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Imperial Nationalism in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), J. M. Coetzee interrogates the foundations of imperial states by highlighting the differences from the barbarians that the anonymous Empire maintains. The Empire defines itself and reinforces its identity by constructing a distance from the barbarians on many grounds. It maintains state institutions and keeps records, seeing itself as a modern state, an evolved version of "primitive" barbarians. Coetzee's novel exposes the Empire's precarious efforts at establishing the Other and its confused notions of state building. While the dominant interpretations of the novel focus on torture and the body, this article analyzes the novel's involvement with imperial state building and nationalism. Torture and the body are important insofar as they expose the Empire's efforts to identify itself and build a nation. The Empire's failure in most of these respects—as suggested by the ending with the Empire losing its hold on the frontier settlement and the settlement's people waiting for the arrival of the barbarians—makes us question the false assumptions on which many imperial enterprises are based. The Empire's failure to protect its borders, its retreat to its heartland, and its failure to maintain civilized behavior in its treatment of its subjects and barbarian prisoners are manifestations of a chaotic, nascent administration rather than an identifiable and civilized imperial nation. In exposing the unstable distinctions colonial nations use to justify their existence, Coetzee's work asserts an alternative ethic of engagement with the Other founded on the idea of essential humanity and tolerant recognition of difference.

Keywords: Imperialism; Nationalism; Identity; Coetzee; *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Imperial Nationalism in J. M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians

In an article entitled "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State," J. M. Coetzee (1986) asserts that *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) [1] is a novel about "the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience" and that torture "has exerted a dark fascination on many other South African writers" (p. 363).[2] However, torture—along with the relevant issue of the body or the discourse of liberal humanism represented by the magistrate as "a man of conscience"—is not the only important theme in Coetzee's novel. In fact, Brian May (2001) succinctly lists three important and yet intersecting issues in Coetzee's fiction: the problematic of history; the problematic of Empire; and the problematic of the body (p. 392). Although these issues are interrelated, more attention was given to the first and the last in the critical scholarship on *WB*. This can be ascribed to a traumatic history enfolding South African politics and embodying a violent apartheid regime that used interrogations and torture. The issue of the Empire was relatively left out. I consider its ramifications and relation to the treatment of identity and history.

Coetzee problematizes and allegorizes the question of history and tyrannical regimes right from the start by giving us an ahistorical setting, an anonymous frontier settlement belonging to an anonymous Empire that is itself rootless in time and place. In the words of David Attwell (1993), "Coetzee drops the definite article from 'Empire,' thus drawing attention to the universalizing forms of self-representation underlying imperialist endeavors" (p. 71).[3] We have an imperial nation-state that defines itself through unfounded differences from barbarian others who are racially and geographically its enemy and who threaten its borders. Hence, Coetzee's fiction, and *WB* in particular, "offers a meditation on the question of whether all civilizations are not necessarily founded upon some arbitrary distinction between the civilized and the barbarian" (Moses, 1993, p. 116). This assertion entails a problematization of the proclaimed colonial/civilized identity and a complication of the foundations of imperialism as a civilizing mission.

Although several critics have understood the import of *WB* as dealing with imperialism, they gloss over the novel's treatment of imperial nationalism and empire building. In a study of Coetzee's early novels, [4] Michael Vaughan (1982) asserts that Coetzee's novels are "a sustained meditation on the principle of racial domination in the history of Western imperialism – with particular reference to South Africa" (p. 126). Michael Moses (1993) claims that in *WB* Coetzee "dramatizes the moral dilemmas and political paradoxes of all imperial enterprises, steadfastly refusing to specify either the geographic or historical setting of his novel" (p. 116). However, a look at the novel reveals the dynamics of imperialism and tactics of nation building. The Empire fails in most of these respects, which can be seen as Coetzee's critique of imperialism.

The Empire in *WB* conducts itself as a nation-state: a sovereign state whose homogeneous people have a feeling of common nationality. Apparently, it meets the criteria for defining a nation. Benedict Anderson (1991) argues in his seminal work *Imagined Communities* that the idea of the nation as a community is a fictional construct existing only in the minds of those who want to create a particular group identity for themselves. His proposed definition of the nation is: "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (p. 6). As Anderson elaborates, "imagined" means that all the members of any nation have in their minds "the image of their communion" (p. 6). He adds that the nation as an imagined political community is limited "because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other

nations" (p. 7). The nation as sovereign means, Anderson contends, free without the notion of religion, i.e. without "the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm" (p. 7). He also argues that the nation is imagined as a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (p. 7). The Empire in *WB* seems to meet most of these basic definitional criteria of a "nation" Anderson lists. The frontier areas represent the point where the borders of the Empire are surrounded by barbarian territories. The Empire has a limited geographical stretch with a capital in the metropolitan center and some distant territories beyond which alien people live. Moreover, the subjects of the Empire see themselves as loyal subjects serving their Empire and attending its interests against a common barbarian danger. When the magistrate uses plural pronouns like "us" or "we" to refer to imperial citizens, he is appealing to an unconscious, communal sense of identity/nationality shared by the Empire's diverse population. In addition, despite the strained relationship between the magistrate and the imperial administration, the magistrate feels the foreignness of the barbarians and the distance existing between them and the Empire when he meets them in their own lands. His distance from the barbarian horsemen signifies his different affiliation with an imperial nation. It is only after his return from the journey to send the barbarian girl to her people—and his arrest for "treason"—that the magistrate feels the unstated bond and identification with the Empire are breached: "my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken …" (p. 76). As for sovereignty, the Empire has an army and state institutions that represent its will and impose its power on its subjects. It has an expanding territorial stretch over which it exerts its sovereign power.

The spread of the Empire as a colonial nation forced the native barbarians to retreat to the surrounding mountains. The walled settlement the Empire built in the oasis, and where the magistrate is posted, has been around "more than a hundred years" (p. 50) by reclaiming barbarian land, building irrigation works, and farming, thus dispossessing the land's original owners. The Empire is depriving the barbarians of the pastures they use for their flocks. It also exploits the nomads during trade barters, bullies them, and despises them (p. 49-50). In exploiting barbarian land and labor, the Empire economically subjugates them as inferiors via flagrant colonial practices. The underlying logic commonly pervading colonialist texts and practices is based on the supposed superiority/inferiority binary between colonizer and colonized. As Abdul JanMohamed (1985) elaborates, "the manichean logic" can be defined as "a field of diverse yet interchangeable oppositions between white and black, good and evil, superiority and inferiority, civilization and savagery, intelligence and emotion, rationality and sensuality, self and Other, subject and object" (p. 63). It seems that the Empire justifies its exploitation of barbarian land and labor on the basis of this manichean logic. The magistrate tells a young conscript that the barbarians want "an end to the spread of settlements across their land. They want their land back, finally. They want to be free to move about with their flocks from pasture to pasture as they used to" (p. 49). The magistrate then exposes the interrelationship between racial and cultural differences in viewing the Other: "How do you eradicate contempt, especially when that contempt is founded on nothing more substantial than differences in table manners, variations in the structure of the eyelid?" (p. 50). He highlights the connection between racial and cultural differences in the manichean logic as used by imperial powers to justify subjugating the Other. To quote JanMohamed (1985) again, this manichean economy "is based on a transformation of racial difference into moral and even metaphysical difference" between self and Other (p. 61). Edward Said (1994) reminds us that a primary distinction in all imperialist

and nationalist enterprises is the one between "us" and "them" (p. xxv), a manichean distinction the Empire continually employs against the barbarians. Said, following another twist, highlights the basic meaning of imperialism and the role of narrative both in imperial quests and in resisting imperial enterprises, and thus helps us see Coetzee's work as participating in resistance literature and critiquing imperialism.[5] Said says:

> … narrative is crucial to my argument here, my basic point being that stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history. The main battle in imperialism is over land, of course, but when it came to who owned the land, who had the right to settle and work on it, who kept it going, who won it back, and who now plans its future—these issues were reflected, contested, and even for a time decided in narrative. (pp. xii-xiii)

Insofar as the Empire is trying to possess barbarian lands, and especially on the frontier area, it is engaging in a stark imperialistic enterprise. Said argues by way of pointing out the nuances of "imperialism" as opposed to the close concept of "colonialism" that "imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others" (p. 7). On a different occasion, Said (1990) reiterates the importance of land for the native and points out the relatedness to a place as a foundation of identity: "For the native, the history of his or her colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose concrete geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored" (p. 77). It is no wonder that the magistrate refers to the barbarians as the people "whose land we have raped" (p. 106), thus exposing the struggle over land in imperialism and settler colonialism Said pinpoints and the land's association with the native's dignity, honor, and identity, which also explains the sexual tinge of the magistrate's reference when land is lost to an imperial nation. Said (1994) defines imperialism and uses as "the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory" (p. 9). The Empire in Coetzee's novel is similarly busy with maintaining and establishing itself as an imperial power with distant territories along its borders and a metropolitan center in its heartland. The setting of the novel is a frontier outpost overseen by an anonymous imperial Capital.

Seizing barbarian land is just one imperial tactic at nation building; another is employing biopower as a means of achieving political dominance. The Empire uses the body as target for achieving control over its subjects and enemies. It directly touches the bodies of the barbarians. An expeditionary force is sent to exterminate the barbarians outside the walls of the town after a series of interrogations and torture practices against the barbarian prisoners, nomads and fishing folks who were brought to the town. What the Empire seeks is to impose its power on the alleged barbarians as a race, torture them, kill them, or even eradicate them in their own territories. For example, the twelve tortured barbarian prisoners brought on Joll's second expedition, with a loop of wire running through their cheeks and hands, try to reduce the pain by acting collectively. Judie Newman (1998) says that they are "forced to move as one cohesive body" and that they represent "the enforced oneness of the body politic" (p. 135). The Empire uses biopower in its political battle to subjugate and control its enemies and even its dissenting population, people like the magistrate. It seeks political power through dominating life and bodies. Joll and Mandel torture the magistrate not to exact a confession through judicial torture, but simply to show the state's power and dominion over its subjects, over both their wills and bodies.

As a nation-state, the Empire employs biopower as manifested in sanitary habits, rationed food, and public torture. The magistrate tries to impose this state biopower on the barbarians brought to the settlement and the officers who accompany him in his trip to send the barbarian girl to her people by stipulating strict hygiene rules. The Empire, on the other hand, starves him and tortures him; it deprives him of clean clothes and water because he is deemed as a disloyal subject. The spectacles of torture held in the public square or in the barracks yard against the barbarian prisoners or the magistrate are meant to teach the town's people a lesson and reassert the sovereign power of the Empire. The social body is brought to conform to the political power of the Empire through internalized fear on the part of the population and a spectacular display of political power on the part of the Empire. Hence, biopower and biopolitics are interrelated.

Michel Foucault (1977) makes it clear that public torture reflects the violence of the crime of the criminal on both victim and the sovereign as "the law represents the will of the sovereign" (p. 47). Hence, the body of the condemned, as it is the case with the magistrate and the barbarian prisoners, becomes the site for "the vengeance of the sovereign" represented in military officers like Joll and Mandel (p. 55). The spectators of public executions, Foucault states, may sympathize with the victim if they deem the conviction as "unjust" (p. 59), which makes them interfere in favor of the victim to stop the execution and creates "social disturbances" if they revolt (p. 61). The magistrate's public objection to Joll's torturing of some barbarian prisoners can be seen in this light. However, the Empire's men overpower him immediately and assert the dominance of the Empire over its subjects. On the other hand, Foucault argues that public torture teaches people by example and fear (p. 58). It demonstrates the power of the sovereign state before the crowds (p. 59), which is what the Empire achieves in conducting public torture. It was expected from the crowds to sometimes take part in the punishment, Foucault adds (p. 58). The exhibited victim would be "offered to the insults, sometimes to the attacks of the spectators. The vengeance of the people was called upon to become an unobtrusive part of the vengeance of the sovereign" (p. 59). The magistrate is humiliated by the public who call him a barbarian speaking a barbarian language while a little girl is allowed to flog the kneeling barbarian prisoners, an attempt by the Empire to maintain the status quo of power relations against enemies and dissenters. To counter the magistrate's public denunciation of Joll's torture practices, Joll offers scathing insults: "Believe me, to people in this town you are not the One Just Man, you are simply a clown, a madman. You are dirty, you stink, they can smell you a mile away. You look like an old beggar-man, a refuse-scavenger" (p. 111). The Empire's display, humiliation, and torture of its victims align it with the older penal systems Foucault describes yet hint at its status as a nation-state.

The magistrate sends the barbarian girl to her people and returns to find Warrant Officer Mandel in his office in the courthouse inspecting his documents and tax folders, the insignia of state bookkeeping. The Empire is found to have a written account of the magistrate's transgressions, documented with witnesses' accounts. Then, the magistrate is imprisoned; his food is rationed; he is not allowed to exercise or wash freely; and he is kept in a cell alienated from others (pp. 77-8). The Empire, thus, acts as a nation that has a distinct disciplinary system for what it deems as guilty. Foucault's (1977) *Discipline and Punish* is relevant here as an important historical document on power relations, normalization techniques, and knowledge formation in modern states. Prisons in modern states, Foucault points out, use examination, supervision, and surveillance; they document the results of such techniques to form a body of knowledge about prisoners and facilitate controlling them. Mandel tells the magistrate as he frees him that they keep records for prisoners (p. 123). Moreover, the idea of timetables and repetition

is employed to control bodies and make them conform to social norms. The magistrate is made to jump over a rope, i.e. to perform an exercise by which the body is controlled via repetitive tasks. He runs in the yard and does tricks for his torturers. The Empire punishes by deprivation from such recurrent practices; he is deprived of exercise or exposure to the sun even on some exercise days.

Discussing the changes in penal systems in the west towards the late 18th century and the early 19th century, Foucault focuses on "the disappearance of torture as a public spectacle" (p. 7). The disappearance of the "theatrical elements" was coupled with the disappearance of the body as a major site for "penal repression" (pp. 8-9). The soul rather than the body becomes the new target of penalty (p. 16, p. 101). Likewise, Joll and Mandel seem to focus on the magistrate's soul as an end although his punishment is corporeal. He is subjected to many bodily privations and punishments in his imprisonment. Foucault asserts the implication of the body power relations: "But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (p. 25). The magistrate's desperation and lack of will make him abnegate a degraded, overpowered body: "There is no way of dying allowed me, it seems, except like a dog in a corner" (p. 115). His whole world is reduced to a cell corner, and the body becomes the ultimate reality when the outer world is denied. Elaine Scarry (1985) argues:

> It is the intense pain that destroys a person's self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one's world disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject. (p. 35)

Mandel seems to be punishing the magistrate as a body in order to punish his soul: "He deals with my soul [Mandel]: every day he folds the flesh aside and exposes my soul to the light; he has probably seen many souls in the course of his working life; but the care of souls seems to have left no mark on him than the care of hearts leaves on the surgeon" (p. 116). Mandel targets the body of the magistrate as an end, thus confusing the penal system of a modern state with a primitive display of torture and undermining the Empire's claim to being a civilized nation:

> But my torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me 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, 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. (p. 113)

During his confinement, the magistrate performs his bodily processes in the same room with a smelly bucket in the corner. The rationed food he keeps eating (soup and porridge) makes him severely constipated. Limited exercise days and times, dirty clothes and underwear, and a wild beard all testify to his degradation by the Empire. The Empire humiliates him for insulting its sovereignty by consorting with its enemy without initially resorting to torture as it does with the barbarian prisoners: "No one beats me," the magistrate complains, "no one starves me, no one spits on me. How can I regard myself as a victim of persecution when my sufferings are so petty?" (p. 83). In modern states, the body, when punishment was no more centered on the

torturing of the body as the magistrate implies, was still touched indirectly through loss of "wealth and rights," things like "rationing of food, sexual deprivation, corporal punishment, solitary confinement" (Foucault, 1977, pp.15-6). However, the magistrate's punishment degenerates into public torture and even mock execution after a new wave of barbarian prisoners are brought to the public square, which exposes the Empire's façade as a civilized state using a modern penal system based on privations. The magistrate is punished and humiliated publicly, and the spectacular torture formerly used against the barbarian prisoners is now used against him. With a broken nose and hand and a cheek wound, he is aware of the corporeal nature of his punishment and says: "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" (p. 112). The Empire's penal system, the magistrate concludes, is a nascent one: "They have no elaborated system of pain and deprivation to which they subject me. For two days I go without food and water. On the third day I am fed. 'I am sorry,' says the man who brings my food, 'we forgot'" (p. 113).

The Empire's penal system is apparently impulsive and inconsistent, a reversion of the institutionalized systems and the notion of recorded history. The Empire imprisons the magistrate and releases him on an impulse. It even impulsively sees him sometimes as a prisoner or as a free man. The magistrate asks for a trial according to the law and Mandel responds: "But you are not a prisoner. You are free to go as you please" and then continues "How can you be a prisoner when we have no record of you? Do you think we don't keep records? We have no record of you" (p. 123). Mandel asks the magistrate to work for his keep—another reversion of the idea of corrective punishment and the socialization of offenders in modern penal systems as the magistrate is not seen as a prisoner—and the magistrate protests that he is a prisoner waiting trial and that according to the law prisoners waiting trial should be kept from "public coffer" (p. 123). The Empire seems to have an idea of public funds or a treasury in its administration, yet it chooses when to implement relevant policies and when not to impulsively. Mandel insists that the magistrate is not a prisoner and frees him. In fact, what the magistrate gets in torture is also a reversal of a fair trial. According to Scarry (1985), "torture is the inversion of the trial, a reversal of cause and effect. While the one studies evidence that may lead to punishment, the other uses punishment to generate the evidence" (p. 41). In not allowing the magistrate a fair trial, the Empire seems to fail as a modern, civilized state with a legal system. By contrast, the public torture of the barbarians as an enemy reflects, in Foucauldian terms, a phase in punishment earlier than the establishment of the prison whereby punishment takes the form of public torture on the body or a new system of representation in which the criminal is punished in a way directly related to the crime. The criminal and the offence become one, i.e. the actual enemy becomes a medium for enacting the offence. The bodies of the barbarian prisoners are a medium that enacts their being an enemy. One could sense a kind of confusion if the barbarian prisoners' punishment is compared with that of the magistrate: a corporal solitary punishment and a spectacular collective one are employed, which undermines the Empire's status as a civilized nation-state.

The Empire uses cultural differences from the barbarians to define itself as a nation-state and subjugate them. The barbarian men's old guns, sheepskin coats, and shaggy horses, among other things, all make them an alien Other: "Bodies clothed in wool and the hides of animals and nourished from infancy on meat and milk, foreign to the suave touch of cotton, the virtues of the placid grains and fruits: these are the people being pushed off the plains into the mountains by the spread of Empire" (p. 71). The peasant farmers who inhabit the Empire's frontier settlement, by contrast, grow crops and till fields; they use bread, sugar, tea, beans, flour, cotton, fruits, and

grain, all things that require settling down rather than an itinerant life (p. 18). Nomads and fisherfolks use animal products and migrate every spring with their flocks. They live in tents, do not wash, and neither read nor write (p. 140). They are sheep-herders, and are in no need of state institutions as a result. The stationary Empire, by comparison, has state institutions like schools, courts, prisons, and the military. For example, a young officer leading a detachment of new conscripts has "the arrogant candour of a young graduate of the War College" (p. 49). Unlike the barbarians who live in the desert and are being pushed to the mountains by the spread of the Empire, the Empire has reclaimed land from the desert, built irrigation works, planted fields, domesticated stock animals, and walled its town to protect the houses it built against the barbarians (p. 50).[6] It has acted as an evolved state of institutions and settled agriculture if compared with the itinerant barbarians.

The Empire has an administrative, fiscal, penal, educational, and military hierarchy. Joll is representative of a brutal military regime, a "fascist" one in the words of Teresa Dovey (1988) ("Allegory vs Allegory", p. 137). The Third Bureau to which Joll belongs is an important division of the Civil Guard, and an indication of the presence of an army for an independent nation (p. 2). The magistrate's penalty for offenders is "a fine or compulsory labour" in the absence of "facilities for prisoners" on the frontier as he tells Joll (p. 2). Petty offenders are sentenced to days of digging in the dunes (p. 14). Alternatively, they repair the irrigation works (p. 14) or tidy his rooms and do laundry as part of social reform (p. 26). The magistrate fills a burial warrant for a dead prisoner because the Empire keeps records (p. 6). An Imperial gazette, military ranks like colonels and lieutenants, law courts, and census officials are all indications of the existence of state institutions (p. 8). The Empire is referred to as a "State" twice in the text: The officials of the Third Bureau are called "guardians of the State" (p. 8), and the tortured magistrate sees himself as "enemy in his own way of the State" (p. 106). The magistrate also indicates an imperial fiscal system: "Perhaps this man [Mandel], and the man he brings along to help him with his work, and their Colonel, are torturers, perhaps that is their designation on three cards in a pay-office somewhere in the capital, though it is more likely that the cards call them security officers" (p. 115). There is a school in the settlement and officers with different military ranks as part of the disciplinary and hierarchical control employed by a modern state. The institutionalization manifested in schools, prisons, and an army serves as a means of normalization and power/knowledge, as Foucault would have it. The Empire also uses the barbarian prisoners as an object of knowledge. Barbarians in the flesh are displayed, subjugated, and punished. The Empire knows them by controlling them and simultaneously controls them in knowing them. As Foucault (1977) argues, "knowledge follows the advances of power, discovering new objects of knowledge over all the surfaces on which power is exercised" (p. 204). While the Empire conducts itself as a nation, a modern state, the barbarian "nation" seems on the verge of formation.

Discussing Yeats as a poet of decolonization, Said (1990) says that nationalism "still serves quite adequately to identify the mobilizing force that coalesced into resistance against an alien and occupying empire on the part of peoples possessing a common history, religion, and language" (p. 74). It is apparent that the barbarians, like the Empire, can equally claim belonging to a nation if they are to resist imperial domination. They do share a common language that the Empire does not understand or represses as an alien language of the enemy, a point manifested in one spectator's comment during the magistrate's public torture that the magistrate moaning from pain was uttering barbarian language. The barbarians also seem to have a common history. Their common history is evidenced by the barbarian relics the magistrate finds in the ruins in the desert

and sees as belonging to an ancient barbarian civilization that existed before the current Empire. Although nothing is mentioned about barbarian religion, we assume it is part of the cultural differences that set the barbarians against the Empire. What is more important is that the barbarians seem to be joining forces and resisting the Empire's possession of their lands, which signals the birth of a barbarian nationalism based on group identification and relatedness to native land. They seem to pose a real threat to the Empire at the end of the novel. One of Joll's surviving men who returns from the expedition tired and starving tells the magistrate that the barbarians lured them into the desert, cut their horses loose, and singled out stragglers (p. 144). The barbarians are also engaging in a decolonizing activity to be followed by a process of nation building on the basis of common interests and a common enemy. Said (1990) says that "the first moment of resistance to imperialism brought forth all the various nationalist and independence movements that culminated in the large-scale dismantling of the great classical empires, and the birth of many new states throughout the world" (p. 83). The dismantling of the Empire marks the birth of a new barbarian "nation." If the barbarians claim belonging to a formative nation, then the Empire's assumed existence as a unique imperial nation becomes questionable.

The Empire in *WB* is building a nation around its capital and decides who belongs and who does not belong to its borders, thus emphasizing the notion of group identity based group membership. In an essay on Salman Rushdie in *Stranger Shores*, Coetzee (2001) suggests this notion of group identity when he begins the essay saying: "The notion of personal identity has dramatically narrowed in our times. Identity has become in the first place a matter of group identification: of claiming membership of a group, or being claimed by a group" (p. 169). The magistrate and the Empire frame the imperial group identity in similar terms of cultural, stereotypical, and linguistic differences between barbarians and non-barbarians.[7] The very meaning of the word "barbarian" entails an alien land, people, or culture. The word becomes an embodiment for foreignness, lack of refinement, learning, or artistic and literary achievements. Rebecca Saunders (2001), in an article on linguistic and literal foreignness in Coetzee's fiction, argues: "The paradigmatic foreigner in the Western tradition—the barbarian—is one who speaks a different language. Indeed, among the most identifiable marks of everyday foreignness are an accent, a mismanaged idiom, an alterity in expression: language bears a primary relation to foreignness" (p. 216).[8] Insofar as language serves as a cultural medium carrying cultural practices and customs and productions, it also becomes a sign of belonging to a particular group or nation or lack thereof. Those who do not speak a specific language are excluded from belonging to the community that speaks that language. Saunders analyzes *WB* as a text that is "thematically and structurally about foreignness" (p. 223). As a novel about the barbarians and a magistrate who himself becomes an Other for the Empire, Saunders argues, it is thematically about foreignness. As a novel "structured as an allegory; and allegory is a kind of language in which a text's literal meaning is foreign to its proper meaning", the novel is structurally about foreignness (p. 223). A look at *WB* reveals how language is implicated in identity formation and imperialism.[9]

The magistrate and the barbarian girl communicate through the patois, the makeshift pidgin of the frontier settlement, as he does not speak her tongue. When the magistrate meets barbarian horsemen on their native northern soil and outside the limits of the Empire, he has to enlist the girl's help with the language to convey to them that she is blind. The linguistic difference as a foundation of identity is now augmented by a geographical one when he says: "We have crossed the limits of Empire" (p. 69). The magistrate asks her to tell them her story, and she has to interpret the terms of her return that the barbarians stipulate to him. After the

barbarian girl decides to go to her people and he feels the language barrier, he regrets not having learned her tongue (p. 70). Later, the magistrate is hanging from a tree in a woman's underclothes shouting for help in a mock crucifixion scene with his hands tied behind his back. He is hoisted to the tree through a rope and as he feels his feet leave the ground his shoulders tear. He screams and bellows, and the spectators identify him as a linguistic foreigner: "'He is calling his barbarian friends,' someone observes. 'That is barbarian language you hear.' There is laughter" (p. 119). People see his cries of pain as cries for help in a barbarian tongue and unconsciously measure group identification in linguistic terms. The notion that a community or a nation is linked by a language is also emphasized in this scene. A shared language heightens group consciousness and singles out an outsider. Seen from a different perspective, the torture he is exposed to reduces his voice to something like animal's roaring, rather than fathomable utterances, and destroys his ability to speak. His torture erases the boundary between the human and the non-human, between life and death; it makes death a process of undergoing extreme pain. As Scarry argues, "physical pain always mimes death and the infliction of physical pain is always a mock execution" (p. 31).

Scarry (1985) highlights the difficulty of expressing physical pain. She argues that pain resists and even destroys language. She shows how war and torture unmake the world and deprive us of cultural content while human creation makes the world. Pain reduces the sufferer to an inarticulate state of cries. The message is that pain and torture, by unmaking the world, destroy culture, civilization, language, and the sanctity of life.[10] While the general import of Scarry's argument is relevant to Coetzee's novel in the sense that the torture practices of the Empire undermine its civilized status and cultural privilege as a nation, the argument is specifically illuminating for the specific scene mentioned above in which the magistrate's screams are seen to be an instance of barbarian language. Scarry argues that "[p]hysical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (p. 4).[11] She also argues that "[t]o witness the moment when pain causes a reversion to the pre-language of cries and groans is to witness the destruction of language" (p. 6). What Scarry sees as a pre-language used for expressing physical pain is seen by the spectators of the magistrate's torture as a primitive barbarian language, an implicit instance of linguistic racism. The Empire employs linguistic erasure to define itself as non-barbarian. It either relegates the language of its victims to a primitive level or silences it in the first place. The barbarian girl's torture, for example, has made her a passive, reticent victim unwilling to share her story. The magistrate tries unavailingly to have her tell the story of violent torture inscribed on her silent body by the Empire.

In addition to linguistic foreignness, the barbarians are also identified by cultural differences, especially about cleanliness, and these are often juxtaposed. The magistrate is repelled by the smell of two barbarian prisoners captured after a stock raid and kept in a hut attached to the granary.[12] Hence, he inducts one of the guards to get the prisoners to clean themselves quickly before he and Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau can talk to them (p. 2). The magistrate then offers to help Joll with the patois of the frontier, a language Joll does not speak. The barbarian language itself is objectified and reduced by Joll to a mere "it", an alien Other not much different from the barbarians who speak it. Joll asks the magistrate about the guard: "Does he speak it?" (p. 4). The fishermen sent to the settlement by Joll on his first expedition into the desert are, according to the magistrate, "aboriginal" people who do not speak the same language (p. 17). They are seen as exotic savages who defecate publicly, pick lice from each other's heads,

and eat voraciously. The barbarians are associated with filth, idleness, and disease. After Joll finishes his first round of interrogations and leaves for the Capital, the magistrate visits the prisoners left behind in the barracks hall and is repelled at their "sickly smell of sweat and ordure" and asks the soldiers to clean everything with soap and water (p. 23). The magistrate tells the barbarian girl that vagrants like her are not allowed in the settlement (p. 26). The magistrate has tried to prevent "a parasite settlement" inhabited by "beggars and vagrants enslaved to strong drink", thus confirming "the settlers' litany of prejudice: that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid" (p. 37). It seems that the linguistic barrier has widened the cultural gap between the Empire and the barbarians. During an atmosphere of paranoid fear of the barbarians, with the imperial army away from the settlement, the magistrate reiterates this notion of linguistic and cultural foreignness: "There has been a drift of refugees to the town, fisherfolk from the tiny settlements dotted along the river and the northern lakeshore, speaking a language no one understands, carrying their households on their backs, with their gaunt dogs and rickety children trailing behind them" (p.122). Cultural differences between barbarians and non-barbarians are often juxtaposed against linguistic ones.

The Empire manipulates language and uses it elaborately to condemn the barbarian prisoners and the magistrate. Its torture practices and interrogations silence its victims or make them confess what it wants to hear. Scarry articulates this point about interrogations memorably: "The question and answer also objectify the fact that while the prisoner has almost no voice—his confession is a halfway point in the disintegration of language, an audible objectification of the proximity of silence—the torturer and the regime have doubled their voice since the prisoner is now speaking their words" (p. 36). The magistrate's conclusion after talking to Joll about torture and truth is something that reflects Joll's belief in pain as the ultimate reality: "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt" (p. 5). However, because he could not bring himself to empathize with the barbarian girl or vicariously feel her pain before he himself is tortured, the magistrate remains doubtful about her torture and about how the torturers touched her eyes and ankles, especially in the absence of an account from the girl herself to relieve him. While the girl is a living example of the tortured body, the magistrate is increasingly doubtful about what exactly took place in the torture chamber. Scarry echoes this when she says:

> So, for the person in pain, so incontestably and unnegotiably present is it that 'having pain' may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to 'have certainty,' while for the other person it is so elusive that 'hearing about pain' may exist as the primary model of what it is 'to have doubt.' Thus pain comes unsharably into our midst as at once that which cannot be denied and that which cannot be confirmed. (p. 4)

However, Joll, unlike the magistrate, remains adamant in his belief in fixed truths. He is free to make the signifier and the referent unite on the backs of the prisoners by writing the word "Enemy" with dust and charcoal and beating them until the word is erased.

The Empire arrests the magistrate for "treasonously consorting with the enemy", what the magistrate describes as "a phrase out of a book" (p. 76), and silences its victims through torture or reduces their speech to meaningless cries of pain. It refuses to give the magistrate a trial in which he might produce a counter discourse to that it employs. The magistrate tries to use language to counter the ornate rhetoric of the Empire, for he sees himself as a loquacious civil servant, but is not listened to and is also unable to articulate language. When he is dangling from a tree at the end of a rope with his hands pinned behind his back, he groans, bellows, and is often

lost for words. "I try to call out something," he says, "a word of blind fear, a shriek, but the rope is now so tight that I am strangled, speechless" (p. 117). When he objects to Joll's using of a hammer to crush the feet of four kneeling barbarian prisoners and says "*NO*" many times (p. 104), he is hit repeatedly and sustains a broken nose and hand and a swollen eye.

The torture of the prisoners, when experienced vicariously by the magistrate who lost his affiliation with the Empire as a "traitor", makes him oppose its imperial authority. He is made to say anything, say "No" to Joll and then scream incomprehensibly. In public executions, Foucault (1977) argues, "[u]nder the protection of imminent death, the criminal could say everything and the crowd cheered" (p. 60). Crowds around the scaffold, Foucault also writes, could hear a criminal who would lose nothing in cursing "the judges, the laws, the government and religion" (p. 60). The magistrate, to some extent, does something similar when he publicly denounces imperial torture against helpless barbarian prisoners and says "NO," thus breaking the repressive silence imposed on the Empire's subjects and challenging the Empire's sovereignty. However, he cannot continue the moralistic lesson he started about the miraculous human body and the miracle of human creation while a soldier continues to hit him with a stick. "Words fail me," he says (p. 105). After he receives a blow on the face, he cannot remember what he said about the miraculous creation of humans: "What I wanted to say next I cannot remember. A miracle of creation—I pursue the thought but it eludes me like a wisp of smoke" (p. 105). The Empire's men stop him from uttering what he began, and he fails to appeal to their communal identity as human beings, as "the great miracle of creation" (p. 105). Interestingly, this can also be read using Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, for she argues that human creation and creativity make the world while torture and wars unmake the world. The pain the magistrate endures disrupts his creative and affective train of thought. Nevertheless, the pain and bodily damage inflicted on the barbarian prisoners undo the miraculous potential of the human body for self-repair. According to Scarry (1985), "Brutal, savage, and barbaric, torture (even if unconsciously) self-consciously and explicitly announces its own nature as an undoing of civilization, acts out the uncreating of the created contents of consciousness" (p. 38). While the blows the magistrate receives silence him, they also contradict the Empire's claims to civilization; torture, thus, asserts itself as the enemy of civilization. On the other hand, the tortured are the ones who come to appreciate more the potential of humanity even if they are not allowed to express it freely. This counter logic implies that the magistrate and the barbarian prisoners become more human in being punished and silenced.

Colonial communities have been identified by language and by racism against the other on linguistic grounds. Language, therefore, has been implicated in nationalism and decolonization. Frantz Fanon's psychological and existential analysis of race relations, *Black Skin, White Masks*, provides an analysis of the role of language in power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. Fanon (1967) asserts that "to speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (p. 17), for one speaks and one makes oneself alive for others. Since language is a carrier of civilization and history, the Negro of the Antilles, Fanon remarks, tries to master French to become "whiter" and more human via possession of language as a "cultural tool" (p. 18, p. 38). To speak a language, Fanon writes, "means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization" (pp. 17-8). Insofar as a man who speaks a language "possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" in Fanon's words (p. 18), the absence of a common language between the Empire and the barbarians makes them unknowable to each other. It relegates human communication and augments instead essentialized differences. Moreover, it makes the apparently more powerful Empire repress/silence the barbarian language and see the

barbarians as non-entities. Dominic Head (1997) asserts this idea with reference to Joll: "Just as the colonizer does damage to indigenous languages, so does Joll reduce all inflection to the single tone of pain/ truth. His role as torturer thus has also this figurative connotation, representative of linguistic imperialism" (p. 82). During the expedition to send the barbarian girl to her people, the magistrate sits in a tent while she talks to the other three men: "The banter goes on in the pidgin of the frontier, and she is at no loss for words" (p. 62). The magistrate is surprised at her fluency in this pidgin. However, the barbarian girl's true language is silenced in all her interactions on the frontier, and she, as a linguistically colonized subject, is forced to use the frontier's pidgin. Even in this pidgin she speaks, she cannot tell the story of her intimate pain at the hands of Joll. In her silence about her torture, she confirms her status as a figure of alterity, a subaltern Other who cannot speak or is not heard even if s/he speaks. The magistrate, in fact, tries to appropriate her discourse by having her tell a story of torture he can ultimately use in his own rhetoric against the Empire. Together with Joll, the magistrate adds a patriarchal dimension to the linguistic colonization of the barbarian girl.

The colonial identity, as the magistrate's confrontation with Joll's practices reveals, is more complex than mere linguistic differences between the Empire and its enemies. It is often fractured from within and fails to maintain its wholeness. The walled settlement stands for the fixed boundaries that delineate the Empire's "distinct" imperial identity, as opposed to the boundless terrain of the barbarians among hills and mountains, which allows the Empire to construct its own conception of barbarian identity and project on them its fears and prejudices. The magistrate and Joll, however, are two faces of the same imperial rule. They embody the ambivalence of colonial discourse in their fluid, overlapping identities. The magistrate's continual self-interrogation makes him a "hyperconscious person" who, according to Coetzee, is trapped in "an endless cycle of self-consciousness, incessantly questioning his own motives" (qtd. in Penner, 1989, p. 80). The doubling of his thoughts links him to Joll, for he reflects: "On the other hand, who am I to assert my distance from him? I drink with him, I eat with him, I show him sights, I afford him every assistance as his letter of commission requests, and more" (p. 5). Comparing himself to Joll, he also remarks that Joll might be his psychological double, a harsher version of himself: "It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive" (p. 7). The magistrate finds that it is more and more difficult to maintain a coherent sense of his self; he turns out to be a "lie" founded on nothing but crumbling self-illusion. He rants: "For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less" (p. 133).[13] Therefore, the magistrate shows how brittle the imperial identity is, how a humanist may well be an exploiter and a torturer, and how a civilized civil servant may be a "barbarian" within. He comes to represent the very unstable distinction between civilized and barbarian, or humanist and torturer, that the Empire prides itself on.

Michael Moses (1993) discusses *WB* in the light of Hegel's conception of history as the combination of events and a written account of such events to produce recorded history and sees this throughout the essay as a primary distinction the novel critiques between the "lettered" civilized Empire and the "unlettered" barbarians (p. 117). What Moses does not point out is that being lettered is another pillar upon which the imperial identity is founded and a signifier of the presence of state institutions. The magistrate is an official serving a lettered Empire in a courthouse. He basically deals with records; he collects taxes and administers the frontier's trade as well as the lawcourt. He hopes to go down in history as a civil servant of the Empire: "When I

pass away," he says, "I hope to merit three lines of small print in the Imperial gazette" (p. 8). The Empire he serves has census officials and keeps records. For example, Joll takes a folding writing table on his first expedition into the desert and sends the magistrate a letter, sealed and signed, asking him to retain the prisoners sent till his return. The magistrate himself, angered by Joll's prisoners, writes yet tears a letter he writes to the Third Bureau complaining about the incompetence of its agents (p. 19). When Joll brings in more prisoners and starts interrogating them, the magistrate occupies himself with municipal paperwork at the courthouse or tries to read the classics. Moreover, the magistrate's office is full of legal texts and administration records (p. 22). After the expected prevalence of the barbarians, the magistrate thinks that they "will wipe their backsides on the town archives" (p. 140). While this image strongly suggests the coming of a people who do not possess a written language as a cultural asset, it more importantly shows that the lettered/unlettered distinction undergirds the imperial identity. The same idea is emphasized when the magistrate says: "No one can accept that an imperial army has been annihilated by men with bows and arrows and rusty old guns who live in tents and never wash and cannot read or write" (p. 140). However, the barbarian relics with a secret script testify that the barbarians have a linguistic system the Empire does not comprehend.

When the magistrate interprets some wood slips with a barbarian script to Joll and Mandel, he gives an allegorical interpretation on imperial injustice and historical recurrence. His interpretation counters Joll's belief in fixities: "They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last years of the Empire—the old Empire, I mean" (pp. 109-10). Lance Olsen says that the wood slips, historically rootless as they are, "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" (p. 53). Lance Olsen (1985) highlights the openness of articulated language to interpretation in the absence of a linguistic context or a historical link. What is more important is that these slips undermine the Empire's belief in its unique possession of a lettered civilization and a system of writing/ bookkeeping and make us question one of the Empire's fundamentals of identity. The slips draw attention to the precarious nature of linguistic signs and the difficulty of using language as a definite tenet of identity. The fact that the barbarian girl easily learns the pidgin of the frontier while the magistrate fails to learn her language can be seen as another indicator that the Empire's privileged stance on the grounds of linguistic superiority is shaky.

As for the barbarian identity, it is an imperial construction. The barbarians are described in evasive, hallucinatory terms as dark rapists and violent thieves (p. 8). They mainly exist in people's imagination and are not allowed real life identities. The Empire does not only try to eradicate their "parasitical" existence around the town, it also uses its fixed notions of truth and language to engage them. The Empire has violently marked its history on the body of the barbarian girl in its attempts to wring a confession from her that validates its emergency state of ruthless interrogations. Moreover, the Empire has erased the history of the barbarian girl in the process of inscribing its own violent history. It has reduced her to a shapeless mass with no distinct features. The scars of torture, a lived reality on her body, make her continually live in the present as a tortured body with no redeeming past or future, and thus with no whole identity. In his dreams, the magistrate sees "a blank, featureless" face (p. 37). He cannot bring himself to remember the whole face of the barbarian girl before torture. He tries unavailingly "to recall her as she was before the doctors of pain began their ministrations" (p. 46). The magistrate finds her

body "blank", "obstinate, phlegmatic", and "incomplete" (p. 41). Her body bears the signs of torture yet fails to give the magistrate a true account of what it has endured at the hands of Joll. It remains beyond the magistrate's comprehension although he continually sees it as a site of hermeneutical and epistemological questions that culminate when he cannot determine whether he is interested in her as a whole, healthy body or as a body that signifies her story of torture (p. 63). The torture she was subjected to has touched her and rendered her incomprehensible to the magistrate. The violent history the Empire has imposed on her has actually made her without a history beyond being a tortured body. It has decentered the subject position of the magistrate, as his existence for her is now peripheral. The tortured eyes of the barbarian girl allow her to see only the outer surfaces or edges of things. There is something missing at the center of things. The identities of both victim and perpetrator are split and confused, though in different ways.

The Empire seeks a justification of its raison d'être through the barbarian girl and other prisoners. The prisoners are to admit about an ongoing plot against the Empire to confirm the Empire's doubts. On the one hand, this assures the Empire about the existence of a barbarian Other, and thus consolidates its own existence as a civilized self. On the other, it justifies the torture practices the Empire carries out against the barbarians. However, the imperial identity is made repeatedly more vulnerable in the figure of the magistrate who is already skeptical about the Empire and its ways. Looking into the eyes of the barbarian woman, already half-blind because of torture, the magistrate sees nothing that affirms his identity: "I look into the eye. Am I to believe that gazing back at me she sees nothing—my feet perhaps, parts of the room, a hazy circle of light, but at the centre, where I am, only a blur, a blank? I pass my hand slowly in front of her face, watching her pupils. I cannot discern any movement. She does not blink" (p. 31). He fails to fathom the nature of his desire toward her or to move her; her face remains blank, refusing to give the magistrate the Hegelian reciprocation of identity he is after: "and with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two black glassy insect eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me" (p. 43). He fails to get the mutual recognition he needs for a whole identity, which means that he does not exist for her in the same way she does not exist for him as an Other. Such a failure unsettles his identity as a master. To quote Dovey (1988) on this,

> The girl's partial blindness is a sign of her state of incompleteness, in Hegelian terms, of her 'inessential consciousness' in relation to the Magistrate's position of mastery. She cannot reciprocate the Magistrate's desire, cannot provide proof of his identity, because she cannot return the look of recognition he seeks. Looking into her eyes, he finds no answering desire there, but only the image of his own desire given back to him. (pp. 226-7)

It turns out that the obliterated identity of the barbarian girl brings to a crisis the magistrate's own identity. He fails to maintain a distance from her as a figure of alterity and equally fails to find himself in relation to her. "The act of returning the girl to her people," Dovey argues, "is an attempt to restore her to 'herself', to a state of wholeness, so that she *would* be able to provide this kind of reciprocal recognition" (p. 227). Restoring her to herself is also akin to ridding the magistrate's conscience of a traumatic experience and restoring him to himself, for Joll's torture practices against the barbarian prisoners, and especially the girl, have initiated the magistrate's

identity crisis. The Empire's torture practices, in seeking to assert certainties about the imperial identity, backfire and make this very identity subject to doubt.

The magistrate's problematic identity, his in-between status as a complicit humanist, is manifested when he says: "I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!" (p. 44). However, the magistrate, an upholder of the values of civilization and progress, is not sure about his sentiments toward the barbarians, whom he refers to in stereotypical terms:

> Do I really look forward to the triumph of the barbarian way: intellectual torpor, slovenliness, tolerance of disease and death? If we were to disappear would the barbarians spend their afternoons excavating our ruins? Would they preserve our census rolls and our grain-merchants' ledgers in glass cases, or devote themselves to deciphering the script of our love-letters? (p. 51)

The magistrate's musing over his thoughts and desires puts him again in a position like that of the Empire, being an enemy of the enemies of civilization. He writes a letter to the provincial governor before he leaves to send the girl to her people and signs and seals the document. However, he is not sure about the nature of the second document because of his conflicting emotions:

> A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years on the frontier? All that day I sit in a trance at my desk staring at the empty white paper, waiting for words to come. ... On the third day I surrender, put the paper back in the drawer, and make preparations to leave. It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with a woman in his bed should not know what to write. (pp. 56-7)

The presence of the barbarian girl in the magistrate's life unsettles his presumed privileged status as an imperial subject who can write and renders him impotent with her. He comes to enact an abortive patriarchal association between phallus and penis. He fails to maintain control over his conscious desires and motivations. Instead, he revels in a dream world about the barbarian girl.

In questioning the manichean binary of civilized/barbarian or self/Other as a definite one, the novel constantly establishes it yet erases it. The word "ENEMY" that is written by Joll on the backs of some barbarian prisoners with dust and charcoal is erased with their blood and sweat (p. 103). Four out of twelve prisoners Joll brings on his second expedition into the desert lie as docile bodies on the ground while they are being beaten. Joll tries to fix the barbarian identity and reduce all doubt about the existence of the barbarians as a threat to the Empire. As Foucault (1977) says, "[t]he tortured body is first inscribed in the legal ceremonial that must produce, open for all to see, the truth of the crime" (p. 35). Foucault means that the body was made to carry its condemnation and to produce it publicly (p. 43). This is basically what Joll tries to do by writing the guilt of the prisoners on their backs: to make the barbarian body testify to its crime as an enemy to the Empire, and thus save the imperial identity from falling apart in the absence of barbarians to subjugate. After the spectacle of pain for the barbarians and the magistrate's own beating (in which he sustains a broken nose and a sore hand and eye and is treated as an enemy of the State like the barbarians), the magistrate expresses his doubts about defending the barbarians: "Easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for the barbarians: for where can that argument lead but to laying down our arms and opening the gates of the town to the people whose land we have raped?" (p. 106). The oscillation in the magistrate's role as an imperial subject and a liberal humanist, and thus an enemy of the State,

and the loose identity labels used by the Empire for its subjects and enemies show that Coetzee is questioning the bases of imperial identity. Such loose labels are clear when the magistrate shifts the label "enemy", and implicitly "barbarian", to Joll and exonerates himself and the barbarian prisoners:

> 'Those pitiable prisoners you brought in—are *they* the enemy I must fear? Is that what you say? *You* are the enemy, Colonel!' I can restrain myself no longer. I pound the desk with my fist. '*You* are the enemy, *you* have made the war, and *you* have given them all the martyrs they need—starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here! History will bear me out!' (p. 112)

The foregrounding of the personal pronouns "they" and "you" makes them exist more as linguistic signifiers whose referents can be easily shifted. Joll is here accused of having committed "filthy barbarities" against the barbarian prisoners back in time, and Mandel is earlier described by the magistrate as "one of the *new* barbarians" (p. 76; my emphasis), which undoes all identity binaries established by the Empire and imposed on history or renders them as impotent pronouncements. Moreover, history as a shifting force that condemns or exonerates imperial practices means that it cannot be taken as an asset for a stable imperial identity or nation.

Coetzee's novel exposes the illusory foundations of imperial enterprises, and foremost imperial identity. It shows that the self is defined by constructing an Other, that may not even exist, and ascribing to it various differences at many levels. The Other can be an inherent aspect of our own instincts or unconscious drives. It can exist, Maria Boletsi (2007) argues, as a "mental image" (p. 85), a Jungian psychic image of our souls or a Freudian alter ego. This can account for the conclusions of the novel in which no barbarians arrive. If the "barbarian" is within, then it will never arrive no matter how much we wait; we should look within ourselves to find it. As Boletsi argues, "[w]e only receive a mediated mirror image of the barbarians, as it is reflected on the bodies of the civilized" (p. 85). The "barbarians" here stand for human nature as opposed to the culture we construct. The magistrate experiences this aspect about our human nature that gets repressed under the façade of civilization. At the end of *WB*, we see that the imperial garrison left in the town and the abortive expeditionary force members become the noticeable "barbarians"—stealing, ravaging, and ransacking—while the expected barbarians continue to have a shadowy existence, never arriving to confirm the Empire's doubts. Said (1979) relates the imaginary construction of otherness necessary to the self-definition of imperial powers and shows that the colonized has equal claims to "civilizations and languages":

> The Orient is … the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. (pp. 1-2)

The defeated imperial army retreats to the heartland to protect the capital against the suspected encroachment of the barbarians upon the Empire. The Empire has failed to maintain its presumed coherent identity. Coetzee's book can be read as a nationalist allegory not only for the Empire but also for the resisting barbarians, for the end signals the assertion of a new barbarian nation. The Empire creates an epoch in history, while at the end the barbarians are about to create a new

history of decolonization. To save themselves and their crumbling nation, the citizens of the settlement learn to work cooperatively to survive the barbarian encroachment, and the magistrate calls them "my fellow-citizens" (p. 141). The school, a state institution, is closed, and the children are employed in securing food for a harsh winter ahead (p. 140).

If the novel undermines imperial notions of identity and statehood, then it is asserting an ethic of viewing the colonized Other. The self and the Other cannot exist as separate entities, and their coexistence should be enriching to both. Instead of looking at their deconstructed binaries, *WB* implies, we need to open up an alternative ethic of recognizing their human differences and appreciating more their similarities (Craps, 2007, p. 59). Insofar as the novel seeks to deconstruct the binary divisions of imperial cultures, it then advocates the assumption that cultures and identities are varied and hybrid rather than monolithic, an idea promulgated by postcolonial critics like Said and Bhabha.[14] Nations also are not microcosmic identities of finite borders and pure races. This endows Coetzee's novel with an ethical stance that interrogates not only political atrocities but also ambivalent political discourses that can harm the Other or further its subjugation, like that of liberal humanism adopted by the magistrate. The novel, in offering an alternative ethic of engagement with the Other, transcends history and asserts the discourse of the novel as a more ethical one.[15] What the magistrate says at the end about his inability to see what is staring him in the face (p. 152) is probably an indication of the failure of the magistrate's discourse of liberal humanism to account for the Other on its own terms or engage it. The new alternative Coetzee offers is not one based on historical or fictional discourses, but on an awareness of our limitations and prejudices. Sigmund Freud (1961) asserts that "civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine single human individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind" (p. 69). This counters all narrow claims to civilization that exclude the Other.

Notes

[1] Hereafter abbreviated as *WB*. Parenthetical citations will be given in the text.

[2] It is not surprising that much of the commentary on the novel focuses on the issue of torture. For example, see J. Wenzel, M. Moses, and B. Eckstein.

[3] Although the anonymous Empire is given an allegorical, universal status by virtue of its being anonymous, Coetzee does not drop the definite article of "the" Empire all times in the text as Attwell seems to suggest. For example, see pp. 8, 17, 18, 37, 110, and p. 128. Hence, I use the definite article for the Empire throughout.

[4] These are: *Dusklands* (1974), *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), and *WB*.

[5] Likewise, Anderson claims that the imagined community which is the nation is mediated by discourses of representation and narration, especially those of the novel and the newspaper (p. 25).

[6] S. Freud argues that civilization is measured by managing rivers and canals, and fields, planting, and breeding domestic animals (p. 39). Freud says: "We recognize, then, that countries have attained a high level of civilization if we find that in them everything which can assist in the exploitation of the earth by man and in his protection against the forces of nature—everything, in short, which is of use to him—is attended to and effectively carried out" (p. 39).

[7] Susan Gallagher argues that "the dichotomy between the Empire and the barbarians is marked by physical and social differences" manifested in differences in physical appearance, food, hygiene, occupations, and lifestyles. She argues that the novel questions "the stereotypes of idleness and slovenliness" used to identify the barbarians (p. 129).

[8] Maria Boletsi says that the etymology of the ancient Greek word "barbaros" "is supposed to imitate the incomprehensible mumblings of the language of foreign peoples, sounding like 'bar-bar' (or, as we would say today, 'bla bla')" (p. 68).

[9] I am not interested in the structural allegoricalness of *WB* or the way it relates to South African politics as a moral allegory. Many critics have examined such issues. See T. Dovey.

[10] Although the overall thrust of Scarry's argument about the negative impact of torture on culture, civilization, and language seems valid, the argument can be problematic if one considers the fact that torture can ultimately awaken

our human conscience against the brutalities of torture. It can be redeeming if it returns us to civilization. The magistrate acquires more of a human status in his own eyes, and in ours as well, when he is subjected to the torture practices of the Empire. In fact, he comes closer to seeing the barbarian girl on equal terms as a tortured human being after he himself is put in her position as a tortured victim of the Empire.

[11] Newman makes a similar claim about this scene and brings a gender twist to it: "In public, therefore, the magistrate enters a state of liminality, inhabiting a space on the margins of male and female, human and animal, an area seen as prelinguistic, outside the categories of language" (p. 136).

[12] Freud sees "cleanliness" and "order" as "important requirements of civilization" (p. 44).

[13] On another occasion, the magistrate reflects: "Whom will that other girl with the blind face remember: me with my silk robe and my dim lights and my perfumes and oils and my unhappy pleasures, or that other cold man with the mask over his eyes who gave the orders and pondered the sounds of her intimate pain?" (p. 132).

[14] See Said's introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, especially pp. xxv and 15.

[15] In "The Novel Today", Coetzee argues against the colonization of the novel by the discourse of history in South Africa. The novel, he argues, should have its own discourse and function according to its principles.

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