

OTHELLO AND WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the role of “barbarians” in civilization’s self-definition, considering them as simultaneously “other” but also symbolically central to that process, both “outside” and “within” society. This dynamics can be explored in the relation existing between William Shakespeare’s *Othello* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, two works which, albeit being culturally and chronologically apart, are made to enter a fruitful dialogue on empire and colonization.

KEY WORDS: William Shakespeare, *Othello*, J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, identity, barbarians, colonization, empire, alterity, ideology, boundaries

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el papel jugado por los “bárbaros” en la autodefinición de la civilización, considerándolos como simultáneamente “otros” y también simbólicamente centrales a dicho proceso, situados tanto “fuera” como “dentro” de la sociedad. Esta dinámica puede ser explorada en la relación existente entre *Othello*, de William Shakespeare, y *Waiting for the Barbarians*, de J.M. Coetze, dos obras a las que, a pesar de estar muy distantes cronológica y culturalmente, se las hace entrar en un diálogo sobre los conceptos del imperio y la colonización.

PALABRAS CLAVE: William Shakespeare, *Othello*, J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, identidad, bárbaros, colonización, imperio, alteridad, ideología, límites.

I begin with the final two stanzas of a poem by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy entitled “Waiting for the Barbarians.” Cavafy was born in 1863, and died in 1933, but he spent his life living in the cosmopolitan environment of Alexandria. The poem imagines the immanent arrival of “the barbarians” and the likely interruption that this will make to city life; senators arrive at the senate but not to make laws, the emperor has prepared a speech; consuls wear their gaudiest jewellery because “Things of this sort dazzle the barbarians;” and orators fail to appear because “They [the barbarians] are bored with eloquence and speech-making.” But what begins as a sense of eager anticipation turns to one of distinct unease:

Why should this uneasiness begin all of a sudden,
And confusion. How serious people’s faces have become.

Why are all the streets and squares emptying so quickly,
And everybody turning home again, so full of thought?
Because night has fallen and the Barbarians have not come.
And some people have arrived from the frontier;
They said there are no Barbarians any more.

And now what will become of us without Barbarians?
Those people were some sort of a solution.¹

Cavafy's claim that the figure of the "barbarian" is somehow necessary to the process of self-definition figures the more terrifying image that Conrad's Marlow conjures up of the Roman legionary landing in a swamp, marching through woods, "an in some inland post feel(ing) the savagery, the utter savagery, had closed around him—all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men."² And it anticipates by almost a century Edward Said's account of cultural identities:

understood not as essentialisations (although part of their enduring appeal is that they seem and are considered to be like essentializations) but as contrapuntal ensembles, for it is the case that no identity can ever exist by itself without an array of opposites, negatives, oppositions: Greeks always require barbarians, and Europeans Africans, Orientals etc.³

Said's strategy is to take what he terms the "cultural grounds" of mutual understanding, documents that embody a particular order of cultural relationships, and to read them differently in order to expose the ways in which imperialism represents its concerns. Thus, documents of "civilisation," by which, of course, Said means "European" civilization—he notes Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as exemplary texts in this regard—can be shown to invest heavily in the very barbarism that they ostensibly occlude. In fact, such texts reaffirm in various ways what Gayatri Spivak, some years ago, identified as "the sovereign subject, as author, the subject of authority, legitimacy and power."⁴

This is what the Bengali intellectual Dipesh Chakrabarty has recently called "reified categories, opposites paired in a structure of domination and subordination."⁵ If we need to be aware of the danger of constructing categories along these

¹ C.P. Cavafy, *Poems by C.P. Cavafy*, trans. John Mavrogordato (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971) 28-9.

² Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 31.

³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994) 60.

⁴ Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Methuen, 1987) 202.

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000) 27.



reified lines, then we need also to be aware of the questionable nature of the manoeuvre, recently suggested by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book on *Empire* (2000): that these reified categories —part of what they call “the dualisms of modernity,” that have allowed “modern critique” to situate itself “in the paradigmatic place of modernity itself, both “inside” and “outside” at the threshold or the point of crisis”— no longer apply in quite the way that they once did. They argue that what has changed “in the passage to this imperial world, however, is that this border place no longer exists, and thus the modern critical strategy tends no longer to be effective.”⁶ I say that this manoeuvre is questionable because it conveniently plays down the fact that the process of globalisation, whose trajectory it seeks to describe, remains aligned to the very structures of capitalism that control its superficially fragmenting narrative. Geographical and cultural borders may very well be more permeable than they were, but permeability should not be taken as a synonym for dissolution, and particularly not for the dissolution of historical narratives that have in recent years attempted to chart the structures of colonisation, its aftermath and its consequences.⁷ If I may be permitted to put the matter polemically, and in the form of a question: how far have we come from the seminal observation of Frantz Fanon in the 1950s that:

The black man should no longer be confronted by the dilemma, *turn white or disappear*; but he should be able to take cognisance of a possibility of existence. In other words, if society makes difficulties for him because of his colour, if in his dreams I establish the expression of an unconscious desire to change his colour, my objective will not be that of dissuading him from it by advising him to “keep his place”; on the contrary, my objective, once his motivations have been brought into consciousness, will be to put him in a position to *choose* action (or passivity) with respect to the real source of the conflict —that is, towards the social structures.⁸

I realise that in posing this question I am straying onto a contested terrain, and so I think that I should make my position clear. I am wary about giving ontological priority in any absolute sense to language itself, even though it is the medium in and through which we perceive reality. That is to say, that the act of enunciation does not exhaust meaning that must reside ultimately in *substance* of any narrative⁹ no matter how complex the inter-relation between form and content might prove to be. This debate reaches deeply into the related questions of “identity” and “subjectivity” that inform the interdisciplinary concerns of post-colonial studies in the academy.

⁶ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000) 183.

⁷ See Ania Loomba, *Colonialism and Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 2005) 213 ff.

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto, 1986) 100.

⁹ See Benita Parry, *Post-colonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004) 59. Parry’s concern is to counter the linguistic turn in the writing of Homi Bhabha.



My concern, as a student of literature, is with the representations themselves: with the ways in which particular texts negotiate the difficult territories of “self” and “other.” I am also concerned with the various boundaries, geographical, social, and psychological, that are defined and traversed as part of that process of negotiation, and some of the imaginary solutions that they proffer. I am aware that in the case of Shakespeare, a number of texts have appeared on the horizon in recent years upon which Post-colonial Studies can make some substantive claim. *The Tempest* is an obvious, and by now familiar, case, but so too is *Antony and Cleopatra*, and, of course *Othello*.

My concern in trying to set up a dialogue between Shakespeare’s *Othello* and J.M.Coetzee’s recent novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* is emphatically not to imply some sort of universality of human experience that transcends racial, cultural, or historical difference. Rather I am concerned to look at the ways in which two texts, separated by some 450 years, and by a significant cultural gulf, articulate, and, perhaps, deal with problems of empire and colonisation. Of course, in neither of these texts is it possible to think through an issue such as that of an “indigenous self-fashioning” except in a negative sense, since both articulate the radical otherness of the indigenous “self” through a complex web of cultural mediations. *Othello* was performed in 1604, at a time when English and Dutch international commerce and exploration was already beginning to supplant that of Italian city-states such as Venice. *Waiting for the Barbarians* was published, in 1980, by a South African of Dutch descent, at a time when the Dutch colonial regime of apartheid was already in its terminal stages. By the time that *Othello* appeared, Ireland had already begun to be colonised, voyages of exploration had increased significantly, and Machiavelli had conceived of a nation state based on an amalgamation of force and diplomacy. By the time that *Waiting for the Barbarians* was published the USA had been defeated in Vietnam, and the divisions within Europe that had been cemented at the end of the Second World War, were within a decade of being dismantled.

“Barbarians,” as the last two lines of Constantine Cavafy’s poem make clear, are both “outside” and “within.” They are objectively “other” but they are also symbolically central to civilisation’s own self-definition. In her book *Strangers to Ourselves* Julia Kristeva re-reads this dialectical opposition in psychoanalytical terms. Following Freud, she notes that:

The archaic, narcissistic self, not yet demarcated by the outside world, projects out of itself what it experiences as dangerous or unpleasant in itself, making of it an alien *double*, uncanny and demoniacal. In this instance the strange appears as a defence put up by a distraught self: it protects itself by substituting for the image of a benevolent double that used to be enough to shelter it the image of a malevolent double into which it expels the share of destruction that it cannot contain.¹⁰

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 183-4.

The motif is a familiar one. It is there in John of Gaunt's lament over the decline of England in Shakespeare's *Richard II*: "That England, that was wont to conquer others, / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself" (II.i.65-6). And it has informed a number of recent popular fictions; for example, Oliver Stone's film *Platoon* concludes with the narrative voice asserting that the enemy the USA defeated in Vietnam was itself. And this is the message that informs Francis Ford Coppola's re-writing of *Heart of Darkness*, the film *Apocalypse Now*. Such narrative strategies flatter to deceive since, in any war that the self conducts with itself, it cannot possibly lose. Moreover such victories are always achieved at the expense of the substance of "history": in this imperial formulation Vietnam for example or in Conrad's case Africa have no independent geographical existence except as an objectivised psychological facet of the North American, or Anglo-European mind. This process has a complex history and, I want to suggest that Shakespeare's *Othello*, among other things, figures as a formative moment of that history.

OTHELLO

Othello is a play that begins with what appears to be a representation of difference: in the opening dialogue with Roderigo, Iago places a value upon talents that, he claims, have gone unrecognised. This rapidly degenerates into an overt racism as he deploys that difference as the means of denigrating, first Cassio, his Florentine competitor, and then "the Moor." His objective is to regain professional esteem through the stigmatisation of others, and what begins as a straightforward articulation of discontent, rapidly descends into an overtly racist dehumanisation of Othello himself. Iago's initial slur is the defensive insult of an inferior directed towards a superior: "But he, as loving his own pride and purposes, / Evades them [Iago's suits], with a bombast circumstance, / Horribly stuffed with epithets of war" (I.i.11-13). Quickly, however, this turns into something else:

Zounds, sir, you're robbed, for shame put on your gown!
Your heart is burst, you have lost your soul,
Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tupping your white ewe! Arise, arise,
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you,
Arise I say! (I.i.85-91)

Here class and race-prejudice come together in the figuration of Venice as a bestiary replete with "black rams," "white ewes" and 'snorting citizens.'" In the face of Brabantio's protestations Iago persists: "You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you, you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans!" (I.i.109-12).

This calculated strategy is shocking enough, and at one level we are meant to respond to it as such. The Venice that could boast multi-cultural harmony is, in reality, blighted by a hostility that derives its energy directly from the city state's

reliance on a “Moorish” general to defend its interests. Shakespeare’s evidently critical deployment of stereotypes in the play is a well-rehearsed theme, but what is not emphasised here is the startling response of Brabantio. He begins by resisting, but resolves, at the invitation of Roderigo, to “satisfy” himself of his daughter’s whereabouts. It turns out, however, that the narrative he openly resists has its being in his “dream”:

Give me a taper, call up all my people.
This accident is not unlike my dream,
Belief of it oppresses me already. (i.i.139-41)

The thoughts that Nature gives way to in repose, to borrow a formulation from Banquo in the later play, *Macbeth*, turn out to be exactly fears of female sexuality, of miscegenation, and of the demonic possession of daughters. In short, the psychological life of Venetian patriarchy is one of warring desires, whose discursive strands meet in the elopement of Desdemona with Othello. During the first act of the play an alternative narrative emerges, in which Othello’s “blackness” is of little importance. Desdemona “saw Othello’s visage in his mind” (i.iii.253), and the Duke, whose capacity for mature judgement has already been displayed, asserts that “If virtue no delighted beauty lack/ Your son-in-law is far more fair than black” (i.iii.290-1). Indeed, it is not until Act 3, after Iago has performed upon Othello exactly the process that Brabantio claimed had “corrupted” his daughter, that he becomes aware of a racial identity that up to this point he has resisted. Indeed, Othello now acknowledges a series of obstacles to his occupation of the subject-position of the Venetian courtly lover that had earlier enthralled Desdemona. What at the beginning of the play was a modest underestimation of the rhetorical power of “the story” of a life that prompted his hearer, “with a greedy ear,” to “[d]evour up my discourse” (i.iii.150-1) now becomes a mark of an unsophisticated racial inferiority, replete with a defensive logic that mirrors that of his father-in-law earlier:

Haply for I am black
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have, or for I am declined
Into the vale of years —yet that’s not much—
She’s gone, I am abused, and my relief
Must be to loathe her. (III.iii.267-72)

The French psychoanalyst André Green regards what he calls this “vacillation in [Othello’s] love” as corresponding “to a failing in his language.”¹¹

¹¹ André Green, *The Tragic Effect: The Oedipus Complex in Tragedy*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1979) 94.

The location of Iago's "corruption" of Othello —like his undermining of Cassio's reputation earlier— is significant. Although the process begins in Venice, and with Brabantio, it is in Cyprus that much of the action takes place. Cyprus, reputedly the island of Venus, had been a Venetian possession, and was situated along the trade route from Venice to the Middle East. Indeed, the route that an English Ambassador, Sir Antony Shirley took in 1599 passed from Venice, through Candia and Cyprus, to Aleppo. His comments on the inhabitants were cast in the idiom that was to become characteristic of Iago, and Brabantio: they were "damned infidels and sodomitical Mahomets... beyond all measure most insolent, superboous and insulting, ever pressed to offer outrage to any Christian if he be not well guarded with janissaries."¹² As a possession fought over by the Venetians and the Turks Cyprus represents a boundary in the play. It is a geographical boundary and a frontier, a space where the tragic hero comes to recognise his own inadequacies in terms of "lack."

It is worth contrasting Othello's own sense of "lack" as it emerges in Act 3, with Aemilia's much more creative response to what Desdemona perceives as the failing of some women. Desdemona asks Aemilia if "there be women do abuse their husbands/ In such gross kind" (iv.iii.61-2), and she asserts that she would not do such a deed for all the world: "No, by this heavenly light!" (iv.iii.65). Aemilia's response turns the commonplace assertion of female promiscuity into something much more positive:

By my troth, I think I should, and undo't when
I had done. Marry, I would not do such a thing for
a joint-ring, nor for measures of lawn, nor for gowns,
petticoats, nor caps, nor any petty exhibition. But for
all the whole world? ud's pity, who would not make
her husband a cuckold to make him a monarch? I
should venture purgatory for it. (iv.iii.70-76)

In the face of Desdemona's continued resistance Aemilia goes on to formulate a female subjectivity that places the blame for its inadequacies squarely upon men: "But I do think it is their husbands' faults/ If wives do fall" (iv.iii.85-6). There follows a spirited statement of resistance whose implications for the question of subjectivity resonate through the play:

Why, we have galls: and though we have some grace
Yet have we some revenge. Let husbands know
Their wives have sense like them: they see and smell,
And have their palates both for sweet and sour
As husbands have. What is it that they do

¹² G.B. Harrison, ed., *The Elizabethan Journals: Being a Record of Those Things Most Talked of during the Years 1591-1603* (London: George Routledge, 1938) iii.214.

When they change us for others? Is it sport?
I think it is. And doth affection breed it?
I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?
It is so too. And have we not affections?
Desires for sport? and frailty, as men have?
Then let them use us well: else let them know,
The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (iv.iii.91-102)

This is precisely the logic that in the earlier play, *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock deploys as a means of establishing his efficacy as a mimic of Venetian “Christian” values. In *The Merchant of Venice* the Jew’s appeal to a common (“Christian”) humanity mimics an authorising discourse that is deeply “racial,” but in *Othello*, Aemilia’s mimicking of masculine behaviour exposes a structural ambivalence that resides at the very centre of Venetian domestic life. Here, and more clearly than almost anywhere else in the Shakespeare canon, Homi Bhabha’s account of mimicry finds a specific analogue:

under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorises them. Similarly, mimicry re-articulates presence in terms of its “otherness,” that which it disavows.¹³

Here Aemilia invokes patriarchy at the same time as she problematises its authority, and it is precisely this structural ambivalence that informs Othello’s own self construction in the play as “the Moor of Venice.” Bhabha identifies the colonial discourse “that articulates an “interdictory” otherness” as being “precisely the “other scene” of this nineteenth-century European desire for an authentic historical consciousness.”¹⁴ Clearly, however, it is a structural feature of all imperial discourse, and in *Othello* the process of mimicry and that of “translation” are shown to operate in close proximity to each other.

For example, Aemilia’s proposal to deploy her libidinal energy in the service of her husband (in this case Iago), is designed to install her as the legitimising power of a distinctly Venetian (that is to say, early Jacobean) bureaucracy in which the very act of law-making becomes hers by proxy. Her relationship to the state, therefore, is analogous to the role that Othello occupies; his military energy is dedicated to the defence of Venetian state interests. In this sense, of course, the Moor is “Europeanised” just as the “woman” is racialized. We can see what this means with regard to the episode of “the handkerchief,” an object that Iago “translates” from a non-realist, alien life-world of magic and mystery, into one that is recognisably modern and secular, and that, significantly relies for its existence upon quasi-sci-

¹³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 91.

¹⁴ Bhabha 91.

tific, empirical proof.¹⁵ Ultimately it is that convergence of mutually exclusive forces that literally splits the tragic hero, whose own body becomes the location —juridical, imperial, “and” libidinal— of the conflict between Christian and Turk.

In the later stages of the play Othello is both the representative of Venetian authority in Cyprus “and” the “barbarian” force against which he is required to uphold its military and legal institutions. And yet, his dispensing of justice in the case of Desdemona is based upon a delusion whose deadly contours are etched into the Venetian patriarchal psyche. We recall that Desdemona’s elopement and her alleged deception “killed” her father. I say alleged, because the story of Othello’s courtship is not clear. Is he, as André Green claims, guilty of practising sorcery upon Brabantio by directing the narrative of his own life cunningly towards Desdemona?¹⁶ Or is Brabantio inadvertently complicit in the courtship, but persuaded by Iago and Roderigo to adopt a negative view? Or is his anxiety —the psychic energy that fuels his dreams and, later, Othello’s waking fantasies— a Venetian anxiety that shapes the inner lives of all its citizens? Certainly Iago’s fabrication of Cassio’s dream, in which the latter unconsciously enacts a sexual encounter, is a version of Brabantio’s in which Iago substitutes himself for Desdemona. And it is now Othello, who, like Brabantio before him, judges the fiction as “monstrous” fact (III.iv.428) while it is Iago who now dismisses it as fantasy: “Nay, this was but his dream” (III.iv.429). The play suggests much through this complex web of repetitions and substitutions, all tending towards the shaping of masculine and feminine identities, while at the same time mapping the contours of a constitutive otherness that is both inside and outside the institutional and geographical boundaries authorised by Venice.

I suggested a moment ago that Venice is capable of “translating” the non-rational, non-realistic, supernatural power that resides in the handkerchief. What begins as an instrument of female power that passes from an “Egyptian” to Othello’s mother and which, “while she kept it/ ‘Twould make her amiable and subdue my father/ Entirely to her love” (III.iv.60-2), and that is, for Iago, nothing more than one of those “trifles light as air” (III.iii.325), will become a “confirmation strong” “as proofs of holy writ” (III.iii.326-7) of Desdemona’s promiscuity. In a world where nothing is as it seems —and where, most of all, the tragic hero is an embodiment of stark opposites, empirical proof functions as “Dangerous conceits [that] are in their natures poisons”:

Which at the first are scarce found to distaste
But with a little art upon the blood
Burn like the mines of sulphur. (III.iii.330-32)

Nowhere is this complexity more in evidence than in Othello’s suicide at the end of the play. Having murdered Desdemona in a nameless “cause” that un-

¹⁵ For the significance of this kind of translation within the realm of Postcolonial Studies, see Chakrabarty 88-9.

¹⁶ Green 98.

wittingly masquerades as justice, and having been subsequently disarmed, Othello enacts a form of summary justice upon himself that is mediated by a narrative distillation of the play's own difficulty in stabilising subject positions. The conflict all along has been between "a malignant and a turbanned Turk" and a "Venetian" each caught in a web of mutual self-definition. The story he tells, and then performs, invokes the strictures of Sir Antony Shirley against the inhabitants he encountered at Aleppo:

And say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbanned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
And smote him —thus! *He stabs himself.* (v.ii.350-54)

At this point Othello fashions himself as either the colonised "Indian" (v.ii.345), if we accept the F2 reading, or "the base Iudean" (QF reading) whose contribution to the perversion of justice inadvertently promotes the Christian narrative of salvation. The "real" Turks in the play, of course, have already been defeated, and by the natural elements. Here the "honourable murderer" (v.ii.291) attempts to efface the marks of difference in a gesture of annihilation that the play all but condones. The idiom here —and we have met it before in the play— opposes the sophistication of Venetian "honour" to the sub-human "Turk," whose allegedly faithless and animal ignorance serves as the justification for his death. Here, as nowhere else in the play, "identity imagines itself in a geographically conceived world."¹⁷

WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

In Shakespeare's play the General waits for the "barbarians" only to find that they are already inside the citadel. Indeed, although the play strives to distinguish between what Edward Said calls, in another context, those "contrapuntal ensembles" in and through which identity is defined, they become inextricably intertwined with each other. It is precisely this complexity that J.M.Coetzee's 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* attempts to untangle. Unlike Shakespeare's play, which only condemns violence when it is misdirected, Coetzee's novel seeks to expose the violence that underpins every imperial project. Throughout his novels questions of colonialism, its aftermath, and the larger questions concerning violence, domination, and the psychological effects of living in divided communities, are at the very forefront of Coetzee's literary imagination. He is also interested in some of the larger philosophical questions that emanate from the violence inherent

¹⁷ Said 61.

in those “contrapuntal ensembles” in and through which colonial identity is represented.

Coetzee does not appear to see himself as a crusading novelist, despite his own geographical location as a white South African of Dutch descent. Rather he has insisted that he is not

a herald of community or anything else. I am someone who has intimations of freedom (as every chained prisoner has) and constructs representations of people slipping their chains and turning their faces to the light.¹⁸

Waiting for the Barbarians is set in a community on an unnamed frontier of an empire whose legal institutions are underpinned by horrific violence. It is the story of an ageing Magistrate who, Lear-like, is brought through an encounter with an unnamed “barbarian” girl both to recognise, and to experience the “barbaric” foundations of the law that he dispenses. Of course, we need to recall that the word “barbarian” derives from the Greek “barbaros” meaning “to speak like a foreigner” (OED) or as “one who is not Greek” (OED 2a), or later “one living beyond the pale of the Roman empire and its civilisation” (OED 2b). I need hardly emphasise the European trajectory of this differential construction. In this particular novel, Walter Benjamin’s dictum that “there is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” applies, as indeed, does his claim that “just such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another.”¹⁹ The etymological association of barbarism with language suggests that the violence upon which the civilised “community” is built resides in the inclusions and exclusions of language itself. Jean-Jacques Lecercle in his book *The Violence of Language* (1990) distinguishes between the most literal kind of violence as “body penetrating body,”²⁰ and the violence that inheres in language itself, where “words are endowed with force, with the performativity of desire” and where “the struggle is conducted not *through* language but *in* language.”²¹ The novel begins with a visit to the frontier from Colonel Joll (“Joll” is Afrikaans for “having a good time”) whose shaded eyes evoke a naïve and parochial response from the ageing Magistrate:

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the

¹⁸ <<http://books.guardian.co.uk.authors>>.

¹⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (Glasgow: Collins, 1979) 258.

²⁰ Jean-Jacques Lecercle, *The Violence of Language* (London: Routledge, 1990) 229.

²¹ Lecercle 236.

outside, but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention.²²

Here the narrator shifts his perspective; he is both the *object* of an inscrutable, possibly sinister gaze, but he is also the *subject* of it. From the very outset of the novel he shuffles across a frontier, and the process itself will prove unsettling to his own sense of self.

The frontier settlement is parochial, the urban centre is sophisticated. Although both the Magistrate and Colonel Joll are on the same side, the colonel's evident superiority—his insistence upon upholding imperial law—is underpinned by a fascist ethics of domination. This is a politics in which novelties (sunglasses, for example) have the capacity to divert and to mesmerise, and where “truth” depends, not upon a correspondence between proposition and a state of affairs in the world, but upon a mastery of the environment, and of its indigenous population by violent means. The Magistrate is responsible for the administration of imperial law, but he prefers not to acknowledge the violence that underpins it; in the opening chapter a boy and an old man have been captured and are accused of theft, and Colonel Joll undertakes to interrogate them in the makeshift prison that doubles as a granary. The Magistrate becomes aware that he is pleading on behalf of the prisoners: “I grow conscious that I am pleading for them” (4), but after he leaves the scene of interrogation he notes: “Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing” (5). This growing self-consciousness places the Magistrate in a liminal space, between “the barbarians” and the agents of empire:

At every moment that evening as I go about my business I am aware of what might be happening, and my ear is even tuned to the pitch of human pain. But the granary is a massive building with heavy doors and tiny windows; it lies beyond the abattoir and the mill in the south quarter. Also what was once an outpost and then a fort on the frontier has grown into an agricultural settlement, a town of three thousand souls in which the noise of life, the noise that all these souls make on a warm summer evening, does not cease because somewhere someone is crying. (At a certain point I begin to plead my own cause.) (5)

In this settlement the Magistrate tells his visitor that “We do not have facilities for prisoners” (2) and it becomes evident from the outset that the further from the frontier, the less conflicted is the empire's perception of the identity of the “barbarians.” On the frontier itself categories merge, distinctions blur, and the violence inherent in the process of lawmaking that Walter Benjamin outlines in his

²² J.M.Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London: Vintage, 1997) 1. All citations are to this edition.

essay “Critique of Violence” is considerably ameliorated.²³ The two prisoners, the old man and the sick boy represent what Giorgio Agamben would call “bare life”²⁴ but it is also a life that is “political” insofar as to be a barbarian is to be willy-nilly involved in acts of banditry. The bandit, as Agamben observes:

has been excluded from the religious community and from all political life...What is more, his entire existence is reduced to a bare life stripped of every right by virtue of the fact that anyone can kill him without committing homicide; he can save himself only in perpetual flight or a foreign land. And yet he is in a continuous relationship with the power that banishes him precisely insofar as he is at every instant exposed to an unconditioned threat of death... In this sense, no life, as exiles and bandits know well, is more “political” than his.²⁵

Ironically, in Coetzee’s novel, this feeling of exile is shared by the Magistrate himself, and as a consequence of his fraternisation with a “barbarian” girl he is made to experience for himself the full and horrifying effects of imperial violence. His dilemma is a reversal of the roles of Othello and Desdemona, although some of the effects are uncomfortably similar.

The novel is uncompromising in its treatment of imperial violence, but it also seeks to uncover, through the growing realisation of the Magistrate, the psychology of empire. For example, the disciplinary regime of empire requires a commitment to a particular form of “truth,” and that the means of extracting “truth”—interrogation and torture—alternate. Within the first few pages of the novel, the older of the two captured “barbarians” is dead, and the Magistrate is urging the frightened young boy to “tell the officer the truth” (7). But he then becomes conscious of his own predicament, and casts himself in the following role: “I cannot pretend to be any better than a mother comforting her child between his father’s spells of wrath. It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive” (8). Much later in the novel, and after he has returned from the expedition to take the “barbarian” girl back to her own community, the Magistrate is humiliated by being hung dressed in women’s clothing: “I am swinging loose. The breeze lifts my smock and plays with my naked body. I am

²³ See Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978) 295: “[T]he function of violence in lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, *what* is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power. Law making is power making, and to that extent an immediate manifestation of violence. Justice is the principle of all divine end making, power the principle of all mythical lawmaking.” See also Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 32 where the concept of “sovereignty” is detected as the moment when “violence passes over into law and law passes over into violence.”

²⁴ Benjamin 183.

²⁵ Benjamin 183-4.

relaxed, floating in a woman's clothes" (132). The Magistrate's narrative seeks to explain the novel's imperial violence in terms of Freud's account of the female fantasy of child-beating.²⁶ The enactment of violence in the novel transforms physical space; the granary becomes the "holy or unholy ground, if there is any difference, preserve of the mysteries of the State" (7). Moreover, the threat posed by the "barbarians" is in inverse proportion to the irrational fears that they generate:

There is no woman living along the frontier who has not dreamed of a dark barbarian hand coming from under the bed to grip her ankle, no man who has not frightened himself with visions of the barbarians carousing in his home, breaking the plates, setting fire to the curtains, raping his daughters. These dreams are the consequence of too much ease. Show me a barbarian army and I will believe. (9)

Through the Magistrate's own introspection the novel uncovers a complex web of mutually supporting imperial fantasies for which Freud's account in his essay "A child is being beaten" seems to offer a convenient, if less than adequate, explanation. Indeed, while it purports to explain the psychology of the *victims* of violence, it actually reinforces the patriarchal self-image that imperial authority projects onto its colonial subjects. It is only when the Magistrate is forced to taste the justice for whose administration he is responsible, in the "prison" haunted by the ghosts of previous victims of imperial violence that he recalls in a Freudian interpolation, the scene of his first encounter with the barbarian girl:

Somewhere, always, a child is being beaten. I think of one who despite her age was still a child; who was brought here and hurt before her father's eyes; who watched him being humiliated before her, and saw that he knew what she saw. (88)

The encounter with the Barbarian girl problematises the Freudian categories that the Magistrate invokes to explain both the processes and the humiliations associated with the disciplinary regime of empire. His fascination with excavating layers of the history of his frontier environment wanes as he becomes more self-conscious, less authoritative:

Space is space, life is life, everywhere the same. But as for me, sustained by the toil of others, lacking civilised vices with which to fill my leisure, I pamper my melancholy and try to find in the vacuousness of the desert a special historical poignancy. Vain, idle, misguided! How fortunate that no one sees me! (17-18)

²⁶ See Sigmund Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten," *On Psychopathology*, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 10. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981) 163-5, and for the connection between masochism and femininity, see 184.

His historicising of his environment is another form of colonisation, but already the “experience” of living on the frontier causes him to question the very ideological grounds of his own perceptions: “The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble” (26). During his first encounter with the girl he washes her feet, the feet that have been crippled through torture. Here Coetzee deploys a familiar topos, that of the colonisation of a “feminised” object, but now projected into the literal domain of the human. As the girl kneels and warms herself before the fire in the Magistrate’s room, and as he contemplates her disability, he reflects: “The distance between myself and her torturers, I realise, is negligible; I shudder” (29). The act of foot-washing leads initially to the Magistrate sinking into a reverie and when he later awakes he is “cold and stiff. The fire is out, the girl is gone” (30-1). The second time he embarks on this ritual, this quasi-biblical act of Christ-like self-abasement²⁷ is given an erotic gloss. The result is confusion as the Magistrate is caught between a ritual gesture of humility on the one hand, and a prelude to sexual possession on the other that he continually resists. He attempts to “read” the girl’s body as though it were a “text”: “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” (33). But, of course, his behaviour is an uncomfortable amalgamation of altruistic motives, and the learned responses of authority, replete with its imperial reasoning. His own reading, a form of translation, is undertaken through the spectacles of Empire, of whose distortions he gradually becomes aware.

The Magistrate’s caring for the barbarian girl is, also, in effect, a form of domestication, a means of rendering a radical “otherness” comprehensible, and of taking responsibility for it. But the realisation of the radical otherness of the girl is something for which the Magistrate is not prepared, and it is something that continually puzzles him. The “relationship” is consummated only once, in the “wilderness” immediately before the girl is handed back to her own people. The gesture that eradicates “five months of senseless hesitancy” and has the Magistrate “floating back into easy sensual oblivion” (69), also results in a temporary loss of self. When he awakes, with the girl still sleeping beside him, he says: “I ease myself off her, rearrange our covering, and try to compose myself” (69). Here the act, and the “composition” of self pull the Magistrate in opposite directions, as he becomes aware that he has transgressed the boundaries of Empire. A little later he confronts the barbarian cavalcade of “strange horsemen” and he realises that “We have crossed the limits of the Empire. It is not a moment to be taken lightly” (77). And yet it is a moment that the Magistrate continues to attempt to read through the spectacles

²⁷ Cf. *The Gospel According to St John*, 13.14-16: “If I then, “your” Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet./ For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you./ Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him.”

of his own imperial culture. It is a meeting that sharpens his own sense of the forces that make history, that divide time into meaningful segments, and that confer upon them a narrative form:

One day my successors will be making collections of the artifacts of these people, arrowheads, carved knife-handles, wooden dishes, to display besides my birds' eggs and calligraphic riddles. And here I am patching up relations between the men of the future and the men of the past, returning with apologies a body we have sucked dry—a go-between, a jackal of Empire in sheep's clothing.(79)

Similarly, the moment of parting with the barbarian girl is also momentous: "This is the last time to look on her clearly face to face, to try to understand who she really is: hereafter I know I will begin to reform her out of my repertoire of memories according to my questionable desires" (79). This process of reformulating, of translating the experience of encounter is never neutral in Coetzee's novel. What baffles the Magistrate is the utterly impersonal nature of the barbarian girl's departure, one that exerts a pressure upon him to reformulate the experience of the previous months. His return journey is punctuated with regrets that he had not learned her language, and with a dawning awareness that the mental process of retrospectively formulating her identity has already begun: "I find her face hardening over in my memory, becoming opaque, impermeable, as though secreting a shell over itself" (82).

The accusations, and the subsequent torture that takes place on his return, leads to further introspection about his motives for befriending the barbarian girl. He had thought to act as a substitute for her own father: "I gave the girl my protection, offering in my equivocal way to be her father. But I came too late, after she had ceased to believe in fathers" (88). He reflects on his own indifference to her torture: "They exposed her father to her naked and made him gibber with pain; they hurt her and he could not stop them (on a day I spent occupied with the ledgers in my office." And he charts the process of her descent into "bare life," that sub-human existence that is expendable: "Thereafter she was no longer full human, sister to all of us" (88).

During his own imprisonment and torture he is haunted by "the irreducible figure of the girl," an image over which he casts "one net of meaning after another" (89), in an attempt to approach what Emmanuel Levinas calls an "authentic relationship with the Other."²⁸ Of course, the obstacle that he continually encounters is the mediating power of language that continually threatens to re-cast actual experience. Once deprived of his authority, forced to re-visit the geographical sites of its

²⁸ See Emmanuel Levinas, "The Face," *Ethics and Infinity*, trans. Philip A. Cohen, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1985) 87-8 for this phrase.

inscription, he is forced to rethink the historicist account of imperial occupation. Not only that, but he must also rethink the process of its recording. Writing history from the position of the victor is, so the novel suggests, write from the perspective of perversion, but even that recognition does not bring peace of mind:

I think: "I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is a cause for shame? (169)

The novel ends with the dis-empowered Magistrate observing two children "humanising" their environment by building a snowman. He falls back on the process of discrimination that as a Magistrate he was called upon to exercise daily: "It is not a bad snowman" (170). But the scene itself is different from whatever intimations of "freedom" he has dreamed of during the course of the novel: "This is not like the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who has lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (170).

From his unfeeling promotion of a carnival of imperial violence, the Magistrate is forced to experience it from the perspective of the victim, and this includes the "effects" of imperial hysteria. The barbarians only come out at night: "All night, it is said, the barbarians prowl about bent on rapine and murder" (134), and as a readily available scapegoat, the Magistrate's fears increase in proportion to the general fears of Empire: "The higher feeling runs against the barbarians, the tighter I huddle in my corner, hoping I will not be remembered" (135). The pain to which the Magistrate is subjected is designed to demonstrate "what it meant 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" (126). The "meaning of humanity" that his torturers demonstrate is nothing more than a shocking indifference, that in itself infects the victim's dreams in such a way as to deprive his suffering of a tragic significance. It is the ordinariness of the process that the novel points up as barbaric. Barbarism that infects the fantasy life of Empire as well as its daily disciplinary practices shapes the dreams and the nightmares of its subjects. In captivity the Magistrate relives "in dreams the pettiest degradations" (128). Such is the nature of imperial violence that it is designed to break resistance, to obliterate the sense of oppression that produces a politics of liberation. Coetzee's novel charts that process in all of its complexity.

Shakespeare's *Othello* is at the beginning of a process of historicisation that links geography, psychology, and social progress together in a form that is ideologically invested in preserving boundaries. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* situated at the other end of this political spectrum, well before the global formulations of theorists such as Negri and Hardt, represents both the social and psychological complexities attendant upon the uncritical dissolution of boundaries, as well as upon the naïve assumption of their easy permeability. Both texts raise fundamental questions of identity —the kind of identity conferred by imperial power, and the kind to which Empire is denied access by its own discursive occlusions.