

**THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AT THE CULTURAL FRONTIER IN JOHN
COETZEE'S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS**

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*Abstract: If we were to identify, as Hayden White would put it, the master trope of John Maxwell Coetzee's writings, this would certainly be allegory. In the words of Northrop Frye, his narration touches upon "the literature of paradox". **WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS** represents the violent encounter between Self and Other placed at the **BORDER**. The frontier is both real and metaphorical; however, instead of defining and shaping different spaces and/or cultures, it symbolizes the paradoxical and ambivalent relationship between colonizer and colonized, a re-writing of the Hegelian master/slave dialectic. **THE BORDER** draws its existence, in Coetzee's work, from the creation of a background suitable for the encounter between Self and Other; it blurs signification. The Magistrate, the novel's main character, crosses the border only to find that "truth is relative". His search for (fixed) identities places him at (on?) the frontier, in an apparent no-man's-land, where meaning is "liquid", seeming almost impossible to be grasped. The representative of the **Law** is subdued the violence of the Empire he serves only to find that everything is open for interpretation. My paper explores the image of the colonizer who rejects colonialism, the key figure of Coetzee's representation of the subverting of fixed meanings, of the paradoxes that the relationship between Self and Other imply, and the use of allegory as the designated literary device.*

John M. Coetzee wrote, back in 1987, that, for him, the novel had only two options of existence: supplementarity or rivalry. Of the two, rivalry with historical discourse is worth taken into consideration because it would lead to:

"a novel that operates in terms of its own procedures and issues in its own conclusions, not one that operates in terms of the procedures of history and eventuates in conclusions that are checkable by history (as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress). In particular I mean a novel that evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process (and here is the point at which true rivalry, even enmity, perhaps enters the picture) perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history – in other words, demythologizing history. Can I be more specific? Yes: for example, a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves. (I need hardly add that to claim the freedom to decline – or, better, rethink – such oppositions as propertied/propertyless, colonizer/colonized, masculine/feminine, and so forth, does not mean that one falls back automatically on moral oppositions, open or disguised, like good/bad, life-directed/death-directed, human/mechanical, and so forth.)" ("Novel Today" 3)

David Atwell comments on this passage and invites us to place it in a wider context, that of the political and cultural debate in South Africa at the end of the 1980s, beginning of the 1990s. The aim of various cultural groups was that of constructing a national culture that would unite various oppressed groups under "a common symbolic framework" (Atwell, 16). This meant that the focus should be placed on a documentary form of realism that describes the everyday life of the oppressed. To talk about "rivalry" at such a moment turned out to be a delicate matter. Still, Coetzee would not abandon his belief concerning the history-narrative dichotomy, not even when it comes to discussing about the formation of a unitary national consciousness.

"I reiterate the elementary and rather obvious point I am making: that history is not reality; that history is a kind of discourse; that a novel is a kind of discourse, too, but a

different kind of discourse; that, inevitably, in our culture, history will, with varying degrees of forcefulness, try to claim primacy, claim to be a master-form of discourse, just as, inevitably, people like myself will defend themselves by saying that history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other..." ("Novel Today" 4)

We have heard such a statement before, that history is not reality, in Hayden White's thesis on "Metahistory". Coetzee seems to borrow this idea of history as a subjective construction, as a discourse about history that has more to do with narration than with actual facts. The rivalry between history and fiction and the overlapping of the two produce a sample of a story that should not be placed under the close inspection of veracity or of realism. "A novel operates in terms of its own procedures and issues its own conclusions". David Atwell cites Ricoeur concerning the issue of the "narrative function" that succinctly shows the relation between "narrativity" and "historicity". "Both elements, Ricoeur argues, participate in the language game of narrating the activity or form of life called narrative discourse. Their unity also exists in the fact that both forms of discourse incorporate reference "beyond" the surface of the text". It's not history that (re-)creates and (re-)produces a sense of identity and belonging; and could we talk about historical representations that instill a sense of belonging and that assign fixed positions within the post-colonial space? It's through the use of literary devices (allegorical representations of "historical" events) that we are able to observe the inner turmoil of the protagonist inhabiting this space, the frustrations linked to that intense feeling of displacement.

The interplay and intertwining between fiction and history is of paramount importance for the analysis that we have undergone. *Waiting for the Barbarians*, one of John Coetzee's most commented novels, may leave little room for additional insights, yet an approach that sets the narrative against the background of postcolonial and postmodernist concepts, and I'm particularly referring to Homi Bhabha in this case, has not yet taken shape. Before attempting an in-depth analysis, we should briefly present the plot and the characters: *The protagonist of Waiting for the Barbarians* is a man known only as the Magistrate, the chief administrator of a small town on the frontier of an unnamed Empire skirted by nomadic barbarian peoples. When the novel opens, Colonel Joll, a representative of the Third Bureau (the Empire's internal security service), arrives to investigate rumours of a barbarian uprising which have begun to circulate in the distant imperial capital. As Joll interrogates and tortures barbarian prisoners, the Magistrate becomes increasingly sympathetic towards the victims. When the Colonel leaves the outpost, the Magistrate takes in a young barbarian woman left crippled and partially blinded by torture. Later, he journeys into barbarian territory to restore her to her people. Upon his return, he finds that the army has arrived as part of a general offensive against the barbarians. The Magistrate is imprisoned for "treason" and tortured soon afterwards. Having failed to engage the barbarians successfully, the army abandons the outpost, leaving the Magistrate to resume his official functions. At the end of the novel, the Magistrate and the inhabitants still await the arrival of the barbarians.

The title and the denouement of the plot remind us of the poem *Waiting for the Barbarians*, written by a Greek poet some 80 years earlier, in which the protagonists await the arrival of tribes at the city gates. Towards the end of the poem, we become aware of the futile hope of encountering these barbarians: they never show up. Although Coetzee has yet to confirm his source of inspiration, the resemblances are striking. One may also state that Samuel Becket may also provide model for the construction of Coetzee's narrative (the South African writer completed his doctoral thesis on Becket's literary works), but we shall talk about this later on.

Coming back to what Coetzee writes in his essay called *The Novel Today*, we cannot but agree that the historical dimension of his narrative(s) is highly allegorical and imbued with literary tropes. However, *Waiting for the Barbarians* does not exactly stick to this norm; the political and historical dimensions represent the building-block of the whole narrative construct. Colonial discourse and binary oppositions are clearly outlined just to be subverted by an extremely witty use of literary tropes. What this essay tries to outline is the failure of discovering the Third Space at the confluence or at the border of two cultures. Thus, the relentless search for *meaning within the in-between space* of the frontier turns out to be the work of Sisyphus. The key for this grasp of meaning lies within the depiction and description of the physical body of the characters. Signification resides within the interpretation of the body as text.

Firstly, we must mention that, even from the beginning of the text, we come across the colonial binary opposition of oppressor/oppressed, of civilization and barbarism, of settled and nomad individuals. The setting is a small town “of about 3000 souls” located at the border of an Empire. Colonel Joll arrives there to make sure the Barbarians that live up north are driven away, thus allowing the Empire to expand its borders and remove potential threats. Of course, the nomad tribes are never given a voice. In Edward Said’s terms, they are the product of imperial discourse. The instance presented is a typical depiction of colonization: “*imperialism means the practice, the theory and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory; colonialism, which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory*” (Said, p. 9). At the discourse level, barbarians are created by Colonel Joll through the use of adjectives like: primitive, backwards, aggressive etc.

The Self/Other dichotomy manifests itself through violent outbursts during this colonial encounter. Torture represents for Col. Joll the perfect method of finding out the truth and is, thus, *applied regularly and methodically* to each and every prisoner: “I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see--this is what happens--first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth.” Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt. That is what I bear away from my conversation with Colonel Joll ...”(p. 20)

Truth represents the Colonel’s final goal and the road that leads to this is torture. The classical colonial paradigm, the omnipresent outcome of this encounter produces violence. Truth, of course, is an extremely subjective concept; here, truth means the Empire’s representation of the idea of truth. We stated earlier on that Coetzee’s not particularly interested in opposing extremities, yet the above-mentioned example seems to contest this statement, but only to be subverted by the author. The truth is a very general, ambiguous notion, it represents an extremely blurry goal, not a vehicle for the achievement of the purpose of stabilizing the borders of the Empire. In spite of this, *Coetzee has often been accused vehemently* (even by N. Gordimer herself), of a too easy dismissal of the documentary/realist aspect of history, at a moment when the social and political tensions within the South African society reached their peak, tortures and interethnic violence took place on a daily basis.

If the Colonel’s unquenchable thirst for truth is somehow appeased, the Magistrate’s quest for meaning cannot be met. The key figure of the narrative, the Magistrate shall represent the postcolonial figure par excellence.

In his famous book, *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha states: “*We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion caught in*

the words here and there, back and forth etc. [...] The in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration..." (p. 3)

The narrator is the Magistrate (first person narration in the present), and the hybrid subject is supposed to be this character. He had/has contacts with the barbarians, he feels compelled to disagree with Colonel Joll's colonial discourse and he is outraged by the torture the nomads have to endure from the zealous commander. Yet, he fails to understand them. A bridge between the cultures cannot be built because of the failure to grasp the meaning of the historical process which he is living.

As stated above, for Joll, pain constitutes truth. He assumes that there is a stable relationship between signs and referents as evidenced when he tells the magistrate, "Prisoners are prisoners" (p.21). He stipulates meanings and believes in *fixed truths*. He is, according to the magistrate, "tireless" in his "quest for the truth" (p.21). He is certain that the magistrate is a traitor, exchanging coded messages with the barbarians. Joll does not undergo the magistrate's hermeneutical crisis. He wants the magistrate to conform to the Empire's ways by reducing some wooden slips with an archaic script to fixed meanings. We can view him as a reader of readerly texts who believes that a stable meaning is there to be grasped.

The magistrate's quest for meaning, on the other hand, engenders more failures and frustrations. Each sign/symbol that promises meaning turns out to be empty or adds to his confusion. He fails to understand, at first, how a prisoner died after interrogation, and then he confesses he is an amateur archaeologist exploring some ruins near the town, where he had found a number of slates containing some inscriptions, but he cannot make out what they say. He also fails at coming to terms with the past, or bringing the past into the present. He goes one night to the ruins to encounter the elders that once inhabited that place, to witness an epiphany, because some children have told him they could hear the ancients' spirits whispering in that place. All he hears, instead, is the howling of the wind and the feeling of the grains of sand blown in his face.

It seems that the past is out of sight, while the geography of the area remains a mystery to him, as well. The chronotope may be thought of as a blurred concept, the mixture of time and space are as strange and as unfamiliar to him as the capital of the Empire (which he had not visited since he was young) or as the Barbarian territories beyond the lake. The borderline contributes to the protagonist's sense of displacement. Instead of creating a new, hybrid identity, the frontier amplifies to the ambiguity of self-representation.

The most opaque reading, however, is the reading of the Other. Using Peter Brook's ideas, we may claim that *narration is "written" on the body, the latter represents the literary vehicle of the former*. His famous example is that of Odysseus who, after ten years of continuous journeys, finally arrives in Ithaca. He dresses as a beggar, but he is shortly spotted by his childhood nurse because of the scar on his ankle which he got when he was little. This recognition represents the climax of the whole narrative construction, it depicts the unveiling of the truth and the possibility of regaining one's former status and privileges.

The body becomes, thus, the object of signification. In colonial and postcolonial studies, this statement may have great importance. The colonizers' bodies are always subject to physical violence, torture, scarring, maiming etc (see Tz. Todorov). This confers a new identity to the respective body, thus allowing the narrative to spring into being.

The barbarian woman's body represents the most alluring space that needs to be given a meaning. The woman is almost completely blind, she has a big scar near her left eye, her feet are swollen, she is chubby and her face is too wide. The Magistrate confesses

that he has never intended to have an intimate relationship with her. What drives him is curiosity:

“There are other times when I suffer fits of resentment against my bondage to the ritual of the oiling and rubbing, the drowsiness, the slump into oblivion. I cease to comprehend what pleasure I can ever have found in her obstinate, phlegmatic body, and even discover in myself stirrings of outrage. I become withdrawn, irritable; the girl turns her back and goes to sleep.” (p. 30)

Her body represents the code that has to be descyphered. Therefore, the gaze becomes the vehicle for understanding, the vehicle for meaning. It's no wonder that the other two main characters' vision is obscured. *The Barbarian woman is almost completely blind, while, even from the first few lines of the book, we are introduced to a character that never takes off his sunglasses - Colonel Joll:*

“I HAVE NEVER SEEN anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. “They protect one's eyes against the glare of the sun,” he says. “You would find them useful out here in the desert. They save one from squinting all the time. One has fewer headaches. Look.” (p. 1)

The two characters occupy fixed positions (civilized man/barbarian woman) that contain fixed meanings, they do not take part in such a quest. The only one who cannot grasp meaning is the Magistrate, and he does that by “examining” the woman's body. Of course, this also results in a failure, with the Magistrate giving up and deciding to take the woman to her tribe. *Crossing the border (assuming another identity) proves to be a huge error on his behalf, when he returns to the town.* He represents the traitor now, he is thrown in a cage and then tortured, along with some other barbarians who are captured by the Colonel. The body becomes, again, the means of representing the relationships between the Empire and the nomads. The image is extremely powerful and very violent:

“The kneeling prisoners bend side by side over a long heavy pole. A cord runs from the loop of wire through the first man's mouth, under the pole, up to the second man's loop, back under the pole, up to the third loop, under the pole, through the fourth loop. As I watch a soldier slowly pulls the cord tighter and the prisoners bend further till finally they are kneeling with their faces touching the pole. One of them writhes his shoulders in pain and moans. The others are silent, their thoughts wholly concentrated on moving smoothly with the cord, not giving the wire a chance to tear their flesh.” (p. 74)

The scarring and the torturing of the body is gruesomely depicted. Moreover, the Colonel writes, in charcoal, ENEMY on each prisoner's back and tells his soldiers to beat them up until the writing wears off. The peak of violence had finally been reached. The Magistrate understands that the ones who are beaten up are not the Barbarians. He feels he'll have the same fate and it's the first time he yells a definite NO! in Colonel Joll's direction. It's a cry of despair, of finally understanding his role in that “play”. Afterwards, the Third Bureau decides to abandon the settlement and retreat to the south.

The Magistrate and a couple of other persons stay behind, waiting for the Barbarians, who will probably never come. In fact, we can easily substitute the noun Barbarians for the noun Godot, an abstraction that may never make its presence visible. The Magistrate remains stuck within the interstitial space, he does not represent the cultural hybrid that has come to terms with history. Each of his attempts to understand and to internalize the historical process is doomed to failure. Even the book, written at the first person singular, present tense, represents a final effort to place the “historical” events under a recognizable and understandable form.

The book wonderfully depicts the quest for a new “national identity”, marvelously imbedded in historical colonial binary oppositions. The tone, however, is not very optimistic and the search for meaning on common grounds (namely, the border between cultures) may be viewed as being unsuccessful because of the inability (or impossibility) of discovering the meaning behind either party’s actions.

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