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“Was auf den Tisch kam, mußte aufgegessen [...] werden”: Food, Gender, and Power in Kafka’s Letters and Stories

“Nur der Hunger kann das ganz und gar Eigentümliche sein; denn mit jeder Speise wird zugleich das Gesetz der anderen, werden die Spielregeln der im Verbot gesetzten Kulinarik übernommen.”¹
—Neumann, “Literatur” 189.

The characters in some of Kafka’s most extraordinary short fiction, and the figure of Kafka himself in his letters,² exhibit a complex relationship to food. For them, the act of eating is invested with meaning and often with power. Food can be the medium through which the authority of the father is exercised (*Brief an den Vater*), it can represent a philosophical conundrum (“Forschungen eines Hundes”) or the unattainable object of a transformed appetite (“Die Verwandlung”). Eating—or fasting—can be a marker of difference (“Ein Hungerkünstler”), a signifier of social isolation (“Die Verwandlung,” “Der Bau”) or the ultimate means of self-assertion (“Der Bau”). The significance of food and eating in Kafka has been interpreted as a response to the Enlightenment paradigm and the 19th-century *Diätetik*,³ and gender critiques have recently attained their rightful prominence in Kafka scholarship.⁴ Yet so far the intersection of the two approaches has not been explored. This article will show that Kafka’s approach to food in his short fiction and letters contains a strong critique of the gender hegemony of his day. It will be argued here that a voracious appetite and the consumption of meat signify masculine privilege in the fiction and letters, and that therefore fasting and vegetarianism represent a rejection of masculinity in those terms. Adopting a marginalized, feminine status, Kafka’s male figures employ an oppositional eating practice which challenges hegemonic masculinity. The focus of this article is the novella “Die Verwandlung” (1915), the short stories “Ein Hungerkünstler” (1924), “Der Bau” (1931), “Forschungen eines Hundes” (1931), and some letters, in particular the *Brief an den Vater* (1935, written in 1919).⁵

Kafka will be portrayed here neither as a feminist nor as a proponent of vegetarianism or animal rights. Instead, this reading invokes Kafka's acknowledged status as a critic of hegemony and a literary expert on power.⁶ Only relatively recently have feminist scholars begun to argue that Kafka's critique of power extends to a critique of hegemonic masculinity. In so doing, critics are reluctant to claim Kafka as a "feminist" author, whilst acknowledging that "Kafka portrays relations between the sexes as power relations."⁷ This article will build on existing insights into Kafka's critique of masculine power and demonstrate the central role that food and eating (or fasting) play in this critique. Indeed, food is inscribed with gendered power relations and eating (or fasting) is at times a tool for the deployment of gendered power. At times, however, it can become a strategy by which to challenge or undermine that power.

Any discussion of the meanings attributed to food and eating in Kafka's work should acknowledge the privileged position of the fast in Kafka's fiction. When eating or fasting are thematized in Kafka's fiction and letters, their subjection to social protocol and investment with cultural meaning are foregrounded. To eat is, for Kafka's figures, to consume social—and therefore gendered—norms. This point can best be made by considering the consequences for male characters of the refusal to eat, i.e., their rejection of the values ingested in eating behavior. Numerous critics have seen in the story "Ein Hungerkünstler" the prime example of fasting as social isolation.⁸ In this story, the eponymous protagonist astounds spectators with his prolonged periods of abstinence. However, when the public loses interest in his art, he continues to fast, becoming the only spectator of his enormous achievement, an overlooked sideshow act. Maud Ellmann notes that much of the fasting in Kafka's stories takes place in situations of confinement: in the hunger artist's cage, in Gregor Samsa's room in "Die Verwandlung," in the creature's burrow in "Der Bau," and in the self-imposed exile of the investigating dog of "Forschungen eines Hundes" (93). Ellmann links these texts to the discourses of imprisoned hunger strikers, who "create a dungeon of the body by rejecting influx from the outer world" (93). For Ellmann, the social dislocation of the hunger artist is symbolized most explicitly by the cage, which physically confines the faster in his own world (65). An entirely different reality prevails in this world; the hunger artist looks upon food of any kind with a sense of disgust, even after forty days of fasting. The inability of the spectators to comprehend the extent of his fasting depresses him: "Gegen diesen Unverstand, gegen diese Welt des Unverstandes zu kämpfen war unmöglich" (HK 168). Despite the crowds who come to view his emaciated form, the hunger artist—through his abstinence—remains alone as the only satisfied spectator of his own art (HK 165). Ultimately, the hunger artist dies in his cage, unable to re-enter for any significant period of time the world of those who eat.

Similarly, in the novella “Die Verwandlung,” in which the protagonist ultimately dies of starvation, Gregor Samsa’s isolation from his family is caused as much by a metamorphosis in appetite as by his curious new physical form. In a bourgeois household in which social roles are solidified around the dining table, Gregor’s inability to eat with the family, or even to enjoy the same foods, imposes upon him complete social isolation. His sister closes and locks the door to Gregor’s room after bringing him his food, “da sie wußte, daß Gregor nicht vor ihr essen würde” (V 28). Significantly, Gregor also loses the ability to communicate through language. The inability to eat, to the extent that eating is also a symbolic and communicative act in this socialized context, is a corollary of this loss of language. The sister approaches a kind of communication with Gregor only by commenting aloud, and referring to Gregor in the third person, on his eating behavior:

“Heute hat es ihm aber geschmeckt,” sagte sie, wenn Gregor unter dem Essen tüchtig aufgeräumt hatte, während sie im gegenteiligen Fall, der sich allmählich immer häufiger wiederholte, fast traurig zu sagen pflegte: “Nun ist wieder alles stehen geblieben.” (V 29)

Beyond the obvious social isolation of the hunger artist and of Gregor Samsa, it has been suggested by critics that these male figures are feminized, or at least de-masculinized. Elizabeth Boa, for instance, argues at length that Gregor’s confinement to the home is a form of feminization. Moreover, Gregor’s room becomes a “refuge from masculinity, protecting the insect both from the father and from the paternal role” (Boa 125). Dagmar Lorenz maintains that “Die Verwandlung” problematizes the notion of the male breadwinner: initially, Gregor is the family’s breadwinner and as such emasculates the father who is “initially configured in a feminine role.” This is reversed when Gregor’s incapacitation leads to the father’s masculine rehabilitation as the breadwinner (185). For Gregor, “the ensuing decrease in masculinity is visualised as a loss of humanity altogether” (Lorenz 185). It will later be argued—with Boa, who sees the hunger artist as emasculated (174)—that the hunger artist is similarly de-masculinized. In contrast to Boa, however, this article will argue that this de-masculinization is manifested specifically in relation to his failure to consume meat, and that the vegetarian diet of the beetle Samsa is an index of Gregor’s retreat from masculinity.⁹

Not all of Kafka’s characters are as “successful” in their fasting as the hunger artist. Others, such as the investigating dog, chew distractedly, then spit out, ingest passionlessly, search in vain for a food they like, or, like Kafka himself, craft their own dietary regimen, contrary to the hegemonic rules. Critics point to Kafka’s letters for evidence of his own alternative diet. Thomas Pekar believes characterizations of Kafka’s diet as merely “vegetarian” miss the mark: vegetarians, Pekar argues, invest eating with meaning, something Kafka and his figures wish to transcend: “es [geht] ihm einzig und alleine um

ein von aller Bedeutung 'gereinigtes' Essen" (339).¹⁰ Interestingly, Pekar sees in Kafka's letters a gustatory enjoyment his characters are not able to find, for example in an account of his eating plan in a letter to Felice:

Abend um 10 im Winter Joghurt, Simonsbrot, Butter, Nüsse aller Art, Kastanien, Datteln, Feigen, Trauben, Mandeln, Rosinen, Kürbisse, Bananen, Äpfel, Birnen, Orangen. Alles wird natürlich in Auswahl gegessen und nicht etwa durcheinander wie aus einem Füllhorn in mich hineingeworfen. Es gibt kein Essen, das für mich anregender wäre als dieses. (qtd. in Pekar 346 n.64)

Conspicuous about this inventory of foods is that it in no way resembles a modern European dinner. The list consists of mostly raw ingredients, eaten separately, and is as such reminiscent of a pre-agricultural, hunter-gatherer diet; there is an absence of culinary technique, such as cooking or the combination of ingredients. A similar food inventory appears in "Die Verwandlung" when, in an attempt to find an appropriate food for her brother in what is described dryly as "seinem gegenwärtigen Zustand" (V 27), the sister lays out a selection of food on newspaper:

Da war altes halbverfaultes Gemüse; Knochen vom Nachtmahl her, die von festgewordener weißer Soße umgeben waren; ein paar Rosinen und Mandeln, ein Käse, den Gregor vor zwei Tagen für ungenießbar erklärt hatte; ein trockenes Brot, ein mit Butter beschmiertes Brot und ein mit Butter beschmiertes und gesalzenes Brot. (V 28)

Gregor devours the cheese which he had, in his earlier condition, before the metamorphosis, declared inedible, along with the rotting vegetables and sauce: "... die frischen Speisen dagegen schmeckten ihm nicht, er konnte nicht einmal ihren Geruch vertragen" (V 28).

To understand Kafka's food inventory, a set of dichotomies established by Claude Lévi-Strauss can be usefully invoked. In *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964), he establishes in the eating and other social customs of the Bororo "Indians" of South America a set of dichotomies converging on the contrast of raw and cooked. Cooking in Lévi-Strauss's study is a process of mediation between nature and society (64–65, 336). Rotten vegetable matter was a common ingredient in the pre-agricultural diet of the people in the area covered by the study (169, 270), and Lévi-Strauss identifies a double contrast:

...on the one hand, between what is raw and what is cooked, and on the other, between the fresh and the decayed. The raw/cooked axis is characteristic of culture; the fresh/decayed one of nature, since cooking brings about the cultural transformation of the raw, just as putrefaction is its natural transformation. (142)

Gregor's ability to ingest with delight "inedible," decaying food such as the rotting vegetables, and Kafka's own preference for uncooked foods position them in opposition to the cultural process of cooking. Kafka's preferred diet

expresses an affinity with “nature” rather than “culture,” his preference for raw and rotting food connotes an unsocialized status—one associated with femininity in Lévi-Strauss’s study.¹¹ For Gregor, his marginality is expressed in his exile from the family dining table. Thus the food he consumes includes some “cooked” foods (associated by Lévi-Strauss with “culture”) that have been discarded from the dining table and are now undergoing the “natural” process of decay. Moreover, the dairy products—cheese and white sauce—which the evening before would not have been out of place in the family meal, appear here in a form reminiscent of Julia Kristeva’s “abject.” The hardened white sauce recalls the skin on milk invoked by Kristeva in her account of food loathing (2). Gregor gratefully devours the decayed and congealed dairy items offered him, items which—in their opposition to culture and their invocation of the maternal body—should arouse disgust in the properly encultured subject. Even in an acceptable form, milk products are associated with femininity and aligned with feminine tastes (Rousseau 358).

When Kafka’s characters fast they are participating in a practice which in the 19th century had come to connote femininity. Devotional fasting—in which men also participated—fell out of favor during the Enlightenment, although women persisted at it into the 19th century (Brumberg 99), and a privatized, bourgeois form of fasting came to be associated with hysteria—a disorder of women. As Ellmann notes, a once public ritual became a private neurosis (67). Thus the fasting of Kafka’s characters must be read in the context of the feminization of the fast from the 19th century on. The feminine associations of the fasting and meta-social feeding of Kafka’s figures can be further highlighted with reference to Hilde Bruch’s groundbreaking study of eating disorders, an ailment now attributed almost exclusively to young women. Outlining two types of feeding behavior, Bruch shows how social organization around eating is arranged in accordance with a domestic (and implicitly gendered) hierarchy:

In one, each searches for himself, ranging freely, taking small items of food here and there. In the other type, commensalism, there is a hierarchy or rank whereby the highest-ranking male is accorded the privilege of satisfying himself first. Snacking or vagabond feeding is appropriate behavior when catastrophic starvation reigns, when living on scraps picked up here and there as one moves about restlessly is the only solution. This type of snack feeding is considered the more primitive, original type of feeding [...]. With higher organization of societies the pattern has been established whereby the family sits down at the dinner table *according to rank* and remains together for a considerable period of time. (11, emphasis added)

We might interpret Kafka’s list of uncooked foods as foraging, a “vagabond feeding” which eludes the gender hierarchy inherent in the “higher organization” of the bourgeois dining table. The pertinence of this observation will become more apparent when the site of the family meal-taking itself comes

under scrutiny in “Die Verwandlung” and the *Brief an den Vater*. It will become clear that these texts exhibit a keen perception of gender hierarchy as it is enacted around the dining table.

The following nuanced exploration of the masculine and feminine roles at the bourgeois dining table centers upon the *Brief an den Vater* and the novella “Die Verwandlung.” Precedent has been set for dealing with the former alongside Kafka’s literary *œuvre* by scholars who have argued that the letter is imbued by a literary sensibility which distinguishes it from purely autobiographical writing. Of particular relevance here is Walter Müller-Seidel’s convincing defense of a literary approach to the former as a text which is much more than biographical material, and his comparison of father figures in the *Brief an den Vater*, “Die Verwandlung,” and “Das Urteil.”¹²

For a child, the purveyors of the *Diätetik* are, most immediately, parents. In their role as “Erzieher” they impart to the child the values of the *Diätetik* and ensure its observance by virtue of their power over the child. In a letter to his sister, Elli, Kafka laments “die ungeheuerliche Übermacht des Elternpaares gegenüber den Kindern während vieler Jahre” (*Briefe* 344). In Kafka’s damning appraisal of family life both parents stand condemned for perpetuating a violent and destructive pedagogy. Kafka invokes a metaphor of consumption when speaking of the tyranny of parental rule, referring to Kronos’s eating of his sons as merciful in comparison to the figurative devouring to which he believes modern children fall victim (*Briefe* 345). Parental rule is characterized as a violent act exercised particularly by the father: “er zerhämmt [...] das Kind” (*Briefe* 345). If the mother’s rule is described by comparison as a tender tyranny (*Briefe* 346), still the aim of parental authority is “das Kind in den Boden, aus dem es kam, zurückzustampfen” (*Briefe* 346).

In “Die Verwandlung,” the traditional hierarchy of the bourgeois family meal is thrown into disorder when Gregor—by virtue of his metamorphosis—withdraws from it, relinquishing his role as the family breadwinner. As a result, the family is forced to take in three lodgers to pay the rent. These paying guests install themselves at the dining table:

Sie setzten sich oben an den Tisch, wo in früheren Zeiten der Vater, die Mutter und Gregor gegessen hatten, entfalteten die Servietten und nahmen Messer und Gabel in die Hand. Sofort erschien in der Tür die Mutter mit einer Schüssel Fleisch und knapp hinter ihr die Schwester mit einer Schüssel hochgeschichteter Kartoffeln. [...] Die Zimmerherren beugten sich über die vor sie hingestellten Schüsseln, als wollten sie sie vor dem Essen prüfen, und tatsächlich zerschnitt der, welcher in der Mitte saß und den anderen zwei als Autorität zu gelten schien, ein Stück Fleisch noch auf der Schüssel, offenbar um festzustellen, ob es mürbe genug sei und ob es nicht etwa in die Küche zurückgeschickt werden sollte. Er war befriedigt, und Mutter und Schwester, die gespannt zugesehen hatten, begannen aufatmend zu lächeln. (V 48–49)

The “natural” hierarchy of family meals (“der Vater, die Mutter und Gregor”) has been replaced here by a hierarchy founded on a financial arrangement. The lodgers obtain their status not by virtue of paternity but by payment. The nurturing and subservient role falls nonetheless to the Samsa women; the mother and sister are the visible face of subservience while the indignity inflicted on the father is his confinement to the feminine realm of the kitchen for his meals. He may have been deposed from his rightful place at the head of the table but it is the role of his wife and daughter to serve masculine authority wherever it arises.

Hermann Kafka, in contrast to the emasculated father of “Die Verwandlung,” is at his most potent when seated at the dining table. Indeed, Kafka’s characterization of his father in the *Brief an den Vater* reveals a consistent interlinking of appetite and masculine power. The mere physicality of his father is a source of fear for Kafka: “Ich war ja schon niedergedrückt durch Deine bloße Körperlichkeit” (BV 11). This imposing physicality is coupled with an “Eroberungswillen” (BV 7) which Kafka associates with his paternal lineage: “Du dagegen ein wirklicher Kafka an Stärke, Gesundheit, *Appetit*, Stimmkraft, Redebegabung, Selbstzufriedenheit, Weltüberlegenheit” (BV 7, emphasis added). Hermann Kafka couples (masculine) strength with appetite in his militaristic parenting: “Du muntertest mich z.B. auf, wenn ich gut salutierte und marschierte, aber ich war kein künftiger Soldat, oder Du muntertest mich auf, wenn ich *kräftig essen* und sogar Bier dazu trinken konnte” (BV 10, emphasis added).¹³

Hermann Kafka’s arbitrary tyranny is heightened at mealtimes, when his appetite is the standard by which the child measures himself:

Was auf den Tisch kam, mußte aufgegessen, über die Güte des Essens durfte nicht gesprochen werden—Du aber fandest das Essen oft ungenießbar, nanntest es “das Fressen,” das “Vieh” (die Köchin) hatte es verdorben. Weil Du entsprechend Deinem kräftigen Hunger und Deiner besonderen Vorliebe alles schnell, heiß und in großen Bissen gegessen hast, mußte sich das Kind beeilen, düstere Stille war bei Tisch, unterbrochen von Ermahnungen: “zuerst iß, dann sprich” oder “schneller, schneller, schneller” oder “siehst Du, ich habe schon längst aufgegessen.” (BV 14)

Kafka identifies his lack of strength and appetite—as compared to his father—as a source of shame (BV 15). Clearly, a voracious appetite for food is portrayed as an index of masculinity in the Kafka household. Franz Kafka is all too aware that he cannot live up to the burly masculinity of his father. A more “masculine” child, like his nephew Felix, Kafka writes, might be better able to withstand the commands of Hermann Kafka’s “Donnerstimme” (BV 18).

“Das Kafka’sche” as it is depicted in the letter is synonymous with masculine dominance (appetite, power, physical strength). Hermann Kafka is represented as one who measures all virtue by the presence or absence of “das

Kafka'sche." Telling, then, are the representations of the father's relationships to the women of the family:

Am glücklichsten in ihrer Stellung zu Dir war Valli. Am nächsten der Mutter stehend, fügte sie sich Dir auch ähnlich, ohne viel Mühe und Schaden. Du nahmst sie aber auch, eben in Erinnerung an die Mutter, freundlicher hin, trotzdem wenig Kafka'sches Material in ihr war. Aber vielleicht war Dir gerade das Recht; wo nichts Kafka'sches war, konntest selbst Du nichts derartiges verlangen; Du hattest auch nicht, wie bei uns andern das Gefühl, daß hier etwas verloren gieng, das mit Gewalt gerettet werden mußte. (BV 30)

The violence to which the son sees himself subjected is apparently intended to bring into relief the masculinity treasured by the father which, when absent in the daughter, is not cause for concern: "Übrigens magst Du das Kafka'sche, soweit es sich in Frauen geäußert hat, niemals besonders geliebt haben" (BV 30–31). That "das Kafka'sche" is indeed a masculine trait is exemplified in Kafka's portrayal of his sister Ottla. Ottla is described as "ausgestattet mit den besten Kafka'schen Waffen" (BV 32), whereby the militaristic imagery is tellingly masculine.¹⁴ Ottla and Hermann Kafka—as opposed to father and son—are in constant conflict *because* of Ottla's Kafka-like traits: "Ihr zwei aber waret immer in Kampfstellung, immer frisch, immer bei Kräften. Ein ebenso großartiger, wie trostloser Anblick. Zu allererst seid Ihr Euch ja gewiß sehr nahe gewesen" (BV 32). Heinz Politzer writes in 1966 of the letter, that "at the roots of the conflict [between Kafka and his father] lay the father's abundance of what he himself was most lacking, vitality" (287). This apparently gender-neutral quality must now be updated to acknowledge that it is a *masculine* vitality which Hermann Kafka seeks, in his son above all.

Lacking as he does significant traces of the masculine "Kafka'sche," Franz Kafka's greater identification is with his maternal lineage: "...ich, um es sehr abgekürzt auszudrücken, ein Löwy mit einem gewissen Kafka'schen Fond" (BV 7). Thomas Anz notes the tendency in the *Brief an den Vater* for Kafka to perceive himself and his father in oppositional categories (26)—"ich mager, schwach, schmal, Du stark, groß, breit"—and the elaborate Löwy–Kafka distinction is a clear example of this contrastive characterization. Importantly, though, the attributes which Kafka ascribes to the father and to himself, dovetail neatly with dominant early 20th-century gender categories. Kafka sees in the physical endowment of his father the antithesis of his own inadequate form. Gilman describes Kafka's "anxiety about 'masculinity'" (101) as informed by nationalist anti-Semitic discourses which posited the male Jewish body as physically inferior, particularly in regard to military service. The contrast between an idealized "soldier's body" and "the nervous, diseased body of the Jewish male" is for Gilman synonymous with the feminization of the male Jew (105–06). In light of Gilman's analysis, Kafka's shame at his physical inadequacy relative to his father position him and his father on opposite sides of a gendered divide.

This looming figure of Kafka's father is described by Kafka as "mein eigentlicher Erzieher" (BV 17), whereas the mother is portrayed as an unknowing accomplice to the father's pedagogical "System" (BV 30): "Es ist wahr, daß die Mutter grenzenlos gut zu mir war, aber alles das stand für mich in Beziehung zu Dir, also in keiner guten Beziehung. Die Mutter hatte unbewußt die Rolle eines Treibers in der Jagd" (BV 23). The mother's complicity in parental tyranny complicates the apparent identification with femininity via the maternal lineage ("ich [...] ein Löwy"). Julie Kafka's role at the table in the *Brief an den Vater* is as a mediator of the father's power. When the father speaks to his son through his wife, his declarations have a particularly menacing quality—it is as though the power of the father were being magnified through the mother. For the son, however, the mother functions as a buffer, a "far less dangerous" means of addressing the power of the father, without looking it in the eye (BV 19–20). Despite—or perhaps because of—the mother's role as moderator of the father's aggression, a disappointment is apparent in the account of the relationship to Julie Kafka. She could have been the child's staunchest defender, were it not for her increasing loyalty to Hermann Kafka (BV 29). The condemnation of the role of the mother is tempered by the insight that in her "Zwischenstellung" (BV 30) between the children and their father the mother suffers doubly: "Rücksichtslos haben wir auf sie eingehämmert, Du von Deiner Seite, wir von unserer" (BV 30).

In the eating regime under which the child suffers Kafka's mother is also an accomplice,¹⁵ but it is the father who pronounces a series of commandments which he himself refuses to abide by: "Knochen durfte man nicht zerbeißen, Du ja. Essig durfte man nicht schlürfen, Du ja. [...] Bei Tisch durfte man sich nur mit Essen beschäftigen, Du aber putzttest und schnittest Dir die Nägel, spitztest Bleistifte, reinigtest mit dem Zahnstocher die Ohren" (BV 14–15). Kafka's objection to this regime is its arbitrariness—the system serves only the power of the father over the child. Living under the regime, the child experiences the world as though divided into three parts: a first part in which he lives as a slave to the father's arbitrary rule, a second part inhabited by his father who is "beschäftigt mit der Regierung, mit dem Ausgeben der Befehle und mit dem Ärger wegen deren Nichtbefolgung" (BV 15), and a third part where everyone else lives free from paternal tyranny.

The father's *Diätetik* is here inflated so as to be synonymous with the machinations of state power. Paternal capriciousness at the dining table is for the child tantamount to totalitarianism. The isolation that Kafka describes as the outcome of the father's dietary tyranny, is reminiscent of that of the hunger artist in his cage, or the creature in his burrow, or Gregor Samsa in his room. The borders between these worlds are controlled by means of a *Diätetik* in which a hearty appetite is synonymous with "das Kafka'sche," with masculinity, and a lack thereof with the despised feminine. If Kafka's work is a critique of power, then masculine power and the power to feminize are surely

part of that critique. The power of the father as arbiter of table manners, as appetitive ruler and ruler of appetite, is masculine power of a kind informed by the gender hegemony of Kafka's day. Strength, appetite, and a military bearing are for Kafka all present in the person of the father, who rules at the dining table over a family of women and a single son debilitated by guilt and a sense of inadequacy.

Kafka's critique of gender hierarchy should not be conflated with a feminist sensibility, however. Some have found in Kafka's female characters a Weiningerian voraciousness,¹⁶ and Kafka's literature and letters also abound with references to the cliché of the nurturing woman. There is Gregor's sister, who makes it her daily task to feed her metamorphosed brother, to seek out foods which may be to his liking and to present them to him. Similar is the preoccupation of a sanatorium kitchen hand, during one of the writer's numerous convalescences, with finding a food to the taste of the fussy patient: "Seit dem Darmkatarrh, der meiner Meinung nach vom Fleisch kam, ist es so eingerichtet, daß ein Fräulein in der Küche ich glaube einen großen Teil ihrer Zeit damit verbringt, nachzudenken, was man mir kochen könnte" (*Briefe* 325). The attentiveness of the women is expressive of typically feminine behavior—it is the role of women to nurture men—yet Kafka's de-masculinized figures respond neither with a masculine sense of entitlement nor with empathy for the feminine role. Gregor becomes increasingly estranged even from his caring sibling; Kafka is astonished at the attention of the kitchen hand; and the hunger artist resents the "scheinbar so freundlichen, in Wirklichkeit so grausamen Damen" (HK 166), who lead him out of the cage toward the fast-breaking meal which represents his failure as an artist.

If it is by now apparent that eating and food are gendered for Kafka, it remains to look in particular at the consumption of meat as the very essence of masculine power in the *Diätetik* which Kafka critiques. Pekar notes that Kafka's vegetarianism is conceived in opposition to the father's "Fleisch-Macht-Welt" (339) in *Brief an den Vater*. It seems the father divines a challenge to his authority in his son's vegetarianism: "Du hast letzthin Franklins Jugenderinnerungen gelesen. Ich habe sie Dir wirklich absichtlich zum Lesen gegeben, aber nicht, wie Du ironisch bemerktest, wegen einer kleinen Stelle über Vegetarianismus, sondern wegen des Verhältnisses zwischen dem Verfasser und seinem Sohn" (BV 40). The "Fleisch-Macht-Welt" is challenged by a son who establishes his own, contrary diet, thereby undermining the disciplinary regime which is the family meal. In "Die Verwandlung" meat plays an important role as emblem of Gregor's exile from masculinity, as it is enacted at the dining table. When the three lodgers inspect the meat served to them by Gregor's mother and sister, then proceed to eat it noisily, Gregor exclaims desperately: "Ich habe ja Appetit [...] aber nicht auf diese Dinge" (V 49). Finding himself only able to ingest a vegetarian diet, Gregor is entirely

isolated from the social activity which is communal eating. But, as the subservience of the Samsa women in this scene suggests, meat has connotations of masculine entitlement. It is a specifically gendered role which is denied Gregor—that of flesh-eater—as exemplified by the three men who examine the meat so carefully.

Carol Adams describes the association of masculinity with meat-eating in *The Sexual Politics of Meat*: “People with power have always eaten meat” (26). Therefore, in patriarchal culture, masculinity is asserted through meat consumption: “. . . a mythology permeates all classes that meat is a masculine food and meat eating a male activity” (Adams 26). Women, as the providers of food in its cooked form, tend to give more generous portions to men and children, or abstain entirely when meat is scarce (Adams 28–29), just as they do in the Samsa household. But the controls on the distribution of meat are not limited to the self-effacement of women; there are plentiful external prohibitions surrounding meat eating. Pekar notes the intensification of regulations around meat consumption in Judaism: “Was das Fleischessen betrifft, so ist es zwar im Judentum nicht ausdrücklich verboten, wird aber als Kompromiß [...] angesehen und von einer Reihe komplizierter Regeln umstellt” (338).¹⁷ While Pekar does not explore the gendered nature of such prohibitions, Adams points out: “Most food taboos address meat consumption and they place more restrictions on women than on men” (27). There are innumerable examples from diverse cultural and historic contexts (many given in Adams’s book) of the specific concern to regulate feminine consumption of meat. Rousseau, to take just one influential example, deems a lack of appetite for meat an inherent feminine trait. His idealized woman in his pedagogical masterpiece, *Émile*, “has preserved her feminine tastes; she likes milk and sweets; she likes pastry and made-dishes, but not much meat” (358).

One might ask, what are the reasons for the associations of meat eating with masculine authority? Adams points to the belief that men, who are seen as performing more physical labor, need meat for strength. Certainly such a view is apparent in Rousseau’s description of Sophy’s “feminine tastes”: “she eats sparingly; women, who do not work so hard as men, have less waste to repair” (358). For Adams, “a superstition analogous to homeopathic principles operates in this belief: in eating the muscle of strong animals, we will become strong” (33). But Adams offers another, surely more convincing, explanation—meat eating is an expression of male sexuality, a measure of “individual and societal virility” (26). Pekar notes that meat was once thought to induce a state of sexual arousal in children, for which reason they were to be raised on more “delicate” foods (334). Indeed, Rousseau prescribes even for male children “plain and simple dishes” (120), as he does for grown women. Women, it seems, must remain in a perpetual state of dietary immaturity. Caroline Bynum notes that the association of meat with virility has a long history:

The history of Western cooking, as reflected in cookbooks, diaries, and memoirs, suggests that “heavy” food, especially meat, was seen as more appropriate for men and lighter food for women, in part because meat had, for a thousand years, been seen as an aggravator of lust. Cookbooks came increasingly to suggest that women—who prepared the meals—hardly needed to eat at all. (191)

Instead, Adams argues, women are identified with meat itself as the object of a masculine appetite which conflates male sexuality with consuming food (39–61). Bynum also points to many instances in European theology and culture which “identified woman with flesh and with food” (275).

It has already been shown that the refusal to eat, and specifically the refusal to eat meat, places Kafka’s characters outside of the predominant social context. It can be further suggested that the male protagonists of stories such as “Die Verwandlung” and “Ein Hungerkünstler” are outsiders with respect to a masculinity predicated on the intersecting notions of voracious sexuality and meat eating. Gregor looks on as he is deposed from the family dining table by the meat-eating lodgers and laments his lack of masculine appetite. Similarly, the hunger artist watches longingly as the guards, who attest to the probity of his fasting effort, devour their daily breakfast: “Am glücklichsten aber war er, wenn dann der Morgen kam, und ihnen auf seine Rechnung ein überreiches Frühstück gebracht wurde, auf das sie sich warfen mit dem Appetit gesunder Männer nach einer mühevoll durchwachten Nacht” (165). These guards—“merkwürdigerweise gewöhnlich Fleischhauer” (HK 164)—with their manly appetites, create a carnivorous contrast to the abstinence of the waifish hunger artist. Neither Gregor nor the hunger artist have any appetite for meat, yet their fascination with male meat-eaters suggests they long to belong to their world—their lack of appetite makes them marginal to a carnivorous masculinity. Kafka himself seems not to have shared the longing of these marginalized figures, if his documented disgust for meat and his conviction about its deleterious health consequences are to be believed (*Briefe* 304, 305, 313, 325). Moreover, a note of fear is discernable in the fictional characters, for example, when Gregor fixates on the sound of the chewing “Zimmerherren,” and when the hunger artist is unnerved by the wild, meat-eating animals at the circus—“die Unruhe der Tiere in der Nacht, das Vorübertragen der rohen Fleischstücke für die Raubtiere, die Schreie bei der Fütterung” (HK 170).

Kafka’s vegetarianism has been linked to a prevailing culture of health and the body (Boa 109), to the controversy over “Schächten” (Gilman 152), and to the notion that the disempowered eat non-meat foods (Pekar 339). In light of the analysis so far it is reasonable to suggest that for Kafka vegetarianism is an oppositional discourse, something the father in the *Brief an den Vater* is alert to, as we have already seen. For if meat-eating is a masculine privilege, it contrasts with the diet of women: “Women, second-class citizens, are more likely to eat what are considered to be second-class foods in a patriarchal

culture: vegetables, fruits and grains rather than meat" (Adams 26). These are the foods which Kafka lists in his inventory with such delight. Men who eschew meat are feminized: "Men who become vegetarians challenge an essential part of the masculine role. They are opting for women's food. [...] Men who choose not to eat meat repudiate one of their masculine privileges" (Adams 38). Thus Kafka and his figures align themselves with a feminine marginality by consuming "feminine" foods. His embracing of appetitive marginality is apparent, too, in his preference for liquid foods, which have been associated with powerlessness.¹⁸ In a letter to Max Brod written in the sanatorium, Kafka celebrates the sensations of liquid food: "Die Mahlzeiten allerdings nehmen nicht viel Zeit weg, da sie als Apfelmus, Kartoffelpurée, flüssiges Gemüse, Obstsäfte usw. sehr rasch, wenn man will ganz unbemerkt, wenn man aber will auch sehr genußreich hinunterrinnen" (*Briefe* 90). The enjoyment of the sensations of swallowing liquid foods is undeniably reminiscent of the first human food, mother's milk, for which reason Neumann associates liquid nourishment with the mother and solids with the father ("Literatur" 189 n.46).

Kafka's celebration of a feminized diet and his revulsion for meat are an embracing of his status as outsider; slightly built, devoid of masculine appetite, lacking the masculine traits of father Hermann Kafka, he seeks to elude the three-way association of meat–masculinity–power by eating milk and vegetable products, in short, "women's food." The joys of this oppositional food discourse are few, however, for the stories do not end well for Kafka's fictional vegetarians. Gregor's is an ignoble, lonely death caused at least in part by paternal aggression and a rotting apple embedded in his flesh, ironically a food which might have helped sustain him. The hunger artist ultimately disavows his art, for he only fasted for so long "weil ich nicht die Speise finden konnte, die mir schmeckt. Hätte ich sie gefunden, glaube mir, ich hätte [...] mich vollgeessen wie du und alle" (HK 171). The butchers he watched so intently are by contrast fortunate creatures, enjoying freely the food they want. The hunger artist is soon usurped by a creature which testifies to the gloriousness of unrestrained appetite, "eine[m] jungen Panther":

Ihm fehlte nichts. Die Nahrung, die ihm schmeckte, brachten ihm ohne langes Nachdenken die Wächter; [...] dieser edle, mit allem Nötigen bis knapp zum Zerreißen ausgestattete Körper schien auch die Freiheit mit sich herumzutragen; irgendwo im Gebiß schien sie zu stecken. (HK 171)¹⁹

The physical perfection of the animal as opposed to the pathetic bundle of bones which comprises the hunger artist reminds one of Kafka's shame at his slight build while his father parades before him a body of which the son is nonetheless "stolz" (BV 11). Equally, the panther's unlimited enjoyment of the food that he likes (as opposed to the hunger artist's nostalgia for a food to his liking which he never found) recalls Kafka's father at the head of the table,

chewing bones, slurping, dropping food all around him, himself oblivious to the rules under which his son suffers (BV 14–15). The panther, like the father, indulges an appetite which is not circumscribed by the oppressive *Diätetik* created for women and children. The usurpation of the hunger artist, who is reduced to a pile of bones, by the panther amounts to his metaphorical consumption by a voracious masculinity which he has admired, feared, and longed for, i.e., an allegory akin to the myth of Kronos to which Kafka refers in his letter to his sister.

Perhaps there is in Kafka's gender commentary an attempt to transcend an inflexible binary system of masculinity/femininity, meat/non-meat, consumer/consumed. At the very least, there is a vivid account of the experience of gender marginality within this system and of the suffering caused by a lack of appetite when voraciousness is the order of the day. The Samsa patriarch, at the beginning of the novella a frail old man, seems to gain in corpulence and masculine credentials as Gregor—once the family breadwinner—literally fades away:

[...] war das noch der Vater? Der gleiche Mann, der müde im Bett vergraben lag, wenn früher Gregor zu einer Geschäftsreise ausgerückt war; der ihn an Abenden der Heimkehr im Schlafrock im Lehnstuhl empfangen hatte; gar nicht recht imstande war, aufzustehen, sondern zum Zeichen der Freude nur die Arme gehoben hatte [...]? [...] Nun aber war er recht gut aufgerichtet; in eine straffe blaue Uniform mit Goldknöpfen gekleidet, wie sie Diener der Bankinstitute tragen; über dem hohen steifen Kragen des Rockes entwickelte sich sein starkes Doppelkinn; unter den buschigen Augenbrauen drang der Blick der schwarzen Augen frisch und aufmerksam hervor [...] Gregor staunte über die Riesengröße seiner Stiefelsohlen. (V 40–41)

Yet Gregor has more to fear than a penetrating look from the father; he knows "daß der Vater ihm gegenüber nur die größte Strenge für angebracht ansah" (V 41). The nostalgia with which Gregor recalls the father in his nightshirt is reminiscent of Kafka's account of rare moments of paternal tenderness in the *Brief an den Vater*, recalling moments in which the tired father took a nap at work, cried when the mother was sick, or quietly looked in on his son during an illness (21–22).

It is weakness and a loss of masculine control—in sleep, in fear, in the presence of sickness—which Kafka recalls with such longing: "In solchen Zeiten legte man sich hin und weinte vor Glück und weint jetzt wieder, während man es schreibt" (BV 22).²⁰ Here and in the terrifying transformation of Gregor's father it is possible to discern an apparent longing for a paternity based on nurturing and consideration, rather than voracious masculine aggression. In his literature, Kafka explores the possibilities of a diet oppositional to the associations of meat–masculinity–power, and beyond the deployment of food as an instrument of family discipline. Kafka's characters resist author-

ity and gender hegemony through their dietary practices. This strategy of diet-as-resistance is arguably itself a feminized approach.

A vegetarian diet is, in the context of a masculinity defined in terms of meat eating, an oppositional discourse of food. So, too, then, when a hearty appetite is prized as a masculine trait, as it is by Hermann Kafka, is the fast. The use of oppositional food discourse has led critics to deem Kafka's literature, even Kafka himself, anorectic (Deleuze and Guattari 30; Medeiros; Neumann, "Menschenfresser" 358). Kafka's "anorexia"—in his literature and letters—can be understood as an attempt to regain the physical autonomy of which the child is deprived by the disciplinary *Diätetik*. An autonomous eating practice is fundamental to an assertion of self; as Ellmann explains: "... the notion of the self is founded on the regulation of the orifices. For it is at these thresholds that the other, in the form of food, is assumed into the body" (105). To be denied jurisdiction over the daily interaction between self and other is a profound experience of powerlessness. To resist this power requires separation from the forces of indoctrination—the isolation of the hunger artist in the cage, of Gregor Samsa in his room, of the creature in its burrow, of the exiled investigating dog (see Ellmann 93). The protagonist of "Forschungen eines Hundes" sees in fasting a potent force which alone can lead to knowledge of the self and the world: "... das Hungern halte ich noch heute für das letzte und stärkste Mittel meiner Forschung. Durch das Hungern geht der Weg, das Höchste ist nur der höchsten Leistung erreichbar, wenn es erreichbar ist, und diese höchste Leistung ist bei uns freiwilliges Hungern" (FH 208).

By contrast, the creature in "Der Bau" is a rare carnivorous protagonist,²¹ who holds to the importance of food as the centerpiece of its subterranean existence. In its burrow, it enjoys the acquisition and subsequent ingestion of its provisions as its most important daily activity, indeed, its *raison d'être*. The creature is assailed by strange noises from outside the burrow, which have the potential to rob it of its consuming pleasure (B 157). Unlike the figures explored so far, who confront power by avoiding certain foods, for the creature in the burrow its gustatory enjoyment becomes a strategy to combat the external threat:

Ich lecke und nasche am Fleisch, denke abwechselnd einmal an das fremde Tier, das in der Ferne seinen Weg zieht, und dann wieder daran, daß ich, solange ich noch die Möglichkeit habe, ausgiebigst meine Vorräte genießen sollte. Dieses letztere ist wahrscheinlich der einzige ausführbare Plan, den ich habe. (B 163)

If Kafka's food discourse is most frequently described in terms of anorexia, here is the protagonist as over-eater or bulimic. The creature is no anomaly in Kafka's *œuvre*, however. This character has found the food to his liking, and it just happens to be that masculine food for which Gregor, the hunger artist, and Kafka have no appetite—meat. The creature shares with its fasting counterparts, however, limited means of opposition—having found an appetite for

this food, the creature's only plan is to indulge it, come what may. Kafka's anorectic discourse has a unique place in a history of largely feminine fasting.²² In this history, jurisdiction over one's own body—denied women within patriarchal culture—is at issue. When Kafka's creature in the burrow refers to eating as "der einzige ausführbare Plan, den ich habe," this is an expression of the limits imposed upon a feminized subject. To seek autonomy in one's alimentary interaction with the world may seem a paltry form of resistance, but it goes to the heart of the construction—and enforcement—of gender roles. There has been much feminist debate about the late-20th-century phenomenon of *anorexia nervosa* as political "protest."²³ The concerns of feminists reluctant to characterize modern anorectics as political hunger strikers center upon their radical conformity to stereotypical femininity (Bordo 176–77; Brumberg 37), for a modest appetite has been a cornerstone of ideal femininity since the Enlightenment. When a woman fasts she is participating in a *Diätetik* which foists appetitive restraint upon her. For Kafka's male protagonists, though—in the context of the valorization of masculine voraciousness and its association with sexual potency—to fast, just as to refuse meat, is to repudiate ideal masculinity, and to embrace a feminized eating behavior. Kafka may not be a feminist, but his use of what is for women a dubious feminist strategy makes for a compelling critique of masculinity.

Notes

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² Kafka himself will be regarded here as a character of the *Brief an den Vater*, as will others who feature in it. The semi-literary nature of the letter which invites such an approach will be discussed later.

³ Pekar describes the term *Diätetik* as the investment of eating with meaning: "Was das Essen betrifft, so wurden alimentäre Verhaltensweisen mit Bedeutung aufgeladen und zu einem Erkenntnisbereich organisiert, den man 'Diätetik' nannte" (333). See also Neumann, "Menschenfresser"; Neumann, "Literatur."

⁴ See for example Boa; Lorenz.

⁵ These texts will hereafter be referred to as V ("Die Verwandlung"), HK ("Der Hungerkünstler"), B ("Der Bau"), FH ("Forschungen eines Hundes"), and BV ("Brief an den Vater").

⁶ See for example Dodd; Canetti 76.

⁷ Boa 21. Boa argues that we may plausibly see Kafka as "anti-patriarchal," but this is not necessarily to assert that his work is "feminist" (17). See also Lorenz, who argues that Kafka "de-essentialised" (169) gender throughout his literary life, and that—despite his often Weiningerian portrayal of female characters—he critically examined

prevailing gender norms. For useful explorations of gender dimensions of Kafka's characters see also Sieg and Gilman.

⁸ See, for example, Frank Vulpi: "The hunger artist's activity is built on alienation of a most radical nature" (11).

⁹ Boa suggests that Gregor dabbles in feminized eating behaviors, such as the enjoyment of "harem sweetmeats" (123), but does not make the connection to meat eating as a masculine activity.

¹⁰ See Pekar and Neumann for excellent contributions to an understanding of food in Kafka. They argue that the Enlightenment's rational disciplining of the child body, resulted in eating becoming laden with meaning and a means to social discipline (Pekar 333). For Neumann, the fasting of the hunger artist appears as a desperate attempt at self-assertion against the parents' pedagogical strategies of (father's) law making and (mother's) all-consuming love ("Menschenfresser" 353). It is argued here, with Neumann and Pekar, that the goal of Kafka's hunger discourse is to problematize the hegemonic *Diätetik*, with the difference that the gender dimensions of this *Diätetik* are explored.

¹¹ Lévi-Strauss notes the prevalence in many cultures of the association of man with culture and woman with nature: "woman is everywhere synonymous with nature" (270). In his analysis of Bororo mythology, he therefore finds a persistent "sexual aspect" (269) which associates raw food, as well as stench and decaying food, with femininity.

¹² Preece overstates Müller-Seidel's critique of the *Brief an den Vater* when he would have Müller-Seidel suggest the letter "portrays a small-minded personality whose views are fuelled by resentment, prejudice and insecurity" (117). For Politzer, the letter is a complaint against the father "raised [...] to the level of literature" (293). Anz characterizes the letter as "ein literarisches Selbstportrait," a view well supported by Kafka's diaries and letters which make the identifications with his characters explicit (19–31).

¹³ Scholars have acknowledged an apparent exaggeration of the figure of the father in the letter as a literary device which exceeds the genre of autobiography. See for example Müller-Seidel 356–57; Anz 25. The father appears in the letter as a booming giant, largely devoid of empathy, a caricature of dominant masculinity which is surely part of Kafka's critique of gendered power.

¹⁴ The battle as a motif in Kafka's work is explored by Müller-Seidel, who sees Kafka—in typically modernist fashion—siding with the "Helden der Schwäche" (366–71). Gilman's chapter three explores the intertwining of notions of masculinity, soldierliness, and the Jewish body in Kafka's context.

¹⁵ Both Pekar (338) and Neumann ("Menschenfresser" 350–53) refer to Julie Kafka's letter to Felice Bauer (in which she invites Bauer to conspire in encouraging Kafka to eat better) as evidence of a controlling maternity, thoroughly implicated in the enforcement of the *Diätetik*, albeit under the guise of "nurturance" and "love."

¹⁶ For an account of the influence of Weininger on Kafka's work, see Sieg.

¹⁷ See Gilman's discussion (chapter four) of the intersection of debates over Jewish slaughter, or *Schächten*, with notions of sexually voracious Jewish men, which reveals the consumption of meat as a component of masculinity, and the easy slippage from meat eating to the realm of sexuality.

¹⁸ See Pekar (339–40) for numerous examples of a predilection for liquid food in Kafka's discourse.

¹⁹Critics have seen the animal as representing base physicality (Deinert 78), or as “a symbol of authentic existence” (Spann 71) in this very physicality. Spann argues persuasively that Kafka transcends simple oppositions of body and mind. Cervo points to the etymology of the word panther: “Greek πᾶν and θηρ: ‘all,’ ‘beast’” (99). Following from the argument that in Kafka’s discourse meat eating is associated with dominant masculinity, it can equally be suggested that we regard the panther as representative of pure masculinity, as *all man*.

²⁰Gilman sees an “identification with the powerful and aggressive father’s ‘feminine’ qualities” (133).

²¹A more extensive look at meat-eating protagonists would have to include the short story “Schakale und Araber,” interpreted by Gilman as Kafka’s veiled critique of the debate over *Schächten* (150–51).

²²The key players in the long history of fasting in Europe—particularly devotional fasting—are women and girls (Neumann, “Menschenfresser” 356; Brumberg 41). Women persisted with devotional fasting long after the practice had gone out of fashion (99), even into the 19th century; Kafka’s hunger artist is an anachronism, like Victorian female fasters clinging to their spiritual beliefs (Brumberg 57).

²³For a summary of this debate, see Bordo 174–77.

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