



J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*: Hermeneutics and Literary Theory

“WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS” DE JM COETZEE: HERMENEUTIQUE ET THEORIE LITTERAIRE

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Abstract

This paper resists a traditional allegorical approach to one of Coetzee's major apartheid novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, by focusing more on the novel's structural and textual import rather than its discursive representation of South African politics. Although this reading is itself ultimately allegorical, it is argued that it is anti-allegorical because it points out the limitations of allegorical representation whereby we read a clear relationship between the text and its external context. Highlighting acts of reading and interpretation, often failed, the novel poses as a challenge to literary theory. As such, it is not only an allegory against itself but also a postmodern example of the relativity of truth, the indeterminacy of meaning, and the necessary textualization of experience via the written word.

Key words: Coetzee; South African fiction; *Waiting for the Barbarians*; Literary theory; Hermeneutics; Allegory; Writerly text; Polyphony; Postmodernism

Résumé

Ce document résiste à une approche traditionnelle allégorique à l'un des romans de Coetzee fondamentales sur l'apartheid, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, en se concentrant davantage sur l'importation structurelle et textuelle du roman plutôt que sa représentation discursive de la politique sud-africaine. Bien que cette lecture est elle-même en fin de compte allégorique, il est soutenu qu'il est anti-allégorique, car il souligne les limites de la représentation allégorique dans lequel on peut lire une relation claire entre le texte et son contexte externe. Soulignant les actes de lecture et d'interprétation,

souvent échoué, le roman se présente comme un défi à la théorie littéraire. En tant que tel, ce n'est pas seulement une allégorie contre lui-même, mais aussi un exemple postmoderne de la relativité de la vérité, l'indétermination du sens, et la textualisation de l'expérience nécessaires par l'intermédiaire du mot écrit.

Mots-clés: Coetzee; De la fiction d'Afrique-sud; *Waiting for the Barbarians*; La théorie littéraire; L'herméneutique; L'allégorie; Le texte scriptible; Polyphonie; Le Post-modernisme

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“It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks; speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive” (Coetzee, 1980, p.7).

“To interpret a text is not to give it a (more or less justified, more or less free) meaning, but on the contrary to appreciate what plural constitutes it” (Barthes, 1974, p. 5).

INTRODUCTION

The South African writer J. M. Coetzee has produced a series of brilliant postmodern and postcolonial novels¹ and critical essays covering a variety of themes and approaches. With a background in linguistics and stylistics, Coetzee makes us conscious of the interplay and articulation of meaning. Although many critics associate his name and work with the South African apartheid years of the 1970s and 1980s, his genius can be approached from many a stance, and his novels have denied reductive readings. This paper is an attempt at resisting a simple allegorical approach to one of Coetzee's major novels by focusing more on the novel's structural and textual import

rather than its discursive representation of South African politics.

Colonel Joll and the magistrate act as “interrogators” with relation to the barbarian girl in Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*² (1980). They seek information and secret stories about the suspected barbarian uprising and the torture practices of the Empire using different methods in their pursuits. They are two readers of the same text: the barbarian girl’s body. Joll is a violent, “harsh” reader of a passive text, while the magistrate is a “seductive” reader of the same passive, yet subtle, text. Joll uses torture to wring a confession from the barbarian girl, whereas the magistrate performs a seductive ritual of cleansing and rubbing her body to reconstruct the story of her torture and expiate his sense of guilt for his complicity with the Empire. The relationship between the magistrate and Joll on the one hand and the barbarian girl on the other can be read as an allegory of reading and interpretation, which, in turn, draws attention to the novel’s artifice as a fictional work. We learn from such an allegory that readers approach texts differently and that one text signifies different ideas to readers. The triangular relationship between the barbarian girl, the magistrate, and Joll is one among many other clues in the narrative that make Coetzee’s novel a “plural” allegory of reading and interpretation. In making this assertion, we are conscious that we are resisting a typical allegorical reading and simultaneously returning to the allegorizing trend in Coetzee scholarship. We approach Coetzee’s novel as active readers of a writerly text to produce meaning out of a labyrinth of failed interpretive acts undertaken by the magistrate. We build on and implement Bill Ashcroft’s (1998) contention that allegory “is not only a function of writing but of reading. Allegory opens up the resistance of reading and this is the function of the allegory of his [Coetzee’s] novel itself” (p.109). As a masterly allegory of an anonymous, remote Empire, the novel is concerned with reading/ interpretation not only thematically but also structurally. Using the framework of allegory, Coetzee brings to the foreground the interplay of signification and establishes at once the relativity of truth. The novel, hence, presents readers with a challenge to literary theory in deconstructing its own allegorical premises, and makes us question a unitary valid reading.

WB tells the story of an anonymous Empire in an unspecified historical and geographical setting. Therefore, the literary technique of allegory seems to propel the novel’s commentary on the postcolonial world that it critiques. What is more important, however, is that this allegory underscores a multiplicity of interpretations. Critics try to locate a time and a place for its events, as manifested in that the majority of the criticism of this novel refers to the novel’s allegorical relevance to the apartheid regime of South Africa during the time in which the novel was written or to universal concerns about the human condition.³ However, we would argue

that the novel’s form and the interpretive acts in which the magistrate is engaged all support our assumption that *WB* evades one-dimensional interpretations. The novel metafictionally enacts an allegory of reading and interpretation. Its receptivity to indeterminate readings is allegorically echoed in the magistrate’s failed attempts to “read” the world around him. By underscoring the failure of interpretation, the text paradoxically opens itself to interpretations and invites more readings. From another perspective, the failure of interpretation permeating the novel can be read allegorically as Coetzee’s comment on the failures of the apartheid regime in South Africa, something beyond the scope of this article.

WB is structured around many “failed” interpretive acts that deconstruct the magistrate’s attempts at understanding. The magistrate, a self-conscious narrator, tries and fails to understand his relationship to the Empire. He is torn between being complicit with the Empire and assuming a liberal humanist stance; he is a prime manifestation of the ambivalence of colonial discourse, as someone who serves an Empire and yet is unable to understand its machinations. The magistrate also fails to understand the secrets of the tortured body of the barbarian girl as well as those of his own aging body and dreams.⁴ Above all, he fails to decipher the archaic script on the wooden slips he finds in the desert. Toward the end, he fails to write a history of the Empire and its frontier settlement. Such failures demonstrate that the magistrate fails as a reader and as a writer, respectively. Simply put, he fails to discover meaning in language, and the abortive interpretive acts he is engaged with make language, reading, and interpretation, we contend, the novel’s major theme. As such, the novel is an allegory of reading, or rather misreading. While these interpretive acts always seem invited and encouraged on the magistrate’s part and our part as well, they are constantly problematized. Unlike the mainstream of Coetzee’s scholarship, which reads the novel in terms of its allegorical treatment of South African politics, torture, and the body, we use textual analysis and follow a deconstructive approach to highlight the novel’s preoccupation with failed interpretation, which in turn points to the limitations of traditional allegorical readings. An account of the relevant criticism on the novel helps to present how other critics have tackled the novel and shows a gap in Coetzee scholarship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Robert Spencer (2008), in a study on the relationship between imperial oppression and dehumanization, succinctly describes *WB* as “a loquaciously confessional text” (p.181) and asserts that “the practice of reading is a central theme of the novel” (p.183). In the first full-length psychoanalytic and deconstructive reading of Coetzee’s novels, *The Novels of J. M. Coetzee: Lacanian*

Allegories (1988), Teresa Dovey argues that Coetzee's novels can be read as Lacanian allegories of the narrators' failed attempts to represent themselves in South African literary discourses. She argues that "the fundamental premises according to which Coetzee conducts his reading and re-writing of the genre—the liberal humanist—are Lacanian..." (p.208). However, Dovey acknowledges the difficulty of applying the theme of the Lacanian subject to *WB*, as this theme is not strongly manifest in this novel (p.208). Her chapter on *WB*, informed by Lacanian criticism, does not employ other poststructuralist theories or examine the problem of interpretation. In "Waiting for the Barbarians: Allegory of Allegories," Dovey (1996) continues her early deconstructive approach to the novel, and writes an insightful relevant comment: "The novel traces his [the magistrate's] failed attempts to posit a meaning for both the script and the girl's suffering; it traces, in other words, a crisis of interpretation" (p.141). Although Dovey cogently mentions this "crisis of interpretation" the magistrate faces, she does not describe it fully. We explore the magistrate's hermeneutical crisis by looking at specific interpretive failures depicted in the novel.

In another relevant article, Lois Zamora (1986) calls the magistrate "an intellectualizing observer," thus highlighting his preoccupation with interpreting his surroundings (p.6). Zamora also touches on the problem of allegorizing and interpretation in Coetzee's novel, and says that the novel "repeatedly rejects the closed circle of traditional allegorical signification" (p.7). This suggests that the novel deconstructs a clear or a simple system of equivalences. Zamora, hence, decides that the magistrate, unlike the reader, "is denied the consolation of allegory" (p.8). While Zamora smartly points out the limitations of common allegorical readings, his reading, like ours, is necessarily trapped within the allegorizing trend it attempts to challenge. The reader is not allowed "the consolation of allegory" because the novel, we argue, is a plural text that resists simple allegorical interpretations and negotiates the very concept of "allegory." According to Richard Martin (1986), the magistrate is "an inveterate seeker out of signs and significances" (p.13). Martin agrees with Zamora, and views the magistrate as a "reader" of people and things around him. In an interesting twist, Martin refers to the first person narrative technique employed by Coetzee in the figure of the magistrate and the use of the historic present to tell the story. Martin writes:

In the light of this obsessive interpretation recounted in the narrative, the narrative itself can be read as a new attempt by the narrator to come to terms with the events narrated.... The function of the present tense in this reading is to enable the speaker to come as close as possible to the events themselves, to distort them as little as possible, in a sort of dream analysis technique. The act of narrating is in this sense not an interpretation of events, but a mass of access to the events themselves in the hope that their significance will phenomenologically reveal itself. (p.14)

Martin's argument makes the magistrate's narrative an attempt to deal with the traumatic present and shattering experiences that follow the arrival of Joll—and not only an interpretive quest. The narrative becomes a means of "working through" of the unfolding present in a Freudian sense by means of conflating the narrating time with the narrated one. Samuel Durrant (1999) agrees with Zamora and Martin that the magistrate tries to "access" and interpret his milieu and claims that the "magistrate's crisis of consciousness/conscience is ultimately a crisis of knowledge" (p.453). These critics basically agree that the novel poses the issues of interpretation and epistemology, although they might disagree on their nature and significance.

Other critics have hinted at poststructuralist and deconstructive aspects in Coetzee's novel. For example, Susan Gallagher (1991) discusses Coetzee's dilemma of how to represent the torturer, and sees the relationship between the magistrate and the torturers Joll and Mandel as a pivotal one. She also refers to an obvious connection between sexuality and textuality. She emphasizes that the magistrate links his failure to write or tell a story to his impotence with the girl. She then argues that "With his combination of sexual and authorial images, his antonymic articulations, and his failure to discover meaning in words, the magistrate seems to be wandering in the wilderness of deconstructive criticism" (p.122). Jennifer Wenzel (1996) continues with the same unexplored deconstructive vein, and confirms Gallagher's insights by writing the following: "Out of history and into language, the magistrate is suddenly more poststructural literary critic than fictional political figure" (p.65). According to Sue Kossew (1996), the novel depicts a postcolonial situation in that it represents "the complexity of the moral issues involved in resistance and the ambivalence and paradoxes involved in the colonizer/colonized relationships" (p.97). The novel's use of allegory, Kossew contends, is employed "paradoxically" in that "it invites interpretation only to subvert it" (p.87). Kossew argues that the magistrate's "narrational activity is directed towards a goal of signification," and that it "parallels that of reading, so that the reader is drawn in to the magistrate's signifying activity..." (p.87). We agree with Kossew's assertion that the magistrate's first-person narration can be compared to the reading process since the magistrate himself is an archeologist, a seeker of meaning and an active reader as well. Moreover, the use of the present tense in the magistrate's narrative makes it an unfolding, progressing text that invites multiple readings rather than a stable one.

Finally, Lance Olsen (1987), in *Ellipse of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Postmodern Fantasy*, provides a Derridean look at the novel's representation of the metaphysics of presence and absence. Olsen argues that absence is at the center of Coetzee's novel, and contends

that Joll is “a misreader, a false reader, a believer in the metaphysics of presence” as he is certain about the presence of the barbarian enemy and the plot against the Empire (p.110). On the other hand, the magistrate for Olsen is a believer in “the metaphysics of absence,” and in “the idea that ‘meaning’ and ‘truth’ must be allowed to float free, even at the risk of casting the commentators into despair” (p.110). Olsen argues, following Derrida and Barthes, that

to write is to produce gaps that must be supplemented, to produce signs which provoke the reader to a kind of rewriting. To this extent, writing is cut off from any absolute responsibility, from any ultimate authority. It becomes orphaned from its father, open to alternate parents. It becomes an absence which must be filled. (p.107)

Although Olsen’s study of *WB* is the most relevant to the deconstructive, open focus of this argument, it focuses on the Derridean metaphysics of presence and absence, and does not move beyond the magistrate’s confrontation with Joll over a box of poplar slips and their mysterious script—a scene which invites a deconstructive reading. Drawing on notions from Barthes, Derrida, and Bakhtin, we re-approach the problematic issue of interpretation and employ literary theory to deal with the novel as an allegory of reading and, hence, (failed) interpretation or misreading. The novel questions the authority of a traditional allegorical reading seeking to establish a connection between the novel and external apartheid realities close to the novel’s composition time, realities like torture, prison interrogations, and racial segregation.

ABORTIVE HERMENEUTICS

The title of the novel promises nothing but waiting for the barbarian enemy who never arrives. Waiting triggers deconstructive associations of deferral and indeterminacy. Waiting as deferred meaning is reminiscent of Derrida’s notion of *différance*. One is also reminded of the end of C. P. Cavafy’s poem of the same title. As in the novel, the Empire in Cavafy’s poem pointlessly waits for the arrival of the barbarians who never come. Its anxious waiting for the barbarians and its excessive preparations lead to nothing. In Coetzee’s novel, the expedition of Joll into the desert meets nothing, and meaning for him, and for the magistrate, is continually delayed. The barbarians, on the other hand, continue to inhabit a shadowy existence. Cavafy’s poem similarly ends in this way:

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.
And some who have just returned from the border way say
there are no barbarians any longer.
And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians?
They were, those people, a kind of solution. (p.20-21)

Having observed this notion of waiting as emblematic of delayed meaning, we should also note that the novel begins with a distinction between sight and blindness as

an attempt at accessing elusive meaning. Commenting on Joll’s dark glasses upon first encountering him, the magistrate says, “Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind” (p.1). We see at once a narrator who is observant of his surroundings and simultaneously a seeker of meaning. The magistrate looks for signs in everything; he examines Joll’s torture chamber closely by staring at the walls and the ceiling. “What signs can I be looking for?” says the magistrate trying to find signs of torture in this chamber (p.35). Walking among the ruins of an archeological dig outside the settlement, he looks for clues about a prior civilization or signs foreshadowing the end of the Empire by invoking a supernatural connection with spirits; he says, “I sat watching the moon rise, opening my senses to the night, *waiting for a sign* that what lay around me, what lay beneath my feet, was not only sand, the dust of bones, flakes of rust, shards, ash. *The sign did not come*. I felt no tremor of ghostly fear” (p.16; my emphasis). The magistrate, we should remember, has many scholarly interests; he is an amateur archeologist, a cartographer, and a reader of the classics. However, this rational representative of the Empire is faced with failure and frustration whenever he seeks a coherent meaning. In the above quote, for example, the “sign” he waits for “did not come” to relieve his hermeneutical anxieties as an imperial subject.

Joll, on the other hand, does not share the magistrate’s hermeneutical concerns. He can easily gather intelligence about the barbarians, read them as the “Enemy,” and find the “truth” by torturing their bodies. By this, he can impose and fix meaning as he pleases. While the magistrate, Douglas Kerr (2000) argues, is “a collector and a semiotician of the frontier” (p.25) trying to decipher the ruins in the desert and the body of the barbarian girl, Joll is an interrogator whose researches are “instrumental and corroborative” and who “knows what he wants to hear” (p.25). When the magistrate asks him how he knows whether he is being told the truth or not, Joll responds that there is “a certain tone” in the voice of those who tell the truth, and continues:

I am speaking only of a special situation now, 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. (p.5)

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 treasonous, exchanging coded messages with the barbarians. Joll does not have 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 Empire for him is an ultimate signified.

The magistrate, by contrast, epitomizes self-doubt and uncertainty. Upon first meeting Mandel, he says, "His insignia say that he is a warrant officer. Warrant Officer in the Third Bureau: what does that mean?" (p.76). A hesitant reader of signs, the magistrate wants and fails to know how an old prisoner died during interrogation; he goes to the granary, wakes the guard, and tears a shroud open to see a mutilated face. He then says to the guard, "They say that he hit his head on the wall. What do you think?" (p.7). He reads natural signs like the migration of birds, the movement of the wind, and the approaching snowstorms. Right before his journey to take the girl to her people, he notices signs of the approaching spring, "The arrival of the first of the migrating waterfowl confirms the earlier signs, the ghost of a new warmth on the wind, the glassy translucence of the lake-ice. Spring is on its way, one of these days it will be time to plant" (p.56). It seems apparent by now that the magistrate is a hermeneutist. However, his interests in reading natural phenomena, the ruins of the desert, the people and the places around him form one aspect of the novel's overall representation of hermeneutics. It is time now to move to some specifically illuminating interpretive acts. The first is the magistrate's abortive relationship with the barbarian girl.

This relationship is the crux of the story. It begins when the magistrate meets the barbarian girl begging in the outpost; she was left crippled and with partial eyesight after being interrogated and tortured by Joll. As a liberal humanist, the magistrate shows some sympathy for her. He takes her to his house and finds her something to do instead of begging and prostituting her body. However, this sympathy changes into a manifest, even obsessive, interest in the story of her torture. Continuing his former hermeneutical concerns, he sees her as a text to be read, and her body as a story replete with signification. He fails, however, to read her body. Her body is an "obstinate, phlegmatic body" for him; it is a "closed, ponderous" body, something "beyond comprehension" (p.41). It is logical that the magistrate, unable as he is to understand the secrets of the barbarian girl's tortured body, is also unable to fathom the nature of his own aging body and his odd sexual desires. He comes to the growing awareness that his body is as opaque and "blank" as the barbarian girl's body; he contends, "These bodies of hers and mine are diffuse, gaseous, centreless, at one moment spinning about a vortex here, at another curdling, thickening elsewhere; but often also flat, blank" (p.33). The magistrate's hermeneutical frustration reaches a climactic stage when he tries to know what the girl's torturers did to

her eyes and ankles; he says, "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her." He then asks, "What did they do to you?" He asks more earnestly, "Why don't you want to tell me?" (p.31). The magistrate is interested in the girl's story of torture and treats her scarred body as a corporeal text, but his frustration stems from not receiving answers. The Empire unsettles his understanding of such concepts as "torture," "justice," "law," "truth," and "desire." He cannot compromise being a "just" man in a barbarous Empire; he cannot understand why he is so attached to the barbarian girl's body, despite the bouts of repulsion he feels toward it. He is uncertain about the nature of his "desire."

The magistrate tries but fails to reconstruct an image of the "whole" girl before torture made her an incomprehensible text. He cannot remember her face before torture. He recalls the other prisoners who were brought in with her, but he cannot recall her image next to her father who died in torture, "But beside him, where the girl should be, there is a space, a blankness" (p.46). Her presence, in Derridean terms, is hampered by her absence and she exists as a trace—a sign left by the absent torturers who, in turn, define her mutilated presence. She comes to inhabit an unconscious, repressed part of the magistrate's mind that cannot be brought to consciousness. The magistrate, on the other hand, plays the role of the analyst and analysand simultaneously. Hence, Yuan Yuan (2000) rightly calls the magistrate "a psychoanalyst," keen on penetrating the barbarian girl's "psyche in order to obtain the secret narrative, and to uncover the primal scene of her violation" (p.79). She is used in a countertransference relation to reveal the magistrate's unconscious. However, she remains "the object without identity, an object without interior, and the signifier of undifferentiability" (Yuan, p. 80). Interestingly, her ponderous body, shapeless feet, broken ankles, blurred eyesight, passivity, and silence signify her unidentified physical existence. While considering whether he really is interested in her as a woman or simply in the marks of torture on her body, the magistrate reaches a linguistic impasse and his hermeneutical failure seems apparent; he thinks:

No thought that I think, no articulation, however antonymic, of the origin of my desire seems to upset me. "I must be tired," I think. "Or perhaps whatever can be articulated is falsely put." My lips move, silently composing and recomposing the words. "Or perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through." I stare at this last proposition without detecting any answering movement in my self toward assent or dissent. The words grow more and more opaque before me; soon they have lost all meaning. (p.63)

The magistrate is suspended in a neutral linguistic environment where language is deprived of its teleological function and simply fails to signify. It is easy to read the magistrate's comments in terms of Derrida's statement

(1974), “But it is because the metaphorical does not reduce syntax, but sets out in syntax its deviations, that it carries itself away, can only be what it is by obliterating itself, endlessly constructs its own destruction” (“White”, p. 71). The magistrate’s quest for meaning engenders more failures and frustrations with language. Each sign that promises meaning turns out to be empty or adds to his confusion. According to Derrida (1974), “Metaphor, then, always has its own death within it” (“White”, p. 74). The magistrate alludes to deconstructive literary discourses and calls the girl “the only key I have to the labyrinth” (p.85). He probably alludes to “the labyrinth” of deconstruction where meaning is constantly sought, questioned, and proliferated. As Derrida (1978) argues, “The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely” (*Writing*, p. 280). Accordingly, the magistrate’s search for meaning yields more questions and uncertainties rather than stable truths. The novel, therefore, foregrounds the postmodern indeterminacy of meaning and dramatizes its own impossible task of communicating an authentic, authoritative historical account about political oppression.

The barbarian girl herself invites a deconstructive critique. She sees no center for things as her impaired eyes see only through the periphery. The center of a thing for her is an empty, decentred space. Thus, she makes us ponder the center/margin binary opposition and its deconstructive and postcolonial associations. The magistrate continually experiences her as a blank space/text beyond his comprehension. He complains, “But with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry” (p.42). This blank text can be filled with multiple readings, but none is more privileged than the others. His frustration with her as a closed text develops into more frustrations with the nature of his strange attraction to her, “But of this one there is nothing I can say with certainty. There is no link I can define between her womanhood and my desire. I cannot even say for sure that I desire her. All this erotic behavior of mine is indirect” (p.42). The magistrate shifts his abortive hermeneutical interest in the barbarian girl to greater concerns with the nature of “desire” and the mentality of the torturer—things he again cannot easily fathom:

I shake my head in a fury of disbelief. *No! No! No!* I cry to myself. It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves. There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman’s body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes! (p.43-44)

On the verge of despair for not being able to find “secrets” and “answers,” the magistrate questions

language and the established system of signifiers and referents. He articulates the seductive nature of allegorical interpretation with its equivalents and correspondences. The supposed distinction he believes in (between torturers like Mandel and Joll, and himself as liberal humanist) does not hold because these notions are questioned and problematized. Insofar as strict definitional boundaries for torturer and humanist cannot be drawn, the magistrate’s whole hermeneutical stance falls apart.

The magistrate cannot understand how torturers like Mandel and Joll commit their barbarities and continue living like other human beings. He asks Mandel, “Do you find it easy to take food afterwards?” and vents his hermeneutical failure by saying, “*I am only trying to understand. I am trying to understand the zone in which you live.* I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. *But I cannot!* That is what troubles me!” (p.123-124; my emphasis).

He enacts these hermeneutical failures in another crucial scene in the novel when, upon his return from the journey to return the barbarian girl, he finds the Empire’s officials in the outpost preparing for a war against the barbarians. He is accused of treason and humiliated and imprisoned accordingly. More importantly, he is asked by Joll and Mandel to “read” an archaic barbarian script on some wooden slips. Early in the novel, it should be noted, the magistrate is obsessed with deciphering the script on these slips he finds in the desert. He is so obsessed with finding the truth (the story) behind the slips that he utters what is in essence an epistemological question per se, “How will I ever know?” (p.15). He fetishizes these slips, counts them, and keeps them in a bag. He finds himself reading them “in a mirror, or tracing one on top of another, or conflating half of one with half of another” (p.15). Joll and Mandel face the magistrate with a wooden chest full of these archaic slips, which they take as secret messages between the magistrate and the barbarians. Assured that the slips communicate a conspiracy between the magistrate and the barbarians against the Empire, Joll asks the magistrate to unravel their meanings by reading the script on them; what ensues is a highly (anti-)allegorical scene where reading is tantamount to misreading and fragmentation is privileged over coherent meaning.

The magistrate finds in these slips mystic signs and cannot decide whether each character stands for a referent or simply for the sign itself. The magistrate says, “I have no idea what they stand for. Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman, a wave for a lake; or does a circle merely stand for ‘circle’, a triangle for ‘triangle’, a wave for ‘wave’?” (p.108). He clearly echoes his former unavailing attempts to understand the barbarian girl’s story, his desires, and the mentality of the torturer, but he is faced with the same hermeneutical failure. When he tries to interpret the slips, he offers arbitrary readings to satisfy Joll’s desire for truth

rather than something he is content with. He does not know whether to read the slips “from right to left or from left to right” (p.108). Interestingly, his reading of the slips becomes an allegory of the Empire’s practices of torture or its approaching end, and simultaneously an ironic counterpart to the Empire’s belief in absolute truths:

Now let us see what the next one says. See, there is only a single character. It is the barbarian character *war*, 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 which sense is intended. That is part of barbarian cunning. (p.109; emphasis original)

The slips, according to the magistrate, “form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways” (p.109). The magistrate renders reading as a quintessentially allegorical act. He is consciously allegorizing the wooden slips in a self-reflexive allusion to Coetzee’s novel. In addition, he is encouraging an allegorical or open reading where the text is mediated rather than assigned a pure reading. His open approach to reading the slips is certainly different from that of the Empire, where things are made fixed or stable in order to give the Empire its self-assured authority over its assumed enemies.

Olsen (1987) discusses the same allegorical interpretation of the slips and argues that “the wood slips form an absence which may be supplemented in an endless number of ways, nothing more than a productive mechanism” (p.110). As written signs, and following Derrida’s notion of logocentrism, the characters on the slips represent writing as a contaminated form of speech or an inferior misleading counterpart to the assuring presence of speech. Hence, they call for interpretation and re-interpretation—unlike what Derrida (1974) calls a “metaphysics of presence,” that is motivated by a desire for a “transcendental signified” (*Of Grammatology*, p. 49). The magistrate cannot offer a “literal reading,” one that is rooted in “the experience of reading as an *event*,” as he is not a master of the barbarian language (Attridge, 2004, p. 39; emphasis original). He is unable, therefore, to suspend the allegorizing, open-ended interpretive impulse in the absence of any knowledge of authorial intention. Moreover, the slips do not have a contextual framework to determine their meaning. They are signifiers with no signifieds. The magistrate, hence, tries to relate them to other signifiers and is trapped in what Derrida (1978) calls “the indefinite referral of signifier to signifier” (*Writing*, p. 25).

The ancient slips can also stand for a linguistic trace as their presence among the ruins indicates. This is the reason why the magistrate reads them as if their meaning were once clear and as a present allegory. The fact that he sees them as an allegory is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s famous aphorism that allegories “are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things”

(qtd. in Dovey, 1996, “Waiting”, p.138). In the absence of a context where words signify with relation to differences from other words and signs, and when the absence of such a linguistic system is coupled with a break with historical continuity on the part of the magistrate, these slips are polysemic or even empty signifiers. It is logical that they make no sense out of the original linguistic system in which they were used. The convention in which a language signifies is not accessible to the magistrate. He is confronted with signifiers, but not signifieds or referents. The slips, then, exemplify what Roland Barthes (1968) calls “neutral writing,” as they are “innocent” writing devoid of thoughts or extra-textual references; they are language standing by itself unhampered by cultural or social references (p.77). Moreover, as letters and characters, the slips are a collection of signs and are, therefore, “écriture” according to Barthes, a zero degree of writing. As the magistrate fails in his hermeneutical quest with the girl, he also blatantly fails with the slips. He coats them in linseed oil, wraps them in an oilcloth, and decides to bury them in the desert again. In a sense, he buries meaning or simply returns it to where it came from. In short, the magistrate is faced with a failure of interpreting the Empire’s operations, along with his own complicity with its machinations, and another failure of understanding the Other who produced these slips—the barbarian girl and her folk.

At the end, the magistrate faces another interpretive failure. He fails as a writer just as he failed as a reader of the barbarian girl and the slips. He gives up his project for writing a history of the frontier outpost. This failure of the magistrate as a writer is the direct result of not being able to fathom the Empire he is serving and his role in promoting its cause. Earlier in the novel, he proves to be a hesitant writer. Before he sends the barbarian girl to her people, he decides to write two documents. He writes a letter to the provincial governor in the capital notifying him of his intention. However, he does not know what the second document should be. His first frustration seems to be finding an appropriate genre, but he suggests then a correlation between authorial and sexual impotence. He considers what he should write:

A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years on the frontier? All that day I sit in a trance at my desk staring at the empty white paper, waiting for words to come. A second day passes in the same way. On the third day I surrender, put the paper back in the drawer, and make my preparations to leave. It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write. (p.56-57)

Commenting on his former sexual exploits, the magistrate hints at the same sexual and textual impotence: “Not only that; there were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story” (p.44). If he fails as a reader of the barbarian girl’s body and

story, he necessarily fails as a writer, and his failure becomes twofold. Accordingly, he enacts what Derrida (1978) calls the “deferred reciprocity between reading and writing” (*Writing*, p. 11). Towards the end of the novel, he decides on a genre and tries to write a history of the frontier outpost as it is waiting for the arrival of barbarians and preparing for a harsh winter. He intends to leave this history for future generations. However, he writes fragments and cannot write a coherent “annals of an imperial outpost” (p.151). What he writes as the opening of his history, instead, is the following nostalgic plea about an idyllic outpost:

“No one who paid a visit to this oasis,” I write, “failed to be struck by the charm of life here. We lived in the time of the seasons, of the harvests, of the migrations of the waterbirds. We lived with nothing between us and the stars. We would have made any concession, had we only known what, to go on living here. This was paradise on earth.” (p.151)

His plea seems idealistic and romanticized rather than truthful. It looks as deceptive and ambivalent as the wooden slips he failed to decipher because it paradoxically ignores his former humiliation by the Empire. He then writes short unconnected fragments, and feels unfit for this task. His failure to write a history of the Empire indicates that he failed to be a reader of a writerly text, whereby he produces rather than consumes meaning. If he fails to read the Empire, then he cannot write its history. He ponders in the last entry, “There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it” (p.152). While his assertion establishes the failure of signification, it yet points to the presence of an ultimate signified beyond his reach. The novel, it seems, negates a straightforward allegorical reading that makes easy parallels between the textual and the historical, between the literal level of meaning and the historical realities of apartheid. It equally articulates the difficulty of engaging history in fiction and the necessary mediation of experience via written discourse.

The magistrate completes the labyrinth of interpretive failure and leaves the last scene in the novel of children building a snowman in the square “feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (p.152). Like former dreams in which he frequently saw a snowy background and a hooded girl or blurred facial features he ascribed to the barbarian girl, this scene is elusive. Although his dreams have somewhat materialized in this scene, he cannot relate what he has just seen to the content of his dreams, which he also cannot fathom. His response to this scene is: “This is not the scene I dreamed of” (p.152). He cannot find what he sought or remember the face of the barbarian girl before her torture. Derrida (1978) would call this “the possibility of concealing meaning through the very act of uncovering it” (*Writing*, p. 26). It seems that the magistrate, as Derrida (1978) says, loses “meaning by finding it” (*Writing*, p. 26). The magistrate’s state of bewilderment

echoes the state of the readers of this novel. Apparently, his failures as a reader/writer should make us examine our own roles as readers/re-writers. To succeed as readers, we should also succeed as re-writers of Coetzee’s open text. Instead of limiting interpretation to the allegorical, political approach or to Coetzee’s treatment of torture and the body (as many critics have done so far), readers should read this novel as a writerly text that evades all such readings by underscoring the magistrate’s failed interpretive acts and inviting, accordingly, a pluralistic reading. The novel has a generalized value of reference to apartheid history and simultaneously moves beyond it.

THE PLURAL TEXT

WB invites us to produce meaning out of an abortive hermeneutical labyrinth. It is a writerly text that asks us to become active rather than passive readers. In underscoring multivalence and the failure of interpretation, it also establishes itself as a plural text of bliss. Barthes (1974) argues that in the readerly text, the reader finds meaning that is ready to be consumed, as meaning in such a text is “controlled by the principle of non-contradiction” (*S/Z*, p. 156). Readerly texts conform to common sense and cultural norms. They do not unsettle our assumptions or make us reconsider our readings of them. In a writerly text, however, the reader is “no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (*S/Z*, p. 4). The “I” which reads a writerly text is the plural subject position akin to the plurality of texts. *WB* is a writerly text in that it forces us to produce readings that are neither final nor authorized. Meaning is not fixed or determined as we learn from the magistrate’s failed interpretive attempts, and the text itself calls attention to its plurality; as Barthes (1974) puts it,

The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (*S/Z*, p. 5)

The ideal plural text, according to Barthes (1974), is one whose “networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (*S/Z*, p. 5). Barthes’s claims apply to the allegorical slips in *WB* as a writerly text and as a trope for the novel itself as a writerly text disavowing a monolithic reading. Indeed, the magistrate’s reading of the slips presents them exactly in the light of Barthes’s above comment on the ideal plural text. A readerly text is a closed one “devoted to the law of the Signified” (*S/Z*, p. 8). In Coetzee’s text, this supreme signified is not within our

grasp, as it is certainly not within the grasp of the overwhelmed magistrate. While *WB* can be clearly identified as a writerly plural text, it is also a text of bliss in Barthes's terms. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), Barthes distinguishes between two kinds of texts:

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a comfortable practice of reading. *Text of bliss*: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomfords (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (p.14; my emphasis)

A text of bliss is not one with a transparent, linear meaning, which makes a text a source of pleasure. In fact, *WB* celebrates contradiction and ambivalence on several occasions. The magistrate's liberal stance and sympathy toward the girl do not seem different from the torture practices of Joll and Mandel. His sympathy is mixed with revulsion and exploitation. Likewise, his relationship with the Empire is ambivalent. He is supposed to be the guardian of the Empire, yet he takes the barbarian girl to her people. While the novel ends with an ambivalent situation of anxious waiting for an elusive enemy that never arrives, thus making us consider the possibility that the enemy is within the Empire, it can be suggested that meaning is within the reader and that it is, again like the barbarians, at once deferred and expected. As a text of bliss, the novel problematizes interpretation in the figure of the magistrate and brings him, and us, to a state of loss whereby we look for interpretive clues. A reading of *WB* as a writerly plural text of bliss should also take into account M. Bakhtin's notion of "polyphony," and apply it to characters and readers alike.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984), Bakhtin praises Dostoevsky's novels for: "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices..." (p.6; emphasis original). Bakhtin continues that what we see in Dostoevsky's novels "is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event" (p.6; emphasis original). While polyphony in Bakhtin stands for the multiplicity of voices, it also denotes that each character has a distinct voice and an individual self that differentiates that character from others. Polyphonic novels do not unify the various points of view expressed by the characters. The consciousnesses of the various characters do not merge with that of the author, nor do they become subordinated to the author's viewpoint.

In *WB*, the magistrate is so absorbed in observation and reflection to the extent that we view him as a psychologically complex character whose position cannot be simply identified with that of Coetzee. While *WB* may

not be a purely polyphonic text in a Bakhtinean sense, as it focuses on the consciousness of the narrating magistrate rather than those of a plethora of characters, it is still the magistrate who is given a richly complex voice and presence like characters in polyphonic novels. Critics treat him as if he were a distinct voice that has nothing to do with Coetzee. Moreover, polyphony in *WB* should be treated in terms of different readers and reading responses, rather than different or autonomous character consciousnesses. Allegory, likewise, can function not only at the level of politics but also at that of readers' multiple voices. As a writerly text of bliss and a polyphonic one in a particular sense, *WB* is a plural text. Therefore, it can or should be read anew because it continually deconstructs its own symbolic meanings; it can also resist the present reading and re-assert its status as an "allegory" of reading and interpretation, rather than failed interpretation, and as a political allegory about the material injustices of apartheid, rather than as a generalized allegory about political oppression. In brief, Coetzee scholarship should move beyond exploring his apartheid novels' allegorical relevance to the political situation in South Africa to focus more on their critical and textual richness. In this light, such Coetzee's early novels can have new and valid interpretations that move beyond the specific context of apartheid or colonialism. The logic through which allegory functions, i.e. directing the reader to its meaning, gets subverted in *WB* as it interrogates the failures of allegorical interpretation. While this is not meant to belittle the value of allegorical critiques, the point is to consider what usually gets ignored in the text when it is read in a certain way.

NOTES

¹ For a discussion of the relationship between such contested terms as post-colonialism and postmodernism, especially with relation to Canadian art, see Hutcheon (1989).

² Henceforth abbreviated as *WB*.

³ Attridge (2004) seems unhappy with the proliferation of allegorical interpretations of Coetzee's works. He believes that such readings, though useful and insightful, ignore many peculiarities about the texts and narrative details. Therefore, he propounds a "literal" reading that focuses on the novels themselves and the reading experience aside from the political and historical allegorizing. This argument follows his advocacy of resisting the conventional allegorical impulse. For more on this, see Attridge (p.32-64).

⁴ For a discussion of three "clues" for the magistrate and the reader (the slips, the girl, and the magistrate's dreams), see Kossew (1996, p. 85-97).

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