

# *The Presence of Absence: Coetzee's "Waiting for the Barbarians"*

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WHEREAS SOME CULTURAL ARTIFACTS, Coetzee has said, "reinforce the myths of our culture, others dissect these myths. In our time and place, it is the latter kind of work that seems to me more urgent."<sup>1</sup> Coetzee's is a writing that dissects, recharts, interrogates, challenges, casts into doubt. Like most postmodern artifacts, it deconstructs, dismantles dominant cultural myths by revealing their opposite, by unfolding the repressed, by setting free the absence that dwells in the heart of the country. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), his third novel, places civilization, authority, humanism and truth under erasure by disclosing the zero that beats at their centres.

Early reviews of the novel were not as positive as one might expect, given the number of literary awards it received during the first year of publication (among which are the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Geoffrey Faber Award, and the South African CNA Literary Prize for 1980). Several reviews, like that by Jean Marquard in *Contrast*, faulted the book on ethical grounds. Marquard trips up South African novels in general because "the effectiveness . . . depends on the measure of disgust they can arouse in the reader," the action occurring "inside the mind of a character from whom the reader is alienated."<sup>2</sup> Others, like Leon Whiteson, fault it on technical grounds: "The geography is garbled: there is desert and snow, lizards and bears. The story is told in that most awkward tense: the historic present. The dialogue is stiff, the writing has the air of a translation. . . . Coetzee's bad dreams have not been earned by any truth. . . . The heart of this novel is not darkness but mush."<sup>3</sup> Irving Howe, in his generally favourable review that appeared on the front page

of *The New York Times Book Review* (which also voted the novel one of the ten best of the year), argues that "one possible loss is bite and pain, the urgency that a specified historical place and time may provide."<sup>4</sup> Each of these is essentially a cryptoprescriptive reading, a reading that implies a refusal on the part of the reader to take the fiction as itself and that implies a deep need to change that fiction into something it cannot or will not be. In other words, these are nostalgic readings, confessional readings. Under the rhetoric, Marquard believes novels should be compensatory. Whiteson believes they should all be Balzacian in setting, logic, tense, and style. For Howe, the fantastic mode of discourse should be mimetic.

But a number of reviews attempted understanding rather than prescribing. Howe himself, for instance, elsewhere in his discussion of the book, argues that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a political fable about South Africa (Coetzee, it should be noted, was born in Cape Town, South Africa, in 1940; grew up in the midst of an unwieldy and corrupt system of apartheid). "Mr. Coetzee," Howe writes, "tells the story of an imaginary Empire, set in an unspecified place and time, yet recognized as a 'universalized' version of South Africa. . . . The result is a realistic fable." The heart of the text for Howe is a "clash of moral styles, a drama of representative ways of governing" — a field of tension among the magistrate's faded humanism, Joll's neofascism, and barbarian anarchy. George Steiner, in his review of Coetzee's novel, reads the book as a Hegelian parable about the interdependence of the master and the slave; the Empire cannot exist without the presence of its opposite, and Joll cannot exist without the presence of the magistrate: we all need our scapegoats, and our scapegoats need us.<sup>5</sup> In a review of several South African novels, Jane Kramer comments that in Coetzee's universe "language itself is protagonist and victim, a commentary on the salutary and oppressive uses of words we speak to each other and ourselves."<sup>6</sup> This last comes closest to my own concerns with Coetzee's text.

While Kramer emphasizes the presence of language, of languages, of their wills to power, in Coetzee's project, I should like to emphasize the inverse — the absence at the centre of

Coetzee's language, the gaps at the centre of his project, the revelations of nothing that make themselves felt throughout his third novel.

Waiting, an idea suggested by the title as well as by the text as a whole, in which an outpost expects any moment to be invaded by barbarians from the north, points to the lack of something that will not show itself, an unfulfilled desire, deferredness of meaning, the inability to know fully, jammed completion, frustrated longing, unknown ends, uncertain futures, (im)possibility, foreboding, dread, blocked hope, absence. Clearly all texts present absences at their core in one way or another, but not all believe they do. With respect to this, Jacques Derrida discusses what he calls a metaphysics of presence,<sup>8</sup> a metaphysics that longs for the "truth" behind every sign, the belief that the reader of a text can pass from the signifier to the signified which is a stable "meaning." In the model of presence, writing is a process whereby an author sends his message to the world and the reader retrieves that message, tries to find what the author had in mind. But however appropriate this model may appear with regard to speech, Derrida argues, such a model with respect to the written word is at best the confession of yearning for an edenic world where no system of mediation called language, writing, exists between form and meaning. The very act of writing severs the word from the writer, and without the presence of the writer the word's "meaning" and "truth" become absent. Hence 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.

At the core of the plot in Coetzee's text is the absence (and words like *blank*, *blind*, *space*, and *empty* — words suggesting absence — appear with high frequency in the text) of the barbarians, towards which events always move. The reader hears how the barbarians flooded a field, how they raped a young girl, how traders have been attacked and plundered by them, how a party of census officials turned up in shallow graves, and so forth (though in each case it appears possible that the barbarians are

not the ones who are responsible: a dam simply could have worn away and collapsed, a soldier from the Empire could have raped the girl, robbers could have plundered the traders and killed the census officials), but he sees them only once, very briefly, and then only in a small force, when the magistrate returns the blind girl to them in the mountains. Otherwise, the barbarians remain only a gap that the Empire fills with its own panic. The plot, then, has affinities with the detective story; the reader, as well as the magistrate and the others, try piecing together clues about what the barbarians are like, who they are, what they want, but meaning continually is deferred. The reader's hesitation never finds relief. The text of *Waiting for the Barbarians* ends on the page after that which the reader is given. The End never comes, the barbarians never overrun the settlement. Worse than the ultimate End is the fear of the ultimate End. The magistrate (and the reader) at the conclusion of the text feel "like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (p. 156).<sup>9</sup> "To the last," he says, "we will have learned nothing" (p. 143). The people in the settlement have learned nothing about humanity, about civilization, about themselves. Both the people in the settlement and the reader have learned nothing about the barbarians, about the ultimate End, about "meaning." And everyone has learned nothing, learned about Nothing, the unsaid and unseen in a culture, has learned about how absence is unfolded.

Howe in his review points to the lack of "a specified historical place and time" in Coetzee's text, and Whiteson faults it because "the geography is garbled." By doing so, they both indicate other absences at work in the text — those of clear topography, time, and space. At first, Coetzee's project may appear relatively mimetic. But, on closer inspection, strangenesses intrude. In what time and in what place, for example, could one account for the fact that the magistrate doesn't know what sunglasses are? How can there be snow in the desert? Where do the bearskins that people wear come from, since there are no bears in deserts? How can there be sunglasses, on the one hand, and no advanced military weapons or motors of any kind on the other? Carefully, subtly, Coetzee jams our notions of where and when. The geog-

raphy of this entropic settlement is garbled because we are in the landscape of almost-dream, of the hypnagogic state — that state of semiconsciousness, of drowsiness and reverie experienced just as one is falling into dreams. Or could we be in a postnuclear fiction — a civilization *after* The End, where sunglasses are alien artifacts; where it snows where once there was no precipitation; where a wasteland's water supply becomes increasingly undrinkable; where no bodies are found in ancient ruins; where the unlucky, the barbarian tribes, wander aimlessly? Like the protagonist in *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), Coetzee's second novel, who realizes she is living "on this island out of space, out of time" (p. 123), all in *Waiting for the Barbarians* exists in a "haze of desert" (p. 14) where "time has broken" (p. 43). In this nowhere and nowhen there is only a "dead season" (p. 49) in a "dead country" (p. 98), a wasteland: "To our right stretches a plain of wind-eroded clay terraces merging at its extremes into banks of red dust-clouds and then into the yellow hazy sky. To our left is flat marshland, belts of reeds, and the lake on which the central ice-sheet has not melted. . . . The marsh-water here in the shallow southern fingers is too salty to be drinkable" (p. 59); a nightmare universe where "dust rather than air becomes the medium in which we live. We swim through dust like fish through water" (p. 60).

Each of the characters in Coetzee's project is a kind of reader, decoder, interpreter. Like the protagonist in *In the Heart of the Country*, who says she is "a great emptiness, an emptiness filled with a great absence, an absence which is a desire to be filled, to be fulfilled" (p. 114), the magistrate is an absence, a man who is never named, who never has a clear identity after the first few pages where he for the first and last time tries defining himself as a "country magistrate . . . serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire. . . . When I pass away I hope to merit three lines of small print in the Imperial gazette. I have not asked for more than a quiet life in quiet times" (p. 8). He finds his quiet life in quiet times shattered by the intrusion of Joll, a kind of Ur-stormtrooper who speaks for the Empire, and he finds himself caught suddenly between two inhumanities, two greater absences: on the one hand, there are the old barbarians ("lazy,

immoral, filthy, stupid" [p. 38]), on the other, there is the Empire ("the new barbarians," "the black flower of civilization" [pp. 78, 79]).

The magistrate is not just a country magistrate serving out his days on this lazy frontier. He is an archaeologist, anthropologist, a digger for "meaning," a detective, an explorer, a scientist, searching those ruins that lie under the dunes around the settlement. They date back before the western provinces were annexed, before the settlement was founded, before, perhaps, the barbarians. Below the floors are buried bags that contain wood slips, on which are painted unintelligible characters that are almost illegible because of the sand's action across them. Hoping to decipher this failed language, the magistrate collects all the slips he can:

There were two hundred and fifty-six slips in the bag. Is it by chance that the number is perfect? After I had counted them and made this discovery I cleared the floor of my office and laid them out, first in one great square, then in sixteen smaller squares, then in other combinations, thinking that what I had hitherto taken to be characters in a syllabary might in fact be elements of a picture whose outline would leap at me if I struck on the right arrangement: a map of the land of the barbarians in olden times, or a representation of a lost pantheon. I have even found myself reading the slips in a mirror, or tracing one on top of another, or conflating half of one with half of another.

(p. 16)

What his attempt at decoding (and it is not just the slips he decodes: until the marks on the barbarian girl's body "are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" — p. 31 — he says; in fact, he tries decoding the universe: "I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea leaves" — p. 44) in the end reveals is that the slips do not hold a single "meaning." It is impossible to tell just what the author(s) had in mind. Rather, he discovers that the slips "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." He concludes: "There is no agreement among the

scholars about how to interpret these relics" (p. 112). The wood slips can only produce a commentator's despair, a multiplicity of meaning; they can generate an infinity of interpretations. 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, nothing more than a productive mechanism.

Joll, on the other hand, is a misreader, a false reader, a believer in the metaphysics of presence: "in his quest for the truth he is tireless" (p. 22), says the magistrate, and this is just Joll's problem. He still reads for "truth," for "meaning." He still believes in interpretation, in the absolute, in stability. For him, behind every signifier there is one and only one signified. So when he comes across the magistrate's slips his response is immediate, and incorrect: "A reasonable inference is that the wooden slips contain messages passed between yourself and other parties, we do not know when. It remains for you to explain what the messages say and who the other parties are" (p. 110). He tries to fix the language of the slips, to decode into compensation. He will (he has done so with the barbarian father and son) kill for the "truth." But the magistrate thinks to himself: "I do not even know whether to read from right to left or left to right. . . . I have no idea what they stand for" (p. 110). The magistrate believes in the metaphysics of absence, in the idea that "meaning" and "truth" must be allowed to float free, even at the risk of casting the commentators into despair.

Images suggesting the universe-as-absence pervade the text. Joll's sunglasses ("two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind?" [p. 1]), for instance, imply the absence of humanism, his spiritual blindness, the lack behind the "mystery of dark shields hiding healthy eyes" (p. 4). This image also indicates the emphasis in the text on eyes, particularly on disfigured eyes. Not only are there Joll's "blind" eyes, but also those of the boy whose father Joll murders (his "face is puffy and bruised, one eye is swollen shut" [p. 3]); the eyes of the barbarian girl ("I notice in the corner of one eye a greyish pucker-ing as though a caterpillar lay there with its head under her eyelid, grazing" [p. 31]); and even the eyes of the magistrate

himself, who cannot *see* what sense the wood slips make, and who, after his beatings by Joll's men, realizes "my left eye is a mere slit" (p. 115). All these point to partial sight, partial blindness, distorted vision, the fact that in every act of perception there is a gap that cannot be filled (if the reader may feel the need to identify with a "moral centre" in the text, with the magistrate, for instance, such imagery emphasizes the impossibility of such an act).

Eyes are not the only images of absence, though. As I have mentioned, there are the barbarians themselves. Also, at the centre of the magistrate's quest into the buried ruins he finds Nothing: "There are no human remains among the ruins. If there is a cemetery we have not found it. The houses contain no furniture" (p. 15). The only thing the barbarian girl can see with her almost blind eyes is absence: "Am I to believe that gazing back at me she sees nothing — my feet perhaps, part of the room, a hazy circle of light, but at the centre, where I am, only a blur, a blank?" (p. 31). The face of the prostitute the magistrate sometimes visits also turns into a void: "It occurs to me that I cannot even recall the other one's face. . . . Blank, like a fist beneath a black wig, the face grows out of the throat and and out of the blank body beneath it, without aperture, without entry" (p. 42). Even the face in the magistrate's recurring dream reveals nothing but absence: "The face I see is blank, featureless; it is the face of an embryo or a tiny whale; it is not a face at all but another part of the body that bulges under the skin; it is white; it is the snow itself" (p. 37).

To quote from Whiteson's review a last time: "The story is told in that most awkward tense: the historic present. The dialogue is stiff, the writing has the air of a translation." Both comments have validity with respect to *Waiting for the Barbarians*. It is written in the historic present, and often the writing *does* sound like a translation. The use of the present tense in a way becomes a mockery of presence in the text. The present tense points to the absence of the past and the future, and underscores by drawing the reader's attention to itself that it is a peculiarly fictional tense, that it is representing fiction, that it is representing what is not there, what is absent. In other words, it points to



what the magistrate knows, that “whatever can be articulated is falsely put” (p. 64). To write is to create absence.

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. Hence does Coetzee’s text have “the air of a translation” (what better tone to create than that of a translation for this text, supposedly a recovered manuscript, the ancient record of a dead culture?). At first the reader may suspect that only Joll’s language has been dehumanized, neutralized, deflated, as in the report he makes to the magistrate after killing the barbarian father:

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

But the same kind of brutal flatness worms its way into the magistrate’s language as well. Here is his record of coming upon the corpse of the barbarian father:

The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket is a bloody hole. “Close it up,” I say. The guard bunches the opening together. It falls open. “They say that he hit his head on the wall. What do you think?” He looks at me warily. “Fetch some twine and tie it shut.” (p. 7)

Short declarative sentences; emphasis on state-of-being verbs; paucity of adjectives; a journalistic efficiency; a cruel precision; small vocabulary; understatement in the face of horrible murder; the tone of legal notices — all these qualities are shared by Joll’s and the magistrate’s language. One can argue that they are speaking the *same* language, that everyone in the text is speaking the same language, that everyone’s means of expression, of humanity, of individuality, of personality, of identity, has been deactivated, neutralized. We are in a monologue with nowhere to go, nothing to say, no one to say it to, a web of linguistic mis-

firings that disintegrate before anyone has heard, a field of blankness and a desolation that there has to be such blankness.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted by W. J. B. Wood in "Dusklands: 'The Impregnable Stronghold of the Intellect,'" *Theoria*, 54 (May 1980), p. 14.
- <sup>2</sup> Jean Marquard, *Contrast* 45, 12, 1, 1983.
- <sup>3</sup> Leon Whiteson, *Canadian Forum*, 62 (October 1982), p. 26.
- <sup>4</sup> Irving Howe, *The New York Times Book Review*, April 18, 1983.
- <sup>5</sup> George Steiner, *The New Yorker*, July 12, 1982, p. 102.
- <sup>6</sup> Jane Kramer, *The New York Review of Books*, December 2, 1982, pp. 8-12.
- <sup>7</sup> The parallels between *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Kafka's project (particularly "An Old Manuscript" and "Before the Law") are striking. For a discussion of them, see my dissertation from the University of Virginia (1985), *Nameless Things and Thingless Names: An Essay on Postmodern Fantasy*.
- <sup>8</sup> The following paragraph is a paraphrase of Derrida's *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), p. 376.
- <sup>9</sup> All parenthetical page numbers in this essay refer to the Penguin editions of *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*.