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**CONTRADICTIONALITY AND POSTMODERNISM
IN THE WORKS OF J. M. COETZEE**

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At a critical moment in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate escapes from his cell to denounce the public beating of twelve barbarian captives. Colonel Joll summons the deposed leader to his office the following day. Joll, an officer of the Empire's Third Bureau, demands that the magistrate account for poplar wood slips he has been collecting from nearby ruins. Examining the slips, which are inscribed with a series of enigmatic characters, the magistrate doesn't even know whether to read from right to left and has no idea what the symbols stand for.

He wonders if a circular character is meant to represent the sun; if it describes the physical state of the tongue, the lips, the throat as they work together to produce a specific word; or if it merely stands for what it is, a circle, plain and simple. He has pored over the slips previously, and arranged them in differing grids, attempting to piece them together like a jigsaw puzzle or map. Despite the fact that he has isolated over four hundred different characters in the script, he fears these are actually scribal embellishments on a repertory of 20 or 30 primitive forms.

Although the magistrate cannot read the script with any more accuracy than Joll can, this fact does not stop him from forwarding a deliberately false translation of the scrawl set before him, weaving a narrative:

We went to fetch your brother yesterday. They showed us into a room where he lay on a table sewn up in a sheet. Tore the sheet wide open and saw bruises all over his body and saw that his feet were swollen and broken. What happened to him? I said. I do not know, said the man, it is not on the paper.¹

His narrative critiques torture and imperialism, but it also foregrounds the role the interpreter plays in creating meaning from texts. At a pivotal point in the scene, the magistrate pauses to examine a single character: It is the barbarian character war he claims, but it has other senses too.

It can stand for vengeance, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read justice. There is no knowing what sense is intended. In this passage, and throughout the text, the magistrate's experience parallels the difficulties faced by the postmodern reader. The magistrate can be understood as the translator who, despite his insufficient grasp of a text, forwards an authoritative interpretation.

The magistrate's reading of the slips provides a useful reference point for the reader and critic of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Lance Olsen, in *The Presence of Absence*, one of the earliest scholarly studies of barbarians, argues that the wood slips form an absence which may be supplemented in an endless number of ways.

For Olsen, the slips mirror the novel, in which language remains at the mercy of the interpreter and holds no inherent significance independent of an interpretive agent. In his estimation, postmodern fiction like Coetzee's novel leaves the reader with a sense of despair before the arbitrariness of language and its essential defectiveness for depicting the world.

¹ Hayes, Patrick. *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett (Oxford English Monographs)*. New York: Oxford University Press USA. 2010. p. 114.

Olsen's argument resonates for many readers of Coetzee. The enigmatic quality of barbarians, emphasized by the magistrate's repeated references to interpretation and his anxiety about making definitive assertions, undoubtedly makes it difficult to locate a center of authority in the book.

However, as Susan Van Zanten Gallagher argues, the fact that the slips do not hold a single meaning does not mean they are without meaning. By reading the absence of authority in *Barbarians* as a limiting factor, Olsen undervalues the various readings Coetzee's elusive work engenders.²

Barbara Eckstein reads Olsen's critique as an aesthetic defense of Coetzee, one directed at critics who claim the author fails to address pressing moral and ethical issues. These critics read the unspecified temporal and geographical setting of *Waiting for the Barbarians* through a straightforward allegorical lens, disapproving of its lack of worldly reference.

Nadine Gordimer, the most prominent of the critics named here, views all Coetzee's early fiction as refusing to engage with the historical situation in South Africa. Gordimer holds that in times of political crisis, it is the artist's duty to critique oppressive regimes, and numerous critics agree with her, criticizing what they see as Coetzee's preoccupation with the concerns of a white liberal elite and his failure to represent South African oppression under apartheid.

By reading *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an allegory, Lewis, Vaughan, and Gordimer overlook the magistrate's own implicit warning against allegorical reading. Translating the slips for Joll, he states, they form an allegory further, each single slip can be read in many ways.

The magistrate acknowledges that an allegorical interpretive approach will yield many meanings, but his own misinterpretation simultaneously undermines the accuracy or finality of these interpretations. Coetzee, through the magistrate, positions his particular allegory as a text that, when divided into its individual parts and examined carefully, resists oversimplified, universal readings. When the magistrate notes that

“...there is no agreement among scholars about how to interpret the barbarian script; he anticipates the widely disparate readings that critics apply to *Barbarians* itself.”³

For several years following the initial release of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, criticism split into two camps. Critics in Gordimer's camp, by searching for explicit political engagement, found the novel lacking in the extreme; by contrast, those more in line with Olsen's critique found a rich store of commentary on the nature of language and interpretation.

The critical conversation was limited to these partisan approaches until the introduction of Teresa Dovey's *Lacanian Allegories* in 1988. Dovey argues that the deconstructive activity of Coetzee's novels is not an empty textual game, but an attempt to destabilize historical discourse itself.

She describes Coetzee's approach as a more nuanced form of political and historical engagement, and her argument significantly alters the critical conversation surrounding Coetzee.

² Head, Dominic. *The Cambridge Introduction to J. M. Coetzee (Cambridge Introductions to Literature)*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2009. p. 313.

³ Coetzee, J M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. London: Viking, 2007. p. 81.

David Attwell's *The Problem of History in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* is particularly indebted to Dovey's scholarship. Attwell argues that the resources of postmodernism in fiction rather than an historical engagement. Along with Susan Van Zanten Gallagher.⁴

Reading Coetzee against the grain in this fashion may seem out of keeping with the author's own statements on history's antagonistic relationship to fiction, he disapproves of the colonization of the novel by the discourse of history.

An interview between Coetzee and Tony Morphet, however, makes Attwell's project appear quite relevant: I hope that a certain spirit of resistance is ingrained in all my books, Coetzee notes, ultimately I hope they have the strength to resist whatever readings I impose on them on occasions like the present one. Coetzee refuses to provide a master discourse to guide interpretation of his novels, choosing instead to employ an indeterminate language that resists any final, authoritative analysis.

Some interpret this elusiveness as political quietude, while others, like Jennifer Wenzel, read the novel as providing a nexus of the political and post structural, the historical and linguistic. Examining the silence of the tortured body in the novel, Wenzel finds relevant contrasts between the magistrate's refusal to impose definitive interpretations on the barbarian girl and Empire's desire to impose a voice on its marginalized subjects.

Waiting for the Barbarians elicits widely differing readings, which span the gamut from Gordimer to Wenzel. This disparity among critics reflects the indeterminate language of the novel.

Bearing in mind the discourse of the novel itself, specifically, its focus on the role the interpreter plays in determining textual significance, it is difficult to forward a definitive interpretation of *Barbarians*.⁵

Derek Attridge has recently made a vital contribution to the critical conversation on Coetzee, arguing that the novel should be approached as an event rather than a puzzle to be deciphered: I treat it as something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding that I, as an individual reader in a specific time and place go through.

In a novel where authoritative meaning is so difficult to locate, the reader plays an indispensable role in creating significance from the text; *Waiting for the Barbarians* engages the reader in the same active process of interpretation that the magistrate undergoes when translating the barbarian script. Ultimately, the reader shares in his project, anxiously working to solidify textual meaning.⁶

The magistrate employs a similarly inconclusive method of translation in his attempts to interpret the marks on the body of a barbarian girl who has been tortured by Joll. Though he is dealing with a human being, the magistrate approaches the girl much like he would a text, reading her, in essence, to elicit the story of her time in the torture chamber. Rosemary Jolly argues, the magistrate's fascination with the barbarian girl stems from her body as the site of torture, rather than any desire for the 'girl' herself.

He worships the surface of her body, the skin, and the site of interaction between tortures and tortured. The magistrate admits that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her; in doing so he exposes the disconnected and objective relationship he has toward her.

To the magistrate, her body is little more than an artifact to be decoded; an encrypted record he hopes will reveal the secrets of Joll's chamber.

⁴ Dooley, Gillian. *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative*. Southampton: Cambria Press. 2010. p. 188.

⁵ Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. London: Viking, 2007. p. 106.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 33.

Drawn to a caterpillar shaped scar in the corner of one, the magistrate mistakenly thinks that by uncovering the cause of this worm-like sear he will come to know the origin of her blindness. While she initially refuses to answer his questions about the scar, the girl later tells him, That is nothing. That is where the iron touched me. It made a little burn.

Far from revealing the cause for her damaged vision, the mark is incidental, a surface wound that does not penetrate her actual eye. This disclosure seems to disappoint the magistrate: he experiences resentment and even stirrings of outrage towards the girl immediately following.

Although the magistrate wishes to restore the girl to her original, intact state, the one she inhabited prior to being tortured, he appears far more interested in gleaning the traces of a history her body bear. To his disappointment, these marks do not go deep enough. The magistrate is more interested in the writing left by her torturers than in the story of the girl herself. In his attempts to read the external marks of torture on her body, though, he often fails to recognize the mark his own interrogations leave on her consciousness.

Rather than work to understand the totality of her being, the magistrate treats the girl alternately as a charity case, a pet and, as noted above, a text. His inability to communicate with her, to elicit her story, stems from a flawed approach.

He is incapable of remembering her face before she was taken to Joll's chamber, and this failing is inextricably linked to his lack of insight into her individuality. He cannot see her as anything more than a tortured body, a physical record of horrific processes to be carefully studied. To him it is as if the girl's body has no interior, only a surface across which he hunts back and forth seeking entry. But it is precisely because he approaches her body as a surface that he cannot gain access to her interior world.

His repeated attempts to wash away the effects of torture from the girl's body with soap and water allow him to clear his conscience long enough to fall into a sleep of oblivion. This washing mirrors his notion that the torturer must ritually wash his hands after leaving the chamber in order to return and break bread with other men. For the magistrate, the body's surface corresponds directly to the human interior, and this is the failure of his approach.

