

# WRITING HISTORY THROUGH TORTURES IN COETZEE'S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

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For nearly five decades, J M Coetzee has produced a series of novels and critical essays whose philosophic depth and stylistic brilliance have elicited responses across the globe. J M Coetzee represents one of the most important voices in what has come to be known as postcolonial literature.

Waiting for the Barbarians, Coetzee's third novel, which takes its title from Constantine Cavafy's poem, is set on the fringes of an unnamed Empire, thriving on emergency laws in an undefined space and time. The outpost where a large part of the novel takes place is controlled by a magistrate whose sole aspiration is to live the rest of his days with as little trouble as possible. However, the Empire has other plans for him and his outpost, namely to fight the so-called impending barbarian threat. The myth of the enemy at the gate has to be continuously revived and becomes the main justification for exerting more control. In this novel, Coetzee moves away from exposing the way historical discourses have worked to construct and reinforce the hierarchical systems or oppression in South Africa and turns to a more allegorical rendition of the dynamics of contemporary life in South Africa.

Waiting for the Barbarians crystallizes the central issue of debate concerning the ethical vision of Coetzee's fiction and his importance as a novelist. Throughout the novel Coetzee is more concerned with a specific issue looming over South African political life: the question of torture. Ever since the National Party gained control in 1948; there have been accusations of state-sponsored torture in South Africa. The parallels, however, are vague in that the time and place of the novel's setting are imprecise. As Dominic Head observes:

At one level, this is an allegory of imperialism and, as such, it inevitably widens its significance. Yet, suppose the parallel political situations are various. In that case, the novel may still be shown to have its compositional roots in a set of specific responses to contemporary South African concerns. It is this achieved duality that lends credibility and resonance to the allegorical style. Through a broadening and questioning of its one-to-one significance, the novel reinvigorates the allegorizing impulse.

(J.M. Coetzee 72)

The spark that ignited the bonfire of rhetoric concerning torture was the death of Stephen Biko. Following the Soweto uprising in June 1976, unrest spread throughout South African townships. Horrified by police shootings of unarmed school children and unable to tolerate the oppression of apartheid any longer, the urban blacks boycotted schools, vandalized official buildings, marched in the streets, and organised stay-at-home strikes. During sixteen months of chaos:

recorded deaths numbered some six hundred but were thought to be nearer a thousand – all but two of them black, and most of them school pupils shot by police. Nearly four thousand were injured, thousands more vanished into detention, some to spend five years of solitary confinement, some never to be seen by their parents again (Nelson Mandela 190).

The mass arrests included not only participants in the protests but also many leaders of the Black Consciousness movement, including the charismatic young leader of the Black People's Convention, Stephen Biko. After almost a month in detention, Biko died under mysterious circumstances on September 12, 1977.

Both the government and those opposed to apartheid immediately turned to public discourse to influence further developments. In a statement made by the then Police Minister J.T. Kruger, the government announced that Biko had died of a hunger strike, but their account was called into question by Donald Woods, a close friend of Biko's and the outspoken white editor of the English – language Daily Dispatch. In a series of editorials and public speeches, Woods challenged the hunger strike theory and accused the Security Police of responsibility for Biko's death. On October 19, 1977, the South African government responded to the outcry over Biko's death and the continued unrest in the townships with an iron fist.

Waiting for the Barbarians locates itself strategically within that portentous moment of suspension when an increasingly defensive imperialism begins making plans for a final reckoning with its enemies. Waiting for the Barbarians is therefore a kind of "interregnum" novel: published in 1980, a year before Gordimer's July's People, it shares with the latter works, as Stephen Clingman puts it, the "semiotic project of seeing the present through the eyes of the future." In other words, of "decoding the signs and codes of the present" through the perspective made possible by imagining the future (Novels of Nadine Gordimer 202).

Waiting for the Barbarians is pivotal not because it deals with a pivotal historical moment but because as a discursive field in itself. In Barbarians history becomes objectified as History – thus emerging in Kermodes terms, as the "time of Crisis or Kros, as against the time of the seasons, or chronos" (The Sense of Endings 48).

As History or history-as-myth, history is the peculiar, informing narrative of Empire itself, partly constituting and partly legitimizing Empire's terrorism:

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

Published at the height of controversy over the treatment of detainees. Waiting for the Barbarians contains several echoes of the recent events in South Africa. The jargon employed by Coetzee's Security Police resembles similar euphemistic phrases used in South Africa. Colonel Joll is here under the emergency powers. He has set procedures for interrogation; the prisoners must be held incommunicado. When the first prisoner dies mysteriously after an interrogation session, the official report of his death given to the magistrate is reminiscent of the explanation of Stephen Biko's death:

During the course of interrogation, contradictions became apparent in the prisoner's testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigating officer. A scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful (Waiting for the Barbarians 6).

The stilted syntax in which the only active subject is "the prisoner" obscures the action of the Security Police and hides their responsibility for the death. But when the magistrate examines the corpse, he finds the "lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket is a bloody hole" (WFB 7). The testimony of the body belies the testimony of the world as given in the official record.

The magistrate's own treatment at the hands of the Security Police is equally brutal. He is kept naked and not allowed to bathe. After months of torture and humiliation at the hands of Warrant Officer Mandel, he is abruptly ordered to leave. He claims that he is a prisoner and demands a trial, but is told, "How can you be a prisoner when we have no record of you? Do you think we don't keep records? We have no record of you. Do you must be a free man" (WFB 125). He has only been detained, and as is the case with many detainees in South Africa. There are no official records of their existence or treatment. Coetzee thus suggests the power of the written record to obscure the origins of oppression. These particular echoes of South African practices not only direct the novel's critique to the specific historical situation but also reveal the role that discourse has played in that situation.

At a basic level, the Magistrate's story suggests an allegory of the situation of the contemporary South African liberal, facing the fact of complicity in the apartheid. Yet, as with the earlier novels, one does not find the kind of detailed correspondences that one might expect of a sustained, old-style political allegory, and this raises familiar questions about the kind of intervention the novel makes. The lack of specificity may signify a subversive elusiveness. This need not be taken to suggest a style of writing designed to deceive the censors through obliquity. Rather this is a different kind of revisionist nonconformity, the writer's pursuit of new codes under the guise of following older ones. What appears to be a universal allegory or parable about power and oppression may really be a special refusal and an interim gesture.

In a similar vein, Attwell defends the lack of specificity in the novel's milieu, an imprecision sometimes taken to denote a form of ethical universalism': the alternative is to see the lack of precision as a deliberate strategy and an immediate response to events in South Africa in the late 1970s:

Coetzee's Empire is recognizable partly as fictionalization of this especially paranoid moment in apartheid discourse . . . certainly, Coetzee Empire represents a continuation of frontier hypothesis in colonial thinking since the eighteenth century, but specific features connect it to the South African situations of the period when the novel was being written. (Politics of Writing 74).

But despite its ambiguities of time and place, the setting of Waiting for the Barbarians is given in concrete sensual detail, resulting in an unusual movement between historical suggestiveness and fictional reality. Paul Ableman notes that as soon as the reader examines the novel

for clues as to a possible historical model the book's meaning sways towards the allegorical. Conversely, if you look for specific allegorical components to the vivid, concrete qualities reassert themselves. The frontier town is real and its inhabitants are as plausible and as inconsistent as living people ("End of Empire" 21).

According to Francois Furet, the historian of the French Revolution, Enlightenment historiography, using classical sources, developed the classification "savage – barbarian – civilized" ("Civilization and Barbarism" 145), as a way of distinguishing among the ancients and their competitors. In the use of these categories the eighteenth – century historians exploited the ironies that arose from a society's slipping from one state of civilization to another. This specific notion of the "barbarian" is not well established in the South African racial lexicon. But the eighteenth-century vocabulary is useful for a novel written in South Africa of the late 1970s, where it was quite natural in official discourse to speak of "nations" – that is, "mature" (i.e., barbarian) black nations – which could be allowed to develop as independent states in their own segregated bantustans, in contrast to a white (civilized) nation, which could be left to its own devices. For such type of discourse, Attwell raises the pertinent question on the notion of barbarian and civilized one:

Such historiographical irony may be suggestive in the South African context, where it was reasonable to ask such questions as, who are the real barbarians, anyway? Thus, the Magistrate steels himself to rebel against

public torture by saying that the future should be left at least "one man who in his heart was not a barbarian." (Politics of Writing 75).

Gibbon concludes *Decline and Fall* by saying that it was among the ruins of the Capitol that he first conceived the idea of writing history. Like earlier historians, he was both moved by the spectacle of the past that reared up from the ruins and struck by the ignorance and superstition of later generations of Romans. Thus, Hayden White refers to *Decline and Fall* as "the greatest achievement of sustained Irony in the history of historical literature" (Metahistory 55). In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the Magistrate is himself an antiquarian who struggles with the idea of writing history of settlement and who spends much time in the ruins of a former barbarian town in his corner of the Empire's western provinces, uncovering artifacts and collecting popular slips containing a script he is trying to decipher. The indecipherability of the slips and the wholly strategic "readings" the Magistrate gives of them when called to account for his action by the agents of the Third Bureau place Coetzee's handling of these questions squarely written postmodern times: But the connection does suggest that the novel might owe not only some of its essential vocabulary but also aspects of the narrative situation to Gibbon's eighteenth-century classic.

The recognition of such social manipulation, with its attendant shaping of history, is a part of broader leaving curve which is realized as a consequence of the Magistrate's failed objective to write history. For Gibbon was able to make the historical records amenable to ironic manipulation. But the Magistrate in his attempt to write a history of settlement, gets no further than repeating some of the disingenuous formulas of colonial pastoralism:

"No one would pay a visit to this oasis, I write, failed to be struck by the charm of life here we lived in the time of seasons, of the harvest, of the migrations of the water birds. We lived with nothing between us and the stores. We would have made any concession, had we only know what, to go on living here. This was paradise on earth. (WFB 154)

It is the question of history which, ultimately, gives shape to the treatment of power. The definition of history, indeed, is a fundamental issue in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and what the novel finally achieves is a pointed application of the idea that history can be variously constructed, that it is a field for contestation. The Magistrate approaches the question of history in different ways as the novel progresses and, on occasions, his concerns mirror the larger metafictional gestures of the works which shows how fiction colludes with certain ideas of history. That is why the Magistrate quickly abandons the project, however, describing his beginning as a plea for forgiveness and conciliation, its implicit evasion of brutality of imperialism is a trace of the critique of settler-colonial-pastoralism. Thus, the Magistrate continues, "It would be disappointing to know that the popular slips I have spent so much time on contain a message as devious, as equivocal as reprehensible as this" (WFB 154). The Magistrate then makes several efforts of peroration, but a sense of unreality pervades each attempt. The last statement which simply expresses the frustration of irresolution, is actually most convincing: "I think: There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it." (WFB 155).

What is staring him in the face is at one level simply his inability to produce significant closure, but at another level it is history itself; history as something brute, impenetrable, and ultimately unrepresentable, something that will not be possessed by his efforts to produce a historical discourse. Although he is prepared to imagine that the barbarians of the former settlement might have possessed a code in which it was possible to write history, he discovers that he does not possess such a code himself. What is true of his efforts to write a history of settlement is true also of his antiquarian interests that is, his excavations, his fascination with slips of popular, and his night's vigil spent in the ruins trying to conjure an image of the barbarian way of life. Although the outpost in the provinces produces the need, as he puts it, "to find in the vacuousness of the dessert a special historical poignancy" (WFB 17), his effort lead nowhere. Kermode explains the predicament of the Magistrate : one of the functions of history is to produce a "concord fiction," a sense of consonance between past, present and the future and in these terms, history is a kind of substitute for authority and tradition. (The Sense of Ending 56).

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