

*And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?*  
Torture and abuse of power as an allegory of the relationship  
between coloniser/colonised  
in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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*Why have our two consuls and the praetors come out  
today in their red, embroidered togas;  
why do they wear amethyst-studded bracelets,*

*and rings with brilliant, glittering emeralds;  
why are they carrying costly canes today,  
wonderfully carved with silver and gold?*

*Because the Barbarians are to arrive today,  
and such things dazzle the barbarians.*

“*Waiting for the Barbarians*”

*What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?  
The barbarians are to arrive today.*

*Why don't the worthy orators come as always  
to make their speeches, to have their say?*

*Why such inaction in the Senate?  
Why do the Senators sit and pass no laws?*

*Because the barbarians are to arrive today;  
and they get bored with eloquence and orations.*

*Because the barbarians are to arrive today.  
What laws can the Senators pass any more?  
When the barbarians come they will make the laws.*

*Why all of a sudden this unrest  
and confusion. (How solemn the faces have become).  
Why are the streets and squares clearing quickly,  
and all return to their homes, so deep in thought?*

*Why did our emperor wake up so early,  
and sits at the greatest gate of the city,  
on the throne, solemn, wearing the crown?*

*Because night is here but the barbarians have not come.  
And some people arrived from the borders,  
and said that there are no longer any barbarians.*

*Because the barbarians are to arrive today.  
And the emperor waits to receive  
their chief. Indeed he has prepared  
to give him a scroll. Therein he inscribed  
many titles and names of honour.*

*And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?  
Those people were some kind of solution.*

*Constantine P. Cavafy (1904)*

Through a magnificent setting in a remote and forgotten land somewhere/sometime in Africa, Coetzee masterfully questions the politics of a decadent Empire. The title of the novel is taken from a poem by a Modern Greek poet, Cavafy. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (COETZEE, 1980) is the story of a civil servant cast away in no-man’s-land, waiting for barbarians to attack the last upstanding frontier of a dying colony. But it is also –in Bhabha’s terms- a story of the “gathering in borders”. This Magistrate –whose name we are not given-, will set up a lantern which will show him what the Empire and its aims really are. This

knowledge will create a space in which he is neither an imperialist, nor a settled inhabitant of the land or a barbarian. He will love an almost blind, almost numb barbarian girl who will teach him the complexity of relationships among peoples from different cultures. She will do this by showing him that the overgeneralisations and stereotyping of the Other necessarily brings in a patronising, suffocating kind of relationship. And he will learn the lesson, and pay a high price for it. He will experience in his body and mind the torture he has more often than not seen executed on others and, through this experience, he will also grow to *see* the barbarism in the Empire he adheres to. We never learn how the oppressed felt, at least not from their mouths; yet it is probably Coetzee's most creative achievement that the Other becomes the *I* and speaks in the language of the coloniser. Sometime in the middle of the story, there is a shift in the subject of torture, and the Magistrate will take the voice of the oppressed. By creating this "interstitial space" Coetzee masterfully enters the a land of blurred frontiers, and oppressor/oppressed; intercultural space relationships in a complex web of situations and revelations that bring home to the reader the impossibility of conceiving just two opposite realities.

One of the main questions one may come across when venturing into the Post-colonial— as it is the case with other theories framed within the Post-modern— is that of how to deal with the intrinsic polarity which may arise. There is, as it is widely known, the idea of the "subversion" of discourse which both inscribes and contests cultural certified codes of recognition and, in so doing, it "uses and abuses, installs and then subverts" the conventions of discourse it sets out to challenge (HUTCHEON, 1988: xi, xiii). To put it differently, there is the risk of overlooking the heterogeneity of the issues at stake. The tendency then of a binary system of oppositions in which one stands on one side to evaluate, criticise or describe the other, does force us into a walk in the shallow waters of overgeneralisations. Worse than that, we may run the risk of having our own ideas becoming the counterpart of that which we so much stand against: the negative of the same photograph. Or, in Hutcheon's words "difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary oppositions." (ibid. 60)

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* by Coetzee it is very easy to trace every issue one could possible read as regards empire, authoritarian governments, torture, abuse of power; denial and self denial, but also humanity, the gathering in borders of the people who in the end, are bound to share the land and live in peace, as the Magistrate describes when he charges a torturer "*there were no border troubles here before you came*" (COETZEE, 1982: 125). It is also a novel about resistance and the capacity latent in all of us to act freely, to try and change the course of our personal or collective history, more often than not to one's cost. Needless to say, my reading of this novel is in Derrida's terms "a limited work, but with its own field and framework. A work possible only in a historical, political, theoretical, etc. situation that is

highly determined” (DERRIDA, 1981: 63). Our country and its recent past cry out from the pages as, once and again, the tortured and the torturers in this story mirror those we have known to exist in Argentina.

Given that it is so complex a novel and coming to terms with length and time, I will, in this paper, only attempt a first bird’s eye view at the issues of the search for the truth (confession), torture and abuse of power in the discourse of the narrator of the novel, in the light of Bahktin’s concept of narrator as always having *another’s speech*. (BAHKTIN, 1981, 313)

**Note:**

Both Breytenbach’s and Cavafy’s poems are presented in this paper as a form of introductory notes to the different sections, given the beauty of the pictures conveyed in them which summarise many of the ideas I will try to discuss here. I consider that any Intertextual analysis of these poems and Coetzee’s novel call for an entire different research.

### **Torture and abuse of power: “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt”**

*“The native’s resistance represents a frustration of that nineteenth-century strategy of surveillance, the **confession**, which seeks to dominate the ‘calculable’ individual by positioning the truth that the subject **has** but does not **know**.” (BHABHA, 2004, 149)*

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* we do not get to meet many barbarians, in fact there are only some, brought from the desert in order to be interrogated in the light of an imminent barbaric invasion decreed by the Third Bureau. A Colonel Joll is summoned by the government to survey this forgotten post in which everyone is leading a quiet undisturbed life, a kind of peace given precisely by the threat of invasion – but never a real invasion- of the absent barbarians. As the Colonel questions the Magistrate for prisoners, it happens that unfortunately and exceptionally, there are two of them in the barracks. They are an old man and his grandson. As the Magistrate reports to the Colonel, these two prisoners have repeatedly stated that the reason for their being there was that they were looking for a doctor since the old man had been ill for a while and needed attention. It was clear to see that these two men were harmless and that they were speaking the truth. The Magistrate, the only one in the place acquainted with the language of these two men, questions them again in front of Colonel Joll. However, the Colonel states that he wants to know the “Truth”. The Magistrate will explain to the prisoner that “his (the Colonel’s) work is to find out the truth” (COETZEE, 1980:3). The question of the truth becomes one of the first relevant issues in this novel: What is true? Who owns the truth? How can you determine if someone is telling the truth? After having tortured both men during the night, Colonel Joll meets the Magistrate who will ask him:

*“What if a prisoner is telling the truth? (...) yet finds that he is not believed? Is that not a terrible position? Imagine, to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to*

*be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more! And what a responsibility for the interrogator!  
How do you ever know that a man has told you the truth?’*

*‘There is a certain tone’, Joll says, ‘A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognise that tone.’*

*‘The tone of truth! Can you pick up this tone in everyday speech? Can you hear whether I’m telling the truth?’*

*(...) ‘No, you misunderstand me. I am speaking only of a special situation now; I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see –this is what happens- first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. This how you get the truth.’” (COETZEE, 1980:5)*

“Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt” (ibid, 5) reflects the Magistrate as he tries to reconcile himself with the idea that he and the Colonel belong to the same system. Yet he will not be able to reconcile anything. When he learns that one of the prisoners is dead, he asks one of the soldiers for explanations on how it all had happened. The soldier explains that the old man became uncontrollable, trying to attack the Colonel so he had to be put down. The Magistrate then asks the soldier whether that was what he had been told to say to which the soldier, under the obvious principle of obedience that had in the first place made him lie, admits “yes”.

On writing about Breytenbach – a South African white poet exiled for his writings denouncing tortures- Coetzee comments:

*“When the police explain a prisoner’s death by saying that he slipped on a bar of soap, the unstated continuation is: and we defy any court in the land to reject that explanation. It is one of the linguistic practices of totalitarianism to send out coded messages whose meaning is known to all parties, but to enforce (by censorship) a literal interpretation of them, at least in the public arena. Thus ‘slipped on a bar of soap’ is known to all parties to mean ‘died under torture’ but it’s public interpretation is nevertheless forced to remain ‘slipped on a bar of soap’.” (COETZEE in TIFFIN and LAWSON, 1994:87).*

So is the case with the barbarian in Coetzee's novel:

*"(...) the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigating officer. A scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful".* (COETZEE, 1980: 6)

We later learn that the prisoner's hands were tied. As Tiffin and Lawson explain:

*"A particular form of obscuring function of language and textuality is the process of erasure by which obscurity is transferred from the language to the field being inscribed".* (TIFFIN-LAWSON, 1994:5)

The magistrate enters the room where the boy is *"holding the lantern high, trespassing, I realise, on what has become holy or unholy ground, if there is any difference, preserve of the mysteries of the State."* (COETZEE, 1980: 7) The fact that he uses the word "mysteries" to describe the functioning and methods of the state gives the state an almighty power; unwritten rules and laws we know to exist, yet cannot comprehend, and are therefore unquestionable. Yet, he does bring in the question of ambivalence: this ground is holy, or unholy; since for him -it seems- it makes no difference. Or worse, he knows of the ambivalence of the State as father and oppressor, and starts seeing the incongruence of it all. The expectations are that he will say something for the benefit of this boy. He will see to it that he gets some food. He will approach the boy and after trying to calm his fear, he will untie his hands, placing them in his as he tries to help the boy recover some blood circulation. But when he does this, however, he senses that the boy does not completely trust his kind attitude and reflects: *"It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive."* (ibid, 8). In Bhabha's terms:

*"The native refusal to unify the authoritarian, colonialist address within the terms of civil engagement gives the subject of colonial authority –father and oppressor- another turn. This ambivalent 'and', always less than one and double, traces the times and spaces between civil address and colonial articulation. The authoritarian demand can now only be justified if it is contained in the language of paranoia."* (BHABHA, 2004, 141)

As the Magistrate realises the refusal on the part of the boy to fully take his help as such, we as readers tend to sympathise with him in the light of this comment: the Magistrate has acknowledged the double nature of the role he plays, the kind of authority he represents. He has untied the boy, talked to him, made the soldier bring him some food. And he goes further. He has the body of the dead old man removed from the room where the boy is. And he opens the shroud only to realise that the old man has been beaten to death. Shockingly enough, on leaving, this is the last, brutal message he will deliver into the boy's ears:

*“Listen: you must tell the officer the truth. That is all he wants to hear from you. Once he is sure you are telling the truth he will not hurt you. But you must tell him everything you know. You must answer every question he asks you truthfully. If there is pain, do not lose heart.”*  
(COEZTEE, 1982: 5)

The ambivalence of his discourse, the double nature of his worries (that he should eat, but that he should confess to whatever the Colonel wants to hear) are both inscribed on the line of the oppressor's *modus operandi*. We know the Magistrate is telling this to the boy out of his own cowardice and lack of strength to stand up against what he considers an act of useless cruelty. He wants the boy to get away with torture by confessing. Given his nature, he consequently moves into the practicalities; into the only acts he feels entitled to perform: providing food and untying of the boys hands. The complexity of the Magistrate's thoughts –regarding the two masks of the oppressor- is present in his discourse. However, he is unable to see how much of the responsibility in this tragic episode falls on his shoulders. By enticing the boy to confess to any truth, he performs this double role of father and oppressor and in so doing, he will be responsible for the boy's death.

Later, once he learns that the prisoner has confessed (we never get to know what he was made to say exactly, and it does not matter) the Magistrate will again visit the boy and tell him:

*“They tell me that you have made a confession. They say you have admitted that you and the old man and other members of your clan have stolen sheep and horses. You have said that the men of your clan are arming themselves, that in the spring you are all going to join in a great war on the Empire. Are you telling the truth? Do you understand what this confession of yours will mean? Do you understand?’ (...)* ‘Kinsmen of yours are going to die, perhaps even your parents, your brothers, your sisters. Do you really want that?’ (...) *He does not flinch: it is like slapping dead flesh.”* (ibid. 11)



Let it be reminded that the only person who can understand the boy's language in the fort is the Magistrate. We do not know how the soldiers and the Colonel conducting the interrogations got the truth out of this boy's confession. Obviously the boy will either die as a consequence of the tortures he has received, or else he will be executed. Cruelly enough, the last words he has heard are those telling him he has betrayed his own people and that now, as he lies dying, they are being threatened because of his confession. If imperial relationships were at first established by weapons, they are maintained by textuality.

*“Colonialism (like its counterpart, racism), then is an operation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation. They are always already written by that system of representation.”* (TIFFIN-LAWSON, 1994:5)

Therefore,

*“Language becomes obscene when it proceeds from an imperium or power base so secure that it can abandon even the pretence of referentiality or the negotiation of truth.”* (ibid, 4)

As a consequence of the interrogations a group of fishermen and their families were also brought to the fort. After being tortured and ill treated, they are left to themselves wandering about the barracks of the fort as stray cats. The Magistrate feels empathetic towards them and orders that they are made free. Some of them cannot even walk and it will take some days for them to recover, if they do at all. However, he will not concede that the barbarians stay. On the contrary, he orders that *“the barracks return to being barracks, the arrangements be made to restore the prisoners to their former lives as soon as possible, as far as possible.”* (ibid, 26) After all the paperwork and the help he provides first the boy and later the other natives with, his thoughts move in the direction of his retirement and reputation: *“When I pass away I hope to merit three lines of small print in the Imperial gazette. I have not asked for more than a quiet life in quiet times”* (ibid 8) In this last quote lies the true nature of his feelings: these barbarians need to be told what to do; they even need to be told what to confess; they are like children and need tutoring. And of course, they need to be away from him to live his quiet life. And with this thought, he is also refusing to see that the times are not quiet. He has held up the lantern, and seen the old man's body beaten to death. And he has gone through the danger of insurrection by feeding and taking care of the boy that night and the surviving barbarians later. He knows this might cause him to lose his position. Nevertheless, he wants everything to stop;

he wants to return to his life, this *modus vivendi* of waiting for the barbarians; that allows for a simple life, away from trouble. And while the interrogations continue the Magistrate will move away from his rooms and choose to spend the days in his archaeological searching and the nights in his favourite prostitute's bed "*away from the empire of pain*" (ibid. 24) but unable to rest; unable to face the truth that shouts at him in the face.

Psychological torture used to undermine prisoners and subvert their beliefs and ideas is also present in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. As the Magistrate keeps investigating he learns –from a soldier- that the boy had been told to sleep with his grandfather (by then dead) to “keep him warm”. The boy was also at a point made to believe that they were going to shroud him together with his grandfather's dead body, just as a joke. After a while, the boy delivered the truth the Colonel needed to hear. We don't know what goes on in the mind of this dying boy. Yet, in a magnificent turn of the screw, the Magistrate will be in a position to speak the mind of the oppressed and the tortured. Bakhtin analyses this figure when he refers to the dialogue in which the statement of one of the speakers has been omitted. Only that in this case it is the first speaker's voice which has been omitted, yet the general sense is not violated. "*The other's discourse is merely implied, but the entire structure of speech would be completely different if there were not this reaction to another person's implied words.*" (BAKHTIN 1984: 197)

**“Unless we are the enemy...”**

“The Windows”

*In these darkened rooms, where I spend  
oppressive days, I pace to and fro  
to find the windows. -- When a window  
opens, it will be a consolation. --  
But the windows cannot be found, or I cannot  
find them. And maybe it is best that I do not find them.*

*Maybe the light will be a new tyranny.  
Who knows what new things it will reveal.*

***Constantine P. Cavafy (1903)***

The Magistrate takes a blind native girl he finds lost in the city to his lodgings. At first he starts by carrying out a kind of ceremony in which he washes her feet, swollen and dramatically wounded by the tortures she has received. He does this every night. And they sleep together, but without any kind of intercourse. The relationship will evolve until a point in which the Magistrate decides that the girl should be returned to her people. He wants her to be confronted with the possibility of being free and nevertheless choosing to remain with him. It is this moment of revelation that will sentence him to experience torture, to become the Other. Here we see the change in the Magistrate's attitude towards the barbarians. Once he has decided the girl belongs with her people; even if they do not live a very comfortable life by his own standards, even if their concept of family, happiness, sex are different from his; this girl has an identity of her own, as valuable as his. And the question of remaining with him has to be answered by her inner self, in absolute freedom of choice; and not under menacing phrases, or threatening ghost of torturers returning to hunt her dreams. After this decision, he says:

*"Now that I have committed myself to a course I sleep more easily and even I detect within myself something like happiness."* (ibid, 63)

He has taken sides, for the very first time in his entire stay in the Station.

On returning from taking the barbarian girl to her people, the Magistrate will find that his place has been taken over by the Colonel, who has returned to show him who is in control. On his arrival, he is taken prisoner on the charges of "*consorting with the enemy*" (COETZEE, 1980 85.) and locked in the same barracks in which the barbarian boy had been held. But, contrary to expectations, he feels a certain kind of relief, and a special kind of elation:

*"My alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over. I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken I am a free man."* (ibid, 85)

He is no longer on the oppressors' side. But neither is he on the side of the barbarians. He is in a space in between, "*in the midst of these lonely gatherings of the scattered people*" (BHABHA, 2004: 200) a place of gatherings in which he will now try and reconcile all his life experience, his ideals, his doings and his omissions in order to be able to set his heart at rest. In his mind, the figure "father and oppressor" breaks up as he tries to remember the girl's father, who he knew had been tortured in the eyes of his daughter and who had been among the prisoners Joll had sent in and he himself had avoided seeing:

*"All I see is a figure named father that could be the figure of any father who knows his child is being beaten whom he cannot protect. (...) this knowledge of fathers, this knowledge of condemnation, is more than he can bear. No wonder he wanted to die."* (ibid. 88)

It is this, his moment of realisation. One cannot be oppressor and father. And one cannot be oppressor and oppressed; torturer and tortured. Finally his responsibility in this tragedy is now turned against him:

*"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. I wanted to do what was right, I wanted to make reparation: I will not deny this decent impulse (...). There must always be a place for penance and reparation. Nevertheless, I should never have allowed the gates of the town to be opened to people who assert that there are higher considerations than those of decency."* (ibid 88)

By acknowledging his share of responsibility in the behaviour of the State towards the barbarians, he will finally be ready to walk down the same paths of the barbarians in the hands of the Empire. And in a beautiful metaphor, he will equate the double discourse, double symbol of the oppressor to the figures of the albatross and the crow:

*"So I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her. She leans on her two sticks looking dimly upward. What does she see? The protecting guardian albatross or the black crow afraid to strike while its prey yet breathes?"* (ibid. 89)

Now, the nature of his torture is a different one.

*“No one beats me, 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? Yet they are all the more degrading for their pettiness. I remember smiling when the door first closed behind me and the key turned the lock. I could bring with me a world of thoughts and memories. But now I begin to comprehend how rudimentary freedom is. What freedom has been left for me? The freedom to eat or go hungry; to keep my silence or to gabble to myself or beat on the door or scream. If I was the object of an injustice, a minor injustice, when they locked me in here, now I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy.” (ibid, 93)*

There are many references of the Magistrate becoming an animal, of having lost hope, dignity; and of his cell guards as also being prisoners to him since they have to stand there all day long keeping watch. He has become the barbarian, the enemy, the Other.

Then the interrogations start. There is a cedarwood chest in the Magistrate office where he has kept for years his archaeological findings. We learn of him being someone truly interested in the past civilizations which inhabited those lands. The contents of the chest are mainly slips of polar wood with alien inscriptions on them. Funnily enough, the Colonel believes these are his exchange letters with the barbarians. Here, the true nature of the Colonel stands out: a complete lack of acquaintance with the place he is trying to take control over. He cannot distinguish the fact that these written slips of wood are so old they even disintegrate in one's hands. The Colonel asks the Magistrate to read the supposed letters between him and the barbarians. The key point here is that, so far, he has been unable to decipher the codes in the scripts but he believes they belong to advanced civilizations that, before his, had tried to conquer the barbarians. We have been told that the Magistrate used to display these plaques on the floor of his flat trying to find a common pattern to them and that he had so far been unsuccessful. There is no possibility of him reading anything in those plaques of wood. Yet, suddenly, he *does* start “reading” them. He also decidedly gives a human face to the barbarians by reciting letters between fathers and daughters, charged with love and caring; with “civilised” ways of inscribing their relationships.

*“‘He sends greetings to his daughter,’ I say. I hear with surprise the thick nasal voice that is now mine. My finger runs along the lines of characters from right to left. ‘Whom he says he has not seen for a long time. He hopes she is happy and thriving. He hopes the lambing season has been good. He has a gift for her, he says, which he will keep till he sees her again.*

*It is not easy to read the signature. It could be simply “your father” or it could be something else, a name.’ ” (ibid.121)*

In the letters in which the voice is apparently his, the Magistrate begins denouncing everything he has seen so far. Now he reads one he has written himself and which shows clearly the blatant lie of his reading for why would a letter he wrote to someone else remain there, as a private diary, as wishful thinking and not in the hands of the receiver of the message?

*“This one reads as follows’ I say, ‘I am sorry I must send bad news. The soldiers came and took your brother away...’ ” (ibid 121)*

And then the reading becomes more and more clear a denounce; a statement against the Empire and its actions:

*“We went to fetch your brother yesterday. They showed us into a room where he lay on a table sewn up in a sheet.’ (...) ‘What if it is the wrong body you are giving me? You have so many bodies here, bodies of brave young men.’ (...) ‘I tore the sheet wide open and saw and saw bruises all over his body, and saw that his feet were swollen and broken. What happened to him? I said. I don’t know, said the man, ‘it is not in the paper; if you have questions you must go to the sergeant, but he is very busy.’ We have had to bury your brother here, outside their fort, because he was beginning to stink. Please tell your mother and try to console her.’ ” (ibid 122)*

We understand the nature of these readings. They are about the truth of what the natives suffer in the hands of the colonisers. The terrible truth that also becomes clear in these readings is that mothers of dead tortured natives never see their sons or daughters’ bodies again. For the parents of the boy who died after telling the truth (or agreeing to statements he barely understood and which condemned him) their child will simply be missing. No record is kept of how many natives come in or leave, live or die. We never know where they bury them, what is the use the oppressors make of their belongings. It does not matter anymore whether the Magistrate can read these scripts or not. It is just about inscribing the natives’ history, which so far has been untold. Yet, such extravagant readings, such complex understanding of the signs sound as mockery, as a parody of the declaration of a person who has been tortured and finally breaks. The Magistrate has finally understood what happens to people when the

torturers want to extirpate from them a certain “truth”. No matter what you say, it will not be true as long as the torturers decide so. After these and other translations, the Colonel –irritated and tired of this insurrection- says he is not interested in those sticks because he assumes those are gambling sticks used by the barbarians. And he goes on to tell the Magistrate that he is the only officer in the frontier who has not been cooperative. He wants to know what the magistrate’s expectations as regards his future are, since it is clear that he cannot be allowed back in his post. The Magistrate says he is waiting for his trial. Of course, there will be no trial, as the Colonel bluntly puts it to him:

*“You want to go down in history as a martyr, I suspect. But who is going to put you in the history books? These border troubles are of no significance. In a while they will pass and the frontier will go to sleep for another twenty years. People are not interested in the history of the back and beyond.”* (COETZE, 1982: 125)

There is no official information of the Magistrate’s detention. And no one is interested in the lives of the people of the back and beyond, the natives, the Magistrate. He is at the whim of a lunatic torturer. And so it is that a new realisation comes to him. These men go about their business and when they feel like it, they pay him a visit. It comes home to him that they do not have a plan; they have not been given orders. There is no one in the Bureau, there in the capital, to know about a tortured dying Magistrate in the outback of the Empire. No news have been sent, no records scribbled. These men are using and abusing the power given to them by an absent State. But, this absence becomes the white card that allows for everything. It is precisely in the absence of a State which sees to the care of all its citizens that this other Authoritarian State becomes overwhelmingly present. The Colonel and his people make it real. One day, someone will have to read out from alien writings and invent a story in which the Magistrate’s truth is told.

And now it is time for the response to the Magistrate’s insurrection. Now the torture is real, palpable; the kind he has seen done on others. Now he becomes, truly, the silenced, oppressed, tortured and forgotten one:

*“When Warrant Officer Mandel and his man first brought me back here and lit the lamp and closed the door, I wondered how much pain a plump comfortable old man would be able to endure in the name of his eccentric notions of how the Empire should conduct itself. 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 fails and voids itself.” (ibid, 126)*

## **Finalities**

*Amid fear and suspicions,  
with agitated mind and frightened eyes,  
we melt and plan how to act  
to avoid the certain  
danger that so horribly threatens us.  
And yet we err, this was not in our paths;  
the messages were false  
(or we did not hear, or fully understand them).  
Another catastrophe, one we never imagined,  
sudden, precipitous, falls upon us,  
and unprepared -- there is no more time -- carries us off.*

## **Constantine P. Cavafy (1911)**

As readers, we have seen innocent people being tortured and compelled to tell lies to quench the torturers' thirst for the truth that will justify their existence. We have also been taken down the road of the regretful Magistrate and his coming of age. However, there is yet a third party in this entirely unfortunate story: the image of the torturer. Early in the novel, the Magistrate will question the nature of the Colonel and his evil acts. Yet he does not know exactly what it is he does (for he has turned away from the Empire of pain; closed his ears to the screams of pain) but he has surely pictured the Colonel's nature:

*“Looking at him I wonder how he felt the very first time; did he, invited as an apprentice to twist the pincers or turn the screw or whatever it is they do, shudder even a little to know that at that instant he was trespassing into the forbidden? I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps,*

*change all his clothes; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean?” (COETZEE, 1980, 13)*

Here, we see how the Magistrate was already aware of the doings of the Bureau. We also see that he understands that inflicting pain on others has always means trespassing the limits of their intimate physical and mental spaces. This will become even clearer to us in his relationship with the barbarian girl. And, through his memories, we also know of a change in the politics of the Bureau; now (as opposed to before) men –torturers- are being *created* that they feel nothing. But if they did, they would probably need to wash their hands or change their clothes to break bread with other men. The others, the oppressed, are not men; they are not human.

Later, when he meets the Colonel for the last time he will ask him:

*“Forgive me if the question seems imprudent, but how do you eat afterwards, after you have been ... working with people? That is a question I have always asked myself about executioners and other such people. (...) “Do not misunderstand me. I am not accusing you. I am long past that. Remember I too have devoted a life to law, I too know its processes; I know that the workings of justice are often obscure. I am only trying to understand the zone in which you live. I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. But I cannot! That is what troubles me! If I were he, I say to myself, my hands would feel so dirty that it would choke me.” (ibid: 138)*

The magistrate has come to understand the true nature of the oppressor’s mind, and what it means to be a father and oppressor, which he by now has shown to himself he is not. In one of his poems, Breytenbach asks:

*Does your heart also tighten in the throat  
When you grasp the extinguished limbs  
With the same hands that will stroke your wife’s secrets?*  
(BREYTENBACH 1927: 27)

The Magistrate here is asking the same terrible question. By trespassing with his questions into the torturer’s secret parts, he is taking revenge with words. He is expecting to torture the Colonel’s mind. And as the terrified Colonel wants to escape from the place, out of fear of the imminent arrival of the barbarians, the farewell words from the Magistrate will be a message to be sent home, the words of someone who has learnt his lesson well:

*“The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves. (...) Not on others”* (ibid 160)

**And yet we err, this was not in our paths**

(...)

*“Because night is here but the barbarians have not come.*

*And some people arrived from the borders,*

*and said that there are no longer any barbarians.”*

(...)

Coetzee’s, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (as in Cavafy’s poem) is –among other themes- a novel about the importance of freedom, respect for others and self respect. But it is also a novel which sets out to remind us that we all share responsibility in the wrongdoings that blow in our faces and still we avoid to see. In the Magistrate’s words:

*“There has been something staring at me in the face, and still I do not see it.”* (ibid, 170)

As I write the conclusion to this paper, a former missing person from the times our country was ruled by the military forces, has disappeared, again. This man’s absence, his not being anywhere speaks of a presence. Jorge Julio López disappeared on the morning he was expected to tell his truth in a trial against a former member of the Police force, torturer Miguel Osvaldo Etchecolatz, who has for some time been serving sentence in prison. López had been called into trial to describe the time he had been illegally imprisoned and tortured. He has not appeared as yet. His absence speaks of a presence. We have come to a moment; it seems, of waking from our sleep to see that the barbarians are out there. Even if it is only to justify the apparently peaceful life we live in at the moment, we have been reminded that this is only possible with the barbarians at the gate.

But then again, one may always choose to see:

*“I ought never to have taken my lantern to see what was going on in the hut by the granary. On the other hand, there was no way, once I had picked up the lantern, for me to put it down again.”* (COETZEE, 1980, 23)

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