

Thought as Revolt in *The Old Man and the Wolves*

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*This article explores how Julia Kristeva's construction of a fictional narrative space enables her to examine the conditions that can produce a culture of revolt. Focusing on one of her novels, *The Old Man and the Wolves*, the article brings together Hannah Arendt's political philosophy (which provides a framework for Kristeva's depiction of totalitarianism) with Duns Scotus's principle of individuation and Giorgio Agamben's notion of quodlibet ("whatever singularity") to argue that the future of a culture of revolt is closely connected to the role of women. By aligning feminine thought to political revolt, I demonstrate that Kristeva's revalorization of feminine experiences in the novel constitutes the basis of an ethics that includes the recognition of "whatever" forms of life that have been historically neglected.*

Kristeva's first novel, *The Samurai* (1992), provoked a great deal of interest because of its depiction of an entire generation of Parisian intellectuals, but her second novel, *The Old Man and the Wolves* (1994) received much less attention. It was disregarded by some as a diversion from critical thought (F. 1991; Donadey 1993), an unsuccessful psychological thriller (Swartwout 1996), or a therapeutic attempt by the author to come to terms with the death of her father under the communist regime in Bulgaria (Smith 1998). Anna Smith reads the novel as a polarization between two kinds of love: *eros*, attributed to a devouring Mother, and *agape*, identified with a loving Father (Smith 1996). According to Anna Smith, this polarization forecloses the possibility of answering some of the novel's provocative questions, especially those concerning the relationship between spirituality and sexuality. Maria Margaroni argues persuasively that Kristeva's novel restages the patricide placed by Freud at the beginning of civilization, with a twist, by incorporating the semiotic and the symbolic into the narrative as a significant contribution to the Oedipal complex (Margaroni 2004). Carol Bové reads the novel as a "familial drama," offering a close examination of the events that led to the loss of the father (Bové 2006). In a more recent analysis, Bové traces the references made in the novel to Italy and Rome to offer a compelling

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reading of the feminine as/and the semiotic in European culture (Bové 2013). Benigno Trigo sees the novel as a representation of “unleashed violence, which kills the symbolic father,” and by so doing, it invites the reader to reflect on “the sources and origins of the violence” as well as on the strategies of how to best approach it (Trigo 2013, 6). Martha Reineke’s eloquent analysis uses René Girard’s theory of violence to discuss the significance of the wolves, which “portend a contagion of conflict that devolves into incidents of scapegoating or sacrifice” (Reineke 2013, 58). Reineke carefully examines the novel’s frequent references to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Tibullus’s poetry as examples of possible “avenues by which conflict could give way to life-giving compassion” (57).

I aim to add to these analyses a reading that draws from Hannah Arendt’s political philosophy, and Kristeva’s own theoretical work on Arendt, in order to reveal a new revalorization of the feminine experience as *thought in/as action*. First, I will review Arendt’s work on authority and totalitarianism to provide a better understanding of Kristeva’s narrative manifestations of totalitarianism. The latter entails not only terror and barbarity in the form of moral and physical violence, as embodied by the “wolves,” but also the destruction of human bonds and of the individual’s capacity to act and think independently. Then I focus on the variants of revolt illustrated by the Old Man, whose rich inner life and imagination contrast starkly with the terrifying everyday invasion of the “wolves.” To counteract the terror and hatred produced by totalitarianism, I show how Kristeva draws on Duns Scotus’s principle of individuation and Giorgio Agamben’s notion of *quodlibet* (“whatever singularity”). Her emphasis on the uniqueness of each individual, premised on an inner life in revolt, remains the only antidote to the “soulless men” of totalitarianism, whose psyche “is destroyed before their bodies are destroyed” (Kristeva 2001, 139).

ARENDT ON TOTALITARIANISM AND AUTHORITY

Hannah Arendt’s *Between Past and Future* provides Kristeva with a framework for examining the relationship between totalitarianism and the loss of respect for authority, laws, and tradition. Arendt claims that the authority that has been “lost in the modern world” is not “authority in general” but “a very specific form which had been valid throughout the Western World over a long period of time” (92). This type of authority provided “durability, continuity, and permanence” to political structures (92). Its binding force provided the “sacredness of foundation” for “all future generations”: “Authority, resting on a foundation in the past as its unshaken cornerstone, gave the world the permanence and durability which human beings need precisely because they are mortals” (95). The disintegration of authority in the modern age was “tantamount to the loss of the groundwork of the world, which indeed since then has begun to shift, to change and transform itself with ever increasing rapidity from one shape to another, as though we were living and struggling with a Protean universe where everything at any moment can become almost anything else” (95). This insight is important to Kristeva’s representation of the breakdown of authority in *The*

Old Man, which opens with a quotation from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: "I resolved to tell of creatures being metamorphosed into new forms." This reference emphasizes, from the outset, that the totalitarian state, depicted in the fictional world evoked, is the result of a violent process of change in which everything can be transformed into something else. There are numerous examples of metamorphoses throughout the novel, most of them in reference to Rome: "No, Rome was not dead—it had undergone a metamorphosis and taken on new forms. Barbaric ones, you say? Perhaps. New, at all events" (Kristeva 1994, 18). In this protean universe, the loss of a sense of permanence and reliability coincides with the loss of respect for authority, respect for the law, and common values. In Santa Varvara, laws "were made to be ignored," and judgments "resembled hatred and folly" (126). In other words, "when everything is forbidden, nothing is prohibited," with the result that chaos, corruption, and barbarism prevail (126). Thus Santa Varvara here serves as an example of any "barbaric" totalitarian regime, embodying the degradation of the rule of law and authority into terror and bureaucracy. An imaginary global village that could be anywhere, Santa Varvara is an epitome of the new world order (as Kristeva understands it, a hybrid setting that provides a lucid critique of both totalitarianisms and, later, of the society of the spectacle [Kristeva 2002]).

For Kristeva, the loss of authority and respect for the law is symbolized by the figure of the "dead" father: "In Santa Varvara they had killed the 'dead' father ... When there's no father, the wolves prowl, metamorphoses multiply and cancel one another out, canine jaws invade the fashionable parts of town, and the suburbs too" (Kristeva 1994, 140). In contrast, the Old Man is presented as an embodiment of the respectable old "law," representing criticism of the totalitarian regime and resistance to it. The position adopted by Kristeva, following Arendt's analysis, that the collapse of authority and respect for tradition and law has a negative effect, might initially seem puzzling, since in other contexts, Kristeva and many other feminists often see authority, law, and tradition as oppressive and needing to be challenged (Kristeva 1993; 1995). Totalitarian regimes are notorious for their abuse of authority and power, including unjust laws and surveillance enforced by violent means. What Arendt and Kristeva refer to as "authority, law, and tradition," which the Old Man represents and defends, evokes a positive and necessary type of authority granted with the people's consent and implemented to protect them, precisely the framework that totalitarian regimes suppress.

Arendt insists that we have to distinguish among different kinds of authority and different methods of political coordination: "Since authority always demands obedience, it is commonly mistaken for some form of power or violence. Yet authority precludes the use of external means of coercion; where force is used, authority itself has failed" (Arendt 1961, 93). The type of authority that Arendt emphasizes and favors was specifically Roman in origin and foundation. She claims that "the word [authority] and the concept are Roman in origin" (104), and that the binding force of authority is closely connected with the preservation of the foundation of a community: "At the heart of Roman politics, from the beginning of the republic until virtually the end of the imperial era, stands the conviction of the sacredness of

foundation, in the sense that once something has been founded it remains binding for all future generations. To be engaged in politics meant first and foremost to preserve the founding of the city of Rome" (120). In other words, creating a community and its public space was understood to be constitutive of all subsequent actions, to the point that all political acts thereafter had to be tied back to that initial act of foundation. The binding power of the foundation itself was religious, with religion in this case meaning literally *re-ligare*, "to be tied back, obligated, to the enormous, almost superhuman and hence always legendary effort to lay the foundations, to build the cornerstone, to found for eternity" (121). Thus, to be religious meant "to be tied to the past," in which case religious and political activities were considered as almost identical (121). Drawing on the etymology of the word "authority" (*auctoritas*), which she links to *augere*, meaning "augment," Arendt argues that what those in legitimate authority "constantly augment is the foundation" (121–22). It is important to distinguish, Arendt insists, between power (*potestas*), which "resides in the people," and authority (*auctoritas*) which "rests with the Senate," whose crucial role was to augment the foundation: "The authoritative character of the 'augmentation' of the elders lies in its being a mere advice, needing neither the form of command nor external coercion to make itself heard" (93). Arendt goes on to explain that the Senate, composed of the fathers of the republic (*patres*), and they "held their authority because they represented, or rather reincarnated, the ancestors whose only claim to authority in the body politic was precisely that they had founded it, that they were the 'founding fathers.' Through the Roman Senators, the founders of the city of Rome were present, and with them the spirit of foundation was present, the principium and principle" (Arendt 1961, 123).

It is important to emphasize the fact that Arendt links the notion of authority (*auctoritas*) to the figure of the father (*pater*) and to the act of foundation, including the creation of community bonds. She argues that the specific function of the authorities (or the "founding fathers") was to give advice about how the community could adapt to changing circumstances, while consolidating to its founding principles. Since change is inherent in the human condition, calling for new laws and institutions, the task of those in authority was to ensure that any changes would be an augmentation of the original foundation. In this way, "by virtue of *auctoritas*, permanence and change were tied together, whereby ... change could only mean increase and enlargement of the old" (122). In other words, the role of the Roman authorities was to provide a certain stability in the public realm by the preservation of tradition, connecting the present to the past.

Arendt explains that to remember the past became customary for the Romans, and was tantamount to the manifestation of "common sense" in the public realm: "Historically, common sense is as much Roman in origin as tradition ... With the Romans, remembering the past became a matter of tradition, and it is in the sense of tradition that the development of common sense found its politically most important expression" (Arendt 2005, 42). "Common sense" is another "traditional value" that was derided and critiqued by French and other intellectuals of Kristeva's generation who wanted to deconstruct everything that is taken for granted and look at who

benefits from unquestioned assumptions in terms of power. For Arendt, common sense, like remembrance of the past, conservation of tradition, and (justified) respect for authority, are all values related to knowledge and experience transmitted by the (fore)fathers, and are demolished or ignored with disastrous results. It is for this reason that the figure of the father-professor is particularly important in *The Old Man*. The figure of the father-professor embodies here Arendt's idea of "common sense" reflected in the "maxims": "to think for oneself," "to think by putting oneself in the place of all others," and "a maxim of an enlarged mind" (Kristeva 2001, 225).

In her novel, Kristeva reinforces Arendt's notion of the links among authority, the figure of the father, and the creation and preservation of community bonds. She portrays the Old Man as a professor of Latin, who despite the terror and violence of the "wolves" tries to keep alive the Roman tradition of Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, reciting verses from Ovid, Tibullus, and Suetonius. His continuous efforts to revive the Roman culture that Arendt admires constitute his only form of revolt against the communist regime. The Old Man, aka the Professor, aka Septicius Clarus, is described as never reading anything but Latin: "Books in early Latin, late Latin, ecclesiastical Latin" (Kristeva 1994, 10). For him, Kristeva goes on to explain, "these verses belonged to the end of a world, the end of the Roman world, which existed before us just as we exist now before some new barbarism or some mere metamorphosis: whatever it was, the Professor was trying to face up to it . . . No doubt, he would always belong to that world of long ago that he called civilization" (14). As an academic and above all a classical scholar, this paternal figure appears to be the epitome of "conservative" values, yet he is also constructed as the most effective rebel against the totalitarian system around him because he is a free thinker, and thought is not only the ultimate sanctuary of privacy and freedom but also has the power to change both individuals and communities.

THOUGHT AS ACTION

In *The Old Man*, paternal authority is not associated with the misuse of power and coercive violence, but rather with loving support and the aptitude to conserve and pass on thoughts and recollections as well to interrogate the past, on which the future depends. This idea is clearly expressed several times by the Old Man, aka Septicius Clarus, when he explains that his continuous efforts to revive the period of Roman civilization before the fall of the Roman Empire are motivated by a desire to find possible solutions to the present situation of crisis, violence, and barbarity, in the hope that things will change: "Septicius knew the present was a period of transition. So he looked at Santa Varvara through the eyes of Ovid and Tibullus" (17). A similar idea is emphasized earlier: "Whereas what his contemporaries liked about Rome moving toward decline was its rank atmosphere of unconscious decay, its languid indulgence in squalid display, insipid debauch, and unsated lust for pleasure, Septicius Clarus was interested in any pointers the period might contain to its problematic future" (16).

Like Arendt, who regards thought and life as one (Arendt 1958), Kristeva formulates the Old Man's aptitude for thought as coextensive with life, and as a metaphor for the endurance of an inner resistance that enables him to ward off fear of the "wolves" and the hatred they provoke. Thought enables him to maintain a form of autonomy and independence in a context where movement is curtailed. His reading replaces social interaction, which is forbidden. Although thought as action might appear as an artificial kind of existence or resistance, it is the only possible self-defense in times of decadence, barbarity, and fear: "he was now autonomous, detached from his departing body because of the artificial existence he had created for himself, from childhood onward, by learning how to speak, read, write, and even identify with a dead language. Dead for his contemporaries, but for him a source of revelation, showing that there was such a thing as the happy chance of being able to live in the mind" (113).

The aptitude for thought is premised on having an inner life. Whereas for Arendt action and speech constitute the specificity of human life, making it inseparable from the conception of the political as a "living relationship" (Arendt 1958, 187), for Kristeva the specificity of being human is having a psychic life. She combines Arendt's thought with that of Freud so as to emphasize psychic life as integral to political life. Her definition of psychic life connects it to the ability to have a "soul." For her, the "soul" is a "structure of meaning" that represents "the bond between the speaking being and the other, a bond that endows it with a therapeutic and moral value" (Kristeva 1995, 4). She goes on to explain that "because of the soul, you are capable of action. Your psychic life is a discourse that acts" (6). Kristeva's definition of psychic life resonates with the Arendtian conception of life in relation to politics, a formulation that Kristeva also uses in her description of the Old Man's revolt against the totalitarian regime. Yet Kristeva adds aspects that Arendt's emphasis on the life of the mind does not adequately address; through her engagement with Freud, Kristeva articulates psychic life not only in the aptitude for thought, recollection, and interrogation, but also in the context of embodiment and the unconscious. The variants of revolt illustrated by the Old Man take both these dimensions into account, as inseparable from thought and European cultural memory.

VARIANTS OF REVOLT: THE STORY OF THE OLD MAN

In *The Old Man*, Kristeva emphasizes the need for a culture of revolt, if life is not to become a "life of death." This idea is also clearly expressed in *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (Kristeva 2000, 7), where she explains that this culture of revolt needs to begin with an examination of the aesthetic and intellectual heritage of European civilization, as well as historical memory, in order to create new variants of that civilization. By endowing civilization with a critical conscience able to assess the past through collective memory, Kristeva also leaves open the possibility of adding an unconscious dimension to that memory. This possibility is explicitly addressed in *Intimate Revolt*, where she claims that "memory is unconscious" (Kristeva 2002, 34). Moreover, because memory is situated where psychic energy and representation meet,

it is “indestructible and yet displaceable, because it is intra- and intersystemic” (34). Kristeva’s comments on the unconscious memory of civilization resonate with Freud’s representation of the collective psyche (Freud 1989), on which Kristeva draws in *The Old Man* in order to make the idea of a conscious and unconscious memory of civilization part of her attempt to formulate a culture of mental resistance and revolt.

Such a culture of revolt depends on singular forms of expression, on the subjective capacity to create an inner life where various forms of cultural representation are revisited and renewed. Memory becomes a montage where subjective and cultural layers are organized in a heterogeneous fashion, through “scraps of ancient poetry” and “bits of forgotten paintings” (115), in a process that is always incomplete, unfinished yet ready to be started anew. When fear paralyzes any other form of action, as in Santa Varvara, the psychic space of memory and creativity becomes the only space where revolt is possible. In the case of the Old Man, this domain where he can communicate with others across space and time is the only thing that enables him to survive.

To confront the tangible and palpable terror caused by the “wolves,” the Old Man has recourse to the imaginary realm, not as something that removes fear from day-to-day existence, but as a way of toning it down, through the hope of freedom created by his dreams. Through his reading, he also has the “strange feeling” that his experience of suffering has been shared by others who managed to survive without giving in to compromise, paralysis, or fear (Kristeva 1994, 13). The Old Man turns back to Ovid, Tibullus, and Goya as guides to lead him out of the problematic future shaped by the regime. They also provide him with examples of how to transform pain and suffering into communicable narratives, stories that he conveys in the lectures he gives to his students.

Kristeva invokes Freud’s representation of the psyche, constructed by analogy with the historical site of Rome, “the Eternal City,” in her description of the Old Man’s references to Roman civilization: “Now let us, by a flight of imagination, suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similar and copious past—an entity, this is to say, in which nothing that has come once in existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one” (34). Similarly, Kristeva insists that past layers of memory, psychic and cultural, are not lost, but displaced and transformed. In their efforts to keep the memory of Rome alive, to unearth its mnemonic traces and imagine its metamorphoses in new present-day forms, the Old Man and his students turn their attention to Tibullus’s elegies and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, reading or reciting them aloud: “they repeated those dreamy, inspired verses as if the language of Rome had never been forgotten” (18). Like Freud before her, Kristeva uses Latin as a metonym for the archaeological excavation of Rome/the past, which the Old Man tries to unearth and revive. She switches to the Latin variant of the many pseudonyms of the Old Man, calling him Septicius Clarus to emphasize the fact that he is in search of the “lost time” of civilization, which he finds echoed in “[s]ome lines of Latin poetry: . . . Their resonance *reconciled Septicius with lost time* . . . These verses belonged to the end of a world, the end of the Roman world, which existed before us just as we exist now before some new barbarism or some mere metamorphosis . . . No doubt about it, *he would always belong to that world of long ago that he called civilization*” (14–15; my italics). The period of Roman

history that the Old Man likes to recall is that of the barbarity of the final years of the Roman Empire, when the actions of the supposedly “civilized” Romans became more horrific than those of the colonized/uncivilized barbarians. The situation in Santa Varvara is closer to the barbaric version of Rome, but for the Old Man hope for the future can be found in remembering that Rome’s decline brought about its fall, and newly civilized successors sought their model in Rome’s foundation. Civilization, like the phoenix, can rise from its ashes, if thinkers recall how it began. Such a renewal does not occur, however, without revolt, implying the necessity for suffering and sacrifice, mental or physical.

SADOMASOCHISM AS PART OF THE LOGIC OF REVOLT

In his search for pointers that might contain alternative solutions to the problematic future of Santa Varvara, Septicius turns to the stories in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which indicate the ambiguity of the pleasure inherent in acts of transformation. Septicius remarks: “For a while, the changes that took place in Ovid were punishments—or, at the very least, tokens of disapproval—the being who imposed them seemed to take as much pleasure in the obloquy of the offense as in its chastisement. Was his intention to wipe out the sin, or to immortalize it?” (17). This ambiguity is reflected in some elements of Septicius’s revolt against the totalitarian regime, which confirm Kristeva’s insight that revolt (even when it takes the form of thought) has sadomasochistic aspects. His research into the past and preoccupation with the ambivalent history of Rome is not entirely innocent. It begins with a process of self-examination that makes him aware of his own potential for violence and the force of his own desires. In reading Ovid’s text, Septicius is searching for a way to understand his own indecision, his own ambivalence regarding possible ways of transforming pain into pleasure, and vice versa. It is in this interval between pleasure and punishment, immortalization or annihilation of sin, that Kristeva situates the similarity between Ovid and Septicius: “Ovid and Septicius hovered somewhere between the two [pleasure and punishment], on the edge of indecision, of the baleful human condition that hadn’t yet chosen its cross but already overflowed with passion” (17). Ovid’s painful exile in Tomis (where he eventually died) and his ability to transform brutal events, human suffering, and conflicts (his own included), into narratives that recount the story of human civilization until the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, offers the Old Man the example of how to transform his own pain and feelings of anger and violence against the injustice and terror of “wolves” into inner monologues and lectures he shares with his students.

The Old Man “bears his cross,” accepting pain and suffering as martyrdom, seeking, like Tibullus in his elegies, to sublimate subjective horror at mass murder into an aesthetic and elegiac contemplation of death. Loneliness and his own approaching end lead to a paradoxical connection to others, including Tibullus: “As for Tibullus, steeped in love, he fed Septicius sweetness like a ripe fruit that knows it must rot but still gorges itself on bursting on the sunshine. The elegies sing of infinite death. They drink deep of death, they grow drunk on it, but they don’t believe in it; for them,

there is no quietus" (17). Shifting between repulsion and fascination with death, his in-between position forces the Old Man to remain alert and vigilant to the truths as well as the dangers revealed by the turmoil inside and outside himself: "[he] saw himself as standing on a dividing line: as a bone between two cavities, a boat between two waves, always eager for the turmoil that affords a glimpse of the worst, the vortex that throws up the strange images in which philosophers may later read truths" (17).

Fascinated by the past, and fearful of the future, the Old Man sees the present as an interval between "then" and "not yet": "Septicius knew the present was a period of transition. So he looked at Santa Varvara through the eyes of Ovid and Tibullus" (17). For Septicius, this period of transition can only be lived as a form of intellectual nomadism, which is temporal rather than spatial, as the wandering of his thoughts becomes tantamount to being free to roam. This mental nomadism is also a way to keep the memory of civilization alive, by connecting with others across time and space. Reflecting on Septicius's search for the "lost time" of civilization, Kristeva explains that his decision to be a nomadic thinker, not to be fixed in any one place, especially not the "here and now," is not simply a critique of the current regime or a "sign of crisis," but rather a choice, an option, an attitude, taking the form of "a quest for what is the best, for what sets out from what has been, without a fixed plan, but free to open up all kinds of avenues. For example, the avenues of memory, which once made Santa Varvara one of the capitals of metamorphosis, as Ovid and Tibullus and even Suetonius could confirm" (150). Just as there is something "artificial" about dissident thought as equivalent to political revolt,¹ there is also something artificial about this concept of mental nomadism being equivalent to the freedom of physical mobility. Connections with others across time and space are in this case possible only in the life of the mind, and the communication or movement is only one-way. The Old Man creates an "artificial existence" for himself by learning how to "speak, read, write, and even identify with a dead language" (113). It is this "artificial existence" that renders him "a new and temporary body, a prosthetic device made of signs that kept his decrepit carcass briefly but determinedly functioning" (113).

Aware of this artificiality, Kristeva defends it by suggesting that under extreme circumstances, having recourse to artificial solutions may be the only way to remain sane and alive. For Septicius, the artificial life of his mind provides an escape, and is the only means available to survive the "transmogrifications" taking place around him (150). It is also his only source of pleasure: "because of the artificial existence that he created for himself . . . there was such a thing as the happy chance of being able to live in the mind" (113).

MEANING AS MAKING CONNECTIONS

Recollection, imagination, and interrogation give Septicius the freedom to make connections with other thinkers, to construct links between times and places that make his present incomprehensible circumstances meaningful. As he explains to Stephanie, "meaning is always a kind of connection . . . There used to be links between people

then, and yet they weren't bound. Freedom—neither passion nor indifference—is a link, perhaps” (58). This paradoxical formulation of freedom as a link, with its Arendtian overtones, also draws on what Kristeva claims to be a Christian definition of freedom as rebirth through living thought (Kristeva 2001, 128). In tracing the genealogy of Arendt's notion of freedom to Christian thought, Kristeva states: “This ‘other beginning’ is a life of the mind . . . it carves out a space for the interior man, and it becomes a will-to-power, which is essentially a will-to-live” (203).

Although Kristeva in this instance relates freedom to Christian thought, she remains critical of other aspects of religion, and in *The Old Man* she differentiates between religion as adherence to a dominant faith and religious belief or practice as an act of transgression based on freedom of dissident thought, in an antireligious totalitarian system. In Santa Varvara, any expression of religious belief is forbidden, and the Old Man, who is deeply religious, is considered a dangerous rebel by authorities. So great is the regime's fear of religion's potential for resistance that they shut down churches, and even demolish them or turn them into museums (Kristeva 1994, 76), as occurred in communist Bulgaria. They develop various methods for persecuting those who continue to express their religious faith, and harassment extends to the entire family, including children. The extent of persecution is vividly illustrated in the story of Stephanie's father, the Ambassador, who is inseparable from the Old Man, to the point that “people often mixed them up” (153). When the Ambassador becomes a persona non grata, the whole family is forced to leave Santa Varvara (153). The Ambassador's daughter cannot attend the school of her choice, as her application is rejected on the basis of his father's nonadherence to the Party and his nonconformist religious beliefs, as the letter of refusal explains:

Comrade Ambassador . . . Your daughter . . . you are not a member of the Party . . . and, let me remind you, you are a believer and very involved with certain local believers. You will agree that this, quite objectively, places you among the enemies of Santa Varvara . . . I am amazed you should have thought your daughter worthy of such a distinguished establishment . . . can only reiterate our categorical refusal. (155)

Thus, for the Ambassador, as well as for the Old Man, religious belief emerges as a way of transforming his anguish into “the humility of a faith that was hidden but not in the least craven” (151), and as part of the mental freedom that enables him to resist oppression. Elsewhere Kristeva explains that Christian thought may enable the displacement of hatred into thought by devising a logic that prevents one from participating in murder and madness (Kristeva 1995, 120). In the case of the Old Man, Christian thought helps him to work through the hatred that he feels toward the officials by sublimating it into inner visions that he calls his “active monsters” (Kristeva 1994, 51): “Like some mad painter, the dying dreamer made pictures out of the hatred that was killing him, yet whose impact he was taming by absorbing into his vision the horror of which he was the victim” (113).

As Septicius learns to transform hatred and horror by giving them aesthetic form and meaning, he looks at other periods in the history of civilization for examples of

how others managed to transform their own inner monsters into cultural representations. He feels particularly close to Goya, who chronicled Spanish history. Goya deplored the “bestiary carnival” of human passions, and the “grotesque” and deceitful practices of the supposedly civilized Spanish society; he transformed his contempt and hatred into compelling paintings (115). By linking Septicius to Goya, as well as to Ovid and Tibullus, Kristeva suggests the “eternal return” of common elements in different periods of moral decadence, violence, and corruption, as well as the ongoing desire to narrate/represent such experiences. There is relatively little variation, other than the increasing sophistication of technologies of murder:

[M]y dear Ovid. I borrow old Goya’s palette to translate into dream what you once wrote by the Black Sea. For the Spanish painter, though deaf, was not blind to the stupidities, corruptions, and revolutions of his contemporaries, nor to anything else in the whole range of their rather unimaginative cruelties . . . nothing has changed . . . The dreams of dying men all paraphrase the same theme: consider the persecuted old age of Goya, the lewd old age of Picasso, the crazy old age of Septicius. Abductions, kidnappings, murders, swindles, violations of international law, invasions of sovereign territory, poison gas, germ warfare. Holy war! Terrorism offered up as a sacrifice to God! (115–16)

The similarities of these different periods of violence and corruption are so striking that they erase the specificity of the historical period, turning the present into an eternal reliving of the past, to the extent that the Old Man can no longer recognize what century he lives in:

What century was it? Was he in the first century, in exile on the shores of the Black Sea, dreaming of the metamorphoses that took place in human beings as they entered upon a new era, a new age just as steeped in brutishness as the old? Or was he in the present, in Santa Varvara, where a Bogeyman would soon come to disconnect the artificial lung that was still keeping the Ovid-haunted ancient alive? (120)

Although the experience of horror and oppression and desire to give them meaning through artistic form are similar over time and across space, collective and political resistance and revolt may take various forms, including revolutions. When open revolt is not possible, freedom of individual thought and artistic expression has always provided a last recourse for personal, individual revolt. The power of such thought lies in the uniqueness of each life, in a “singularity” that makes a life like the Old Man’s worth living.

“WHATEVER SINGULARITY”

The Old Man’s story emerges as a tribute to the singularity² and uniqueness of human life, to the capacity to make a new beginning, premised on the aptitude for

thought that is tantamount to that of acting. Kristeva uses the notion of *quodlibet* as a plea for human uniqueness, whose very meaning—"whatever singularity"—invokes a desire to appreciate that life matters "no matter what," as Stephanie explains: "So I go on telling you about my whims and fancies, because, like the Professor, I persist in thinking that *quodlibet ens* means not 'no matter what being' but 'a being that matters, no matter what'" (Kristeva 1994, 145; my italics). Kristeva's notion of *quodlibet* resonates well with Giorgio Agamben's, developed in *The Coming Community* (Agamben 1993).³ It is useful to juxtapose their interpretations of the term, to look at how Kristeva's association of *quodlibet* with a beloved father figure enables her to rethink Arendt's ideas on authority and the rule of law, as mentioned earlier.

Agamben argues that the common translation of *quodlibet* as "whatever" in the sense of "it does not matter which, indifferently" is inaccurate or incomplete, for its use in the Latin phrase "*quodlibet ens*" conveys the opposite. He claims that this phrase does not mean, as is often assumed, "being, it does not matter which," but rather "being, such that it always matters" (Agamben 1993, 1). As quoted above, Kristeva uses similar terms, rejecting the translation "no matter what being" in favor of "a being that matters, no matter what" (Kristeva 1994, 145). For Agamben, the basis of the coming community is the singular being, "whatever being," in the sense that "I care for you 'such as you are'" (Agamben 1993, 2). In *The Old Man*, Stephanie defines her relationship with her father in similar terms: "Father mattered to me, no matter what, despite the difference we both affected" (Kristeva 1994, 145).

The singularity of human identity, for Agamben, is not mediated by a person's belonging to a set or class (Agamben 1993, 1). Kristeva also emphasizes that the singularity of the father cannot be circumscribed by ascribing any category to him. She describes him as "not belonging to the category of fathers in general, of ambassadors, foreigners, Santa Varvarians, Frenchmen, friends, or enemies of the Professors, or any other classifications whatsoever, human, inhuman, or superhuman" (Kristeva 1994, 145). This refusal to classify the individual simply as representative of some group does not imply, for either Agamben or Kristeva, a negation of all forms of belonging. For Agamben, the singular being occupies a "space of appearance" that is not rooted in a "here" or "there," but belongs "everywhere" and "nowhere" (Agamben 1993, 2). Rather, he places the focus on the singularity of "being-such," beyond the notion of belonging: "Thus being-such, which remains constantly hidden in the conditions of belonging," as in the example "there is an X as it belongs to Y," is in no way "a real predicate" of the singular being (2). Agamben insists that the singularity exposed "as such" is "whatever you want, that is, lovable" (2). Similarly, in *The Old Man*, Kristeva also uses "X" and "Y" to describe the relationship between Stephanie and her father as a loving space, situated everywhere and anywhere: "for me [Stephanie], his virtue consisted in being an X who was such . . . and in being content to appear as such, just as he was, and therefore thinkable and lovable by others who were the same as he, other ordinary beings. By me, for example, who am a Y to his X, and so appear to him in all my ordinariness" (145).

For Kristeva, the singularity of *quodlibet* is not determined by any belonging, but resides in the ability to expose oneself "anywhere" and "anytime," to transgress

cultural and social identity markers. Referring again to Stephanie's father, Kristeva writes: "He was really exposing himself, with trusting gentleness, with a kind of shattered tension of eye and skin, in permanent prayer" (Kristeva 1994, 163). Kristeva's horror at the mass murders of totalitarianism is expressed as a plea for the uniqueness of "whatever life," and Kristeva also makes reference to Duns Scotus's principle of individuation in order to emphasize this idea. This type of individuation is thus associated with "ordinariness":

Father and the Old Man both had the simplicity of ordinary men, no matter who, and that was why they mattered, no matter what. Yes, amid the darkness of great men, my light, my argument is based on the principium individuationis, the principle of individuation. And that's what would need to be saved if ever there were another Noah's Ark, since it was by its abolition that Santa Varvara set out on the downward path. Yes, what needs preserving is the principle of individuation, the *quodlibet*, the Old Man, and my father. (146)

Duns Scotus (whom Stephanie quotes in her plea for the singularity of her father) offers Kristeva a chance to refine her meditation on the *quodlibet*, by calling attention to the co-presence of thinking, action, and love. Commenting on the principle of individuation, Kristeva argues later that Scotus "not only individualizes the power of mind, but he also adorns this power with desire and reasoning and endows the unique man with an untold freedom" (Kristeva 2001, 176). This freedom resides in the capacity to recognize that willing and loving have primacy over the intellect and are at the root of thought. The singularity of individual experience is based on a dynamic between thought and sensory perception, and as a result freedom consists in the internal ability to initiate something, to begin something anew in the life of the mind. In a context where totalitarianism destroys the individual capacity for thought and therefore for life, simultaneously suppressing the common space and loving family ties, it is only the capacity for beginning something anew that "guarantees spontaneous uniqueness" (141). In *The Old Man*, this capacity to make a new beginning is what defines the singularity of the Old Man's experience, his own "manner" of being happy. It is a happiness rooted in ordinariness that is "*thinkable and lovable* by others who were the same as he, other ordinary beings" (145; my italics).

By making the learned and respected father figure loving and "ordinary," a "simple" person who believes that life matters no matter what, Kristeva proposes an alternative way of thinking about authority and law. As discussed earlier, like Arendt, Kristeva links the notion of authority to the figure of the father and to the possibility of creating community bonds. But whereas Arendt reconfigures paternal or patriarchal authority and tradition in transcendental terms,⁴ Kristeva turns to psychoanalysis to provide a different framework. By associating the Old Man with a loving fatherliness, Kristeva also challenges traditional psychoanalytic conceptions of the paternal function as stern and tyrannical. Without denying Freud's or Lacan's models of authoritarian fathers, she suggests that there are also various other paternal functions. In *Tales*

of *Love*, Kristeva had already advanced the notion of the imaginary father, which she defines in clear contrast to Lacan's Father of the Law:

Maintaining against the winds and high tides of our modern civilization the requirement of a stern father who, through his Name, brings about separation, judgment and identity, constitutes a necessity, a more or less pious wish. But we can only note that such jarring sternness, far from leaving us orphaned or inexorably psychotic, reveals multiple and varied destinies for paternity—notably archaic, imaginary paternity. (Kristeva 1989, 46)

Later, in *Contre la dépression nationale*, Kristeva outlines some of the many other facets of the father, including his femininity, passion, and desire, making the paternal figure a much more complex authority than the one represented by Lacan (Kristeva 1998, 29), closer to the “beloved authority” illustrated by the Old Man in her novel.

In *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, Kristeva argues that the imaginary father, or the “father of the individual prehistory,” is the “keystone of our loves and imagination,” and incorporates characteristics usually associated with both parents (Kristeva 2000, 53). Kelly Oliver demonstrates that Kristeva had already set up this formulation of the imaginary (combined) parent as a primary identification in subject-formation: “The identification with this conglomerate is the vortex of primary identification within what Kristeva calls the ‘narcissistic structure.’ This identification is the originary identification that sets up all subsequent identifications, including the ego’s identification with itself” (Oliver 1993, 77). Oliver also provides a useful explanation of how the paternal and maternal functions are embodied in the notion of the imaginary father:

This identification with the imaginary father is a transference between the semiotic body and an ideal other who lacks nothing. It is called a father in spite of the fact that it is also a mother because, following Lacan, Kristeva identifies the Symbolic with the Father. She explains this curiosity by arguing that even though the child’s first affectations are directed toward the mother, these archaic ‘object’ relations are already ‘symbolic’ and therefore associated with the father. This is to say that the logic of the Symbolic is already within the maternal body. Although it seems strange, this combination is called a father because it is a metonymic relationship-in-the-making. (78)

Oliver emphasizes the fact that this loving imaginary father plays a primary role in the subject’s psychic development, making creativity and love possible, and also providing the guarantee of communal meaning as the element that can “supply the missing link between social and psychic space” (Oliver 2002, 82). In *The Old Man*, the loving father figure serves precisely as a link between psychic and social space, and Kristeva insists on the *quodlibet* aspects of this imaginary parent as necessary to a loving identification not only with the father but with others, as well as a condition for becoming an autonomous, thinking subject. The role of this bond in nurturing an

inner life capable of adaptation and change is conveyed by Stephanie's relationship with her father:⁵

But he [my father] believed in things for me ... But I, Stephe Delacour, was there, he said, to stir up the ebb and flow, and perhaps to get some happiness out of it one of these days ... Why me? No reason at all. Wasn't I programmed for the low tide too: to contemplate the mud, to be a part of it? But no—come, come! Stephe wasn't like all the rest, she'd come through, she'd go far ... What a hope! But he had a reason: he loved me. It was a reason so unassuming it made the chivalrous, protective expression on his face unbearable to contemplate. (Kristeva 1994, 162–63; my italics)

The beloved authority of the father emerges not only as a support for Stephanie's elaboration of an inner psychic life, stimulating her capacity for thought and interrogation, but also as necessary for the possibility of individual resistance and revolt. The Old Man's continuous efforts to revive Roman culture also reflect the notion of a beloved and respected type of authority as integral to the possibility of collective revolt. Personal forms of attachment to individuals, and intellectual attachment to certain types of thought and aesthetic expression, are antidotes to any totalitarian regime and may be as, or more, effective than other types of resistance and revolt in maintaining some kind of freedom. In some cases, they may be all that makes life worth living, and their absence can produce monsters, as illustrated by the parallel story of Vespasian and Alba Ram.

READERS IN REVOLT

The act of narration as an act of revolt and forgiveness also implicates and complicates the act of interpretation by the reader. As forgiveness, writing emerges for the writer/narrator as a continuing process of self-transformation, of putting suffering into words, and ascribing meaning to a painful experience, as occurs in the case of Stephanie's self-examination. As revolt, writing appears as a process of self-reflexive literary production and analysis that opens up the space between the author and narrator to a continuing process of scrutiny, laying bare the dynamics of the writing experience. This form of writing does not favor coherence in terms of the structure of the plot, nor linearity in the telling of the story. In *The Old Man*, repeated movements of return and transformation occur not only in terms of intersecting characters and their narratives, but also in the historical realm (from the fall of the Roman Empire to the fall of the Berlin Wall), creating an effect of constant temporal and narrative dislocation. The reader is invited to participate in the co-production of a "*texte scriptable*," to become part of the exchange of stories, as "Our goings hence and our coming hither all take place in the form of stories" (66). Readers who prefer a "*texte lisible*," and like to have the meaning revealed to them with less effort on their part, may give up. The effectiveness of Kristeva's novel as an act of forgiveness and

reconciliation depends on the imaginary support of implied readers. Such support implies identification and willingness to love and forgive, and without it the meaning of the Old Man's and Stephanie's stories is lost, as Kristeva/Stephanie tells "us": "The only way I could mourn was by making their ordinariness seem lovable to you. I plead for a truce in our fascination with murder, though I haven't forgotten about it and promise to get back to it in due course" (146).

Kristeva seems to have a particular audience in mind, made up of women, as she regards them as the only ones capable of paying attention to the personal, to the ordinary, to the "whatever singularity":

It won't be long now till women are the only ones who still believe in the personal, still think—for women know how very ordinary they are themselves—that an ordinary individual may be of interest. So I go on and tell you about my whims and fancies because, like the Professor, I persist in thinking that *quodlibet ens* means not "no matter what being" but a "being that matters, no matter what." (144–45)

In attributing to women the capacity to preserve the meaning of life as a life that "matters no matter what," Kristeva suggests an alternative way of valuing life in relation to culture that depends on women's (supposed) preoccupation with the personal or subjective, rather than the general or objective dimensions of life. This positions women at the forefront of the social and ethical scene that Kristeva later associates with a culture of revolt (Kristeva 2000, 5). The subjective experience that Kristeva has in mind has meaning rather than signification and relates to the prelinguistic, corporeal, and semiotic aspects of subjectivity and revolt. The emphasis on subjectivity and personal thought is essential to political revolt, as an antidote to a totalitarian regime that considers individual life "superfluous," to recall Arendt's term (Arendt 1994). Kristeva positions women as capable of preserving both life in its biological sense, and the meaning of life in its "ordinariness." This revalorization of "feminine" experience constitutes the basis of an ethics that includes the recognition of "whatever" forms of life that have been neglected.

NOTES

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1. As early as 1977, in "Un nouveau type d'intellectuel: Le dissident," published in English in 1986, Kristeva articulates clearly the connection between dissidence and thought. She writes: "For true dissidence today is perhaps simply what it has always been: *thought*" (Kristeva 1986, 299; italics in original). Kristeva argues that a breakdown in the value system that formed the backbone of the European tradition before the French Revolution led to the advent of both fascism and Stalinism, as well as contemporary

consumerism. In other words, she laments the crisis of the European tradition, which since the French Revolution led to what she later called the “normalizing and falsifiable” new world order (Kristeva 2002, 4), and which in the novel takes the form of Santa Varvara. Kristeva credits the intellectual with the responsibility to take on a response to this crisis of European tradition and analysis of its causes, by spearheading a type of political and cultural dissidence (Kristeva 1986, 295). In the novel, the intellectual is embodied by the Old Man, aka Septicius, aka the Professor, aka the Father.

2. Kristeva’s interest in the notion of singularity is not new here. It appears as a central concept throughout her work. It was first developed in relation to the notion of revolution in poetic language (Kristeva 1974), and to the semiotic traces in language (Kristeva 1977). It acquired a new prominence in *Strangers to Ourselves* (Kristeva 1991), where it is examined in relation to various forms of estrangement implicated in origins of subjectivity. It continues to persist in her latest works on revolt, drawing more significantly on Arendt’s philosophy.

3. A close reader of Arendt, Agamben defines the “coming community” in opposition to any sovereign regime that reduces human life to “bare life,” that is a life deprived of any rights. In making the distinction between “bare life” (*zoe*) and “qualified life” (*bios*), Agamben invokes Arendt’s distinction between *bios* and *zoe*, which Kristeva, in *Hannah Arendt*, explains as a difference between a life that acquires meaning through narration and interrogation (*bios*) and a life without questions (*zoe*). Though Agamben’s book was originally published in Italian in 1990, a year before Kristeva published *The Old Man*, it is possible that Kristeva read the book in the original, since there are striking similarities between Kristeva’s description of the notion of *quodlibet* and Agamben’s analysis.

4. Arendt draws on Christian theology to construe living thought as the only form of secular transcendence that remains after the disappearance of the “Roman trinity” of tradition, authority, and religion (Arendt 1958). This living thought is premised on a time of renewal, of new beginnings. Tracing Arendt’s “new” secular transcendence, understood as “*thinking as life*,” to a Roman and Biblical genealogy, Kristeva writes: “This ‘other beginning’ is Christian thought, which, since the break in the ‘thread of tradition,’ is no longer theology, but a life of the mind” (Kristeva 2001, 203).

5. The story of Stephanie’s relationship with her father interlaces with the story of the Old Man. The two stories run parallel, sharing many similarities. The death of the Old Man, who suffers from an ulcer and is taken to the hospital where he dies under mysterious circumstances, reminds Stephanie of the death of her own father, which also occurred in suspicious circumstances. Mourning the death of the Old Man as well as of her own father, Stephanie is determined to bring those responsible to justice, but before she can investigate further, the Old Man is cremated against his expressed wishes. Realizing that there is little she can do in a world where fear and murder rule in the absence of effective laws, Stephanie goes back to Paris. She promises to return to Santa Varvara to continue to investigate future crimes, a task she pursues in Kristeva’s next novel, *Possessions*.

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