

THE DISCOURSE OF HUMAN DIGNITY AND TECHNIQUES OF
DISEMPOWERMENT: GIORGIO AGAMBEN, J. M. COETZEE, AND KAZUO
ISHIGURO

A Dissertation

by

MALEK HARDAN MOHAMMAD

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2010

Major Subject: English

The Discourse of Human Dignity and Techniques of Disempowerment: Giorgio

Agamben, J. M. Coetzee, and Kazuo Ishiguro

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ABSTRACT

The Discourse of Human Dignity and Techniques of Disempowerment: Giorgio Agamben, J. M.

Coetzee, and Kazuo Ishiguro. (December 2010)

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A multidisciplinary approach is needed to critique the frequently invoked but seldom questioned notion of “human dignity,” a discursive tool that is subtly serving abusive power structures while seemingly promoting human rights. The discourse of human dignity misrepresents the meaning of empowerment for modern citizens, making them interested more in political gestures and less in profit, comfort and protection from abuse. Dignity’s epistemes—self-assertion, recognition, political action, public-spiritedness, responsibility, resistance, the denial of animal instinct, sacrifice—should not be human ideals, for they are exactly the opposite of the sovereign’s characteristics and because they are responsible for recursive violence that preserves the *status quo*. They should be replaced with ethics based on sensuous interest, instinct, and natural-spiritedness (a sense of mystical oneness with other living beings).

This dissertation answers Foucault’s question about how the modern state endows citizens with a political subjectivity while simultaneously subjecting them to a totalized system, exposing human dignity as just the link between individuation and totalization. It questions Agamben’s notion of the indistinction between political life and natural life, arguing that sovereign power, using the discourse of human dignity, creates a clear distinction. The human dignity discourse keeps the human within political life, representing such life as the middle point

between the instinctive life of the animal and the mechanical life of the laborer. In reality, the dissertation shows, these two demonized modes of life are the same mode, which should be championed as a valuable and empowered state of being.

In the literary field, a close examination reveals that J. M. Coetzee's fiction subverts the human dignity discourse while Kazuo Ishiguro's work is enmeshed in it. Coetzee generates sympathy for humans who lack the sense of human dignity and act on mere instinct. He offers "disgrace" as a spiritual-ethical state of sensuality, acceptance and humility and promotes an agenda of desire-based rights in lieu of dignity-based ones. His writings also eschew authorial dignity as they discount the values of newness and originality in favor of expression attuned to desire, even when such moves appear selfish and politically irresponsible.

DEDICATION

To Mariko Nishibe, whose place in my heart is beyond discourse

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: HUMAN DIGNITY AND SOVEREIGN POWER

This dissertation argues that the notion of human dignity is in fact a subtle discursive tool in the service of abusive power structures. The notion of human dignity is more a function of sovereign power than a deep and abiding concept in the service of human rights. Human dignity is vital to a state-compromised liberal discourse of individual autonomy and identity to the same extent that the value of cultural and hierarchical “dignity” has long been central to the more forthrightly abusive language of national identity and social class. Egalitarian human dignity is a mere variation on the same concept that has been variously but consistently defined by power, be it the dignity that means rank and distinction or the monotheistic dignity of the human’s privileged but tormented relation to her Creator. The dissertation explores the philosophical and ethical paradoxes of a supposedly inherent human dignity that not only still needs to be proactively realized by the individual but has also to be recognized, guaranteed and protected by society. While I recognize the aspirations and the occasional effectiveness of the well-intentioned use of “human dignity” as a rhetorical tool to help disadvantaged populations, I seek to expose the underlying complicity between the notion of human dignity and a stifling power structure.

In order to capture several of the ideals that have been directly and indirectly linked to, and advanced under the rubric of, human dignity after the concept was first introduced by Immanuel Kant, I survey several fields including: human rights; ethics; moral philosophy;

This dissertation follows the style of *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*.

political science; psychology; literature and literary criticism. A general list of such dignity-based ideals includes: intrinsic human worth; personal autonomy; acting in freedom from or against animal instinct; recognition of and respect for the other and demanding the same in return; self-assertion; demotion of personal interest in favor of responsibility, altruism and sacrifice; political consciousness, action and inclusion in a political community; claiming an identity; the need for creativity, originality, and authenticity. Based on this accumulative meaning, I argue that human dignity, in all its formulations, is a discourse that misrepresents the meaning of empowerment for modern citizens as they become interested more in political gestures and less in material profit. Running through most of the dissertation is a continuing effort to correct Giorgio Agamben's response to Michel Foucault's question about how the modern state endows its citizen with a political subjectivity and individuality and, by the same gesture, subjects him to a totalized system. I argue that it is the discourse of human dignity that makes possible a superficially individuated, but subtly and ultimately totalized, culture. This project also demonstrates, sometimes in a counter-intuitive way, how some of the ideals within the discourse of human dignity have worked in accord with nationalist, racist and other dangerous world views.

While my interdisciplinary approach interrogates how writers from different disciplines either question or reinforce the discourse of human dignity, the bulk of this research is focused on works of fiction. For, the literary text, while it can at times be as subject as other forms of text to discursive constraints, still has more potential to break through dominant discourse. The poetic is more likely than the philosophical to offer alternatives to conventional thinking about ethics and human rights. Moreover, fiction can be a better venue for examining how discourse works. Fiction can rely on a default exemption from history, and this complacency results in less careful

concealment of discursive traces. Therefore some fictions question the discourse of human dignity, even as others are caught within this discourse. In this light, I argue that South African novelist and Nobel Laureate J. M. Coetzee's fiction subverts the discourse of human dignity while Japanese-British novelist Kazuo Ishiguro's work is still enmeshed in that discourse. There are several reasons for my choice of these two particular novelists.

Coetzee's novels are written over a period spanning the height of apartheid and its aftermath. As somebody who has taken a strong stance against the racist cruelties of apartheid at home and against perceived injustice worldwide, Coetzee is evidently no apologist for systems of abuse. In his acceptance speech for the Jerusalem Prize for the Freedom of the Individual in Society in 1987, Coetzee denounced apartheid as an artificial system that produced "deformed and stunted relations between human beings." Yet, his views on the ethical value of human dignity draw a great deal of validity from his historical circumstance. For, when a white South African novelist with top literary prestige questions the value of human dignity, he stands the risk of trivializing the suffering of human beings under colonialism, apartheid, and their still painful aftermath. Due to this risk, Coetzee's criticism of the ideals encompassed within the discourse of human dignity is based on deliberate and careful thought and not on unquestioned sentiment.

Ishiguro's historical and geographical coordinates, also, are relevant to his position in relation to the discourse of human dignity. The novelist was born in Japan, but he has lived in England since the age of six, was educated in England, and writes in English. Both Japan and England, as it happens, are associated with a certain self-image or national character of "dignity"—not "human dignity" but social characteristics such as reticence, restraint, loyalty to tradition, etc. Consequently, Ishiguro's fiction, aiming to replace the traditional dignity of

custom, finds itself entangled in the more subtle and pervasive discourse of human dignity.

Ishiguro uses the power of his narratives to bring his characters out of the unconscious dignity of norm and into a conscious struggle to realize their personal autonomy and adopt particular identities.

In Chapter I, I identify the parameters of Kantian dignity, survey some existing criticisms of the concept and pinpoint places where the notion of human dignity takes on additional meanings. After this overview, I develop the argument that the discourse of human dignity constitutes the link between the two processes of subject-formation and subjection to power. I do so by questioning Giorgio Agamben's explanation of the biopolitical state as a site of indistinction between natural life and political life. My argument is that the modern state wields the discourse of human dignity to exclude natural life and limit its citizens to political life alone. I then develop a second argument that the discourse of human dignity impairs the citizens' sense of what empowerment means as they become interested more in political paraphernalia and less in tangible welfare, power and freedom. I then summarize some of Jacques Derrida's thoughts on the nature of sovereignty and argue that the ideals within the discourse of human dignity are the exact opposite of sovereign characteristics. I also survey Francis Fukuyama's views on revolution, arguing that the notion of dignity is responsible for much political violence, and then move to Agamben and Walter Benjamin to connect dignity to their concept of the circular violence that only preserves the *status quo*. By turning to J. M. Coetzee's theoretical writings on apartheid, I pinpoint places where ideals within the discourse of dignity are behind racial instigation, social violence, and sexual abuse. By reading Hannah Arendt's writings on human rights against and through those of Agamben and Derrida, I show how the notion of human dignity can be a barrier in the face of refugees and other stateless populations. I then end with

some historical and semi-fictional glimpses of what a mode of life without the discourse of human dignity might look like. One such important historical figure, in this regard, is the death camp inmate (the *Muselmann*).

Chapter II is dedicated to J. M. Coetzee's fictions and non-fictions. In this chapter, I develop the argument that J. M. Coetzee's writings break through the discourse of human dignity, rejecting its epistemes of self-assertion, recognition, political action, membership in a community, resistance, responsibility, altruism, and sacrifice. Coetzee replaces this discourse with ethics based on sensuous interest, instinct, desire, love, and a sense of mystical oneness with other living beings. I demonstrate how two of Coetzee's early novels dramatize the conflict between dignity-based aspirations for a political mode of life and instinct-based yearnings for animal life, where the latter consistently overcome the former. I also explore the mystical or shamanic ethics of natural-spiritedness (a combination of instinct and spirituality) that Coetzee offers as an alternative to the ethics of dignity in these two novels. I also examine one Coetzee novel that portrays and generates sympathy for a human being who lacks any sense of human dignity and who acts on mere instinct. With reference to another novel I tease out Coetzee's ethics of "disgrace," a spiritual-ethical state of sensuality, acceptance and humility and then trace what I see as Coetzee's program of desire-based rights in lieu of dignity-based ones.

Chapter III engages several of Agamben's books, *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*; *The Open: Man and Animal*; *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*; and *State of Exception*, next to two of Ishiguro's novels, *Remains of the Day* and *Never Let Me Go*. I argue that the discourse of human dignity aims to keep the human within political life, which this discourse represents as the middle point between the instinctive life of the animal and the functional life of the laborer. I offer the corrective view that these two demonized modes of

being are actually one and the same (the working-animal), for which I propose the name *dignitas*, and champion it as a sovereign and powerful state of being. I return to Agamben's thesis on the indistinction between political life and natural life, for I believe that making a categorical distinction is a necessary step toward developing a theory of power in relation to dignity. I also survey some of Agamben's own examples to demonstrate how they fit better within my own framework and also to explain why I choose the term *dignitas* to designate a state of being categorically opposed to human dignity. I then turn to Kazuo Ishiguro's fictions, with few references to other cultural texts, as products of the discourse of human dignity in order to demonstrate how they support my correction of Agamben's thesis and to expose how they criminalize man's real sovereignty (*dignitas*) while they champion subjected modes of being, even when the latter are openly abusive. I particularly emphasize how the texts valorize every act against instinct, and I then return to the figure of the *Muselman* to connect his lack of dignity, his instinctive behavior, and his sovereignty. I end the chapter with a discussion of Agamben's main figure of indistinction, the *homo sacer*, in order to read him in light of the information accrued through the dissertation up to that point.

Chapter IV explores Coetzee's views on (his) writing, in fiction and nonfiction, in relation to the terms, arguments, and views explored in the preceding chapters. I argue that Coetzee's aesthetic, in theory and in practice, falls within the *dignitas* category. I demonstrate that Coetzee's writings eschew authorial dignity in pursuing no calculated desire for distinction and originality, qualities assumed to be pre-requisites for canonization. I also argue that Coetzee experiments with forms of expression attuned to physical desire, even when such artistic modes might prove self-interested and politically irresponsible. I then show how Coetzee brings writing as close as possible to an art embedded in material and functional utility; in particular, I argue

that Coetzee's aesthetic steers clear from the political function of art as an expression of the artist's (human) dignity and approximates the primal function of rituals, understood as rites of passage tied to life's necessities and death's inevitability (*dignitas*, natural life).

I conclude by proposing a different ethics that combines sensuous interest, mysticism, and sympathy to replace the discourse of human dignity.

Kantian Dignity

The concept of "dignity" has historically evolved from a point when it referred to social prestige and elevation in public status to a modern sense that indicates autonomous personhood and intrinsic human worth. As far back as Latin jurist Cicero and the Emperor Augustus, "dignity" was used to indicate official office, rank or authority. With the Abrahamic tradition, dignity came to be associated with the sanctity of the human who is made in God's image. But, in the modern period the concept of dignity has been most closely associated with Immanuel Kant, who offered the first, supposedly non-theological, conception of a "universal" and "egalitarian" *human dignity*.

In his *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant wrote that "man and generally any rational being *exists* as an end in himself, *not merely as a means* to be arbitrarily used by this or that will, but in all his actions, whether they concern himself or other rational beings, must be always regarded at the same time as an end" (56). Kant's "practical imperative will be as follows: So act as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only" (57). For Kant, human dignity means that the human being has intrinsic worth that no one can put a price on because it is not

tied to the relative utility or benefit of that person to others: “everything has either Value or Dignity. Whatever has a value can be replaced by something else which is *equivalent*; whatever, on the other hand, is above all value, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has a dignity . . . , an intrinsic worth” (64-5). Man’s dignity also means rising above “all laws of physical nature, and obeying those only which he himself gives, and by which his maxims can belong to a system of universal law, to which at the same time he submits himself. . . *Autonomy* then is the basis of the dignity of the human” (66). Kant speaks of “the *dignity* of any rational being, obeying no law but that which he himself gives” (64). This rational autonomy from the dictates of instinct is essential to what Kant calls “pure reason.” In *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), while suggesting that the autonomous will freely legislating for itself might be in fact a product of nature, Kant argues that the human being ought to separate his judgment from, and elevate it over, instinct and mere survival mechanisms that he shares with other living beings:

[The human] is yet not so completely an animal as to be indifferent to everything that reason says for itself and to use it merely as an instrument for the satisfaction of his needs as a sensuous being. For the fact he has reason would not elevate [the human] in value above mere animality at all if he used reason only for the sake of that which instinct accomplishes in animals: it would then only be a particular way that nature had made use of in order to equip man for the same end which it had made the vocation of animals, without giving him a higher end for his vocation. Given his natural constitution, he no doubt has reason in order to take account of his weal and woe, but he also has it for a higher purpose, not merely to take into consideration what is in itself good and evil, about which pure, not sensuously interested reason alone can judge, but rather to distinguish

entirely the judgment of reason [from sensuously interested judgment] and to make it the highest condition of the latter. (61-2)

The notion of “human dignity” emerges from Kant’s thought, then, with at least four implications: 1) a human being has inherent and absolute worth that is not contingent on social, economic, or material factors; 2) a human being is an autonomous subject who authors and follows his or her own, universally applicable, ethical code; 3) human beings possess the faculty of reason that should shape their moral conduct in freedom from animal instinct and legal norm; 4) every human being has the right to be treated as a person with inherent worth and bears the responsibility to treat others on the same principle. In the Kantian formulation, therefore, human dignity is a universal and egalitarian quality of all human beings, who are still superior to other living beings (a continuation of the religious tradition); human beings must recognize their own dignity and that of others. Kantian dignity, consequently, has proven to be the most persistent term in the discourse of rights and responsibilities governing human interaction.

The notion of human dignity has evidently been embraced and emphasized by twentieth-century constitutions and declarations. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) opens with the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.” Countries that have witnessed gross crimes on racial and economic grounds are particularly attached to the notion of human dignity. Article 10 in the Bill of Rights section of the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996), for example, is unequivocal in asserting an inherent human dignity and the connection of such dignity with entitlement to rights: “Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected.”

The persistent allure of Kantian dignity has several explanations. The most evident one is that human dignity appears to be a minimal or threshold ethical concept. Subscription to the minimal character of dignity can be seen in the work of moral philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum. In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), Rorty proposes his vision of an ethical person, whom he terms the “liberal ironist,” who recognizes that “what unites her with the rest of the species is not a common language but *just* susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans—humiliation” (92). Rorty sees resentment of humiliation as the special and morally significant characteristic that unites humanity. While we can see here a commonality with Kantian dignity, this conception—in its insistence on the distinction from animals—does not vary much from earlier views of dignity either, views rooted in theology and social hierarchy. Martha Nussbaum also insists on the indispensable and minimal character of dignity even as she argues that *shame* has no role in a liberal democracy. Her legal vision is very protective of the notion of human dignity, whose cultivation she considers one of “the most basic obligations of a liberal state” (386). Nussbaum draws a line in the sand around dignity by arguing that “a minimally just and decent society would provide all its citizens with a minimum threshold amount of certain key opportunities” (283). One such opportunity is the “capability” to possess “the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others” (283). Nussbaum asserts dignity as a key legal value despite its murky philosophical basis. Although it is not clear at first sight, dignity—in these specific situations and in public debate generally—is for Nussbaum a *forensic* term, at home in the *legal* discourse of rights/claims and suited to litigation.

Recent debate on the meaning and value of human dignity has focused on contrasting the view that society should *recognize* the dignity of individuals by treating them as ends rather than as means, as opposed to the *agency* view that stresses the individual's own act of *claiming* dignity. The latter association—of dignity with the act of claiming rights—is often attributed to Joel Feinberg, who also stresses the minimal nature of dignity as an ethical term:

Having rights, of course, makes claiming possible; but it is claiming that gives rights their special moral significance. This feature of rights is connected in a way with the customary rhetoric about what it is to be a human being. Having rights enables us to “stand up like men,” to look others in the eye, and to feel in some fundamental way the equal of anyone. To think of oneself as the holder of rights is not to be unduly but properly proud, to have that minimal self-respect that is necessary to be worthy of the love and esteem of others. Indeed, respect for a person may simply be respect for their rights, so that there cannot be the one without the other; and what is called “human dignity” may simply be the recognizable capacity to assert claims. (252)

Feinberg places clear “moral significance” in the capacity to possess, claim, and assert rights; and he conceives of human dignity as indistinguishable from such a capacity.

Such attempts to link dignity to minimal requirements might explain also why dignity has persisted in rights discourse even though related ideals such as ‘honor,’ ‘merit’ and ‘self-fulfillment’ have faded in recent deliberations on issues of social justice. According to Alan Gewirth, “self-fulfillment” has experienced “diminution of concern in much of modern moral and political philosophy . . . as a reaction to the seemingly elitist focus of many ideals of the good life” (4). Moral philosophers have grown less interested in individual attainment of the good life and more focused rather on interpersonal duties and obligations. These duties

supposedly cater to “moderate or even minimal but indispensable needs rather than the superlative fulfillment of aspirations and capacities” (4). As we can see in Rorty, Nussbaum and Feinberg, dignity has become accepted as a minimal requirement and, hence, it needs to be asserted by the individual, society and the state. Human dignity has become a matter of responsibility to oneself and to others. Nevertheless, the reasoning behind the place of dignity in the culture of human rights has not gone without questioning.

Existing Criticisms of Kantian Dignity

The humanist tradition has widely embraced the concept of dignity, so much so that the “idea has been weakened less by counterargument than by being so invariably honored in speech that it is now cliché” (Tinder 238). This embrace continues even though almost two centuries ago Schopenhauer made a sharp and convincing critique of the concept. In *On The Basis of Morality* (1840), he offers a “positive” ethical theory as an alternative to Kant’s artificial ethics, specifically targeting “human dignity” which “once it was uttered by Kant, became the shibboleth of all confused and empty-headed moralists . . . supposing cleverly enough that their readers would be so pleased to see themselves invested with such a ‘dignity’ that they would be quite satisfied” (97). For Schopenhauer, the philosophical use of Kantian dignity is both deceptive and condescending: “this ‘dignity’ is made to rest solely on man’s autonomy, and to lie in the fact that the law which he ought to obey is his own work, his relation to it thus being the same as that of the subjects of a constitutional government to their statutes” (97). More importantly, Schopenhauer notes that, despite its secular façade, “human dignity” is a theological aftertaste because it has no material or natural basis; it is extremely hard, he argues, to imagine

“a man, possessed, as it were, by a *daemon*, in the form of an absolute Ought, that speaks only in Categorical Imperatives, and, confronting his wishes and inclinations, claims to be the perpetual controller of his actions” (97). Even if we are able to imagine this “figure,” what we see is “no true portrait of human nature, or of our inner life; what we do discern is an artificial substitute for theological Morals, to which it stands in the same relation as a wooden leg to a living one” (97).

Ranjana Khanna calls human dignity into question on both philosophical and ethical grounds. She argues that “even though it appears as a byproduct of the categorical imperative to treat every human as an end and not a means,” in Kant’s ethics “human dignity is [still] a categorical imperative” in itself (57). Eleni Coundouriotis also points to the blind-spot problem plaguing the position of dignity in the discourse of human rights:

Although dignity is a foundational concept of human rights, it has a peculiar position in the discourse because it rarely elicits a critical examination. As a result, dignity is pushed to the margins; it is seen either as synonymous with humanity and hence a starting point for elaborating a theory of rights, or as the ultimate expression of rights realized.

Occupying this place at the beginning or the end of the human rights narrative, dignity is rarely part of a discussion of process. (843)

The use of human dignity as a discursive tool also changes depending on the historical moment. We can see that in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s “notion (developed specifically to facilitate the post-apartheid transition) that it has the power to restore the dignity that has been stolen by the illegitimate regime of apartheid” (Coundouriotis 847). In post-apartheid Africa, it is more convenient to think of dignity as something that can be *restored*. On the other hand, at a different historical point, the *African Charter on Human and People’s Rights* (1981) would claim

in its preamble that victims of racism are yet to *attain*, rather than *restore*, their dignity; Africans “are still struggling for their dignity.”

The fact that Kantian dignity is based on personal autonomy is also the object of critique, as several problems arise when we begin to consider the background of this autonomous subject. Drucilla Cornell notes how Kantian dignity is posited as “the moral mandate in which all of us are viewed as subjects who, in principle, can articulate their desire as well as morally evaluate their ends Indeed, much political philosophy takes it for granted that we act as actively desiring subjects who simply shape our own lives” (144). Cornell reminds us of the feminist grievance that it was easy for theorists “to make this assumption because the subjects in the purview of the theory were not all human beings, but straight white men of a certain class background” (144). While moral philosophy continues to discuss dignity on the premise that we all are autonomous subjects, we should be cognizant of misgivings about such an assumption and see that “self” and “subjectivity” are not so readily and equally recognized across cultures and disciplines.

Although it is based on a clear demarcation of the self, dignity continues to elude deconstruction a generation after poststructuralist and postmodernist critiques have destabilized the sovereign, homogenous subject and revealed it as porous and fluid. Ethical projects that emphasize dignity are strangely out of step with current theoretical trends. In her examination of the use of “dignity” in Cornell’s *Legacies of Dignity: between Women and Generations*, Sarah Murphy questions the “claims for the autonomy of the female subject” that are “vital to a feminist project” and looks instead for a Lacanian constitution of the subject in a “heteronomy, a relation to otherness” (158-59). Murphy asks, “What has become of Kantian dignity in the process of being Lacanized? Or more precisely, to what extent can Kant’s dignity, which relies

so intently on a rational, autonomous subject in so many ways not the subject of Lacanian psychoanalysis, survive this analysis?” (158). Ranjana Khanna points to the possibility that dignity perhaps plays the crucial part in resistance to the deconstruction of the autonomous subject: “If Jacques Derrida claimed in ‘Force of Law’ that the term *justice* is undeconstructible and, more controversially, that justice is deconstruction, it would seem that in current usage *dignity* is held in high esteem and becomes the source of indignant defense of the subject and resistance to the questioning of its boundaries” (45). She draws attention to several terms that repeatedly stall “radical questioning of the constitution of the subject in contemporary discourse, and these seem to be underpinned by dignity—like identity in politically oriented work, the body in political critiques, or the selfsame in philosophical paradigms. Many of these seem to take dignity as their crucial underpinning” (45). Several philosophical disciplines have recognized the philosophical value of recent theory that downplays subjective autonomy, accentuates intersubjective experience and troubles the self/other binary. Hence, a moral philosophy of dignity, in that it continues to rely on a sovereign subject, can be understood as a reactionary resistance to deconstructive analysis.

Hannah Arendt: Human Dignity as Political Action

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Hannah Arendt rejects the idea that human rights are based on the notion of an intrinsic human dignity:

The concept of human rights can again be meaningful only if they are redefined as a right to the human condition itself, which depends upon some belonging to some human community, the right never to be dependent upon some inborn human dignity which *de*

facto, aside from its guarantee by fellow men, not only does not exist but is the last and possibly most arrogant myth we have invented in all our long history. (439)

Throughout its dark history, Arendt argues, “the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human” (295). For Arendt, human rights do not have a divine or natural basis: “human rights are civil rights: they are based on forms of human action, not a set of moral truths about the laws of God or nature. It is as political, not legal, actors that we are granted rights” (51). Arendt notes that the French *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (1789) makes human rights dependent on civic rights; it is only citizens who can count on the protection of the law and who can expect their dignity to be respected. A general characterization of Arendt’s position, offered by Andrew Norris, is that “the direct defense of human rights will alone be insufficient. By her account what is needed is rather a recognition of the ultimate basis of civil rights—what she terms the ‘right to have rights.’ This right Arendt finds in political action” (Norris 51). Seranah Parekh argues that Arendt “disparages” a mode of living where the human does not attempt to affirm dignity through participation in public discourse: “Arendt wants people to have the possibility of transforming themselves from mere givenness (*zoē*) into individuals with unique identities (*bios*); that transformation is only possible through acting and speaking with others in a public space” (39). This political action Arendt terms *praxis*.

In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt takes *praxis* from the Greek verbs, *archein* and *prattein*, “to begin” and “to perform” respectively; as co-acting creators, people “begin” and “perform” together, thereby expressing their otherwise incommunicable identities. To engage in *Praxis* is to be politically engaged and conscious, a *worldly* human expressing one’s individual identity and distinction, as opposed to the *worldless animal laboran* “imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfillment of his own needs in which nobody can share and

which nobody can fully communicate” (119). Arendt’s politics, therefore, place the ideals of dignity ahead of the empirical realm that concerns itself with economics and administrative matters. The politics Arendt aspires to is a form of public space where individuals assert and express themselves under conditions of mutual respect and recognition. For Arendt, then, while human dignity is not the natural basis of human rights, the achievement of dignity is the *telos* of political action.

The form of political consciousness that Arendt calls for is to be distinguished from scientific and factual knowledge. When I refer to consciousness throughout this dissertation, I mean knowledge of and concern with political and social issues that have no tangible impact and profit for the individual. I do not mean scientific and factual knowledge. In fact, attention to scientific knowledge can be opposed by some to the human dignity that liberates the mind from attachment to instrumental detail and frees it up for loftier human aspirations. Such an attitude could be a continuation from an earlier form of dignity that Francis Bacon noted in his *Novum Organum* (1620) when he spoke of “the opinion, or inveterate conceit, which is both vainglorious and prejudicial, namely that the dignity of the human mind is lowered by long and frequent intercourse with experiments and particulars, which are objects of sense and confined to matter” (31).

Human Dignity as the Hidden Link between Subject-Formation and Subjection

My own critique of human dignity targets all visions of the concept that have accumulated so far. In the remainder of this chapter, I demonstrate that the notion of human dignity, in all its formulations, is a way of nudging the human being out of her mere “givenness”

(animality, instinct) and into acts of political self-assertion and physical self-sacrifice. This contradictory combination of self-assertion and self-sacrifice makes the core of a deeply flawed understanding of power on the part of “subjects” who become interested more in gesture than profit, who willingly discipline themselves and forego any life outside political action. The modern state, in my view, uses empty and contradictory tokens of human dignity to promote a superficially individuated, but subtly and ultimately totalized, culture. Therefore, I argue, the notion of human dignity (whether it is seen as the beginning or end of rights) is the basis of subject-formation and the modern seal of subjection to sovereign power.

Agamben on the Link between Subject-Formation and Subjection

Much of Michel Foucault’s work focuses on analyzing the connection between the constitution of the subject and the formation of the state, the link between technologies of the self and technologies of government. Foucault distinguishes two meanings in the word *subject*: a person being “subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to” (“Subject” 212). Foucault attempted to demonstrate that the *modern* sovereign state and the modern autonomous individual facilitated each other’s emergence. Yet, there remains a gap in Foucault’s analysis, a gap that has been observed, but, I argue, not adequately closed. As Giorgio Agamben points out in *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), “Foucault argues that the modern Western state has integrated techniques of subjective individuation with procedures of objective totalization . . . Yet the point at which these two faces of power converge remains strangely unclear in Foucault’s work, so much so that it has even

been claimed that Foucault would have consistently refused to elaborate a unitary theory of power” (6). Agamben continued Foucault’s examination of the biopolitical state in an attempt to locate where individuation and totalization intersect and to expand and resolve Foucault’s unanswered question of why the modern state—which, in Agamben’s words, incorporated “bare life” or *zoē* (natural life) into *bios* (political life), made *zoē* its main concern by caring for the population’s health—did not protect *zoē* from destruction.

Agamben attempts to *correct or, at least, complete* Foucault’s thesis that modern politics is characterized by including *zoē* into the polis and making it the object of state power by arguing:

[T]he decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction. At once excluding bare life from and capturing it within the political order, the state of exception actually constituted, in its very separateness, the hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested. When its borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflicts of the political order, the one place for both the organization of state power and emancipation from it. Everything happens as if, along with the disciplinary process by which State power makes man as a living being into its own specific object, another process is set in motion that in large measure corresponds to the birth of modern democracy, in which man as a living being presents himself no longer as an object but as the subject of political power. (*Homo* 8-9).

Agamben's use of "bare life" has continued to confuse. In the last issue of *Theory & Event*, which opens with a symposium responding to the tenth anniversary of the English language publication of *Homo Sacer*, Daniel McLoughlin writes of "the difficulty that is particularly evident in the ambiguous role that 'bare life' plays in *Homo Sacer*. While the term principally refers to life that is excluded from the protection of the law, Agamben often also refers to bare life as *zoe*, natural or nutritive life." For Agamben, western politics brings "living man" (or woman) into the "polis" by separating him from "his bare life and, at the same time," maintaining him "in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion" (*Homo* 8). In other words, humans gain political rights and protection (*bios*), in other words become political subjects, when they are rescued by the modern state from their *zoē* (their mere givenness), but, since exclusion works only through inclusion, humans bring their *zoē* within them. Therefore, for Agamben, humans become the object of "sovereign violence" because of the kernel of *zoē* inside them that they have not really lost even though they took on political characters, and this *zoē* makes them the object of "sovereign violence" (118). Man's surviving *zoē*, in this formulation, trumps his political life and subjects him to power. Man's *zoē*, in Agamben's complex way, is the source of his woe.

Agamben argues that "the existence of this line of thinking seems to be logically implicit in Foucault's work" but says that "it remains a blind spot to the eye of the researcher, or rather something like a vanishing point that the different lines of Foucault's inquiry (and, more generally, of the entire Western reflection on power) converge toward without reaching" (7). I disagree with Agamben on how the biopolitical process of subject-formation and subjection—to which human dignity is essential—works.

Correcting and Adding to Agamben's Thesis

My argument is that the biopolitical state makes *zoē* the exclusive domain of the sovereign while the citizen turns herself into absolute *bios*, an exclusively political life. Modern democracy turns human life into citizen life—"way of life" or *bios*—and in this sense what makes man the object of violence is his *bios*, his lack of any *zoē* that is not way of life. The modern state does not turn all its citizens into mere *zoē* but opts to endow them all with an exclusively political life in the token of universal, egalitarian, politically conscious dignity. Hence, man as a "living being" cannot present himself as a "subject of political power"; he can only do so as a political being, and it is this very (political) presentation that makes man the willing object of sovereign power. The uncontested place of dignity in the "modern discourse" of human rights, therefore, marks the centrality not of bare life but of political life to the mechanism of the biopolitical state. The dignity-bearing citizen is the object of violence by virtue of his attachment to the empty token of human dignity, his mere political life.

Agamben's complex exclusion/inclusion thesis attempts to "return thought to its practical calling" (*Homo* 6). My "unitary theory of power" offers dignity as an alternative to Agamben's explanation of sovereignty in a complex and obtuse mechanism of exclusion/inclusion, an explanation that cannot have any practical use. I argue that the discourse of human dignity—premised as it is on the notion of a subject, be it autonomous or heteronymous—is the ultimate technology of the self; dignity, after all, means self-control and self-respect, concepts that reflect one's standing in a community. The discourse of human dignity is a function of subjectification—the creation of dignity-bearing subjects who are subjected to power. Thinking in terms of a discourse of dignity should also help us see sovereignty in a new light.

Human Dignity and the Reversed Understanding of Empowerment

Defining a concept in symmetrical terms can be misleading, and such an approach might sound particularly futile when applied to a question as perennial as the question of empowerment. Nevertheless, it is a good start to make the obvious argument that power is the exact opposite of non-power. What is less obvious about this diametrical relation between power and non-power is that, for at least some people some of the time, the vision is reversed. It is of the nature of power that what we see as power is exactly non-power and vice versa; power is masked that way. Hence, the harder we strive for empowerment, the more firmly we are subjected to sovereign power. This debilitating reversal essential to power is brought about almost exclusively by our attachment to human dignity. The ideals and aspirations that come under the rubric of human dignity are the opposite of all the manifestations of sovereign power. Noting this reversal brings us to the ultimate contradiction in the way human dignity is deployed in discourse: it is safe to argue that affirming egalitarian dignity means restoring to the “common man” such attributes as have long been the exclusive domain of “Man.” The ethics of human dignity envisions a human who is conscious of her place in the world, self-assertive, responsible, responsive, seeking recognition of her noble or human status, i.e. politically alive. But, sovereignty is unconscious, irresponsible, irresponsive, beyond recognition, i.e. politically dead.

Derrida: The Sovereign is Irresponsible

In *The Sovereign and the Beast* lecture series at the University of Chicago, Derrida emphasizes the “motif of the ‘response’ which one finds at work in the exclusion of the ‘beast’”

from the social “convention” at the origin of the state (56). In theories of the state, the “animal” is excluded from the social contract because it cannot “respond” (56). Derrida argues that for Descartes, Hobbes, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, and Lacan, “the most powerful, impassive, and dogmatic prejudice about the animal did not consist in saying that it does not communicate, that it does not signify, and that it has no sign at its disposal, but that it does not respond” (57). This exclusion leads Derrida to conclude that the “sovereign,” in a sense, is “like the beast” since he “does not respond, that in any case we cannot be assured of his acceptance, we cannot count on his response” (57). It is the absolute nature of sovereignty that “unbinds it from all duty of reciprocity. The sovereign . . . has the right to a certain irresponsibility” (57). In this light, the sovereign looks “stupid,” looks “even like the death he carries within him, like that death that Levinas says is not nothingness, nonbeing, but nonresponse” (57). It hardly warrants emphasizing that the exclusion of bestial irresponsibility—an exclusion essential to the sovereign state—has culminated in modernity with the concept of “*human dignity*.” Of course, this irresponsible bestiality is eliminated from the citizen of the sovereign state, not from the sovereign state itself.

Agamben, also, points out the implication of “responsibility” in state-sanctioned discourse. Cautioning against the “tacit confusion of ethical categories and juridical categories,” he writes in *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive* (1999) that “categories that we use in moral and religious judgments are in some way contaminated by law: guilt, responsibility, innocence, judgment, pardon” (18). Hence, dignity accounts for the inherent contradiction in a struggle that purports to empower and liberate the common man—to make him sovereign himself—but, simultaneously, condemns him to a system of obligations, of rights and responsibilities. Derrida does not think that man can escape sovereign power, but, were that to

happen, were man to be really free, he speculates “it would be so much *like* this expropriating ecstasy of irresponsibility, like this place of nonresponse that is commonly and dogmatically called bestiality, divinity, death” (*Sovereign* 57). I argue that human dignity—first conceived by Kant as man’s ethical detachment from his sensuous interest and then tied by Arendt to the necessity of political action—makes it impossible for man to be irresponsible, free and sovereign because it trims his *zoē*, his bestiality, and leaves him with the shell of *bios*. Power works in such a way that the thing we value most (our dignity) is what makes us least sovereign; the mode of life that repels us most is the mode that is characteristic of absolute freedom and power.

Dignity and Political Violence

The dignity-oriented subject’s reversed understanding of power makes her a direct target of political violence, not sovereign violence. So far I have avoided the phrase “sovereign violence” (except when I am quoting Agamben) because, I argue, there is no such thing as sovereign violence: sovereignty or absolute power evinces no violence because it would not be absolute power if it had to. Violence ensues from the dignity-oriented *struggle* for power that always draws on one or more of the ideals under the rubric of dignity. So, a dignity-conscious, responsible humanity playing by the terms defined for it by an irresponsible power generates and receives its own violence, a violence from which sovereign power, which has preserved its natural state, is protected by its very irresponsibility.

Fukuyama: Revolt for Dignity, Not Profit

Examining the place of dignity in theories of revolution puts this argument in more concrete terms. I argue that the goal of revolt (violent or otherwise), when it is necessary, should be the achievement of more material prosperity and comfort and less physical violence and abuse. The discourse of dignity, however, muddies up that process; this discourse presents living in a “democracy” and even just “fighting” for democracy as ends in themselves. The dignity-oriented mentality is more interested in the gesture of political struggle rather than in what material difference such struggle makes in people’s lives. Frances Fukuyama, for instance, believes that it is the citizen’s desire for recognition of his or her dignity, not for welfare, that is the basis of liberal democracy and warns that an erosion of that aspiration can bring about the downfall of liberal democracy. In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), Fukuyama explains that the “Hegelian understanding of the meaning of contemporary liberal democracy differs in a significant way from the Anglo-Saxon understanding that was the theoretical basis of liberalism in countries like Britain and the United States” (xviii). For people like “Hobbes, Locke, and the American Founding Fathers like Jefferson and Madison,” a system of government based on rights and freedom was a means to an end (xviii). They saw that “rights to a large extent existed as a means of preserving a private sphere where men can enrich themselves and satisfy the desiring parts of their souls” (xviii). In other words, it is a pragmatic view of what political action is meant to achieve. Hence, in the Anglo-Saxon tradition, “the prideful quest for recognition was to be subordinated to enlightened self-interest—desire combined with reason—and particularly the desire for self-preservation of the body” (xviii). In the Anglo-Saxon

formulation, this summary suggests, revolution takes place for the sake of material gain and protection from tyranny, and not for the sake of triumphalism and proud self-assertion.

According to Fukuyama, the Hegelian tradition, on the other hand, views “rights as ends in themselves, because what truly satisfies human beings is not so much material prosperity as recognition of their status and dignity” (xviii). As summed up by Fukuyama, the Hegelian view posits prestige as the purpose of political action:

With the American and French revolutions, Hegel asserted that history comes to an end because the longing that had driven the historical process—the struggle for recognition—has now been satisfied in a society characterized by universal and reciprocal recognition. No other arrangement of human social institutions is better able to satisfy this longing, and hence no further progressive historical change is possible. (xviii)

According to Fukuyama, “Communism is being superseded by liberal democracy in our time because of the realization that the former provides a gravely defective form of recognition” (xix). Fukuyama’s hypothesis about the end of history heralded by the triumph of liberal democracy is more in sync with the Hegelian view: he “finds in Hegel a more profound understanding of human nature than can be gleaned from the ideas of such philosophers as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, who privileged self-preservation above recognition” (Griffiths 91). He argues that while “[d]esire and reason are together sufficient to explain the process of industrialisation, and a large part of economic life more generally,” these two qualities alone “cannot explain the striving for liberal democracy, which ultimately arises out of *thymos*, the part of the soul that demands recognition” (Fukuyama xviii). With improvement in the material quality of life, “people begin to demand not simply more wealth but recognition of their status”: people, for Fukuyama, do not strive for material comfort alone for if they did, “they would be content to live

in market-oriented authoritarian states like Franco's Spain, or a South Korea or Brazil under military rule" (xviii). Human beings have "a thymotic pride in their own self-worth, and this leads them to demand democratic governments that treat them like adults rather than children, recognizing their autonomy as free individuals" (xviii).

Fukuyama borrows the figure of the "last man" in his title from Nietzsche, who scorned the Anglo-Saxon vision of liberal democracy and did not see a world without dignity as a human world:

Nietzsche believed that modern democracy represented not the self-mastery of former slaves, but the unconditional victory of the slave and a kind of slavish morality. The typical citizen of a liberal democracy was a "last man" who, schooled by the founders of modern liberalism, gave up prideful belief in his or her own superior worth in favor of comfortable self-preservation. Liberal democracy produced "men without chests," composed of desire and reason but lacking *thymos*, clever at finding new ways to satisfy a host of petty wants . . . The last man had no desire to be recognized as greater than others, and without such desire no excellence or achievement was possible. Content with his happiness and unable to feel any sense of shame for being unable to rise above those wants, the last man ceased to be human. (xxii)

Fukuyama uses this dystopian "last man" that liberal democracy can produce to caution us that a lack of dignity can cause the demise of liberal democracy itself.

Dignity, Circular Violence, and Sovereign Power

The role dignity plays in reversing the way power is understood can also be seen in such cases where sovereign power can rest on a dignity associated with revolution and creative violence while at the same time using dignity to block these very same potentialities. First, let us see how sovereign authority, particularly in the modern period, is based on the sanctity and prestige of revolutionary violence. In the Roman and medieval traditions, Agamben argues in *State of Exception* (2005), the “syntagma *force of law* . . . has the generic sense of efficacy, the capacity to bind. But only in the modern epoch, in the context of the French Revolution, does it begin to indicate the supreme value of those state acts declared by the representative assemblies of the people” (37). In other words, in modernity, “force of law” means respect and awe for the law, for the law now has a revolutionary mystique. This modern law is written with the blood of martyrs, brought into existence through patriotic sacrifice. Furthermore, it *appears* democratic—creatively formulated and adopted by the people.

On the other hand, dignity—acquired through an image of popular revolt and violence—becomes the very means of preserving the power status quo and forestalling innovation and change. Walter Benjamin’s distinction between “constituting” power and “constituted” power is helpful here. Benjamin, according to Agamben, “presented the relation between constituting power and constituted power as the relation between the violence that posits law and the violence that preserves it” (*Homo* 40). Both forms of violence are part of a circular schema: law-positing violence (revolutionary, radical violence) becomes part of the law-preserving violence (the law-enforcing state). Agamben notes: “If constituting power is, as the violence that posits law, certainly more noble than the violence that preserves it, constituting power still possesses no title

that might legitimate something other than the law-preserving violence and even maintains an ambiguous and ineradicable relationship with constituted power” (*Homo* 40). Benjamin sees this hopeless circularity reflected in the work of representative bodies:

If the awareness of the latent presence of violence in a legal institution disappears, the juridical institution decays. An example of this is provided today by the parliaments.

They present such a well-known, sad spectacle because they have not remained aware of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence . . . They lack a sense of the creative violence of law that is represented in them. One need not then be surprised that they do not arrive at decisions worthy of this violence, but instead oversee a course of political affairs that avoids violence through compromise. (qtd. in Agamben, *Homo* 28)

Benjamin laments the fact that legal institutions never remain faithful to their violent, democratic roots.

My argument, however, goes a step further; it is only to the extent that such institutions of sovereign power represent themselves constantly as attuned to their revolutionary beginnings that they hold on to the dignity that in turn guarantees their survival. Agamben’s characterization of revolutionary violence as “certainly more noble than the violence that preserves” the existing law betrays the role I see dignity playing in this paradoxical relation between the two forms of law. The “noble” badge gives the creative violence immunity and turns it into an untouchable violence. Article Three of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* states that “sovereignty resides essentially in the Nation. No body nor individual may exercise any authority which does not proceed directly from the nation.” Article Twelve states that “security of the rights of man and of the citizen requires public military forces. These forces are, therefore, established for the good of all and not for the personal advantage of those to whom they shall be

intrusted.” The popular force that bestows mystique on this declaration then places force exclusively in sovereign power. The dignity of violence in a back-handed way shields sovereignty from potential violence.

The “Uncomfortable Paradox”: Human Dignity and Dangerous Worldviews

In “The Two Western Cultures of Privacy: Dignity versus Liberty,” James Q. Whitman shows how the Nazis invoked dignity to unify Germans and exclude others. He presents the “uncomfortable paradox” that connects Nazism and dignity in concrete legal and political terms (1166). Whitman makes a clear distinction between an American vision of privacy based on liberty (protection against state intervention) and a continental version based on dignity (protection against violations of personal honor). He dismisses the assertion that “contemporary continental dignity is the product of a reaction against fascism,” the view that “Europe has dignity today because Europe was traumatized seventy years ago” (1165). After tracing the value of dignity back to monarchical and hierarchical norms that protect persons with high status and to the restrictive social discipline of dueling and etiquette, Whitman arrives at the question of how the right to personal dignity became the “universal” right of every citizen of the state; he argues that “much of this leveling up took place *during* the fascist period, for fascist politics involved precisely the promise that all members of the nation-state would be equal in ‘honor’—that all racial Germans, for example, would be masters” (1166). In “On Nazi ‘Honour’ and the New European ‘Dignity,’” Whitman questions the “commonplace” that “the European embrace of the values of ‘dignity,’ and ‘dignity’'s imposing cousin, *human dignity* . . . is founded on a forthright rejection of the fascist past” (243). The “Nazi ideology of honour” promised “that all

Germans would be better than somebody else. The promise, which turned out to be murderous, was integral to the making of a Nazi dignitary order” (265). For Whitman, this premise is consistent with “a paradox in ‘dignity’ itself, as ‘dignity’ plays itself out in the realities of human psychological and social structures” (265). People “of good will like to talk, in our Kantianized post-war world, as though ‘dignity’ were something that could easily be extended to all humans,” but in reality human “societies often rest on distinctions of status. For most people, most of the time, the promise of ‘dignity’ is accordingly a promise that they will be regarded as better than somebody else” (265). Someone might still argue that a distinction has to be made between this hierarchical form of recognition (one for which a different word than dignity has to be used—perhaps “honor”) and a better form of recognition that is worthy of the word “dignity.”

Charles Taylor makes such a distinction, yet he does not sever the tie between the notion of dignity and the dangerous politics I have explored above. Taylor starts with a distinction between two kinds of recognition: on the one hand, “*honor* in the *ancient regime* . . . is intrinsically linked to inequalities. For some to have honor in this sense, it is essential that not everyone have it”; on the other, we have “the modern notion of dignity now used in a universalist and egalitarian sense, where we talk of the inherent ‘dignity of the human being’, or of citizen dignity . . . that everyone shares . . . It is obvious that this concept of dignity is the only one compatible with a democratic society” (320). The novelty of Taylor’s distinction lies in his argument that, while honor is connected with social position, dignity as a democratic principle is connected with “identity.” In the context of his commentary on the issue of multiculturalism, Taylor argues that the new respect for “human dignity” coincides with interest in the notions of *originality* and *authenticity* by people like Herder: originality indicates “a certain way of being human that is *my way*” and “authenticity” means “being true to my own originality” (322). This

new ideal “accords moral importance to a kind of contact with myself, with my own inner nature” (322). In light of this coincidence, respect for human dignity, or treating the human as an end in himself, means respecting his authentic way of being human.

Yet, ironically, this latter conception of dignity can be as serious an inspiration for dangerous world views as the concept of “honor.” Taylor notes that “Herder applied his conception of originality at two levels, not only to the individual person among other persons, but also to the culture-bearing people among other peoples. Just like individuals, a *Volk* should be true to itself, that is, its own culture” (322). Taylor, needlessly, directs us to “recognize here the seminal idea of modern nationalism, in both benign and malignant forms” (322). What Taylor does not point out, however, is that even at the individual level, an originality-based concept of dignity can be malignant; infringements on an individual’s authentic *way* of being human can be met with the same obstinacy as insults to one’s social honor were avenged through dueling in the old days. Even in its conception as a matter of personal identity, dignity is a matter of *position*. Even if it is not a social position like honor, dignity is in the least a moral position—a self-assured and defensive position. Respect for human dignity can spell ethnocentricity at the *Volk* level and egocentricity at the individual level. This egocentricity, it should be noted, is not the same as the sensuous self-interest that Kant wants purged from “pure reason.” As self-assertion, egocentricity is a political position within the realm of *bios*, not a matter of instinct that belongs in *zoē*.

Coetzee: Racism and the Stigmatization of *Zoē*

Coetzee argues that social violence results from stigmatizing natural desire and sensuous self-interest as undignified, from suppressing the *zoē* in favor of *bios* (life in a political community, the *Volk*). The logic of institutionalized racism, as represented in apartheid, is political and not biological; it works by delegitimizing personal material interest, desires, and instincts. Coetzee shows that racist discourse, particularly in the modern period, depends less on biological arguments and more on notions of a community and the responsibility to such a community. In *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (1996), he probes the mind of Geoffrey Cronjé (1907-1992), pro-apartheid writer and academic, who “shifts his ground” for *Afrikanervolk* uniqueness, “from biologism to the idea of the organic *Volk*, as elaborated by Herder. For in Herderian theory the individual is born into the *Volk* and has no natural rights apart from it. The *volkswil* to which each individual member must bow is thus more than a political consensus” (173-5). As we can see here, hegemonic discourse does not allow subjects “natural” life outside the community.

Coetzee’s attempts to demonstrate that racism is an act of suppressing natural desire in the name of dignity and self-respect also counter the commonly held belief that hegemony creates a self-contained animal fulfilling petty needs. For instance, Coetzee argues that Cronjé, while naturally supporting the 1939 recommendation by the Commission on Mixed Marriages for banning interracial marriages, does not confront the question of why a law is necessary, in other words, “why a person should fly in the face of public opinion to make a mixed marriage”; neither the Commission nor Cronjé “confronts, that is, the question of desire” (171).

What Cronjé does not address in his text, what he turns away from, is the desire for mixture. Yet to mixture his mind obsessively returns . . . It is mixture and the desire for mixture that is the secret enemy of Geoffrey Cronjé and his fellow-knights of apartheid, the baffling force that must be thwarted, imprisoned, shut away. Apartheid is a dream of purity, but an impure dream. It is many things, a mixture of things; one of the things it is, is a set of barriers that will make it impossible for the desire to mix to find fulfillment.

(165)

Cronjé casts his evasion of the question of desire in the discourse of “self-respect” and “racial pride,” terms that conjure Nietzsche’s description of the “last man” who satisfies petty wants and desires and loses the *thymos*. Coetzee quotes Cronjé: “There are whites, born in this country, who have degenerated to such an extent in respect of morality, self-respect and racial pride that they feel no objection against blood-mixing.” For the “blood purity of the people” to be protected, Cronjé wants “women confining themselves to men of pure blood” (168). However, “feminine chastity is in itself no guarantee of continuing blood-purity, and the *Afrikanermoeder* will be the protector of the race only as long as she, too, is protected” (169). Coetzee reformulates and analyzes one of the perennial questions for Cronjé: “Is it natural or unnatural to desire to mix blood with the blood of another race? . . . If the former, then we may expect desire continually to cross race-boundaries, and the struggle to contain it within race boundaries will be never-ending. If, on the other hand, desire operates naturally only within the race, then desire across racial lines is as unnatural as bestiality.” Cronjé prefers to think that “aversion to sexual contact with other races” is “determined genetically (i.e., racially)” and not “culturally (i.e., by custom).” But Cronjé cannot cover up the big “mixed-blood population in South Africa” and, therefore, he has to account for its history: “For a generation or two in the seventeenth century,

he concedes, there may have been no prejudice against blood-mixing. However, as the eyes of the colonists became opened to the extent of differences between the races, an aversion grew . . . to be ‘an instinct.’ But it was not a true instinct” (169).

Moreover, Coetzee seems to argue that pursuing “real” self-interest (i.e. personal interest as opposed to group interest) is a way of breaking through racist discourse, even though such an argument might sound politically incorrect (political correctness, as we will see later, is never one of his concerns). Under the guise of “rationalism” (the long-term interest of the group), an “insane” apartheid system legitimized racism by delegitimizing self-interest (immediate personal interest, which Coetzee sees as the only sane form of self-interest):

If there is an orthodoxy among historians of apartheid today, it is . . . that apartheid legislation was a by no means irrational response to social developments which threatened the expectations of Afrikaners and the privilege of white South Africans in general. White liberals who diagnosed apartheid as a form of hubris or madness, and by denouncing it as such distanced themselves from it, were ultimately, in this reading, attempting little more than to distract attention from their continuing material complicity in the exploitation of black labor.

. . . Rationality and economic (or “real”) self-interest do not have to be the same thing; the logic that takes apartheid to be sane because rational, rational because governed by self-interest, deserves to be questioned . . . The theorists of apartheid justified their doctrine on the grounds that it was in the long-term interest of whites; apartheid demanded sacrifices, they said, but in the long term such sacrifices would pay off. (163)

Cronjé proclaimed that “*The individual is responsible to his community for all his activities*. The nation-community [*volksgemeenskap*] is entitled to call to the dock everyone who acts in conflict

with its highest interest . . . For the interest of the nation [*volksbelang*] always outweighs personal interest [*eiebelang*]" (172). Coetzee notes how the "passage echoes not only Nazis' notorious Nuremberg statutes but, for a moment, the characteristically denunciatory, minatory tone of Hitlerian oratory itself" (172). The notion of dignity, the same when employed in discriminatory/exclusive or accommodating/inclusive venues, persistently opposes "self-respect" to the fulfillment of natural desires and self-interest.

An Informed Look at the Role of Dignity in Human Rights

I argue that casting human dignity as the basis or *telos* of human rights can have the opposite effect of what human rights agendas seek to accomplish. The notion of human dignity can result in more violence, block relief for victims of violence, and also frustrate long-term solutions for transient populations such as stateless people, refugees, and exiles.

According to Coetzee, the notion of dignity eroticizes violence; sexual abuse such as rape and pornography plays by the schema of preserving and then transgressing the dignity taboo. Based on a definition, gleaned from Bernard Williams's arguments, of "personhood" as "mutual respect for one another's most basic wishes, which include the wish not to suffer pain and the wish to preserve self-respect," Coetzee argues that "for torture and debasement to be capable of being eroticized, it is therefore a precondition that personal dignity and freedom from pain must be generally accepted as human values" (*Giving* 67). In this instance, establishing personal dignity as a human value can be the grounds for the infliction of pain. We might be able to understand the sense of losing an "irreplaceable integrity" felt by women who have been raped or have acted in pornographic films by trying to imagine what "implications for a woman's self-

worth and *dignitas* may follow from being physically penetrated—which is as emotionally complex an experience as any that human beings undergo, but certainly includes an instant of loss of power over one’s own body—and then having the spectacle of penetration exhibited to a world of unsympathetic and, indeed, hostile strangers” (79). In this schema, sexual abuse springs from a hostile desire directed at the woman’s dignity rather than body.

To further understand how the notion of dignity can contribute to sexual violence, we need to be aware of Coetzee’s observation that the “ambivalence of rape victims—particularly outside the West—about seeking redress from the law, and the surprising degree of suspicion and hostility with which the public, even in the West, treats such plaintiffs, indicates that in matters of honor archaic attitudes are far from dead” (80). He quotes from Julian Pitt-Rivers that “to go to the law for redress is to confess publicly that you have been wronged and the demonstration of your vulnerability places your honor in jeopardy, a jeopardy from which the ‘satisfaction’ of legal compensation at the hands of the secular authority hardly redeems it” (80). Valuing their dignity blocks relief for rape victims, protects the rapists and gives them impetus for further rape, as the victims’ silence of shame can be the green light for perpetrators to commit more rape.

Moreover, a dignity-based human rights agenda is particularly counter-productive in negotiating and theorizing the condition of the stateless, the refugees, and other transient populations. Such an approach is doomed because it cannot escape a certain foundational philosophy of the political life. Intertwined, as we have seen, with the necessity of membership in a political community, human dignity is antithetical to the prospect of a post-national world and a post-normative ethics. Hannah Arendt’s argument that “human rights can again be meaningful only if they are redefined as a right to the human condition itself, which depends

upon some belonging to some human community, the right never to be dependent upon some inborn human dignity which *de facto*, aside from its guarantee by fellow men, . . . does not exist” (*Origins* 439) replaces one problem with another. Human dignity is still the *telos* of politics in this formulation. Human dignity might not be inborn, for Arendt, but the guarantee of such dignity is the goal of *political* and *collective* action: human dignity depends on the work of a political community. The problem with this premise is that making human dignity the end of human rights necessitates an erasure of life outside the political, an abnegation of mere “givenness.”

Arendt’s rejection of human dignity as the basis of rights while positing this ideal as the consummation of rights becomes a source of confusion. Seyla Benhabib, explaining Arendt, speaks of a core of dignity that simultaneously precedes and coincides with man’s *right to have rights*. According to Benhabib, history has shown that the politically empowered usually do not protect the politically disempowered; therefore, the disempowered should first be recognized as having the *moral* right to have political rights. Arendt is interested in cultivating this first right, and it is this right she associates with human dignity; even when a person loses “all the so-called Rights of Man,” he should not lose “his essential quality as man, his human dignity” (Benhabib 57). The right to have rights is a “moral claim to membership and a certain form of treatment compatible with the claim to membership” (Benhabib 56). As we can see, whether it is as the origin of rights or the end of rights, human dignity encloses the human in the discourse of power, which privileges the concept of *community*. It is a normative ethics that cannot see the human as free from the bonds of community. Even when it is idealized as the equal representation of ideas by equal members, community politics will derive meaning exclusively from deep structures that mask privilege and hierarchy. Not only does human dignity *derive* from membership in the

public discourse of a political community, but it *contributes* to such discourse, which ultimately binds the human to the mental constructs of power.

Even though Arendt adopts an anti-foundational approach to human dignity, her insistence on collective political discourse that ultimately leads to human dignity cannot escape the normative ethics of a dignity inscribed in group membership. Disappointingly, instead of looking forward to a new ethics divorced completely from the notion of human dignity, Arendt elects to play by the terms of sovereign power. As we have seen Serena Parekh put it, “Arendt wants people to have the possibility of transforming themselves from mere givenness (*zoē*) into individuals with unique identities (*bios*); that transformation is only possible through acting and speaking with others in a public space” (39). Turning the transient into a politically involved citizen is an instance of the intersection between individuation and totalization.

To be sure, Arendt’s emphasizes worldliness and political consciousness and action as antidotes to evidently problematic modes of thinking such as racial and cultural allegiances—part of being worldly is to claim citizenship of the world at large. A freedom-aspiring person, according to Arendt, attains her goal through singular action rather than associative sameness within a group. Arendt, following Bernard Lazare, refers to this person as the “conscious pariah,” one who refuses to assimilate and who always separates and rebels (*Origins* 67). Political action and rebellion, however, often descend into totalitarian and ideological group identity, as Arendt herself notes with regard to Zionism. For Arendt, Zionism started as a political idea that went awry when it sought a model in the western nation-state.

Human dignity as group membership in a community is detectable in the notion of *welcoming* or *hospitality*. The terms are now being used in addressing transient issues, especially with regard to the mass movement of populations with the expansion of the European Union.

The discourse of dignity is also manifest in the concept of welcoming; to welcome somebody is to dignify her. But from Derrida's perspective, we only welcome those who are already conversant in the discourse of dignity. In his and Dufourmantelle's *Of Hospitality* (2000), a meditation on migrants and refugees, Derrida sums up the problem and contradiction in the discourse of hospitality in the inevitable fact that the right to hospitality is not extended to an individual, for this morality is "inscribed in a custom, an *ethos*, and a *sittlichkeit*" (23). Just like the right to hospitality, dignity is inscribed in a *sittlichkeit* (an ethical life). In other words, it is attached to an established form of life such as family life, civil society or the state. It is extended by a family to a family; the foreigner receiving the hospitality is never without a "proper name" or a family (23). For Derrida, the "foreigner" *we welcome* is never the barbarian, the absolute other. The foreigner we welcome is expected to know the rules of hospitality, and that's why she receives it. By the time she receives the hospitality, the foreigner is already drawn into the discourse of the state. Therefore, because dignity is now lodged in a custom, it does not serve the purpose of addressing the real foreigner, who does not have a proper name or a family or a state. In the terms of hospitality, offshoots of the discourse of dignity, the host's offer implies an acknowledging by the guest. There is no place for the untranslatable *zoē* in the common discourse that brings them together. Dignity here is also based on an identifiable place of origin and a fixed place of arrival. In the discourse of dignity, the foreigner ceases to be foreign the moment he receives the hospitality. The discourse of human dignity is a major barrier on the way to unconditioned hospitality, if the latter is ever possible.

An Alternative Vision: Transients without Dignity

Meanwhile, a non-normative approach whereby the transient/foreign is seen as transient/foreign through and through can help us envision a post-dignity and, hence, post-national world. Arendt's call for including man in a moral community, necessitated by the quest for human dignity, contradicts a more thought-provoking suggestion she made earlier in her career. In a 1943 article "We Refugees," Arendt argues that the condition of the stateless or the refugee can help free our imagination to theorize a post-state world order. Picking up on Arendt's suggestion, Agamben wonders why the refugee is never recognized and theorized as such; transience is not thought of as a mode of existence in itself: "there is no autonomous space within the political order of the nation-state for something like the pure man in himself" as evidenced by the fact that "the status of the refugee is always considered a temporary condition that should lead either to naturalization or to repatriation" ("Hannah"). This is so because the principle of modern sovereignty is the incorporation of natural life into the political order of the nation state. Nation means birth: "Nation-state means a state that makes nativity or birth (that is, of the mere human life) the foundation of its own sovereignty." So, when "in the system of the nation-state the refugee represents such a disquieting element, it is above all because by breaking up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, the refugee throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty."

Based on the link I have been trying to establish between human dignity and the elimination of *zoē*, I argue that it is the discourse of dignity that frustrates the possibilities heralded by the figure of the refugee. Dignity can be just the word for that principle of modern sovereignty—the link between biological human life and the state. Moreover, as I have argued,

“universal dignity” coincides with the rise of nationalism. Hence, dignity can hinder our attempts to grasp a post-state mode of living. The discourse of dignity neutralizes the “avant-garde” value of the transient figure, turning her either into a political hero or a legal victim, both dependent on sovereign power for “recognition.” The transient, otherwise, would be an approximation of the “pure man in himself.”

The Post-Dignity Figure of The *Muselmann*

The transient as a post-national avant-garde corresponds to a post-dignity human we might call the “submissive.” This figure can be exemplified by the historical figure of the *Muselmann*, the inmate of the Nazi concentration camp who reached a new ethical sphere that lay beyond dignity. Holocaust survivor and historian Jean Amery writes that the “*Mussulman*, as the camp language termed the prisoner who was giving up and was given up by his comrades, no longer had room in his consciousness for the contrasts good or bad, noble or base, intellectual or unintellectual. He was a staggering corpse, a bundle of physical functions in its last convulsions” (9). Agamben describes the *Muselmann* as “a being from whom humiliation, horror, and fear had so taken away all consciousness and all personality as to make him absolutely apathetic” (*Homo* 119). There is no decisive evidence for why the *Muselmann* came to have that name, but it is certainly an interesting choice. The Arabic word “Muslim” literally means a person who surrenders, submits or hands himself over (implicitly to God). In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben endorses this linguistic explanation as the most likely one: “the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God. It is this meaning that lies at the origins of the legends

concerning Islam's supposed fatalism" (45). A Muslim trusts that his or her life and destiny are in God's hands.

It should be noted here that nothing in the Islamic theology of this "submission" can readily be interpreted as abrogation of dignity. In "Turning Jews into Muslims: The Untold Saga of the *Muselmänner*," S. Parvez Manzoor, writing from a devout perspective, sees the opposite and finds the connection between the *Muselmann* and the Muslim offensive: "for all the deprivations of his life, the Muslim will not accept an ignoble death. He may be destroyed, but not defeated; he may be deprived of life and limb but not of humanity and dignity, and for him, the biological imperative to survive does not abrogate his submission to the will of God."

According to Manzoor, to be a Muslim is antithetical to surrender:

The Muslim submits to the will of God only because he may not submit *in the same manner* to the will of man. He does not give absolute allegiance to any earthly regime so that his humanity may not be decided by any powers-that-be. It is in affirming the dignity of his death, through struggle and *jihad* rather than through inaction and 'Musulmanhood', that the Muslim gives testimony to his faith.

Manzoor's resentment reflects the internal conflict of many religions, particularly monotheistic ones—the conflict between annihilation of egotistical self-assertion versus affirming the dignity of faith, between *jihad* and "submission," between the crusade and the meekness of the "lamb." In the Islamic context, Roxanne L. Euben captures such "ambiguities in the Qur'anic references [to jihad] in a tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. Upon returning from battle Muhammad is reported to have said 'We have returned from the lesser *jihad* to the greater *jihad*.' When asked which is the greater endeavor, Muhammad reportedly replied 'It is the struggle against one's self.' It is thus the internal struggle that is termed 'the greater *jihad*' whereas the

‘*jihad* of the sword’ [*jihad bil saif*] is the lesser.” Euben echoes the mainstream, strict interpretation of this parable, which actually tends to deny its historical validity on the grounds that it belittles *jihad*, but looks favorably on the part that underlines the importance of resisting the self understood as temptations of the flesh (notable among those—fornication; consumption of pork and alcohol; listening to music; for men, wearing gold and silk; excessive love of property). Euben writes that greater *jihad* “entails the more mundane and daily efforts to engage in what Jean-Jacques Rousseau might call the moral freedom of self-mastery, that is, the effort to resist temptation.” So, it is a dignity-oriented interpretation of the greater *jihad* as a struggle against instinct and mere *zoē*, and not a renouncement of political self-assertion.

From a certain perspective, the *Muselmann* can be the figure who ultimately escapes power. I use Agamben’s words here to support this argument, even though Agamben has a more complex plan for the *Muselmann*, an issue I address in more detail in Chapter III:

[He] was no longer capable of distinguishing between pangs of cold and the ferocity of the SS. [He] moves in an absolute indistinction of fact and law, of life and juridical rule, and of nature and politics. Because of this, the guard suddenly seems powerless before him, as if struck by the thought that the *Muselmann*’s behavior—which does not register any difference between an order and the cold—might perhaps be a silent form of resistance. (*Homo* 119)

With reference to the *Muselmann*, Agamben warns against the equation of humanity with dignity, arguing that the *Muselmann* is a “limit figure of a special kind, in which not only categories such as dignity and respect but even the very idea of an ethical limit lose their meaning” (*Remnants* 56). In *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (1976), Terence Des Pres attempts to break through the shame usually nagging the Holocaust survivor,

who, “[s]tripped of everything but life,” has nothing to “fall back upon except some biologically determined ‘talent’ long suppressed by cultural deformation, a bank of knowledge embedded in the body’s cells. The key to survival behavior may thus lie in the priority of biological being” (228). Des Pres dismisses the belittling attitude towards “the prisoners’ anonymous and everyday fight to survive, in the name of an antiquated ethics of the hero, of the one who is ready to renounce his life. For Des Pres, the true ethical paradigm of our time is instead the survivor, who, without searching for ideal justifications ‘chooses life’ and fights simply to survive” (Agamben, *Remnants* 92). An ethics that cannot look beyond dignity is inadequate because it cannot accommodate the *Muselmann*.

Kant emphasized the “idea of dignity of a rational being who obeys no law but that which he himself gives” (*Foundations* 42). Kant linked this autonomy unequivocally to separation from one’s *zoē*: the human has dignity if he does not use “reason only for the sake of that which instinct accomplishes in animals” (*Critique* 61). It seems that the discourse of dignity, whether it is manifested in the individual’s act of claiming dignity or in society’s act of recognizing an individual’s dignity, is an important item in the repertoire of sovereign power. Therefore, an individual can only live on her own terms (the emphasis here is on freedom and not on the sense of self-assertion that the phrase “her own terms” might signify) if she renounces dignity, embedded as it is in the norms and customs of power. To be clear, the *Muselmann*’s surrender should not be confused with submission to power. It is submission of any claim to political subjectivity, a surrender of the dignity into which he has been indoctrinated. He is, in Agamben’s words, the “the guard on the threshold of a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends” (*Remnants* 69). I do not argue that the life of the *Muselmann per se* should be an ideal to aspire to: the *Muselmann*’s historical circumstances were horrific beyond

imagination—a starving death camp laborer more often than not assigned to disposing of the corpses of his relatives and friends. In the figure of the *Muselmann*, however, there is a glimpse of a human being who *mentally* breaks through the discourse of human dignity that serves sovereign power—in varying degrees of subtlety—in creating violence at a much wider scale than the *Muselmann*'s particular moment of service. To imagine life that acts only on instinct with no regard for calls to political action and recognition might be a step towards preventing large-scale crimes committed in the name of affirming human dignity. In other words, finding ethical value in the mentality of the undignified camp worker rather than in that of the dignity-bent political activist might be a better antidote to the creation of future death camps.

Rousseau's Post-Dignity Claim

Euben's characterization of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "self-mastery" as resistance against temptations of the flesh is inaccurate. In *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, written between 1776 and 1778, Rousseau claims to have taken reason in the opposite direction from Kant. For Rousseau, reason is a tool for preserving the body from physical harm and pursuing pleasure without interest in political resistance and moral judgments on good and evil. According to Rousseau, for "all the ills that befall us, we are more concerned by the intention than the result. A tile that falls off the roof may injure us more seriously, but it will not wound us so deeply as a stone thrown deliberately by a malevolent man. The physical pain is what we feel least of all when misfortune assails us" (128). The person guided by "the light of reason," the "wise man," views such injuries as "no more than the blows of blind necessity and feels none of this senseless agitation; his pain makes him cry out, but without anger or exasperation, he feels only the

physical impact of the evil that besets him, and though the blows may hurt his body, none of them can touch his heart” (128). Therefore, especially when it comes to nonphysical “wounds” such as political and intellectual persecution, Rousseau chooses to see no “intention, purpose, or moral cause,” opting to “submit to it without argument or resistance since these were useless” (129). While his “reason and heart assented” to this new vision of life, Rousseau still feels “dissatisfaction” which he associates with the sense of “self esteem,” which is a disguise for “self-love” (129). Rousseau then goes on to make a very important distinction between self-love and “love of self”: self-love or self-esteem is bound to the “tyranny of public opinion” while “the proper love of self” is “returned to the true natural order and freed me from the tyranny of public opinion” (129). It is the self-love, the egotistical self-assertion, Rousseau claims to have surrendered. In Rousseau’s definition, self-love is within the court of *bios* while the real love-of-self belongs exclusively within the realm of *zoē*. I argue that the vision he expresses here should be the basis for the right form of empowerment.

Recognizing how dignity and the state are genealogically intertwined and approximating a correct view of the relation between power and non-power, we should now be able to spot the logical and ethical pitfalls in Nussbaum’s demand that the state enforce dignity upon its citizens, that “the state must treat citizens with dignity, not simply give them the option to be treated with dignity” (386). This unrestrained demand that carries the Kantian Law to an extreme, coupled with the role dignity plays in eroticizing violence (the schema of preserving and then transgressing the dignity taboo), makes it easier to accept Žižek’s argument that Lacan’s “statement ‘Kant is Sade’ is the ‘infinite judgment’ of modern ethics,” in a way “positing the sign of equation between the two radical opposites, i.e. asserting that the sublime disinterested ethical attitude is somehow identical to, or overlaps with, the unrestrained indulgence in

pleasurable violence” (“Kant” 291). Nussbaum’s demand that the state treat citizens with dignity empowers the state to use dignity as a tool for policing citizens, but more importantly urges citizens to police themselves.

The modern state, therefore, does not turn every citizen into mere *zoē*, as Agamben argues, because such a figure would be something like the *Muselmann*, a figure of “stupidity,” “irresponsibility” and mere “bestiality,” to use Derrida’s words; the state does not want to produce a figure before whom it stands helpless. What the state produces, rather, is a citizen endowed with a universal, egalitarian dignity that completely eliminates his *zoē*. Therefore, when the modern state makes the population’s health the basis of its politics, as both Foucault and Agamben argued, it is only to eliminate life outside politics. Agamben’s attempt to explain the biopolitical state as a complex exclusion/inclusion of *zoē* cannot “return thought to its practical calling.” On the other hand, to think of power as *zoē* which is the opposite of non-power (*bios*), to see dignity as a discursive sleight of hand that strips the human of her freedom and sovereignty, should be a step toward bringing thought back into relevance. This thought should inspire, in Agamben’s words, “a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins where dignity ends” (*Remnants* 69). Such an ethics, I argue, will have to doggedly and persistently privilege survival and self-interest—no matter how petty—over a dignity that stipulates political action, responsibility and self-sacrifice; to do otherwise would be to play by the terms defined for us by power.

Natural-Spiritedness as an Alternative to the Discourse of Human Dignity

While Fukuyama acknowledges that the desire for recognition can have disastrous effects, he is not willing to throw out the baby with the bath water:

Recognition is the central problem of politics because it is the origin of tyranny, imperialism, and the desire to dominate. But while it has a dark side, it cannot simply be abolished from political life, because it is simultaneously the psychological ground for virtues like courage, public-spiritedness, and justice. All political communities must make use of the desire for recognition, while at the same time protecting themselves from its destructive effects. (xxi)

However, “public-spiritedness” itself has been invoked to promote domination and injustice, as we have seen in Coetzee’s analysis of the discourse of apartheid thinkers. Therefore, in this section I explore the notion of “natural-spiritedness” as an alternative to the political ideals advanced in the name of dignity. Natural-spiritedness is a rejection of Kant’s urge for man to elevate himself above sensuous interest and a dismissal of Arendt’s call for political action. It is a form of dwelling in *zoē* that also includes a mystical sense of oneness with all living beings. This liberation from all the dignity-based obligations of life in a political community would make man sovereign and, using the terms of Derrida’s speculation, “would be so much *like* this expropriating ecstasy of irresponsibility, like this place of nonresponse that is commonly and dogmatically called bestiality, divinity, death” (*Sovereign* 57). With sensual gratification and ego annihilation, the human reverts to being animal yet divine. In this irresponsible state, the human—like god and the beast—recognizes neither the self nor the other and simultaneously

hates neither the self nor the other. This balance, indifference, or irresponsibility—both divine and bestial—can lay the ground for freedom, peace, and sympathy.

The Animal, the Divine, and the Sovereign

It is only logical that the animal and the divine should converge against the discourse of human dignity; the *secular* ethics of Kant that attributes inherent dignity to the human by the same gesture severs the divine and the animal. The human who follows his own law listens to the voice of pure reason only, to the exclusion of supernatural or natural instinct. The sovereign state, like human dignity, is based on the elimination of the natural and the supernatural. Derrida describes “the convention” as “the *thesis*, the prosthesis, the contract at the origin of sovereignty” (*Sovereign* 46). This prosthesis “excludes God just as much . . . as it excludes the beast” (46). That the contract excludes both animal and god—the natural and the supernatural—is a notion that dates back to Aristotle if not before. In *The Politics*, Aristotle argues that “[w]hatever is incapable of participating in the association which we call the state, a dumb animal for example, and equally whatever is perfectly self-sufficient and has no need (e.g. a god), is not a part of the state at all” (Sinclair 61). This is not surprising since, in Aristotle and generally in Greek, a god’s (eternal) life is, like the animal’s, *zoē* not *bios*. But, what is novel and useful for my argument is that “the two living beings that are not man,” and that therefore are excluded from sovereign power, are both, as Derrida argues, models for the sovereignty of man in the sense they do not have to *respond* (*Sovereign* 49). This exclusion leads us to “think that the sovereign’s sovereign, God himself, like the beast, does not respond” (57). The model of an irresponsive, irresponsible divinity can inspire both morality and freedom. More generally, the discourse of sovereignty

uses divine and bestial terms for the sovereign, who has absolute power and obeys no law. Derrida writes that Hobbes “will reject the objection of a convention above the human convention, for example a convention with God” (49). The sovereign is both the representative of God on earth and a monster—a Leviathan. As we will see, Derrida’s use of God has a “positive” sense—“positive” as in being a liberating lacuna in the discourse of sovereignty and also “positive” in that it shares the “natural” characteristics of the beast.

But the divine that is liberating for Derrida is significantly different, at least to Schopenhauer, from the God of monotheism; for Schopenhauer, the discontinuity between god and beast is essential to monotheism. He blames Judaism, Christianity and Islam for “disavowing and reviling the eternal essence that lives in all animals” (*Basis* 97). He, “in common with the whole of Asia not tainted with Islam (which is tantamount to Judaism),” finds this attitude “odious” (94). Monotheistic belief systems are certainly invested in God’s responsibility or responsiveness. However, just to add some complexity to the argument, one can find parables in monotheistic texts that connect (divine) sovereignty with bestiality and irresponsibility.

Perhaps no other piece of monotheistic tradition expresses a connection between sovereign bestiality (even the shedding of dignity), divinity, and the “expropriating” irresponsibility than the story of Nebuchadnezzar’s punishment for his excessive pride: Nebuchadnezzar “was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers, and his nails like birds’ claws” (*Holy*). Nebuchadnezzar is punished precisely for his claim of agency and his self-assertion in taking credit for building Babylon. His sovereignty is restored to him when he acknowledges that he has no power except that God offers him. What Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges by way of penance, though, is God’s irresponsibility: “none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest

thou?” (*Holy*). After this surrender on Nebuchadnezzar’s part, he is rewarded with even greater sovereignty: “my reason returned unto me; and for the glory of my kingdom, mine honour and brightness returned unto me . . . and I was established in my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added unto me” (*Holy*). However, we are not told whether Nebuchadnezzar lost his bestial characteristics. Whatever else we can read in the parable, one certainly gets the sense that a return to nature becomes the basis for unprecedented sovereignty.

In Schopenhauer’s “natural” ethics, unlike Kant’s humanist ethics (according to Schopenhauer, a form of “biblical ethics”), to be inspired by all living beings is to injure no one (*Basis* 95). Schopenhauer criticizes Kant’s views on man’s relation to animals. In Kant’s imperative that whereas “man can have no duties toward any being, except towards his fellowmen, . . . [to] treat animals cruelly runs counter to the duty of man towards himself; because it deadens the feeling of sympathy for them in their sufferings, and thus weakens a natural tendency which is very serviceable to morality in relation to other men’,” Schopenhauer sees a relation to animals that has only the purpose of “practice” (94). By possessing “inherent dignity,” man enters, as Khanna argues, “in an evolutionary progression, some xenophobic notion of a ‘human family’” (56). Human dignity, which comes with rights and responsibilities, has excluded the divine and the beast and laid the ethical basis for modern sovereignty.

In *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (2002), John Gray gestures toward a re-appreciation of *zoē* when he recommends devaluing morality and identifying with animals as a way to end humanity’s self-destruction and personal discontent. Gray asks why, when our kin “animals do not see a purpose in life,” we cannot “think of the aim of life as being simply to see?” (199). Gray associates mystical meditation with willed concentration so he calls for a less determined form: “Contemplation is not the willed stillness of the mystics but a willing

surrender to never-returning moments. When we turn away from our all-too-human yearnings we turn back to mortal things” (199). Gray reminds us that the “human mind serves evolutionary success, not truth. To think otherwise is to resurrect the pre-Darwinian error that humans are different from all other animals” (26). This surrender leads to less violence and personal torment.

The turn to instinct is a way of pursuing personal interest and oneness with other beings as well. Gray’s call for identification with animals has been described as a break from his earlier writings. Terry Eagleton, reviewing the book, writes that Gray changed from a “swashbuckling free-marketeer” to a despondent nihilist, swinging from “Thatcherite zest to virulent misanthropy.” Contrary to such views, it should be stressed that locating a solution to human violence in identification with nonhuman animals is not necessarily misanthropy. Again, Gray’s transition from free market spirit to animal spirit is not change, but rather taking reason back to its function as serving sensuous interest, the function of reason devalued by Kant.

Eagleton’s negative reaction to Gray can become clear when seen in the context of the former’s career as both a “socialist” and “Christian” philosopher. In his recent *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2009), he describes his difference with “militant” atheists as a difference between “tragic humanism” and a “liberal humanism” that holds “if we can only shake off a poisonous legacy of myth and superstition, we can be free” (168). On the other hand, tragic humanism, which can be traced in the gospels, while sharing the liberal humanist “vision of the free flourishing of humanity,” maintains that this ideal world “is possible only by confronting the very worst” (169). To really affirm humanity is to ask “whether humanity is worth saving in the first place” and to entertain the possibility that the “human species” might be an “odious race of vermin” (169). Eagleton’s experimental approach to human dignity is to be contrasted with David Hume’s empirical concept of human nature in “Of the Dignity or Meanness of Human

Nature.” Eagleton wants humanity in general to be examined for the presence of dignity/goodness or lack thereof. Hume, on the other hand, views dignity as a contingent feature of some human beings as opposed to others. By Hume’s account, human beings have quantities of dignity and “meanness” in varying degrees (85). Eagleton’s tragic humanism, “whether in its socialist, Christian, or psychoanalytic varieties, holds that only by a process of self-dispossession and radical remaking can humanity come into its own” (169). Eagleton’s dialectic works by confronting, struggling against, and excluding the “vermin” in the human. Liberal humanism, for Eagleton, runs the serious risk of descending to man’s instincts, which he clearly sees as dangerous because bestial.

Several writers explored here note that Kantian dignity is artificial in the sense that it discounts the instinctive and the divine despite its basis in theological morals. According to Gray, “Kant tried to protect our most cherished notions—above all our ideas of personal autonomy, free will, and moral autonomy—from the solvent of skeptical doubt. Putting them to the acid test of personal experience, Schopenhauer . . . destroyed . . . the idea of the human subject that underpins both Christianity and humanism” (44). For Schopenhauer, as I have already noted, “human dignity is an artificial substitute for theological Morals, to which it stands in the same relation as a wooden leg to a living one” (*Basis* 97). Rousseau also sees as artificial what is held to be an inherent ethical concept: the “persecuted man is all too inclined to mistake his own petty pride for a pure love of justice . . . Self-love, with its train of illusions, can often creep in under the guise of self-esteem . . . I was never much given to self-love; but in the world this artificial passion has been exacerbated in me” (129). Of Rousseau’s claim to have given up self-love, Michael Moses writes that “indifference to political concerns for justice, is precisely what makes [Rousseau], in his own eyes, a divinity: he is ‘unperturbed, like God himself.’ From

the perspective of those still immersed in the struggle for recognition and political justice, such a god is indistinguishable from a beast” (144). Rousseau’s switch from self-love to love of self is also brought about by both sensuous reason and contemplation—reverie.

Looking Forward

The foregoing discussion is a step towards unmasking the exclusionary purposes and regimes served by the discourse of human dignity. This conceptual frame is not fit for promoting a more humane, peaceful, and prosperous world though these are the implicit objective of contemporary intellectual and political projects that deploy the notion of human dignity. The critique advanced in this chapter should lend support to a form of narrative more sympathetic *zoē*, personal pleasure and self-interest, and where “sympathy” *might* flourish as an alternative *option* to the burdensome ideals (they might as well be mandates) of responsibility. Only a narrative that does not demonize the dignity-free human being who *merely lives* can break through the discourse of power. Coetzee’s writings, the focus of my next chapter, can give us a more elaborate view of life beyond dignity.

CHAPTER II
COETZEE, BEYOND DIGNITY

The purpose of this chapter is to argue that J. M. Coetzee's writings break through the discourse of human dignity, rejecting its epistemes of self-assertion, recognition, political action, membership in a community, resistance, responsibility, altruism, and sacrifice. Coetzee replaces this discourse with an ethics based on sensuous interest, instinct, desire, love, and a sense of mystical oneness with other living beings.

Any attempt to define or even make a general characterization of Coetzee's ethics might, in fact, be a doomed project—so much so that Derek Attridge, the foremost authority on Coetzee's fiction, writes that “the most valuable and rewarding qualities of [Coetzee's] writings, as literature, lie elsewhere” (164). Attridge does not find ethical import in Coetzee's fiction *per se* but conceives of the fiction itself and the reader as ethical agents: only if we respond to Coetzee's fiction as “fiction—operating always as fiction and not as a disguised treatise or tract, operating, that is, in response to the contingent, the unpredictable, the other—can we do justice to Coetzee's work” (*Coetzee* 112). Therefore, Attridge predicts, when Coetzee builds a novel “on such overworked concepts as “trust” and “love,” . . . one might predict that his having done so will be frequently misunderstood” (112). However, if Coetzee overworks politically irresponsible concepts such as love and trust and introduces less overworked ones such as desire and god as ethical concepts, don't we risk doing his work injustice if we withhold a specific understanding?

In Coetzee's fiction and nonfiction, I argue, one finds great ethical import in erotic love and pleasure and none in the abstract concepts of dignity and responsibility. He states that he "would not assert the ethical superiority of pain over pleasure" (*Doubling* 248). Also, Coetzee's ethics, at least as a writer, is more than evasive about the value of responsibility to the other: "The feel of writing is one of freedom, of irresponsibility, or better, of responsibility toward something that has not yet emerged, that lies somewhere at the end of the road" (Wood 246). Based on the genealogical connection between irresponsibility and sovereignty/freedom that we glimpsed in Derrida's *The Sovereign and the Beast*, we should see how Coetzee's ethical narrative escapes the discourse of human dignity. By leaving behind a censorious ethics that criminalizes the love of self and the survival instinct, Coetzee's fiction is a corrective intervention in how the difference between power and non-power is perceived.

In the first section of this chapter, I demonstrate how two of Coetzee's early novels, *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, dramatize the conflict between dignity-based aspirations for *bios* and instinct-based yearnings for *zoē*, where the latter consistently prevail. In the second section, I explore the mystical or shamanic ethics of natural-spiritedness (a combination of instinct and spirituality) that Coetzee offers as an alternative to the ethics of dignity in these two novels. In the third section, I examine *The Life and Times of Michael K*, where Coetzee offers the peculiar case of a human being with no sense of dignity and who acts on mere instinct. In the fourth section, I read *Disgrace* as a novel that celebrates "disgrace" as a spiritual-ethical state of sensuality, acceptance and humility. The novel also offers a full-fledged system of desire-based rights, a notion that Coetzee alludes to in his other novels.

Conversion from Dignity: *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*

In this section, I examine two of Coetzee's novels that feature troubled characters who ultimately come to an acceptance of what they have sensed but fought against all along, that their intellectual torment is caused by an egotistical quest for political recognition that masquerades as a feel for universal human dignity. Based on this realization, they turn to the body for relief from their discontent and find a redeeming value in the rhythms of *zoē*. They abandon their dignity-based sense of self-assertion and surrender to a life guided by instinct. From this dignity-free perspective, they see discursive violence as nothing but the suppression of the unconscious instinct to survive in favor of the constructed wish for dignity, the exclusion of *zoē* for the sake of inclusion in *bios*.

In moments of intense “animal” sensuality or physical pain, Coetzee's protagonists see their egos—manifested in the desire for their authentic and original articulation to be recognized and celebrated as their own—crumble, and a sense of bestial oneness with other living beings is revealed to them. In this epiphany, their erstwhile, apparently altruistic, pursuits are exposed as the working of their sense of self-worth. Their misguided belief that they have a *unique* sensitivity to human suffering, Coetzee's protagonists come to realize, has implicated them in violent *political* epistemes produced by the struggle for power. Only in this “converted” state, wherein they abandon their dignity, do Coetzee's protagonists close the perspectival gap with their narrators and become Coetzee's “mouthpieces.”

To say that Coetzee's protagonists go through a process of conversion bears some implications for the narrative structure. In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee references William C. Spengemann's (already) “converted narrator,” who, according to Coetzee, has a “temporal

position in the after [that] gives him, in his own eyes, complete self-knowledge” (260). Because he has established presence on both sides of the conversion bridge, this narrator-protagonist’s “knowing, converted, narrating self stands invisibly beside the experiencing, acting self” (260). Whether it is a first-person or third-person narrative at hand, we should be cognizant that Coetzee’s narrator might be in on the outcome from the beginning.

I should note here that my approach to Coetzee’s fiction is not intended to be psychoanalytical because such an approach will be difficult and problematic. In his review of Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, psychiatrist Alan D. Stone writes that it is easy “for the psychodynamic psychiatrist to formulate several unconscious drives and mechanisms that would explain it all. Coetzee’s writing is not like Nabokov’s, thumbing its nose at psychoanalysis, but, in my view, he does not intend that his characters or the human condition be reduced to the psychology of the unconscious” (2249). Moreover, to align the ego’s desire for recognition with consciousness and the body’s instinct for survival with the unconscious, as my argument does, is not without technical faults, because someone might argue that egotism can be an “unconscious” drive—in the sense that the subject is unaware of its existence. But, I am using “unconscious” in this project to capture sensuous interest and instinct within the politically detached realm of irresponsible *zoē*.

Coetzee’s engagement with the dilemma between a dignity-based ethic of recognition and self-sacrifice versus an irresponsible impulse for survival and pleasure arguably spans his whole career. He prominently dramatizes this conflict, however, as early as his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977). Magda—the white Afrikaner narrator—comes to realize that her intellectual and emotional torment results from denying her natural, sensual desires in an egotistical fret over justice, a socially mediated, and only apparently altruistic, desire that makes

her complicit in the “power” she resists. My argument differs from the view that in the novel “the body does not figure prominently, being too weak to save the mind from itself. The suggestion is that the body’s involuntary, autonomous processes are as nothing next to those of the mind . . . : in Coetzee there may be a kind of contempt for the body that does not have to be learned, that is native” (May 400). I argue that the novel shows how the native impulse of the body is to love itself.

The conflict between the ethics of dignity and the instinctive impulse is reflected in what Magda admits is her “unreliable” narration, all the more so because she offers different versions of what happens on the isolated farm where, according to her, she has lived with her father, and the black farm laborer Hendrik, who is later joined by his young wife, Anna. There are also different versions of the patricide Magda commits and different accounts of Anna’s rape at the hands of Magda’s father and Magda’s rape at the hands of Hendrik—all of which might never have occurred.

Magda’s aspiration to be more than a human animal, to be a *political animal*, translates into obsession with terms of conflict—oppressor/oppressed—and she casts herself alternatively as either, neither, or both. In words one critic uses to describe another Coetzee character, Magda’s “position of both oppressor and oppressed is experienced as a kind of double consciousness that can only lead to madness” (Poyner, *Coetzee* 54). Anxious to reconcile her conflicted consciousness, she seeks to develop a unique but universal conception of what power means: “I am a spinster with a locked diary but I am more than that. I am an uneasy consciousness but I am more than that” (3). Magda strives to assume political significance and recognition, to transcend the physical into the metaphysical, to surpass the euphoric and reach the metaphoric: “Resolutely I beat down the blind, subjective time of the heart with its spurts of

excitement and drags of tedium: my pulse will throb with the steady one-second beat of civilization” (3). She resists “becoming one of the forgotten ones of history” (3). Magda’s angst derives from a dignity-based desire for recognition, a wish to transition from mere *zoē* to political action and representation (what she herself calls the “as-if”): “I imagined that if I talked long enough it would be revealed to me what it means to be an angry spinster in the heart of nowhere. But . . . I find none of that heady expansion into the as-if that marks the beginning of a true double life. Aching to form the words that will translate me into the land of myth and hero, here I am still my dowdy self in a dull summer heat that will not transcend itself” (5). In the same league as human dignity, this “as-if” is abstract, heroic, autonomous, and self-determined. In Magda’s vision, the “as-if” is an escape from the corporeal being that lacks ethical and intellectual control over itself and the power to represent itself. However, there is no way to enter the political realm other than as an antagonist, as oppressor or oppressed, so she starts with the question, “Who is behind my oppression?” (4). Magda wonders if she is disqualified from the dignified discourse of political representation because she has no “vision of a second existence passionate enough to carry [her] from the mundane of being” (4). This resentment of the “mundane” constitutes, as we will see, a recurrent dynamic in Coetzee’s novels.

Initially tying their self-worth to resistance against any “easy,” mundane, “cliché,” or “quotidian” existence that obliterates the “I,” Coetzee’s protagonists struggle to assert their unique and distinct egos. Coetzee, however, ultimately highlights the ethical potential in the mundane, an unassertive state of being he articulates in the pastoral language and motifs of peasantry. Magda insists that she is “not a happy peasant” and that she has a “miserable” story, but we can clearly see that, because she sees dignity in such a narrative, it is a story she wants to adopt: “I am a miserable black virgin, and my story is my story, even if it is a dull black blind

stupid miserable story, ignorant of its meaning and of all its many possible untapped happy variants. I am I” (5). The culturally inflected desire for the political stands here opposed to the “happy” life of peasants.

For Magda and other protagonists, Coetzee stages this struggle between an egotistical wish for political recognition, articulating itself in an as-if metaphorical language and the mere givenness of the body, intimating itself through animality, bestiality and fertility. Magda’s insistent description of herself as a “black virgin” is her way of privileging the political language of oppression over the bodily intimations of fertility. She casts all sexual relations in her narrative as rape because she privileges the language of oppression; as Rosemary Jolly argues, Magda “has no access to a discourse of mutuality outside of abuse; but she suspects . . . that her current reality may be inadequate to her desire” (“Writing” 95). This suspicion, I argue, reflects Magda’s abortive will to have rational and autonomous control over her natural life.

While unwilling to acknowledge *zoē*, the animal tugging at her core, Magda concedes that another “aspect” of her younger self is “love of nature, particularly of insect life, of the scurrying purposeful life that goes on around each ball of dung and under every stone” (6). She “would have no qualm . . . if it came to the pinch . . . about living in a mud hut, or indeed under a lean-to of branches, out in the veld, eating chickenfeed, talking to the insects. Even through the little girl the lineaments of the crazy old lady must have glimmered” (7). Magda tells us also that what stands between her and “becoming a beast” is only her “commerce with the voices” she hears: “For I am sure that if the voices did not speak to me I would long ago have given up this articulated chip-chop and begun to howl or bellow or squawk” (125). I argue that the voices that “speak” to Magda are induced by an ill body that has been ignored, a body that appeals to her out of neglect, a hallucination that sometimes overcomes her (socially conditioned) sense of personal

autonomy; she is in a hallucinatory, trance-like mental state of the kind that might at times be purposefully induced by mystics—a point that will be addressed in more detail in Chapter IV.

But for now let's take Magda's word for it, which is still valid for the argument. Her interaction with the "voices" helps her avoid talking like an animal. In other words, the interaction with the voices is a way of suppressing the beast in herself. Even then, the voices frustrate her attempts to make them address her unique person, to translate their "universals" into terms readily applicable to her specific situation. The voices tell her: "*It is the slave's consciousness that constitutes the master's certainty of his own truth*" (130). I read this statement to mean that political consciousness or resistance actually contributes to sovereign power. For sovereignty to work, people have to be conscious and alert to its existence. To use Derrida's language, people cannot be "stupid" and irresponsible; only the sovereign is entitled to such stupidity (*Sovereign* 57). Magda's response to the voice gives substance to such a conclusion: "How did the servants come to know that they could hurt [my father] most essentially by obeying him most slavishly? . . . Did my father grow harsher and harsher toward them simply to provoke them out of their slavishness? Would he have embraced a rebellious slave as a father embraces a prodigal son, though his next act might be to chastise him?" (130). The voices say: "*The slave loses everything in his chains, even the desire to escape from them*" (134). Power works in such a way that what you consciously resist is not what has controlled you in the first place. Magda says: "If I were truly a slave resigned to my chains would I not have learned the word *Yes* long ago? . . . If my speech is not rebellious from beginning to end, what is it?" (135). But Magda has not been resigned to her chains; she wants to be rebellious, and this itch for political action constitutes her chains. "*It is in order that we shall not fall victim to the assassin, said the voice, that we consent to die if we ourselves turn assassins*" (134). Our dignity, our will

to be political animals, makes us rebel against oppression and by the same gesture turns us into oppressors; we do so even when the position we take is not to our advantage, even if it is against our survival. Coetzee sums up what the “hero” of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* “has to say about desire”:

The enlightened 1860s view, he says, is that desire obeys a law, the law that man desires in accord with his own advantage. But the truth is that every now and again man will desire what is injurious to himself precisely “in order to have the right to desire for himself” without being bound by any law. And he desires that freedom from determination in order to assert “what is most precious and most important—that is, our personality, our individuality” (26). The primal desire is therefore the desire for a freedom that the hero identifies with unique individuality. (*Doubling* 280-81)

Coetzee’s writings differ with the Underground man’s view that the “primal desire” is a desire for freedom and unique individuality; the primal desire is an unconscious desire for survival and pleasure. Magda wonders: “How can one possibly consent to die? The flesh loves itself and cannot consent in its extinction” (135).

The voices say: “*The feeling of solitude is a longing for a place. That place is the centre of the world, the navel of the universe. Less than all cannot satisfy man*” (135). The ego does not want only to be part of the public space, but to be at the center of it. The political desire for recognition is ultimately egotistical rather than egalitarian. Magda then starts to realize that she has lost her freedom in the struggle for freedom. She has been subjected to power by a discourse that does not depict life in itself but always frames it in terms of political relations—between classes, between ideologies, between generations.

Then we begin to glimpse Magda's release from the disabling, reversed way she used to see power and freedom when she loses interest in the voices, wanting only to sleep undisturbed, when she is "sure that they do not hear" her, that they do not *respond* to her. Magda becomes less confrontational in her interaction with them and, hence, her freedom is complete: "I for one do not wish to be at the centre of the world. I wish only to be at home in the world as the merest beast is at home. Much, much less than all would satisfy me: to begin with, a life unmediated by words: these stones, these bushes, this sky experienced and known without question; and a quiet return to the dust. Surely that is not too much" (135). Magda has lost interest in political action and turned from the double as-if of political representation to the unconscious, unmediated realm of natural givenness.

She brings her father back into the narrative even though she has led us to believe that she has murdered him in multiple versions of patricidal fantasy; in her relationship with her father she has dramatized power struggle to the extreme. Immediately after surrendering her wish to be part of the political world, Magda reverts to the other aspect of her life to which she has alluded at the beginning of the novel, that she feels more at home in a natural, unmediated world: "But I have other cares besides quarrelling with my voices. Sometimes when the weather is fine, as it is today, sunny but not too warm, I carry my father out of his room . . . so that he can once again face out over the old acres, which he no longer sees, and be exposed to the birdsong, which he no longer hears" (135-36). Magda's antagonistic relationship with her father is the result of his association with the natural state; he is a sum of bodily functions. The fact that we are aware of now—that he is in a state of physical decay, losing the ability to move, see, and hear—sheds more light on the situation. Magda accepts the mundane pastoral: "It takes generations of life in the cities to drive that nostalgia for country ways from the heart . . . I am corrupted to the bone

with the beauty of this forsaken world” (139). The novel ends with Magda’s reminiscences about her father, which are almost exclusively about food, nourishment, and physical decay.

Magda’s surrender of her wish for political action is concomitant with a deep understanding of, and an escape from, the epistemic violence of the political struggle for power. This insight continues but becomes more complicated in Coetzee’s third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). The novel is narrated by a “magistrate” who runs a far-flung colonial outpost/town, allowing free, albeit minimal, trade and interaction with the “barbarians”—nomadic people. A typical Coetzee protagonist, the skeptical magistrate administers the “law” with barely any enthusiasm, conscious of the philosophical ironies of his role. His half-hearted authority is being superseded by intelligence officer Joll, dispatched from the central “Bureau” with “emergency” powers to investigate rumors of a barbarian uprising. Despite the magistrate’s pleas, Colonel Joll starts capturing and torturing barbarians to get to the “truth.” After the first group of prisoners is cleared, one girl is left behind with broken legs and a generally battered body. In what seems vaguely like an intimate relationship, the magistrate nurses her and becomes obsessed with the marks of torture on her body. He then sets out on a journey to reunite her with her people and, once back, he is charged with treason (“consorting with the enemy”), imprisoned, humiliated, and physically tortured to the breaking point.

I argue that in this novel Coetzee explores how an abstract notion of human dignity prevents the magistrate from intellectual surrender to a feeling that what he *shares* with the “barbarians” is a “barbarian” desire for survival and pleasure; therefore, he is not willing to accept any vision of life outside the terms of political signification. This willed, unnatural ethics of resistance, self-sacrifice, and public-spiritedness is at the core of his imperial-magisterial ego’s complicity with the political empire. Coetzee once again explores the tug between the will

to power and the will to life. While “barbarians” is used literally in the novel to refer to the nomads, I argue that the “barbarians” also indicates the natural intimations of the body that cannot be contained within, and keep breaking through, the ego’s will to recognition and dignity.

Coetzee’s magistrate is intellectually and emotionally split with regard to a dignity-based ethics, where *life* is only a political relation to others, where “irresponsibility” means *death*. Upon asking the girl “where” she lives, he is puzzled that her answer is merely “I live” (26). When one barbarian boy, under torture, tells the Colonel what the latter wants to hear—that the barbarians have committed acts of sabotage and are plotting an uprising—the magistrate intervenes with “vehemence,” urging the boy to consider what such a statement will bring on his “people.” The boy, however, “makes no *response* . . . it is like slapping fish” (11). He watches how the captured “savages seem to forget they ever had another home. Seduced utterly by the free and plentiful food, above all by the bread, they relax, smile at everyone, move about the barracks yard from one patch of shade to another, doze and wake”; he is conflicted about the indignity of how they “grow excited as mealtimes approach” and how they are frank about their “filthy habits” (19). Yet he *wants to* “hope” that, when they do return to their homes, the “history of their captivity enters their legends, passed down from grandfather to grandson” (19). Trapped in the discourse of human dignity, the magistrate constructs the other in the ethical terms of political consciousness and heroic sacrifice.

The magistrate is conscious, nevertheless, that he might be contriving an ethical life and projecting it on the barbarians, that he is assigning them to a *sittlichkeit* and forcing them into an ethics of self-sacrifice. He is actually, as Coetzee describes Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, “hyperconscious” in the sense that he is conscious of being self-conscious, infinitely questioning the motive behind every motive. The magistrate is self-conscious, for example, about the motives

behind his opposition to torture as opposed, say, to murder in combat, wondering if what he stands for is nothing but “an archaic code of gentlemanly behavior towards captured foes” (108). Imprisoned and limited to one kind of food and one change of clothes, he is not sure “so petty” a punishment qualifies as “persecution” if nobody “spits” on him (85). Yet, the terms of his punishment might be “all the more degrading for their pettiness” (85). He finds “nothing ennobling” in his torture because all he is subjected to is the “most rudimentary” functions of the body: “to drink, to relieve itself, to find the posture in which it is least sore” (115). I do not argue that Coetzee’s point is that the magistrate *must not* pity the barbarian victims because this impulse originates in an unconscious desire for ennobling self-destruction. Coetzee writes, “What psychoanalysis has to say about ethical impulses may be illuminating (I give as an instance the link Freud points to between pity and destructiveness) but is ultimately of no ethical weight. That is to say, whatever one thinks the psychological origins of love or charity may be, one must still act with love and charity” (*Doubling* 244). Coetzee’s “one must still act with love and charity” should not be taken as an ethical imperative. The argument is that one must *not* withhold love and charity based on the knowledge of their possible origin. In fact, as Attridge notes, Coetzee’s fiction has been criticized for deploying ethically and politically irresponsible terms such as love and charity: “It is characteristic of Coetzee that he should risk building a politically engaged novel on such overworked concepts as ‘trust’ and ‘love,’ and one might predict that his having done so will be frequently misunderstood (both by those who want to exclude the political and by those who want to emphasize it)” (*Coetzee* 112). In Coetzee, exposing the ego’s intricate involvement with ethical imperatives will only help us articulate an alternative ethics.

The magistrate's questioning of the conflicting ethics of survival and dignity intensifies as the physical toll of his punishment increases. His "whole being" gradually becomes occupied by "the misery of being simply a body that feels sick and wants to be well" (87). His torturers want to show him "what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well" (115). The unmediated physical effect of the punishment, in the form of sore gums and painful bowel movements, both overwhelms and piques his wish to grasp the political significance of his ordeal: "Never before has my nose been so rubbed in the quotidian. The flow of events in the outside world, the moral dimension of my plight, . . . have lost all interest under the pressure of appetite and physical functions" (87). As with Magda, the conflict between the "quotidian" existence and the metaphoric expansion is the main source of the magistrate's dilemma.

As in the earlier novel, privileging the metaphysical over the physical is also behind the protagonist's entrapment in hegemonic discourse. The magistrate asserts that he is "not afraid of death" but only cringes from the "shame of dying as stupid and befuddled" (94). He opposes physical death, the death of "nonbeing," to the death that equals stupidity. As a symptom of his paradoxical desire, the magistrate does not accept for himself a condition that, at least in Derrida's *The Sovereign and the Beast*, makes the sovereign sovereign—the irresponsibility that makes him look stupid, bestial, and even dead (57). This condition of stupidity the magistrate associates with *shame*. An irresponsible, stupid, bestial sovereign surely does not feel shame, for it is a sense reserved for those subjected to the sovereign. As his torture progresses, however, he says that even though at the beginning he has felt "agonies of shame" to stand naked before the public, now he is "past shame" (117). He is surprised that the moment does not come when he would say "Kill me—I would rather die than go on" (117). During his intense physical pain, the

magistrate's budding liberation starts to come into view.

The conflict between the body's politically irresponsible desire for survival and the ego's responsible desire for dignity is reflected in a doubling, disjunctive narrative structure that we can glimpse in the magistrate's pompous proclamation: "Let it be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian" (104). He affirms his political agency but at the same time questions such agency because it can only *be said* that he is not a barbarian. He wants to be immortalized as a hero, to be recognized well into the "future," but that future is "remote." What will be said—a multilayered statement—is of real significance here. The visible layer is where the magistrate does not regard himself as a "barbarian," in other words as a violent maniac, because he does not approve of the political and material violence of the empire. The second, not much less obvious layer says that he is not a "barbarian" because he privileges sacrifice for the other over his own survival. The third is related to the second, with a slight difference—he is not a barbarian (violent) in his *heart* as opposed to being a barbarian in his mind (his ego). His ego is intertwined with the rational "Empire of light"—an empire that means, in Magda's words, "heady *expansion* into the as-if that marks the beginning of a true double life." This last interpretation will be vindicated later by the magistrate's query:

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in the water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. (133)

The empire of his mind is complicit in the violent and artificial epistemes of political signification, but his heart is not; his heart works in accord with Magda's "subjective time of the heart with its spurts of excitement and drags of tedium." As we will see later, Coetzee directs our attention to the fact that the heart, which has been culturally deformed into a metaphor, is first and foremost a blood pump that gives intimations of the body and not the soul.

After he is released from incarceration and told that, although his safety is not guaranteed, he can leave or do whatever he pleases, the magistrate sees himself as mere natural givenness; he finds pleasure in living as a beggar; he hopes to "to be fat again," with "a belly that gurgles with contentment," and aspires to a "life of simple satisfactions" (130). We see in this life without dignity not vulnerability but freedom and sovereignty.

Coetzee's Ethics of Natural-Spiritedness

Coetzee's fiction promotes a shamanic sense of the body as bestial yet divine, intimating natural desires that bring god and the beast together. *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* show resistance, self-sacrifice, and public-spiritedness as grounded in egotism rather than altruism and thus a self-destructive and unsound ground for ethics. Coetzee's writings describe immersion in sensual gratification as a mystical experience, even a theistic one. With sensual gratification and ego annihilation, the human reverts to being animal yet divine. Coetzee's ethics is shamanic morality in the sense that it irresponsibly ignores "rational" imperatives and seeks supernatural guidance through identification with the natural world.

Coetzee repeatedly uses the motifs of divine bestiality to displace the discourse of human dignity. To deter the Colonel from using a hammer to conclude his torture of the barbarians, the

magistrate says that no one would use a hammer even “on a beast,” for we are the “great miracle of creation,” but when he is struck himself, it occurs to him that “we crush insects beneath our feet, miracles of creation too, beetles, cockroaches, ants, in their various ways” (107). The conventional wisdom is that humanism replaced the deity with man as the origin of morality, but Coetzee makes it clear repeatedly that, in both monotheism and humanism, man regards himself as the center of the universe, pleased only by “love” and “recognition,” be it from god or fellow men. In *In the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee uses the example of a non-responsive, indifferent deity to demonstrate the futility of the struggle for recognition. Magda’s voices tell her that “*God loves no one . . . and hates no one, for God is free from passions and feels no pleasure or pain. Therefore one who loves God cannot endeavor to bring it about that God should love him in return; for, in desiring this, he would desire that God should not be God*” (134). Magda’s eventual shift from *bios* to nature coincides with a switch in the way she sees herself in relation to the divine; were she to tell the “truth,” she says, it would be that she “never wanted to fly away with the sky-gods” (138). She wants them to “descend” and join her “here in paradise” (139). Her view of divinity changes from a vertical, metaphysical position to a horizontal, natural continuum. Magda’s concession to the mundane leads her to feel a divine presence in nature. The magistrate also makes the same concession, even though he pretends not to know what it is, and reaches the same change of perspective: “We would have made any concession, had we only known what, to go on living here. This was paradise on earth” (154). I want to infer that what Magda and the magistrate concede is their claim to a significant and recognized position in the eye of history (human dignity) and in the eye of God (grace). In response to David Attwell’s question whether there is an element of “absolution” or salvation for the protagonist at the end of *Age of Iron*, whether he is “close to the Dostoyevskian principle of grace,” Coetzee says, “no,

regrettably no: I am not a Christian, or not yet” (*Doubling* 250). Lurie, the protagonist of *Disgrace* finds himself “[t]rying to accept disgrace as [a] state of being” (172). As we will see later, Coetzee proposes divine-bestial “disgrace” as a free space and an ethical (non)position. It is no wonder that such implicit concessions and new perspectives, articulated as they are by a white South African writer, would become the object of sharp postcolonial critique that I address later in this chapter.

Such concessions or forms of surrender can make humans escape the mental hold of sovereign power and be free without resisting such power. Magda and the magistrate’s shamanic identification, as opposed to confrontation, with the “scurrying, purposeful life” of insects is a way of becoming sovereign. Analyzing what sovereign “majesty” means, Derrida looks at the epistemology of the “phallus,” asking whether it is “proper to the sovereign,” whether it is “*bêtise* [beastliness] itself,” and how it is related to “the standing position, the grandeur or highness of the most high” that is the sovereign (*Sovereign* 256). He argues:

The more, the supreme, the maximum that characterizes sovereignty is a more of power and not of size, and so of quality or intensity and not of magnitude. And the being-potential, the possible, the *dynamis* can be as small as possible without ceasing to be potential, precisely. And the scheme of erection, or even of phallic erection that we have associated with the sovereign is a schema of potency, not of size. More potent cannot be reduced to ‘bigger’ nor ‘smaller.’ Potency in general, sovereign potency, like any potency in particular, cannot be determined within the oppositional grid of the large and the small. (258)

After making clear how the discourse of sovereignty appropriates this potency with its connotations of energy, fertility, and the beast, Derrida moves on to examine that in terms of divinity:

The smallest in miniaturization dissociates itself from the largest, but can continue to be associated with the highest: the smallest can be the highest or even, beyond earth, in the supraterrrestrial, higher than the highest. There is no more reason to call a supraterrrestrial God great ('God is great') than small. Why does one not say, to describe the absolute power of God, 'God is small' . . . ? [I]f God is in us, more intimate with us than we are ourselves, then he must be in us insensibly, invisibly, both greater and smaller than we in us. (258)

Magda's voices tell her that God can only be invisible: "*God is hidden, and every religion that does not affirm that God is hidden is not true*" (134). Derrida also reminds us that "in certain religions the manifestation of divine presence or sovereignty passes through the small, the smallest" (258). He refers to the "the lamb" to tie the small, the divine and the animal, which should add credence to my reading of Nebuchadnezzar's induced bestiality and resulting disgrace and meekness as the grounds for what he perceives as his consequently maximal sovereignty.

Michael K: The Sovereign Life of Instinct

The Life and Times of Michael K (1983), Coetzee's fourth novel, depicts a life that is natural, instinctive, and, hence, sovereign through and through. The protagonist, K, never entertains the conflicting consciousness that Magda and the magistrate come very late to

outgrow. He wants no political association or recognition, aspires to nothing beyond the “mundane,” and goes about his life as a “termite” in “God’s earth.”

Divided into three parts, the novel is set in civil-war torn South Africa and follows K, a young man of ambiguous race with an harelip and apparently limited intelligence. After spending his early years at an institution, K now works as a gardener for the city of Cape Town, where his mother works as a maid. With the city in the grip of rioting, upon his ailing mother’s request, he takes his mother in a rickety makeshift pushcart on a one-way trip to her birthplace in the country. Soon after leaving the city, the mother dies at a hospital, and K is arrested for travelling without proper paperwork and assigned to mandatory railroad work. Eventually, he reaches an abandoned farm where his mother presumably was born. K starts exploring different ways of drawing sustenance and nourishment from the land; then he escapes into the mountains soon after a relative of the farm owners shows up. Upon returning to the farm, he cultivates a patch of land and encounters a group of rebels from whom he runs into hiding. In between periods of starvation, some satisfaction and sometimes even bliss on the farm and the mountain, K is captured by police and confined to a work camp from which he also escapes.

The second chapter is narrated from the point of view of a medical officer who tends to him at a rehabilitation camp. The doctor is obsessed with K’s peculiar character and way of life that includes refusing to talk or eat. He tries to interpret K’s conduct and his inexplicable ability to escape even though he is a mere skeleton; the medical officer fantasizes about following K as a disciple. In the third chapter, having escaped, K looks forward to resuming his subsistence farming. The novel ends with K presuming he could live on a spoonful of water drawn from deep in the earth; “he would bend the handle of the teaspoon in a loop and tie the string to it, he would

lower it down the shaft deep into the earth, and when he brought it up there would be water in the bowl of the spoon; and in that way, he would say, one can live” (184).

Despite evidence that in this novel Coetzee depicts a character who acts completely on instinct, critics stop short of making that conclusion. Attridge, for example, writes:

We are never made privy to K’s decision making; it is almost as if he acts without going through the process of deciding what to do next. (Thus we don’t hear of any preliminary thoughts about the construction of a barrow to make the journey to Prince Albert . . .).

This is, of course, only one example of many mental processes we’re not allowed to share, and it can’t be construed as evidence of a mind so peculiar that it acts completely on instinct; but this particular exercising of the novelist’s prerogative to withhold has the effect, as we read, of allowing us to try out, as it were, a mode of existence in which decision-making is reduced to a minimum. (*Coetzee* 37)

At every point, the narrator describes K as a being that is only continuous and integrated by the sum of his bodily functions: “It came home to him that he might die, he or his body, it was the same thing” (69). All K does in the middle of this political chaos is to go to St Joseph’s Mission for a cup of soup. He does not think that bodily functions are ever affected by politics:

He showed his mother a picture of a gleaming flank or roast pork garnished with cherries and pineapple rings and set off with a bowl of raspberries and cream and a gooseberry tart. “People don’t eat like that anymore,” his mother said. He disagreed. “The pigs don’t know there is a war on,” he said. “The pineapples don’t know there is a war on. Food keeps growing. Someone has to eat it.” (16)

At the hospital, “an orderly brought tea and left a cup at his mother’s bedside with a biscuit in the saucer. K raised her head and held the cup to her lips but she would not drink. For a long while

he waited as his stomach rumbled and the tea grew cold. Then with the orderly about to return, he gulped down the tea and swallowed the biscuit” (29). With his mother unresponsive at the hospital, K is offered a pie “so delicious that tears came to his eyes . . . K listened to the birds in the trees and tried to remember when he had known such happiness” (30). K again steals “his mother’s tea and that of the old woman in the next bed, gulping it down like a guilty dog” (30). K thinks “of himself as a termite boring its way through a rock. There seemed nothing to do but live” (66). At the camp, “children incorporated his body into their game. They clambered over him and fell upon him as if he were part of the earth. Still hiding his face, he rolled over and found that he could doze even with little bodies riding on his back” (84). His encounter with the police is described in apolitical, biological terms. He wonders if they can “smell fear on him” and “baulk[s], like a beast at the shambles” (40). K’s resistance lacks political will; it is a mere biological reflex.

In the scene where K sees the rebels, Coetzee eliminates every politically conscious motive and emphasizes the innate survival drive: “Like a worm he began to slither towards his hole, thinking only: Let darkness fall soon, let the earth swallow me up and protect me” (107). The use of the exclusive “only” is to emphasize that K’s *modus operandi* is defiant to political influence or interpretation. There is truth to Gordimer’s criticism that the novel displays “revulsion against all political and revolutionary solutions” and that Coetzee “denies the energy of the will to resist evil” (3).

There is no space left in the novel for ethics to locate any of its imperatives advanced in the name of dignity. Coundouriotis writes that “dignity is not safeguarded only if the individual is provided protections by others . . . Dignity must be pursued by the individual’s own action” (853). Feinberg argues that “what is called ‘human dignity’ may simply be the capacity to assert

claims” (252). K neither asserts claims (the Feinberg formulation) nor wants society to recognize him as worthy of anything (the Kantian formulation). And K does not have dignity since, according to Jack Donnelly, “any plausible account of human dignity must include membership in a society” and “people must be parts of social groups if they are to live lives worthy of human beings” (844). K occupies a mode of living that is antithetical to asserting dignity through speech and participation in a political community; his life is limited to the private sphere where the needs of the body need to be tended. K is anything but a political actor thriving among peers in the public sphere and striving to display his individuality and distinction.

Moreover, this novel is a good place to address and ultimately challenge Richard Rorty’s view that what should unite the ethical person “with the rest of the species is not a common language but *just* susceptibility to pain and in particular to that special sort of pain which the brutes do not share with the humans—humiliation” (92). Rorty sees resentment of humiliation as the special and morally significant characteristic that unites humanity. The novel supports the first part of the statement in the sense that it limits itself to the throes of the body, its physical pain, starvation, nourishment and survival. However, the *Life and Times of Michael K* ultimately rejects the second part, which maintains that fear of humiliation is a common ethical ground, particularly so because the “fear of humiliation” is a sentiment that the “brutes” do not share with the “humans.” Coetzee seems to argue that the only ethical terrain possible is the one that includes humans and brutes alike. Such ethical ground has no place for the discourse of dignity and humiliation.

The novel focuses on what the law can or cannot do with regard, not to human dignity or lack thereof, but to body capacity and limits. In a contrast between the law and the body, the medical officer tells K that “laws are made of iron,” that “[n]o matter how thin you make

yourself, they will not relax” (151). As in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this novel privileges the limits of the body’s capacity in the face of the rational subject’s unbridled quest for ethical meaning. When the medical officer protests against K’s participation in the exercise, the duty officer replies that K can drop out when “he can’t take any more” (144). The medical officer says that K’s heart will collapse, and that’s almost what happens. K does not protest exercise as long as he can run; he only stops when his body cannot take it anymore and he is brought back to the ward unconscious. The medical officer is piqued by how K does not resist the law in his conscious will but only in body:

As time passed, however, I slowly began to see the originality of the resistance you offered. You were not a hero and did not pretend to be, not even a hero of fasting. In fact you did not resist at all. When we told you to jump, you jumped. When we told you to jump again . . . , however, you did not respond but collapsed in a heap . . . You acquiesced in your will (excuse me for making these distinctions, they are the only means I possess to explain myself), your will acquiesced but your body balked. That was how I saw it. Your body rejected the food we fed you and you . . . were crying secretly, unknown to your conscious self (forgive the term), for a different kind of food, food that no camp could supply. Your will remained pliant but your body was crying to be fed its own food, and only that. Now I had been taught that the body contains no ambivalence. The body, I had been taught, wants only to live . . . It was not a principle, an idea that lay behind your decline. You did not want to die, but you were dying. (163-64)

The medical officer relapses from his earlier perception of K as somebody who, beneath the surface, must still be an autonomous person attached to his dignity, asserting his will and actively shaping his life. The officer speaks of K’s “self” because it is the only language at his

disposal. The novelty of Coetzee's ethics lies in the fact that not only does it question K's homogenous subjectivity, but it also offers no heteronomy as a substitute; K does not assume an ethical identity constituted through a relation to the other either. K is sovereign *because* he neither asserts an autonomous agency nor makes a conscious claim to a political and ethical dimension separate from the body in-itself. What he possesses is only an innate and unconscious instinct for survival.

This utter indifference to a dignity that privileges personal autonomy over the body perplexes power's epistemology. Michael Moses argues that "K's lack of desire for recognition . . . cannot by its very nature produce a political alteration in the regime. For without a strong desire for recognition, which takes the form of the demand to have one's human dignity publicly acknowledged, K cannot take political activity very seriously" (143). But, despite being indifferent to asserting his dignity, K constitutes more of a threat to the powers-that-be than any form of political resistance because he undermines the abstract structure of power, the allegorical circulation, described by Benjamin and Agamben, between the violence that posits law and the violence that conserves it (*Homo* 40).

Now let us see how K fits into Agamben's argument that no natural life precedes "sovereign violence," that what seems to be natural life is actually political life exposed to power. After Agamben made that argument, several studies have described K in terms of the bare life; even before that, the argument has always been that the "bestiality" of K's mode of living is imposed upon him by society. In "Towards an Ethics of Silence: Michael K," Duncan Chesney writes that "times force K into bestiality" and that "Michael's reticence in the novel is not just that of shame and intimidation. His silence is more profound and passes a harsher judgment on his 'times'" (310). Chesney also casts K in the biopolitical language of the bare life:

His experience on the mountain and the farm reduces him to sheer body, outside of human commerce and time, but if K is a figure of barely human existence, it is not in some mystical, presocial connection to the earth or in any equally mystical transcendence. He is, rather, an example of Giorgio Agamben's *nuda vita*, and "bare life is the product of the [biopolitical] machine and not something that preexists it, just as law has no court in nature or in the divine mind." Michael's peculiar existence is precisely produced by the society that has no place for him. (310)

For Chesney, K represents "the indistinctness of the limit between human and nonhuman that is exemplified for Agamben in the 'undignified,' destroyed *Muselmann*, another figure of silence, as of bare life" (311). Again, I argue, K's natural life does precede his trying times. If we can take a hint from the novel's title, K's "life" comes before his "times." K's represents exactly the "mystical, presocial connection to the earth" and other living beings. Chesney is right that K is in an undignified figure with no distinction between the human and nonhuman, like the *Muselmann*, but he is not bare life. We have explored Agamben's argument that the modern state turns all citizens into bare life, and we have also established that the same state turns all its citizens into dignity-bearing subjects; therefore, the lack of dignity in K dissociates him from bare life, sets his biological existence ahead of the *baring* violence, shields his fertile nature from *barren* civilization. As we will see, power attempts to bring about the opposite effect with K—to vest his life in the discourse of dignity and political resistance.

K's way of life is neither a personal choice (agency) nor a social allotment (sovereign violence); it is the embodiment of his pleasure, the way he survives and satisfies natural desire: "His deepest pleasure came at sunset when he turned open the cock at the dam wall and watched the stream of water run down its channels to soak the earth, turning it from fawn to deep brown.

It is because I am a gardener, he thought, because that is my nature” (59). K does not think that he is the product of the camp or sovereign violence; he is a gardener, a man of the soil. Even when the political comes into clear coincidence with natural or bestial life, it is hardly possible to argue that this bestiality is brought about by the eruption of the political present. During the riot, “Anna K and her son huddled quiet as mice in their room beneath the stairs, not stirring even when they smelled the smoke . . . , the conviction grew in them that the real war had come to Sea Point and found them out” (12-3). The war only *finds* K and his mother living like mice. When K and other young boys were committed to Huis Norenus, they are like “animals who stole from one another’s plates and climbed the kitchen enclosure to rifle the garbage cans for bones and peelings,” but then he grew “older and stopped wanting. Whatever the nature of the beast that had howled inside him, it was starved into stillness” (68). So, it is actually the institution that had attempted to silence the voice of the beast inside K; his times are not about to turn K into a mere body but rather to silence the yearnings of his body.

Even when one aspect of K’s silent life seems to be a product of the biopolitical machine, Coetzee still finds in it mystical and ethical value. K recalls how in one class at his Huis Norenus everyone had to sit hands on head, lips pursed and eyes closed while the teacher patrolled the rows with his long ruler. With time, the posture sheds its “meaning as punishment,” for K, and turns instead into an “avenue of reverie” (68). He now reminisces of “sitting, hands on head, through hot afternoons with doves cooing in the gum trees and the chant of tables coming from other classrooms, struggling with a delicious drowsiness” (69). By himself in the wilderness, years later, K willingly assumes the same posture and voids his mind of all thoughts, “wanting nothing, looking forward to nothing” (69). Beyond the connection with the natural

world K seeks no other intellectual purpose for life than mere acceptance and mystical meditation.

Both the tyrant and the heroic revolutionary operate in the symbiotic relationship of dignity, which connects the populace to the sovereign. When K does not accept camp food as his “kind of food,” the medical officer tries to draw this refusal into the morally and politically heroic narrative of self-sacrifice—“protest fast” (145). Commenting on K’s escape from the camp, the officer writes: “Do you know what thought crossed my mind when I saw you had got away without cutting the wire? ‘He must be a polevaulter’—that is what I thought. Well, you may not be a polevaulter, Michaels, but you are a great escape artist, one of the great escapees: I take off my hat to you!” (166). The medical officer says that if there is not more to K than meets the eye, then he (the officer) will not be able to continue working at the camp; he will retire into a closet and put a bullet in his head. He also tells the camp commandant that “when the shooting stops and the sentries are fled and the enemy walk through the gates unchallenged, they will expect to find the camp commandant at his desk with a revolver in his hand and a bullet through his head. That is the gesture they will expect” (143). Sovereign violence, particularly in the modern period, is in a way enabled by the aura and mystique of revolutionary violence. Therefore, Coetzee “protests the body colonized by narrative, including postcolonial narrative” (May 393). His skepticism towards revolutionary heroics partly accounts for the falling out between Coetzee and the post-apartheid government.

The medical officer’s futile attempt to impose a narrative framework on K’s life and to draw him into a discursive community highlights the problem with Nussbaum’s injunction that “the state must treat citizens with dignity, not simply give them the option to be treated with dignity” (386). If we take the medical officer to be part of the institution of sovereignty, we will

understand his insistence that K be a hero of resistance, and not a mere sum of bodily functions. He tells K, “If you will not compromise you are going to die, Michaels. And do not think you are simply going to waste away, grow more and more insubstantial till you are all soul and can fly away into the aether. The death you have chosen is full of pain and misery and shame and regret” (151). The discourse of power cannot control K biologically; it stands helpless before the substantiality of his existence; it can only appeal to the sense of shame. The medical officer insists that bodily survival and extinction are not all there is to the matter; there are shame and other things to take into consideration.

Eventually, the medical officer reaches the conclusion that K’s life is not and cannot be connected to the sovereign; he compares him to a “stone, a pebble that, having lain around quietly minding its own business since the dawn of time, is now suddenly picked up and tossed randomly . . . enveloped in itself and its interior life. He passes through these institutions and camps and hospitals and God knows what else like a stone. Through the intestines of war. An unbearing, unborn creature” (135). He realizes that K cannot be represented by the political, metaphorical narrative of power but only by the quotidian art of peasants: K is “a genuine little man of earth, the kind of little man one sees in peasant art emerging into the world from between the squat thighs of its mother-host with fingers ready hooked and back ready bent for a life of burrowing, a creature that spends its waking life stooped over the soil” (161). It was going to be a futile effort if any “organ of state would play with the idea of recruiting creatures like that as its agents” (161). Via this irresponsibility and interiority, K embodies the ecstasy that, for Derrida, marks freedom. The medical officer concedes that much to K: “Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory, if you know that word. It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without

becoming a term in it. Did you notice how, whenever I tried to pin you down, you slipped away? I noticed” (166). Seen this way, K is not bare life but natural life that resists definition by power and does not contribute to the discourse of power by becoming a term in it. This is particularly the case since this resistance is inadvertent. The camp can neither strip K of dignity nor, more importantly for power, endow him with dignity, for he exists outside the terms of dignity and thus outside the biopolitical machine of the camp. Even if we hypothetically agree that it is power that produces the beast, we should see how this putative production is a self-defeating aberration in the system. The logical, “self-serving,” workings of power should have stopped short of reaching that point.

Power takes pains to integrate K’s life into the abstract ethics of *sittlichkeit* with its terms of self-sacrifice, responsibility, and “duty.” Yet, K approaches others, in the same way he approaches the earth, in accord with inner forces over which he has no control and in which he finds pleasure. He would only treat others with charity if that was something he desired to do. The medical officer aggrandizes the way K took his mother out of the city, seeing it a burdensome obligation of which K would have been happy to be released: “You made a great mistake, Michaels, when you tied her on your back and fled the burning city for the safety of the countryside . . . I think of you carrying her, panting under her weight, choking in the smoke, dodging the bullets, performing all other feats of filial piety you no doubt performed” (150). Attridge reads instances of K’s piety toward his mother as rare acts of duty: “he occasionally acts out of duty--most notably in seeking to honor his mother’s wishes, both before and after her death” (*Coetzee* 57). I argue, however, that K’s relation to the mother compares to a natural cord, the same cord that connects him to the earth (which he thinks of as “God’s earth) that has mothered him, the natural world that is his birthplace. The “beginning of his life as a cultivator”

coincides with K's distribution of his mother's ashes "over the earth, afterwards turning the earth over spadeful by spadeful" (59). When he assumes care of his ailing mother, K returns this tenderness to natural-divine origins: "he had been brought into the world to look after his mother" (7). K evidently thinks of his life in passive terms, being "brought" into existence. He unquestioningly accepts his mother's logic: "Just as he had believed through all the years in Huis Norenius that his mother had left him there for a reason which, if at first dark, would in the end become clear, so now he accepted without question the wisdom of her plan for them" (8-9). There is a biological basis to his ethical (if we can call it that) approach to others; his care for his mother does not stem from his will, but rather from his natural function—he is "brought into the world" for that pre-determined purpose.

K does not meet the definition of dignity even when the latter is cast in the discourse of interpersonal duties and obligations; he does not understand why the medical officer feels obligation toward him and is not sure whether he himself will help others. K does not "crawl out and stand up and cross from darkness into firelight to announce himself [to the revolutionaries] because enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over" (109). K wants to "keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children" (109). When it comes to people with whom he feels no natural cord, K does not have an ethical, universally applicable imperative: "Do I believe in helping people? he wondered. He might help people, he might not help them, he did not know beforehand, anything was possible. He did not seem to have a belief, or did not seem to have a belief regarding help" (48). When the young army deserter, with all his dovish talk about peace, begs K for help purchasing groceries, the latter unthinkingly turns his back on him, buries the money and escapes into the mountains, disturbed only by the "cord of

tenderness that stretched from him to the patch of earth beside the dam . . . It seemed to him that one could cut a cord like that only so many times before it would not grow again” (66). He concludes: “I have escaped the camps; perhaps, if I lie low, I will escape the charity too” (182). It is the discourse of human rights, intertwined as it is with power, which tries to include him as a term in its narrative, in the system.

Having offered my appreciative reading of K as a figure of surrender and mystic living, I think this is the right place to address critical concerns with the ethical and political efficacy of Coetzee’s narrative strategies and to engage with such critiques that find K particularly troubling. Coetzee’s non-affirmative maneuvers—such as K’s silence and his frustration of the officer’s efforts to find in him more than meets the eye—would lead Benita Parry, for instance, to charge that Coetzee’s “narrative strategies . . . pre-empt dialogue with non-canonical knowledges through representing these as ineffable” (158). In her influential and exemplary chapter “Speech and Silence in the Fictions of J. M. Coetzee,” Parry finds it problematic for Coetzee to wrap figures of otherness—such as K, the barbarian girl, Magda’s servants and others—in muteness as if silence were a privilege: “although the silence of each of these figures has a distinctive tenor, what all signify is not a negative condition of lack and affliction, or of sullen withdrawal, but of a plentitude of perception and gifts: Michael K’s aphasia facilitates a mystic consciousness” (153). Parry, disapprovingly, attempts to demonstrate that Coetzee’s fiction lacks concrete ethical and political import that might help counter colonial discourse. She expresses dissatisfaction with critics “focused on detecting condemnations of an egregious political system . . . [and] predisposed to proffer Coetzee’s fictions as realist representations of, and humanist protests against, colonial rapacity at large, and in particular against the intricately institutionalized systems of racial oppression that until recently prevailed in South Africa” (149). She also differs

with other critics who concern themselves with “the radicalism of Coetzee’s textual practice, . . . foreground parody and reflexivity as oppositional linguistic acts, [and] argue that the authority of colonialism’s narratives is undermined by subversive rewritings of the genres traditional to South African fiction . . . hence opening conventions to scrutiny and confronting the traditional and unquestioned notion of the canon” (149). For Parry, while the “failure to project alternative perspectives might signify Coetzee’s refusal to exercise the authority of the dominant culture to represent other subjugated cultures,” his “virtually plotless novels, taking in nothing outside the narrators’ world-view,” sustain “the West as the culture of reference” (151). She asks:

Is the silence of these ‘strange’ and defeated people deployed here as a textual strategy which counters the colonizing impulse and impudence in simulating another’s voice? Alternatively, can it be construed as a mute interrogation and disablement of discursive power?—a possibility offered by Attridge, who reads Coetzee’s fictions as a continued and strenuous effort in figuring alterity as a force out there disrupting European discourse . . . , not by initiating dialogue, but by ‘interrupting or disturbing the discursive patterns in which we are at home’ . . . (151-52).

Parry argues that Coetzee’s strategies of silence do not support “a notion of commerce with alterity as a contact taking place in an intersubjective space where the non-identity of the interlocutors is respected and retained, and which leaves both ‘I’ and ‘you’ separate and intact, but enhanced” (152). For Parry, casting the other in terms of silent withdrawal is not amenable to creating “a multiple, ‘neologicistic’ idiom, which because it inscribes alterity not as a disarticulated presence but as an interlocutor, would counter what Levinas names (in *Totality and Infinity*) ‘the eclipse, the occultation, the silencing of the other’” (152).

My reading of K as a being untouched by the system is problematic since the character is an obvious reference to Josef K, whose author is particularly interested in exploring how an individual becomes caught up, defined and alienated by the state apparatus. But, Coetzee's comment on the connection between the two K's shows his interest in exploring dimensions in his predecessor's K that are beyond the system. He remarks to Attwell:

But behind your question about Josef K and Michael K and the forms of alienation they experience I detect a presumption that must, for Kafka's sake if not for my own, be laid bare. It is that Josef K is alienated as a clerk in Hapsburg Europe, or, closer to the bone, that Josef K is alienated as a sign and a traceable consequence of the social, cultural, religious, and political marginality of Franz Kafka himself.

We open up here a field of argument about the relations between a writer and his society that it would take days even to reconnoiter. So why don't we just assume we have done that, and let me go on to name a set of coordinates in the field, which I do in the form of a question. What is left of Franz Kafka after the alienation of Josef K has been explained in terms of Kafka's marginality? What is left of Michael K after he has been explained in terms of my marginality in Africa? Is it not what is left *after* that interrogation that should interest us, not what the interrogation reveals? Is it not what Kafka does *not* speak, refuses to speak, under that interrogation, that will continue to fuel our desire for him (I hope forever)? (*Doubling* 200)

By inviting the reader to look at K's life as separate from the politics of his author's marginalization, Coetzee is also encouraging her to read the character as a living being in isolation from the system of marginalization.

With K, Coetzee begins exploring a “rights agenda” that he will develop more in later works—an agenda that replaces human rights with body rights. Upon smelling the food at the hospital, K “felt the saliva deep in his mouth. It was the first hunger he had known for a long time. He was not sure that he wanted to become a servant to hunger again; but a hospital, it seemed, was a place for bodies, where bodies asserted their rights” (71). Coetzee also associates such body rights with the divine; K feels he has a divine, natural right to survive. He finds “neatly tended patches of vegetables” and “on hands and knees began to pull yellow half-grown carrots out of the soft earth. It is God’s earth, he thought, I am not a thief” (39). Coetzee’s notion of the natural and divine “rights” of the body holds the center of his 1999 novel, *Disgrace*.

The Ethics of *Disgrace*

Set in post-apartheid South Africa, *Disgrace* tells the story of David Lurie, a literature professor bored with the task of teaching communication classes at a technical university in Cape Town. He is dismissed from his job after seducing a student, Melanie, and then defending himself before the university’s disciplinary committee with sarcasm and nonchalance. He moves to live with his hippie, lesbian daughter, Lucy, on her farm in the Eastern Cape, hoping to continue working on his Byron book. Three black men attack them, raping and impregnating Lucy and inflicting serious burn injuries on Lurie. Eventually he takes to caring for or euthanizing unwanted dogs and changes his book project into an opera on one of Byron’s disgraced mistresses.

After his scandal breaks out, David Lurie wonders whether “it is the right of the young to be protected from the sight of their elders in the throes of passion. That is what whores are for,

after all: to put up with the ecstasies of the unlovely” (44). In “Writing Desire Responsibly,” Jolly looks at how “Coetzee’s representations of sexual relations . . . figure devious desire and responsibility for such desire” (93). Lurie “thinks of sex as a need which he fulfills with the least expenditure of energy on his part,” making sure to mention how much his weekly visit to the brothel costs him in terms of time, finance, and temperament (94). According to Jolly, “Lurie’s configuration of ‘the problem of sex,’ then, would appear to be how to fulfill desire while minimizing any responsibility that could emerge through the pursuit of that desire” (94). Apart from the technicalities of fulfilling desire with minimum social responsibilities, *Disgrace* caps Coetzee’s exploration of the connection between dignity and sexual and social violence, an investigation that has started as early as *In the Heart of the Country*.

For Coetzee, as we have seen in his views on the eroticization of violence, rape is not a natural sexual desire, but a political act of hate and domination that happens when natural desire is socially repressed and stigmatized, when the desire for mixing is culturally barricaded. Rape is not a god of desire like Eros but one that rages when Eros is repressed—“Rape, god of chaos and mixture, violator of seclusions,” as David Lurie puts it (105). For Lurie, “[u]nacted desires can turn as ugly in the old as in the young” (70). Rape is a desire for domination and vengeance, a will to power and dignity, to avenge one’s humiliation. Magda thinks of Hendrik’s desire for her as inseparable from his desire to assert his dignity: “He has learned to leave his hat on in my presence. He has learned to storm up and down while he talks, striking his fist into his palm. His gestures express anger, but also the confidence of a man free to show his anger. It is interesting. What passion he has shown for me has been a passion of rage. That is why my body has locked itself against him” (117). When denied, natural desire induces a reaction of hating and eliminating this vulnerable desire and, in turn, a violent mediated desire to either possess or

eradicate the other, the object of desire. Magda articulates the violence inherent in mediated desire—the desire for the other’s desire. Socially mediated desire is based on the egotistical quest for capturing the other’s desire, for making them either desire us back or disappear:

To the spur of desire we have only one response: to capture, to enclose, to hold. But how real is our possession? The flowers turn to dust, Hendrik uncouples and leaves, the land knows nothing of fences, . . . the very food I devour passes through me. I am not one of the heroes of desire, what I want is not infinite or unattainable, all I ask myself, faintly, dubiously, querulously, is whether there is not something to do with desire other than striving to possess the desired in a project which must be vain, since its end can only be the annihilation of the desired. (114)

Magda’s declaration that she is not a hero of desire is typical of her tendency to make her point by denying it. She asks why the voices are “blind to the source of our disease, which is that . . . our desires stream out of us chaotically, without aim, without response” (135). She wants her chaotic desires to have social and intellectual barriers.

Sexual abuse is a hostile desire directed at the woman’s dignity rather than body. David Lurie thinks that Lucy’s rapists have targeted her sense of shame; he imagines that those “men will watch the newspapers, listen to the gossip. They will read that they are being sought for robbery and assault and nothing else. It will dawn on them that over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket. *Too ashamed*, they will say to each other, *too ashamed to tell*, and they will chuckle luxuriously, recollecting their exploit” (110). Lucy’s refusal to admit being raped must be read in Coetzee’s awareness, evidenced in the essays we explored in Chapter I, that women, particularly in cultures much attached to the concepts of dignity and

honor, expect hostility and suspicion when they come forward to claim legal redress for sexual violations.

Waiting for the Barbarians places the mediated desire as the center of imperial conquest. The magistrate is also conflicted about the two faces of his relationship with the barbarian girl—mediated, “imperial” desire (which is a suppression of natural desire in favor of an ethic of responsibility—recognition, possession) versus natural desire (the drive to concupiscent pleasure):

From the moment my steps paused and I stood before her at the barracks gate she must have felt a miasma of deceit closing about her: envy, pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire. And in my lovemaking not impulse but the laborious denial of impulse! From the first she knew me for a false seducer. She listened to me, then she listened to her heart, and rightly she acted in accord with her heart . . . (135)

For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was a lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less. (135)

Up to a certain point in the novel, he is incapable of, or willfully resistant to, engaging the girl in unmediated intercourse that does not aim to possess or destroy her; he cannot see her body as mere *zoē* but only as a site of *bios*, a field of political exchange and debate. His traumatic obsession with the marks on her body stems from his own egotistical wish to register his own mark, to leave his own trace, to make a political statement. His effort to erase the marks on her body is only part of a political project to leave his own marks. The act of undoing the mark is an act of marking. He defaults to mere sexual desire only when the political realm of marking is

darkened by the cover of the night; when she slips into his camp bed, “sending him into easy sensual oblivion,” he wakes up barely able to “reinsert [himself] into time and space” (64).

I do not shy at the thought that if she had not spent the evening with the young men around the camp fire she would very likely not have found any need for me. Perhaps the truth is that it was one of them she was embracing when I held her in my arms. I listen scrupulously to the reverberations of that thought inside me, but cannot detect a plunging of the heart to tell me I am injured. She sleeps; my hand passes back and forth over her smooth belly, caresses her thighs. It is done, I am content. (64)

In that moment, he reaches the point where he does not want to engage the girl in a political game of mutual recognition. His dignity does not stand in the way of his desire as he is not offended by the possibility that she does not recognize *him*, that she is engaged in a purely physical intercourse with him.

More so than any other Coetzee novel, *Disgrace* has provoked much critical reflection on the concept of dignity, particularly so because of its implications for the TRC, which aimed to restore the “dignity” of apartheid victims. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee rejects the discourse of human dignity, a combination of humanist, rationalist and religious ideals, and offers as an alternative a mystical concept of “disgrace,” a form of “humility” with erotic overtones. It is not that Coetzee objects to the pragmatism or convenience of the notion of dignity were it to contribute to peace, but he sees in such discourse the potential for more violence and vengeance. In an instance reminiscent of Rousseau’s idea that the intention hurts us more than the physical pain does, when David Lurie imagines the rapists out there gloating over his defeat, giggling in pride, happy that Lucy is ashamed to report the crime, he struggles to prevent his anger at the notion from overshadowing his rage at the crime itself. He tells his daughter that she should not think that “by

meekly accepting what happened” she will get a “safe conduct into the future” because “vengeance works . . . like a fire. The more it devours, the hungrier it gets” (112). The discourse of dignity, in its aversion to meek acceptance, can induce victims to mistreat their former victimizers.

Coetzee’s rejection of dignity in all its manifestations—whether it is seen as universal or contingent—has produced confused readings. Psychiatrist Alan Stone writes that “Coetzee’s account of the humiliated professor’s unwanted visit to the home of his student’s parents is extraordinary. He abjectly prostrates himself before the mother, asking her forgiveness, and yet when he leaves he is not sure why he did it and neither are we. He seems incapable of true remorse; the best he can do is self-pity” (2249). Coetzee’s literary and theoretical formulation of a world that transcends dignity catches other forms of discourse off guard, including psychoanalytic discourse. Countdouriotis reads David Lurie’s objection to Lucy’s entering a bigamous marriage with Petrus (the black partner-laborer on her farm whom David Lurie accuses of collusion with the rapists) as his wish for her to “resist history and politics as too restrictive of individual identity. She does not have to sacrifice herself as an individual to these historical forces. . . . Lurie believes in an individual who should, in the best of the humanist tradition, transcend history. The individual’s dignity should not be contingent upon historical right and wrong” (859). Countdouriotis adds that “for Lurie, human dignity is something that must be kept away from the contaminations of history and politics” (859). As we will see, Coetzee realizes that it is a contradiction to see claiming an individual identity as an act of transcending history. The discourse of individual identity or dignity is the very thing that drives the language of historical right and wrong. For Countdouriotis, “Lucy, as a materialist, sees herself in the stream of history and is radical enough in her thinking to challenge the notion that

dignity is an historical, universal principle”; as a white woman raped by black men, Lucy views dignity as “historically a function of privilege and, hence, something she is willing to give up along with her privilege . . . In her fantasy of contrition, Lucy is willing to debase herself in order to right the wrongs of her white ancestry” (859). But the text itself does not support this claim; when her father asks if her decision not to report her rape to the police is “some form of private salvation,” a way to “expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present,” she replies: “Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don’t act in terms of abstractions” (112). Neither Lucy nor her father believes in the religious, juridical or humanist abstraction that is dignity.

This new ethical state has been described by some as “secular humility.” In “Humility in a Godless World: Shame, Defiance, and Dignity in Coetzee’s World,” Kissack and Titlestad look at the emergence of a “more secular understanding of the notion of humility” in Coetzee (137). Coetzee’s notion constitutes a break from a tradition where humility is “eschewed because of its historical association with Christian belief. Its ethical currency has been embedded in a discourse that stresses the sinfulness of Man in relation to his Maker—the finitude of human mortality is obliged to acknowledge humbly its inferiority to the omniscience and omnipotence of the Divinity” (136). Secular humility, on the other hand, “manifests itself in a relationship to others, both human and animal, which can be sympathetic, non-rational and even ineffable” (137). David Lurie’s “traumatic re-evaluation induces a new attitude towards others, one which is not the product of rational deliberation, but of intuition and ‘sympathetic imagination’ . . . His ethical disposition, completely divested of any transcendent or optimistic expectation, one that in fact embraces the perversity of life, becomes a clear example of secular humility” (137). David Lurie’s humility is “a disposition that has no public profile, no profound profession or metaphysical referent; it is rooted in a limited present, and is in many ways inchoate” (139). I

only depart from this argument on the ground that this humility is in fact transcendent and optimistic; it does have a metaphysical referent, one that is indistinguishable from the physical.

Replacing Dignity-Based Rights with Desire-Based Rights in Disgrace

Taking the sympathetic imagination as far as it goes, *Disgrace* makes the case for body-based or desire-based rights and ethics. In the divine-bestial “potential,” which Derrida argues has been appropriated by sovereign power (*Sovereign* 258), Coetzee finds a potential for ethics and freedom, and this seed comes into fruition or “flowers” in this novel. David Lurie thinks of himself as a “servant of Eros”; he wants to say, “*It was a god [Eros] who acted through me.* What vanity! Yet not a lie, not entirely. In the whole wretched business there was something generous that was doing its best to flower” (89). David Lurie views desire as a dynamo of generosity and guidance: “Every woman I have been close to has taught me something about myself. To that extent they have made me a better person” (70). Yet, he concedes that this is an argument “that can no longer be made, *basta*. Not in our day. If I tried to make it I would not be heard” (89). Lucy reminds him that even though it is not a trendy argument, David Lurie can count on the potential of curiosity to speak his mind: “Even if you are what you say, a moral dinosaur,” she says, “there is curiosity to hear the dinosaur speak” (89). David Lurie, the animal from a different era, tells us that his “case,” which nobody now is willing to hear, “rests on the rights of desire, . . . on the god who makes even the small birds quiver” (89). This dynamic ethics of “quiver” parallels what Derrida calls the “ecstasy” of irresponsibility. Jolly writes that “the assumption that all desire is perverse, and should therefore be denied, constitutes precisely the

kind of Calvinistic repression . . . Coetzee’s fiction consistently challenges” (“Writing” 96).

Coetzee’s ethics is desire-based, and not dignity-based.

David Lurie weighs the rights of desire against the Kantian ethics of dignity that is based on the imperative “Ought”: in the auditorium, watching Melanie act in a play, he thinks:

He ought to be gone too. An unseemly business, sitting in the dark spying on a girl (unbidden the word *latching* comes to him). Yet the old men whose company he seems to be on the point of joining, the tramps and drifters with their stained raincoats and cracked false teeth and hairy earholes—all of them were once upon a time children of God, with straight limbs and clear eyes. Can they be blamed for clinging to the last to their place at the sweet banquet of the senses? (24)

David Lurie puts forward a new understanding of desire in relation to dignity: while dignity is in a way traditionally understood as the restraining of desire, David Lurie perceives something base in such attempts. He sees “something ignoble in the spectacle” of a neighbor punishing a sexually aroused dog for “following its instincts” (90). He empathizes with the dog, arguing that “[n]o animal will accept the justice of being punished for following its own instincts . . . What was ignoble about the . . . spectacle was that the poor dog had begun to hate its own nature” (90). David Lurie tries to “redeem desire as innate and thus acceptable” (Anker 246). His feelings towards nonhuman animals give us a glimpse of Coetzee’s thinking about an ethic of desire and survival versus an ethic of dignity.

Coetzee privileges an ethic of *desiring* to help that goes against Kant’s characterization of charity in relation to dignity. Kant’s view is that only “benevolence from principle (not from instinct) [has] an intrinsic worth” (*Critique* 65). In all instances where Lurie shows interest in the lot of one animal, it is either as solidarity in the face of persecuted desire or as sympathy that

Lurie cannot explain to himself, that comes unbidden, that grows on him. His ambiguous, irrational sympathy is reflected, for example, in Lurie's attitude towards the two sheep Petrus plans to slaughter in celebration of appropriating a piece of Lucy's land: "A bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. The bond is not one of affection. It is not even a bond with these two in particular, whom he could not pick out from a mob in the field. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him" (126). Lurie's ethics does not spring from the moral norms of his society but rather from his desire; he is not even the author of such desire, only a conduit for it—"it was a god that acted through" him. This bond, like the "cord" attaching K to the earth, does not translate into an ethical imperative. Lurie still does not share Lucy's view of an ethical obligation to animals (Lucy actually goes a step further than ethics by hoping to see the relationship between human and nonhuman animals institutionalized in the legal structure of the state; she regrets that "[o]n the list of the nation's priorities, animals come nowhere") (73). This bond with the two sheep, just like desire, is a product of the chaotic workings of the body, and is not structured in an ethical or legal imperative of obligation to animals.

In the same way he feels there is something potentially "generous" in his desire for Melanie, he insists that charity should be based on generosity. When Lucy says that she wants to "share some of our human privilege with the beasts" so she won't "come back in another existence as a dog or a pig and have to live as dogs or pigs live under us," Lurie disagrees; "if we are going to be kind, let it be out of simple generosity, not because we feel guilty or fear retribution" (74). Like his ethics of disgrace, Coetzee's views on animal "rights" can be confusing. Alan Stone "can only surmise that Coetzee in his Tanner lecture and in *Disgrace* wants to suggest that how we treat animals is in some way a measure of our immorality" (2249).

However, measuring our morality or lack thereof by the standard of our relation to animals is tantamount to ethical “practice,” the kind Schopenhauer criticizes in Kant’s ethics (*Basis* 94). “Like Michael K,” argues Derek Attridge, David Lurie “finds himself relinquishing intellectual control in obedience to a dimly perceived demand that comes from somewhere other than the moral norms he has grown up with” (*Coetzee* 176). This dim ethical origin does coincide with relinquishing intellectual control, but it is also, and more importantly, reached through succumbing to the process Lurie *desires* to pursue. He “stands before them, under the sun, waiting for the buzz in his mind to settle, waiting for a sign” (126). The sign Lurie hopes to receive, the signal that will direct his action, comes after a “buzz,” a sensation that rhymes with his “quiver” of pleasure. Coetzee shows the body as a viable ground for ethics, a place where pain is not ethically superior to pleasure. The setting for this ethical moment is detached from the sphere of logic and placed exclusively in the realm of the body and its senses. The moment comes *without reason, under the sun*. The bond happens like a buzz from basking in the sunshine. The dimly perceived place is that *somewhere at the end of the road*, described by Coetzee, where the *writer wanders freely, irresponsibly*.

Lurie claims to be a passive conductor of desire and denies any agency in the delivery of generosity. He cannot explain the sudden desire to help the sheep by moving them to a better patch of grass. His concern with the lot of these two animals, while not generalized as an ethical imperative on the relation between human and nonhuman animals, is not specific to these two Persian sheep either and by extension not specific to him as an ethical agent. He is passive in this ethical encounter: a bond seems to *have come into existence*; the sheep’s lot *has become important to him*; he is *waiting for the buzz to settle*.

Casting Lurie's ethical thought process in terms of natural desire becomes much more convincing and interesting when we know that the Greeks, as Agamben points out, used "zoē" for both god and the thinking process: "Concerning God, Aristotle can certainly speak of a *zoē aristē kai aidios*, a more noble and eternal life . . . but only in so far as he means to underline the significant truth that even God is a living being (similarly, Aristotle uses the term *zoē* in the same context—and in a way that is just as meaningful—to define the act of thinking" (*Homo* 4). This passive ethical *zoē* makes Lurie a natural conductor of generous energy, buzz, or quiver, with Eros/god at the source, at the end of the road that Coetzee associates with irresponsibility, and Derrida with both irresponsibility and potentiality—*dynamis*.

Lurie's only gesture of reparation following his "disgrace" is interspersed with erotic desire and utter indifference to what might be the opposite of disgrace—Christian grace or human dignity. His motive for visiting Melanie's family asking for forgiveness is not clear to him, to the family or the reader. The visit, instead of bringing about a moment of grace for Lurie, is marked by humiliation and a desire more in conflict with moral norms than the initial desire that had disgraced him; he imagines himself in bed with both Melanie and her school-age sister, "Desiree, the desired one" (164). This is the explanation for what Alan Stone sees as puzzling in Lurie's prostration in front of Melanie's parents (2249). Lurie's "humility"—erotic-divine "disgrace"—defies psychological profiling or categorizing. Lurie thinks that Desiree's parents "tempted the gods by giving her a name like that" (164). During the visit, Melanie's father, a devout schoolmaster, asks if he can "pronounce the word *God*" to Lurie, who replies:

As for God, I am not a believer, so I will have to translate what you call God and God's wishes into my own terms. In my own terms, I am being punished for what happened between myself and your daughter. I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will

not be easy to lift myself. It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term? (172)

Alan Stone writes that Lurie's "impulse to visit the parents, like his impulse to have sex with their daughter, is inexplicable to him" (2249). We can begin to explain by saying that the two impulses are one and the same. Lurie accepts "disgrace" as a mystical "punishment" and not as a juridical sentence in the same way that his confession of what happened between him and Melanie is an expression of desire rather than of guilt.

David Lurie never makes a claim to dignity, always associating his ethics with desire, even what might appear to be perverse desire. Lurie also feels obscure affection for Katy, the abandoned bulldog Lucy is temporarily hosting. Lucy finds her father fast asleep in Katy's cage. Attridge writes that in an instance that "combines absurdity and pathos (a moment typical of Coetzee's narrative imagination at its most telling), [Lurie] falls asleep in Katy's cage, stretched out on the concrete beside her. The ironic parallel with all the women he has slept with needs no underlining" (Coetzee 174). Attridge's observation supports the argument that Lurie's ethics is underpinned by unconscious desire working through him. If Lurie's empathy with Katy is really parallel to his womanizing, then we have reason to believe his apparently self-serving remark: "Every woman I have been close to has taught me something about myself. To that extent they have made me a better person" (70). A host of natural desires, not ethical or legal imperatives, makes Lurie more humane. He promises Lucy to volunteer at the animal clinic on the condition that this act is not considered "community service" or "reparation for past misdeeds"; he will do it as long as he does not have to become a better person (77). Jolly writes that *Disgrace* "interrogates what to be humane might mean without recourse to the species boundary between

human and nonhuman animals, . . . without invoking public testimony and the law as watchdogs, and how our sense of ourselves as human is radically undermined by our addiction to a cult of the rational” (“Going” 150). For Lurie, the ethical road is paved with desire, not obligation.

Coetzee repeatedly locates a redeeming value in the pettiest of desires; the magistrate, for instance, ends his narrative with a simple statement that may sound outrageous: “But when the barbarians taste bread, new bread and mulberry jam, bread and gooseberry jam, they will be won over to our ways. They will find that they are unable to live without the skills of men who know how to rear the pacific grains, without the arts of women who know how to use the benign fruits” (154). Michael Moses refers to such an outrage when he underlines the problematic nature of K’s yearning for “a pinch of salt, and a dab of butter, and a sprinkling of sugar, and a little cinnamon” to complement the taste of his naturally grown pumpkins (114). The items that K craves are linked, as Moses notes, to “the entire modern industrial process of refining, with its unsavory links to the colonial slave plantations of the Caribbean, and the cinnamon at the center of Dutch imperial ventures to control the spice trade in Ceylon” (150). K’s craving for such condiments despite their problematic background, however, is a strong indication that his turn to nature is not a political stance but a physical desire. Coetzee’s ethics goes against the censorious morality of self-sacrifice and the purging tendencies of postcolonial criticisms.

Coetzee attempts to redeem desire and instinct in the eye of (Kantian) ethics, which has always been hostile to them, to see desire for a while as not part of a power struggle. He distinguishes his ethics from philosophical logic, which he sees as too dignified. In Lurie’s words, “Follow your temperament. It is not a philosophy, he would not dignify it with that name” (2). Associating dignity with philosophy indicates that his anti-dignity ethics is not based on a rational scheme; it originates from a physical and mystical fluidity. Coetzee, however,

insists that the notion of dignity is not rational either; for him, dignity is fictitious, and a dangerous fiction for that matter. While the “fiction of dignity helps to define humanity and . . . an affront to our dignity strikes at our rights,” Coetzee cautions that, “when, outraged at such affront, . . . we would do well to remember how insubstantial the dignity is on which those rights are based” (*Giving* 14-5). This non-combative ethics, an ethical *zoē* that looks beyond differences between colonizer and colonized, self and other and seeks a concupiscent and drowsy embrace of, rather than responsibility to, the other, obviously does not sit well with a political and philosophical culture that, understandably, finds it difficult to overlook affront and makes the restoration of dignity its primary goal.

The forgoing discussion demonstrates how Coetzee disrupts the discourse of human dignity with its epistemes of recognition, political action, resistance and responsibility, replacing it with an ethics based on sensuality, instinct, and desire, and irresponsibility. Later in this dissertation, we should see how such desire-based ethics translates into his art or his craft as a writer.

CHAPTER III
IRRESPONSIBLE *DIGNITAS* AND RESPONSIBLE DIGNITY: AN
INTERLOCUTION WITH AGAMBEN AND ISHIGURO

In this chapter I argue that the discourse of human dignity aims to keep the human in *bios*, which this discourse represents as the middle point between the instinctive life of the animal and the functional life of the laborer. I offer the view that these two demonized modes of being are actually one and the same mode (the working-animal), for which I propose the name *dignitas*, and champion it as a sovereign and powerful state of being. I open the chapter with a review of the main arguments advanced in Chapter I before moving to elaborate briefly on the new terms in my overarching argument (on human dignity and the reversed vision of the relationship between power and non-power). I then return to Agamben's thesis on the indistinction between *bios* and *zoē*, for I believe that making a categorical distinction is necessary for my argument. I also survey some of Agamben's own examples to demonstrate how they fit better within my own framework and also to explain why I choose the term *dignitas* to designate a state of being categorically opposed to human dignity. I then turn to Kazuo Ishiguro's fictions as products of the discourse of human dignity in order to demonstrate how they support my correction of Agamben's thesis and to expose how they criminalize man's real sovereignty (*dignitas*) while they champion subjected modes of being, even when the latter are openly abusive. I particularly emphasize how the texts valorize every act against instinct and then return to the figure of the *Muselmann* to connect his lack of dignity, his acting on instinct, and his sovereignty. I end the chapter with a discussion of Agamben's main figure of

indistinction, the *homo sacer*, in order to read him in light of the information accrued throughout the dissertation.

Review of Chapter I

In Chapter I, I argued that the discourse of human dignity masks hegemony in such a way that what appears like an empowering quality is exactly a disabling characteristic and vice versa: the ideals and aspirations pursued in the name of dignity sharply contrast with the manifestations of sovereignty. The ethics of dignity envisions a human who is politically alive but naturally dead—conscious, worldly, self-assertive, responsible, responsive, seeking recognition. By contrast, sovereignty is naturally alive but politically dead—unconscious, irresponsible, unresponsive. Hence, man’s freedom and sovereignty, as Derrida speculated, would look like the irresponsibility that characterizes bestiality, divinity, and death (*Sovereignty* 56). I also argued that this reversed understanding of sovereignty leads people who are caught up in the discourse of human dignity to abhor the very same qualities that would have made them sovereign. The *animal laboran*, I argue, is one such *fictive* figure that captures how people recoil from the only possible freedom imaginable. Revolutionary logic, as I engaged it in Chapter I, demonstrates counter-intuitively that hegemony does not produce the “worldless” and unconscious *animal laboran*, who is trapped, according to Arendt, “in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfillment of his own needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate” (*Human* 119). What hegemony creates is rather a worldly, conscious man whose life is only *bios* and who, by consequence, enters voluntarily into economic, cultural and political

servitude. I argued that a working-animal does not serve *voluntarily* against his interest, but the dignity-bearing, worldly subject does.

Addition to the Argument Advanced in Chapter I

I argue that the discourse of human dignity claims to free the human by placing her at that middle point between mere *zoē* and self-alienating function (labor); the path from *zoē* to function, I hope to show, runs 360° bringing us back to the original point of departure, and sovereignty is located at that non-violent, blind spot where *zoē* and function are one and the same thing, where there is no gap between function and “being.” This geometry places the political, dignity-bearing subjects 180° from the place of sovereignty, locating them in an area where they are subjected to their own political violence. Some might not see a clear difference between “function” and “*bios*”; but, as should become clear by the end of this chapter, *bios* indicates the same concept that Sartre called *praxis*, the political and conscious dialectic that abolishes the complete identification between a person’s being-it-self and her function and that creates what Sartre supposes to be freedom.

I argue that power never attempts to produce (working) animals or *zoē* but to make citizens, and that there is a clear distinction between the two categories. In the name of dignity, culture draws a reprehensible figure of the non-political man as a mechanical working-animal, even though, when examined closely, this figure possesses the same characteristics associated with absolute freedom and sovereignty. The discourse of human dignity demonizes this sovereign mode of being (a mode for which I will follow Agamben in using the Latin word for dignity, *dignitas*). Culture portrays *dignitas* (absolute sovereignty) as violent and barbaric at the

same time that this culture creates sympathy for, even celebrates, the real characters of violent barbarity if they possess the qualities that subjugate them to power, e.g. autonomy, sociability, loyalty, vulnerability, and responsiveness.

Back with Agamben: *Dignitas* as Freedom and Sovereignty

This chapter draws on and continues to correct—or at least clarify—many of the threads developed by Agamben, particularly in *Homo sacer*. Agamben’s main goal in that book is actually to discredit just this kind of geometrical categorizing that he sees in classical political thought: “Every attempt to rethink the political space of the West must begin with the clear awareness that we no longer know anything of the classical distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, between private life and political existence . . . This is why the restoration of classical political categories proposed by Leo Straus and, in a different sense, by Hannah Arendt can have only a critical sense” (121). In examining several figures apparently reduced by “sovereign violence” to mere *zoē* (notable among these are the *homo sacer* and the *Muselmann*), Agamben wants to prove that “we are not only, in Foucault’s words, animals whose life as living beings is at issue in their politics, but also—inversely—citizens whose very politics is at issue in their natural body” (121). He argues that “a law that seeks to transform itself wholly into life is more and more confronted with a life that has been deadened and mortified into juridical rule” (121). In this reasoning, power attempts to subject or destroy man by turning him into life but repeatedly discovers that there is no life outside law; Agamben wants to rebuild political thought (to oppose the demands of power) on this zone of indistinction.

I begin by accounting for my choice of *dignitas* as the word for real freedom. Italian Renaissance philosopher Giovanni Pico's 1486 oration on the importance of human quest for knowledge was, by most accounts, published without a title. However, it later came to be known by *de hominis dignitate*, i.e. *On the Dignity of Man*. Pico's central argument is that, after creating the universe, God wanted somebody to appreciate the beauty of his work and so decided to create man. But, models of creation and ranks in the chain of being were already filled, so man had to be created without prototype. Lacking a model, man was therefore free to shape himself in either bestial or divine form. God said to man: "Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and the maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine" (5). Hence, when "we see anyone blinded by the illusions of his empty and Calypso-like imagination, seized by the desire of scratching, and delivered over to the senses, it is a brute not a man that you see . . . If you come upon a pure contemplator, ignorant of the body, banished to the innermost places of the mind, . . . he more superbly is a divinity clothed with human flesh" (6). Evidently, this putative freedom to shape himself has condemned man to a never-ending struggle against himself. Pico's oration adds to the continuing dilemma surrounding human worth; humans have a special and honorable position in the universe, an honor they must continually strive for.

In *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004), Agamben wonders why Pico's oration "continues improperly to be called *de hominis dignitate*, even though it does not contain the term *dignitas*, which simply means 'rank,' and could not in any case refer to man" (29). He sees that "this definition of man by his lack of . . . specific vocation" makes man "constitutively nonhuman";

the “humanist discovery of man,” argues Agamben, “is the discovery that he lacks himself, the discovery of his irremediable lack of *dignitas*” (30). Agamben’s account connects *dignitas* with an essential, immutable character of the human, a character that the humanist tradition negates. Therefore, we can say that the added title does make some sense; the oration is a project to prove that the “human rank” of its title does not exist. More important than the title, however, is what impact the content has on “the human condition.” Agamben locates the damage to man in the idea that this humanist project classifies the human as a “manlike animal”: in other words, humanism is one stage in the evolution of biopolitical power that does not separate the public man from the private animal. But I see that the problem lies in the fact that humanism constructs a politically mutable and creative dignity and privileges such dignity over an immutable *dignitas*. Therefore, there is ethical potential in pursuing a line of thought where restoring *dignitas* (immutable rank) to man means rescuing him from the putative freedom to shape himself into a promising divinity or a menacing brutality. Defaulting back to an unconscious vocation, man—like God and the beast—achieves real freedom by exempting himself from the struggle and becoming, in his case, constitutively human (mere givenness). By reverting to this *dignitas*, the human turns her back on Eagleton’s “tragic-humanist” and the demands that she *dynamically* confront and rise above the “very worst” in us (our animal instincts).

This insistence that humans should always aspire to uplift themselves seems to contradict Kant’s injunction that the human is an end rather than a means, a contradiction that Kant sensed and dealt with:

Thirdly, as regards contingent (meritorious) duties to oneself; is not enough that the action does not violate humanity in our own person as an end in itself, it must also *harmonize with it* . . . Now there are in humanity capacities of greater perfection, which

belong to the end that nature has in view in regard to humanity in ourselves as the subject: to neglect these might perhaps be consistent with the maintenance of humanity as an end in itself, but not with the *advancement* of this end. (*Foundations* 57-8)

The link between “*dignitas*” and the *inert* nature of sovereignty can be traced, not without some pugnacity toward Agamben, in his other texts. In *State of Exception*, for example, he examines the difference between “*auctoritas*” (personally embodied authority) and “*potestas*” (officially endowed authority). Based on the translation choices in the passage below and on the discussion of *auctoritas* that will follow, we can presume that, for all purposes, “*dignitas*” and “*auctoritas*” indicate the same prerogative. Agamben writes:

It is perhaps in the *auctoritas principis*—that is, in the moment when Augustus, in a famous passage of the *Res gestae*, claims *auctoritas* as the foundation of his status as *princeps*—that we can better understand the meaning of this unique prerogative. It is significant that the rebirth of modern studies of *auctoritas* coincides precisely with the publication in 1924 of the Monumentum Antiochenum, which allowed a more accurate reconstruction of the passage in question. The issue here concerned a series of fragments of a Latin inscription containing a passage from chapter 34 of the *Res gestae*, which was extant in its entirety only in the Greek version. [Theodor] Mommsen had reconstructed the Latin text in these terms: “*post id tempus praestiti omnibus dignitate (axiōmati) potetatis autem nihil amplius habui quam qui fuerunt mihi quotue in magistrature conlegae* [After that time I surpassed all in *dignitas*, although I had no more *potestas* than those who were my colleagues in each magistracy].” (80-1)

Agamben goes on to argue that the correct translation of the quality in which Augustus surpassed his fellow magistrates is *auctoritas*, and not *dignitas*: “The Antiochean inscription showed that

Augustus had written not *dignitate* but *auctoritate*” (81). He quotes philologist Richard Heinze that ““philologists should all be ashamed for having blindly followed Mommsen’s authority: the only possible antithesis to *potestas*—that is, to the legal power of a magistrate—was, in this passage, not *dignitas*, but *auctoritas*”” (81). Agamben does not explain why semantically *dignitas* is the wrong word. Moreover, even though Heinze qualifies his statement by saying that “in this passage” the correct translation is *auctoritas*, Agamben does not make such a note. This is so even though when, two pages later, he comes across “*dignitas*,” he conveniently inserts “(which is simply a synonym for *auctoritas*)” (83).

Augustus’s statement [After that time I surpassed all in *dignitas*, although I had no more *potestas* than those who were my colleagues in each magistracy] shows that absolute sovereignty is *zoē* (not both *zoē* and *bios*, as Agamben argues). The other magistrates had some political authority, but what Augustus *imagined* to be his absolute authority was associated in his mind with his *zoē-dignitas*. It sprang from his private and not public life. Moreover, *dignitas*, which “intervenes to ratify the decisions of the popular *comitia* and make them fully valid,” granted him sovereignty because it sealed the identification between his being and his function, leaving no space for political *praxis* (*State* 78). The power of *dignitas* derives from the way it merges the natural life of the sovereign with his legal function. For example, according to Agamben, evidence for the “peculiar status of his person” lies in the fact that Augustus made his house public: “Unlike the life of the common citizens, the ‘august’ life can no longer be defined through the opposition of public and private” (*State* 83). We have before us another trick: the sovereign’s authority is all the more absolute as it originates from his *dignitas*, a merger of his life and function. Yet, the discourse of power maintains that the sovereign’s authority is particularly commanding for it derives from the dignity of the populace, a dignity that

supposedly situates them in that self-conscious area between the self-alienating function and mere *zoē*. In sum, the sovereign is the uncontested source of the law because he possesses *dignitas* while citizens possess dignity. The crafty discourse of power enables such reversed understanding on the part of the populace.

The evolution of the *dignitas*-dignity connection in the discursive repertoire of power might have reached its consummation in fascist ideology. Support for this argument can be gleaned from two separate observations Agamben makes about the position of the fascist leader: “the authority of the ductor or the Führer can never be derivative but is always originary and springs from his person” (*State* 85). This authority “is not coercive, but is rather founded . . . on consent and the free acknowledgement of the ‘superiority of value’” (*State* 84). Meanwhile, in *Homo sacer*, he argues that “the office of the Führer is no longer an office in the sense of traditional public law, but rather something that springs forth without mediation from his person insofar as it coincides with the life of the German people” (*Homo* 118). So, sovereign *dignitas* is not mediated while human dignity is culturally, socially, and juridically mediated. But, as I have argued before, it was not identification with the biological life of the German people that served the Führer’s *fantasy* of absolute sovereignty but rather the absorption of such life into his own person. What German citizens were left with was not biological life, but rather, as Whitman argues, the promise that they could all achieve dignity by following the Führer, that they would be masters. The history of fascism (used as a generic term for both Nazism and Fascism) illustrates how a sinister hold on power can be served by the connection between the sovereign’s *dignitas* and the subject’s dignity. The Führer’s power is based on a continuation between his *dignitas* and the dignity of the people. Sovereign *dignitas* embodies mere life (life as both *zoē*

and function) while human dignity *defines* the politically conscious as-if-life (the humanist life that should always aspire to lift itself upward).

With reference to Augustus and the Führer, I said “imagined to be his absolute authority” and “fantasy of absolute sovereignty” respectively, and it is time to elaborate on this notion that presupposes neither really had absolute power. My argument is that every power-that-be, since it is not absolutely powerful or sovereign, has a logical fantasy to be absolute and therefore creates tokens of *real* sovereignty. No power is absolute because political power is contingent and, hence, contentious by virtue of its being political. So, the (contested) power-that-be creates a cultic function that signifies its dream existence of power without politics, of sovereignty outside *praxis*, of authority without responsibility, i.e. having an embodied, in-itself *dignitas* without worrying about dignity—something like an emeritus position, a figurative retirement with entitlement. In this ideal state, life is official function; there is no distinction between a natural act and a “sovereign” act. Agamben’s figures that were *officially* turned into *zoē* fit into this category. They do not correspond to every citizen of the modern state, however; they only correspond to the sovereign, in the sense that they are his alter-egos. In this logic, the more inert and numb the figures grow, the more sovereignty and power they represent. Carried to its logical end, this fetishistic discourse makes the corpse an emblem of sovereign *dignitas*.

In *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (1957), Ernst Kantorowicz argues that in medieval jurisprudence the concept of “royal *dignitas*” does not refer to “moral or ethical qualifications, that is, as something contrary to an ‘undignified’ conduct” (383). This *dignitas* pointed “chiefly to the singularity of the royal office, to the sovereignty invested in the king by the people, and resting individually in the king alone” (384). The jurists distinguished between the sovereign’s “*Officium* and *Dignitas*”; for example, “a person might

have the Dignity of Senator . . . and yet be without an office” (384). In this distinction, “[d]ignitas finally emerged as a corporate entity,” i.e. connected to the sovereign’s body (385). Kantorowicz’s main goal is to show that the perpetual nature of sovereignty (summed in the doctrine, *The King Never Dies*) made use of Christian theology, particularly Christ’s *mystic body*. The jurists borrowed from the ecclesiastical hierarchy a concept of *dignitas* that “on the death of a prelate or other dignitary” would “lapse either to the hierarchal superior or to the Church universal or to the head of the Church, that is, to Christ or the vicar of Christ. In the last analysis, therefore, Christ would have functioned during the interval, so to speak, as *interrex*” (314). For secular jurists, then, the problem with such a transfer was merely procedural, for “it was not feasible that the divine incumbent of a vacant dignity (or his vicar on earth) should be summoned, or be held responsible, or be penalized” (314). Therefore, in the context of royal death, the peculiar doctrine of the king’s two bodies corresponded to the mystic body in the theological tradition.

The king’s two bodies tradition (particularly in one French version) serves as a good illustration of the link I propose here between the corpse image and sovereign *dignitas*, between irresponsibility and sovereignty. Upon the death of Francis I, “the encoffined body in the flesh was exhibited for about ten days in the hall of the palace. Then the scenario changed: the coffin containing the corpse was placed in a small chamber while in the hall the lifelike effigy of the king . . . took its place and lay in state—the so called ‘imperial crown’ on its head” (425). For Kantorowicz, the purpose of the ceremony was to affirm sovereign perpetuity by displacing the inevitability of death into a triumphant life—“one ritual of the Church, observed by the clergy for the misery of the naked or half naked man *in* the coffin (‘internally there remains what is human’), and another ritual of the state, celebrating through the effigy the immortal and regal

Dignity exposed *on* the coffin ('externally there appears the majesty of God'). The triumph of Death and the triumph over Death were shown side by side" (425). However, we have reason to believe, based on a secret genealogy, that this particular rite affirms sovereignty through a display of death, and not through the masking thereof. For, while this ceremony is supposed to further reveal the Christian grounds of the perpetual sovereignty doctrine, Kantorowicz notes, without explaining, that the ceremony had a classical precedent: "Herodian, when describing the apotheosis of Emperor Septimius Severus, described also a series of ceremonial services which were rendered to the effigy of the dead ruler: the effigy, treated like a sick man, lies on a bed; senators and matrons are lined up on either side; physicians pretended to feel the pulse of the image and give it their medical aid until, after seven days, the effigy 'dies'" (427). Agamben infers that Kantorowicz's reason for deemphasizing the connection between the French and the Roman ceremonies is twofold. Kantorowicz's obvious problem is that the link complicates, if it does not discredit, his theological argument. The second and less apparent reason is more pertinent to the link between death and sovereign fantasy.

According to Agamben, the Roman connection also defeats Kantorowicz's point because "nothing in Roman consecratio allowed one to place the emperor's effigy in relation to what is sovereignty's clearest feature, its perpetual nature" (*Homo* 62). In other words, the two bodies rite does not emphasize the *perpetual* nature of sovereignty but rather reflects the immemorially *biopolitical* and, hence, *absolute* nature of sovereignty. In Agamben's reading of the ritual, "it is as if the emperor had in him not two bodies but rather two lives inside one single body: a natural life and a sacred [political] life" (66). Yet, one can argue that the two forms of relating to death—acknowledging the triumph of death and affirming the triumph over death—indicate how the image of death underlines the ultimately absolute nature of sovereignty. The human remains

and the divine majesty are indistinguishable. The Roman effigy was not exactly treated as a “living person,” as Agamben argues, but as a dying person, a sick man on his death bed. In this discourse, sovereignty’s perpetual nature (its “clearest feature,” according to Agamben) and its absolute nature (to me, equally clear but also equally fantastical) are affirmed through the image of a *deathly* figure. It is as if sovereignty is parading its death-like image, prolonging its *retired* status over a week. Unto the dying effigy, power projected its fantasy of a perpetual, absolute, and therefore, relaxed sovereignty. If the ceremony aimed to emphasize absolute sovereignty, then its structure had got to have been not a survival of death or triumph over death but sovereignty *as* death. Since sovereign *dignitas* is corporate, as Kantorowicz argues, then absolute *dignitas* would be an incommunicable corpse. In this fantasy, the sovereign can reduce himself to the smallest of the small potentials, as Derrida argued. Given an equation where the minimal vital sign equals maximal power, then it only makes sense that sovereignty would aspire to communicate its absolute nature via a straight “pulse” line. Logically, it would not be absolute otherwise.

Dignity-Bearing Fiction: Ishiguro and the Demonization of *Dignitas*

In this section I argue that Ishiguro’s ethics, in fiction and non-fiction, prefers dignity to *dignitas*. By reading two of his novels as cultural phenomena, I also highlight *distinctions* in the way the state relates to the mere givenness of life-as-function. *The Remains of the Day* (1988) and *Never Let Me Go* (2005) show that the relation between the state and the *animal laboran* is one of exclusion through and through and that Agamben’s indistinction between Law and life lacks both validity and practical emancipatory value. Agamben’s argument that the state’s

project is to force natural life to its extreme but only to see it collapse back into law is questionable, to say the least, because the state never attempts such a project. Using Ishiguro's fiction, I show that, contrary to Agamben, the mere life of body, instincts and reflexes, do constitute the categorical opposite of the political realm and that it is never part of the state's modus operandi to reduce the human to her "instincts." The state's laboratory, rather, creates political subjects who can act against their instincts and thus can be recruited as ideological agents.

Agamben, however, offers historical (if you will, real) specimens—such as the *Flamen Diale*, the *homo sacer*, the effigy, the *Muselmann*, the scientist using his body as an experimental laboratory—to support his thesis on the indistinction between *bios* and *zoē*, between law and life, while I rely for the most part on works of fiction to support my argument that the two realms are distinct. Yet, I argue that my move to flatten the technical difference between history and fiction can be justified on more than one level. To begin with the reason that brought me to challenge Agamben's argument in the first place, I argue that Agamben's figures are not historically representative but rather exceptional. Agamben's thesis is evidently built on the premise that the exception is the rule: "the decisive fact is that, together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life—which is originally situated at the margins of the political order—gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (*Homo* 8). Moreover, these figures, in the sense they existed by a sovereign decision, are fictive; they did not emerge in a historical process of cause and effect; they were random "inventions" by the sovereign who *formally* turned them into *zoē*. They did not correspond to every citizen of the state. On the other hand, my fictive accounts allow us to see

the distinction between *bios* and *zoē* in philosophical, political, and historical terms. We have better access to the thought processes and the circumstances that shaped the fictive characters at hand. The narrative process itself provides a historical context for the characters while we lack access to the background and immediate circumstances of Agamben's examples.

The Remains of the Day and *Never Let Me Go* illustrate the argument that the identification of life with function equals *dignitas*. In other words, they show how function and *zoē*, as may be embodied by the perfect butler and by the clone created for organ harvesting, are one and the same thing. And, more importantly, these two figures share the characteristics of sovereign *dignitas*. *The Remains of the Day* is narrated by Mr. Stevens, who aspires, but ultimately fails, to become a perfect English butler. *Never Let Me Go* is narrated by Kathy H, a clone describing her life at Hailsham, a special clone colony that cultivates a cultural life for its "students." The two novels, as discourse, reflect cultural unease about the images of the butler and the clone. The two figures create unease because the reader sees in them the socially disturbing (albeit liberating) quality of sovereign *dignitas* (function in *zoē* and *zoē* in function).

Both novels fail to represent seamless *zoē*/function because they are *narrated by*, respectively, a clone and a butler. The narrative structures make it impossible for Stevens to *be* a butler and for Kathy to *be* a clone, and nothing else. They narrate their lives *as* butler and *as* clone, and narrative works only through creating the as-if gaps that constitute consciousness. One can actually argue that Ishiguro's novels in general are specifically designed for creating bursts of consciousness. The novelist says, in an interview, that he is "interested in this business of values and ideals being tested, and people having to face up to the notion that their ideals weren't quite what they thought they were before the test came" (*Conversations* 36). The two narratives, at any rate, would have come closer to representing unconscious life/function if they

only presented the butler's interaction with his employer or the clone's interaction with, say, the surgeon harvesting her organs, without the narrators stepping outside of themselves to explain their lives and motives to us or to themselves. Nonetheless, we can catch glimpses of what seamless identification between unqualified *zoē* and shrink-packed function would look like from the two narrators' descriptions of other butlers and clones they should or should not emulate, and from some scholarly reaction to the assumed lack of consciousness in the two characters. And it is such glimpses that I am interested in.

The point here is not that the butler and the clone are sovereign *per se*; it is only to argue that cultural representations of *zoē* and function are identical and that they are equally repulsive by the standards of human dignity. For example, culture frequently associates function-life and cloning with Nazism. It is in this vein that Ishiguro chooses to make Stevens's employer, Darlington, a Hitler sympathizer. Ira Levin's *The Boys from Brazil* (1976), for instance, is the story of a Nazi scientist's attempt to clone ninety-four boys, each from one of Hitler's cells. And, a *Sunday Mail* tabloid, warning against the menace of cloning, runs: "Imagine a million-strong army of Hitlers!" (qtd. in Jerng 372). More importantly, such representations are, in turn, identical with representations of sovereign *dignitas*. Ishiguro's novels also reflect cultural anxieties, evidently shared by Ishiguro himself, about the very same philosophical concepts I see as liberating and empowering. Ishiguro's perspective is ultimately compromised by dignity's complicity with power. The function-*zoē* figures in the two novels are represented by an imagination that cannot completely break through the opaqueness of dignity (even though it tries) and by a vision of power and non-power that is still reversed.

We can actually locate a good illustration of how culture represents life as function in Virginia Woolf's description of the Victorian cook, whom she comically cites in her essay "Mr

Bennett and Mrs Brown,” as one of the “solemn instances of the power of the human race to change”: “The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing-room, now to borrow the Daily Herald, now to ask advice about a hat” (319). Woolf’s use of “leviathan” to describe a state she is evidently happy to see the cook abandon is testimony to her intelligence; she senses that there is something subtly sovereign and powerful in that temperamental mode. On the other hand, this urge for change and creativity—to see the cook come out of her dungeon—resembles a desire expressed in *Never Let Me Go*. Miss Emily, the director of Hailsham, tells the clones that the goal of her institution is to demonstrate that “if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being. Before that, all clones—or *students*, as we preferred to call you—existed only to supply medical science. In the early days, after the war, that’s largely all you were to most people. Shadowy objects in test tubes” (239). In this description, the cook-being and the clone-being—figures that manifest neither the individual autonomy nor the social responsiveness essential to dignity—look like the *bêtise* Derrida attributes to sovereignty. They look like death and at the same time like the Leviathan.

On the other hand, Coetzee, as we have seen him do in *The Life and Times of Michael K*, describes K in similar but favorable function-life terms:

[K is] the kind of little man one sees in peasant art emerging into the world from between the squat thighs of its mother-host with fingers ready hooked and back bent for a life of burrowing, a creature that spends its waking life stooped over the soil, that when at last its time comes digs its own grave and slips quietly in and draws the heavy earth over its head like a blanket and cracks a smile and turns over and descends into sleep, home at

last, while unnoticed as ever somewhere far away the grinding of the wheels of history continues. What organ of state would play with the idea of recruiting creatures like that as its agents, and what use would they serve except carry things and die in large numbers?

(*Life* 161)

While the state cannot ideologically co-opt this *animal laboran* who has no interest in as-if political signification or recognition and whose life and death are acts of reflex, we will see that it is this kind of creature that is anathema to Ishiguro's ethics. Ishiguro would not be content with a human being who sees himself as a gardener and nothing else. We have seen Coetzee liberate his protagonists—Magda and the magistrate—by saving them from a punishing state of consciousness and self-questioning; on the other hand, Ishiguro aims to free his by leading them in the opposite direction, into political consciousness and double life.

The Remains of the Day stages Stevens's obsession with the concept of "dignity," a word that holds the novel together. However, I will be using the word "*dignitas*" to indicate that mode of being avidly sought by Stevens and evidently condemned by the novel. Ishiguro says that the novel debates Stevens's notion of *dignitas* "against another concept of dignity. The dignity given to human beings when they have a certain amount of control over their lives. The dignity that democracy gives to ordinary people . . . [Stevens] starts to question whether there isn't something profoundly undignified about a condition he has rather unthinkingly given all his loyalty to. A cause in which he has no control over the moral value of how his talents are spent" (*Conversations* 38). The lesson Stevens learns from contact with villagers on his "journey" is that "there is another definition of dignity . . . that comes from being a democratic citizen, the ability to control, to some extent, your own fate. But that only comes if you actually accept the responsibility and participate" (*Conversations* 102). Stevens's obsession with *dignitas* springs

from the pronouncements of a defunct butler society he continues to admire. The Hayes Society, initially vague about membership pre-requisites, came under pressure to reveal that “the most crucial criterion is that the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position. No applicant will satisfy requirements, whatever his level of accomplishments otherwise, if seen to fall short in this respect” (33). In Stevens’s interpretation, *dignitas* “has to do crucially with a butler’s ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits” (42). *Dignitas* is a function-life, a “professional being,” one that squeezes out both autonomy and sociality. This *dignitas* is unconscious, for it has no room for role-playing or as-if approximation; it is the mere givenness. What “separates a ‘great’ butler from a merely competent one” is the fact that for the latter “being a butler is like playing some pantomime role; a small push, a slight stumble, and the façade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath” (42). Butlers with *dignitas*, on the other hand, “inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit” (42-3). *Dignitas* negates sociality, for it does not respond to external factors. A butler can have *dignitas* “only after one had seen him perform under some severe test,” and Stevens considers it a turning point in his effort to acquire such *dignitas* that he did not let his father’s deteriorating health and eventual death distract him from the discharge of his professional tasks (43). The novel attempts to create pity for Stevens’s “self-deception” rather than admiration for his mode of living.

The novel highlights Stevens’s self-deception in the sense that occasionally Stevens, unaware of the irony, criticizes the very same figure that he seeks to embody. He sometimes ridicules certain butlers who are not different, in principle, from the unperturbed butlers he admires:

I have heard of various instances of a butler being displayed as a kind of performing monkey at a house party. In one regrettable case, which I myself witnessed, it had become an established sport in the house for guests to ring for the butler and put to him random questions of the order of, say, who had won the Derby in such and such a year, rather as one might to a Memory Man at the music hall. (35)

This comically and horribly mechanical primate for a butler, the novel suggests, is the ultimate realization of Stevens's ideal.

Stevens's understanding of *dignitas* as life undistinguishable from function sounds comic because, while it does not fit the current, egalitarian sense of human dignity, it does not exactly match the earlier, hierarchical sense of social distinction either. According to Michel Terestchenko, "dignity" (what I see as *dignitas*), as articulated by Stevens, "is not understood as a universal attribute that belongs to every human being by virtue of his or her being human; that is, the term is not used in the modern egalitarian sense, both ontological and moral, that can be traced back to the Renaissance, to the great works devoted to *dignitas hominis*" (80). Stevens's "notion of dignity is more in tune with the Romans' understanding of dignity as respect linked to office or status" (80). But, since "Roman dignity was reserved for those holding the highest social positions (tribunes, senators or generals) . . . , no student of antiquity would think of using this term in application to a servant or see it as a capacity for living within one's function with a perfect professionalism" (80). Yet, it is not far-fetched to say that Stevens, like any figure of power, has a fantasy for absolute sovereignty—he aspires to be sovereign and therefore shapes himself into one of those cultic correspondents (alter-egos) to the sovereign that we discussed earlier, an example of which being the corpse figure.

One such figure that Stevens particularly approximates is the *Flamen*; as described by Agamben, the “Flamen Diale” is “one of the greatest priests of classical Rome. His life is remarkable in that it is at every moment indistinguishable from the cultic functions that the Flamen fulfills . . . Accordingly, there is no gesture or detail of his life, the way he dresses or the way he walks, that does not have a precise meaning and is not caught in a series of functions and meticulously studied effects” (118). Agamben notes that this figure blurs the distinction between *zoē* and *bios*, and that he is reduced to this death-like state by sovereign violence: “All of the Flamen’s *zoē* has become *bios*; private life and public function are now absolutely identical . . ., a sacred living statue” (118). But, we can also say that the *Flamen* is (as possibly all cultic functions are) the sovereign’s fantasy. According to William Ramsay’s description of the *Flamen*, the figure in a sense embodied political death as he “might not . . . look upon an army marshaled” and “he was also altogether precluded from seeking or accepting any civil magistracy” (541). Stevens is one of those death-like figures that the sovereign fancies and the subject abhors. Moreover, in his narrative of ascendance to “great” butlership, Stevens attains the peak, attending (to) one of the most significant meetings of Europe’s political history, at the exact second his father (a professional predecessor) passes away upstairs.

Stevens has sharp insight into the nature of sovereignty, recognizing it as private, relaxed and absolute, not political, contingent and relative. His generation of butlers “viewed the world not as a ladder, but more as a *wheel*”; he believes that “the great decisions of the world are not, in fact, arrived at simply in the public chambers, or else during a handful of days given over to an international conference under the full gaze of the public and the press. Rather, debates are conducted, and crucial decisions arrived at, in the privacy and calm of the great houses of this country” (115). For Stevens and his fellow professionals, the goal then “is to work our way as

close to this hub as were each of us capable” (115). The fact that he does not reach that hub should not indict Stevens’s logic. In *The Ethics of Identity* (2005), Anthony Appiah sees Stevens’s logic as “vulnerable” only to “the vagaries of moral luck”; his “life is a failure because his master’s life [as a Nazi puppet] has proved one, not because service is, in fact, bound to lead to failure. After all, if Mr. Stevens had been working for Winston Churchill, he, at least, could deny that he had failed” (12). More significantly, though, as we have already established, it should not be impossible for the discerning student of antiquity to see someone’s complete merger of her life with professional function as *dignitas*.

Stevens’s definition of *dignitas* clashes with a contradictory human dignity that is invested simultaneously in autonomy and sociality. The anticipated reader, caught up in the discourse of human dignity which the novel reinforces, will want to see Stevens rid himself of the apparently unconscious and seamless identification with his function, snap into consciousness and that way be liberated. Stevens’s unconsciousness is presented as the basis of his subjection to power. But, the political unconsciousness or ethical coma Stevens ultimately fails to reach could hold the potential for freedom, particularly so because it sounds like a horrifying prospect from a political point of view. Scholarship on Stevens’s putative identification with his profession unfailingly addresses the way this character disturbs the values of individuation and socialization. Stevens, the argument goes, does not assert his individual autonomy and, if he is counter-intuitively argued to have done so, such autonomy is inscribed in terms of sociality. Appiah, who purports “to read Ishiguro’s novel against the grain,” advances such a counterintuitive argument, challenging philosophers who “would want to deny that [Stevens] was fully autonomous” (12). For Appiah, “Stevens is a helpful illustration of individuality—of the values of self-development and autonomy— . . . in part because he must

seem an unlikely representative of such things” (12). Even if he “doesn’t much believe in liberty, equality, or fraternity,” contends Appiah, Stevens still “demonstrates the power of individuality as an ideal” (13). The notion that belief in equality is not a presupposition for the ethical value of individuality is not uncommon. In *Perspectives on Human Dignity: A Conversation*, Malpas and Lickiss express a similar view:

[D]ignity is best understood in terms of notions of mutuality, reciprocity, and relationality (implying a notion of the self akin, for instance, to Charles Taylor’s, such that the self exists, as Taylor puts it, ‘only within. . . webs of interlocution’), and not only does this temper any emphasis on autonomy alone, but also forces one to recognize that, on some occasions, dignity may be possible precisely through the ways in which human beings are able to find a place for themselves, and a sense of who they are, within what may otherwise appear to be unequal or hierarchical forms of social organization. That does not imply any simple endorsement of inequality, but it does suggest that the maintenance of dignity and the denial of inequality cannot be construed as simply identical. (3-4)

Most crucially to Appiah, Stevens is a case that dispels “the worry about the unsociability of the individuated self” (20). Stevens “did choose this mode of life, in the full awareness of alternatives, and pursued it with focused ambition,” and in doing so, “he clearly sought to surpass his father’s own considerable achievement in the profession” (11). Hence, according to Appiah, Stevens’s self-definition and moral sense are, simultaneously, entirely his own and developed out of a relation to society.

To elaborate on the notion that autonomy and sociality do not exclude each other, Appiah draws a parallel between Stevens and Sartre’s famous waiter: “Even Sartre’s *garçon de café* takes up an identity that has a function outside himself: he is taking up a profession that provides

a service; he is finding, as Mr. Stevens did in butlering, a way of making a life. (Moreover, the profession that he is taking up, with its intricate conventions and protocols, is not one of his own devising)” (70). For Appiah, Stevens’s life is not the being-in-itself but rather a *way* of making a life, a form of *bios*. Sartre’s take on the being-in-itself (*être-en-soi*) and the being-for-itself (*être-pour-soi*) or consciousness reflects how a culture invested in both autonomy and sociality demonizes life as function. Sartre asserts, favorably, that consciousness can prevent “bad faith” (self-alienating identification with one’s function) and, for illustration, he asks us to consider this waiter in the café:

His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while he is carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium . . . He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms . . . (101)

Sartre offers no evidence to support his conclusion that the waiter “is playing . . . amusing himself”; all we get by way of an explanation is that the waiter is “playing at *being* a waiter in a café” (102). In Sartre’s logic, the waiter is *only playing* at being a waiter because he is conscious of other alternatives for his life: it is impossible for that waiter to have completely merged his being-in-itself with what he is obligated to be (*devoir-être*). The *garçon* cannot be the epitome of bad faith because he cannot close all margins and gaps: “If man is what he is . . . candor ceases to be his ideal and becomes instead his being. But is man what he is? And more generally, how can

he *be* what he is when he exists as consciousness of being?” (101). Sartre contends that complete identification of the being-in-itself with representation is evitable if we engage in *self-discovery*.

In Sartre’s theory, bad faith would be the most extreme negation of authenticity and freedom, but it is not impossible to “radically escape bad faith” if one can accomplish “a self-discovery of being which was previously corrupted”; this self-discovery he calls “authenticity”—a value that can be *the* virtue of existentialism (116).

In particular when I am in the unauthentic mode of the “they,” the world refers to me a sort of impersonal reflection of my unauthentic possibilities in the form of instruments and complexes of instruments which belong to “everybody” and which belong to me so far as I am “everybody” . . . The unauthentic state—which is my ordinary state in so far as I have not realized my conversion to authenticity—reveals to me my “being-with,” not as the relation of one unique personality with other personalities equally unique, not as the mutual connection of “most irreplaceable beings,” but as a total interchangeability of the terms of the relation . . . Authenticity and individuality have to be earned . . . (322)

However, the possibilities Sartre promises as the reward of defeating bad faith are ethically questionable, even dangerous. We have seen how interest in the notions of originality and authenticity in Herder, which coincided with the renewed interest in human dignity, led to exclusionary world views: authenticity inspired exclusionary world views at both the individual and group levels. Other possibilities proposed, beside authenticity, are also counterproductive to man’s sovereignty.

Foucault, for example, finding Sartre’s liberated and liberating authenticity practically deficient, wanted to replace it with creativity:

Sartre avoids the idea of the self as something that is given to us, but through the moral notion of authenticity, he turns back to the idea that we have to be ourselves—to be truly our true self. I think the only acceptable practical consequence of what Sartre has said is to link his theoretical insight to the practice of creativity—and not to that of authenticity. From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think there is only one practical consequence, we have to create ourselves as a work of art. (*Ethics* 41)

However, an ethics of creativity condemns us to the same struggle that comes with Pico's freedom to create ourselves in whatever shape we like. Stevens's story, as much as it celebrates human dignity, actually celebrates the process, the struggle, the confrontation, the "self-discovery": if "human dignity" was Stevens's principle from the beginning, without him struggling to discover it, this dignity would not have been "authentic" and "responsible."

Subtle problems in the ideal of creativity become clear also through a certain reading of *Never Let Me Go*. In order to loosen the uncomfortable indistinction between the cloned life and its medical function, the Hailsham staff introduced, in Kathy's words, the notions of "exchange," "merit" and "creativity."

Four times a year . . . we had a kind of big exhibition-cum-sale of all things we'd been creating in the three months since the last Exchange. Paintings, drawings, pottery . . . For each thing you put in, you were paid in Exchange Tokens—the guardians decided how many your particular masterpiece merited—and then on the day of the Exchange you went along with your tokens and 'bought' the stuff you liked. The rule was you could only buy work done by students in your own year . . . (14-5)

Kathy says that the system's subtle goal was to create a sense of responsibility: "If you think about it, being dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your private

treasures—that’s bound to do things to your relationships . . . A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at ‘creating’” (15). By concocting the value of creativity, Hailsham sets in motion an unabated competition where the clones vie for the honor of having their artifacts selected for a “Gallery” they are not sure exists. The Gallery is supposedly run by a certain “Madame” who studies the collected art for signs of the clones’ soul refinement. Ironically, Foucault’s “creativity” makes the clones willingly subject themselves to the hardships of prestige.

Shameem Black rightly argues that creativity and autonomy engender a reality that sharply contrasts with the freedom we associate with these two ideals. With reference to the staff’s mantra, “art will reveal your inner selves,” Black infers from Ishiguro’s choice of words that the clones’ artistic production “prefigured the process of organ donation”; at an early stage, the young clones are indoctrinated into “the idea of handing over their ‘inner selves’ to figures of authority”—The staff “literally paid” the clones in “Tokens,” one of the novelist’s “most frightening word plays” (794). As Black succinctly puts it, “creativity” becomes “the opiate of the students” (798). She also suggests there might be a correlation between the four times a year Exchange and the four cycles of donations the clones would be (un/lucky) to complete. So, a merit system that cultivates responsibility and creativity becomes a mask for the clone’s sacrifice. Ironically, Black sharply observes, Hailsham’s education system includes no talk of sacrifice.

I argue that talk of sacrifice is absent from Hailsham because the clone’s life negates ethics. The clone’s existence as life whose sole function is to die for others disturbs the ethical grounds of sacrifice because the clone’s being is absolutely sacrificial and hence her sacrifice is *amoral*. Philosophically, an absolute sacrifice is beyond sacrifice, for it lacks morally conscious

reasoning. It is the thing-in-itself that is the culmination of ethics and so lies beyond ethics: an ethical sacrifice cannot be a natural, mechanical act. In *Beyond Freedom & Dignity* (1971), B. F. Skinner writes that the “credit a person receives is related in a curious way to the visibility of the causes of his behavior. We withhold credit when the causes are conspicuous. We do not, for example, ordinarily commend a person for responding reflexly: we do not give him credit for coughing, sneezing or vomiting even though the result may be valuable” (45). In fact, it is reasonable to argue that cloning causes cultural anxiety because, like the sovereign’s, a clone’s life is amoral, and not because it is unethical. The clone’s being is not a *violation* but a *negation* of human dignity.

The novel shows that Kant’s “human dignity” is based on the opposite of its purported ideal that man should be treated as an end. For a culture of human dignity, the ultimate violation is when life seems to be an end in itself rather than a social means. When Kathy finally meets “Madame,” hoping to secure a deferral on “donations” based on the genuineness of her love for fellow clone Tommy (a genuineness that can be determined from the quality of their art), their hopes are dashed. Miss Emily, who is now residing with Madame, tells them that, despite its eventual failure, the Hailsham project still deserved respect. According to Miss Emily, the project had to come to an end because of an unrelated project that “frightened people” and crossed “legal boundaries”: the scientist involved sought to “offer people the possibility of having children with enhanced characteristics. Superior intelligence, superior athleticism” (241). Her own project, as we have seen, attempted to prove that clones did not lack intelligence, that they could be as intelligent as “humans” when reared in appropriate circumstances. Hence, we can see that an absolutely unintelligent being and an absolutely intelligent one are equally troubling. In both cases, we have the image of the sovereign—a mechanical animal, a body that

is absolutely natural and absolutely mechanical, a scientific body. This body does not fit in an ethical narrative. Mark Jerng argues that “Ishiguro brings together instrumentalization and life . . . thus disrupting the assumption that a life must never be thought of as a means to something else” (382). Apart from the obvious cruelty of the technological instrumentalization of life, we should direct our critique at the “ethical” instrumentalization of human life where it is turned into a tool of responsibility and condemned to the labor of creativity. This latter instrumentalization is more insidious and hegemonic than technological instrumentalization, which is flagrantly unethical.

In this new perspective, a life that is not an instrument is a life that means only life. Freed from the obligation to be creative or authentic, human life becomes an instrument of its own survival. Tommy, who is less indoctrinated and therefore less conscious, has initially been the object of teasing by fellow clones for his lack of “creativity,” an ordeal that has in turn marked him out as the angry boy. Tommy is then permanently relieved of his bad temper when a sympathetic Miss Lucy tells him that he should not force himself if he “didn’t want to be creative” (22). Mystified by the sudden change in Tommy’s personality, Kathy says that “something in the way he carried himself, the way he looked people in the face and talked in his open, good-natured way . . . was different from before” (20). When Tommy, of his own will, resumes drawing, he produces images of minutely detailed animals. Kathy’s “first impression was like one you’d get if you took the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird” (171). Tommy’s animals look like machines with no souls. He says of his tiny creatures: “It’s like they come to life by themselves. Then you have to draw in all these different details for them. You have to

think about how they'd protect themselves, how they'd reach things" (163-4). Thinking about Tommy's drawings in relation to the Hailsham motto that art expresses "what someone is like inside," Kathy remembers another clone's apparently tongue-in-cheek drawing "of her intestines" (160). Thinking back to the connection Black draws between art production and organ donation, we can see in Tommy's "art" a natural expression of his will not to abandon his body parts.

By producing art that will hopefully get him a deferral, Tommy does not reveal his soul but rather his vital organs; his art is a way of *making a living*, concerned foremost with preserving the body. After he has "donated" some organs but not yet "completed," a frail Tommy draws sketches of "a kind of frog—except with a long tail as though a part of it had stayed a tadpole" (220). He tells Kathy: "These two I did thinking they were made of metal . . . , everything's got shiny surfaces. But this one here, I thought I'd try making him rubbery" (220). Tommy's synthetically complemented frogs are creatures that can persevere by replacing organs. Kathy says that Tommy's creatures "weren't as fresh now . . . something was definitely gone, and they looked labored, almost like they'd been copied" (221). It is as if Tommy's survival instinct communicates itself by reproducing urgently needed body parts. Like his frog, Tommy is the quintessential *animal laboran*, absorbed in fulfilling his vital needs; he does not "create himself as a work of art" but reproduces himself. His drawing is not an enterprise in "self-discovery," but a natural reflex of body preservation. In being nothing but a reflex, Tommy's drawing is a sovereign act.

The functional clone corresponds to the sovereign also in the way his life is absolutely ethical and thus *amoral*. The clone living to die for others is an absolute beast and an absolute citizen. Tommy is utterly unconscious of any moral dimension to his self-sacrifice. His sovereign

life is not a social function because it is an absolute function. He has no life outside his function. Agamben cites Paul Rabinow's use of the term "experimental life" to capture the case of the scientist who "decided to make his own body and life into a research and experimentation laboratory . . . His body is no longer private, since it has been transformed into a laboratory; but neither is it public, since only insofar as it is his own body can he transgress the limits that morality and law put to experimentation" (*Homo* 119). He also looks at the "life" of a "neomort" awaiting organ transplantation: The "biological life" kept functioning by machines appears to be "pure *zoē*" cut off from the social character or "name" of the person, and yet this life—maintained "by virtue of a legal decision" regarding biotechnology—is "a legal being as much as it is a biological being" (120). On the other hand, Tommy is a more appropriate correspondent to the sovereign because there is no gap of ethical consciousness between his life and function—his function is not *bios*; Tommy is not a "legal being" because neither did he consciously turn his body over to science nor was there a legal decision authorizing Hailsham. As we will see later, Tommy could have been absolutely sovereign if Ishiguro did not endow him with social qualities such as "love" and "friendship."

Ethical debates on cloning focus most on social values rather than on the clone's life in itself. Mark Jerng shows how, for Fukuyama, "who argues against cloning, the familial example is the most compelling," even for the other side's point of view (373). In the forum "Ethical Issues in 'Therapeutic/Research' Cloning (Session 6)," Fukuyama says "I have a friend that emails me constantly because he wants to be able to clone, you know, his son. He wants a back-up copy of his son in case his son gets killed. He gets horribly indignant at the idea that anyone is going to restrict this, you know, ability of his to create this back-up copy" (qtd. in Jerng 373). Out of the five "possible arguments in favor of reproductive cloning," included in the *President's*

Council on Bioethics Report, four “have to do with the preservation and construction” of the family; “[t]o continue the name and biological lineage’ of the family (traditionally defined) seems to be of the utmost importance among the reasons for cloning” (Jerng 373). The report stresses “the relations between generations and how cloning might affect the sanctity of these relations,” urging us to “consider what kind of a society we wish to be, and, in particular, what forms of bringing children into the world we want to encourage” (qtd. in Jerng 374). One might see in the report an anxiety about how children are incorporated into the state if they do not fit in the normative family. Jerng argues that *Never Let Me Go* “challenges our privileged narratives of humanness” also by examining how a life “not ‘born’ in the usual sense” might be “given form and dignity” (383). The clone comes into life through a *birth* that does not automatically mean *nation*. As Agamben argues with regard to the figure of the refugee, the principle of modern sovereignty is the incorporation of natural life into the political order of the nation-state: “Nation-state means a state that makes nativity or birth (that is, of the mere human life) the foundation of its own sovereignty” (“On Hannah”). The forgoing discussion on bioethics demonstrates that the clone represents as “disquieting” an element in the system as does the refugee, if not more; Agamben writes that “in the system of the nation-state the refugee represents such a disquieting element, it is above all because by breaking up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, the refugee throws into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty.” In both cases where the link between the biological human life and the state is disturbed, the notion of dignity is invoked.

Moreover, as continuity without differentiation, cloning disrupts a social formula of generational connections that necessitates both a separation from and a relation to the parent figure (what Appiah called autonomous sociality in reference to Stevens). Fukuyama’s single

plea on the clone's behalf (rather than on society's) is that cloning violates the product child's dignity because it deprives her of the potentiality for individuation and separation from the parent. Fukuyama views the ability to individuate, the process of "becoming" a "unique" and "whole" character, as what distinguishes humans from others (Jerng 376). In Fukuyama's formulation, dignity means the child's ability to develop an individual autonomy.

Factor X [i.e. that which makes us human] cannot be reduced to the possession of moral choice, or reason, or language, or sociability, or sentience, or emotions, or consciousness, or any other quality that has been put forth as a ground for human dignity. It is all of these qualities coming together in a human whole that make up factor X. Every member of the human species possesses a genetic endowment that allows him or her to become a whole human being, an endowment that distinguishes a human in essence from other types of creatures. (qtd. in Jerng 376).

Fukuyama's potentiality for becoming—while termed genetic—is a social potentiality, the opposite of the sovereign potentiality Derrida describes. The potentiality for becoming is produced by an anxious culture to counter the clone's figurative potentiality for mere being without the social dynamics of separating and relating.

On the other hand, *The Bioethics Report*, while stressing the child's potentiality for individuation, still lays the duty on the family to help the child shape her life—which means partial separation. Fukuyama's anti-trans-humanist position aligns with Pico's tragic humanism that wants man, cognizant of his vulnerability, to improve himself morally through intellectual creativity. Cloning is horrifying because it challenges a politically mediated notion of generationality. In the sense that she does not break the continuity with the parent figure, the clone resembles the perfect butler who does not assert his individuality. That's why it is

considered counterintuitive for Appiah to argue that Stevens made an individual choice (to surpass his father). Both the clone and the butler approximate that perpetual quality that defines sovereignty.

As a social threat—to the normative fabric of the state, cast as a relation between generations—and as a figure of sovereignty, the clone is also analogous to the illegitimate child. It is, therefore, paradoxical that a defense of the familiar/family represents itself as a defense of mysterious life. In his case against biotechnology, “The Case against Perfection” (2004), Michael Sandel denounces “the hubris of the designing parents” and their “drive to master the mystery of birth.” But, it is actually in the very mystery of cloned or illegitimate life that societal fear lies. This is particularly so because sovereign life is mysterious; like cloned and illegitimate birth, sovereign birth exists outside society, politics and law. This sovereign life does not register partial separation (individuation-socialization) and, therefore, does not meet the coordinates of personal identity that link the subject to the state.

In a similarly paradoxical way, the “bastard” label, while stigmatizing for the subject, can be a token of power for the sovereign. As an example of how “bastard” may have not always been a pejorative term, the *Online Etymology Dictionary* notes that William the Conqueror, an out-of-wedlock child, “is referred to in state documents as ‘William the Bastard’.” William the Bastard himself then went on to commission the *Domesday Survey* that catalogued the population of England and contributed to institutional identity. If we take him as sovereign, William the Bastard derives power from a symbolic “bastardry” that places him in an absolute *sittlichkeit* that is not *sittlichkeit* at all. He has the potentiality, by the masculinist standards of his time, to be anybody’s child and nobody’s child. As sovereign, he exists in a (non) relation that also means ir/responsibility. Incidentally, if we consider the cultural connotations for the

pejorative term “bastard,” we see the implication of petty selfishness and an unwillingness to sacrifice that are anathema to a culture of dignity. Even though Stevens’s identification with his role is superficially read as self-sacrifice, his sacrifice is *amoral*, and therefore, like the clone’s, is no sacrifice. Our culturally subtle problem with Stevens’s situation is not that he sacrifices his life for his function, but that his sacrifice is amoral. Moreover, what we really hold against him is that he does not sacrifice his professionalism for others. He, like a “bastard,” does not let his father’s death interfere with his career, and, even worse, he places his professional life ahead of responding to Miss Kenton’s desire.

The Remains of the Day and *Never Let Me Go* demonstrate how subjectivization works by socio-politicizing desire: they promote an ethics of desire that runs counter to Coetzee’s, as we have explored it in the first and second chapters. Ishiguro’s ethical desire is of the type eventually recognized by Coetzee’s magistrate as the source of his own discontent and the basis of his complicity with power: the latter realizes that the barbarian girl sees in him “pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire. And in [his] lovemaking not impulse but the laborious denial of impulse” (*Waiting* 153). Foucault’s suggestions regarding power and sexuality—that modernity found in sexuality the right place to deploy power and that a possible escape might be located in a different conception of pleasure—can be vindicated with reference to Ishiguro’s novels. For Agamben, of course, a “different economy” of pleasures cannot be the “ground on which to oppose the demands of sovereign power” due to the “difficult zones of indistinction” between fact and law; sexuality is “always already biopolitical,” and no alternative vision of pleasures will place us outside the hold of power (*Homo* 120). But we have to make a distinction and recognize that turning sex from fact (*zoē*) into politics is essential to the way a dignity-laden culture creates subjects. I argue that power co-opts sexuality by turning sex from a natural act of

desire (instinct) into a political act (denial of instinct). In the name of human dignity, culture demonizes those who do not deny instinct—do not deny instinct in the sense that they act on it or in the sense that they do not seem to have it in the first place. This valorization of instinct denial—related as it is to the special place that struggle, hardship, and pain occupy in the discourse of dignity—parallels the self-defeating way we approach power.

In “Wounded Attachments” (1993), Wendy Brown asks “[w]hat kind of political recognition . . . identity-based claims seek that will not resubordinate the subject?” (390). Moreover, “given the averred interest of politicized identity in achieving emancipatory political recognition in a posthumanist discourse, what are the *logics of pain* in subject formation . . . that might contain or subvert this aim? What are the particular constituents . . . of identity’s desire for recognition . . . that seem as often to . . . reproach power rather than aspire to it, to disdain freedom rather than practice it?” (390). Brown ascribes this paradox (of an emancipatory politics that disdains freedom) to the marginalized subject’s dependence on her weakness: “Politicized identity” is “attached to its own exclusion . . . because it is premised on this exclusion for its very existence as identity” (406). As we will see, Ishiguro’s sexual ethics—by emphasizing responsibility, recognition, autonomy and dignity; by denying instinct rather than acting on it; and by privileging vulnerability, weakness and pain over pleasure—engenders violence and consolidates our reversed vision of power.

The Remains of the Day locates the single most pitiful aspect of Stevens’s life in the way he repulses Miss Kenton’s love and insists that their relationship is “predominantly professional in character” (151). The intolerability of the (non) relationship between Stevens and Miss Kenton lies not with the fact that they do not become romantically/sexually united or with the *apparent* withholding on Stevens’s part. What really terrifies the reader is the possibility that Stevens

actually is *not withholding*, that he is *not denying an instinct* to respond. The implicit reader prefers to think that Stevens's non-response is a denial of instinct; that is, even though the butler does not openly reciprocate, he is merely withholding an instinct to respond. The novel invites the reader to understand Stevens's behavior as a *struggle* against instinct. We have a culturally abhorrent picture of sex that is not part of a power struggle. That's why the instances of (romantic) teasing between Stevens and Miss Kenton are moments of comic relief. Of course, what the anticipated reader expects is for Stevens to drop the mask and show he has been denying instinct all along, and the novel eventually delivers, as evidenced by the following commentary by Christina Mason in "A Journey Towards Understanding: True and False Dignity":

Stevens cries. He pours out his feelings, admitting that he blindly followed Lord Darlington and that he has no real dignity. He has set a butler's dignity above human dignity, and realizes that human dignity must always come first. Stevens for the first time is deeply and movingly in touch with his feelings. This overall exchange shows that Stevens has attained dignity even though he does not yet realize it. Stevens has thrown off the false dignity of role and reached the core of his dignity as a human being, aware of his own thoughts, feelings and vulnerabilities. (112)

The "appeal" Ishiguro would make on his characters' behalf is that "they have some sense of dignity as human beings, that ultimately there is something heroic about coming to terms with very painful truths about yourself" (*Conversations* 39). Ishiguro does eventually open Stevens's eyes to the undignified nature of his cocooned existence and, judging from Ishiguro's comment, the anticipated reader is to see the badge of honor ("something heroic") as worth the heartbreak. In making the painful confession about his misguided trust in Lord Darlington, Stevens takes on

all the anxiety, self-consciousness, and self-doubt of the “confessant as hero,” to use Coetzee’s words, “willing to confront the worst about himself” (Coetzee, *Doubling* 263). In the heroics of secular confession, explains Coetzee, the person is supposed to self-doubt, when there are grounds for such doubt, even if doubt is not profitable” (264). Ishiguro puts Stevens through the grueling and endless process of self-doubt in order for him to be really a hero with dignity, not *dignitas*. But one may ask what profit lies in self-doubt for Stevens when his formative life is behind him and he has only the remains of the day left.

On the other hand, and in the same vein, what humanizes Miss Kenton’s emotional state for the reader, as we will see with reference to Skinner’s psychological view, is not that it appears as an act of instinct but as a political, authentic act, against instinct. Her love appears political and conscious for several reasons. First, her love appears counter-instinctive because Stevens is not a generally lovable character; so she is doing something not many people would do—she is autonomous. Second, her love seems to be directed at Stevens’s love, not at Stevens himself; she wants him to love her back—she wants to save him from a stiflingly professional state of being. Third, hers is an unrequited love. As an example that social commendation is relative to the absence of natural motives from an act, Skinner says that “[I]love is somewhat more commendable when unrequited” (47). According to Skinner, people “stand in awe of the inexplicable, and . . ., of course, what we do not understand, we attribute to autonomous man” (53). Because of this reversed connection between instinct and autonomy, sexuality is a fertile ground for identity politics. Sex becomes, not an end in itself, but a social means for expressing resistance and autonomy.

Similarly, in *Never Let Me Go*, Hailsham sex education is repulsive because it strips the clone’s sexuality of political complexity. Kathy finds it “obscene” that Miss Emily, as if she

were explaining “Geography,” uses a skeleton to demonstrate the various sex positions (75-6). The latter instructs her students that they should be careful about having sex with people from outside because for other people sex has rules and affects emotions. She tells them that in the outside world “people were even fighting and killing each other over who had sex with whom” (76). The implication is that the clones’ sex, by contrast, does not come with social struggles; she attributes the difference to the fact that clones cannot have babies. But, even then, according to Miss Emily, the clones have to “respect the rules and treat sex as something pretty special” (76). The sinister nature of these remarks, the novel insinuates, lies in the way Miss Emily violates the clones’ human dignity by severing emotional vulnerability from their sexuality. Kathy tells us that among the clones the image of being sexually active is a badge of prestige: “sex had got like ‘being creative’ had been a few years earlier” (89). Yet, the really significant part about this connection between “creativity” and “sexuality” is not intentional on Ishiguro’s part. Ishiguro intends to show how both creativity and sexuality have become, for the clones, mere addenda to an older concept of dignity (prestige). But Kathy’s pronouncement is right on the money in the sense that both “creativity” (which Foucault looks favorably upon) and politicized sexuality can be tools for creating subjects.

Tommy’s would have been an absolutely sovereign and, hence, disturbing life if Ishiguro had not cast it in an intricate network of “love” and “friendship” with other clones. In Tommy, we would have had a disturbing glimpse of life without *sittlichkeit*, which means responsibility but also, more importantly, conflict. But Ishiguro does not give us that. He indulges the reader’s desire to see Tommy socialized, a desire that becomes very urgent after Tommy’s death. We only fathom and really come to mourn Tommy’s death when Kathy misses him at the end of the novel. Tommy is posthumously stripped of his sovereignty, and his death is pronounced not non-

being but non-response. It is the death that affirms Kathy's responsibility and vulnerability and makes us respond. Ishiguro's two novels affirm that human dignity is dependent on a degree of vulnerability. Myra Seaman is right to observe that *Never Let Me Go*, among some other "dystopian" novels, nurtures "a nostalgia for the weaknesses that result from particular embodied affectivities, representing these characteristics as what ultimately separates . . . the human . . . from the alternatives" (267). Stevens's definition of *dignitas*, as Ishiguro sees it, means "being something less than human. He somehow thinks that turning yourself into some animal that will carry out the duties you have been given to such an extent that you don't have feelings, or anything that undermines your professional self, is dignity. People are prone to equate having feelings with weakness" (*Conversations* 37). However, it seems that people—including Ishiguro—associate dignity with weakness. More importantly, Ishiguro also equates Stevens's *dignitas* (which, as I have hinted, is a non-denial of instinct) with the working-animal.

Human Dignity as an Act against Instinct

In fact, the question of "instinct"—like "dignity," a recurrent word in *The Remains of the Day*—is pivotal to the argument that a working-animal has sovereign *dignitas*. One point of intersection between function and *zoē* is that neither mode registers struggle against instinct; sovereign *dignitas* means no denial of instinct. As testimony to real butler *dignitas*, Stevens cites a story that his father, a "great" butler himself, never tired of telling and "knew instinctively that somewhere in . . . [it] lay the kernel of what true 'dignity' is" (42). We can say that Stevens too sees "instinctively" the core of *dignitas* in that tale and that, by extension, Ishiguro conveys in

the tale that form of *dignitas* he deems dangerous. Hence, the story is part of the cultural and ethical demonization of *dignitas* that I set out to interrogate:

The story was an apparently true one concerning a certain butler who had travelled with his employer to India . . . One afternoon, evidently, this butler had entered the dining room to make sure all was well for dinner, when he noticed a tiger languishing beneath the dining table. The butler had left the dining room quietly, taking care to close the doors behind him, and proceeded calmly to the drawing room where his employer was taking tea with a number of visitors. There he attracted his employer's attention with a polite cough, then whispered in the latter's ear: 'I'm very sorry, sir, but there appears to be a tiger in the dining room. Perhaps you will permit the twelve-bores to be used?

And according to the legend, a few minutes later, the employer and his guests heard three gun shots. When the butler reappeared in the drawing room some time afterwards to refresh the teapots, the employer had inquired if all was well.

'Perfectly fine, thank you, sir,' had come the reply. 'Dinner will be served at the usual time and I am pleased to say there will be no discernable traces left of the recent occurrence by that time.'

This last phrase—'no discernable traces left of the recent occurrence by that time'—my father would repeat with a laugh and shake his head admiringly. . . (36)

In this narrative, we have an encounter between the butler as a professional being and the tiger as a natural being, where each acts on his instinct in the sense that neither denies it. On the one hand, taken as an epitome of "bad faith," the butler has no gap of consciousness between his function and his life, and, therefore, has no instinct *to deny*. On the other, the tiger, at least as we imagine an animal to be, acts on instincts and denies none.

Moreover, in this setting, we have an encounter between two beings at the dining table, eyeing each other with complete calmness and repose. Our initial expectation is for the tiger to prey on the butler, but what transpires in a sense is that the butler devours the tiger at the dining table. Like a magician, the butler “disappears” the tiger, leaving no visible traces behind. In this act of consuming, the butler and the tiger figuratively collapse into each other and become one and the same thing. This oneness is vindicated by the butler’s apologetic response to his employer, reassuring him that he has made amends and left no trace of the incident; it is as if the butler has revealed an aspect of his character and now he takes it back.

In this encounter between the two coldblooded beings, we also have a subtle enactment of a cannibalistic scene. Ishiguro’s depiction of this state of unconsciousness/unbridled instinct constitutes it as the most horrific and repulsive anathema to the narrative of human dignity, i.e. cannibalism. The professional man, the *animal laboran*, is depicted as a cannibal. It is then no wonder that Anthony Hopkins plays both Stevens and Hannibal Lecter with hardly any change in calm demeanor. We should also remember that Dr. Lecter is, after all, a professional with zero tolerance for bad manners and that he also subdues preying animals (the cannibalistic hogs) with his instinctive calm. Stevens seeks to acquire the sovereign’s *dignitas* that means unperturbed being, a steady death-like pulse, regardless of politics (trying circumstances). But, culture demonizes such a mode of being as *sociopathic* and cannibalistic even though it is just *socioapathetic*. In the character of Lecter, culture demonizes death-like apathy. His pulse, we are told, does not go above 85 beats per minute even when he attacks his nurse and swallows her tongue. What terrifies us about a harmlessly professional butler, transposing him into a figurative monster in our eyes, is his amoral, irresponsible, and unconscious being. On the other hand, what redeems Lecter in our eyes, despite his real cannibalism, is that his unethical criminality is

ethically and socially conscious and responsive—his childhood trauma watching his sister being cannibalized, his “responses” to Clarice, his withholding of the instinct to eat her, his political and unique love for her (alone and for nobody else) as an idea (he tells her the world is much more interesting with her in it), his self-sacrifice for her (he chops his own hand instead of hers), and a shallow sense of justice (his victims are usually obnoxious characters).

The butler’s post-murder statement “dinner will be served at the usual time” also stands out by the same mechanism as Peter Clemenza’s “Leave the gun, take the cannoli.” The indistinction between indulgent life and non-questioning functionality is cast in a monstrous picture of the mafioso’s kill-and-eat combo. Again, culture locates Clemenza’s subtly redeeming value in his sense of responsibility within a *sittlichkeit*—his moral (not mercenary) loyalty to the mafia family and to his own family (it was his wife who asked for the dessert). As cultural figures, the tiger-shooting butler, the cannibal, and the Mafioso redeem “responsive” crimes that resist instinct while demonizing non-responsive life-functions that do not deny instinct.

While Sartre disqualifies his waiter from bad faith even though the latter lacks verifiable consciousness, and despite Stevens’s evident consciousness as narrator of his own story, surprisingly some authors still look at Stevens as an “epitome of bad faith.” Terestchenko sees Stevens as more like the thing-in-itself than Sartre’s waiter:

Stevens would have made a kind of perfect waiter who would have suppressed all elements of playfulness and amusement in Sartre’s description of his character. I would like to suggest that Sartre’s waiter is analogous to what Stevens calls with contempt a “merely competent” butler. What distinguishes the accomplished figure from the one who remains on the side? It is precisely the latter’s playfulness, in the sense of creating a role-

distance, that amounts to an inadequate way of identifying the private being and the professional character. (88)

The significance of Terestchenko's comparison, however, together with its major error, lies in his argument that Stevens surpasses the waiter in bad faith because the former's has a moral dimension: "Stevens can serve remarkably well as an example of . . . bad faith . . . : the way in which an individual alienates his or her freedom for the benefit of his or her social function. Stevens plays this part perfectly, especially since his self-alienation is raised to the degree of a virtue" (78). Stevens "emerges as a servile and obedient person, all the more ready to obey destructive orders, because he has elevated renunciation of the self, absence from his true self, ideologically, to the rank of virtue" (88). Yes, Stevens's moral idealization of sacrifice distinguishes him from the waiter, as Terestchenko argues, but it is this moralizing that proves Stevens's consciousness and disqualifies him from bad faith.

Having pinpointed Stevens as a character of bad faith, Terestchenko, following Sartre, finds it fortunate that Stevens can only be fictional, a fortune guaranteed by the assumption that no human ever "abolishes the distance between the *en-soi* and the *por-soi* . . . which constitutes human consciousness and the foundation of one's irrevocable responsibility" (88). Based on this philosophical argument—that no human being can cite "obedience to authority . . . as an excuse for shunning responsibility for one's own actions"—the Court of Nuremberg condemned Nazi war criminals (Terestchenko 88). The way Stevens carries out his employer's command to fire two maids because they are Jewish, Terestchenko notes, underscores the "extremities of horror [to which] the professional ethics of obedience to orders can lead" (87). However, despite Terestchenko, Stevens, like all war criminals, is led by a conscious sense of responsibility, and

not by blind professionalism, to what he recognizes as horrible acts. He commits his crime because he considers it a form of “dignity” to act against one’s instinct. Stevens says:

I was not unperturbed at the prospect of telling Miss Kenton I was about to dismiss two of her maids. Indeed, the maids had been perfectly satisfactory employees and—I may as well say this since the Jewish issue has become so sensitive of late—my every instinct opposed the idea of their dismissal. Nevertheless, my duty in this instance was quite clear, and as I saw it, there was nothing to be gained at all in irresponsibly displaying such personal doubts. It was a difficult task, but as such, one that demanded to be carried out with dignity. (147-48)

The “dignity” invoked here is not irresponsible *dignitas*, but the responsible dignity of resistance; in this instance, he is resisting the *instinct not to fire*. Stevens makes a conscious, meditated, and responsive justification for his act through a reverse logic that actually offers him the satisfaction of *enduring a hardship*, of doing *something not many people could do*.

I derive this argument from Žižek’s reading of the Nazi *modus operandi* as reverse logic—the logic of resisting temptation, a reading he claims to base on Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. The logic of resistance can function as a state apparatus that co-opts citizens, turning them into silent witnesses, if not willing executioners. Žižek argues that it is actually people morally drawn to such concepts as self-respect and dignity who are frequently called upon to carry out the most merciless crimes. It is in the name of dignity that people can be induced to commit heinous acts and to resist any pangs of conscience or remorse. Žižek perceives the same twist with reference to the current “war on terrorism.” Commenting on the U.S television drama *24* (which revolves around the lives of security agents battling terrorists and features many torture scenes), Žižek writes that the “problem for those in power is how to get people to do the

dirty work without turning them into monsters” (“Depraved”). Nazi executioners came to accept the atrocities they perpetrated through a twist of logic whereby they actually drew pride rather than shame from what they did; “instead of saying ‘What horrible things I did to people!’ they would say ‘What horrible things I had to watch in the pursuance of my duties, how heavily the task weighed upon my shoulders!’ In this way, they were able to turn around the logic of resisting temptation.” The temptation resisted, Žižek explains, is “pity and sympathy in the presence of human suffering, the temptation not to murder, torture and humiliate.” According to Žižek, the U.S. interrogation techniques, as represented by 24, operate with the same convoluted logic: “that it is not only possible to retain human dignity in performing acts of terror, but that if an honest person performs such an act as a grave duty, it confers on him a tragic-ethical grandeur.” What keeps torturers going is not only the possibility of *retaining* dignity but also the prospect of *gaining* dignity. Nazi ideology counted on people who consciously resisted instincts, not on *animal laborans* who did not resist instincts. Political crimes in particular—which happen on a much larger scale—are committed against instinct.

Terestchenko is wrong to see Stevens’s act “as subtly alluding to what Eichmann at his trial in Jerusalem called ‘corpse-like obedience’ (Kadaver gehorsam)” (88). Stevens does not carry out immoral orders in a “corpse-like” fashion, just as Eichmann did not. Moreover, unlike Eichmann, Stevens does not even attempt to establish an unconsciousness claim—he says he is aware the act is morally wrong but he finds something heroic (dignity) in it. He does not carry out the order as part of his for-itself function, but he does it consciously, as *praxis*, a dialectical act that surpasses the rigid in-itself. Hence, despite Sartre, the goals of destructive ideology are not carried out by inert, corpse-like soldiers. Sartre says that the waiter’s obligation to *be* a waiter “is not different from that which is imposed on all tradesmen,” who “endeavor to persuade their

clientele that they are nothing but a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor. A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer, because such a grocer is not wholly a grocer. Society demands that he limit himself to his function as a grocer, just as the soldier at attention makes himself into a soldier-thing with a direct regard that does not see at all, which is no longer meant to see” (102). But, does discipline really mean to produce a soldier-thing that does not see? And why would a dreaming grocer offend the client? If the customer subscribes to hierarchical dignity, she would want the waiter to realize that he could have been in her place and in that way be conscious of his inferiority to her. On the other hand, if she is a person who believes in an egalitarian human dignity, this customer would want the waiter to be conscious that he is a human being with a value that is independent of his function. That is to say, power does not allow people corpse-like privilege because the corpse is the exclusive domain of the sovereign.

The *Muselmann*'s Instinct

After the forgoing attempt to show that power is deployed in the subject's denial of her instinct, I want to go back to the figure of the *Muselmann*, with a final push toward that distinction that Agamben blurs. Agamben says: “What is the life of the *Muselmann*? Can one say that it is pure *zoē*? Nothing ‘natural’ or ‘common,’ however, is left in him; nothing animal or instinctual is left in his life. All his instincts are cancelled along with his reason” (*Homo* 119). For Agamben, the *Muselmann* lost his “instincts” *with* his reason as he could not distinguish between the “cold pangs” and the “ferocity of the SS” (119). In Agamben's logic, what he supposes to be the cancellation of the *Muselmann*'s instincts was not the result the sovereign had hoped for. The sovereign wanted to destroy the *Muselmann*'s reason and reduce him to instinct.

The *Muselmann*, therefore, is another figure of indistinction between *zoē* and *bios*—just like the neomort and the *Flamen*, and the king’s body with two lives. He corresponds to the sovereign and the subject-citizen. The sovereign, attempting to reduce the subject to mere *zoē*, finds itself, in even the most extreme of cases (the *Muselmann*), confronted with a life indistinguishable from law. Because of this indistinction, the classical categories of *bios* and *zoē* are not workable and it is impossible for us to oppose the demands of the sovereign based on a different conception of the body.

But, were Hitler’s camps designed to produce *zoē* outside juridical rule or to eliminate it? Does the sovereign attempt to transform the citizen into a *Muselmann*? Did the *Muselmann*, who could not distinguish between nature’s blows and the Storm Trooper’s, really lose his “reason” and “instincts”? And, before that, are “reason” and “instinct” separate from each other? If we rely on Rousseau’s idea of “wisdom” alone, we should know that reason and instinct are the same, and that the *Muselmann* did not lose them. For a person “guided by the light of reason,” the strikes coming from (“malevolent”) men are “no more than the blows of blind necessity and [he] feels none of this senseless agitation; his pain makes him cry out, but without anger or exasperation, he feels only the physical impact of the evil that besets him, and though the blows may hurt his body, none of them can touch his heart” (128). The moment the *Muselmann* lost consciousness and dignity, then, he fell back on both instinct and reason. Once again, I argue that, by turning into an apathetic *animal laboran*, the *Muselmann* passed into sovereign *dignitas*.

Who Is the *Homo Sacer*?

As a main illustration of the correspondence between sovereign and citizen in the state of exception (which reaches its culmination in the modern state), Agamben uses the figure of the *homo sacer* (in Latin meaning literally both “holy man” and “accursed man”), an ambiguous figure that he resurrects from Roman law. In general, it refers to a person, stripped of civic rights, who can be killed by anybody but cannot be sacrificed in a religious ceremony. According to Agamben, the sovereign is the very counterpart of the *homo sacer* in the sense that both have a very particular and paradoxical relation with the law: the sovereign is the source and end of the law yet exists outside the law. The *homo sacer* is designated as *homo sacer* by the law, yet this very designation places him or her outside the law. Moreover, according to Agamben, the modern nation-state turns every citizen into a *homo sacer* and thus creates a perpetual state of exception:

Every society sets this limit; every society—even the most modern—decides who its “sacred men” will be. It is even possible that this limit, on which the politicization and exception of natural life in the juridical order of the state depends, has done nothing but extend itself in the history of the West and has now—in the new biopolitical horizon of states with national sovereignty—moved inside every human life and every citizen. Bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or a definite category. It now dwells in the biological life of every living being. (*Homo* 89)

I agree with Agamben that the *homo sacer* corresponds to the sovereign, but this figure does not correspond to the citizen of the modern state or of any polis for that matter. The sovereign and the *homo sacer* are outside the law, but this exteriority, contrary to Agamben’s

argument, does not mean inclusion in the law. The sovereign and the *homo sacer* do not exist in *bios*. To prove that the *homo sacer* does, Agamben writes:

What is more, his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in continuous relationship with the power that banished him precisely in so far as he is at every instant exposed to the unconditioned threat of death. He is pure *zoē*, but his *zoē* is as such caught in the sovereign ban and must reckon with it at every moment, finding the best way to elude it or deceive it. In this sense, no life, as exiles and bandits know well, is more “political” than his. (*Homo* 118)

There are several gaps in Agamben’s logic; how can the threat of random death be interpreted as sovereign power or law? Are the lives of the “exile” and the “bandit,” philosophically, metaphorically, or even practically, equivalent to a life outside law, even if we take what they “know well” as the truth about the nature of sovereignty? The exile and the bandit do have political lives because they are evading a law that still applies to them and actually pursues them, but the *homo sacer* is sovereign in the sense that no law applies to him.

The modern state does not turn all its citizens into *homo sacers* but endows them all with an exclusively political life in the token of human dignity. The uncontested place of dignity in the modern discourse of human rights, therefore, marks the centrality not of bare life but of political life to the mechanism of the biopolitical state. Unlike the sovereign *homo sacer*, the modern citizen becomes the object of violence by virtue of his human dignity.

CHAPTER IV

DIGNITAS AND WRITING: THE CASE OF COETZEE

Over the course of the previous chapters, several philosophical and political values have fallen on either side of the line between dignity and *dignitas*. On the dignity side of the divide, we have ideals such as autonomy, self-assertion, recognition, responsibility, and worldly consciousness. *Dignitas*, on the other hand, has subsumed qualities such as sensuous interest, survival instinct, irresponsibility, and functional utility. In this chapter, I investigate Coetzee's views on (his) writing, in fiction and nonfiction, in relation to the forgoing dichotomy and argue that his aesthetics, in theory and in practice, falls within the *dignitas* category.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore Coetzee's take on canonical recognition and show how his writing reveals no calculated desire for distinction and originality, qualities assumed to be pre-requisites for canonization. The second section teases out the ways in which Coetzee experiments with forms of expression attuned to physical desire, even when such artistic modes might prove self-interested and politically irresponsible. In section three, I show how Coetzee brings writing as close as possible to an art embedded in material and functional utility; in particular, I argue that Coetzee's aesthetics approximates the primal function of rituals as rites of passage tied to life's necessities and death's inevitability.

Recognition: Coetzee and the Canon

An artist's struggle *as an artist* for ideals such as autonomy and recognition can best be examined in light of his or her approach to the canon and to canonic predecessors. According to Attridge, "[e]very writer who desires to be read (and that is perhaps part of what it means to write) has to seek admittance to the canon—or, more precisely, *a* canon, since any group approval of a text is an instance of canonization . . . Awareness of this necessity, conscious or not, governs the act of writing quite as much as the need for self-expression or the wish to communicate" (*Coetzee* 75). Attridge underlines the indistinction between these "processes of canonization" and the "processes that operate in our everyday's experience" that include "constructing and sustaining an identity"—these are "all in part a matter of telling one's story (the story of who one is, was, and aspires to be) in such a way as to have it accepted and valorized within the body of recognized narratives" (74). In "Reassessing 'Genius' in Studies of Authorship: The State of the Discipline," Christine Haynes also notes the connection between identity formation and writing, locating this link in the context of modernity: "modernity is defined in its most fundamental sense as the conscious creation of the self, and one of the primary means of creating the self is writing, preferably for a public audience" (301). Writing thus emerges as self-affirmation and, to use Rousseau's terms, as self-love rather than love of self, for it is rooted in the court of public opinion (the public audience). Rousseau, I might add, notes that his fellow writers are particularly susceptible to the sense of self-worth: "I was never much given to self-love; but in the world this artificial passion has been exacerbated in me, particularly when I was a writer; I may perhaps have had less of it than my fellow-authors, but it was still excessive" (*Reveries* 130). Writing can be linked, as Arendt would have it, to the

“agonal” passion for individuation and distinctive achievement: through innovative writing, authors (as actors) can and should “show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world” (*Human* 79). What needs to be explored further, then, is how the *agonal* passion for individuation and distinction translates in terms of an author’s wish for distinction from other writers and for stepping out of the shadow of strong predecessors.

In *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), Harold Bloom describes a poet’s attempts to evade the sense of indebtedness to a stronger predecessor as a “war between Pride and Pride” (101). For Bloom, however, this “war” has creative, not only violent, effects, for “momentarily the power of newness wins” (101). Poets, according to Bloom, are always anxious to produce original material to ensure that they will be read and remembered, in other words, to leave a trace that guarantees their survival into the future:

Poetic influence—when it involves two strong, authentic poets,—always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist. (30)

Bloom writes of the sense of “belatedness” haunting the poet, the feeling that past writers have already made all the big statements, leaving no room for new creativity: “Cultural belatedness is never acceptable to a major writer” (xxv). Bloom himself is influenced (and probably also haunted) by W. J. Bate’s *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970). Bloom writes:

The modern poet, as W. J. Bate shows in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*, is the inheritor of a melancholy engendered in the mind of the Enlightenment by its skepticism of its own double heritage of imaginative wealth, from the ancients and from the Renaissance masters. In this book I largely neglect the area Bate has explored with great skill, in order to center upon intra-poetic relationships as parallels of family romance. (8)

In crude Freudian terms, the anxiety of influence is then reflected in the poet's urge to displace or negate the father figure.

I argue that Coetzee tends to bask in other writers' sunshine, rather than, as Bloom phrases it, "feel the chill of being darkened by a predecessor's shadow" (50). Coetzee finds no value in "anxiety" even though this passion has been accorded value by several theorists, even outside the literary field. In "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'," for instance, Derrida pegs deconstruction to anxiety and sees in the latter great potential for justice: "deconstruction is not possible" without a "moment of suspense [that] is always anxiety-ridden," a moment that is "also the interval or space in which transformations, indeed juridico-political revolutions take place" (955). Coetzee sees in anxiety a paralyzing and debilitating problem rather than a creative force. For Coetzee, writing has to rid itself of the anxious and egotistical quest for originality, recognition, and canonization. For, just as the culturally mediated desire for recognition and dignity lays the basis for but hinders the pursuit of justice, the poet's desire for recognition, while in some cases stimulating her desire for writing, ultimately deforms her work.

Coetzee, in fiction and non-fiction, is overly and overtly open to the influence of canonic authors such as Defoe, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka and others. He has written several essays analyzing, critiquing and appreciating canonic literature so much so that he in fact appears

desperate for canonic recognition. Attridge, not sharing such a view of Coetzee's motives, writes that "through their allusiveness [Coetzee's] novels offer themselves not as challenges to the canon, but as canonic—as already canonized, one might say. They appear to locate themselves within an established literary culture, rather than presenting themselves as an assault on that culture . . . Coetzee's novels could be said to presuppose and to reproduce the canonic status of their predecessors while claiming to join them" (*Coetzee* 68-9). If this description appears to contradict my argument, I draw attention to an important observation buried in one of Attridge's footnotes: "Some degree of resistance to canonic demands can itself be a canonic requirement: I have already suggested that a possible disability of Coetzee's novels is that they may appear to conform too obviously to the requirements of the canon" (78). Coetzee's reply to Attwell's question about Kafka's influence is exemplary of what I see as the general air of indifference to his image in relation to his predecessors: "You ask about the impact of Kafka on my fiction. I acknowledge it, and acknowledge it with what I hope is a proper humility. As a writer I am not worthy to loose the latchet of Kafka's shoe. But I have no regrets about the use of the letter K in *Michael K*, *hubris* though it may seem. There is no monopoly on the letter K" (*Doubling* 199).

Coetzee's trilogy of fictionalized autobiographies (*Boyhood*, *Youth*, and *Summertime*) is primarily an exercise in self-deprecation, even self-abasement, which can obviously be read as subtle self-promotion. Yet, one has to pause and think through the oddity of a consecrated writer's willingness to publically brood over the technicalities of his and other writers' works. In *Summertime: Fiction* (2009), Coetzee imagines himself already dead, so the book is a fictionalized (auto)biography written/narrated by the biographer, Vincent, about Coetzee's life in South Africa in the years 1971-77. One of the people supposedly interviewed for the work is a colleague and lover who offers her opinion on his novels as follows: "I did not read all of them.

After *Disgrace* I lost interest. In general I would say that his work lacks ambition. The control of the elements is too tight. Nowhere do you get a feeling of a writer deforming his medium in order to say what has never been said before, which is to me the mark of great writing. Too cool, too neat, I would say. Too easy. Too lacking in passion” (242). I shall come back to the significance of *Summertime* later on, but for now we should note Coetzee’s awareness of the canonic requirement articulated by Bloom and noted by Attridge: A canon-aspiring artist has to be willfully deformative.

When we turn to examining how such issues are thematized in Coetzee’s fiction, we frequently encounter anxiety-ridden author-protagonists who eventually opt out of the quest for distinction and valorization. As Attridge points out, canon-formation is a major theme of Coetzee’s *Foe* (1986): “the large part of the novel consists of a memoir and several letters written by the newly returned castaway Susan Barton to the well-known author Daniel Defoe, . . . presented not as a simple day-to-day record of experience, as in a novel of letters or diary-entries, but for the explicit purpose of proffering a narrative—the story of Barton’s year on an island with another, earlier, castaway named Robinson Cruso—for insertion into the canon of published English texts” (*Coetzee* 73). Even though Susan Barton recruits Foe (Coetzee changes Defoe’s name) for the writing process, initially and for the most part of the novel, she is wracked by anxiety over his influence, fretting over her own status as “goddess and begetter” of the story (126). This anxiety is apparent, despite some critics’ readings to the contrary. According to Poyner, even though it is implicit in the novel that Susan Barton “*may* have been a prostitute,” she has no “anxieties about her femininity and is not afraid to challenge both Foe’s authorial and sexual authority” (*Coetzee* 95). However, the fact that Susan Barton feels the need to “challenge” Foe presupposes the presence of anxiety.

She is also anxious that Cruso (Coetzee drops the *e*) might take over the narrative she wants Foe to write. She writes to Foe: “The island was Cruso's (yet by what right? by the law of islands? is there such a law?), but I lived there too, I was no bird of passage, no gannet or albatross, to circle the island once and dip a wing and then fly on over the boundless ocean. Return to me the substance I have lost, Mr. Foe: that is my entreaty” (69). Coetzee’s problematic approach to the anxious desire for having one’s voice heard and valorized has been noted in postcolonial and feminist criticisms. Benita Parry observes that Coetzee’s female and other subordinated narrators who urgently seek to be the progenitors of their own stories, who “resolutely position themselves as authors of their own narratives,” wind up dismayed (157). She cites Susan Barton’s “I am a free woman who asserts her freedom by telling her story” next to Magda’s “I have uttered my life in my own voice . . . I have chosen at every moment my own destiny (Coetzee, *Heart* 131; *Foe* 139).

Through the figure of Susan Barton, Coetzee stages his criticism of views upholding the creative value of the anxiety of influence by literary predecessors. While she is anxious that Cruso might interfere with her narrative, she is also, curiously, troubled by his indifference to writing, dismayed that he has not produced his own unique castaway narrative about his time on the island “so that what you have passed through shall not die from memory”; she feels Cruso should write a “memorial to be left behind, so that the next voyagers . . . may read and learn about us, and perhaps shed a tear” (17). By her reasoning, “seen from too remote a vantage, life begins to lose its peculiarity . . . All shipwrecks become the same shipwreck, all castaways the same castaways, sunburnt, lonely, clad in the skins of the beasts he has slain. The truth that makes your story yours alone, that sets you apart from the old mariner by the fireside spinning yarns of sea-monsters and mermaids, resides in a thousand touches which today may seem of no

importance” (18). Barton is evidently of the view that a writer should make her story distinct from those of other story-tellers.

Coetzee, then, puts Susan Barton through the now familiar conversion, as she reverts from a worldly wish for literary fame to a self-contained impulse for bodily survival. Having experienced hunger and deprivation, she reveals and then abnegates her original motive for writing: she tells Foe she once “hoped to be famous, to see heads turn in the street and hear folks whisper, ‘There goes Susan Barton the castaway.’ But that was an idle ambition, long since discarded. Look at me. For two days I have not eaten” (125). Susan Barton highlights the difference between pursuing fame on the one hand and utility on the other, making it clear that the latter value lacks dignity: she asks for his help obtaining employment so she “could return in every respect to the life of a substantial body, the life you recommend. But such life is abject. It is the life of a thing. A whore used by men is used as a substantial body” (125-26). The distinction between originality and utility leads us to a recurrent theme in Coetzee’s fiction, the idea of the clichéd and the quotidian.

Aversion to the cliché, which we have already established as central to Magda’s pathological consciousness, is further explored in *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). A collection of eight sections or “lessons” the fictitious novelist and human rights activist Elizabeth Costello undergoes, the novel is one of several Coetzee novels that can be labeled semi-autobiographical. “At the Gate,” the eighth lesson which Elizabeth Costello thinks of as a “Kafkaesque dream,” mainly deals with the novelist’s reflections on her vocation. Past middle age and firm health, she draws parallels between her physical weakness and the writing career to which she has dedicated her life. Waiting on a “permit” to pass through what can only be described as an allegorical gate (to the other world? the world of real literature or literary distinction?), Elizabeth Costello finds

her predicament even less tolerable due to the lack of originality in the literary scene in which she is cast: “She could be in any of the gulags, she thinks. She could be in any of the camps of the Third Reich. The whole thing put together from clichés, with not a speck of originality” (198). She describes her surroundings as “what one would expect in an obscure Italian or Austro-Italian border town in the year 1912. Out of a book . . . Is it all being mounted for her sake, because she is a writer? Is it someone’s idea of what hell will be like for a writer, or at least purgatory: a purgatory of clichés? . . . That is what life has been since she arrived in this place: an elaborate set of dovetailing commonplaces” (206). Her aversion to the commonplace, however, begins to slowly give way:

Yet even as she skulks . . . , who is to say she is playing no part? Why should she think that she alone has it in her power to hold herself back from the play? And what would true stubbornness, true grit, consist in anyway but going through with the performance, no matter what? Let the band strike up a dance tune, let the couples bow to each other and step on to the floor, and there, among the dancers, let her be, Elizabeth Costello, the old trouper, in her unsuitable dress, circling in her stiff yet not graceless way. And if that is a cliché too—being a *professional, playing one’s part*—then let it be a cliché. What entitles her to shudder at clichés when everyone else seems to embrace them, live by them? (206-7)

Just as resistance to the canon is a pre-requisite for canonization, so Elizabeth Costello wonders whether her contempt for the cliché is not a cliché in itself. This constant struggle for the original entraps her mind in ever receding self-doubt, self-consciousness, and anxiety as to whether what sounds original is not original by default and so on infinitely. Here we have a glimpse of

Coetzee's opposition between "professional," utilitarian art on the one hand and anxious, self-conscious art on the other, an issue explored in much detail in the last section on art and ritual.

In regard to the link between the anxiety of influence and self-consciousness, however, a return to *Disgrace* is helpful. At the beginning of the novel, David Lurie is troubled by the fact that his two published books of criticism have not "caused a stir or even a ripple" (4). One of the two disappointing books is titled *Wordsworth and the Burden of the Past*, an allusion, as Laurence Wright notes, to Bate's *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet*. According to Wright: "In Post-apartheid South Africa, and in *Disgrace*, the past is an ethical and political burden in a particular sense, one deeply felt by David Lurie and his daughter. But it is also, and in a correlated way, a burden felt directly in the defining problem of the Romantic poet . . . as expressed by Bate, 'What is there left to do?'" (149). Wright sees in David Lurie's way of teaching Romantic poetry the same strategy followed by the Romantics to escape the sense of belatedness: "resort to complex archaeologies of the self . . . deep preoccupation with responding adequately to the present moment" and "an overt fictive reliance on fidelity to actual, present experience" (149). For Wright, the sense of belatedness "marks a distinct step towards that philosophical egoism which later metamorphosed into the massive egotism seen in romantic individualism—notably exemplified in the figure of Byron" (150). As we will see, Byron starts out as an important figure for David Lurie, who then switches from writing a scholarly book on the poet to composing an operetta about him. By the end of the novel, Byron disappears completely from the operetta. During the course of composing the opera, David Lurie slowly neutralizes the sense of belatedness and the anxious "resort to complex archaeologies of the self" by basing the operetta more and more on love and desire and making the decision that his work will not be performed. This sentiment, some say, is no more than the expression of hackneyed

and romantic theorizing that is destined for practical failure. Elizabeth Anker, for instance, notes the change in David Lurie's artistic impulse but claims that he eventually recognizes he has failed: "Lurie endeavors to conceive of the creative process as motivated solely by love, as he refers to his opera as composed of 'melody without climax' [but] comes to realize that such a unilaterally self-less comportment cannot be sustained—that both creativity and ethics are ineradicably dependent on the ego" (250). As the significance of the operetta receives is the object of detailed discussion later, there will be more room for disagreeing with Anker's assessment of David Lurie's final beliefs.

In one section of *Elizabeth Costello* where the novelist is giving an award acceptance speech (a lecture considered highly representative of Coetzee's views due to the similarities with the format of Coetzee's own lectures), Coetzee delivers the clearest and sharpest critique of the burden of the past and literary recognition:

Despite this splendid award, for which I am deeply grateful, despite the promise it makes that, gathered in the illustrious company of those who have won it before me, I'm beyond time's envious grasp, we all know, if we are being realistic, that it is only a matter of time before the books which you honour, and with whose genesis I have had something to do, will cease to be read and eventually cease to be remembered. And properly so. There must be some limit to the burden of remembering that we impose on our children and grandchildren. (20)

So if the anxious and self-conscious wish for originality and recognition is a violent and deforming motive for writing, what does Coetzee offer as an alternative?

Writing as an Irresponsible Desire

Coetzee responds to Attwell's query about why K was not cast as a revolutionary hero by saying that "[o]ne writes the books one wants to write. One doesn't write the books one doesn't want to write. The emphasis falls not on *one* but on the word *want* in all its resistance to being known. The book about going off with the guerillas, the book in the heroic tradition, is not a book I *wanted-to-write*, wanted enough to be able to bring it off" (*Doubling* 208). For Coetzee, writing in the heroic tradition clashes with his own desire as a writer. While desire appears inadequate to the writer's ethical responsibility to his (immediate) community, Coetzee sees it as ultimately not unethical. Writing a novel is "a place where one goes everyday for several hours a day for years on end. What happens in that place has less and less discernable relation to the daily life one lives or the lives people are living around one" (205). Coetzee does not shy from revealing that fulfilling such a desire is for the writer's personal interest: "Whatever the process is that goes on when one writes, one has to have some respect for it. It's in one's own interest, one's own very best interest, even one's material interest, to maintain that respect" (205). In the correspondence with Phillip R. Wood, he writes that there is no "profit—least of all for me—in using this occasion to grub any 'deeper' than I do in the book" (Wood 183). However, this unabashedly selfish embrace of artistic pleasure, we shall see once and again, proves problematic for a writer in the middle of hard-to-ignore political emergencies.

In the middle of this tug-of-war, Coetzee's writing eludes the demands of both the oppressive state and the revolutionary hero. This mode of operation, as we have seen with *The Life and Times of Michael K* in particular, leaves many a critic unsatisfied. Coetzee writes: "If one takes Michael K seriously as a hero, a paragon, a model, it can only be as a hero of

resistance against—or rather withdrawal from or evasion of—accepted ideas of the heroic” (*Doubling* 206). Coetzee’s choice of words shows that he does not really think of K as a hero of resistance. The novelist is almost allergic to the word “resistance,” replacing it with seemingly diluted versions (“withdrawal” or “evasion”), words that in reality can mean the opposite of resistance. For Coetzee, following Mario Vargas Llosa, literature frustrates both “the bureaucrat-censor in the hire of the tyrant, and the tyrant’s foe, the revolutionary scheming to enroll the writer in the grand army of the revolution” (*Taking* 46). Coetzee expresses admiration for Erasmus’s writing whose power “lies in its weakness—its jocoserious abnegation of big-phallus status, its evasive (non)position inside/outside the play” (103). Like the Erasmian text, Coetzee’s writing neither commits to nor resists any interpretive discourse.

In fiction, Coetzee repeatedly draws parallels between physical desire and the writing impulse. Susan Barton tells Friday the story of a “watch-dog, raised with kindness but kept from birth behind a locked gate. When at last the dog escapes . . . the world appears . . . [so] full of troubling sights and smells, that it snarls at the first creature to approach, and leaps at its throat, after which it is marked down as vicious, and chained” (80). She subsequently regrets telling such a story to Friday and assures him that she does not mean to chain him by analogy: “my stories seem always to have more applications than I intend, so that I must go back and laboriously extract the right application and apologize for the wrong ones and efface them. Some people are born storytellers; I, it would seem, am not” (81). Seen in the context of David Lurie’s story of the dog punished for its sexual instinct to the point he begins to hate his nature, Susan Barton’s anecdote also establishes a link between the denial of instinct and violence. By extension, Barton’s style of story-telling is marked by restraint, denial, and chaining, and hence violence. Barton is ironically right in assessing her writing as not inborn (read as natural), but it

is only unnatural in the sense that she practices *laborious* extraction and application. If dignity, as I argue in Chapter III, is based on the laborious denial of instinct, then we have more reason to associate irresponsible writing with *dignitas* rather than dignity.

Coetzee, however, understands that this violent restraint is a problem embedded in language itself as a manifestation of the violent deformation of culture. In *Disgrace*, for instance, Coetzee shows frustration with how language, through a process of socialization and denaturalization, has frustrated the expression of bodily sensations. David Lurie wants “Petrus’s story . . . not reduced to English. More and more he is convinced that English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus’s story would come out arthritic, bygone” (117). David Lurie would prefer to do away with the linguistic medium and read Petrus’s story “in his face, his face and his hands. If there is such a thing as honest toil, then Petrus bears its marks . . . A peasant, a *paysan*, a man of the country. A plotter and a schemer and no doubt a liar too, like peasants everywhere. Honest toil and honest cunning” (117). The truth about Petrus cannot be gleaned from a conversation in English, but through “something far more – he casts around for the word – *anthropological*” (118). I think that Coetzee’s discomfort with English, in this instance, is not related to the concretely political terms of colonial and postcolonial history. I disagree with Coundouriotis’s reading of David Lurie’s observation as indicating that Coetzee “links dignity to equality, and wonders whether English does not perpetuate the inequality that makes it impossible to achieve dignified social exchanges” (858). Rather, it is the insistence on dignified social exchanges that causes language

to come out “arthritic.” The problem here is with (civilized) language in general and not limited only to the contingent link between English and the colonial situation.

Therefore, in order for language not to come out deformed and arthritic, Coetzee meditates on situations where the writer feeds his or her corporeality into the fiction while at the same time deriving physical sustenance from such work. Frustrated by her writer’s block, Elizabeth Costello considers turning her attention inward as opposed to waiting on the “dictates of the invisible”:

The slow thud of the blood in her ears, . . . the soft touch of the sun on her skin. That at least she does not have to invent: this dumb, faithful body that has accompanied her every step of the way, this gentle, lumbering monster that has been give to her to look after, this shadow turned to flesh that stands on two feet like a bear and laves itself continually from the inside with blood. Not only is she *in* this body, this thing which not in a thousand years could she have dreamed up, so far beyond her powers would it be, she somehow *is* this body; and all around her in the square, on this beautiful morning, these people, somehow *are* their bodies too. (210)

We also see in Coetzee’s fiction writers depicted as ghosts haunting the living for their blood. Alluding to Dante’s encounter with ghosts in Hell, Susan Barton, now changed from her earlier ways, tells Foe that she is after his blood: “Is that not why ghosts return: to drink the blood of the living?” (139). To make the nature of this transfusion even more concrete, Susan Barton continues: “Foe kissed me again, and in kissing gave such a sharp bite to my lip that I cried out and drew away. But he held me close and I felt him suck the wound. ‘This is my manner of preying on the living,’ he murmured” (139). The theme of writing as a way of dealing with life and death will be the object of extensive discussion later.

Coetzee's search for a medium of expression more physical than language underlies the consistent privileging of music over fiction in his writing. In "An Exclusive Interview with J. M. Coetzee," upon receiving the Nobel Prize, Coetzee tells Attwell: "It has always struck me as strange, by the way, that Alfred Nobel did not institute . . . a music prize—music is, after all, more universal than literature, which is tied to a particular language." The same sentiment carries into Coetzee's fiction. In *Foe*, for instance, Barton complains about Cruso's detestation of language, asking why he talks about language as if it "were one of the banes of life, like money or the pox": If Friday knew English, she suggests, they "might have experienced, all these years, the pleasures of conversation; you might have brought home to him some of the blessings of civilization and made him a better man" (22). Barton's yearning for civilized language is identical with Magda's: "So if the company of brutes had been enough for me, I might have lived most happily on my island. But who, accustomed to the fullness of human speech, can be content with caws and chirps and screeches, and the barking of seals, and the moan of the wind?" (8). Cruso, on the other hand, asks Friday to play his flute and tells Barton to listen to "The voice of man" (22). David Lurie, relegated to the task of teaching a technical communications class, finds the textbook's explanation of the origin of language "preposterous" ("Human society has created language in order that we may communicate our thoughts, feelings and intentions to each other") (4). His opinion, which he keeps to himself, is that "the origins of speech lie in song" (4). In the same spirit of revulsion against the rationalistic framework of language, the once aspiring literary scholar grows "tired of criticism, tired of prose measured by the yard. His desire now is "to write music: *Byron in Italy*, a meditation on love between the sexes in the form of the chamber opera" (4). Music proves for David Lurie a better medium than language for fulfilling life necessities such as the achievement of pleasure and the expression of pain.

After he has gone through one predicament after another, his opera thins into a lighter form in reflection of his agony: instead of borrowing the music, as he initially tells Lucy, he starts composing his own. In his hands the music sheds the gravity we usually associate with the opera genre. He finds the piano too grand and replaces it with Lucy's child banjo with its "silly plink-plunk" noise (184).

At the piano he sets to work piecing together and writing down the beginnings of a score. But there is something about the sound of the piano that hinders him: too rounded, too physical, too rich. From the attic, from a crate full of old books and toys of Lucy's, he recovers the odd little seven-stringed banjo that he bought for her on the streets of KwaMashu when she was a child. With the aid of the banjo he begins to notate the music that Teresa, now mournful, now angry, will sing to her dead lover . . . (184)

The piano sounds grand so he opts for the banjo, a toy banjo for that matter. Playing with the idea of incorporating a wounded dog's moans into the operetta, he asks himself, "Would he dare to do that: bring a dog into the piece, allow it to loose its own lament to the heavens between the strophes of lovelorn Teresa's? Why not? Surely, in a work that will never be performed, all things are permitted?" (215). David Lurie's aesthetic is both politically irresponsible and indifferent to recognition.

Such an aesthetic can also be detected in the other ways he demystifies one of the most dignified of art forms. One such instance of irresponsibility is the way David Lurie shifts the focus of his melody from his heroic Byron to the physicality of Teresa, the disgraced and physically challenged ex-mistress. When he first conceives of the operetta, Lurie makes Byron the centerpiece, but then he finds himself moved more by Teresa, and not the young lush Teresa but a less attractive one. He "tries to pick Teresa up in middle age. The new Teresa is a dumpy

little widow installed in the Villa Gamba with her aged father, running the household, holding the purse-strings tight, keeping an eye out that the servants do not steal the sugar” (181). It seems that it is the very indignity of such a character that attracts the composer: “Is this the heroine he has been seeking all the time? Will an older Teresa engage his heart as his heart is now? The passage of time has not treated Teresa kindly. With her heavy bust, her stocky trunk, her abbreviated legs, she looks more like a peasant, a *contadina*, than an aristocrat” (181). David Lurie feels he wants to “love this plain, ordinary woman” and “love her enough to write a music for her,” even though Byron, in some of his correspondence, “lists her flippantly among his Italian conquests, makes jokes about her husband, alludes to women from her circle with whom he has slept” (182). He even draws life lessons from Teresa; he is not “able to bend to the tempest; he cannot, not with honor. That is why he must listen to Teresa. Teresa may be the last one left who can save him” (209). At least in this operetta, “Teresa is past honor. She pushes out her breasts to the sun; she plays the banjo in front of the servants and does not care if they smirk. She has immortal longings, and sings her longings. She will not be dead” (209). Commenting on the Teresa-centered operetta, Attridge writes that “the connection between the aesthetic and the erotic is profound, if resistant to analysis: both forces take one unawares, as if touched by a god, and lead one into unknown territory, for good or ill . . . Coetzee leaves us in no doubt that this trope can be an excuse for irresponsible and selfish behavior; but it also seems to be the only way to understand the forces at work in desire and artistic invention” (“Coetzee’s” 37). One segment of this unknown territory that Coetzee pushes us into, as I see it, can be summed up as an aestheticization of dishonor: in her indifference to the concept of honor, she reduces herself to simple biological life, both literally and metaphorically. She will not be dead; she is driven by

the wish for life, for survival. By creating an aesthetic of disgrace, David Lurie can now live from day to day without hope or need for redemption, as he tell Mr. Isaacs.

Not only the physicality of the characters is at issue here; the medium emphasizes its own physicality and irresponsibility as well. In his “*Plink-Plunk: Unforgetting the Present in Coetzee’s Disgrace*,” Michael Holland argues that the operetta takes over the novel, concentrating on “the immediate present of material existence” and the “absolute priority of the raw material of language—*plink-plunk*—over any present or any presence within”; the music, according to Holland, suspends the “signifying function” and replaces it with “the raw sonority of onomatopoeia” (404). David Lurie’s turn from writing prose to composing music, within which he also uses the dog’s howls, has pronounced similarities to Schopenhauer’s views on music. Turning to the laws of physics to support his pronouncements on the superiority of music to other art forms, Schopenhauer foregrounds the connection between the “metaphysical” aspects of music with the “physical”; in *World as Will and Representation* (1818), he writes that music “expresses the metaphysical to everything physical in the world, the thing-in-itself to every phenomenon. Accordingly, we could just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will” (262). Music is “an exceedingly universal language” that expresses “in a homogenous material, that is to say, in nothing but tones, and with the greatest distinctness and truth, the inner being, the in-itself, of the world” (264). As we will see in the next section, Coetzee, building on such a link between the physical and the metaphysical captured in music, promotes writing that approximates music in creating mystical rites of passage for physical life necessities.

Writing as Ritual

I argue that Coetzee pushes writing as close as possible to a realm where it functions as a life ritual rather than a political agenda. In this sense, Coetzee attempts to restore writing to the ritual tradition that Walter Benjamin identifies as the origin of art. My conception of Coetzee's art's *dignitas* should be interrogated in relation to Benjamin's conception of the "aura." In "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin argues that a work of art originally possessed an "aura" that sprang from its rootedness in a tradition serving a ritualistic function: "The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition" and "the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual, the location of its original use value" (217). This original quality is "depreciated" when the work is extracted from that tradition in the age of mechanical reproduction: one can capture "the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (217). For Benjamin, the "uniqueness" of the work of art is not a politically constructed and affirmed uniqueness but one that is attached to specific ritualistic function in life. Aura belongs to a work of art that takes no note of the uniqueness or autonomy of the artist as such.

Coetzee's plan for the work of art is drastically different Arendt's "political" agenda for the role of art and artists. With approval of the classical "mistrust and actual contempt of the artists," Arendt calls for separating a work of art from the "mentality that brought it into being" as nothing but a fulfillment of life necessities (*Between* 216). Arendt wants art out of the circle of biological and natural necessity and into the worldly realm of constructing political identities and creating social relations that communicate individual uniqueness and distinction. By Arendt's

standards, for any work of art to have real value it has to be rescued from the hands of its producer and placed in the custody of the philosopher/critic, to be changed from its function as work (*poiēsis*) to a new role as action (*praxis*). The issue for Arendt “is not whether the creative artist is free in the process of creation, but that the creative process is not displayed” and therefore is incommunicable (*Between* 153). Arendt wants the artist to engage in *praxis*, to create art that has no use-value or utility except to express the inherent worldliness of the artist; worldly art is durable and cannot be used up through use” (*Between* 200). Arendt associates the utter debasement of art in “mass society” with life functions:

Perhaps the chief difference between society and mass society is that society wanted culture, evaluated and devaluated cultural things into social commodities, used and abused them for its own selfish purposes, but did not “consume” them. Even in their most worn-out shapes these things remained things and retained a certain objective character; they disintegrated until they looked like a heap of rubble, but they did not disappear. Mass society, on the contrary, wants not culture but entertainment, and the wares offered by the entertainment industry are indeed consumed by society just like any other consumer goods. The products needed for entertainment serve the life process of society even though they may not be as necessary for this life as bread and meat. They serve, as the phrase is, to while away time, and the vacant time which is whiled away is not leisure time, strictly speaking—time, that is, in which we are free *from* all cares and activities necessitated by life process and therefore free *for* the world and its culture—it is rather left-over time, which still is biological in nature, left over after labor and sleep have received their due. Vacant time which entertainment is supposed to fill is a hiatus in the

biologically conditioned cycle of labor—in the “metabolism of man with nature,” as Marx used to say. (*Between* 205)

Based on this distinction between art that has use value and art that has no value as such, I argue that the aura of Benjamin’s art, like the *dignitas* of Coetzee’s writing, is opposed to dignity when the latter is understood as worldly pursuit of recognition and distinction.

Coetzee’s overt pessimism and disillusionment with writing is due to its being the farthest among the art forms from the original nature of art *as function*, specifically as ritual. He negates the need for art to be a means of expressing the artist’s autonomy. Attridge comes across but underestimates this element in Coetzee’s thinking. He sees it staged in a challenge to Elizabeth Costello by her sister Blanche, who has devoted herself to Catholic volunteer work in South Africa:

The gulf between the two sisters on questions of art becomes most apparent when Elizabeth visits Blanche’s mission in Zululand and is introduced to a Zulu sculptor, Joseph. Joseph, now an old man, has spent his life carving nothing but crucified Christs, the same tortured body over and over in a variety of sizes, and although Elizabeth can think of this only as a stultifying waste of artistic potential, Blanche praises it as true devotion . . . Coetzee—through the power of his writing—lets us live for a time inside the mind of a dedicated servant of Christ for whom most art is a squandering of human energy . . . We see more clearly than ever that this book is far from a celebration of the novelist’s art. (*Coetzee* 202-3)

Attridge, however, does not see this instance the same way I do, as evidenced by his most recent work on Coetzee: “The only kind of artist this god recognizes is the one whose work is entirely devoted to depicting his anguish: not an artistic career one can imagine either Costello or her

author embracing” (“Coetzee’s” 32). It is not that Coetzee sees art as nothing but religious devotion, but he does see it as serving a function that can be religious or otherwise. For Coetzee, religious ritual, as we will see, is no different from other ceremonies and rites that help man deal with natural phenomena and biological necessities.

One of the rites that art performs is a form of prayer for survival and peaceful co-existence with the forces of nature. The ending of *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be read that way. Attempting at the end of the novel to produce a record of life in the settlement, the magistrate finds that he cannot write a history but something else:

But when I sit down at my writing table . . . what I find myself beginning to write is not the annals of an imperial outpost or an account of how the people of that outpost spent their last year composing their souls as they waited for the barbarians.

“No one who paid a visit to this oasis,” I write, “failed to be struck by the charm of life here. We lived in the time of the seasons, of the harvests, of the migrations of waterbirds. We lived with nothing between us and the stars. We would have made any concession, had we only known what, to go on living here. This was paradise on earth.” (154)

The writer here does the work of the shaman praying to nature—a function that is mystical as well as physical.

In one of her early letters to Foe, Susan Barton writes to Foe about one odd observation involving Friday: he sails out on a board some distance into the ocean with a pouch tied with a string around his neck; out of the pouch he begins producing “handfuls of white flakes which he began to scatter over the water” (31). Barton concludes “he had been making an offering to the god of the waves” or “some other such superstitious observance” (31). Before that she “had given to Friday’s life as little thought as I would have a dog’s or any other dumb beast’s,” but the

“casting of petals was the first sign I had that a spirit or soul—call it what you will—stirred beneath that dull and unpleasing exterior” (32). As Poyner notes, Susan Barton “construes [Friday’s ritual] as an exotic religious rite only for it later to transpire that he is performing an act of remembrance at the site of the sunken slave ship on which, we assume, he was cargo . . . Barton later deciphers this ritual as a memorial to lost family or friends on such a ship . . .” (*Coetzee* 102). But the text indicates that Friday’s ritual, while it can also be an act of remembrance, is both a religious rite and a form of writing that is simultaneously mystical and physical.

Susan Barton, even though she has set herself the task of bringing out Friday’s voice, strikes him when he takes Foe’s pen and draws a string of Os on the paper. Foe tells Susan Barton that she should let Friday be; the Muse can visit him too. Asked about the significance of the O and whether it might appear like an exoticizing gesture, representing Friday’s people’s prayer to a spirit or a god that circulates in the universe, Coetzee replies, “The O, the circle, the hole are symbols of that which male authoritarian language cannot appropriate” (*Doubling* 404). Coetzee does not deny the mystic symbolism in the circle. This circular movement, according to Foe, is the same as other forms of prayer practiced by all living beings, a prayer that is originally a quest for survival: the “waterskater, that is an insect and dumb, traces the name of God on the surfaces of ponds” (143-44). Susan Barton, herself freezing on the long trip to Foe’s hideout from his creditors, resorts to the circle to protect herself from the elements: “I stretched out my arms and, with my head thrown back, began to turn in Friday’s dance. It is a way of drying my clothes . . . Otherwise I shall perish of cold. I felt my jaw relax, and heat, or the illusion of heat, begin to steal through my limbs” (103). She says: “for what I had seen in my trance, whatever it had been—I can summon back nothing distinct, yet felt a glow of after-memory, if you can

understand that—had been a message (but from whom?) to tell me there were other lives open to me than this one” (104). Such trance-like perspectives on life, however, have sometimes been read as signs of compromised ethical visions. Poyner describes the magistrate’s trance as unethical: “Each night, uninvited, [he] ritually bathes and oils her broken feet and in the process is lulled into a trance-like sleep, ironically oblivious of the presence of the girl herself. The Magistrate’s somnambulistic state is symptomatic of his lack of ethical vision” (60). As we will see later, this trance-like approach to ethics and writing is a mode of knowing that Coetzee claims for himself.

Moreover, as we can see also in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, art for Coetzee is a form of fertility ritual: when he has attempted the same writing project earlier in the novel, the magistrate waits for the “words to come,” but they do not, it being “appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write” (58). This connection between sexuality and writing, besides being a trope of gendered authorship, indicates how the urgency of authoring or political engagement can deform art and interfere with its place in the natural course of desire. Having failed to draw a story or ethical reaffirmation from the barbarian girl, the magistrate is struck by how she gets involved, with “no loss for words” in “banter” with the young joyful men accompanying them on the trip: “Perhaps if from the beginning I had known how to use this slap-happy joking lingo with her we might have warmed more to each other. But like a fool, instead of giving her a good time, I oppressed her with gloom. Truly, the world ought to belong to the singers and dancers” (63). Coetzee does not seem to agree with Eagleton that jocular and musical entertainment on the one hand and self-sacrifice on the other are embedded in the same faculty that distinguishes man from animal. Art is a form of pleasure practiced by human and nonhuman animals alike.

When Elizabeth Costello resigns herself to the possibility that she might not be granted admittance through the gate, she starts telling the panel of judges about frogs that populated the region where she grew up: “the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing” (217). In a statement that seems to win their approval, she tells the judges: “It is because of the indifference of those little frogs to my belief [that I tell you about them] (all they want from life is a chance to gobble down mosquitoes and sing; and the males among them, the ones who do most of the singing, sing not to fill the night air with melody but as a form of courtship, for which they hope to be rewarded with orgasm, the frog variety of orgasm, again and again and again)” (217).

One more function of art is a form of warding off, dealing with, or preparing for death. Foucault writes that the “link [between writing and death in modernity] subverts an old tradition exemplified by the Greek epic, which was intended to perpetuate the immortality of the hero: if he was willing to die young, it was so that his life, consecrated and magnified by death, might pass into immortality; the narrative then redeemed this accepted death” (142). However, “[o]ur culture has metamorphosed this idea of narrative, or writing, as something designed to ward off death. Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: it is now a voluntary effacement that does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer’s very existence. The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author’s murderer, as in the cases of Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka” (142). Moreover, the “relationship between writing and death is also manifested in the effacement of the writing subject’s individual characteristics. Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity

of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing” (142-43). However, the way Coetzee perceives the connection between art and mortality is significantly different from Foucault’s. The death that concerns Coetzee’s art is physical death and not the death that cancels individuality and singularity. Foucault conflates the two forms of death when he uses the *Arabian Nights* as an example: “In another way, the motivation, as well as the theme and the pretext of Arabian narratives—such as *The Thousand and One Nights*—was also the eluding of death: one spoke, telling stories into the early morning, in order to forestall death, to postpone the day of reckoning that would silence the narrator. Scheherazade’s narrative is an effort, renewed each night, to keep death outside the circle of life” (142). Coetzee’s characters, both human and non-human, produce art as a ritual that helps keep them within the circle of natural life or, if that is not possible, facilitates their passage into the realm of physical death.

Most of Coetzee’s novels are built around the theme of death. *The Life and Times of Michael K* begins with K’s journey to fulfill his mother’s wish for dying in the countryside of her youth, her death on the way, and then his search for the right place to bury her ashes. The text of *The Age of Iron* (1990) is presumably the terminally ill protagonist’s letter to her daughter to be read only after the former’s death. *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) follows Dostoevsky’s process of mourning his stepson’s death and finding a way to channel that grief through writing. *Summertime* is notionally a biography written after Coetzee’s own death.

To begin with a by now familiar text, we can see a clear interlocking between art and the process of dying in *Disgrace*. Coetzee draws an unmistakable parallel between Lurie’s toil on his operetta and his work at the animal clinic euthanizing animals with hopeless conditions:

When people bring a dog in they do not say straight out, ‘I have brought you this dog to kill,’ but that is what is expected: that they will dispose of it, make it disappear, dispatch

it to oblivion. What is being asked for is, in fact, *Lösung* (German always to hand with an appropriately blank abstraction): sublimation, as alcohol is sublimed from water, leaving no residue, no aftertaste.

So on Sunday afternoons the clinic door is closed and locked while he helps Bev Shaw *Lösen* the week's superfluous canines. One at a time he fetches them out of the cage at the back and leads or carries them into the theatre. To each in what will be its last minutes, Bev gives her fullest attention, stroking it, talking to it, easing its passage. If, more often than not, the dog fails to be charmed, it is because of his presence: he gives off the wrong smell (*They can smell your thoughts*), the smell of shame . . .

He thought he would get used to it. But that is not what happens. The more killings he assists in, the more jittery he gets. (142)

Earlier, soon after he has begun helping Bev ease the moment of death for the animals, she says to him: "I don't think we are ready to die, any of us, not without being escorted" (84).

Meanwhile Lurie grows particularly fond of a mangled dog, whom he names Drietpool, and he is unwilling to let him go. The operetta then starts to metamorphose into a way of making Drietpool's inescapable death easy both on the dog and on Lurie himself. By mixing the dog's howls with the music, Lurie attempts to gradually *Lösen* him: "The dog is fascinated by the sound of the banjo. When he strums the strings, the dog sits up, cocks its head, listens. When he hums Teresa's line . . . the dog smacks its lips and seems on the point of singing too, or howling" (215). Laurence Wright makes a connection between this moment, Lurie's erotic ethics (discussed in Chapter II), and art: "The German word *Lösung* means something like 'solution' or 'resolution.' Musically, in the course of the novel what had been conceived as a chamber opera . . . thins to a duet, a musical dialogue, between Teresa in her fifties and the shade of the dead

Byron, and finally to a one-sided, all absorbing ‘inner duet’ in which Lurie hears only the music of Teresa. The pattern, both musical and epistemological, culminates in the perfective—‘an action carried through to its conclusion’ . . .—after the final period” (161). Right after the Drietpool’s howl becomes notated in art and right before the final period in the novel, “[b]earing [the dog] in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. ‘I thought you would save him for another week,’ says Bev Shaw. ‘Are you giving him up?’ ‘Yes, I am giving him up’” (220). The selfish element, underscored by the sacrificial imagery, is hard to ignore, however.

The foregoing ritual is not designed to facilitate the moment of death for Drietpool only; the operetta is also the composer’s strategy of facing up to his own impending death, an inevitable fate signaled by physical decay, waning sexuality, and also significantly an inability to write. Lucy Graham argues that “Lurie’s work in the service of the dogs is not redemptive in itself,” seeing such conduct as “ineffectual, even self-indulgent, as he is possibly the only one who benefits from his fussiness about the treatment of the dead corpses. His care for the dogs could be seen as his attempt to recover redemption, or the grace that he feels he has lost” (11). Graham is right to see selfishness in Lurie’s ritual, but his ulterior motive is not a wish to reclaim grace. The act of giving up his favorite dog to death is a way of preparing himself for the same destiny. Chris Danta, on the other hand, better captures Lurie’s interest: “Lurie’s sympathetic treatment of the dead dogs . . . certainly puts him in relation to his own death—but a relation to death that is so pure it is somehow unconcerned with the possibility of personal redemption or grace” (733). In “Metamorphosis and Sexuality: Reading the Strange Passions of *Disgrace*,” Pamela Cooper also reads the act of surrendering Drietpool as a ritual, but she sees it as a form of self-saving sacrifice on Lurie’s part, a way of averting his own death:

Obviously a bowing to necessity, the relinquishing of the dog is nonetheless staged as a sacrifice, an offering . . . Coetzee reworks in a very strange way another primal scene of the Western aesthetic/religious tradition: the story of filial sacrifice. Abraham and Isaac, the seraph and the ram, hover here, as *Disgrace* evokes the redemptive turn enacted in that story—its narrative derailing—by the appearance of the angel/emissary and the ritual substitution of the animal body for the human. In this formulation, the definitive other, death, is called forth and banished at the same time . . . (35-6)

Cooper's wording represents "necessity" and "aesthetic/religious ritual" as opposites, but Coetzee's narrative impulse does not support this structure. Coetzee's fiction is an aesthetic "bowing" to necessity. By the standards of Arendt's call for the separation of art from life necessities, Coetzee's writing is nothing but a detour. Cooper rightly sees a disjunctive gesture in Coetzee's appropriation of the ritual: "this doubleness resides in the body of the animal, specifically the dog, which stands simultaneously in *Disgrace* for dignity and debasement, heroism and the mock-heroic, tragedy and parody. As the novel moves to its conclusion, the dog and the man become uneasy mates: spectral, loveless, and bound together, not by the unfolding future, but by the encroaching shadow of death" (34). The placing of dignity on the left side of the slash is effective and indicative of the narrative progression—it is dignity that is then overcome by debasement, which is fitting for a novel that does not perpetuate the traditional triumph of grace. Reading his decision to separate from his favorite animal as David Lurie's way of preparing for his own death is vindicated in a similar episode in *Elizabeth Costello*.

The elderly Costello's rumination on what it takes to get her to the other side of the gate can also be understood as a ritual for effecting a painless passage into the other world. Struggling

to come up with a statement of her beliefs as a writer (as demanded by the judges who will decide whether to let her pass), she recalls a scene in the *Odyssey* that has always haunted her:

Odysseus has descended into the kingdom of the dead to consult the seer Tiresias.

Following instructions, he digs a furrow, cuts the throat of his favorite ram, lets its blood flow into the furrow . . . The favorite ram of the king of Ithaca, so runs the story, yet treated in the end as a mere bag of blood, to cut open and be poured from. She could do the same, here and now: turn herself into a bag, cut her veins and let herself pour on to the pavement, into the gutter. For that, finally, is all it means to be alive: to be able to die.

Is this vision the sum of her faith: the vision of the ram and what happens to the ram?

Will it be a good enough story for them, her hungry judges? (211)

My reading of this rite of passage runs counter to readings of rites of passage as steps in terms of the development and construction of identity. In “Fluctuating Meanings: ‘Passage Rites’ in Ritual, Myth, *Odyssey*, and the Greek Romance,” Ken Dowden offers an exemplary reading of Odysseus’s journey in such terms:

Odysseus has achieved an identity, proved what he is through this passage. We have little awareness of what Odysseus is before this, perhaps the wily warrior of the *Iliad*, but afterwards he is a man with an *oikos* who has chosen and indeed *constructed* it in contrast to other less responsible and less civilized modes of existence. The identity of Odysseus is not a question that happens to be asked or raised because he travels a lot in countries where, for realistic reasons, he is not recognized; it is also about establishing what that identity is, how it impacts on others, and how it matters. (230)

My reading of Coetzee’s rituals shares little with Dowden’s reading of the *Odyssey*. On the contrary, I see Coetzee’s ritualistic writing as a process of surrendering all claims to responsible

and civilized existence and also of relinquishing all attachments to identity, recognition and worth in order to attain an anxiety-free mode of living. What I want to address, more specifically at this point, is how this connection between art, ritual and death relates to the question of death and power explored in the previous chapter.

My argument here is that writing can be a way of attaining the anxiety-free state of political death in a similar fashion to the king's two bodies ritual. Paul Patton sees this motif in David Lurie's surrender of his favorite dog to death, but, in this case, a death that has been redefined: David Lurie "becomes-dog but the favored dog becomes everything that he is now able to give up, including his honour, his intellectual pride and his attachment to life itself. He becomes capable of letting go of his social and personal identity. He gives up the state of grace for the disgrace of dying, but only once dying has been revalued to incorporate identification with an impersonal and indeterminate life, the cosmic life" (117). Hence, I argue that in Coetzee writing as a death ritual eliminates the spectral horror from the inevitability of physical death through the power of narrative to re-imagine physical death as anxiety-free political death. By depicting what lies after death, narrative tries to neutralize the ultimate fear and to answer the perennial query best articulated by Hamlet. Moreover, by highlighting and parading the hardships of life, death becomes more palatable.

Coetzee, the object of the posthumous "biography" *Summertime*, is consistent with the protagonist of the two earlier semi-fictional memoirs *Boyhood* and *Youth*: stressed, anxious, struggling, lacking confidence in both his physical and intellectual self. In the words of former lovers and acquaintances, the aspiring writer is "not an at-ease person" (231), "socially inept" (20), "very much the tortoise" (238), an "unimportant little man" (293). What better way to ease one's passage than a performance that plays back one's life as nothing but misery. Here also we

have one of the strongest indications of art as a self-contained biological process of healing and dealing with pain: Julia Frankl, a former lover, describes John's first novel *Dusklands* as "self-administered therapy," a project wherein the fledgling novelist hoped to "block cruel and violent impulses in every arena of his life—including his love life, I might say—and channel them into his writing" (58). In his review of the novel, John Reese Moore sees luxury that can only be attributed to the fact that the person—whose life is being narrated—is already dead: "How lucky can you be? Here is a man who can indulge in the delicious irony of writing about his younger self after he is dead" (Ixxxiv). Moore, however, locates the luxury not exactly in the fact that John is over such tribulation as much as in the fact that he later comes to achieve success and fame (even though he is dead): "A famous writer, he has attracted a biographer who goes to the trouble of hunting up five people who knew him when he was young and unpromising. They describe him as awkward, shy, bumbling, withdrawn, and unattractive. None of them give the slightest inkling of what he was to become" (Ixxxiv). If the title of the novel does make a hint to the Gershwin Lullaby, then it can only be a summertime where the fictitious novelist now resides and where the real one expects to. The lullaby, one might say, is a ritual in the sense that it provides emotional escort for passage from one state to another.

My labeling of *Summertime* as its author's own death lullaby gains more credence when we read it in light of Costello's son's words of comfort to his mother at the end of her self-torturing lecture on animal cruelty—"She turns on him a tearful face . . . He pulls the car over, switches off the engine, takes his mother in his arms. He inhales the smell of cold cream, of old flesh. 'There, there,' he whispers in her ear. 'There, there. It will soon be over'" (69). Stephen Mulhall offers the following take on this moment:

What, then, are we to make of John's final words to his mother? *What* will soon be over? He begins by addressing her as if she is one of his children—her progress towards the grave or the urn returning her to the condition of childhood, and the need to be mothered by someone she mothered (or failed to). This context suggests that what will soon be over is her need to be so comforted (her childlike, tearful immersion in her overwhelming emotional state). The context provided by his sense of smell—cold cream, old flesh—suggests that what will soon be over is her time in this apparently insane world, a world that is making of her final years a hell on earth. (135)

To be sure, this is not the way of accepting death commonly described—without much thought—as facing death with “dignity” or “grace.” It is an acceptance that is only possible when death is re-imagined as an escape. It is undignified and cowardly, in a way, but it is convenient and functional.

Writing as a (selfish) escort to death figures prominently in *Age of Iron*. Coetzee frames the text as a letter written over a period of three years by the terminally ill Elizabeth Curren to her daughter, who is self-exiled in the United States as a gesture of protest against apartheid. The letter also, in a technical twist, includes dialogue with other people, especially with the taciturn and not very sympathetic vagrant Vercueil who takes up residence at Mrs. Curren's house the day she receives her cancer diagnosis, which is also the day she begins writing. In the same way that David Lurie's operetta might never be performed, the letter might never be read. *We* read that she repeatedly requests Vercueil to post the letter after her death, but he is hesitant and we never know whether he eventually does. Mrs. Curren's stated motive for requesting that the letter be read post mortem is selflessness: she does not want her daughter to interpret the letter as a

plea for help. The letter, I argue, constructs the imagined daughter-mother reader as a comforter in the face of death (in the same way that Costello's comforter is a son-mother).

The first time Mrs. Curren evokes her daughter as the potential reader of the letter, the first time she addresses her directly, she writes:

How I longed for you to be here, to hold me, comfort me! I begin to understand the first meaning of the embrace. We embrace to be embraced. We embrace our children to be folded in the arms of the future, to pass ourselves on beyond death, to be transported. That is how it was when I embraced you, always. We bear children in order to be mothered by them . . .

To live! You are my life; I love you as I love life itself . . .

The first task laid on me, from today: to resist the craving to share my death. Loving you, loving life, to forgive the living and take my leave without bitterness. To embrace my death as my own, mine alone.

To whom this writing then? The answer: to you but not to you; to me; to you in me. (5-6)

In her "Writing in the Face of Death" chapter on the novel, Poyner argues that Mrs. Curren's "writing is imbued with self-interest. In his theory of the categorical imperative Immanuel Kant argues that morality is premised on duty: an act is only morally good if it stems from a sense of duty, untainted by ulterior motives . . . The letter violates the ethics of gift-giving because, rather than simply conveying mother-love, it is her means of uncovering self-truths" (*Coetzee* 118). Hence, following the fictitious assessment of Coetzee's *Dusklands*, we can see Curren's letter as "self-administered therapy." Her designated reader is none but Mrs Curren herself, reading simultaneously as she writes—"to you but not to you; to me; to you in me" (6). For all we know, the daughter can be imaginary, a prosthetic audience that facilitates the writing process (some

might argue that writing is actually impossible without readers, real or implied, an issue to which I shall return). She notes that every person and object she mentions (we would assume the daughter too) is a projection of herself for the purpose of dealing with pain—to produce writing in lieu of or as moaning. Speaking of Vercueil, she writes:

Six pages already, and all about a man you have never met and never will. Why do I write about him? Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself in a way that can be written. Otherwise what would this writing be but a kind of moaning, now high, now low? When I write about him I write about myself. When I write about his dog I write about myself; when I write about the house I write about myself. Man, house, dog: no matter what the word, through it I stretch a hand to you. In another world I would not need words. I would appear on your doorstep. “I have come for a visit,” I would say, and that would be the end of words: I would embrace you and be embraced. But in this world, in this time, I must reach out to you in words. So day by day I render myself into words and pack the words into the page like sweets: like sweets for my daughter, for her birthday, for the day of her birth. (9)

When Mrs. Curren has established her daughter and herself as one, the emphatic preclusion of any future meeting between the daughter and Vercueil can only mean that the latter does not exist in reality, furthering the implication that the letter is not meant to be read. Mrs. Curren sets up this writing as a ritual wherein she can *Lösen*, sublimate herself into letters and hence into words. Having also established her writing as a substitute for or a form of moaning, she goes on to note that primal moaning comes out as art, a melody with a tonality that is “now high, now low,” bringing narrative closer and closer to Schopenhauer’s combination of the physical and the metaphysical in music.

Yet, to argue that everybody in the narrative is an invention has proven problematic. An important issue in critical work on the novel, naturally, has been how to read the political and historical realities of apartheid that unfold alongside the process of Mrs. Curren's private death. Coetzee himself suggests that there is an uneasy co-existence between the political and the private in the novel: "Elizabeth Curren brings to bear against the voices of history and historical judgment that resound around her . . . the authority of . . . a private death . . . To me as a writer, as *the* writer in this case, the outcome of this contest—what is to count as classic in South Africa—is irrelevant. What matters is that the contest is staged, that the dead have their say, even those who speak from a totally untenable historical position . . . What is of importance in what I have just said is the phrasing: the phrases *is staged, is heard*; not *should be staged, should be heard*" (*Doubling* 250). Nonetheless, as Parry notes, the "novel which speaks an intimacy with death was welcomed in reviews as an allegory where the narrator's affliction with cancer is a figure of a diseased body politic—and certainly this is a connection which her rhetoric insistently makes" (162). Parry argues that "since the narrative of Mrs. Curren's dying occupies a different discursive space from the story of South Africa's bloody interregnum, her terminal illness is detached from the demise of a malignant social order" (162). I agree with Parry's assessment that the political malady occupies a sphere detached from the immediacy of Mrs. Curren's disease; I would even argue that the political plays a peripheral role and a subservient function in Mrs. Curren's narrative about her own death.

When Bheki, the black youth she has come to know closely, is killed by police, Mrs. Curren writes: "I cried . . . for Bheki. Wherever I turned he was before me, his eyes open in the look of childish puzzlement with which he had met his death. Head on arms I sobbed, grieving for him, for what had been taken from him, for what had been taken from me" (109). Bheki's

death is then immediately isolated from history and subsumed within Mrs. Curren's personal exercise on life and death. Bheki is a personification of Mrs. Curren's own "childish puzzlement" in the face of death, a puzzlement that one cannot be sure whether she is trying to nurture or eliminate. "I want to go home!"—she recalls saying after Bheki's death, and she traces that utterance to an inborn and unconscious knowledge of death: "From an old person's throat a child's voice. Home to my safe house, to my bed of childhood slumber. Have I ever been fully awake? I might as well ask: Do the dead know they are dead? No: to the dead it is not given to know anything. But in our dead sleep we may at least be visited by intimations. I have intimations older than any memory, unshakable, that once upon a time I was alive. Was alive and then was stolen from life" (109). Mrs. Curren is rehashing Hamlet's canonic musings on seeking refuge from anxiety in the "sleep of death": as Hamlet puts it, it is "dread" of the "undiscover'd country" after death that "puzzles" the wish to escape pain ("the thousand shocks that flesh is heir to") and humiliation ("scorns," "contumely," "despised love," "insolence," and "the spurns that patient merit from the unworthy takes") (Shakespeare 78-9). In order to neutralize that fear of the known, Mrs. Curren employs a self-serving strategy of broaching the gap between life and death. She injects life into death through the channel of "intimations": the dead have mystical intimations of life while the living possess the same with regard to death.

Intimations constitute a mode of knowledge claimed by Coetzee himself, one he opposes to the rational, experiential mode. Asked whether he sees himself as a "herald" of a new ethical community," Coetzee tells Attwell: "To be a herald you would have to have slipped your chains for a while and wandered about in the real world . . . I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations . . . of people slipping their chains" (*Doubling* 341). Mrs. Curren's rite of passage into death thus combines the

transcendental (intimations/dreams) and the organic (the intimations are passed down from mother to daughter): “That is the reason . . . I cling so tightly to the memory of my mother. For if she did not give me life, no one did. I cling not just to the memory of her but to her herself, to her body, to my birth from her body into the world. In blood and milk I drank her body and came to life. And then was stolen, and have been lost ever since” (110). The ending reaffirms the nature of the narrative as a rite of passage in the form of words circulating from the narrator through the daughter and back, a reach to embrace and be embraced back that makes death easier: “The time is nearly upon me when I will have to depend on help for the most intimate things. High time, then, to put an end to this sorry story . . . I am going to release you soon from this rope of words . . .” (196-97). The parallel between the narrative string and the umbilical cord is unmistakable.

Writing in the sketches I explored above is a way of channeling pain and pleasure rather than a forum for debating good and evil. Like Tommy’s art, it is a form of pleading for life or a ritual of preparing for death. After penning his plea, “We would have made any concession, had we only known what, to go on living here. This was paradise on earth,” the magistrate reflects back on the collection of engraved poplar slips that were recovered from ancient relics near his post, and that he has been bent on deciphering: “For a long while I stare at the plea I have written. It would be disappointing to know that the poplar slips I have spent so much time on contain a message as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible as this” (154). Coetzee’s writers do not meet the Kantian standards of dignity. They use their craft as an instrument for the fulfillment of their needs as sensuous beings. Their work is not intended to elevate them in status above bestiality as it only accomplishes in a particular way what instinct generally accomplishes in all animals.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

The research conducted in this dissertation demonstrates that the notion of human dignity is invested in political paraphernalia rather than in humans' real comfort, material gain, peace, and safety from abuse. Human dignity's epistemes—self-assertion, recognition, political action, public-spiritedness, responsibility, resistance, the denial of animal instinct, sacrifice—should not be human ideals, for they are exactly the opposite of the sovereign's characteristics and because they are responsible for recursive violence that preserves the *status quo*. They should be replaced with ethics based on sensuous interest, instinct, and natural-spiritedness or a sense of oneness with other living beings.

My anti-dignity position does in part champion the pursuit of economic gain as an ethical value. While this idea might sound repulsive as it is associated with “cut-throat capitalism,” I hope that the notion gains sympathy from our insight into how pursuit of personal interest translates into material relief for the disadvantaged and abused as opposed to token recognition of their dignity or, even worse, dignity blocking their access to such relief. The critique advanced in this dissertation should lend support to a form of ethics more appreciative of *zoē*, pleasure and sensuous interest, and where compassion and charity might then flourish as an alternative to the burdensome mandates of responsibility.

The spirit of divine bestiality explored above can be used to displace the discourse of human dignity. For, the only ethical terrain possible is one that includes humans and brutes alike, an ethical ground that has no place for the notions of dignity and humiliation. We should

promote an ethic of *desiring* to help, in lieu of the Kantian idea that only benevolence from principle, rather than instinct, has ethical value. Promoting an ethical culture of desire-based rather than human dignity-based rights is a step in the right direction. Evident from the forgoing discussion, human dignity, despite its egalitarian pretensions, is deeply rooted in rivalry, confrontation, and competition. Therefore, I hope that demoting such an ideal will lead to less economic, cultural and political competition and, hence, to a life oriented toward mere subsistence, common prosperity and peace. Less dignity can lead to less greed and to wider availability of resources.

Moreover, valuing humans who act only on instinct, with no regard for calls to political action and recognition, might be a step towards preventing large-scale crimes committed in the name of ideals that fall within the domain of human dignity. In other words, finding ethical value in the mentality of the undignified living being who seeks only to survive rather than in that of the dignity-bent political activist might be a better antidote to future political crimes and genocide.

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