasting.”\(^\text{30}\) Even the hunger artist’s skeletal frame—the most visually interesting aspect of his performance—is not a reliable index of his hunger. On the contrary, the hunger artist speculates that it was “dissatisfaction with himself that had worn him down,” his emaciation a product not directly of his starvation but instead of the fact that, “he alone knew, what no other initiate knew, how easy it was to fast.”\(^\text{31}\) The disjuncture between the spectacle and the experience of the hunger artist’s starvation makes his performance into a paradoxically unobservable art, one whose most complete audience can only ever be the (p. 43) performer himself. The autonomous art depicted by Kafka’s story is therefore an impossible one, caught between autonomy’s need for a social context and hunger’s inherent resistance to an audience.
The Modernist Art of Hunger

The impossibility of Kafka’s hunger art leads him to imagine the aspiration towards aesthetic autonomy as a spectacle of unfreedom. The setting of the story, which moves through a variety of cages as the hunger artist’s fame declines, renders this spectacle literal: in order to perform his art, he must be literally imprisoned and, indeed, this imprisonment itself forms part of the spectacle and thus part of his art. What changes over the course of the story is not the fact of his imprisonment but its position in relation to an audience, and therefore the nature of the unfreedom to which he is subject. In the opening pages of the story, when public interest in his art remains strong, he finds himself intolerably subject to the dictates of the market, with all the limitations this imposes on his art. By the story’s end, however, the public’s lack of attention leaves him exposed to the opposite pole of necessity: his art’s subjugation to the limitations of his own body. Although, as he insists, the hunger artist has an exceptional capacity to survive without food, his death at the story’s end reveals that this capacity is not without its limits. Indeed, the foreshortening of his fast in response to public demands early in the story creates an illusion of immortality or invincibility, an illusion that there are “no limits to his capacity for fasting.” The removal of the public’s artificial limits on his fast, however, reveals an underlying natural limit in his own mortality. The hunger artist therefore stages his unfreedom as a movement between two poles of subjugation: his subjugation to the logic of the market, on the one hand; and his subjugation to the limits of his own body, on the other. Trapped between his body’s need for sustenance as a horizon of necessity and the market as a horizon of coercion—trapped, that is, between a mass audience and no audience at all, with no possibility of the restricted audience necessary for a truly autonomous art—the hunger artist’s art is structurally unfree.
The hunger artist’s deathbed confession to the circus overseer renders this unfreedom as a question about personal autonomy. As he lies dying, the hunger artist confesses that his fast was unworthy of admiration, explaining that he only starves, “Because I have to fast [ich hungern muß], I can’t help it [ich kann nicht anders]...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.” With his final words, the hunger artist disavows responsibility for his fast, emphasizing that it is not a freely (p.44) chosen enterprise but a form of compulsion or obligation. In a parodic rewriting of the Kantian aesthetic tradition’s view of aesthetic autonomy as the renunciation of one’s interest in food, his art’s necessity is presented as a product of the hunger artist’s lack of taste. The hunger artist suggests that insofar as his disinterest in eating is unchosen, it is not free (“ich hungern muß, ich kann nicht anders”). In contrast, the panther who replaces the hunger artist in the story’s final paragraph is a model of self-contained freedom, whose “noble body, furnished almost to the burst point with all that it needed, seemed to carry freedom around with it too; somewhere in his jaws it seemed to lurk.” The animal conjoins freedom with public fascination in a combination that renders obsolete the hunger artist’s emphasis on a specifically aesthetic autonomy—that is, an autonomy premised on the purity of art, recognized and authorized by an elite society of artists.
In this sense, “A Hunger Artist” suggests that the aesthetic autonomy that his hunger performs precludes the personal autonomy so central to the Kantian philosophical tradition more broadly, with its presumption of a freely choosing, rational, and autonomous subject. The opposition between aesthetic autonomy and individual autonomy staged by this story becomes one of the defining features of the art of hunger tradition. Autonomous art, in this tradition, is that which is not freely chosen: hunger that has no rational motivation, and that is therefore not an exercise of conscious discipline. But without this free choice, the artist is not autonomous—he is not an agent of freedom. The art of hunger, therefore, describes an art that is unfree by imagining aesthetic autonomy and the artist’s personal autonomy to be mutually exclusive, at least in the context of an autonomous art for which there is no society of artists. It dramatizes aesthetic autonomy as a mode of unfreedom that lacks its proper social milieu.

2. Hunger And The Collapse of The Autonomous Subject: Hamsun
The art of hunger’s tension between aesthetic autonomy and the self-possessed subjectivity associated with individual autonomy is more fully elaborated in Knut Hamsun’s semi-autobiographical novel Hunger (Sult). First published in 1890, it is often credited as one of the first modernist novels and specifically one of the earliest examples of modernist psychological narration. Although relatively neglected today, during his lifetime Hamsun was a central figure in European modernism. Hailed as an exemplary embodiment of modernist autonomy, he became one of the most important influences on those who took up the mantle of writerly starvation after him. In 1929, for his seventieth birthday, he was presented with two Festschriften whose lists of contributors read like a roll-call of key figures in European modernism: André Gide, Thomas Mann, Herman Hesse, Robert Musil, Stefan Zweig, Maxim Gorky—even Albert Einstein. As Hamsun’s biographer records, “For the contributors he stands as the great example of the unyielding and uncompromising artist, indifferent to misunderstanding, one who sacrificed everything for his art, and won the victory.”35
If Hamsun was feted by his contemporaries and heirs as the living embodiment of the modernist ideal of aesthetic autonomy, *Hunger* is in many respects the key text of this reception. A kind of *Künstlerroman*, *Hunger* follows its unnamed writer-protagonist through a period of failure and poverty, as he finds himself caught, like Kafka’s hunger artist, in the contradiction between his art and the demands of the market. Like the hunger artist, Hamsun’s protagonist is a creature of the cultural marketplace. Everything he writes, he writes in hope of selling, and, on those occasions when he manages to produce something, he assesses it like a commodity. “I weigh the piece in my hand,” he says of one of his stories, “and appraise it on the spot at five kroner, by a rough estimate.” But like “A Hunger Artist,” *Hunger* is the record of its protagonist’s inability to succeed in this marketplace, and the vicious circle of economic and aesthetic failure that results. As Paul Auster writes in an essay on the novel (reprinted as its introduction in some editions), “he must eat in order to write. But if he does not write, he will not eat. And if he cannot eat, he cannot write. He cannot write.” The protagonist’s starvation produces a precipitous mental decline, preventing him from writing. In a market where writing is transformed immediately into income, the protagonist’s body therefore becomes the mediator between market forces and aesthetic production, yoking them together in the devastating logic by which no writing means no food but no food means no writing. In this sense, *Hunger* dramatizes the fraught position of literature in a world of embodied subjects who depend upon income from writing for survival. In its recalcitrant, stubborn protagonist, it provides a model for later starving artists and a figure of “the unyielding and uncompromising artist” with which Hamsun himself would come to be identified by his modernist peers. In this sense, *Hunger*, like “A Hunger Artist,” dramatizes aesthetic autonomy as a form of exclusion from the market.
Often cited as one of the earliest examples of stream-of-consciousness narration, *Hunger* charts the protagonist’s mental state through the tumult of semi-starvation, as his subjectivity loses its coherence in a series of self-contradictory gestures, thoughts, and actions marked only by their apparent lack of motivation. He loses track of himself from moment to moment, becoming at points so absorbed in a simple question that “I forget where I am and stand like a solitary buoy in the middle of the ocean, surrounded on all sides by surging roaring waves.” His thoughts compete with each other without resolving into focus or action; his actions occur without apparent thought, animated by, as Nicholas Royle writes, “a ghostly irony that is a power of interruption, discontinuity, non-presence.” Interspersed with these unmotivated actions and the tumults of thought that accompany them are various intensely observed sense-impressions, the constant pains and distractions of a body dying of starvation and exhaustion, as well as periods of complete dissociation, intense lethargy, or dazed stupor. This succession substitutes for both plot and character, producing what Sverre Lyngstad calls a “kaleidoscopic literary texture” that follows the randomly shifting attention of the narrator-author.

With his discontinuous, ungovernable consciousness, Hamsun’s protagonist is far from the rational autonomous subject on whom modern theories of freedom frequently rely. His actions are either reactive or unmotivated, his motivations impenetrable even to himself. At one point, he is suddenly “seized by a strange desire” to follow two sisters whom he encounters on the street, taunting them with nonsensical questions. He repeatedly lies “without any ulterior motive,” simply because, “My thoughts fluttered about in disarray and gave me more fanciful notions than I could handle.” With such limited capacity to understand or control his actions, he is unable to make free choices and unable to function as an autonomous, self-governing subject. In this sense, he fleshes out the unfree subjectivity of Kafka’s hunger artist, offering a portrait of an artist driven not by freedom but by fleeting obsessions, unwilled compulsions, and unmotivated whims.
Starvation is both the cause and the effect of the *Hunger* protagonist’s disintegrating subjectivity. Where theories of personal autonomy are conventionally premised on the mind/body dualism, his hunger dissolves the autonomous mind by rendering it subject to the materiality and unfreedom of his starving body. As Sverre Lyngstad argues, “what holds the hero together is nothing but his emaciated body, which to a large extent determines the behavior of his mind.” The body’s centrality governs not just the protagonist’s experience of the world, but the structure of the text itself, for the limits of the novel are identical with the periods in which the protagonist is starving. Times during which the protagonist is relatively well fed are excised from the text, their absences marked by the section breaks that divide the novel into four parts. The shape of this proto-stream-of-consciousness text, in other words, is determined by the state of its protagonist’s body. Consciousness and starvation, mind and body, therefore become inextricable in *Hunger*’s narration, producing an art that is fully coextensive with hunger. In the process, the protagonist is rendered unfree, his personal autonomy sacrificed before the unfreedom of his disintegrating body.
In its attempt to trace the development of its young protagonist’s writerly self, *Hunger* is a kind of *Bildungsroman*, but one that, uncharacteristically for the genre, foregrounds its protagonist’s unfreedom. As Franco Moretti has argued, the classic *Bildungsroman* stages “the clash between individual autonomy and social integration,” in order to dramatize the formation of bourgeois subjectivity. But with a protagonist who is neither autonomous nor socially integrated and who becomes less so as the novel progresses, *Hunger* imagines this kind of formation as a frankly impossible task, at least for the impoverished artist. The novel’s strangely shifting tenses compound this effect. Told in the first person throughout, the narrative voice shifts almost at random—sometimes even within a single sentence—between present and past tense. As several critics have noted, the effect of this technique is to reduce the narrator to “only an abstract narrative function,” and thereby to render “neutral(ized)” the relationship between narrating self and experiencing self. We therefore lose the retrospectivity of the narration, the point beyond the text from which the text is produced. In the process, we also lose the sense of distance and closure inherent in the *Bildungsroman*, which is conventionally granted by the fact that, as Kristin Ross has argued, “The novel of youth...is ventriloquized out of the mouths of the aged.” *Hunger*’s errant narrative voice, which grants us neither the immediacy of the subject-in-formation nor the reflective distance of the fully formed subject, constantly underscores the protagonist’s failure to emerge as an autonomous subject.
Instead, the narrator constantly merges with—and then separates himself out from—the all-encompassing experience of the starving body. Staging the instability of the subject as an instability in narrative form, *Hunger* reflects the modernist claim that, as Samuel Beckett wrote of James Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, “form *is* content, content *is* form…His writing is not *about* something; it *is* *that* something itself.”⁴⁸ Such claims have historically served as a variation on claims to aesthetic autonomy: by assimilating content to form, they privilege the text’s internal aesthetic features over its connection to the world beyond the text, imagining the literary text as a special kind of autonomous and internally coherent artefact that only appears to refer beyond itself. In this sense, Hamsun’s partial identification of body with text creates the impression of an autonomous and self-referential aesthetic product. As a result, it produces a text that, like Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist,” seeks to imagine aesthetic autonomy without individual autonomy.

Moreover, because the starving body is a product of the pressures of a commercialized literary marketplace, the analogy between body and text has the effect of inserting the text, with its claims to aesthetic autonomy, back into the realm of commerce. The autonomy of *Hunger*, that is, lies not in its ability to hold itself apart from the literary marketplace, but precisely in its failure to thrive in this commercial world—a failure that produces the hunger that in turn generates the autonomous, self-referential text of the novel. The protagonist’s failure as a commercially successful writer—his failure within a capitalist system premised on the autonomous bourgeois (p.49) subject—simultaneously renders him a failed autonomous subject, and his text an exemplary work of literary autonomy.
Like “A Hunger Artist,” *Hunger* imagines the contradiction between aesthetic and individual autonomy as taking place against the backdrop of a collapsing social context. Hamsun himself vacillated over the question of *Hunger*’s intended audience, following the familiar modernist hesitation between a broad public and an elite readership. If in 1888 he hoped to write, as he records in a letter, “for people wherever they found themselves,” by the time he completed the novel in 1890, he was intending instead to write for something more like Bourdieu’s society of artists, professing that “I absolutely cannot write for the masses,” and preferring instead a “culturally sophisticated and select group of people” as his audience. The reception of *Hunger* suggests that Hamsun’s hopes for a select audience were borne out: in its immediate reception, the novel was well reviewed but sold poorly.
Hamsun’s reception, like Kafka’s, is complicated by his marginality—both perceived and actual—in relation to a broader European modernism. As Timothy Wientzen has argued, in 1890, Norway was a rapidly modernizing but still self-consciously peripheral country, akin to what we might now call a “developing” economy. In this context, according to Anna Westerståhl Stenport, “while modernity came quite late to Scandinavia, its accelerated aspects quickly brought a sense that fundamental social change needed to be matched by aesthetic changes,” producing an early modernism in the context of a belated modernity. These early Scandinavian modernists were positioned self-consciously on the margins of Europe but sought, like Kafka’s Prague circle, a transnationalism that would allow them to position themselves within a cosmopolitan European literary sphere and “to write Scandinavia out of perceived marginality.” Moreover, within this small circle of Scandinavian letters, Hamsun sought, in a series of lectures that coincides with the publication of *Hunger*, to position himself aggressively in opposition to the earlier innovations of Henrik Ibsen and other major figures of early modernist Norwegian writing. The “largely hostile public reaction” that his polemics generated is a classic instance of what Bourdieu would describe as position-taking within a literary field. But while it therefore marks Hamsun as part of a Bourdieusian literary field, it also threatened to confine him, as a young writer, to the margins of his own, already marginal, field. Moreover, as Hamsun’s writing has circulated through European modernism and beyond, it—like Kafka’s writing—has become decontextualized from its original literary field. Reread in new contexts, the peripherality of Scandinavian modernism confers a sense of eccentricity and idiosyncrasy on both text and author, exaggerating Hamsun’s actual social isolation in 1890s Norway.
This sense of Hamsun’s extra-social position is amplified by
the text itself, which dramatizes the protagonist’s radical
exclusion from the social. Hamsun’s hesitation between a mass
art produced for a large audience and an autonomous art
aimed at the restricted sub-field is not available to his
protagonist, who, like Kafka’s dying hunger artist, finds
himself with no audience at all. In this sense, *Hunger*, like “A
Hunger Artist,” dramatizes the experience of producing an
autonomous art without a social field. Stripped of this social
context, the protagonist rages against the uncomprehending
masses who refuse to become his proper audience. He
constantly measures himself against social and moral
standards, but systematically reneges on the conventions that
underpin the social cohesion to which he seems to aspire,
lying gratuitously, stealing, and refusing even to acknowledge
the shared meaning of words. Like Kafka’s hunger artist, he
jealously guards the autonomy of his own inventiveness, even
as he laments its lack of an audience. Having lied outrageously
to a stranger in the street, for instance, he recalls furiously,
“His composure bored me. How did this disgusting, blind old
fool dare play around with the foreign name I had invented, as
if it was just an ordinary name you could see on any huckster’s
sign in town!”54 The characteristically modernist fear that the
uncomprehending masses will reduce his linguistic
experimentation to the commercialized banality of “any
huckster’s sign” is amplified by an awareness that, unlike most
modernists, this writer lacks an audience who can understand
and appreciate his creativity. Like Kafka’s hunger artist, he
suffers in the knowledge that he is “the sole completely
satisfied spectator of his own fast.”
The furious, antagonistic confrontations that Hunger’s protagonist has with the public are, on the one hand, the product of his lack of control over his own reactions—the product, that is, of his unautonomous subjectivity—and, on the other, constitutive of his claim to aesthetic (p.51) autonomy. His confrontations with social censure allow his self-constitution through and against the external perspective of the “man on the street.” If hunger produces a formal narrative that disintegrates, only to be reconstituted in and through the lived experience of the starving body, the inverse is also true: the starving body coalesces into an incoherent subject through the experiences of rage and shame that are engendered by his confrontation with an audience. This incoherent subjectivity arises not as an autogenetic principle of autonomy but out of the simple assertion of autonomy in the face of a skeptical, indifferent, mocking, or outraged public. In the absence of a social milieu that can provide an audience for his autonomous hunger art, Hunger nonetheless continues to imagine aesthetic autonomy as a social phenomenon. Its sociality, however, becomes more straightforwardly antagonistic, a performance of dissidence and exclusion whose most visible sign is the protagonist’s wasted frame and haggard appearance. In the pressures and antagonisms provoked by the starving body’s display before a public, Hunger’s protagonist performs aesthetic autonomy without a social context as a traumatic experience of unfreedom and a spectacular collapse of the writer’s personal autonomy.

The fraying of the autonomous subject that both Hamsun and Kafka describe as one of the chief effects of the art of hunger presents significant complications for the gender position of its artists. Such complications might be expected, given that the autonomous subject has historically been a gendered position. The personal autonomy granted to the individualist, rationalistic subject is widely regarded by feminist philosophers as “inherently bound up with masculine character ideals,” even as some contemporary philosophers seek to redefine autonomy in the light of these feminist critiques.55 If individualist, rationalistic forms of autonomy have historically presumed a male subject, then the collapse of the autonomous, presumptively or stereotypically masculine subject has significant consequences for the gendering of the non-subjects or unautonomous selves that are left in its wake.
Hamsun and Kafka both suggest that the art of hunger presupposes and creates a failed or marginalized masculinity. Its gendered nature is already (p.52) suggested by the fact that the texts assembled in this book constitute a canon exclusively by and about men. Moreover, most of these texts either strip their male heroes of all social relation, as in Hunger, or place them within primarily or exclusively male milieus into which the protagonists fail to integrate, such as the commercialized show business of “A Hunger Artist,” or the law firm depicted in Herman Melville’s Bartleby. The art of hunger, in other words, is an art that is produced by solitary male writers. This gender position is consistent with the way in which the tension between modernism and mass culture has been figured by writers and scholars since the nineteenth century. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, modernist autonomy is premised on a gendering of culture, whereby “mass culture is somehow associated with woman while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men.” The commitment to an art of hunger is a commitment to “real, authentic culture” and its autonomous art, and it is therefore a presumptively masculine position. But, as I argue in Sections 1 and 2, these writers dramatize the disjuncture between different kinds of autonomy: between aesthetic autonomy, to which they remain committed, and personal autonomy, now rendered impossible. Because both of these forms of autonomy are linked in the discourse of their day to masculinity, the art of hunger ends by positioning its writers as failed, failing, or marginalized men: masculine in their aesthetic autonomy, but feminized through their lack of personal autonomy.
The art of hunger, in this sense, represents a special case of what Rita Felski calls the “feminized male,” an influential gender position in the modernist period, whereby “an imaginary identification with the feminine emerged as a key stratagem in the literary avant-garde’s subversion of sexual and textual norms.”  

For the writers I examine here, hunger itself underlies this cross-gender identification. As Walter Vandereycken and Ron van Deth have shown, hunger and self-starvation have been associated with women since at least the medieval period. This gendering of hunger achieved a particularly influential formulation in the nineteenth century where, as Anna Krugovoy Silver has argued, middle-class femininity came to be identified with an “anorexic logic” that valued slenderness and a renunciation of appetite. As men who starve, the hunger artists of this book therefore adopted a feminized position. Moreover, they repeatedly associate hunger with attitudes and traits that are themselves feminized, from Kafka’s hunger artist’s link to mass culture, to Hamsun’s emphasis on hunger as an irrational, embodied state. If hunger stages a kind of radical autonomy, it understands this autonomy not as a position of exemplary masculinity, but as the instantiation of a feminized masculinity—a masculinity from the margins.

Hunger in these texts poses a problem for gender difference. While starvation lessens the inhibitions and self-control of a character like Hunger’s protagonist, it also greatly reduces his sex drive. To the extent that gender difference was understood in this period as premised on heterosexuality, hunger is therefore represented as bringing about a loosening of gender roles. Refusing a proposition from a prostitute, for instance, the protagonist of Hunger laments, “Alas I had no real bounce in me these days. Women had become almost like men to me. Want had dried me up.” In the absence of sexual interest, whose decline he links explicitly to hunger, he imagines gender as dissolving into indifference, women into men. But while the texts of the art of hunger do suggest that hunger troubles gender identities, the dissolution of gender anticipated by the protagonist in this scene is not complete: women are only almost like men and the distinction still somehow tenuously holds. Gender is troubled and undone—but not surpassed—by hunger.
In *Hunger*, the compromised heterosexual masculinity of the text’s protagonist is central to one of his most sustained encounters with a member of the public: his strange, abortive romance with a woman he names Ylajali (we never learn her real name). Their “relationship” begins with him following her through the streets of Kristiania (now Oslo) in the novel’s opening pages and culminates in her refusal of his sexual advances at the end of Part Three. In its climactic scene, Ylajali induces the protagonist to “go on and tell me” the details of how he had been living, assuming him to be leading a dissolute, self-destructive, and alcoholic existence. What he tells her instead—something akin, we assume, to the story we ourselves have been reading up to this point—horrifies and repulses her, and she immediately recoils from their flirtation. The protagonist is dismayed: “Was I less worthy now, in her eyes, than if I had only myself to blame for my hair falling out, because of unbridled living? Would she have thought better of me if I had turned myself into a roué?” The answer to both these questions seems to be “yes.” Ylajali has, in effect, (p.54) misrecognized the novel’s protagonist as a starving artist, assuming him to be performing a kind of rakish, transgressive masculinity. This masculinity’s attractiveness is premised on its intentionality and its autonomy: she hopes he would have “only myself to blame” for his actions and that his persona would be something that he had “turned myself into.” Her disappointment arises not from his physical state, but from the realization that this state is not an index of his exemplary individual autonomy, but simply of his subjugation to circumstances, his exclusion from the market, his myriad failures rather than his triumphant renunciation. The starving artist—a figure like Hemingway or Breton or Miller—makes the hunger artist socially intelligible by casting him as an autonomous and therefore properly masculine subject. In contrast, the hunger artist—of which the protagonist of *Hunger* is a chief example—is a failed autonomous subject, a feminized and therefore sexually uninteresting (even sexually repulsive) man.
Like Felski’s feminized male avant-gardists, the protagonist of *Hunger* finds the germ of aesthetic self-consciousness in the experience of failed masculinity. Bridling at Ylajali’s sudden withdrawal of intimacy, he defensively formulates a theory of poverty’s aesthetic virtues: “The intelligent poor individual was a much finer observer than the intelligent rich one. ... He is alert and sensitive, he is experienced, his soul has been burned.” His hunger, he suggests, makes him unusually receptive. This receptivity—itself a paradigmatically feminized position—does nothing to bolster his masculine sexual prowess, but it recasts both his unchosen poverty and his compromised masculinity as the foundation of an aesthetic sensibility. It imagines poverty not as the site of heroic, transgressive masculinity, but rather as a state whose feminized masculinity makes the protagonist an exemplary figure of aesthetic response.

The link between a feminized masculinity and the position of the writer is elaborated in more detail in the work of Arthur Rimbaud, whose 1873 farewell to poetry, *A Season in Hell* (*Une saison en enfer*), pairs his sections describing his love affair with fellow poet Paul Verlaine and his experiments in poetic invention as his two “Deliriums.” Like Kafka and Hamsun, Rimbaud imagines hunger as a figure for writing as such. *A Season in Hell* opens by figuring the tumultuous few years in which he wrote poetry as the period of his exclusion from a banquet. His turn away from poetry, he explains in the poem’s opening, is provoked by a desire to abandon the hunger of writing and return to normal appetites: “on the verge of giving my last croak, I thought of looking for the key to the ancient banquet (p.55) where I might possibly recover my appetite.” Rimbaud’s exclusion from the banquet links his writing to an exclusion from the social life of the community. “Now,” he writes, “I am an outcast [maudit]. I loathe my country.” The banquet figures the integrated social life that would have situated the young Rimbaud within a national and social context, giving him friends and identity. Imagining his exclusion from it, he imagines his starvation as a form of social isolation.
Rimbaud figures this exclusion from society as a failure to conform to the norms of contemporary masculinity. His exclusion from the banquet is prompted by his disillusionment with Beauty, figured as a woman whom he “pulled...down on my knees.—I found her embittered and I cursed her.” Once outside the banquet, “debauchery and the companionship of women were denied me.” He takes up with a demon—presumably his lover, Verlaine—who “do[es] not like women” on the grounds of their contemptible conformity to social norms: “All they want now is a secure position. When security is reached, their hearts and their beauty are set aside. Only cold scorn is left, the food of marriage today.” Rimbaud implicitly figures his tumultuous relationship with Verlaine as a conscientious abstention from the unsatisfying food of contemporary marriage. Like Hamsun, he figures his social exclusion through his exclusion from heterosexuality and with it the codified forms of masculinity that attend the bourgeois marriage. But outside these strictures, Rimbaud finds himself in the feminized position of the outlaw woman, “dancing the witches’ sabbath in a red clearing with old women and children.”

Exiling himself from women (at least, women in their roles as wives) and the reproductive institutions with which they are associated, Rimbaud disavows the possibility of genealogy. In his 1872 poem “Comedy of Thirst” (“Comédie de la soif”), he explicitly imagines thirst as the refusal of inheritance. He rejects in turn the comforting country drinks—dry wine, cider, milk, tea, and coffee—of his parents and grandparents; the “pure drinks | These water flowers for glasses” of stock poetic diction offered to him by the Spirit; and the fashionable absinthes and wines of his friends. At each juncture, Rimbaud’s devotion to his thirst is a rejection of a social context that would position his poetry in a lineage and grant it a social meaning.
In assuming a feminized position that excludes actual women, Rimbaud disrupts not just genealogical models of filiation and literary sociality, but also the prospect of active, masculine labor. As Rónán McDonald reminds us in relation to Ireland, the sustaining of the patrie is often understood in this period as relying on active, masculine citizenship. Rimbaud, who proudly proclaims, “I loathe my country [patrie],” actively resiles from this model of masculine citizenship, declaring himself “lazy and brutal.” Like the Irish modernists that McDonald discusses, Rimbaud develops a model of “male inactivity.” Refusing work, Rimbaud rejects the growing professionalization of writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, insisting on the aesthetic as a domain that is excluded from the capitalist demand to sell one’s labor. But as Kristin Ross has shown, Rimbaud’s refusal of work—like that of other writers in this tradition—also distinguishes itself from the aristocratic refusal of labor more typically associated with aesthetic autonomy, through Rimbaud’s willing “embrace of inferiority.” The art of hunger stages precisely this “inferior” aesthetic autonomy. Hunger dramatizes the stakes of the refusal of labor and professionalization for those who are not aristocratic, and reimagines autonomy not as a heroic freedom from social norms but as a feminized exclusion from them.

In the Letter to his Father (1919), Kafka develops Rimbaud’s espousal of a marginal masculinity, opposed to both genealogy and labor, in the context of the family dinner table. Written to and against his domineering father, the letter repeatedly figures his father’s hearty appetite as part of a constellation of traits associated with his hegemonic masculinity, while underscoring the son’s distance from this masculine ideal. “I did not, for instance, have your strength, your appetite, your skill,” Kafka writes, drawing a firm distinction between his father’s appetitive masculinity and his own disinterest in food. Against this backdrop, the fasting of a character like the hunger artist gestures towards an alternate model of masculinity, one premised not on appetite but on the feminized renunciation of food. As Heather Merle Benbow argues, “Adopting a marginalized, feminized status, Kafka’s male figures employ an oppositional eating practice that challenges hegemonic masculinity.” By renouncing food altogether, the hunger artist rejects the affirmative masculinity associated with Kafka’s father, in favor of a performance of indifference and weakened appetite.
What is at stake in these competing forms of masculinity is, for Kafka, a question of power and freedom, of control and constraint. In the *Letter*, he makes the dinner table the principal site of his relationship with his father, the latter’s teaching equated with “the teaching of proper behavior at a table.” This dinner table teaching is bound up in an oppressive system of power relations. Kafka imagines himself as “a slave” who “lived under laws invented only for me,” in contrast to both his father, who lived in a world “concerned with government, with the issuing of orders and with the annoyance about their not being obeyed,” and to the rest of the world, who “lived happily and free from order and from having to obey.” The practices and rituals of eating become for Kafka the source of his oppression, in contrast to both the tyranny of his father and the freedom of everyone else. The power dynamics of the family dinner table, in other words, translate the relations between dominant and subordinate masculinities into systems of oppression and exclusion, in which Kafka imagines himself, a picky eater and a vegetarian, in the oppressed position.
In this context, the hunger artist’s unfreedom comes into sharper focus. Like the Kafka of the *Letter*, the hunger artist suffers from a lack of appetite, which places him outside the hegemonic regime of dominant masculinity. His hunger might therefore be understood as the full expression of the subordinated masculinity—weak, subjugated, hungry—that Kafka develops in the *Letter*. But whereas Kafka imagines his dietary habits through and against the hegemonic masculinity of his father, the hunger artist’s performance of a weakened, hungry, and marginalized masculinity is not obviously defined in contradistinction to its successful or ideal form. The difference, in essence, lies in the distinction between oppression and unfreedom. In the *Letter to his Father*, Kafka imagines himself oppressed, reading the negotiation between different masculinities as an overt exercise of power by the father, which leaves the son in a position of subservience. His idiosyncratic dietary habits provide the territory on which this war is waged, the setting for the operation of his father’s power. In “A Hunger Artist,” in contrast, the eponymous figure is not persecuted on account of his refusal to eat. Instead, his hunger brings him up against different limitations to his autonomy and his freedom: the demands of the market, the mortality of his body, and his own lack of taste. He feels himself to be unfree, but not directly oppressed. His marginalized masculinity is not a directly oppositional position. Indeed, it barely comes into contact with the coercive operations of hegemonic masculinity. Unfree but not necessarily oppressed, the hunger artist—like the protagonist of *Hunger*—stands at the head of a tradition that imagines aesthetic autonomy as a position of feminized—and thus, unfree—masculinity.

4. The Anti-Politics of Refusal: Kafka–Hamsun–Melville
While the art of hunger carves out an alternate form of masculinity, its refusal of dominant gender roles does not necessarily entail a direct political challenge to them. As Felski suggests, “to assume that male identification with the feminine is necessarily subversive of patriarchal privilege may be to assume too much.” While the Kafka of the Letter is hyper-alert to the power dynamics inherent in the gendering of eating, the performance of masculinity in “A Hunger Artist” is considerably less interested in challenging or even identifying patriarchal systems of power. Moreover, as Benbow acknowledges, despite his critique of hegemonic masculinity, Kafka cannot easily be understood as a feminist writer. These texts depict a struggle between different forms of masculinity, rather than one that specifically valorizes women or acknowledges their more substantial oppression within the gendered power dynamics around food. More dramatically, Rimbaud’s attitude towards women is openly misogynistic, while Hamsun’s protagonist’s relationship with Ylajali begins with him stalking her and ends with him only barely refraining from raping her. Both reveal the extent to which failed or feminized masculinities may remain as bound up with misogyny and sexual violence as more successful or conventional masculine gender performances.

The ambivalence over the politics of the hunger artists’ gender performances points to a larger ambivalence over politics more generally in the art of hunger. Given their marginal position and their refusal of social norms, critics have often read writers in this tradition as heroic figures of critique, or as agents of political resistance. As Fredric Jameson notes, the received ways of reading Kafka see him as staging the trauma of “authority now staged as the father, the state, or God himself.” As the master critic of modern bureaucracy in a work like The Trial, or as a fabulist of the real (p.59) in his short stories, Kafka is understood as performing the political work of exposing the operations of authority, writing against the violence of the status quo.
That Kafka shares a position at the head of this tradition with Knut Hamsun, however, might already give us pause. Hamsun’s reputation continues to suffer from his enthusiastic embrace of Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s, which induced him to offer his vigorous support to the Nazi invasion of Norway during World War II and, incredibly, to send his Nobel Prize medal as a gift to Joseph Goebbels in 1943. Leo Löwenthal, a member of the Frankfurt School, offered one of the most influential condemnations of Hamsun’s politics in his 1957 study Literature and the Image of Man, which argues that the roots of Hamsun’s fascism are evident throughout his writing and as far back as the 1890 text Hunger. Löwenthal points to a number of themes in Hunger that he finds to be proto-fascist: “the abandonment of any participation in public life, submission to the stream of incomprehensible and incalculable forces, distrust of the intellect, flight from the city and escape to nature.” But these themes are also detectable in the writing of Kafka, Rimbaud, and many of the other hunger artists of this study—and particularly in those aspects of their writing that are commonly read as subversive, critical, or antagonistic to the political status quo.

My point is not that Löwenthal is right to find the traces of fascism in texts that predate the existence of the ideology by several decades, and still less that the similarity between Kafka or Rimbaud and Hamsun on these points ought to encourage us to think of the art of hunger as itself a fascist tradition. Instead, I want to suggest that the conditions that allow Hamsun, Rimbaud, and Kafka to be read together as exemplars of a single tradition might encourage us to rethink the political function of these texts. The art of hunger’s exploration of unfreedom is less a form of critique than the basis for an anti-politics, an attempt to resile from political commitment and to explore the ways in which we are unfree, above and beyond the ways in which we might be oppressed by specific political systems. Hunger itself provides the conditions that allow these writers to imagine unfreedom outside the terms of oppression, and therefore to imagine it in terms other than those that would generate political critique.
The clearest example of the way that hunger distorts the force of political critique in these texts comes in Herman Melville’s 1853 story *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. This story turns principally around the refusals of the eponymous character, a law-copyist or scrivener, as recounted by his employer. With a mounting absolutism, Bartleby refuses to do as instructed: he refuses to compare documents, to run errands, to answer questions about himself, and finally to copy at all, each time responding to requests with the opaque but immovable formula: “I would prefer not to.” Finally, he refuses to be fired, and refuses to leave the lawyer’s office, even after the lawyer himself moves out in desperation. He is eventually taken to prison, where his final words—“I would prefer not to dine today….It would disagree with me; I am unused to dinners”—foreshadow his apparent death from starvation some days later.83

As a commercial writer who refuses to submit to the demand for productivity levied on workers in the capitalist system, Bartleby epitomizes the anti-market, anti-work mode of aesthetic autonomy. Accordingly, Bartleby has often been read as a figure for his creator: “a parable,” as Leo Marx has influentially argued, “having to do with Melville’s own fate as a writer.”84 As both an alter ego for the literary Melville and a commercial writer with no aesthetic aspirations, Bartleby is suspended in the conceptual abyss then emerging between the aesthetic and the commercial, and his doomed refusal acquires its hopelessness from his attempt to pull away from the commercial structures towards something more autonomous, more aesthetic. In this sense, starvation functions for Bartleby, as for Kafka, Rimbaud, and Hamsun, as the mark of the irreconcilability of aesthetics and the market—that is, of the impossible espousal of aesthetic autonomy.
If Bartleby’s immovable refusals make his life into a figure for aesthetic autonomy, they have also made him, for a certain tradition of political thinkers, an exemplary figure of resistance. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri hold Bartleby up as “the beginning of a liberatory politics,” although they go on to caution that “it is only the beginning. Their refusal itself is empty….Beyond simple refusal, or as part of that refusal, we need also to construct a new mode of life and above all a new community.”

Slavoj Žižek radicalizes this position, arguing that Bartleby represents not a preliminary refusal, but the whole goal of political activity. He is “a kind of arche, the underlying principle that sustains the entire movement; far from ‘overcoming’ it, the subsequent work of construction, rather, gives (p.61) body to it.”

Similarly, for Gilles Delsuzue, “Bartleby is not the patient but the doctor of a sick America,” a redemptive figure who embodies the full promise of the American revolution as a project for the realization of a “community of celibates.” Giorgio Agamben makes a similar claim, arguing that Bartleby is the “paradigm” for the “coming community.” For Agamben, Bartleby’s paradigmatic political status derives from his embodiment of potentiality: “Bartleby is the extreme figure of the Nothing from which all creation derives; and at the same time, he constitutes the most implacable vindication of this Nothing as pure, absolute potentiality.”

As such, Agamben’s Bartleby creates a new ontology, on which his new politics will be founded. For all these thinkers, Bartleby promises a new system by his rejection of the status quo and of the actually existing political and economic arrangement. In this sense, these claims echo the most radical hopes for aesthetic autonomy in their commitment to understanding Bartleby’s disinterest as producing a new order and a new mode of life.
These theorists’ focus on Bartleby as the exemplary figure of a new political dispensation, however, relies on an emphasis on the political agency of what Deleuze calls Bartleby’s “formula”—“I would prefer not to”—at the expense of his starving body. Despite Žižek’s repeated calls for a politics that would “give body” to the formula “I would prefer not to,” Bartleby already, quite literally, gives body to this formula—and that body starves to death. There is a tension therefore between the liberatory possibilities held out for the isolated and verbalized act of resistance, and the narrative trajectory in which the formula’s repetition moves inexorably towards its speaker’s solitary death. Bartleby’s death not only suggests that resistance of this kind comes at significant personal cost. It also, more troublingly, forecloses the possibility of on-going political action, while leaving the social and political structures against which it is taken to act wholly untroubled.

A reading of Bartleby which foregrounds hunger therefore finds within the story less space for an affirmative politics, emphasizing instead the body as the horizon of necessity and unfreedom. Bartleby’s narrativized \( \textbf{(p.62)} \) body, which starves to death in his cell, and the declamatory statement (“I would prefer not to”) each have their own logics. The body offers a kind of completion or perfection of the formula, which strips the latter of its political efficacy at precisely the moment it reaches its most radical form. Bartleby’s politics, such as they are, therefore follow the same self-foreclosing logic as the hunger artist’s art. In this sense, Bartleby can be read as both the champion and the failure of the aesthetics of those theorists and philosophers, from Schiller to Rancière, who seek to stage a rapprochement between politics and aesthetics by elaborating the political potential of aesthetic autonomy. Bartleby’s role as an Ur-hunger artist therefore highlights the difficulty of deriving a politics from this art of unfreedom. It reveals the extent to which hunger in this tradition undoes an affirmative politics grounded in either resistance or potentiality, by bringing each up against the brute reality of a body that, by the nineteenth century, was understood as marking the limits of human agency and autonomy.
The fact that starvation functions in these texts to foreclose a politics of resistance does not of course mean that hunger always voids a political reading. On the contrary, the modernist period and the years that immediately preceded it saw some of the most important political deployments of hunger in Western history. As James Vernon has shown, the late nineteenth century was the period in which hunger was first constructed as a humanitarian ill, a malady that demands restitution through political and social response. The early twentieth century meanwhile became the period that saw the emergence of the hunger strike as a powerful form of protest, from the hunger strikes of the suffragist movement, to the rise of Irish hunger striking in the aftermath of the Easter Rising, to the internationally publicized fasts of Gandhi in India, which began in the 1910s and continued until 1948. Emerging against this backdrop of diverse forms of political and politicized hunger, the art of hunger shows not that starvation cannot be political, but that it is not inherently so.

For hunger to become a vehicle for politics, two conditions must be met. First, hunger must be made meaningful, the starving body induced to “speak” in order to bear witness to some form of injustice. Second, this meaning must be inscribed within a social field, so that the starving body ceases to be exceptional and instead can be read as exemplary of larger systems of power and broader social relations. It is this successful transformation of starvation into a political sign for collective suffering that allowed hunger to become a humanitarian crisis in the nineteenth century, and hunger striking to emerge as a political response to other forms of injustice in the twentieth. The art of hunger, however, fails both conditions, being neither social nor meaningful. To the extent that it stages the collapse of a social context for aesthetic autonomy, it is a figure not for collective suffering but for the idiosyncratic exclusions of the individual artist. At the same time, as I argue in Section 5, the art of hunger insists on the literalness of the starving body, resisting (but never entirely preventing) its transformation into symbol, metaphor, or sign. As a result, the art of hunger produces not a model for a new politics, but an exploration of the unfreedom of embodiment that outlines instead an anti-politics of refusal.

5. Anti-Referentiality And Empty Transcendence: Hamsun–Melville–Kafka–Rimbaud
The Modernist Art of Hunger

The hunger artists of this study seek to write a stubbornly literal art, a form of literature that, tautologically, will be only what it is. This literal art aims for the radical form of autonomy that Andrew Goldstone calls “autonomy from reference,” in which the text’s self-containment, its refusal of reference to the outside world, becomes the mark of its autonomy. The hunger artists, however, carry this anti-referential art in a more anti-social direction than the authors that Goldstone examines. Where Goldstone argues that writers like Wallace Stevens “understand that self-referential poetic as having a communal basis and a communal function,” the art of hunger instead denies reference precisely as part of a broader reservation about shared or collective meaning—and ultimately about hermeneutics as such. The emphasis on the literal that mobilizes this anti-hermeneutic art takes a range of forms, from a focus on the body and its performance of starvation, to an exploration of the rigorous and logical unfolding of a set of conditions, to an emphasis on the materiality of language at the expense of meaning. What these diverse formal manifestations share is a commitment to the literal in art. The literalism of the art of hunger imagines autonomous art as resting in an anti-social incommunicability that is also a refusal of transcendence and thus a tendency to remain at the level of language’s and the body’s materiality.
Hamsun’s protagonist’s invention of the word “Kuboaa” as he sits starving in a jail cell overnight typifies the attempt to free language from meaning. Running through a range of possible meanings for this word without committing to any, he concludes counter-intuitively, “It wasn’t difficult to make sense of such a word.” Viktor Shklovsky has argued that this passage is an example of “trans-sensible language,” a “‘word’ without concept and content that serve[s] to express pure emotion.” In this sense, Hamsun’s invented word embodies a specific and radical form of aesthetic autonomy, one in which reference itself is understood as compromising autonomy, and which therefore locates literary autonomy at the level of the word’s materiality. For Hamsun, this anti-hermeneutic quality allows him to assert his autonomy as a rejection of meaning’s social function. His deliberation over the word’s meaning is interrupted by his paranoia that meaning is being forced upon it from without: “Then it seems to me that someone was speaking, sticking his nose into my chat….I had invented the word myself, and I was perfectly within my rights in having it mean anything whatsoever.” Creating an imaginary interlocutor, Hamsun’s protagonist imagines the autonomy of his word—like the autonomy of his experience more generally—as social only in an aggressively oppositional way. In this sense, his version of autonomy from reference is significantly different to the more collective version that Goldstone identifies. Where Goldstone argues that Stevens’s use of tautology relies on shared meanings and understandings to give it sense, Hamsun’s new word violently refuses the imposition of shared meaning in order to preserve its irreducibly private meaning—and ends by producing no fixed meaning at all. Moving beyond the merely anti-referential, Hamsun’s invention of words becomes anti-communal and anti-hermeneutic.
The mutual reinforcement of the resistance to meaning and the refusal of the social is a common theme throughout the art of hunger, which searches for its autonomy in the negation of community. But while Hamsun pursues this through an unbounded inventiveness, for other writers in the art of hunger tradition anti-referentiality arises instead from an attempt to reimagine art as uninventive and uncreative. Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to,” for instance, is an exemplarily literal verbal correlate to his behavior, rigorously translating his stated preference into inaction. When Deleuze calls this statement a formula, he is gesturing towards its specific kind literalness: its ability to unfold predictably and with a minimum of flourish the consequences of a stated preference. This vision of literature as the predictable unfolding of all available options (p.65) is what Jameson finds so distinctive in Kafka’s work, and becomes, as I argue in Chapter 2, the formal principle of Beckett’s late work, whose unfolding is driven by a permutative compulsion. This emphasis on the rigorously logical and literal unfolding of consequences is, as Jameson argues of Kafka, “quite the opposite of inventiveness.” Its literalness undoes the possibility of an art founded on the autonomous individuality of the artist, making the writer instead into an amanuensis for the physical laws of body, causality, and mathematical or logical progression. This version of the literal as the rigorous and un inventive unfolding of possibilities differs formally and aesthetically from Hamsun’s invention of new words. Whereas Hamsun seeks a radical form of creativity, Kafka, Melville, and Beckett instead privilege the uncreative. Nonetheless, in pushing their respective positions to the limit of non-sense, they each end in a repudiation of hermeneutics and meaning’s social function.
Taking starvation as the source of this anti-social, anti-referential art, both these positions disrupt hunger’s potential to be politically efficacious. Nonetheless, this resistance to the literal produces a kind of leaky availability for interpretation, as Hamsun’s narrator finds in the proliferation of possible meanings that his word produces, or as we see in the obsessive attention accorded to Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” by generations of critics. By not being a sign for anything obvious, these texts are open to critics searching for unobvious meanings. As a result, they retain the faint prospect of political recuperation. By insisting on the literal unfreedom of their characters’ experience, they tempt critics to seek out the promise of freedom—or at least the force of critique—hovering at the text’s margins. A literature of unfreedom can therefore slip easily into a literature of critique, as unfreedom is read as a critical gesture. At the same time, the process of translating the starving body into language inevitably brings hunger into the orbit of interpretation. The presumptive interpretability of language makes the opacity of Bartleby’s formula into an invitation to interpretation, while the opacity of his starving body becomes simply a mark of its critical disposability. As a result, the art of hunger’s resistance to interpretation and its consequent refusal of hunger’s political uses is always at risk of producing a proliferation of interpretation and political meaning despite itself.

The art of hunger is therefore always at risk of failure. Indeed, in a diary entry from December 6, 1921—just months before he began writing “A Hunger Artist”—Kafka suggests that this failure is inherent in the nature of writing itself:

(p.66)

From a letter: “During this dreary winter I warm myself by it.” Metaphors are one among many things which makes me despair of writing. Writing’s lack of independence of the world, its dependence on the maid who tends the fire, on the cat warming itself by the stove; it is even dependent on the poor old human being warming himself by the stove. All these are independent activities ruled by their own laws; only writing is helpless, cannot live in itself, is a joke and a despair.”
The irresistible conclusion of Kafka’s lament is that writing cannot be autonomous insofar as it is referential; that its inevitable metaphoricity compromises both its independence and its ability to generate and be subject to its own laws. When critics of Kafka, from Adorno to Deleuze and Guattari to Fredric Jameson, follow Walter Benjamin’s reading of Kafka’s stories as parables without a doctrine, they suggest that his writing aspires to forestall this metaphoricity, and thereby to become literal. But if dependence is, as Kafka suggests, in the nature of language itself, then such an aspiration will always fail.

“A Hunger Artist” dramatizes this dilemma. By theorizing his art not through writing or any other representational medium, but through the performance of starvation, Kafka imagines an art that does not generate a gap between what it is and what it means. The performance of starvation is, ideally, neither referential nor metaphorical. Its force and its significance inhere straightforwardly in the minimally mediated starving body. Merging together two different freak show acts—the living skeleton, famous for his extreme thinness, and the hunger artist, renowned for his ability to fast for extended periods of time—Kafka’s hunger artist comes as close as possible to making the body and act coincide, turning them into such perfect signs for each other that they no longer truly signify. He therefore embodies what Deleuze and Guattari call Kafka’s “skeleton of sense,” in which the tautology of the literal undoes meaning: “Since things are as they are...he will abandon sense, render it no more than implicit.”
But as we have already seen, the hunger artist’s performance is inherently unobservable. His skeletal frame is therefore never a perfect analogue for his acts of self-starvation, slipping inevitably back into the slipperiness of signs that are at once dependent on the world and never entirely (p.67) themselves. Moreover, if the emphasis on performance is meant as the negation of writing’s miserable dependence, then it already fails in the straightforward sense that Kafka’s hunger artist is already written. As such, he is “dependent” on the world in ways that critics (myself included) cannot help but fall back on: he is tied to Kafka and thus to his diaries; to history and thus to historical figures like Giovanni Succi and other hunger artists on whom Kafka based his story; and to interpretation, and thus to just the kind of quasi-allegorical reading that allows us to take the hunger artist as a figure for the writer. Reading Kafka’s aesthetics out of “A Hunger Artist,” we are already plunged back into the problem of metaphor, forced to produce a metaphorical reading of a purportedly anti-metaphorical art. This dilemma replays Kafka’s despair over language, underscoring the way in which art—both in itself, and wherever it comes into contact with language—is cursed to remain dependent on the world, and in this sense, cursed to be unfree.
Kafka’s hunger artist reflects a paradox that inheres in the art of hunger more generally: he is unfree both in his attempt to be literal (because the literal would keep him confined to the materiality of his body, and prevent starvation’s repurposing as liberation through political or other meanings), and in the failure of that attempt (because this failure itself reflects the ways in which his autonomy is incomplete, always bound to the world, without thereby moving him beyond it). Freedom, in this context, would seem to require a movement beyond the literal entirely, a leap into a transcendent realm in which neither bodies nor social relations were limiting factors. In fact, “The Hunger Artist”—whose protagonist’s fast, like that of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus before him, lasts for forty days—alludes to a religious reading that would understand starvation in these terms, as an act of transcendence in the traditional ascetic mode. In this too, however, the hunger artist fails, producing only what Peter Sloterdijk calls a “beheaded asceticism, in which the supposed tensile strain from above proves to be an aversive tension from within.”\textsuperscript{102} Tracing his fast to a personal failure of taste, the hunger artist does away with the self-overcoming, self-transcendent movement of asceticism. For Kafka’s hunger artist, for whom his hunger is his art, the aesthetic is located in a practice of autonomy that frustrates transcendence through its emphasis on the literal and the immediate. In this failure of transcendence, the hunger artist is thrown back onto the finite confines of his material body, \textsuperscript{(p.68)} his art unfree in the metaphysical sense that it allows no scope to move outside of these material limitations.
Rimbaud develops Kafka’s flirtation with an art of failed transcendence and empty religiosity. In a letter to Paul Demeny in 1871, he imagines himself as a “seer [voyant]” producing a new form of art “by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses.”\textsuperscript{103} The goal of this derangement is “reaching the unknown,” as he writes to Georges Izambard around the same time.\textsuperscript{104} In this sense, it is an aspiration for a kind of transcendence, a faith in poetry’s capacity to open up hitherto unknown paths. But as Hugo Friedrich argues, Rimbaud ultimately finds only an “empty transcendence,” in which a religious vocabulary is repurposed in the performance of the impossibility of transcendence.\textsuperscript{105} Hunger, with its long-standing association with asceticism and mysticism, is the central site of this repurposing, as Friedrich notes: “Hunger and thirst are frequent in Rimbaud’s diction. These are the same words that the mystics and Dante used, in keeping with biblical language, to denote sacred yearning. In Rimbaud, however, such passages point toward the unquenchable.”\textsuperscript{106}

Rimbaud’s 1872 poem “Fêtes de la faim” (Feasts of Hunger) exemplifies the empty transcendence of his use of hunger. The poem’s first four-line stanza opens:

\begin{verbatim}
Si j’ai du goût ce n’est guères
Que pour la terre et les pierres
Dinn! dinn! dinn! dinn! Mangeons l’air,
Le roc, le charbon, le fer
If I have any \textit{taste}, it is for hardly
Anything but rocks and stone
Dinn! dinn! dinn! dinn! Let us eat air
Rock, coal, iron\textsuperscript{107}
\end{verbatim}
Repudiating both the normal appetites that he elsewhere associates with integration into society, and the yearning for a truly incorporeal food—the body of the lord, manna from heaven—that we associate with religious fasting, Rimbaud’s desire to eat stones produces an empty transcendence. Preferring to eat rocks, he simultaneously disavows his bodily need for food, and intensifies his affiliation with the material world. Even when his hunger turns its attention in a later stanza to religious artefacts—“Les vieilles pierres d’églises | Les galets, fils de déluges” (The old stones of (p.69) churches | The pebbles, sons of floods)—he can engage them only in their most brutally material forms, seeking transcendence, again and again, through the untranscendable stone. The hunger for stones will return in Beckett’s Molloy, who takes great delight in sucking pebbles (Chapter 2), and in Auster’s poetry, where the stone is a repeated motif for the indigestible (Chapter 3). In each case, it marks a limit of transcendence, and thus signifies the impossibility of turning hunger into asceticism, of reimagining privation as a route to spiritual freedom.

“Fêtes de la faim” is reprinted in a revised form in the “Alchimie du verbe” (Alchemy of the Word) section of A Season in Hell. In this later version, the summons to eat the inedible —“Dinn! dinn! dinn! dinn! Let us eat air | Rock, coal, iron”—is revised to suggest that the impossible meal is already and perpetually under way: “Je déjeune toujours d’air | De roc, de charbons, de fer” (I always feed on air, | Rock, coal and iron).108 This new version produces the speaker of the poem as a product of what Friedrich calls “absolute metaphor,” a figure in which “metaphor, no longer a mere figure of comparison, now creates an identity.”109 The speaker of “Fêtes de la faim” is (and is not merely like) the kind of (impossible, unimaginable) person who can find nourishment in air and minerals. He is the product of a species of language that, as Kristin Ross suggests, seeks “to verge beyond representation, to function as a machine to produce, not reproduce, the real.”110 In this sense, Rimbaud’s rock-eating speaker seeks to solve the same problem with metaphor that Kafka laments in his diaries: the problem of metaphor’s (and language’s) representational reliance on the world. The method of “absolute metaphor” strives towards a kind of language that is no longer bound to the world—a kind of language that is autonomous in Kafka’s radical and anti-referential sense.
The autonomy of this anti-referential projection of an alternate reality is heightened in Rimbaud by his poetry’s autopoetic tendency, in which the poem generates itself from its own internal logic. The lines that open the 1872 version of the poem, for instance, verge on the nonsensical on the level of pure meaning: “Ma faim, Anne, Anne | Fuis sur ton âne” (My hunger, Anne, Anne, | Flee on your donkey). They make sense only on a strictly aural level, where they can be understood as arising from the progression of sounds: its half-rhyme with “faim” summoning “Anne”; the homonym of “Anne” and “âne” producing the donkey. Like Hamsun’s invented words and like the art of hunger’s inclination towards an anti-referential art more generally, this autopoetic impulse locates the autonomy of Rimbaud’s poem in its capacity to produce a self-contained language that does not rely on reference to the outside world. Indeed, Rimbaud’s speaker’s hunger is nurtured by his desire to feast not only on rocks, but also on “le pré des sons,” which Wallace Fowley translates as “the meadow of bran” but which could just as easily be “the meadow of sounds” (son meaning both “bran” and “sound” in French). This pun imagines language as an alternate food, taking its material aspects—its sound rather than its meaning—as the source of its capacity to nourish. It reflects an extreme form of aesthetic autonomy, one analogous to Shklovsky’s trans-sensible language, which develops the anti-referential desire for a literal art into a theory of art as the generator of self-contained worlds.
Seeking in poetry an alternate, self-generating world, Rimbaud’s writing rejects both the social and the referential. He seeks autonomy in a liberation from the tyranny of the world as it is, from the rule of a world in which one only eats food and transcendence involves a leap into the immaterial. This approach inevitably fails, running headlong into the inevitable disappointments of empty transcendence and the flight back to the materiality of language and stones. In this sense, as writers have repeatedly affirmed, Rimbaud writes an art of the impossible. As Henry Miller writes, “The future is all his, even though there be no future.”\textsuperscript{113} Or as Yves Bonnefoy puts it, in a study that puts impossibility at the center of Rimbaud’s writing: “So Rimbaud made himself collide with the impossible, without resolving anything, without any miracle taking place.”\textsuperscript{114} For both Bonnefoy and Miller, Rimbaud’s status as a precursor for their respective literary projects is grounded in his necessarily failed confrontation with the impossible.
Bonnefoy seeks to redeem this Rimbaudian impossibility as a route to freedom. It is, he argues, a “tragic confrontation with the absolute” that leads Rimbaud to write, “the most liberating [poetry]...in the history of our language.” As he writes in the concluding line of his study: “the Phoenix of freedom, which makes its body out of burnt hopes, comes to beat the air here with its new wings.” If Rimbaud’s poetry were liberating, however, it would be so only in the sense that he has left society and its understanding of reality behind in a definitive way, launching himself into a confrontation with the absolute that can only be undertaken alone. But as Miller argues, to the extent that “the liberty he demanded was freedom for his ego to assert itself unrestrained,” then, “that is not freedom.” And even this unsatisfactory egotistical freedom fails. In the image of eating rocks, Rimbaud runs up against the hard materiality of a world that, even in his imagination, remains stony and resistant. His empty transcendence refers itself back to the material world, and his attempt to find autonomy through the absolute metaphor or the autopoetic poem leads him not to transcend the known but, as he writes in the Season in Hell version of “Fêtes de la faim,” to “consume myself.” As a result, Rimbaud’s quest for freedom is always deferred, until, in the final line of A Season in Hell, this deferral points beyond poetry itself, to a future free from the disorder of his writerly life, in which “I shall be free to possess truth in one body and soul.” Like Hamsun, Rimbaud locates freedom in an imagined future beyond the constraints of writing and hunger. He thus relegates writing to a period of unfreedom, associated with hunger, his divorce from truth, and his immersion in the blind impulses of the body. Regaining his appetite and attaining freedom become the same ambition—one that can only be realized by abandoning his vocation as a poet.
Read together, as they have often been by later critics and authors, Rimbaud, Melville, Hamsun, and Kafka elaborate a theory of hunger’s relationship to literature. They posit hunger as a figure for a form of aesthetic autonomy that is both unfree and at risk of losing its social context. Outside the market and its systems of labor, outside masculinity and its models of genealogy and activity, outside liberal subjectivity and its assumptions about free will and free choice, the art of hunger sees aesthetic autonomy as a form of rebellion against society and its structures. But because it refuses all forms of community, it does not produce freedom or the impetus for political change. Instead, it traces an art of unfreedom that takes the starving body and the material, sonorous text as both the limit of its authors’ freedom and the site of their art. The unfree, anti-social writing of the art of hunger provides the groundwork for the writers of surrealism and the Lost Generation, with whom this chapter began, and through them for a vernacular tradition of the starving artist. While for these writers, this reprisal of starvation helps to mark their position within a literary milieu, for another set of late twentieth-century writers (p.72) the art of hunger instead serves as a way of figuring aesthetic autonomy in places where their milieu no longer embraces autonomy. For these later writers, like their modernist and proto-modernist forebears, the collapse of aesthetic autonomy’s social context produces an art that can no longer imagine itself as free. The fate of this unfree aesthetic autonomy as it mediates modernism’s role in the later twentieth century is the subject of Chapters 2–4 of this book.

Notes:

(2) Ibid.,


(9) Ibid.,

(10) Ibid.

(11) Ibid.,


(17) Ibid.,


(22) Ibid.,

(23) Ibid.,


(25) Ibid.,

(26) Ibid., Die Erzählungen

(27) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16.


(31) Ibid.,

(32) Ibid.,

(33) Ibid., Die Erzählungen

(34) Ibid.,


(38) Hamsun, *Hunger*, 43.


(41) Humpál, *Modernist Narrative*, 57–8; see also Alber et al.’s claim that “the narrating and narrative parts of the consciousness are conflated”: Jan Alber et al., “Unnatural Narrative, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models,” *Narrative* 18, no. 2 (May 2010): 123.

(42) Humpál, *Modernist Narrative*, 57–8; see also Alber et al.’s claim that “the narrating and narrative parts of the consciousness are conflated”: Jan Alber et al., “Unnatural Narrative, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models,” *Narrative* 18, no. 2 (May 2010): 123.

(43) Ibid.,


(49) Ibid.,


(52) Peter Sjølsyt-Jackson, *Troubling Legacies: Migration, Modernism and Fascism in the Case of Knut Hamsun* (London: Continuum, 2010), 27.


(54) Hamsun, Hunger, 28.


(61) Ibid.,

(62) Ibid.,


(64) Ibid.,
(65) Ibid.,

(66) Ibid.,

(67) Ibid.,

(68) Ibid.,

(69) Ibid.,


(71) Rimbaud, Complete Works, 269.

(72) McDonald, “Nothing to Be Done,” 72; see also Miller, The Time of the Assassins, 21–2.


(76) Kafka, Letter to his Father, 23.

(77) Ibid.,

(78) Felski, The Gender of Modernity, 93.


(92) Ibid.,

(93) Hamsun, *Hunger*, 75.


(95) Hamsun, *Hunger*, 76.


(98) Ibid.,

The Modernist Art of Hunger


(104) Ibid.,


(106) Ibid.,


(108) Ibid.,


(112) Ibid.,

(113) Miller, *The Time of the Assassins*, xi.


(115) Ibid.,

(116) Ibid.,


(119) *posséder la vérité dans une âme et un corps* Ibid.,