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Hunger and Modern Writing
Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright
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English Summary

This book examines the relevance of hunger in the writing of Herman Melville, Franz Kafka, Knut Hamsun, and Richard Wright. It argues that hunger is an important theme not only for the selected works of these authors, but also for the way it is deeply involved with concepts of modernity and modernist literature and how it is bound up with a writer's role in modern society.

In my discussion I draw upon two contentious and complex views of hunger: the first is material, relating to the body as a physical entity that has a material existence in reality. Hunger in this sense is a physiological process that affects the body as a result of the need for food, the lack of which leads to discomfort, listlessness, and eventually death. The second view is that of hunger as an appetite of the mind, the kind of hunger for immaterial things that is normally associated with an individual's desire for a new form of knowledge, sentiment, or a different way of perceiving the reality of the world.

By means of this dualistic approach I address the ongoing discussion regarding the figure of the modern author, a creative individual who strives for independence of thought and action, yet is influenced by the same biological, cultural, and economic forces that shape the rest of society. By introducing the theme of hunger into this debate, I argue that the interaction between the artist's immaterial, creative life of spontaneous thought and emotion and the way in which this inner life is rooted in the material world of the body offers an approach to the work of these canonical writers that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

The first of this book's four chapters examines how Melville draws upon two aspects of hunger—appetite and absence—in his portrayal of the scribes on Wall Street, and it supports the idea that *Bartleby* exhibits an artistic temperament. Chapter 2 explores the link between modernist art and the alienation of the individual in Kafka's writing, and it examines how hunger is bound up with both the physical decline and the spiritual withdrawal of Kafka's heroes, which culminate in their death from starvation. Chapter 3 demonstrates the significance of hunger for Hamsun's narrator with regard to his self-destructive tendencies, and how his rejection of society and willingness to act against his own interests may be read as an expression of Hamsun adopting an anti-modern stance comparable to that of Dostoevsky's. Chapter 4 discusses how, in Wright's text, hunger is bound up with self-

fashioning, an important theme in the narrative that is also relevant to an appreciation of the book as an intellectual autobiography. All four chapters discuss how perceptions and experiences of hunger may alter reality in the narrative and how hunger impacts and transforms the substance and conditions of the protagonists' lives.

The works of Melville, Kafka, Hamsun, and Wright can thus be directly linked with conflicting concepts of modernity and its consequences for the individual and the author, as well as with conflicting concepts of a hunger that can be read both as a symbol of a materialist, capitalist modernity and as a potential cure for its inherent ills of greed and indifference. This book examines the inconsistencies and contradictions in the selected authors' conceptualization of hunger as both desire and absence of desire, or as both a creative and a destructive force, and argues how these contradictions relate to the broader conflicts relating to the writer's role in modern society.