Chapter 4 examines the writing of J. M. Coetzee in the context of late apartheid South Africa, where the call to political responsibility returns with a new urgency. Coetzee breaks with this consensus, maintaining a commitment to aesthetic autonomy through his investment in a European modernist tradition that incorporates the art of hunger. In a context where hunger itself was highly politicized, Coetzee’s 1983 novel *Life & Times of Michael K* produces an anti-politics of hunger, whose autonomy rests in the disjuncture between its white author and its Coloured protagonist. Pursuing this argument through a genetic reading of the novel’s drafts, this chapter shows how this novel was written out of and against both the debates about art and politics in apartheid-era South Africa, and the emerging theoretical positions that governed Coetzee’s international anglophone academic context at this moment.

**Keywords:** J. M. Coetzee, South Africa, apartheid, race, hunger, *Life & Times of Michael K*
On December 3, 1971, J. M. Coetzee was newly returned to South Africa from the US, where he had taught at SUNY Buffalo and completed a Ph.D. at the University of Texas at Austin. Seeking a publisher for “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee,” a novella that would later be published as part of his first novel *Dusklands*, the young Coetzee made his first approaches to the British publisher Calder and Boyars, and to seven American literary agents. Conceding that his novella “is of no historical value, in the narrower sense,” he argues that it nonetheless “does trace a line between so-called autonomous fictions and the psychology of the conquistador.”¹ The letters go on to underscore this line, comparing his work favorably to “Calley’s recent work on My Lai”—a dark joke about the conflicting stories told at trial by a US officer who had been convicted over the My Lai massacres in Vietnam earlier that year—before conceding, in the letters to agents (but not to Calder and Boyars), the likelihood that “it will never win a massive readership.”² While the absence of a projected readership shows Coetzee aligning himself with a model of aesthetic autonomy that refuses the demands of the market as part of the paradoxical attempt to sell his work, the analogy between his writing and Calley’s fabrications suggests that this autonomy carries potentially significant political import.
Nonetheless, the politics that emerges from Coetzee’s “autonomous fictions” is, in its link to the “psychology of the conquistador,” not necessarily the politics that many of his readers, past and present, have wished. South African literary culture in the 1970s and 1980s increasingly understood literature’s role as part of a larger project of anti-apartheid liberation and, with striking consensus, rejected aesthetic autonomy for its (p.157) failure to contribute to this project. While many proponents of aesthetic autonomy have, as we have seen, sought to defend it by claiming that it too is a practice of freedom, Coetzee’s letters also reject this position, linking aesthetic autonomy to structures of oppression and the worldview of those who uphold such structures. His writing, that is, carries forward the art of hunger’s understanding of aesthetic autonomy as fundamentally unfree. Reprising this conviction in the highly politicized literary field of late apartheid South Africa and in a context where hunger itself is a political instrument, he reimagines the unfreedom of this tradition in explicitly political terms. In this sense, Coetzee’s art of hunger is a specifically South African one, linking its claim that autonomy is unfree with the anti-apartheid attack on aesthetic autonomy as the tool of a colonial elite.
This chapter assumes that, as Jarad Zimbler has argued, to understand Coetzee’s early fiction requires us to read it within the literary field of apartheid South Africa, whose debates and anxieties shape it.\(^3\) In this context, as the 1970s turned into the 1980s, the intense politicization of South Africa’s post-Soweto literary field came to echo the dilemma of post-Vichy France, producing a field whose politicization was so thoroughgoing that to declare one’s art autonomous was to be taken to occupy a political position. For a white South African with an Afrikaner surname like Coetzee, to insist on the autonomy of art was to risk complicity with the status quo—to risk assent to the apartheid regime. Coetzee’s writing in the 1980s therefore develops out of a complex maneuver that seeks to defend an autonomous position, while refusing the co-optation of this autonomy to a conservative politics. This is the context in which Coetzee delivered his widely quoted 1987 address “The Novel Today” as part of the Weekly Mail Book Week. Reprising the commitment to “autonomous fiction” first signaled in the 1971 letters, in the 1987 lecture he mounts a defense of the “novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions...a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process...perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of the paradigms of history.”\(^4\) Arguing for the specificity of literature as “another, an other mode of thinking,” he maintains that such a mode is valuable—and politically powerful—precisely because of its capacity to usurp history’s discursive position.\(^5\) The autonomy of literature, in this account, allows literature to reflect upon the discourse of history and, he (p.158) implies, to engage more broadly with contemporary political and cultural concerns from this putatively autonomous position. Autonomy is defensible because it is, after all, political.
“The Novel Today,” with its beleaguered tone, testifies to the closing of the structural and intellectual space for literature outside politics in the final years of apartheid. While this lecture attempts to solve the dilemma by politicizing autonomy, however, this chapter focuses on the text and archive of Coetzee’s fourth novel, *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), which, I argue, suggests that literary autonomy, in order to remain autonomous, must embrace a form of anti-politics. The drafts of *Michael K* play out the tension between aesthetic autonomy and political engagement in the evolution of their narrative and intertexts, culminating in a text that, with its starving protagonist in the lineage of Bartleby, Kafka’s hunger artist, and Hamsun’s *Hunger* narrator, takes up a position within the art of hunger tradition. Like earlier texts of the art of hunger, *Michael K* offers a response to the twinned contemporary crises of aesthetic autonomy and modernism, by way of the figure of starvation. In a political context in which hunger itself carries a powerful political charge, however, Coetzee’s manifestation of the art of hunger explores the divergence of aesthetic from political autonomy, reanimating the art of hunger’s unfree aesthetic autonomy in a context where such a disavowal of literature’s political potency was anathema. By taking the art of hunger as the site for testing the intersection of aesthetic and political autonomy, *Life & Times of Michael K* imports the art of hunger’s claims about autonomy into the political sphere. It takes on the schism that the art of hunger establishes between autonomy and freedom, as Michael K, the last of the hunger artists, transforms the aesthetics of the art of hunger into an anti-politics.
Michael K reveals Coetzee triangulating his defense of aesthetic autonomy against two other, less immediate, literary contexts. As I have been suggesting throughout this book, the story of the art of hunger is a story of the collapse and delegitimization of social contexts for aesthetic autonomy. In this context, the modernist legacy of the art of hunger provides an imagined counter-field, an alternate context, in which the notion of aesthetic autonomy can be sustained and extended. At the same time, this constructed modernist canon is embedded within a more concrete and contemporary literary field in Coetzee’s address to a transnational literary and academic elite for whom modernism remained an important touchstone. Addressing himself as a provincial writer to the metropolitan centers of power, as he does in the 1971 letters, he seeks to locate himself within literary systems of value that speak above all to the value of autonomy, and to find a global audience that prizes this concept where his local peers do not. For Coetzee, this global audience was to a significant extent an academic one. As a result, his defense of aesthetic autonomy develops by reading South African critiques of the idea through theoretical debates about the relationship between literature, politics, and autonomy that emanated from the US academy during the 1970s and 1980s. These debates taught Coetzee a pessimism about the terms in which political freedom was imagined in South Africa. In doing so, they provided an alternate literary field into which Coetzee could insert his writing, in which both modernism and aesthetic autonomy retained their credibility.

1. Modernist Autonomy Under Apartheid
The debates over aesthetic autonomy that ran throughout twentieth-century literary culture were perhaps nowhere more vehement than in South African writing during the dying days of apartheid. Against the backdrop of mounting international criticism and growing internal resistance that seemed, to people at all points on the political spectrum, to augur the regime’s imminent collapse, politics seeped into all aspects of life. In this context, writers—both black and white—increasingly felt themselves bound by what Afrikaner writer André Brink called “that responsibility one owes to one’s society and one’s time”—a responsibility almost always conceived in immediately political terms, as the responsibility to describe and critique the injustices of apartheid. Reading South African literary discourse of the 1980s, what is immediately striking is the almost unanimous consensus that political engagement must be the primary locus of literary activity, a consensus that echoes and amplifies the sentiments of the French literary field of the 1940s. Louise Bethlehem remarks on the “rhetoric of urgency” and the “commitment to literary truth-telling” that pervades (and, she believes, constrains) literary discourse of this era. In such a context, claims for autonomous art appear not so much irrelevant as downright irresponsible, a refusal of one’s immediate political duties that could only lend succor to the racist status quo. As Nadine Gordimer argued, “In South Africa the ivory tower is bulldozed anew with every black man’s home destroyed to make way for a white man’s.”
The consensus over the necessity of literary commitment grew throughout the 1970s, until by the early 1980s aesthetic autonomy had been widely discredited. The emergence of this consensus can be traced in the gradual fall from grace of the Sestigers, a group of experimental young Afrikaner writers, active in the 1960s and influenced by the literary innovations of post-war European writing. The Sestigers were perhaps the most prominent apartheid-era writers to embrace what Jarad Zimbler and André Brink variously call “art for the sake of art” or “l’art pur.” By the end of the 1960s, however, their preference for literary experiment over political engagement had led to a split within the group, with Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and Jan Rabie arguing for “the need for literature to take arms within and against the socio-political realities of South Africa.” By 1983, Brink was able to argue that “most of the key figures among the Sestigers, including those who had initially argued very strongly against commitment, have in the course of the 1970s broadened the scope of their writing to include the contemporary South African scene.” If the opposition between aesthetic autonomy and political engagement constituted a real debate at the beginning of the 1970s, when Coetzee first described his writing as autonomous, by the early 1980s, when he began writing Michael K, autonomy no longer seemed a viable position, even for its formerly most devout adherents. By the final years of the 1980s, the collapsing status of aesthetic autonomy had seriously tarnished the Sestigers’ reputation, leading to a growing critical consensus that they represented an unfortunate and embarrassing aberration in South African literature, irretrievably compromised by what Martin Trump calls their “enormous political naivety” and what Neil Lazarus, slightly more generously, suggests was their “failure...to resist appropriation by a neutralizing tradition.”
One of the pressures that paralleled and contributed to this growing politicization of literary discourse was the growth of the state’s censorship apparatus over the course of the 1960s, which intensified during the 1970s. As censorship became increasingly draconian, authors not only became politicized in defense of their right to say what they would, but also, as Zimbler argues, came to see “bannings...as signs of election, as evidence that the publication or person in question had been deemed sufficiently political by the state.” In this context, censorship paradoxically increased the importance of political engagement to South African literature. The relationship between censorship and the claim to aesthetic autonomy is a complex one in the South African context. On the one hand, the censor is a figure of the state’s denial of literature’s privileged social position and its exertion of its power over the literary, and in this sense censorship denies that literature may have any sovereignty or autonomy in its own right. This is Coetzee’s position, and he goes so far as to argue that “the censor forces him [the writer] to internalize a contaminating reading,” suggesting that censorship compromises literary autonomy not just after the fact, but in the very moment of composition. On the other hand, as Peter D. McDonald has shown in his study of censorship under apartheid, censors saw themselves as “officially certified guardians of the literary” and, in keeping with this position, frequently—if somewhat sporadically and capriciously—passed works that they believed held sufficient literary merit. In this, they espoused a position of qualified support for literature’s autonomy, a belief not only that a work’s “literariness” merits special consideration, but that it necessarily limits its political power, along with its intended audience. As Zimbler suggests, this situation “inevitably contributed to the general opinion that avant-garde literature was complicit or, at best, politically irrelevant.” It had a similar effect on the position of aesthetic autonomy itself, amplifying the politicization of literary discourse by increasing the sense that the recourse to pure art was itself an act of complicity with the apartheid regime.
For all Coetzee’s antagonism towards censorship’s attack on literary autonomy, he was one of the beneficiaries of the exemption on grounds of literary merit. None of his three novels vetted by the censorship authorities—*In the Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *Life & Times of Michael K*—was ultimately banned. While in each case the censor flagged potentially problematic elements, each was passed because of their lack of popular appeal, their literary experimentation, and their lack of geographic and historical specificity—all elements of a classic humanist definition of aesthetic autonomy. The censor’s report on *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in fact, is striking in its echo of Coetzee’s own sense of his works’ autonomy, pointing out the “Kafkaesque” qualities of the narrative and arguing against banning it in part because, “Though the book has considerable literary merit, it quite lacks popular appeal.” The proximity between Coetzee’s and the censors’ defenses of autonomous literary value was clearly uncomfortable, and it underscored the suspicion, prevalent in South African literary culture of the time, that the appeal to autonomy was not a neutral position but one which, intentionally or otherwise, provided tacit support for the unacceptable status quo.
Nonetheless, Coetzee’s discomfort with the tension between autonomy and responsibility was not entirely unique. Despite the vehemence of the disavowal of aesthetic autonomy, statements about literature by white South African writers in this period suggest a contentious, unsettled relationship between the demand for political engagement and the pull towards aesthetic autonomy. In her influential 1982 essay “Living in the Interregnum,” Nadine Gordimer finds herself trapped between “two absolutes”: “One is that racism is evil... The other is that a writer is a being in whose sensibility is fused what Lukács calls ‘the duality of inwardness and outside world,’ and he must never be asked to sunder this union.”

Gordimer’s second certainty is not precisely a claim for the autonomy of literature in any absolute sense, but it does maintain that art has its own internal logic whose preservation—even in the face of external demands—is central to its status as literature. Going on to argue that, at least in the contemporary South African context, “the coexistence of these absolutes often seems irreconcilable within one life,” Gordimer points up not only the difficulty of carving out a space in which art can operate under its own internal laws, but also the continuing impulse to do so.

This vestigial desire to maintain the autonomy of the aesthetic realm makes sense in light of the literary canon that late apartheid white South Africans constructed for themselves. This canon centers around European modernism, reaching back to its nineteenth-century precursors and forward to its post-World War II heirs, but always gravitating inexorably around writing from Europe, across a range of European languages, from the early twentieth century. In their essays, writers like Brink and Gordimer develop their theories of literature by constant and explicit reference to modernist writers, from Joyce and Eliot to Céline and Kafka. The interweaving of quotations from these Europeans with their own thoughts speaks to the extent to which this tradition has been assimilated into their own thinking about literature. References to South African literature, in contrast, are widespread, but tend to be engaged more as an object of analysis than as fully assimilated cultural touchstones.
Given the centrality of European modernism to South African literary culture, it is perhaps unsurprising that later critics should have sought to read South African letters through the lens of theorists whose ideas have developed out of precisely this modernist tradition. But in this electric political environment, the importance of aesthetic autonomy to such theories has posed a particular challenge for critics seeking to bring European modernist thinkers and European thinkers of modernism to bear on apartheid South Africa. Neil Lazarus, for example, has argued that an Adorno-influenced reading of South African modernism requires that ‘Adorno’s preference for ‘autonomous’ over ‘committed’ art is seen to be contingently rather than abstractly and aesthetically motivated’—an extraordinary claim, given the centrality of aesthetic autonomy to Adorno’s theory of art. More recently, Jarad Zimbler has offered a Bourdieusian account of the apartheid-era South African literary field, which similarly requires a redefinition of aesthetic autonomy so that it describes, not autonomy as a denial of social, commercial, or political claims upon the artist, but rather “a particular state of the literary field, one in which the relevant mode or modes of evaluation are chosen by the artists themselves.” By redefining autonomy in this way, Zimbler ensures that it need not entail a retreat from social or political commitment, allowing him to suggest that South Africa’s political literature is not the opposite of autonomy, but rather an expression of it. For both critics, the centrality of political art—a category that neither Adorno nor Bourdieu are able to find a place for—to the South African literary environment necessitates a whole-scale reinvention of aesthetic theories with which they engage.
Zimbler and Lazarus both have recourse to theories of literature that have been developed out of an analysis of modernism—out of Beckett and Kafka, in the case of Adorno; and out of the aestheticism of late nineteenth-century France, in the case of Bourdieu—and that, as a consequence, place aesthetic autonomy at their center. The South African critics, however, subvert this equation from within, maintaining the modernist theoretical frameworks while denying the demands of autonomy. In this sense, both Lazarus and Zimbler show how apartheid-era South African literary culture presents a serious challenge to theories of literature that derive from modernism, within which the significance of some model of aesthetic autonomy can seem like a given. Their theoretical revisions reflect autonomy’s tortured, delegitimized place in South African (p.164) letters, even as it echoes the extent to which South African literary culture of this period remains deeply and self-consciously indebted to European modernism. The intense ambivalence that aesthetic autonomy generates in these critics is a feature not only of the critics themselves, but also of the white apartheid-era South African literary establishment that they are describing, torn as it is between a political investment in engaged art and an aesthetic commitment to the literary tradition most closely associated with aesthetic autonomy.
The tension between aesthetic autonomy and “responsibility” comes clearly into focus where “engaged” South African writers seek to enter into dialogue with “autonomous” European authors. Here Beckett offers a particularly instructive example, given that he functions as an important figure in both apartheid-era South African literary discourse and the post-war reconfiguration of aesthetic autonomy that I discuss in Chapter 2. Both Brink and Gordimer have recourse to Beckett at moments where they find themselves seeking to work through the relationship between autonomy and engagement. For Brink, Beckett—writing *Watt* while in hiding in Roussillon during World War II—becomes an example of what it is to “écrire dangereusement,” equating Beckett’s political and aesthetic activities in such a way as to efface his impulse towards autonomy.23 Similarly, in “The Essential Gesture,” Gordimer seeks to redefine what I describe in Chapter 2 as Beckett’s grappling with autonomy, making it instead into an abstract mode of responsibility. For Gordimer, “Through a transformation by style—depersonalized laconicism of the word almost to the Word—Samuel Beckett takes on as his essential gesture a responsibility direct to human destiny, and not to any local cell of humanity,” a position made possible because, Gordimer argues, “His place—not Warsaw, San Salvador, Soweto—had nothing specific to ask of him.”24

Running through both Gordimer’s and Brink’s readings of Beckett is the impulse to save him from the unspoken charge of “art for art’s sake,” or what Martin Trump, writing critically of the European allegiances of the Sestigers, dismisses as “the historically truncated works of Beckett, Artaud, Sartre and Ionesco.”25 Both Brink and Gordimer, in contrast, seek a hidden mode of responsibility in Beckett’s writing. Both these readings, however, produce uncharacteristic blind spots: Gordimer’s necessitates the effacement of the serious demands placed on writers in France during and immediately after World War II, a situation that her frequent recourse to Camus shows her to be intimately aware of, while Brink’s ignores the significant gap between the text of *Watt* and its context of production. Such blind spots are symptomatic of the tense attempt to reconcile European modernism with the call to responsibility that characterizes white South African literature’s uncomfortable relationship to modernist autonomy.
Coetzee’s more ambivalent sense of the author’s political responsibility is reflected in his rather different engagement with Beckett’s work. Where Brink and Gordimer seek to articulate Beckett’s responsibility as a writer, Coetzee’s most prolonged engagement with the Irishman’s writing is his 1969 doctoral dissertation on Beckett’s English fiction, and a series of articles based on this and similar research during the 1970s. All of these articles apply computational stylistics in his quest for “the ideal of mathematical formalization”—a reading of Beckett that maximizes and exaggerates his texts’ formalism, reading them as a series of permutations on sets of words. At the same time, Beckett also marks, for Coetzee, the limit case for his espousal of aesthetic autonomy. Since at least the early 1970s, Coetzee has been vicious in his attacks on Beckett’s late prose, which he described in a 1973 essay on *Lessness* as “a formalization or stylization of autodestruction” that is also a form of “automatism,” and, in the 1992 *Doubling the Point* interviews, as “disembodied” and “posthumous.” This repudiation of Beckett’s late writing suggests that for Coetzee the living body represents the limit of aesthetic autonomy. Elsewhere in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee affirms that his own fiction erects “a simple (simple-minded?) standard” in the body, and links this to the South African context, claiming that, “in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body.” In dispensing with the body, Beckett becomes, for Coetzee, not a covert practitioner of political commitment, but a cautionary tale of aesthetic autonomy taken too far. More broadly, Beckett’s reading of Coetzee shows him participating in his broader literary culture’s tendency to form their aesthetic principles by testing European modernism against the political exigencies of contemporary South Africa.
While claims for the “modernism” of South African writing are common, however—Lazarus argues as much as far back as 1989—the importation of the term to Africa, particularly via studies of influence, has been deeply controversial. In an influential 1976 essay on Charles Larson’s *The Emergence of African Literature*, Ayi Kwei Armah disputes Larson’s claim (p.166) that he was influenced by James Joyce, attributing “this language of indebtedness and borrowing and influence” to “a none too subtle way Western commentators have of saying Africa lacks original creativity.” Nicholas Brown, more recently, has followed Armah, opening his study of African literature and European modernism by reminding us that, “In the context of African literature and modernism, we have been permanently warned away from influence study by Ayi Kwei Armah’s funny but devastating response to Charles Larson’s *The Emergence of African Fiction*.”
Nonetheless, the stakes and significance of modernism in Africa are quite different when we turn our attention from the black anti-colonial literature that is Brown’s primary focus, towards the white South African writing that is mine. While black African literature has often understood the European intellectual tradition, including European modernism, as an extension of colonial hegemony, white South African writing, especially of the apartheid era, is uncomfortably aware that its status as a settler literature leaves it suspended between European and African frames of reference. Coetzee uses the term “white writing” to describe this literature written by “a people no longer European, not yet African.” As he acknowledges in a 2003 interview, in response to a question about his relationship to South Africa, he himself is “a late representative of the vast movement of European expansionism,” and his “intellectual allegiances are clearly European, not African.” The hint of the derivative and the taint of colonialism that make modernism such an uncomfortable frame of analysis for black African literature are, in contrast, constitutive features of white South African writing. White South Africa’s fraught relationship to European modernism thus underscores the “provincial” status that Coetzee attributes to South Africa during this period. These white South African writers sit uncomfortably between the poles Tim Woods identifies of “European artists [who] looked to Africa for borrowings to revitalize what was perceived to be a flagging and insipid aesthetics,” and “African writers [who] borrowed from European modernism for the purposes of promoting a radical politics of counter-colonialism.” For white South Africans, modernism dramatized not the turn to counter-colonial politics, but the uncomfortable awareness of the colonial frame of their aesthetic preferences and positions.
The claim of a genealogy with European literature thus serves, particularly for Coetzee, as a way of acknowledging the political reality that binds white South Africans to colonization, and therefore a way of gesturing towards the foundational illegitimacy, the original sin, of white settler culture. In this context, the autonomy that these writers acknowledge as the historically specific by-product of a certain moment of European culture is already political in a very specific way, because it enters the South African scene as part of the legacy of colonialism. It is significant, therefore, that the anxieties about aesthetic autonomy belong more or less exclusively to white South African writing. While black South African literature of this period certainly has its debates and controversies, they turn not on the question of whether art should be autonomous, but on how best to engage with the political reality in which they find themselves. Thus, Njabulo S. Ndebele’s influential essay “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary,” sometimes linked to debates within white South African letters about the status of the aesthetic, is clear that what is at stake for him is not a debate between political and autonomous art, but rather a debate between different modes of political art, a claim not that art shouldn’t have political change as its central goal, but rather that “the means of combating the situation have become too narrow and constricting.” For white South Africans like Gordimer and Brink, in contrast, the assumption that writers have a responsibility to their society, while never disputed, is also made to answer to a separate set of concerns about the value and possibilities of an autonomous aesthetic sphere—and does so as part of the continuing links that bind white South Africa to Europe and white South African writing to European modernism.

2. Hunger In South Africa

In Chapters 1–3 I argued that the art of hunger becomes compelling for writers at historical moments when the status of aesthetic autonomy enters a state of crisis. But while modernist autonomy enters what may be one of its most serious crises in the context of apartheid South Africa, hunger is far from a neutral site for exploring this particular crisis. For many South African writers, hunger offers not a metaphor for aesthetic autonomy, but its most troubling indictment. Pondering the line between internally generated and externally imposed modes of responsibility, for example, Nadine Gordimer wonders:
If the writer accepts the social realist demand, from without, will he be distorting, paradoxically, the very ability he has to offer the creation of a new society? If he accepts the other, self-imposed responsibility, how far into the immediate needs of his society will he reach? Will hungry people find revelation in the ideas his work contains “without his knowledge”?  

For Gordimer, “hungry people” emerge as a final arbiter of this debate, implying that the writer’s responsibility is, in the final account, always directed towards the hungry and measured against the writer’s capacity to reach them. The “impossibility” that Coetzee acknowledges of denying the authority of suffering and the body in the South African context therefore becomes for Gordimer both the limit and antithesis of aesthetic autonomy, the final demand to which the writer must bow. For Sarah Christie, Geoffrey Hutchings, and Don Maclellan, hunger constitutes the paradox that risks destabilizing even the most realist and engaged writing, “for [realist writers] know that if people are hungry or suffering from persecution you feed them and free them from persecution. You do not first write novels about them.” Hunger in this reading could not be further from the figure for aesthetic autonomy that it becomes in modernist writing. It is not a trope for literature’s distance from the world but the very thing that most forcefully condemns such distance.
Conversely, South African writers also use hunger metaphorically, to make the case for literature as a necessity of human life. In an essay from 1969, André Brink argues that art “satisfies a need in man as vital as hunger...Like hunger, it is a personal need.”\textsuperscript{38} This analogy echoes Antonin Artaud’s claim in the 1939 preface to \textit{The Theater and its Double} that “What is important, it seem to me, is not so much to defend a culture whose existence has never kept a man from going hungry, as to extract, from what is called culture, ideas whose compelling force is identical with that of hunger.”\textsuperscript{39} Brink’s version, however, introduces a more humanist note, using the analogy with hunger to (p.169) suggest the possibility of a synchronicity between the artist’s personal impulses and his or her universal responsibilities, a synchronicity that ultimately makes the writer into “a conscience in the world.”\textsuperscript{40} Meanwhile, by 1989, when Leon de Kock reprised this figure, hunger was no longer a metaphor for Artaud’s dream of a compelling culture, nor for Brink’s sense of a universal human desire for expression, but instead a figure for the realist obligation to testify and document: “There was a desire to tell, from the individual’s point of view, to reveal the lie behind the moral sanctimony of separate development. This was an immediate, primary need as strong as hunger.”\textsuperscript{41} Taken together, these references reveal that hunger was already—quite independently of the art of hunger tradition—an important figure in late apartheid South African literary discourse, where it functioned to generate what Louise Bethlehem has called a “rhetoric of urgency.”\textsuperscript{42} Linked to the realist, politically engaged impulses that dominate late apartheid writing, hunger in South Africa is repeatedly cast not as a figure for, but as the opposite of aesthetic autonomy.
Hunger’s importance to South African literary discourse reflects its centrality to South African political discourse in the final years of apartheid. Among black and Coloured people, poverty and the associated food privation was one of the more common forms of devastation wrought by apartheid. The authors of *Uprooting Poverty*, a landmark 1989 study of poverty in South Africa, estimated that one-third of all non-white children suffered from malnutrition and that in 1975 between 15,000 and 27,000 children had died from starvation. As the authors note, this is particularly striking in a country that habitually exported food, and was a direct consequence of the highly racialized economic inequality that was a feature of apartheid society. In this context, hunger came to be firmly identified with non-white racial groups, especially black and Coloured people. As Coetzee recalls of a rare encounter with a young Coloured boy in his fictionalized memoir *Boyhood*, the boy “is also Coloured, which means that he has no money, lives in an obscure hovel, goes hungry.” The bareness of the equation of this racial category with poverty and hunger speaks to the racialization of deprivation that underwrote apartheid society.
In this context, hunger played an important role in shaping how South Africans thought about and discussed racial inequality. As Diana Wylie has argued, debates over “whether the first cause of African hunger lay in ignorance or poverty” shaped much twentieth-century discourse about hunger in South Africa.⁴⁶ Until the 1960s, the former theory—that Africans lacked the knowledge to feed themselves adequately—held sway, as “Cultural racism succeeded in making modern black poverty appear to be a cultural trait rather than the result of political and economic policies.”⁴⁷ In the final two decades of apartheid, however, this consensus began to shift. Research increasingly linked hunger to poverty, and this linkage ultimately became central to anti-apartheid campaigns both within South Africa and internationally. Grace Davie has shown that, from the early 1970s, the poverty line became a central tool in black trade union campaigns, while her interviews with participants in the 1973 Durban Strike show them pointing to their “empty stomachs” and the simple fact that “we were hungry” as the root causes of their activism.⁴⁸ This interaction between social scientific measurements of poverty and its lived experience—understood and remembered by activists as hunger—made poverty and hunger a catalyst for anti-apartheid activities, as well as one of the most effective discursive tools for advocating for change, both inside and outside of South Africa. In this context, hunger assumed an important political function, becoming a metonym for black and Coloured suffering.
As the most visceral and crushing—but also the most quotidian and widespread—of apartheid’s many injustices, hunger made an obvious counterpoint to excessively disengaged forms of “pure art.” This is the context in which Gordimer seeks to test her art against the revelation it provides to “hungry people” and that Brink aspires to test his against hunger’s own brutally compelling logic. At the same time, and for similar reasons, hunger became a widespread trope in South African literature. Athol Fugard, for instance, describes his improvised play *Friday’s Bread on Monday* (1970) as “an improvised essay into hunger and desperation in the townships,” and this use of hunger as a way of visualizing and dramatizing black desperation pervades South African literature, especially black South African literature.\(^49\) We get a sense of this pervasiveness in *A Land Apart*, an anthology of South African writing edited by Brink and Coetzee in 1986 that focuses on post-1976 writing. In the English-language section, for which Coetzee had responsibility, hunger emerges as a major theme. Joel Matlou’s portrait of life in the mines, “Man Against Himself,” opens with the narrator choosing the mines because “my stomach was empty” and finding similar “empty stomachs” among those working there.\(^50\) Mtutuzeli Matshoba’s dissection of police abuses of power, “Call Me Not a Man” observes that “the poverty-stricken vendors were not licensed to scrape together some crumbs to ease the gnawing stomachs of their fatherless grandchildren at home.”\(^51\) Jeremy Cronin’s portrait of a man he befriended in prison describes “this undernourished frame | that dates back | to those first years of his life.”\(^52\) The section is concluded by Oupa Thando Mthimkulu’s “Like a Wheel,” with its refrain of “Today I’m hungry | Tomorrow it’s you.”\(^53\) The cumulative impression is of the pervasiveness of hunger and malnutrition in the black experience of apartheid, and of its centrality to writing that seeks to testify to the hardships and injustices of apartheid South Africa.
In this context, the art of hunger as I have so far described it in this book—the art of hunger as a way of dramatizing aesthetic autonomy's contradictions and crises—acquires another layer of contradiction, another incarnation of crisis. In 1980s South Africa, where hunger is a widespread and discursively important effect of the apartheid regime, representations of hunger are politically coded from the outset. If aesthetic autonomy is already political in South Africa, so too is hunger. The political context of apartheid South Africa, in other words, exacerbates the contradictions of the art of hunger, magnifying the political significance of both aesthetic autonomy and the representation of hunger, and revealing that these two axes pull in opposite directions, aesthetically and politically. Suspended between realism and modernism, and between colonial legacies and anti-apartheid activism, the art of hunger acquires an inescapably political cast in apartheid South Africa.

The 1983 novel *Life & Times of Michael K* offers Coetzee’s most sustained engagement with the challenges that apartheid South Africa poses to aesthetic autonomy. Of all his novels, it became the most prominently entangled in the debates about the function of art that were raging in South Africa at the time. South African critics attacked it for its perceived lack of utility to the anti-apartheid struggle, for the perception that, as a review in the *African Communist* complained, “those interested in understanding or transforming South African society can learn little from the life and times of Michael K.”

The best-known critique of this sort is Nadine Gordimer’s review of the novel for the *New York Review of Books*, in which she argues that “J. M. Coetzee has written a marvellous work that leaves nothing unsaid—and could not be better said—about what human beings do to fellow human beings in South Africa; but he does not recognize what the victims, seeing themselves as victims no longer, have done, are doing, and believe they must do for themselves.”

The doubts that unite the *African Communist*’s rather vicious review with Gordimer’s more appreciative but nonetheless critical reading reflect the terms of literary discourse in 1980s South Africa. The problem with *Michael K*, these reviewers suggest, is the author’s abdication of his responsibility to create literature that acts in the world. Central to this apparent failure is the passivity of the title character, his refusal to “do” anything—and specifically, to take a stand within the political and historical currents that flow around him but to which he seems curiously impervious. *Michael K* therefore comes to exemplify the risk that contemporary literature will abandon realism and, with it, political action; that it will lapse into an autonomy that is indistinguishable from irresponsibility.
The tension between responsibility and autonomy that dictated *Michael K*’s South African reception also haunted its composition. Coetzee drafted the novel between 1980 and 1982, scrupulously dating drafts and handwritten emendations. Alongside the novel’s manuscript drafts, composed in University of Cape Town exam booklets, Coetzee kept a small grey notebook that contains commentary and reflection on the process of composition and the direction of the manuscript. Taken together, these two parallel records of the novel’s genesis suggest that Coetzee was surprisingly responsive to the terms of debate and the demands made upon writers in the South African literary context, and that he both anticipated and sought to avoid precisely the kinds of criticism advanced by the *African Communist* and, particularly, by Gordimer.

The earliest drafts of the novel point towards an entirely different sort of book, whose key intertext is not the hunger artists of this study, but Heinrich von Kleist’s *Michael Kohlhaas*, a novella about a horse-wrangler-cum-terrorist who sets out to wreak vengeance on a local squire for his arbitrary and capricious abuse of power. In these early versions, Coetzee’s Michael K seems destined to follow a similarly violent path, reacting to apartheid’s injustices with the terroristic fury of his namesake. Such a reaction might not have satisfied the *African Communist*—for which K’s lack of social ties proved a major problem—but it would have done much to assuage Gordimer’s concerns, offering an appropriately outraged and active response to the oppression of the apartheid state.

Plans to make K into “a little avenging angel” on the model of Kohlhaas first appear in the grey notebook in August 1980, as Coetzee is embarking on a third attempt at the novel. They remain a prominent feature of the grey notebook throughout the composition process, but although Coetzee experiments with drafting various outrages that could push K to action, he never attempts the terroristic response. When the crucial moment comes in the drafting process, K (and Coetzee) does not act. In fact, K never displays any of Kohlhaas’s propensity for violence, instead becoming more passive, more reclusive, and less sociable as the text nears completion. As Coetzee reworks his drafts, K seems to slip out of history, eluding the intertext that promised to make him into a political agent.
In the published version, this impasse is preserved in the arrival of a rebel gang on the farm where K is tending his garden. Critics have often read K’s decision not to join, or even to reveal himself to, these passing figures of history as the novel’s key moment of historical refusal, what David Attwell describes as “the most politically sensitive point in the novel.” Coetzee’s composition notes worry over this scene and its implications at least as much as his critics have done. In the published version, K feels pressed to explain himself: “enough men had gone off to war saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the (p.174) idea of gardening.” In early versions, however, this explanation is tinged with a sense of regret that does not survive in the published text, as he describes his decision to remain in hiding from the rebels as “a terrible defeat for me” and laments, “If I had been following my heart I would have crept away during the night and joined the men in the mountains.” K’s sense of failure mirrors the author’s own inability to turn this character into a political figure, and this shared incapacity presages the critical frustration over K’s failure to take up arms, which followed the novel’s publication. K’s early expression of discontent and dissatisfaction with his course of action, in other words, assumes a metafictional function in the context of apartheid-era South African literary discourse, reflecting not only on K’s personal political failure, but also on the novel’s inability or refusal to fulfill the demands of political responsibility.
The revision process that moves Michael K to the edges of the South African literary mainstream is underpinned by a persistent exploration, throughout the drafting process, of hunger. While this interest keeps K lodged within the material inequalities of apartheid South Africa right up to the point of publication, the role of hunger, like K’s political commitment, shifts significantly over the course of the revisions. The first version—a monologue by a narrator, Annie, addressed to her brother Albert, who ultimately evolves into Michael K—takes place against a backdrop of severe food shortages. Much of this early narrative is focused on Annie’s quest to “keep you [Albert] from hunger;” and this early plot, like several subsequent versions, is focused tightly on the dynamics of poverty and the struggles to survive conditions of hunger and material deprivation. Annie’s protestation in this early draft that “We cannot starve, Albert. I refuse to believe that people can starve in a land of plenty” echoes a widespread theme of South African anti-apartheid discourse, as seen, for instance, in the exasperated opening of Uprooting Poverty’s chapter on hunger: “South Africa is one of the few countries in the world which normally exports food in considerable quantities. Yet it is also a country in which there is widespread hunger and malnutrition.” The hunger that both Annie and anti-apartheid scholars find so outrageous is rooted in a shared, collective experience of racialized inequality, heightened by what will become the wartime privations of the published novel. In both cases, its representation partakes of the larger cross-disciplinary documentary project of anti-apartheid resistance, whose manifestation in literature is an exhortation to socially responsible realism. For Michael K, this shared experience of suffering and starvation promises to create the conditions for his never-realized transformation into a figure of violence, “a little avenging angel.”
This collective hunger, produced by inequality and functioning as a spur to action, is the mode of hunger that I describe in Section 2 as inimical to the art of hunger, and it persists, in an attenuated form, in the opening pages of the published version, where K goes to a corner store only to find there is “no bread, no milk,” and where he worries about “[falling] into that sea of hungry mouths.” Unlike most of the hunger artists discussed in this book, for whom hunger is an individual experience to be passively accepted (or even passively induced), K first experiences hunger in Cape Town as a threat to be resisted and as an experience that helps to fix his class and racial position within the imperiled apartheid regime. By Version 4 of the drafting process, however, Coetzee had begun to minimize the early versions’ vivid descriptions of poverty and hunger. At the same time, the grey notebook begins to project an alternate form of hunger, one in which K ends the novel by “starving up in the mountains.” This new hunger—isolated, asocial, and singular, removed from the immediate context of poverty, and less available to political interpretation or analysis—eventually predominates. For readers of the published novel, hunger registers most prominently in K’s slow starvation on the Visagie farm and his refusal of food in the rehabilitation camp—forms of hunger that break with both the collective, poverty-induced malnourishment of the novel’s opening and early drafts, and the social realist mode that dominated anti-apartheid discourse and South African literature of the 1970s and 1980s.
This shift effectively writes *Michael K* into the art of hunger tradition, a fact that Coetzee recognizes when, between mid-1981 and early 1982, as he is completing the first recognizable full draft of the novel (Version 6), he identifies Hamsun’s *Hunger*, Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist,” and Melville’s “Bartleby” as key intertexts.64 The art of hunger emerges in the drafts as the expectation of Kohlhaas-inspired political action is transformed into K’s passive retreat, and as hunger as a recognizable political critique is supplanted by a more ambivalent mode that renders it individual and aberrant. (p. 176) It therefore appears as a symptom of the novel’s anxious turn away from its more politically legible, historically determined early drafts—away from the external exigencies of political action and realist representation—under what appears to be the pressure of its own internal logic, the pressure of its impulse towards autonomy. Like earlier hunger artists, Coetzee turns to the art of hunger as a way of making the effects of autonomy material and legible, at the point where the novel’s turn to aesthetic autonomy emerges as a crisis for the text, creating a break with the prevailing social consensus around the role of art.

4. Reading Hunger
The composition of *Michael K* evolves under the shadow of how the novel will be read, as if playing out Coetzee’s dread that censorship will lead the writer to “internalize a contaminating reading.” If hunger emerges from this process as a mark of the novel’s autonomy, it does so in the consciousness that it will elicit responses like those of Gordimer and the *African Communist*. In the tradition of the art of hunger, autonomy for Coetzee is therefore a gesture of willed indifference towards his immediate South African audience, an act of writing against his projected readership. *Michael K* has its genesis, in other words, in the awareness that the text’s claim to autonomy will be tested and ultimately rejected by its readers. Autonomy and interpretation, in this historical moment as in the art of hunger tradition more generally, evolve as opposite gestures, bound uncomfortably together in their mutual antagonism.
The novel itself thematizes this antagonistic relationship between the autonomous text and the inescapability of its interpretation, through the struggle for interpretive control between Michael K and the medical officer who narrates the second section of the novel. At stake in this tension is the hermeneutic gap between K as a radically irreducible figure—a figure of autonomy, both personal and aesthetic—and the medical officer’s attempt to make him mean something. The medical officer plays out this tension in the closing scene of his section, where he imagines “Michaels” fleeing, while he chases him, yelling an analysis of “what you mean to me”: “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.”

The conflict Coetzee imagines in the grey notebook between “K— and his interrogator/writer” is embodied in the physical comedy of this scene, in the medical officer’s dream of Michaels’s comically literal flight from meaning and interpretation (and from forms of interpretation that are uncomfortably contiguous with those deployed by his academic readers). Like earlier writers in the art of hunger tradition, Coetzee imagines interpretation and the confrontation with a readership as an impingement on autonomy. Read in this way, Michael K himself becomes an allegory for the imperiled and besieged fate of aesthetic autonomy in the context of apartheid South Africa, where literature, like K, is called on to be “responsible”—put to use, made to mean something.
The reading of Michael K as allegory—aesthetic or otherwise—has been influentially challenged by Derek Attridge, who argues that Coetzee’s work calls for a mode of “literal reading” that, by resisting allegorical interpretation, enables an encounter with alterity through the person of Michael K.\(^{67}\) In the kind of *mise-en-abyme* characteristic of Coetzee’s fictions, Attridge’s reading is itself inscribed within the novel: he is, effectively, picking sides in the novel’s central conflict by aligning himself with Michael K in his resistance to the medical officer’s (and the academic reader’s) excessive and often allegorical interpretation. The medical officer’s comic haplessness, and the slapstick violence of the scene in which he imagines chasing K down with his interpretation, lend textual weight to this reading, but, as Attridge himself acknowledges, the novel nonetheless allows for, even seems to require, the oscillation between literal and allegorical modes of reading.\(^{68}\) In this sense, *Michael K* reanimates a tension that has long plagued the art of hunger, between the literal existence of the starving body and its disdained but irresistible reproduction of itself as metaphor and allegory.
In apartheid South Africa, however, this struggle over modes of reading is also a struggle over the role of politics. Despite Attridge’s call for literal reading, without the medical officer’s more systematized modes of reading we miss important aspects of K’s existence. K’s starvation on the farm brings this dynamic into focus: alone, in the final pages of Part I, K exhibits the symptoms of serious and prolonged starvation—a loss of appetite, “giddiness,” diarrhea, the sense of “the processes of his body slowing down”—but does not make the interpretive leap that would allow him to diagnose himself as starving. Coetzee himself has this information—he takes extensive notes on the medical effects of starvation in the unpaginated back pages of the grey notebook—but it is not K but the medical officer who makes use of it, observing immediately on K’s admission that: “There is every evidence of prolonged malnutrition: cracks in his skin, sores on his hands and feet, bleeding gums. His joints protrude, he weighs less than forty kilos.” To read K literally and on his own terms is to fail to recognize his starvation as such, for such recognition requires the fundamentally interpretive act of diagnosis. And, as social scientists and medics under apartheid came to realize, by not interpreting his symptoms, K not only puts his life at risk, he also makes his suffering inaccessible to any kind of political reading.
By reading K’s physical state as symptomatic of starvation, the medical officer is able to read K’s hunger within a political narrative that has freedom as its goal. “Are you fasting?” the medical officer asks his patient, “Is this a protest fast? Is that what it is? What are you protesting against? Do you want your freedom?” The medical officer sees K’s starvation as a bid for freedom from an oppressive state. Following this reading, some critics have interpreted K’s life in the mountains as his attempt to become a “radically free subject,” as David Attwell puts it. But in fact, both K and the third-person narrator stubbornly resist using the term “freedom” (or any of its cognates) to describe his life in the mountains, using the word only negatively to, for instance, speak of his inability to “kick himself free of sleep.” The situation in which idleness was “stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth” from his daily life no longer pertains in the mountains, the narrator insists, suggesting that freedom is defined in this novel only through its opposition to some form of oppression. Outside the grip of society and the state, K’s period of starvation is portrayed throughout the first section of the novel not as a state of freedom but rather as a state beyond the poles of freedom and oppression.

In lieu of understanding his time in the mountains as freedom, this period is described as “a yielding of himself up to time,” a surrender to an intensely embodied experience of temporality. Given that this stretch of time constitutes a period of starvation and that the slowing of time itself is symptomatic of malnourishment, K’s idleness emerges not as a liberation from specific state structures or forms of oppression, but instead as a subjection to the dictates and rhythms of his starving body. In this sense, K’s starvation in the mountains translates the art of hunger, with its decoupling of aesthetic autonomy from claims to freedom, into the political realm. Like earlier hunger artists, K becomes autonomous not by way of an assertion of freedom, but through his subjugation to his body. The medical officer, in seeking to read K’s autonomy as a bid for political freedom, fundamentally misreads what autonomy means for K.
The struggle over the politics of reading K’s starvation reanimates the art of hunger’s ambivalence about figurative uses of starvation. To choose between the narrator’s literal and the medical officer’s allegorical readings of Michael K’s starvation is to choose between an ethical and political understanding of the novel. While the literal can indeed produce the kind of ethical reading that Attridge advocates—reading as an encounter with alterity—it cannot produce readings that signify on the collective, social, or symbolic levels that are necessary for political discourse. Conversely, while the allegorical readings of the medical officer necessarily put Michael K’s body to work in a political sense, they do so only by forcing K’s isolated existence in the mountains into an uncomfortable relation with medical and political schemas. The art of hunger’s attempt to insist on literal readings therefore manifests in Michael K as an insistence on both Michael K’s and Michael K’s irreducible autonomy. Its inevitable breakdown into allegory and metaphor parallels the irresistible politicization of autonomy in apartheid South Africa.
Michael K—stubbornly resistant to the medical officer's political interpretations—stands at the center of this debate about the relationship between reading and politics. In fact, K's desire to escape the political leads to a resistance to reading in general. Seeking not only to not be read, but also not to read, he refuses to espouse the political and social ties that reading creates. The drafts of the novel suggest that this position evolved over time, in tandem with K's autonomy and his retreat from politics. In striking contrast to the published texts, the earliest drafts depict Albert (Michael K's predecessor) and the early Michael K as highly literate characters, engaged in a translation of *Michael Kohlhaas*. As late as Version 6, Coetzee is still writing in the grey notebook that K “must unavoidably become more bookish (vulgar realism to make him stupid & ignorant).” Nonetheless, the drafts evolve towards K's illiteracy. K begins Version 4 as a semi-literate character, who teaches himself to read using the books discovered in an abandoned flat, allowing him to read and model himself on Kleist. In the published version, Coetzee retains this scene, but uses it to stage not K's education but his disinterest in literacy: Michael K, in the published text, “had never liked books”; instead, he flicks idly through (p. 180) “piles of magazines...paging through pictures of beautiful women and luscious food.” Because of the centrality of *Michael Kohlhaas* as both the early Michael K's reading matter of choice and the explicit model for his projected political action, his gradual move towards illiteracy maps onto his retreat from politics. K's turn towards aesthetic autonomy is therefore also a turn away from both the act of reading and the potentially political act of modeling himself on literary antecedents.
K’s declining literacy coincides with the emergence of references to the art of hunger in the notebooks. Where *Michael Kohlhaas* was incorporated directly into the text, however, these new intertexts entail new models of intertextuality. The published Michael K embodies, rather than reads, his intertexts. His habits and attitudes link him to other texts, but K himself never becomes conscious of them. As the intertext shifts from reading material to practice, the novel establishes a new relationship to K’s literary predecessors. In the early drafts, K’s reading of Kleist leads him to repeatedly describe Michael Kohlhaas as his father, suggesting a genealogical relationship both between the Kleist and Coetzee texts and between the German father and the Coloured South African son. This familial model reworks Harold Bloom’s Oedipal “anxiety of influence” as a relationship not between authors but between characters. It produces a kind of textual community across racial and national boundaries, in which characters can learn political action from their predecessors and filiation serves political as well as identity-forming ends.

As Paul Auster discovered, however, the staunch anti-social stance of the art of hunger resists easy assimilation into a genealogical model of textual relations, and as Michael K drifts towards the art of hunger, it too abandons the father-text. The art of hunger intertexts that replace it appear well after the text’s conception, first appearing in Coetzee’s notes as the novel is already nearing completion. They offer not a genealogical model of influence and literary descent, but something more like the “community of celibates” that Deleuze identified with the US: a model of elective affiliation between autonomous beings. This shift in models of intertextuality implies a changed theory of what texts can do politically. In the early versions, K’s reading of *Michael Kohlhaas* and his subsequent attempts to model himself on the German horse-wrangler show texts at work in the world, forming political subjects through the act of reading. K’s reading of *Kohlhaas* is, in other words, a model of the engaged, politically active text. As K develops into a hunger artist, this model of reading as political formation disappears, along with the sense that texts can be organized to produce genealogical or communal ties.
The published K’s ignorance of his intertexts makes the novel’s intertextuality into an understanding between author and reader, to which K himself can never be privy. This is, of course, a common mode of literary allusion, but Michael K’s intertextuality “over the head” of the protagonist has specific social and political resonances in apartheid South Africa. K’s declining literacy is the product of what Coetzee calls the text’s “vulgar realism”: Michael K’s embodiment of the generally poor education and high rates of illiteracy that were an effect of apartheid for many black and Coloured people. In contrast, the author emerges from the grey notebook as hyper-literate, linking the evolving novel to eighteenth-century and modernist works of European literature, scientific studies of starvation, and European thinkers from Bataille to Bachofen. Thus, while K’s autonomy—linked to his refusal of reading—manifests as a form of historically conditioned ignorance, Coetzee’s is vested in his position of highly educated privilege.
The yawning gap between the white author’s and the Coloured protagonist’s reading practices reflects one of the most significant differences between earlier incarnations of the art of hunger, where the protagonist tends to function as an avatar for the author, and *Life & Times of Michael K*. As a Coloured man in apartheid South Africa, Michael K’s experience is stubbornly inassimilable to that of his white author. The explicitly racialized nature of hunger in this context ensures that the art of hunger is necessarily vicarious: the experience of a victim of apartheid, as written by one of its beneficiaries. In South Africa, the art of hunger therefore becomes fraught in a new and newly politicized way: as a literary tradition, it belongs to the European lineage that is the preserve of white authors like Coetzee; as an experience—as a form of hunger—it is the province of apartheid’s non-white population. David James has argued that Coetzee “aligns himself with a particular modernist credo of economy to dramatise imperialism’s remnants along with the tensions and contradictions of an age of decolonisation.”

A similar claim could be made of the art of hunger, in a context where both Michael K’s starvation and Coetzee’s modernist appropriation of that starvation are racialized positions. In an entry in the grey notebook in July 1982, Coetzee, still worrying over K’s abandonment of Kohlhaas-inspired political action, writes, “His not going off with the guerillas is thematized as a lacuna in his story. It is a lacuna in the logic of his political progression, a lacuna in my own position. It is an unbridgeable gap (and must be so with all comfortable liberal whites), and the best one can do is not to leave it out but to present it as a gap.” For Coetzee, the abandonment of political action and the interpretive hole that this produces is an impasse that reflects the “unbridgeable gap” between the Coloured protagonist and his white author. It is a product of the attempt to think across racial categories in a context where racial difference pervades all aspects of society. In this context, the art of hunger’s newly inter-racial dynamics can only reproduce the politics of apartheid. The white author’s attempt to write an “autonomous fiction” still requires a Coloured character to bear the brunt of the physical suffering this entails, to live out the art of hunger through his starving body. Even aesthetic autonomy, *Michael K* suggests, is inescapably tainted by the dynamics of apartheid.
A key manifestation of this taint lies in the inequitable and dissimilar ways that autonomy is distributed in this text. For Coetzee, autonomy is above all a literary phenomenon, arising from the density of his text’s allusive structure and the dialogue that his novel establishes with modernist texts that make parallel claims to autonomy. In this sense, Coetzee’s claim to autonomy is a claim to a certain way of reading, culminating in a retreat from his immediate reading public into a literary tradition where autonomy remains defensible. K’s illiteracy, however, ensures that the protagonist can espouse only personal, not aesthetic, autonomy. Both Coetzee’s aesthetic and K’s personal autonomy ultimately require the starvation—the sacrifice—of K’s body. In this sacrifice, the white author seeks his liberation from a politicizing readership in the same gesture that the Coloured protagonist establishes his distance from the institutions of late apartheid society.

5. Discourses of Autonomy: Idleness And Maternity
Michael K may not have access to aesthetic autonomy in the highly literary and erudite form that Coetzee does, but he seems nonetheless to achieve a provisional personal autonomy in the closing pages of Part I, as, living in the mountains, he carefully tends his pumpkins. As Gordimer writes, K embodies “an idea of survival that can be realized outside a political doctrine...the idea of gardening.”\(^8\) When Michael K retreats to the mountains to grow a crop of pumpkins, he experiences this gardening as an ecstatic, almost religious state that carries within it the promise of self-determination, the promise that there might be other modes of life beyond the war that rages around him. This dream of a life in the mountains is also the dream of a kind of extra-political autonomy, of a life apart not just from the demands of the state, but from the demands of politics as such. But Coetzee’s construction of this life outside politics keeps Michael K firmly inscribed within a set of (white, European) discursive structures. He therefore imagines K’s autonomy as profoundly unfree, a captive to a long discursive history tied to colonialism, which locates freedom in absolute alterity. Extending the struggle over interpretation, the discursive construction of K’s autonomy foregrounds his textual boundedness to the systems he seeks to repudiate. It produces a form of unfree autonomy that, rooted in the debates over agency and discourse of the 1980s academy, finally relocates the art of hunger to the Anglo-American university.

The ambivalence over autonomy produced by Michael K’s time in the mountains emerges clearly when the novel is read in dialogue with Coetzee’s scholarly essay “Idleness in South Africa,” written as he was drafting the novel and first published in 1982. The essay is an exploration of European and white South African anxieties over “Hottentot” and, later, Afrikaner idleness, a preoccupation that Coetzee argues has haunted discourse about South Africa since the first Dutch settlement in 1652.\(^8\) \textit{Life & Times of Michael K} draws on the terms of the essay to paint Michael K’s life in the mountains as analogous to the lives of idle South Africans. In the novel, K is described as idle:
learning to love idleness, idleness no longer as stretches of freedom reclaimed by stealth here and there from involuntary labour, surreptitious thefts to be enjoyed sitting on his heels before a flower-bed with the fork dangling from his fingers, but as a yielding up of himself to time, to a time flowing slowly like oil from horizon to horizon over the face of the world, washing over his body, circulating in his armpits and his groin, stirring his eyelids. He was neither pleased nor displeased when there was work to do; it was all the same.\(^{85}\)

Coetzee presents Michael K’s life in the mountains as a kind of Eden that collapses the opposition between idleness and work. It reflects what, in the “Idleness” essay, he describes as South African idleness’s status as an “authentically native response to a foreign way of life.”\(^{86}\) Imagining idleness as a site of resistance and a scandal for the system, Coetzee suggests that, for both Michael K and the Hottentots and Boers of his essay, it represents an autonomous mode of life.

In “Idleness in South Africa,” this idle lifestyle links the idle Hottentot with the creative artist. Coetzee wonders, “which is better, to live like the ant, busily storing up food for winter, or like the grasshopper, singing in the sun all day, heedless of the morrow?”\(^{87}\) The grasshopper, who in Aesop’s fable sings through the summer and is refused food by the industrious ant when he risks starving through the winter, is often taken as a figure for the artist. At the same time, Richard Ballard has shown that the ant and the grasshopper play a recurring role in conservative post-apartheid South African discourse, where the grasshopper is imagined as the black or Coloured heir of the idle Hottentots whose laziness brings their poverty on themselves.\(^{88}\) In popular usage, then, the grasshopper overlays stereotypes of black and Coloured laziness with a critique of the self-indulgence of aesthetic autonomy. Coetzee’s question, which seeks to revalue both the grasshopper’s purported laziness and his aesthetic practice, implicitly links the artist to the idle Hottentot. In their shared refusal of labor, both pose a scandal for their respective systems.
But even a most cursory glance at Coetzee’s archive suggests that he is emphatically not an idle writer. His archive foregrounds the painstaking labor of both reading and writing that underpins all of Coetzee’s written work, the voluminous research and painful, studied drafting. Often, this work is a specifically scholarly labor. In the grey notebook, for instance, Coetzee compiles the archive that lies behind *Michael K* and *Michael K*. In the process, he produces a kind of cipher for the text’s later interpretation: notes towards an unwritten academic essay or monograph. In this sense, it is both a scholarly labor in its own right, and an invitation to future scholarly labor. It produces a counterbalance to Auster’s rejection of the institutionalization of autonomy, generating instead a claim for autonomy (p.185) that is fully embedded within the institution of the university and its characteristic modes of labor. Michael K’s life in the mountains, outside of all institutions, emerges as the dream of the institutionalized writer for a different kind of autonomy. As K makes a claim to the art of hunger’s autonomy through his mode of life and his idle, starving body, he emerges as Coetzee’s projection of the person for whom autonomy is not labor.

In the opposition between his own scholarly labor and K’s autonomous idleness, Coetzee replicates the central claim of “Idleness in South Africa”: that idleness poses a problem for scholarly discourse. It is, Coetzee writes, “an anthropological scandal” that “brings him [the early anthropologist] face to face (if he will only recognize it) with the limits of his conceptual framework.” Indeed, the idle South African brings even “the modern researcher and writer” to the very limits of language, “present[ing] him with nothing to say.” This scandal of the subject about whom nothing can be said is also the scandal of Michael K, his incommensurability with the medical officer’s interpretive schema, and the recalcitrance with which he confronts his scholarly writer and his scholarly readers.
In such a reading, both Michael K and the idle Hottentots and Boers mount an implicit critique of the system through their position outside discourse. In a common gesture for humanities scholarship of the 1970s and early 1980s, the outsider subject’s autonomy from discourse is imagined as the site of political resistance, a space of freedom from totalizing hegemonic systems. In this sense, “Idleness in South Africa” takes its position in a tradition of scholarly political critique that incorporates such important and varied texts as Ranajit Guha’s 1982 foundational document of the Subaltern Studies group, in which he lauds the “autonomous domain” of the subaltern, and Hélène Cixous’s 1975 essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” which imagines women’s alterity to phallogocentric discourse as inherently emancipatory. Like these contemporaneous texts, “Idleness in South Africa” assumes that the scholarly recovery of an excluded group’s mode of life promises freedom not just for that group, but for all subjects, through its capacity to throw the system itself into question.

The shifting theoretical terrain of the early 1980s, however, put the possibility of a truly free, truly extra-discursive position into question. In the grey notebook, Coetzee inserts the novel into this critical debate by explicitly linking K, whom he describes as a “fool,” to Foucault’s analysis of madness. For Foucault, madness—like Guha’s subaltern or Cixous’s woman—is precisely that which is excluded from discourse. Foucault imagines this state as ideally free, but, unlike Guha’s and Cixous’s accounts of the extra-discursive other, always necessarily captured by its representation in discourse. “The liberty of madness,” Foucault writes in a 1961 preface to The History of Madness, “can only be heard from the heights of the fortress in which it is imprisoned.” Derrida’s response to Foucault critiques this position by arguing that the internment of madness is more fundamental than Foucault acknowledges, lying at the very foundation of discourse itself, so that “speech...is able to open the space for discourse only by imprisoning madness.” For both Foucault and Derrida, what is at stake in this debate is the possibility of a site of freedom and resistance that lies outside the coercive strictures of discourse; for both, there is ultimately no such possibility.
Coetzee, who had left the US reluctantly in 1971, remained immersed in these debates as they moved into the American academy over the 1970s and 1980s. His position in this intellectual field is reflected in the fact that he cites, not Foucault and Derrida’s original texts, but Shoshana Felman’s account of their debate in her 1975 essay “Madness and Philosophy, or Literature’s Reason,” published in Yale French Studies. Indeed, throughout this period Coetzee continued to read and contribute to scholarly debates coming out of the US. In 1988, his essay collection White Writing was published with Yale University Press, and throughout these years he continued to publish articles in major US literary studies journals, including PMLA, Comparative Literature, and MLN.

In 1979, immediately before commencing Michael K, he spent a sabbatical in Austin and Berkeley, and from the mid-1980s he returned to the US academy in a series of visiting positions and guest speaking engagements at a number of US institutions, most enduringly holding a part-year appointment at the University of Chicago’s Committee for Social Thought from 1996 to 2003.
Coetzee’s ambivalent engagement with South African literary norms is, therefore, shot through with a countervailing investment in US academic debates, which were coming to substantially different conclusions about questions of freedom and autonomy in this period. While South African writers placed aesthetic autonomy in opposition to political freedom, American academics, in dialogue with French theory, suggested that (p.187) discourse’s totalizing power erased the possibility of any mode of freedom that imagined itself external to discourse. The question of whether it is possible to be free of discourse—of whether resistance can be mounted from some space beyond the regime of power/knowledge—became increasingly pressing as the high theory of the 1970s was absorbed into the more politically engaged theory of the 1980s. By the end of the 1980s, texts like Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) and Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble (1990) would formalize this growing doubt, countering the optimism of the earlier generation of political thinkers with the belief that discourse determines the limits of thought within a society, that no subject can exist outside of discourse, and that no form of resistance is therefore possible from this imagined extra-discursive position. If earlier thinkers like Guha and Cixous imagined the oppressed other as occupying an “autonomous domain” outside of discourse, in which freedom itself might be discovered or fomented, theorists of the 1980s rejected the possibility of both autonomy and freedom, arguing that political change takes place not from a position of alterity but instead, as Butler has it, “through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them.” Following Derrida and Foucault’s intimations from the 1960s, the American academy came eventually to believe that discourse inevitably imprisons the madman who seeks his autonomy.
Coetzee’s writing of the early 1980s teeters on the brink of this disillusionment with the possibility of an extra-discursive freedom. His notes on the Felman article in the grey notebook conclude with an idea for the novel’s ending: “Perhaps my book ends with a great final internment of all the vagabonds of C[ape] T[own]. Like fools ever since, K lacks a language in which to defend himself.”96 This proposed ending is an allusion to the “great internment” of the mad that Foucault takes as a pivotal moment in his History of Madness. As Felman puts it, with the great internment, “madness is now desacralized, and through its exclusion takes on a political, social, and ethical status.”97 For Coetzee to speculate that his novel should end with such an event suggests that he envisages Michael K and his fellow “fools” as captives to the very political system from which they are excluded. Even in “Idleness in South Africa,” the freedom that Coetzee associates with Hottentot and Boer idleness has no autonomous existence: it does not exist outside of the traces it leaves, the (p.188) disruptions it produces, in the writing of the colonizing class, and in this sense it remains trapped within their discourse. Whatever freedom and autonomy this “authentically native” way of life entails, it registers in “Idleness in South Africa” only as a disturbance in the colonial discursive field.
While Michael K ultimately escapes from the camps in which he is interned, the novel remains in the thrall of Foucault’s larger claim that modernity marks the shift from physical to discursive imprisonment. Through the scholarly labor that Coetzee’s archives make visible, Michael K’s apparently autonomous life in the mountains comes to embody not so much a position liberated from discursive constraints, but an amalgam of discourses, drawn primarily from colonial and apartheid archives. Through the novel’s echoes of “Idleness in South Africa,” Coetzee imagines K’s apparent exteriority to the system in and through a set of colonial tropes. Indeed, Coetzee constructs Michael K as an amalgam of racist tropes, as when he wonders in the grey notebook, “Why isn’t this man a slave to drink?” The fact that Coetzee demands of himself an explanation for K’s failure to wholly conform to the stereotype of the Cape Coloured people as “idle, alcoholic, and morally decadent” suggests the extent to which he is modeled on such stereotypes. Michael K’s personal autonomy, in other words, his status as an embodiment of the freedom granted by idleness, is also a reflection of the discursive status of Coloured people within the racist South African imaginary. Like Foucault’s madman, his “liberty can only be heard from the heights of the fortress in which it is imprisoned.”
In fact, Michael K is not so much determined as overdetermined by discourse, imagined not just through stereotypes of black and Coloured people, but also through (often racialized) tropes of motherhood and femininity. Throughout his life in the mountains, K is described as a mother. The metaphor is most explicit as he reflects on the aftermath of the rebels’ visit, imagining himself as “a woman whose children have all left the house,” a reiteration of the gendered division of labor by which K’s refusal of war and politics feminizes him. But it most profoundly shapes K’s relationship to gardening. Although he disavows aspirations to fatherhood, worrying that “I would be the worst of all fathers,” he describes his pumpkins as his children and his relation to the land as a “cord” (suggestive of an umbilical cord), figuring himself as a mother who is concerned above all with “provid[ing] well” for his vegetal offspring. Instead of founding a rival patrilineal line with himself at the head, which he foresees would be the “worst mistake,” K positions himself within the matrilineal line of his mother and grandmother, emphasizing his occupation of the land as the thread that holds him in this relation: “am I such a child, such a child from a line of children, that none of us can leave, but have to come back to die here with our heads upon our mothers’ laps, I upon hers, she upon her mother’s, and so back and back, generation upon generation?”
Just as Coetzee reprises colonial discourses about idleness to imagine his life in the mountains, his description of K as a mother inscribes him within a set of nineteenth-century discourses about maternity and matriarchy. As Coetzee is writing the final handwritten draft of K’s encounter with the rebels (Version 7), he repeatedly evokes the nineteenth-century Swiss anthropologist Johann Jakob Bachofen and his theory of “mother right” or _Mutterrecht_ in the grey notebook. This influential (but now largely discredited) theory claims that all societies pass through a period of matriarchy before arriving at the patriarchy that he associates with advanced civilization, developing this matriarchal organization in tandem with the development of agriculture. For Bachofen, understanding this matriarchal prehistory involves the same enormous, almost impossible, leap that Coetzee finds in scholars’ confrontations with idleness. Bachofen cautions that: “The scholar must be able to renounce entirely the ideas of his own time, the beliefs with which these have filled his spirit, and transfer himself to the midpoint of a completely different world of thought. Without such self-abnegation no real success in the study of antiquity is thinkable.” Bachofen, in other words, generates a discourse about ancient matriarchy that, like Coetzee’s account of idleness and Foucault’s of madness, imagines it as extra-discursive, unimaginable within the language of scholarship and troubling to the very identity of those who try to think it.
Bachofen imagines this prehistoric matriarchy as a characteristically religious form of social organization, a theory that he develops out of existing nineteenth-century discourses about women’s supposedly natural religiosity: “To man’s superior physical strength woman opposed the mighty influence of her religious consecration.”

In keeping with this theory, Michael K’s feminization develops in tandem with a new religious bent, so that, for instance, when his pumpkins ripen, he prepares his meal by praying to the earth. Even the medical officer suspects a religious explanation for K’s hunger, although, true to his persistent misreading of K, he imagines this spiritual food as having its source in the heavens rather than the earth: “Did manna fall from the sky for you…? Is that why you will not eat camp food—because you have been spoiled forever by the taste of manna?”

Linking K’s matriarchal Eden to both religion and agriculture, both K and the medical officer imagine his life in the mountains through the lens of Bachofen’s *Mutterrecht*. In this sense, Coetzee follows Bachofen in adopting a discourse of maternal religiosity as the emblem of a radically other form of life, one that might free its practitioners from the constraints of society.
Bachofen’s ideas are important enough to *Michael K* that Coetzee alters long-standing themes—such as K’s father, whom Coetzee had long been figuring as Michael Kohlhaas—to make his character more consistent with the logic of *Mutterrecht*. As he warns himself in the grey notebook, “In view of the opposition, traced by Bachofen, between mother and father right, I ought to be careful about giving K both a mother and a father.”¹⁰⁸ This passage marks the point at which K’s relationship to Michael Kohlhaas is definitively severed, and it occurs as part of a shift in K’s gender position: K turns his back on war, politics, fatherhood, and Kleist’s terroristic embodiment of all three, in favor of a feminized, spiritualized relation to land and life. Seen from one perspective, the feminized life of gardening and idleness described by Bachofen and the writers discussed in “Idleness in South Africa” reflects a liberated position outside of discourse. In this reading, K’s rejection of masculine political action is understood as a recuperation of a feminized utopia, freedom imagined as maternal. But this extra-political freedom is, as we have seen, itself only legible because of the way in which Coetzee imagines Michael K as the embodiment of a particular discursive formation that projects a fantasy of absolute freedom onto society’s gendered and racialized others. Modeling K on the twinned logics of *Mutterrecht* and Hottentot idleness, Coetzee gives K a freedom that is already a kind of captivity.
The unfreedom of K’s maternity is underscored by the association of motherhood with hunger, which inscribes the novel’s treatment of motherhood within a narrative of bad mothers and consequent filial failure. In a notebook entry from August 1981, Coetzee toys with a possible ending to the novel: “Or else he dies—from not eating enough (p.191) for too long—thinking that if he can only recover he can take charge of his story. The story is then all about hunger: the failure of the mother to sustain the child.”\(^{109}\) The unexpected leap from hunger to maternal failure is striking for its disconnection from both the details of K’s projected death, which do not feature a mother, and from the contemporaneous drafts, which do not deal with mothers at this stage in the drafting process. It suggests that, like Erich Neumann, whose *The Great Mother* appears on his Record of Reading, Coetzee sees hunger itself as integrally connected with the maternal, and particularly with what Neumann calls the archetype of “the Terrible Mother.”\(^{110}\) *Michael K* bears out this connection from its opening pages, where Michael’s hare lip disrupts both the emotional and physical connection between mother and child, preventing him from “suck[ing] the breast” so that he “cried with hunger.”\(^{111}\) When K himself becomes mother to his garden in the mountains, the act of nurturing it repeatedly leads to hunger, such that, “as he tended the seeds and watched and waited for the earth to bear food, his own need for food grew slighter and slighter.”\(^{112}\) Drawing on a set of sexist tropes that blame mothers for the problems of their children, Coetzee presents Michael K’s adult hunger as already predetermined by the circumstances of his infancy. In this sense, motherhood functions not as the agent of utopia, but as the source of compulsion, and hunger emerges as the unfree autonomy that exemplifies this psychological determinism.
The link between K’s hunger and poor mothering is, like other facets of his character, inscribed within a complex discursive web that amplifies the sense that this state is, for K, unfree and overdetermined. Michael K’s starvation forms part of the larger South African conversation about non-white hunger, bearing the traces of two prominent discourses about African hunger in twentieth-century South Africa, which explained it, as Diana Wylie argues, in terms of “habits of mothering and of agriculture.” Wylie quotes a Department of Public Health official lamenting that, with respect to nutrition, the “ignorance of Native mothers especially is appalling,” echoing Coetzee’s fascination with Anna K’s inability to feed her son properly. At the same time, Michael K, whose farming ultimately produces pumpkins that do nothing to nourish him, would conform to the expectations of “most of the hunger experts in this book [who] blamed African malnutrition on African farming.” Because these explanations for African hunger were cultural, they allowed white health officials to avoid directly examining African poverty, instead blaming Africans themselves for their malnutrition and contributing to a discourse of cultural racism that assumed African culture to be inherently flawed. If motherhood promises a utopia outside of politics and war, the association with failed mothers and racist stereotypes undercuts this possibility, dragging K’s discursively overdetermined bids for freedom back into the thrall of apartheid and colonial discourse’s most straightforwardly oppressive modes.
Coetzee imagines K as perpetually and inevitably hungry, forced into a life of autonomous self-sufficiency and withering appetite, as a result of his mother’s failure to feed him. The radical and unchosen individualism that results from Anna’s failed mothering marks the limits of K’s politics. As a bad mother from a line of bad mothers, he finds himself unable to enter politics even in a nurturing role, observing of the rebels: “I would have liked to give them food, but all I fed were their donkeys, that could have eaten grass.” The asocial, apolitical impulse of the art of hunger, its investment in the eccentric individual, has always been a gendered position, one that relies on but seeks to abdicate the masculine. Coetzee’s interest in motherhood, and specifically in bad mothers, as the source of both hunger and the exclusion from community explicitly feminizes this position. As it does so, it reveals K’s inscription in a set of (often racist and sexist) discourses about maternal failure and maternal utopia, African idleness and Coloured appetite, and it translates the overdetermination of K’s hunger into a position that refuses to make him an agent of political freedom.
Taken together, these competing discursive frames overdetermine the character of Michael K, repositioning his apparently autonomous existence as the accumulation of discursive givens, and producing him as a figure that, even in his liberation, remains trapped within the history of colonial and apartheid discourse. As Coetzee insists in the grey notebook, “One of the things this book is not is a record of the visions of a mad seer, someone outside and above society.”

The key way in which Coetzee keeps K bound to society, enmeshed within it, even through his isolation, is by foregrounding his status as a product of colonial and apartheid discourses. Hunger is central to this accumulation of discourses. On the one hand, it functions as a figure for K’s autonomy; on the other, hunger’s complex discursive history—as a mark of quasi-religious purity and devotion, maternal failure, Protestant abstention from appetite, and idle failure of productivity—makes it one of the central engines by which K’s claim to autonomy is recast as unfree and overdetermined. Written in dialogue with the contemporaneous debates in the US academy over political agency and freedom, Michael K, in his starvation, is a figure both of extra-discursive alterity that holds out the hope of a radically other way of life, and of that hope’s negation by the shifting theoretico-political consensus of the 1980s academy, as alterity came to be understood as unthinkable outside of discourse. This doubleness, in which K’s autonomy is simultaneously asserted and rendered unfree, replicates the dual perspective produced by K’s resistance to reading. In refusing to be read, he asserts his alterity, his claim to a freedom beyond language. At the same time, even K’s claim to alterity is itself a function of Coetzee’s reading, rereading, and rewriting. The oscillation between these two perspectives reveals K’s autonomy to be unfree, his alterity always bound to its social moment: to the task of interpretation and the production of alterity as a function of discourse.

6. Anti-Realism And Aesthetic Autonomy
Through his allusions to Foucault and his foregrounding of the discursive construction of Michael K, Coetzee locates the novel within a Franco-American theoretical tradition that increasingly attacked the terms on which South African leftist and anti-apartheid discourse operated. When Gordimer criticized *Michael K* for failing to show “the energy of the will to resist evil” among the South African black population, for instance, she did so on the understanding that resistance was a position outside the ideologies and hegemonic structures of the apartheid state. In doing so, she assumed a vastly different model of political resistance than that espoused by Foucault and Derrida in their debates over madness, for whom no such position of autonomous resistance is possible. For many anti-apartheid writers, literature’s role was to sacrifice its own autonomy in order to create a space in which voices of resistance from outside the apartheid system could be heard.

In contrast, while the US and French practitioners of “French theory” doubted the possibility of a truly autonomous space for discourse and a truly autonomous subject, they retained, as we have seen, a lingering attachment to aesthetic autonomy. Indeed, Suzanne Guerlac suggests that the group of theorists associated with *Tel quel*—the key journal in the emergence of poststructuralist theory—should be understood as an outgrowth of modernism due to their (p.194) continued commitment to the modernist principle of “esthetic autonomy (sometimes transvalued into a fetishization of text).”118
This investment in aesthetic autonomy survived theory’s translation to the US in haphazard and uneven ways. The Shoshana Felman article from which Coetzee draws his reading of Foucault on madness, however, comes down heavily on the side of literature’s special status, turning the Foucault/Derrida debate towards a defense of literature’s particularity and autonomy. In Felman’s reading, “literature is, for Foucault, in a position of excess, since it includes that which philosophy excludes by definition: madness...The History of Madness is the story of this surplus, the story of a literary residue.”119 In its capacity to include madness, literature also assumes madness’s autonomy, its exteriority to coercive systems, becoming the only form of writing that can register in language that which is other to discourse. As such, Felman attributes to literature a characteristically poststructuralist form of autonomy. In doing so, however, this position outside of discourse loses much of its political force. By the end of her article, the politically potent discussion of madness’s freedom from and imprisonment within discourse disappears in favor of an understanding of madness as that which “questions somewhere else: somewhere at that point of silence where it is no longer we who speak, but where, in our absence, we are spoken.”120 Literature for Felman is this agentless form of writing, preserving its autonomy without promising a freedom beyond discourse.
Coetzee’s defense of aesthetic autonomy in this period followed Felman in tying literature’s autonomy to madness. In a 1982 talk to the University of Cape Town Philosophical Society, entitled “Realism in the Novel,” Coetzee evokes Foucault in linking the rise of the realist novel to the “great confinement” of the mad, “the locking up of people who deny the universality of the reality-sense asserted by the authorities, the authors of that reality sense.” For Coetzee, this coercive construction of reality is enforced both through the exile of the mad and the dominance of realism, and in this sense, they are interrelated phenomena, manifestations of a historically specific turn to the empirical. Literature that seeks to keep open a space for madness and its melding of the possible with the impossible must therefore be anti-realist, following in the tradition of either the escapist fiction with which the talk ends (and of which K is, at one point in the drafting process, an avid reader), or the autonomous anti-realist writing, exemplified by Kafka, with which it begins. This anti-realist literature, this literature of madness, stands outside the authorized “reality” laid down for it, sustaining its autonomy from the “official literature” and its middle-class version of life.
Despite Michael K’s apparent resemblance to realism, there are indications that we ought to read this text, at least in part, within the anti-realist mode advocated by “Realism in the Novel.” David Attwell highlights Coetzee’s frustration with the novel’s tendency towards realism, locating a resistance to realism in the metafiction introduced by the medical officer’s section, its capacity to “bring self-consciousness into the text.” As Coetzee writes while drafting Version 5, “What I need is a liberation from verisimilitude!” The tension that Attwell highlights between Michael K’s realism and its metafictive escape from realism is evident in the dynamics I have been tracing in this chapter: between a “literal” reading of K, and the medical officer’s self-conscious allegorical interpretations; between K as an autonomous figure that escapes from discourse, and our scholarly reading of this escape as merely an archive of colonial and patriarchal fantasies of otherness. This oscillation is central to Michael K, but in important respects, neither phase really escapes the pitfalls of realism, as Coetzee describes them in the “Realism in the Novel” lecture. The problem for him here is the “disillusionment” that Coetzee argues is “built into the realist novel” due to the fact that, “insofar as they are fictions aware of their own fictionality, they are aware that fictions, illusions cannot be sustained.” In this sense, the oscillation between realism and metafiction is ultimately an oscillation between different moments in the process of realism’s undoing, its disillusionment.
Coetzee counters this disillusionment with a resistance to realism, grounded in K’s alterity. As a “fool” whom Coetzee considers sweeping up in his own “great confinement,” Michael K embodies the anti-realist mode of aesthetic autonomy, through the non-naturalist treatment of K’s superhuman resistance to hunger. In the novel’s closing lines, K imagines returning to the farm and fetching water from the well with a teaspoon, “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.”\(^{125}\) In a literal sense, this closing image is clearly impossible: one cannot live off teaspoons of water. But while the closing scene is presented as K’s own fantasy, his unrealistically ability to survive his own starvation pervades the second half of the novel, as K’s radical new way of life coexists with the brute reality of his starvation. During this period, the narrator claims that K’s “need for food grew slighter and slighter…If he ate, eating what he could find, it was because he had not yet shaken off the belief that bodies that do not eat die.”\(^{126}\) The implication, running throughout the scenes in the mountains and camps, that K is not the kind of body who dies without food breaks significantly from the norms of contemporary South African literary culture. As we have seen, hunger plays a central role in the commitment of apartheid-era literary culture to social realism. The abandonment of a realist hunger, therefore, constitutes a denial of the political consensus on which social realism rests, and a refusal to accept that the duty of the novelist consists in bearing witness to the suffering of the hungry.
The problem that Michael K poses for realism brings the novel back into the orbit of Michael Kohlhaas. The German novella returns here not as a model for political action but as an example of the aesthetic realm’s escape from the constraints of political realism. While most of Kleist’s novella is given over to a detailed account of the slight against Kohlhaas and his attempts to seek redress by legal and terroristic means, the end introduces a fantastic subplot involving a fortune-teller and a prophecy. This divergence from realism has confused critics, who, as Clayton Koelb observes, have tended “to read the story as a realistic chronicle gone astray.”

In fact, Georg Lukács—whose advocacy of social realism underpins apartheid-era South Africa’s enthusiasm for the mode—heaps considerable praise on Kohlhaas’s realism, but finds it “regrettable...that this masterpiece should have been disfigured by some cranky Romantic elements that Kleist incorporated into it.” Allied not with the politics of Kleist’s heroic avenger but with the formal integration of realism with “cranky Romantic elements,” Michael K is an anti-Lukácsian Kohlhaas, a rejection not just of the obligation to represent a positive political vision but of the formal requirement to do so according to the conventions of realism. If the novel declares its autonomy from politics, it also lays claim to a formal autonomy, whereby the literary text is freed from its compulsion to represent the world as it empirically is.
In avoiding straightforward realism and in going beyond deflating metafiction, the novel avoids the “disillusionment” that Coetzee argues is “built into the realist novel.”¹²⁹ *Michael K*, in contrast, ends not with disillusionment, but with the assertion of the outrageous fantasy that its protagonist can survive indefinitely on only teaspoons of water. This fantasy is a vehement denial of the political project of social realism and of the “authority of suffering and therefore of the body” that, in *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee would claim is “not possible to deny [in South Africa]...for political reasons, for reasons of power.”¹³⁰ If Michael K is the kind of body who can survive starvation, then his very existence seems, impossibly, to deny the authority of the body by floating free of its most basic needs. Just as Coetzee praises *Don Quixote* in “Realism in the Novel” for its refusal of “the reality-sense asserted by the authorities,” in *Michael K* he refuses the reality-sense that transforms the body and its suffering into authority. Transcending the authority of the body, the fantasy of the starving man who does not die functions as an assertion of the novel’s aesthetic autonomy—its refusal of both the political and aesthetic demands of social realism.
Through his hunger, then, Michael K is transfigured into an exemplary anti-realist body, a manifestation of autonomy that is at once personal and aesthetic. Like its model Michael Kohlhaas, this novel aims to escape the “prison” of what Coetzee calls “the official literature,” and to ascend instead to the freedom of “a culture which does not distinguish between myth and history”—a culture that leaves its madmen free. But as Coetzee repeatedly emphasizes, there is no such straightforward escape from cultural context. On the one hand, as the medical officer’s section reminds us, Michael K will always be read back into his cultural moment, his otherness interpreted on the basis of that which is intelligible within the moment of reading. On the other, he is also and just as inevitably the result of Coetzee’s own voluminous reading, a product of the writer’s own specific cultural and intellectual heritage. As such, there is no vantage point from which Michael K’s autonomy might escape cultural determination. Where David Attwell finds in Michael K “an affirmation of artistic and intellectual freedom,” and in Michael K a “radically free subject,” I have been suggesting that what we really find in text and protagonist is not freedom so much as the unfree autonomy of the art of hunger tradition: an autonomy whose refusal of social context provides not liberation, but simply paralysis.
To understand the politics of this novel, I have suggested, we need to see the space that opens up between Michael K’s personal autonomy and the novel’s aesthetic autonomy. This is what Coetzee calls the novel’s “spiritual problem”: the fact that Coetzee is “incorrigibly elitist” and “unable to move from the side of the oppressors to the side of the oppressed.” As a result, Michael K’s autonomy fails to coincide with Coetzee’s, and in the disjuncture between these two modes of autonomy, each negates the other’s capacity to lead to freedom. K’s personal autonomy emerges as constrained by its overdetermination by colonial discourse, which is the product of Coetzee’s rigorous and scholarly commitment to understanding his protagonist through the society from which he emerges. Coetzee’s aesthetic autonomy in turn produces not a mode of transcendence but, via K’s unfreedom, an image of the novelist’s own limitations within both the South African and the transnational academic contexts out of which he writes. Hunger’s dual signification—as a politically charged site of struggle in apartheid South Africa, and as a figure for aesthetic autonomy in European modernism—is central to this political ambivalence, and central to the novel’s ultimate repudiation of freedom and the political. In this sense, *Life & Times of Michael K* reanimates the art of hunger tradition in order to dramatize both the political stakes of autonomy in late apartheid South Africa, and the limits of white South Africa’s attempt to build a politics of freedom.

Notes:


(2) Ibid.


(4) J. M. Coetzee, “The Novel Today” (TS, 1987), 2,

(5) Ibid.,


(10) Brink, Mapmakers, 27.

(11) Ibid.


(13) Zimbler, “For Neither Love Nor Money,” 609.


(16) Zimbler, “For Neither Love Nor Money,” 612.


(18) ibid.,

(19) Gordimer, Essential Gesture, 277.

(20) Ibid.


(22) Zimbler, “For Neither Love Nor Money,” 615.

(23) Brink, Mapmakers, 183.


(27) Coetzee, *Doubling the Point*, 45, 23.

(28) Ibid.,


(33) See, for example, J. M. Coetzee, "Address to UCT Fellows" 1985, Container 64, Folder 3, J. M. Coetzee Papers, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.


(38) Brink, Mapmakers, 46.


(40) Brink, Mapmakers, 46.


(42) Bethlehem, “Rhetoric of Urgency.”


(44) Ibid.,


(47) Ibid.,


(49) Russell Vandenbrouke, Truths the Hand Can’t Touch: The Theatre of Athol Fugard (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), 104.


Ibid., *Uprooting Poverty*


Ibid.,

Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*, 166.


Ibid.,

(70) Ibid.,

(71) Ibid.,


(74) Ibid.,


(84) The term “Hottentot” refers to the Khoikhoi people who inhabited the southern tip of Africa at the time of the arrival of the Dutch. This term is considered offensive today, but I preserve this usage in this chapter, both because Coetzee himself does so throughout the essay, and because these accounts of African idleness are less an accurate description of an actually existing people than a discursive construct produced by Dutch and British colonizers. The term Hottentot captures the discursive and historical nature of this construct more fully than do terms such as Khoikhoi.


(87) Ibid.,


(89) Coetzee, *White Writing*, 22, 24,

(90) Ibid.,


(95) Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 188.


(97) Felman, “Madness and Philosophy or Literature’s Reason,” 211.


(100) Coetzee, *Life & Times of Michael K*, 111.

(101) Ibid.,
Starving Across the Color Line

(102) Ibid.,


(105) Ibid.,


(107) Ibid.,


(109) Ibid.,


(111) Coetzee, Life & Times of Michael K, 3.

(112) Ibid.,

(113) Wylie, Starving on a Full Stomach, 15.

(114) Ibid.,

(115) Ibid.,

(116) Coetzee, Life & Times of Michael K, 112.


(119) Felman, “Madness and Philosophy or Literature’s Reason,” 223.

(120) Ibid.,

(121) J. M. Coetzee, “Realism in the Novel” (Talk, Philosophical Society, UCT, 1982), 5,

(122) Attwell, Coetzee and the Life of Writing, 139.


(125) Coetzee, Life & Times of Michael K, 184.

(126) Ibid.,

(127) Coetzee, Doubling the Point, 248.


(130) Coetzee, Doubling the Point, 248.
