Asceticism poses a threat: 
The enactment of voluntary hunger

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The hunger strike is a practice of abstention that operates with an inherent risk of damage to one’s own self. It must be enacted in a particular way in order to make the renunciation of food even seen as a tool of political resistance in the first place – and not, for example, as a personal diet; the way the body declines and breaks down, the inherent possibility of damage to one’s health, and the risk of death must all be positioned within a theatrical setting like the scenes of a play. Paradigms for this practice can be found not only in the religious ascetic exercises of earlier ages but also in the early modern-era performances of the hunger artists. With the help of one historical and one contemporary example, this paper demonstrates the kind of destructive dynamics at work within the voluntary renunciation of food and what principles and greater context govern the way that renunciation of food is staged.

Passivity as fomentive provocation

As they scurried across the marble floors of Paris’ Palais Bourbon on 7 March 2006, members of the French National Assembly were greeted with a surprising scene: representative Jean Lassalle, member of the social liberal Union pour la Démocratie Française, sitting on a red sofa in the vestibule and announcing that he was now on hunger strike. The 50-year-old parliamentarian cited the intention of Japanese aluminum producer Toyol to relocate its factory from Lassalle’s hometown (a small town in the Pyrénées) to a city 60 kilometers away as the reason behind his attention-getting tactic; the threat of job loss looming over the 150 residents of Vallée d’Aspe had driven Lassalle to resort to drastic measures in criticism of globalization, and he quit eating. Over the course of the following weeks, representatives from across the political spectrum were forced to watch Lassalle grow increasing pale and gaunt. Soon, he could only follow the daily parliamentary sessions from a lying position, dabbing his parched lips with soda water. Lassalle had also made the decision to move into his office for the entire duration of the hunger strike in order to lend his demands an even greater sense of urgency. His colleagues thus became witness to the morning routine of the politician as he padded barefoot through the halls of the National Assembly in an attempt to grant his

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1 The UDF is a liberal political party in France with Christian Democratic roots.
2 A comprehensive collection of materials, including photos, can be found on the website http://www.jean-lassalle.fr/ (as of 27.03.2007) Many thanks to Dominique Lassagne and Thierry Baubet for pointing out Jean Lassalle’s social-political action to me.
suffering body a bit of exercise and as he underwent subsequent examinations at the hands of the parliamentary doctor. Lassalle was denied any measure of solidarity, not only by his political opponents but also by the members of his own party. Bernard Accoyer, chairperson of the governing UMP party, even complained that “no policymaking” can result from the use of such means, which represent “an admission of powerlessness” more than anything else. Despite this, Lassalle – who, according to a statement, had never before felt famished or even gone on a diet – held to his renunciation of food, week after week. With a book by Mahatma Gandhi tucked under his arm, Lassalle, the son of a goat herder, granted interviews to Le Monde, Liberation and French television, and his popularity rose continually. The longer “Jean” adhered to the restrictions of his endeavour, the more he was celebrated as a hero. After being brought to the hospital on April 14, 2006, after thirty-nine days of fasting and a loss of twenty-one kilograms of body weight, the parliamentarian – by this point a public icon – was able to end his strike; at the behest of Jacques Chirac, President of France at the time, Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin and Minister of the Interior Nicolas Sarkozy personally intervened and negotiated a promise on the part of the Japanese corporation to retain the threatened jobs. In view of the mass layoffs that have become nearly a daily occurrence today, the level of engagement on the part of the French leadership for one hundred fifty Pyrenean employees hardly seems plausible. The impact made in this singular case – as marginal as that impact may be when looking at the multitudinous global economic chains of cause-and-effect – can hardly be explained by the set of facts underlying it. The basic assertion of this paper is that the political outcome of Lassalle’s renunciation of food was brought about primarily by the emotions Lassalle was able to evoke in voters, ministers and the president through his strategic non-action. The longer Lassalle continued fasting and the greater his degree of passivity in connection with the fast became – passivity in the sense of his growing difficulty moving and even speaking – the more the witnesses to and addressees of his actions were spurred into action. This interdependent dialectic of non-action/non-negotiation triggering action/negotiation is a typical characteristic of passive resistance. At the same time, however, a specific way of staging Lassalle’s renunciation of food was also necessary so the practice could be seen as a tool of such resistance and not, for example, just as a personal diet. In this paper, I will be elucidating the forms of enactment that permitted Jean Lassalle to shape his hunger into a political tool. I will also be exploring the specific dialectic of suffering and fervor inherent to that enactment – a conjunction that serves as the defining moment of fomentive provocation.

Lonely experience

According to literary scholar Maud Ellmann, it is “impossible to share another person’s feelings of hunger, just as it is impossible to feel another’s pain; both sensations clearly demonstrate the terribly ‘lonely’ nature of bodily experiences” (Ellmann 1994, 15ff).

If hunger is an experience that generally cannot be shared, how can it be explained that witnesses to the Lassallesian hunger strike reacted with a wide array of impassioned statements instead of sheer ignorance? The example before us reveals the kind of impact the choice to go hungry can have on people who are filled. The appellative character of going hungry makes the renunciation of food an almost unbearable provocation, and this appeal evoked three different kinds of reactions in the particular case at hand – annoyance, even anger, as a sign of rejection; sympathy as a sign of concern and solidarity as a sign of supportive agreement. These reactions did not come about because of any emotional pleas; they did not mirror any emotional statements on the part of the hunger striker. Although Lassalle first indicated desperation as the reason for his hunger strike⁴, this desperation still expressed itself in a soberly objective, almost unemotional bearing on the part of the politician, one that almost appeared to be based on the political ideal of “stoic apathy” dating back to antiquity.⁵ The emotionally laden statements of Lassalle’s political colleagues, on the contrary, are representative examples of reactions to a provocation. The basic pattern behind that provocation is paradoxical; hunger strikes injure others through their self-inflicted injury. Since the struggle is enacted without any bodily contact, its primary objective is to mobilize others’ feelings. Indeed, one might even say it is about making the enemy a prisoner of one’s own emotions. In order to be able to trigger such a cause-and-effect chain reaction, Lassalle availed himself of an array of strategies, strategies that will serve as the subject of the following remarks.

Enacting abstention


⁵ The most ancient concept of apathy holds up a lack of passion as the highest goal of the cynical approach to life. Over the course of various generations of philosophers, it became the stoic virtuous ideal of composed aplomb. Cp. M.-P. Engelmeier.
Even when we speak of Lassalle’s strike as a form of passivity, such passivity has nothing to do with a kind of “docile inaction”; rather, it has to do with purposeful non-action. In a freely chosen, calculated act of self-denial, the politician abstains from eating and from leaving the premises of the French parliament. This can be described as forbearance, since Lassalle spurns an expected action, namely, the intake of food and the connected physical act of self-preservation (Birnbacher 1995, Berger 2004).

The provokingly fomentive character of his action is grounded in its breach of “the rules.” The representative breaks with the verbal forms traditionally used in pursuit of political interests – methods geared toward negotiation and persuasion – and uses the mute gesture of self-denial in their stead. Despite the fact that so much remains unspoken, however, the gesture is appellatory in nature. With his permanent reference to the loss of mental and physical health, Lassalle competes for attention by highlighting an existential threat. Also, because the physical risk involved increases the longer he denies himself sustenance, this gesture gains momentum very quickly and reaches its temporal culmination with the corresponding increase in the willingness of the public to take action. Over time, Lassalle’s party colleagues, who initially reacted with rejection, impassive derision and anger, grow in admiration for him; and in the end, his actions result in a corresponding act of solidarity: an intervention at the highest political level.

The latent character of every hunger strike – latent meaning effective only in the long term – also presents a marked problem to those who wish to use it as a gesture of resistance. In contrast to conspicuous physical injuries such as cuts, wounds and fractures, the physical effects of hunger are not immediately visible in adults but only manifest themselves slowly, having very little of the “spectacular” about them within the first few weeks (Halsted 2005). Jean Lassalle had to ensure three things in order to make sure his renunciation of food is even recognized and accepted as a strike: His hunger had to be publicly perceptible; it had to be understood as an experience of pain; and that pain had to have a substitutionary character to it – substitutionary meaning able to be accepted as a “pain for [someone or something]” (Ellmann 1994, 35ff).

“Voluntary hunger is, first and foremost, a performance,” noted Maud Ellmann, pointing out that “in the Irish hunger strike of 1981 […], it was not the hunger [itself] but the public exhibition of that hunger that the prisoners used to humiliate their oppressors […]. The success of the strike hinged on its representation – with ‘representation’ meaning how things were portrayed and what stood for what” (Ellmann 1994, 35).

Lassalle, too, stages his hunger in a public way. His venue: the parliament, its inimitably public nature intrinsically making it a place of great symbolic value. With the parliament as his stage, he presents his emaciated body to the entire nation through the media. The “siege” element serves as an important means within Lassalle’s presentation. He stakes out a plot within the parlia-
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mentary building, transforms his office into a living space, and uses the floors as a sports ground and the halls of the parliament as a sickbed. His tenacious refusal to vacate the space serves as a sign of his unyielding sense of resolution. With it, the politician makes use of a juridical practice already known in the Middle Ages in which a debtor or someone who has been wronged encamps on the doorstep of the creditor or defendant, conspicuously fasting until the other party is prepared to relent.6

A call to action and proclamation of judgment

Hunger strikers have one central goal: to transform their bodies into a symbol that can be seen and understood by all. Strikers work to tell of the suppression that stems from the oppression they are fasting in order to abolish. “What distinguishes a hunger strike from all other kinds of voluntary fasting is the verbal statement that consummates the mute witness of the emaciated body. Hunger strikers, in order to be able to shape their bodies into hostages and make their own mortality a means of extortion, must declare the reason behind their forbearance,” writes Ellmann in her study on hunger artists. She points out that while fasting is associated with taciturn non-communication, a hunger strike is accompanied by “conversationality” (Ellmann 1994, 36).

In order to make sure their statement is able to be understood properly, hunger strikers use the dual strategy of issuing a call to action and proclaiming judgment. In the same vein, Jean Lassalle’s gestural reference to Mahatma Gandhi is a citation of the tradition of politically motivated fasting in which the male body is transformed into a tool for struggle and resistance. Lassalle’s reference to Gandhi is meant to ensure that the media appearance he is staging is not centered on an exhibitionist brand of fasting but instead wielded as a political tool to bring about freedom (Conrad, Conrad-Lütt 2006). Lassalle’s renunciation of food thus makes recourse to another struggle against a seemingly almighty opponent – one encountered by the Indian resistance as a British occupational power but perceived in 21st-century France as an international corporation. In his verbal statements, press releases and numerous interviews, Lassalle’s outline of its anonymously inhumane nature is like a caption for the picture that portrays the scene set around the bedridden martyr:

Ce jour, mardi 7 mars 2006, j'engage à l'Assemblée Nationale, lieu et symbole de la représentation du peuple de France, une grève de la faim qui ne s'arrêtera que lorsque la délocalisation de l'usine Toyal, qui emploie 150 salariés dans la vallée d'Aspe (Pyrénées-Atlantiques) et qui est arrachée à son site par le groupe Total sans aucune

6 In Ireland, this practice is spelled out in the civil code “Senchus Mor” as “trosced,” or “fasting for a deposit.” Cf. Ellmann, p. 26.
justification, aura pris fin. Il m’est devenu insupportable que des hommes seuls, aussi puissants soient-ils, puissent décider du sort de dizaines de familles, de leur vie ou de leur mort, et du devenir de notre territoire déjà en lambeaux. Durant ce jeûne, je prendrai tout le temps nécessaire pour parler à tous ceux qui pourraient être intéressés par mon sentiment sur quelques faits précis, révélateurs du dysfonctionnement qui depuis longtemps mine insidieusement l’édifice de notre société, la rendant chaque jour plus injuste, inhumaine et pour tout dire effrayante.7

As is the case with all hunger strikes, Lassalle’s struggle follows the principle of self-sacrifice, laying his own life on the line for the sake of strategic goals. He thus assumes traits of martyrdom, which takes on its tragic dimensions in the contact between victim and victimizer (Weigel 2007, 26). The secret undergirding hunger strikes is the way they “overpower the oppressor with a theatrical representation of the loss of power” (Ellmann 1994, 42). When hunger strikers act out their independence from sustenance, even from life itself, they compromise the power of the foe, confronting the enemy with an unexpected form of subject autonomy.

Personal pain and the pain of others

Paradoxically, however, the pain associated with this process can only take on a representative character when shared by others. For that reason, hunger strikes aim to create a communitas, perhaps best described as a community tied together through its fervent solidarity. In the case at hand, this community initially encompasses only the group of threatened workers before Jean Lassalle arrives on the scene to advocate for them. The ensuing goal is to enlarge this core group over the course of the staged action, supplementing its ranks with numerous sympathizers whose help makes it possible to confront their ‘all-powerful opponent’ at the national level. Tellingly, this group is not forged together by the concrete experience of shared pain; physical anguish remains restricted to the politician. Emotional participation in the group is much more of a mental nature. The path leading from anger and derision over Lassalle’s break with the rules to recognition of his ‘achievement’ is built upon the groundswell of sympathy that continually grows throughout the strike. As Dieter Thomä recently demonstrated, sympathy

7 Jean Lasalle, press release, 7 March 2006 (1 May 2008). <http://www.jeanlassalle.fr>. English translation: “It has become unbearable to me that individual men, regardless how powerful they may be, have the power to make decisions that affect dozens of families, on their life and their death and on our territory [the Pyrenees], which is already divided into pieces. During the fast, I will take the time to speak with those who are interested in how I feel about various facts, who will show the way things are not working – how the basic construction of our society has been undermined for some time, making it more and more unjust, inhuman and terrible with each passing day.”
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bonds together beings that are able to experience pain in a type of “coexistence.” (Thomä 2006, 191). Regardless of whether the reader wishes to regard sympathy as containing a “fear centered on oneself” with Lessing, (Lessing 1968, 381) an “inborn reluctance to see others of the same kind in pain” with Rousseau (Rousseau 1995, 218) or as one of the “three wellsprings of human negotiation” with Schopenhauer (Schopenhauer 2005, 78), each of these vantage points in some way knits together the fates and fortunes facing different beings. Hunger strikes, as with religious martyrdom, aim to call forth an “emotional community of the compassionate” (Weigel 2007, 20). The immanent risk and readiness to accept death as a “selfless, tragic and heroic victim for the sake of the greater good” (ibid), lends the pain a “metaphysical purport” (Weigel 2007, 14). The change of heart exhibited by Lassalle’s political colleagues testifies to a recognition and acceptance of this ideological framework.

Virtuosic fasting

Just as with hunger strikes, virtuosic fasting draws its appeal from the way it acts out a break with norms. Hence, the superlative and the exotically fantastical are well suited for use in staging passivity and voluntary pain. The European tradition of performative fasting can be traced all the way back to the 17th century (see Vandereycken, Deth, Meermann 2003). This secular strand of ascetic fasting was undertaken outside the bounds of the set fasting times proscribed by the church and was oftentimes carried out by adolescent girls, such as Appolonia Schreier of Switzerland, with her ostentatious ten-year fast in 1611, and Martha Taylor of England, who began and completed a 13-month hunger treatment in 1667 without cloister or hermitage. Thanks to the printing press, news of these extraordinary achievements spread far and wide via flyers and became the subject of supra-regional attention on the part of both women and men. It was not uncommon for these “fasting wonders” and “wonder-girls” to reap commercial benefits as well, receiving summons to various royal courts and billed as attractions in travel guides (see Pulz 2007). In order to ascertain whether their ascetic fasts should be classified as proof of religious austerity, as miracles of God or as the “work of the devil,” clerics subjected those fasting to detailed scrutiny and the widest possible range of various tests, and numerous cases were identified as fraudulent. Finally, in the 18th century, Pope Benedict XIV established a canonization process in which doctors would help in determining whether or not the respective case on hand represented a “real” and “exceptional” fasting achievement.

It was the pathologization of female fasting and the 1873 clinical discovery of “anorexia nervosa” as presented by Ernest-Charles Lasègue and William
Gull that engendered the disappearance from the public eye of the ascetics once labeled as “wonder-girls.” The public display of voluntary abstention from food, however, returned within the context of the art world and the field of virtuosity, with aspirants – by and large male – appearing in public shows of fasting. Popular public entertainment venues provided the setting for most such hunger artists, venues such as the Verona Arena and the Wiener Pratergarten as well as restaurants and coffeehouses in which the fasting person’s body was staged as an “exoticism.” Giovanni Succi of Italy, among the most famous fasting virtuosos of the late 19th century, went on European-wide tours and established the first record with his forty-four day fast. But there were women, too – such as Austrian actress Auguste Victoria Schenk, who made her appearance as a hunger artist in Vienna in 1905 – that submitted themselves to confinement in see-through cages for weeks on end in a public staging of their fast (see Payer 2002).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the art of fasting was increasingly standardized, giving way to the implicit cultivation of a defined dramaturgical canon. Following a phase of preparation – in which they would choose the proper venue, create advertisement materials and build a “hunger cell” that could be seen from the outside – hunger artists would publicly perform their “last meal,” often appearing with their impresario to eat a substantial dinner accompanied by intensive commentary. Finally, after addressing a short speech to the audience, the fasting person was “walled in” – that is to say, locked in – availing themselves of the services of the fire department or security guard guild as a testament to the import of the occasion. After the weight of the hunger artist was measured, the long period of waiting would begin, interrupted only by changes of the guard, visits from the public or the arrival of “fan mail.” Once the day of “liberation” arrived, a crowd of curious spectators would form a dense circle around the cell – as happened during the “walling out” of Riccardo Sacco on June 13, 1905:

Long before the set time, a huge crowd of onlookers filled the hall of the hall of the local establishment of Pertl, and a solid ring formed around the small glass house in which Mr. Sacco awaited his liberation with a visibly cheerful sense of expectation. It was no easy job for the Hernals fire department personnel on duty [...] to keep the roped-off space cleared between the glass house encasing Mr. Sacco and the stage, where he was to break his fast with his first meal.8

In the end, surrounded by multitudes of photographers, the hunger artist exited the cell, underwent examination by the doctors standing ready and, after a toast to all the bystanders, publicly ate his “first meal.” The reactions of those present in the audience – arising to the occasion as fellow actors to accompany Mr. Sacco in his liberation scene – attested in a particularly clear way to

8 Illustriertes Wiener Extrablatt from June 14, 1905, cited by Payer, 83f.
Asce ticism poses a threat the dynamic of immanence that permeated the entire event. In like manner, the high point of the public hunger art genre came about in 1926, as hunger artist Jolly left his cell in the Berlin restaurant “Krokodil” after forty-four days’ confinement; in the mass hysteria that followed, “the tumultuous crowd tore the very clothes from his body” (Payer 2002, 35). Extremely feeble, Jolly had to be transported immediately to the hospital – though he was able to pocket profits of 130,000 German Marks after his convalescence.

All the participants in these events were bound together in a kind of cast with set roles. There was the suffering artist, reintegrated into society in a final sort of resurrection scene; there was the impresario, who served as a sort of guardian protector of the artist; then there were the guardsmen, who functioned as the keepers of the game rules; and there were the doctors, who measured and certified the degree of achievement; and finally, there were the members of the greater public, able to appear in the roles of the doubter, the fan or the provocateur. The template models for these enactments, however, go well beyond the context of art.

**Summary**

In contemporary politics and art alike, voluntary hunger can be enacted as a kind of controlled “self-abandonment” and publicized via the media. The provokingly fomentive effect accompanying the public performance of such abstention has its roots in the break with the rules that is seen through by the fasting person and in the person’s willing exposure to the inherent physical risks. In the case of Jean Lassalle, this enactment serves as a gesture of resistance within the political context. While the aim of hunger strikes is to load physical suffering with a gesture of non-compliance, the goal of popular performative fasting is to create a spectacle. While both cases involve the goal of conveying a “hunger for” something, the two still differ; the politician goes hungry in the name of a suppressed group while the artist goes hungry in the name of inspiration. Both kinds of performances are locked into a media-governed “economics of attention” (see Franck 1998) in order to make this “lonely” experience publicly felt. In effect, both hunger strikes and performative fasting evoke vehement collective emotions ranging all the way from fury and rejection on the one side to adamancy and sympathy on the other. Between those two emotional poles is commiseration, which to some extent breaks down the unshareable nature of physical experience. The boundary-crossing nature of commiseration takes the persona, the fate and the fortunes of the suffering person and binds them together with the person who merely learns about that suffering. Far from being a hindrance, the representative character of this suffering is actually a requirement in order to
evoke the level of responsiveness around which the whole revolves (Thomä 2006, 198ff).

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References


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