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J. M. COETZEE AND COLONIAL VIOLENCE

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humanism

imperialism

literature

torture

violence

*This essay offers an example of a form of literary criticism appropriate to an era that has demonstrated the manifest durability and even intensification of imperial ideologies and practices. The essay's premise is that one of criticism's chief aims should be to address the ways in which many literary texts succeed in fostering a critical and ultimately moral and political response to exclusionary ideologies and the violence that they engender. The topicality of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) is due firstly to its capacity to demonstrate that torture is made possible not just by the criminality of its perpetrators and the connivance of policymakers but also, ultimately, by a pervasive ideology of dehumanization. Secondly, by virtue of its first person narrative form, *Waiting for the Barbarians* recounts in the voice of the colonizer a gradual process of confusion, introspection and remorse that enables the reader to experience closely rather than merely witness from a distance an exemplary process of self-questioning. Though the novel's protagonist is unable fully to reach either a successful rejection of imperial structures or an effective empathy for their victims, the specific practice of reading that the novel dramatizes and requires makes those achievements appear both available and compelling to its readers. *Waiting for the Barbarians* is thus further distinguished by its revival in its*

readers of a moral and ultimately political sensibility that is usually inhibited by the ideology of dehumanization. Through its dialogic form as much as through its main narrator's agitated reflections on the 'war on terror', Coetzee's most recent novel, 2007's Diary of a Bad Year, throws into very sharp relief the normative dimension of Coetzee's oeuvre by way of a new, characteristically subtle though unusually explicit advocacy of aesthetic and political engagement.

.....

Dehumanize the victims and debase the perpetrators, and morality will not enter the frame. The history of imperialism is the history of barbarism.

James Kelman (2003: 373)

When the security police in J. M. Coetzee's 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* charcoal the word 'enemy' on the captured barbarians' backs and then lash them until the words are obscured by blood, then the link between representation and torture – between the derogatory and dehumanizing definition of others and the infliction of pain – is made, as it were, graphically clear. What I wish to explore here is the way in which such representations still serve, and since 2001 have served increasingly, to reinforce a system of beliefs that by defining a group of people as less than human seeks to legitimize their torture, not to mention their murder and exploitation. That the townspeople in Coetzee's scene titter and gawp at the gruesome spectacle in the square is testament to its success in denying the humanity of the 'barbarians' and in placing the barbarians' pain beyond the reach of their tormentors' moral imaginations. The act of torture in this case is a public one; it marks off a boundary between what is human and what is not in order to justify the infliction of pain and terror on defenceless bodies. But when Coetzee's protagonist catches sight of the hammer with which Colonel Joll is about to cripple the ankles of the captives and interrupts what Samuel Durrant has called this 'pedagogical spectacle' (1999: 456), he seeks heroically though inarticulately and with terrible personal consequences to protest against this logic of dehumanization: 'Look at these men', he implores, 'Men!' (Coetzee 2004: 117). In so doing the Magistrate provides a decidedly timely reminder of what I will claim is both the implicit normative vision of Coetzee's novel and the necessary corrective to torture: an egalitarian and unabashedly humanist moral code based on our shared vulnerability to physical pain.¹

Coetzee's work is a sustained and serious meditation on violence and especially on the peculiarly heightened violence of torture. But the violence to which it responds is, obviously, not only that of imperialism. For instance,

1 It is worth pointing out in passing that, though its presentation in Coetzee's work bears many similarities with the egalitarian convictions one associates with the kind of radical humanism set out by Edward Said (2004), the faculty of empathy is not restricted in Coetzee's work to relations between people. The current essay does not have the space to do justice to this topic, which has been very instructively analysed by some of the contributors to Jane Poyner's (2006) volume and by Louis Tremain (2003).

one of the most conspicuous and important allusions of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is to Jean Améry's *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and its Realities*, a book which is equal parts memoir and exploration of the origins and meaning of the Holocaust. The pertinence of this text is to be found not just in the fact that Améry's account of his torture at the hands of the Gestapo in Belgium in 1943 so obviously resembles and, it is therefore reasonable to deduce, perhaps influenced Coetzee's description of the scene in *Waiting for the Barbarians* in which the Magistrate, his hands shackled behind his back and attached to a rope slung over the branch of a tree, is hoisted from the ground by his tormentors (Améry 1980: 32–3). Améry's book, more interestingly, makes the case that the practice of torture was not an accidental quality of the Third Reich but its 'essence': the apotheosis of its cruelty and its denial of the humanity of its victims (Améry 1980: 24). For its victim, torture means the 'transformation of the person into flesh' (Améry 1980: 33): the total violation of the self's integrity and the forcible circumscription of his intellectual horizons. For the torturer, it means the total negation of a social world that grants others life, acts to alleviate their suffering, and does not brand them as beasts, the better to legitimize their extermination. In 'the world of torture', Améry argues,

man exists only by ruining the other person who stands before him. A slight pressure by the tool-wielding hand is enough to turn the other – along with his head, in which are perhaps stored Kant and Hegel, and all nine symphonies, and the World as Will and Representation – into a shrilly squealing piglet at slaughter. (Améry 1980: 35)

Améry's book illuminates the close and important relationship between torture, domination and dehumanization. Like the testimonies of many other Holocaust survivors it also contains some very powerful reflections on the idea of responsibility. Primo Levi's *The Drowned and the Saved* explores the sense of answerability and solicitude that potentially results from a peculiar sensation of guilt or culpability that is somehow inseparable not just from the state of being a survivor but from subjectivity itself: a supposition, in Levi's words, that 'everyone is his brother's Cain, that every one of us (but this time I say "us" in a much vaster, indeed universal sense) has usurped his neighbour's place and lived in his stead' (Levi 1993: 62). Guilt, the inkling and eventually the awareness and acceptance of one's responsibility for others, is the theme of much writing about the Holocaust and the sentiment most effectively engendered by Coetzee's novel. Moreover, it is the antidote to what Améry sees as the unbridled egotism of the torturer. 'The better, the right kind of society is a goal which has a sense of guilt entwined about it', according to Max Horkheimer (1982: ix): guilt caused not just by what the philosopher perceives as the interminable postponement of a

non-antagonistic society, but also the guilt or, put differently, the consciousness of responsibility required to bring such a society into being. ‘Confronted with the accusation of another’s suffering’, writes the critic D. G. Myers in his study of Holocaust testimonies, ‘the I is put in question’ (Myers 1999: 282). No more cogent summary could be desired of the effect of Coetzee’s novel on its readers.

Without wishing to play down the importance of this other catalyst of Coetzee’s reflections on torture my principal aims here are to explore colonial violence and the torture which is its ‘essence’ and to show how the literary exploration of torture can actually call forth resistance to what Derek Gregory (2004) has called ‘the colonial present’. Colonialism is my sole focus, though it is not Coetzee’s. Indeed, the present essay is intended to demonstrate a form of postcolonial literary criticism appropriate for an era in which, as Arundhati Roy has argued, the war in Iraq ‘has achieved what writers, activists and scholars have striven to achieve for decades’: that is, has made manifest the persistence, contrary to what the prefix ‘post-’ would have us believe, of imperial practices and ambitions (Roy 2004: 99). Numerous critics have therefore beseeched a greater engagement in postcolonial studies with the durability of imperial ideologies and practices and with the diverse ways in which literary texts register and resist that durability (Brennan 2006; Dirlik 1997; Eagleton 1998; Lazarus 2005, 2006; Loomba 1998; Parry 2004). I am concurring with the editors of a recent anthology of postcolonial criticism that

the shadow the 2003 US invasion casts on the twenty-first century makes it more absurd than ever to speak of ours as a postcolonial world. On the other hand, the signs of galloping US imperialism make the agenda of postcolonial studies more necessary than ever. (Loomba et al. 2005: 1)

I want, in other words, to demonstrate that it is among the principal purposes of postcolonial literary criticism to address the ways in which novels like Coetzee’s engender a critical and ultimately moral and political response to contemporary imperialism. The coexistence of torture with the employment of a humanitarian rhetoric to promote the ‘interventions’ made recently by the United States and its auxiliaries ought to alert us to the fact that this response will need to recognize what Edward Said made clear in his *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*: that it is necessary ‘to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism’ (Said 2004: 10),² that therefore the idea and practice of humanism must be more clearly distinguished from the ethnocentric variety championed by political elites in the west (what Noam Chomsky (1999) has dubbed ‘the new military humanism’), and that the humanism espoused by, for instance, Coetzee’s novel should thus be understood to involve both a biting distrust of such exclusionary and

2 See also Spencer (2006).

self-seeking doctrines and, consequently, an inclusive commitment to humanity as a whole (and not to this or that nation, religion or 'civilization').

Torture, *Waiting for the Barbarians* shows, is inseparable from and indeed licensed and even encouraged by the dehumanizing categories that empires employ in order to justify their fear and domination of outsiders. As has been exhaustively documented and as is now thankfully well known, torture has been an integral part of the so-called war on terror. It should suffice to name the 'rendition' of prisoners (frequently, according to the Council of Europe, with the connivance of European governments) to unscrupulous regimes with fewer political and legal obstacles to the practice of torture (Paylen and Thompson 2006), the United States' hidden global network of detention centres (Grey 2006), and the notorious crimes perpetrated at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad. Many of these wrongdoings remain shrouded in secrecy. All have been imperfectly understood. None have resulted in satisfactory prosecutions or in justice for their victims. To speak only of events at Abu Ghraib, numerous official inquiries have camouflaged the deeds with jargon, hidden their extensiveness, rapped the knuckles of the low-ranking perpetrators and exonerated their overseers. Citizens of democracies, not unlike the townspeople challenged by Coetzee's Magistrate to recognize the humanity of their reputed enemies, have greeted largely with indifference and inaction revelations that soldiers and unaccountable contractors acting in their name and with the explicit or effective endorsement of their elected representatives, subjected prisoners to excruciating positions, isolation, sensory deprivation, ravening dogs, hooding, terrifying threats, beatings, forced nudity, sexual humiliation, repeated near-drowning, and extremes of heat and cold. Acts that are outlawed by a universal and infeasible legal prohibition,³ that are utterly unwarranted under any defensible moral code, and that are operationally useless and guaranteed only to sow the dragon's teeth of future conflict, have nonetheless been allowed to pass with only a momentary spasm of contrition and without, therefore, anything remotely resembling the sort of sustained self-scrutiny enjoined by the former Chilean dissident Ariel Dorfman (2006).

How and why has this been allowed to happen? The first part of the answer can be found in the legal memoranda, official reports into abuses, and other documents collected by Karen Greenberg and Joshua Dratel (2005) and Mark Danner (2005) and in three articles published in *The New Yorker* in 2004 by the investigative journalist Seymour Hersh.⁴ Volumes and articles reveal the extent of official connivance in the torture that took place in Iraqi prisons under the American occupation. But Hersh's journalism and the assiduous fact-gathering of Danner and Greenberg and Dratel, penetrating and instructive though they are, tell us *how* torture has been allowed to take place but not *why*. *Waiting for the Barbarians* provides a different but no less essential kind of insight. It helps us understand why democracies tolerate

3 Amnesty International (n.d.) provides the most accessible account of the legal basis of that prohibition and of the reasons why it must not be compromised.

4 Those articles subsequently formed part of Hersh's *Chain of Command* (2005).

torture even when confronted with evidence of its adoption as official policy and with confirmation of its revolting and self-defeating effect. The torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere took place, as Danner, Greenberg and Dratel, and Hersch all demonstrate, as the result of the complicity of a chain of command that stretched all the way from senior officers to the Pentagon and the White House, but also, perhaps more ominously, of the general acceptance of the view that the west's 'others' do not merit the moral and legal status of human beings. According to General Janis Karpinski (the bungling head of Iraq's prison system in 2003), Major-General Geoffrey Miller, the commander of the naval base at Guantánamo who was sent to Abu Ghraib to introduce his methods there, told her that Iraqi prisoners 'are like dogs, and if you allow them to believe they're more than a dog, then you've lost control of them' (Fisk 2005). A guard at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan allegedly told Moazzem Begg that he could do his job only if he persuaded himself that the inmates were subhuman (Hilton 2005). 'Since January 2002', writes David Rose in his study of the prison at Guantánamo, 'the rhetoric of Donald Rumsfeld and President Bush has reinforced the message of those first shocking photographs: that the detainees were in some way subhuman, lacking the qualifications for full membership of the species: *üntermenschen*' (Rose 2004: 134). What I am contending is that the events symbolized by the Abu Ghraib snapshots occasioned hardly a modicum of self-scrutiny, let alone admissions of guilt or real justice, because for many they had befallen not beings whose sufferings it was possible to imagine and disapprove, but legitimate targets of violent correction, a contemptible sub-species outside the rule of law and humanitarian obligation.

Informing my reading of Coetzee's novel, therefore, is an unapologetically political conviction that the practice of torture in the conduct of the 'war on terror' is the result less of random wickedness or casual sadism than of a widespread and long-lasting ideology of dehumanization. We need to remind ourselves of this insight when we contrast the sufferings depicted in the notorious images from Abu Ghraib with the cheerful callousness of the American guards. Dehumanization staves off the moral horror that would stay the hand of the torturer or stop the mouth of his apologist if they were able to imagine the agonies suffered by their victims. Obscured by the doublespeak of the war on terror's protagonists and excused by the casuistry of their lawyers, the abominations committed at Bagram, Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo Bay and other known and unknown stockades and 'black sites' upon suspects, 'unlawful combatants', uncooperative locals, even unfortunate bystanders abducted without reason by jittery patrols, are indicative of the selective, indeed hypocritical, insincere and ethnocentric, humanism betrayed over a hundred years ago by Joseph Conrad's Kurtz when, in a fit of distraction, he scrawled 'Exterminate all the brutes!' at the bottom of his humanitarian report (Conrad 1995: 83–4).

Coetzee has recently responded quite directly to these events in 2007's *Diary of a Bad Year*. The novel is organized around a series of ruminative essays commissioned for a German collection of prominent writers' Strong Opinions. A typical example is an anguished reflection on 'an article in a recent *New Yorker* [that] makes it as plain as day that the US administration, with the lead taken by Richard Cheney, not only sanctions the torture of prisoners taken in the so-called war on terror but is active in every way to subvert laws and conventions proscribing torture'. The article, presumably one of Hersh's exposés, shows the Bush administration to be 'operating beyond the bounds of the law, evading the law, and resisting the rule of law' (Coetzee 2007: 39). However, the lesson that the narrator draws from his powerful meditation on the 'national shame' heaped on citizens by their government's misdeeds is not that effective political action is necessary or even possible (he notes 'the absence of any groundswell of popular revulsion against torture' (40) and doubts the prospect of a reversal of policy), but that some sort of private expiation of guilt must take place. Has there, he asks, already been an unsuccessful 'Stauffenberg plot' 'to assassinate these criminals in high office'? Ways must be found 'to save one's honour, which is to a degree the same as keeping one's self-respect but is also a matter of not having to appear with soiled hands before the judgement of history' (41). A sort of fastidiousness or reserve, evident as much in his fussy insistence on referring to Richard Cheney as in his self-justificatory doubts about the moral capacities of others and the effectiveness of political engagement, holds the narrator aloof from the temptations and rewards of public involvement. In other words, the ferocity and eloquence of his denunciations are in inverse proportion to the inadequacy and indeed the melodramatic despair of the responses that he advocates. Thereafter, the novel seeks to address and ultimately ameliorate its protagonist's pensive detachment. That is, it explores and revises not the validity of its narrator's judgements about, most notably, the obligation on individuals to respond to the shame occasioned by the practice of torture (a shame familiar, as he points out, to 'the generation of white South Africans to which I belong' (44)), but his view of the best way to translate those judgements into action. What changes in the course of the narrative, as he recognizes, 'is not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions' (136).

Whereas the tireless self-criticism of the protagonists of Coetzee's previous novels is usually brought about by the interaction of their manifestly fallible voices with challenging circumstances and interlocutors, the process of dialogue is here built more openly into the very form of the text. At the foot of each page the philosophizing is interrupted by the confessional and personal voice of JC, the author of these opinions who, interestingly, resembles closely but is not identical with Coetzee himself (he lives in Australia and refers to 'my novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*' (171) but is

childless and several years older than Coetzee). JC relates his encounters with Anya, a young woman from the same apartment building who has caught his eye and who he has hired to transcribe his work. Later in the text JC's voice is pushed to the middle of the page by Anya's thoughts. That we are partially discouraged from confusing JC with J. M. Coetzee is part of the process by which this novel dissociates its principal narrator from the credibility and authority of its eminent, prize-laden author. However, by gradually revealing to us their similarities the novel then likens the increasingly apparent fallibility and lack of authority of JC, whose thoughts become juxtaposed with and therefore challenged and contested by other voices, with what is revealed to be the equally provisional, arguable quality of the novel itself. The contestability of the author and therefore of his text and its contents are made known. The teasing confusion of the text's author with its manifestly fallible and dubious main narrator is thus one of the means by which *Diary of a Bad Year* invites from its readers the sort of argumentative, distrustful involvement shown by its characters and embodied in its form.

Anya's worldly, at times sensual and frequently humorous narrative, is concerned less with abstraction or reflection than with the trials and pleasures of human relationships. By contrast JC's theoretical commitment to his moral and political principles manifests itself as a sort of anxious self-absorption, as an exaggerated disdain for political institutions and as a prickly distrust of human contact. Though Anya is presented initially, through JC's eyes, as little more than an object of sexual longing, a young girl in a revealing shift who 'thinks Kyoto is a misspelling of Tokyo' (71), she is gradually revealed by her narrative to be shrewd, intelligent and principled: more cordial and broad-minded than her cantankerous taskmaster. Her narrative succeeds in accentuating the pedantic, unworldly quality of JC's views, their frequent querulousness and lack of fellow feeling. The novel's technique, appropriately enough given its narrator's reverence for Bach, is contrapuntal: made up of interweaving voice parts. This means not that the thoughts of JC are supplanted or discredited in any way, but rather that his too-proud and oracular voice is qualified by that of Anya, whose own frequently flippant outlook is modified in turn.

At the end of the novel we are given excerpts from a letter from Anya in which she praises the breadth of feeling in JC's unpublished ruminations, his 'second diary' or what she calls his 'soft' as opposed to his 'strong' opinions (193). In this second group of essays JC reflects movingly on his father, love, birds, compassion and children, on his newfound consciousness of mortality (a counter to his former self-importance) and on the durable proof to be found in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach that human beings can endure cruelty in order to give birth to art that is fortifying and joyful and that, therefore, 'life is good' (221). The reference to 'my novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*' therefore serves, at least for readers familiar with his *oeuvre*, to

accentuate the contrast between the saturnine milieu of his previous fiction and the newfound willingness of the almost celebratory latter half of *Diary of a Bad Year* to explore the basis and possibility of right living, a concern which is muted and surreptitious in the earlier work. The aging JC looks back on his preference for 'laments', 'fulminations' and 'curses' (138), and is tempted to agree with his critics that he is nothing 'but a pedant who dabbles in fiction' (191). A penitent writer conscious now of his neglect of the importance of human relationships, he sympathizes with the late Tolstoy who renounced the world of appearances 'to face directly the one question that truly engaged his soul: how to live' (193). *Diary of a Bad Year* thus demonstrates the importance of reflection and especially self-reflection, experiences dramatized and indeed enabled by its modernistic form (that is, by a form that casts doubt on the narrator's purportedly authoritative point of view), at the same time, crucially, as it makes clear the comparable urgency of the kind of pedagogical purpose that its narrator associates with an earlier realist mode: in this case, a modest faith in humane deeds akin, perhaps, to the belief expounded in a great realist novel such as George Eliot's *Middlemarch* that 'the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts' of human fellowship (Eliot 1967: 795). The writer's life and especially his work, JC ponders, should be informed by the knowledge that the at times pedantic and captious business of criticism leads only to despair and solitude if it is not accompanied by the kind of self-criticism that brings about an awareness of moral obligations (Coetzee 2007: 170).

What *Waiting for the Barbarians* dramatizes and, much more importantly, what the reader experiences as a result of reading it, is a meditation on an exemplary consciousness reflecting on its entanglement in a situation of domination. What Edward Said has said of Joseph Conrad could therefore with equal justice be said of Coetzee as well: that he 'know[s] what it [means] to write the history of conscience, to record the growth of the faculty that grants one a moral awareness of conduct' (Said 1966: 10). Narrated throughout in the first person, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a loquaciously confessional text, in the course of which the consciousness dramatized by this narrative method comes up against the limits of its knowledge and of its moral imagination. But it is not just its self-consciousness alone that makes Coetzee's novel a radical and, I think, protestatory document, but also what it is self-conscious of: namely, an aggressive humanism that sets itself against a barbarian foil and in so doing seeks to justify imperial violence. Furthermore, *Waiting for the Barbarians* does not just protest but protests in the name of an alternative set of values or, if this sounds like too grand a description of Coetzee's guarded writings, of a normative if tentatively articulated moral code. Coetzee's protagonist tries in vain (though his struggle is no less impressive and instructive for its

failures) to triumph over his ignorance and to think himself into practical sympathy with other lives.

Initially, however, Colonel Joll and the officials of the Civil Guard face no obstruction from the Magistrate of an unidentified Empire's isolated desert settlement when they elicit confessions from the captured barbarians. He has a kind of patrician contempt for the earnest bureaucrat from the capital and a disdain for his methods but, as he remarks,

I drink with him, I eat with him, I show him the sights, I afford him every assistance as his letter of commission requests, and more. The Empire does not require that its servants love each other, merely that they perform their duty. (Coetzee 2004: 6)

The immediate catalyst for what the Magistrate later calls 'a change in my moral being' (47) is his relationship with a barbarian girl who is found wandering about the town after she was tortured and her father murdered by Joll's men. Until his disquieting infatuation with the girl the Magistrate is almost devoid of the self-consciousness necessary to understand experiences different from his own or to reflect on his complicity in the Civil Guard's crimes. The ruins excavated from the adjacent dunes are a mystery to him; so too, more significantly, is the indecipherable script inscribed on the cache of wooden slips that he discovers there. The Magistrate is at first a similarly clueless and unimaginative reader of the gestures and thoughts of the girl: 'The body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping in my bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension' (45). Endlessly washing her feet in a futile effort to expiate a sense of guilt that is only very dimly understood and badgering her for details of her mistreatment, the Magistrate attempts, like Joll and his men, to crack his subject, uncover her secrets and translate the girl into his own terms and definitions. The motives and judgements that he ascribes to this recalcitrant figure are, he realizes gradually, nothing but projections, less insights or discoveries than, like the confessions extracted by Joll's torturers, self-serving constructions of the truth that are actually produced by coercive interrogation. 'Is this how her torturers felt', he wonders with a dawning consciousness of guilt, 'hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was?' (46).

When the Magistrate returns from a perilous expedition across the frontier to convey the girl back to her people, he is arrested and detained for making contact with the 'enemy'. It is at this stage of the Magistrate's moral development that he gains insight for the first time into the dubiousness of the Empire's ideological categories. It is not the indigenous people who are barbaric, he realizes in the light of his own mistreatment and the lawlessness of his assailants, but the Empire itself: 'We are at peace here', he tells his interrogator, Warrant Officer Mandel, 'we have no enemies... Unless I make a mistake. ... Unless we are the enemy' (85). Aware that the customary

distinctions are erroneous, he describes the officials who have ransacked his office as 'barbarians' (189). The Magistrate is subsequently tortured for the same reason that the detainees are tortured earlier in the novel: not so that any actual conspiracy against the Empire can be uncovered but so that the dichotomy that structures the imperial worldview and underpins its authority can be protected. The 'barbarians' are made to confess to subversive plots so that the myth of a united and belligerent barbarian threat can justify the activities of the secret police and confirm the Empire's *raison d'être* as a civilized outpost in a backward wilderness. Similarly, by reducing him to basic, almost feral needs, the Empire silences the Magistrate's increasingly cogent critiques of imperial rule. The high-sounding phrases he plans to fling in the faces of his tormentors are reduced to the simple, levelling eloquence of pain.

What I am made to undergo is subjection to the most rudimentary needs of my body: to drink, to relieve itself, to find the posture in which it is least sore. . . . [M]y torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it means to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. . . . They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal. (Coetzee 2004: 126)

Neither information nor incrimination is the objective of his torment, but rather the utter abasement of the victim: the reduction of a thinking, vigorous and insubordinate human being to 'no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy' (93), a gibbering and helpless body focused now not on resistance or triumph but on the endurance or alleviation of suffering. The Magistrate, alas, is confused and defeated. Neither his incipient critique of the Empire nor his outrage at his treatment and at the merciless torture of barbarian captives are permitted to develop into a fully articulated rejection of the Empire's legitimacy.

The normative vision entreated by *Diary of a Bad Year*, though less explicit than in the later novel, is nonetheless countenanced already in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Few readers can have failed to observe that the practice of reading is a central theme of the novel. Indeed, the form of reading that *Waiting for the Barbarians* commends and requires possesses the same capacity for self-criticism and therefore, potentially, the same moral and political intelligence that I have been arguing are required to critique and eventually supplant the dehumanizing ideology that makes torture possible. The ethical implications of reading in the widest possible sense, by which I mean understanding of one's world and of one's place

within it rather than just the perusal of literary texts, are in the end the subject of the book. The Empire and its servants are inclined to interpret the ‘barbarians’ as outsiders and inferiors. But the torturers’ pursuit of ‘truth’ is in fact no kind of reading or interpretation at all, or at best a very deficient and ineffective one. It is instead an imposition of ideological meanings on resistant texts, bodies and interlocutors. Methodical and inflexible, this ‘truth’ survives contact with the ‘enemy’ because its ideological centrality for the imperial power cannot allow it to be adapted, let alone refuted, by the sort of counter-truths that might result from attentive engagement with actual events, circumstances and people. The captured prisoners are not encouraged to divulge the truth about their presence near the settlement (which it seems is to seek medical help for a sore on the young man’s leg), but are instead coerced into verifying their tormentors’ expectations of barbarian sabotage.

Though the Magistrate initially reads his environment in this way (he wishes to strip the girl of her mystery and implores the captives to tell Joll the truth about their ‘subversion’ instead of asking if they are subversives (3)) the ‘change in his moral being’ takes the form increasingly of an altered method of interpreting his world. Instead of viewing the world as if it were comprised of familiar signs revealing (or being made to reveal) a dominant truth, he gradually learns to appreciate that incidents and encounters are complicated and strange enough to warrant close scrutiny and therefore capable of contesting and even confuting that dominant ‘truth’. Put simply, the Magistrate ceases to be the author of his world and becomes its reader. For example, the Magistrate gains greater insight into his situation when he is asked by Colonel Joll to arrange and translate the wooden slips found in the nearby ruins. Joll wants this interrogation to confirm his view that the slips are coded messages from ‘barbarian’ conspirators. A lackey is poised to transcribe the Magistrate’s confession but does not put pen to paper because no meaning is forthcoming, or at least not in the sense anticipated and desired. Indeed, the thirst for order and familiarity evident in Joll’s clinical rearrangement of the Magistrate’s office is intentionally frustrated by the Magistrate’s newly imaginative approach to interpretation. He invents numerous and contradictory (not to mention implausibly long-winded) versions of the little slips’ meanings. These improvised translations mock Joll’s assumption that the slips contain a subversive code, not only because the slips are, the Magistrate claims, ‘open to many interpretations’ (123), but also because he attributes this ambiguity parodically to ‘barbarian cunning’ (122). Hence the Magistrate’s interpretations of the slips are subversive rather than whimsical or merely jocose. The slips are said to ‘form an allegory’; ‘each slip can be read in many ways’ (122). The Magistrate is obviously unaware (or at least unsure) of their original meanings, but it is precisely this indeterminacy and fragmentariness that makes the slips

susceptible to allegorical interpretation. His last, provocative account of their meaning reads them ‘as a history of the last years of the Empire – the old Empire, I mean’ (122). To both the Magistrate’s interrogators and the novel’s readers the hasty correction sounds sarcastic and serves only to draw attention to the possibility of comparing the ruined settlement from which the slips were taken with the current Empire and its increasingly apparent transience.

In other words, the Magistrate’s interpretation of the slips is neither simply mischievous nor wholly arbitrary, for what is revealed to Magistrate and reader by this ruined town’s recondite but suggestive fragments is something like the knowledge granted Shelley’s ‘traveller from an antique land’: the transitoriness of systems of power and therefore, by implication, the Empire’s own obsolescence. Likewise, his imaginative readings of the slips as ‘barbarian’ reports of abductions and torture at the hands of the Empire and as assertions of a desire for ‘vengeance’ and ‘war’ (122) are occasions for the Magistrate’s first articulated insights into the Empire’s violence and its consequences. Latterly, his recognition that the slips testify to the transience and ultimate demise of systems of power pushes him into declaring his opposition to Joll’s regime and its abuses. As the Magistrate employs the allegorical wooden letters not to divulge some now unintelligible original sense but to shed light on his situation and declare his opposition to it, so must we use this novel, which is no less runic, for the same purpose. Though, as we have seen, the experience of torture denies the Magistrate an opportunity to use the labour of reading to develop his incipient critique of the Empire and its ideology into a declaration of political opposition, there is no reason why we readers cannot set about the tasks that he leaves unfinished and which an aesthetic construction like the novel is in any case incapable of resolving.

At points in *Waiting for the Barbarians* the characteristic fallibility of Coetzee’s narrator is manifested in a kind of obtuseness that positively invites a corrective from his readers: ‘There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it’ (170), the Magistrate relates at the novel’s denouement. He has taught but has not himself learnt the novel’s transparent lesson. His experiences, in other words, are not the model but the catalyst of an effective response to torture. *Waiting for the Barbarians* demands an allegorical and therefore topical and acutely introspective method of reading. The potential effects of reading it allegorically are self-analysis, guilt and practical gestures of reparation. Its unrelenting preoccupation with mortal bodies and with their capacity for suffering, along with its sustained presentation of a fictional consciousness striving in an exemplary way to recognize and to respect this mortality and suffering, are what make *Waiting for the Barbarians* so pertinent for a contemporary readership. The novel casts doubt on received truths only insofar as this process of negation and

critique brings into view an underlying normative idea. In other words, Coetzee injects disbelief into every discourse and doctrine of power until nothing is left that speaks with authority but the bellowing, clamouring body in pain: 'Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt' (5). He starts a new morality from scratch, based not on pious abstractions but on suffering's incontrovertible eloquence (Coetzee 1992: 248).

Waiting for the Barbarians enjoins reflection on an ideology that has not ceased to deny its perceived opponents their humanity and is once again scrawling the word 'enemy' on their backs. That ideology has consigned these 'enemies' to a remote and twilit sphere like Wells' island of Dr Moreau, a place of pain outside the ambit of conscionable awareness. The images of US troops committing torture are indeed scandalous and repulsive. But the abominations they depict were not unsupervised aberrations. Nor were they simply crimes permitted, even encouraged, by an especially belligerent and reactionary government. What is only glimpsed in the images of smirking sentries fooling around besides piles of naked men is an ideological system that has for decades denied the moral and legal status of humanity to a significant portion – in fact, a majority – of the globe's population and in so doing has made the unselfconscious projection of military power and the unrelenting immiseration of the so-called postcolonial world appear legitimate in the eyes of the system's beneficiaries. Atonement for this situation requires the 'spirit of outrage' (2004: 110) of Coetzee's Magistrate as well as the sense of engagement and the normative vision beseeched by *Diary of a Bad Year*. At the very least, it entails respect for the rule of law, for the numerous infeasible covenants by which torture is outlawed, and for the idea and practice of humanism. In a memorable phrase the barrister and activist Helena Kennedy states that 'human rights is where the law becomes poetry' (Kennedy 2004: 318). But the reverse is also true: human rights is where poetry becomes the law, where the imaginative sympathy engendered by writers like Coetzee is embodied in our actions and institutions.

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