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A HUNGER ARTIST

The New York stage has recently witnessed the revival of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, complete with Mikhail Baryshnikov as the story's hideously transfigured beetle. I reread Kafka's masterpiece late last year and would recommend it highly. As I recall, I spent 15 nonstop minutes describing the plot and its implications to my family while heading for the snow in Utah, and for me, that comes close to a verbal marathon. Tucked away towards the back of the anthology, however, was another short story that haunted me over 20 years ago and struck me again the second time around. It's titled *A Hunger Artist* and it has to do with free will, or perhaps the lack of free will. Kafka, whose productive years centered around the turn of the twentieth century, formed a bridge between the philosophy of "determinism" (the past determines the future) and "existentialism" (man is totally free to make his own choices), and nowhere is that dilemma more clearly posed than in the story of his hunger artist who fasts for a living. Evidently, the profession of fasting for periods of up to 40 to 50 days was fairly common and quite respectable in 19th century Europe. Almost every village supported at least one faster who amused his neighbors

by doing something they presumably couldn't or didn't want to do. But therein lies the rub. After creating the impression that his behavior was special and distinct; after convincing his neighbors that he had willed himself to create a valued and esteemed life; the hunger artist on the throes of his death bed, confesses just the opposite. "I always wanted you to admire my fasting," said the hunger artist, but you shouldn't... have. (The fact is) I have to fast, I can't help it... 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." Quite a preposterous conclusion I'll admit, but it's meant to be outrageous. I think Kafka was saying that each of us lives a life that in some ways might appear preposterous to outsiders. Whether that should be admired, denigrated, or simply accepted at face is the critical question, and the element of free will or fate is the critical factor. I don't have the answer, but if I had to choose, I'd lean towards the side of determinism. Under the combined onslaught of heredity and environment, I'm not sure that any of us truly "chooses" what he wants to do. Admire who you want, or pillory who you feel like, but do so, I think, at a respectable distance and