Torture and the Novel: J. M. Coetzee's "Waiting for the Barbarians"

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One of the most horrifying realities of the twentieth century is the widespread existence of state-approved torture. Amnesty International cites allegations that torture took place in ninety-eight countries in 1984 and estimates that in the 1980s more than one-third of the world's governments are responsible for torturing prisoners. The existence of torture in the modern world raises difficult questions for writers, particularly those from South American and African countries. Should authors depict torture in their work, and if they do, how should they portray this incomprehensible act? One writer who has wrestled with these issues is J. M. Coetzee, a South African novelist, linguist, and critic. His fiction represents a working out of some tentative strategies for the novelist confronted with the question of torture.

Writing in the January 12, 1986, *New York Times Book Review*, Coetzee admits that “torture has exerted a dark fascination” on himself and many other South African authors (13). But the writer who depicts “the dark chamber” faces two moral dilemmas, according to Coetzee. First, he or she must find a middle way between ignoring the obscenities performed by the state, on the one hand, and producing representations of those obscenities, on the other. Coetzee objects to realistic depiction of torture in fiction because he thinks that the novelist participates vicariously in the atrocities, validates the acts of torture, assists the state in terrorizing and paralyzing people by showing its oppressive methods in detail. Yet these acts must not be hidden either. Coetzee suggests, “The true challenge is how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms” (13).
The second problem, which is both moral and aesthetic, concerns how to represent the person of the torturer. Coetzee thinks many authors resort to clichés: the figure of satanic evil, the tragically divided man, the faceless functionary. Other writers—he identifies South Africans Mongane Serote and Alex La Guma among them—present the world of torture “with a false portentousness, a questionable dark lyricism” (35). Again, the author needs to find a middle course between trivializing and glamorizing the figure responsible for inflicting pain.

Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* embodies his fictional solutions to these two dilemmas. His third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* was published to critical acclaim and won the prestigious South African CNA Literary Prize for 1980. Initial reviews point out the book’s allegorical depiction of depravity (Schott 12) and “the mentality behind brutality and injustice” (Burgess 88). Irving Howe reads the novel as “a drama of representative ways of governing” (36). Simple allegorical meanings are hard to sustain, however, in the face of the novel’s pervasive ambiguity. As Paul Ableman notes, “The Empire finally represents . . . an ambiguity which governs all relationships and dissolves all clear-cut moral judgments” (21). One of the first critical studies of *Waiting for the Barbarians* focuses on these ambiguities and argues that the novel “places civilization, authority, humanism and truth under erasure by disclosing the zero that beats at their centres” (Olsen 47). Coetzee’s unusual combination of allegory, often thought to be a precise technique, and a text full of gaps, absences, and uncertainties represents in part his solution to the moral issue of how a novelist should treat torture in fiction. Simultaneously, in his allusions to uncentered language and the death of the metaphysics of presence, Coetzee also points to the moral vacuum that allows torture to exist in the contemporary world.

Coetzee describes *Waiting for the Barbarians* as “about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience” (“Chamber” 13). This man of conscience, known only as the Magistrate, is the chief administrator of a small village on the frontier between the civilization of the Empire and the wastelands inhabited by the nomadic Barbarians. The novel opens as Colonel Joll, a storm-trooper-like security man, arrives to investigate the rumored attack of the Barbarians upon the Empire. As Joll interrogates and tortures Barbarian prisoners, the Magistrate becomes increasingly sympathetic toward the victims. When the Colonel leaves the outpost, the Magistrate takes a Barbarian woman, crippled as a result of her torture, into his house and bed. Later, he makes an arduous journey across the desert to restore her
to her people. The army arrives to fight the Barbarians in his absence, and he is imprisoned for treason and tortured on his return. But the army finally abandons the village to its fate and releases the Magistrate. Once again under his leadership, the few remaining villagers wait for the Barbarian hordes to descend upon them.

Narrated by the Magistrate, the novel is full of images of the impotency of writing, perhaps in acknowledgment of the pitfalls faced by an author who attempts to portray the world of torture. The old bureaucrat parallels his flagging interest in sex to his struggles to articulate his story: “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” (58). The metaphor works both ways: “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” (45). Even after he consummates his sexual relationship with the Barbarian woman, he is unable to establish its meaning:

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 myself toward assent or dissent. The words grow more and more opaque before me; soon they have lost all meaning. (64–65)

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. His statement that “whatever can be articulated is falsely put” is in itself an articulation and so, as Derrida puts it, “endlessly constructs its own destruction” (71). The process of the Magistrate’s thought in this passage resembles Derrida’s comment that “metaphor, then, always has its own death within it” (74). Articulation, creating a text, causes falsehoods to emerge.

The Magistrate’s sexual and linguistic failures demonstrate his lack of authority. He can neither read the text of his world nor create a text that precisely conveys his experiences. Throughout the novel, when the Magistrate searches for meaning, he confronts blankness. When he tries to remember the Barbarian woman as a prisoner, he sees only “a space, a blankness” (47). After the woman leaves he tries in vain to remember her face. His recurring dream of trudging across an end-
less, snow-covered plain ends when he looks into the “blank, featureless” face of a hooded child (37). His inconclusive dream demonstrates that the Magistrate cannot even read the text of his own identity: “I try to look into myself but see only a vortex and at the heart of the vortex oblivion” (47). His attempts to locate fixed meanings inevitably fail.

Coetzee’s references to contemporary literary theory suggest the authorial impotency of the novelist who attempts to write about torture, oppression, and—in his particular case—South Africa. The novelist must struggle to articulate torture without falsifying it, to understand and to depict oppression without unconsciously aiding the oppressor, to find texts transparent enough to carry meaning. Coetzee may also be addressing the paradox of the contemporary critic who believes in the radical indeterminacy of the text yet is still politically and socially committed, for despite the Magistrate’s doubts about articulation and truth, he does narrate the story, he does give us a text, provisional though it may be.

Another incident in the novel points even more blatantly to contemporary critical theories about language and meaning. In his amateur archaeological diggings in the desert, the Magistrate has discovered hundreds of white wooden tiles containing mysterious inscriptions. Colonel Joll orders him to translate these inscriptions, but the Magistrate does not know what they say. He tells the reader:

In the long evenings I spent poring over my collection I isolated over four hundred different characters in the script, perhaps as many as four hundred and fifty. 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”? Does each sign represent a different state of the tongue, the lips, the throat, the lungs, as they combine in the uttering of some multifarious unimaginable extinct barbarian language? (110)

The Magistrate’s musings point to the difficulty of ascertaining the connection between the signifiers and the signifieds, the text and the meaning. Lance Olsen comments, “As Derrida would have it, those wood slips form an absence which may be supplemented in an endless number of ways, cut off from responsibility, from authority, an emblem of orphaned language” (53). However, when importuned by Joll, the Magistrate picks up a tile and “reads” story after story that reveals the Empire’s cruelty to the Barbarians. In this way he gives the language a temporary father-interpreter.
This incident again suggests the ambiguous nature of texts and the freedom of the reader to interpret such texts, but in the Magistrate’s “translation” of the tiles lies the hope that in storytelling—impotent, opaque, and uncertain as it might be—oppression and torture may be unveiled.

The Magistrate’s storytelling thus represents Coetzee’s own way of solving the first moral dilemma of the author writing about torture. The narrator also comments on the specific technique to be employed when the Magistrate tells Joll, “‘They [the tiles] form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last years of the Empire—the old Empire, I mean’” (112). The qualification of the meaning of the term “Empire” suggests the multiple interpretations possible for Coetzee’s own work. By setting his novel in an unnamed country at an unnamed time, by terming the two parties the Empire and the Barbarians, and by simplifying the technology and weapons of the people, Coetzee creates an allegorical landscape that loosely suggests the Roman Empire on the verge of collapse but undoubtedly points to South Africa today. As Anthony Burgess writes, “[Waiting for the Barbarians] is not about South Africa: It is not about anywhere, and hence it is about everywhere” (88). The effect of this time displacement is to reveal truths

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1 Olsen sees the multiplicity of meaning generated by the tiles as negating the possibility of a correct reading. He argues that the Magistrate is a complete deconstructionist: “The Magistrate believes in the metaphysics of absence, in the idea that ‘meaning’ and ‘truth’ must be allowed to float free” (53). Olsen overlooks the Magistrate’s own reading of the tiles, which is in a sense a correct reading, for it points to the Empire’s barbarism. The fact that the slips do not hold a single meaning does not mean that they are without meaning. Olsen’s interpretation does not allow the Magistrate to achieve any kind of moral recognition and results in this conclusion: “We have arrived, as we often do in postmodern fiction, at a giving up, a frustration, a despair before the arbitrariness of language and its essential defectiveness for depicting the world. We have circled around again to the notion that language is a game, that the game is futile, that linguistic zero is ever-present” (55). This reading is incomplete. Although Coetzee does recognize the problems of ambiguity and authority that plague the creator of a text, neither he nor the Magistrate gives up using this uncertain medium to advance moral truths. The very fact that he refers to the “moral dilemmas” of the author indicates Coetzee’s own concerns and priorities.

2 Not all readers have been pleased with the universality of the setting. Peter Lewis concludes, “this kind of fiction as a whole, peopled as it is mainly by stereotypes, is often in danger of moving so far away from the familiar in its determination to
about any oppressive society, any society that employs torture as a technique.

By using this kind of setting, Coetzee solves his first moral dilemma. He does not ignore the obscene acts performed by his government under the guise of national security, yet neither does he produce representational depictions of these acts. Instead, he insists on his own authority, tentative as it might be, and imagines death and torture on his own terms. He does not identify the particular atrocities performed by the South African security police in Vorster Square (as André Brink and Alex La Guma do), but nonetheless the maiming of the Barbarian woman and the Magistrate's own ill-treatment ineluctably point to the treatment of political prisoners in South Africa. In suggesting universal truths about torture and oppression, Coetzee also obliquely condemns his own country.

The solution to Coetzee’s second dilemma—how to depict the person of the torturer—is a bit more complicated. The Magistrate seems unable to comprehend the torturers. He speculates about Colonel Joll:

I wonder how he felt the very first time: did he, invited as an apprentice to twist the pincers or turn the screw or whatever it is they do, shudder even a little to know that at that instant he was trespassing into the forbidden? I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean? (12)

He asks Mandel, the man who tortures him, “Do you find it easy to take food afterwards? I have imagined that one would want to wash one’s hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial of cleansing, don’t you think?” (126). The Magistrate sees both Joll and Mandel as types of Pilate, who must somehow absolve themselves of the responsibility for their dreadful acts.

establish universals that it defeats its own purpose” (1270). Irving Howe similarly states, “One possible loss is bite and pain, the urgency that a specified historical place and time may provide. . . . such invocations of universal evil can deflect attention from the particular and at least partially remediable social wrongs Mr. Coetzee portrays” (36). But when we understand Coetzee’s reluctance to depict torture realistically as a moral refusal to endorse the authority of the torturer, his use of the universal takes on greater significance.
Both men represent some kind of moral vacuum, an absence that is reflected in their eyes. Colonel Joll wears dark glasses, in what might appear to be one of the clichés of the torturer, except that the “two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire” are a new phenomenon to the frontier people, a modern curiosity of civilization (1). “Is he blind?” the Magistrate wonders in the opening lines of the novel (1). The eyes of Mandel are uncovered, but as hidden as Joll’s: “I look into his clear blue eyes, as clear as if there were crystal lenses slipped over his eyeballs. He looks back at me. I have no idea what he sees. Thinking of him, I have said the words torture . . . torturer to myself, but they are strange words, and the more I repeat them the more strange they grow, till they lie like stones on my tongue” (118). Again, words fail the Magistrate and are inadequate to depict the reality.

Questioning Mandel, the Magistrate claims that he is neither blaming nor accusing his torturer: “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!” (126). Perhaps the Magistrate’s failure represents the author’s own failure, for by centering his novel in the narration of the Magistrate, Coetzee avoids having to depict the zone of the torturer. So, in one sense, Coetzee solves this dilemma by posing it: how can the mind of a torturer even exist?

Yet in another sense Coetzee does enter the zone of the torturer, the oppressor, in his rendition of the Magistrate himself. When he takes in the Barbarian woman after the security police have left, the Magistrate acts like an obsessed man. He continually asks her about her experience of being tortured, probing for every last detail. He stands in the room in which the torture took place and tries to imagine the act. But most perversely, he nightly strips the woman and, in his own ritual of purification, washes her, always beginning with her maimed feet. He seems to be trying to absolve himself of the guilt he feels for having allowed the torture to take place. But he also is attempting to penetrate her secret being, to find her deepest and most hidden feelings. In frustration at his inability to enter her either psychologically or physically, he wonders, “What do I have to do to move you?” (44). But this is the question of the torturer, as the eye imagery again indicates: “with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time to offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me” (44). The Magistrate
immediately denies this recognition: "No! No! No! I cry to myself. . . . There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. . . . I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!" (44).

Only after he fulfills the conditions of his dream, struggling across the vast desert to return the woman to the Barbarians, and consequently is imprisoned and tortured himself, does the Magistrate acknowledge his affinities with Colonel Joll. He realizes that he has used the woman and has wanted to engrave himself on her as deeply as Colonel Joll has: “From the moment my steps paused and I stood before her at the barracks gate she must have felt a miasma of deceit closing about her: envy, pity, cruelty all masquerading as desire” (135). He sees his acts as “futile gestures of expiation” as he attempted to erase the guilt of his passive acceptance of the state’s atrocities. He now can admit:

I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less. But I temporized, I looked around this obscure frontier . . . and I said to myself, “Be patient, one of these days he will go away, one of these days quiet will return[.]” . . . Thus I seduced myself, taking one of the many wrong turnings I have taken on a road that looks true but has delivered me into the heart of a labyrinth. (135-36)

Although the Magistrate ends his narrative “feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (156), his moment of self-recognition and his changes in behavior suggest that he may have found the right road after all. When the Army brings back a new set of Barbarian prisoners, he escapes from his prison to denounce publicly the cruel beating of the captives. In his dream he now sees the face of the child to be that of the Barbarian woman, and in one dream she gives him a piece of bread in an apparent peace offering. Even though his torture and imprisonment have physically reduced him to the level of an animal, these experiences also have elevated his moral awareness not only of the Empire’s barbarity but also of his own.

Coetzee thus resolves his second dilemma—how to depict the torturer—by eliminating the distinction between “them” and “us,” the evil and the innocent. This elimination does not result in moral ambiguity but rather in an assertion that everyone is guilty, everyone is in need of a ceremony of purification like Pilate’s ritual cleansing. Through the figure of the Magistrate, Coetzee identifies the universal
tendency to acquiesce, to have complicity, to wait for the Barbarians to act and to wait on the acts of the Barbarians. Those who passively allow torture and oppression to take place are just as much Barbarians as the torturers.

Near the end of his *New York Times* article, Coetzee speaks of his desire for a world where “humanity will be restored across the face of society,” a world where all human acts “will be returned to the ambit of moral judgment” (35). He concludes, “In such a society it will once again be meaningful for the gaze of the author, the gaze of authority and authoritative judgment, to be turned upon scenes of torture” (35). Coetzee thus identifies the absence of moral authority that results in torture with the absence at the heart of contemporary literature since the advent of deconstructive criticism. In a world without a moral center, in a world where barbarity hides behind all the faces of society, the author can only struggle to provide authority and meaning. Coetzee's fiction is full of gaps and absences, yet he nonetheless suggests that temporary presences, especially the presence of the storyteller, can at least approximate a moral and linguistic center. In *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee demonstrates that the final impact of the dark chamber upon people of conscience is paradoxical: they realize the need to write and proclaim the truth about this kind of oppression, but they also realize their own inability to do so completely and effectively.

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WORKS CITED