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**“The Knot Loops in upon Itself”: Futility in Language,  
Communication, and Meaning in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the  
Barbarians***

Senior Paper

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Greek poet C. P. Cavafy's 1910 poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" shares more than just a title with J. M. Coetzee's 1980 novel. As the title suggests, the loosely identified "barbarians" are central to the basic premise of the poem and novel. In one instance, the unidentified speaker in Cavafy's poem says: "—And why don't our worthy orators, as always, come out / to deliver speeches, to have their usual say? / Because the barbarians will arrive today; / And they get bored with eloquence and orations (8-9.24-27). This general sentiment is expressed nearly verbatim in Coetzee's novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, when the protagonist—known only as the Magistrate—thinks about a barbarian woman: "She has a fondness for facts, I note, for pragmatic dicta; she dislikes fancy, questions, [or] speculations" (47). The speaker of Cavafy's poem openly mocks the barbarian language and thereby insinuates the inferiority of barbarians because of their less intelligent and simplistic language. The Magistrate may be more objective in his observations, but through these passages it is clear that the barbarian language is often undermined.

The extent to which the barbarian language is considered inferior is also reflected in the use of the word "barbarian," which has historical connotations with unintelligent savages. Critic Maria Boletsi traces the etymology of the word and explains succinctly, "Within colonial rhetoric, the barbarians are violent and irrational by nature, whereas imperial rule is rational and its violence is justified under the pretext of the civilizing mission" (69). Barbarians are not only savage and violent (as Boletsi shows) but also their language is simple, unintelligent, and meaningless within this historical colonial frame. Coetzee's novel examines this historical binary between civilization and barbarian, but in the process makes a commentary on how "civilized" forces work to degrade and destroy the Other's language.

In the novel, language and communication become intrinsically tied up with power and oppression within the context of the Empire—the militaristic ruling body of the local town. During the present tense of the novel, the Empire uses the tools of torture, writing, and inscription to successfully communicate power. While the Empire succeeds in controlling communication and erasing the language of the Other, barbarian experiences are rendered uncommunicative. Not only are the traces of barbarian history—as found on the tablets the protagonist unearths—meaningless to anyone inside the world of Empire, but also even communication between him and a barbarian woman is problematic. The further that the Magistrate tries to make meaning of their experiences, or even impose his own meaning onto the barbarians, the deeper he falls into an inescapable hole: “The knot loops in upon itself; I cannot find the end,” he thinks (23). As long as the Magistrate is identified within the Empire’s ideological system, his attempts to communicate with the barbarians are flawed and inadequate. *Waiting for the Barbarians* therefore examines how language can be manipulated and destroyed when a dominant entity works to control and impede forms of communication. Through the control of language, the dominant structure can assert its authority and successfully perpetuate the ideology of power. For anyone who looks for a meaning or deeper symbolism outside of the Empire’s logic (like the Magistrate), it becomes difficult for language and communication to convey anything other than pain and oppression. The text’s final stance asserts a failure of conclusive interpretation. Critics have stressed the novel’s deferment of meaning, implying that a singular interpretation is inconclusive for both the Magistrate and readers.

The colonial situation at the center of the narrative establishes the backbone of the text. This colonial and imperialist framework—maintained by the ominously titled “Empire”—plays a critical function in how the barbarian language and culture is effectively erased. Literary critic

Stephen Watson supports this point when he writes “language itself fails to signify, to mean at all, under the conditions prevailing in such a situation” (373). The oppressive Empire has effectively removed the native barbarians, presumably by forcing them off the land. But this seemingly straightforward colonial context is complicated by the Empire’s regime that ventures out, captures barbarians, and brings them back to interrogate and torture them. The Magistrate, who wishes to fulfill his duty as a servant of Empire, is quite aware of the systemic oppression the Empire has inflicted. When he is not overseeing the records and day-to-day activities of the Empire, he spends his free time excavating an ancient barbarian ruin. When the Magistrate uncovers undecipherable characters etched onto stone tablets, it becomes clear that many aspects of barbarian culture—including language—have been destroyed.

Because the novel inherently deals with colonialism, and invites a post-colonial reading, many critics have grappled with where to place the text politically. On one hand, the presence of an oppressive colonial system has connections with the historical colonialism of South Africa. Jean-Philippe Wade, an early Marxist critic of Coetzee, argues *Waiting for the Barbarians* makes a commentary on the dying stages of imperialism and colonialism. In fact, Wade calls this “a *systematic crisis of the colonial state*,” that could be associated with the dwindling status of South African apartheid in the 1980s (283). Wade also points out parallels between the uses of torture in the novel with instances of torture in apartheid South Africa (275).

Yet because so many details of the text remain intentionally elusive, a specific political commentary or critique becomes difficult to pin down. However, if we place the political implications of the text aside, it becomes clear how language becomes a stable thread throughout the novel. The archeological ruins the Magistrate uncovers, the physical act of torture, and the barriers between a barbarian woman and Magistrate all function as forms of ineffective language

and communication in the novel. These ineffective forms all contribute to the overall sense of failed meaning at the end of the novel.

The text explores the relationship between power and language in many ways. One of the methods by which the Empire simultaneously controls and impedes communication (and asserts its power) is through spoken language. In this case, it is undoubtedly the Empire that works to deny the barbarian language and the initial instances that display this are through spoken (or verbal) language. The Magistrate is positioned as seemingly the only character who can distinguish the language difference between the nomadic barbarians and the Empire. In one early scene, Colonel Joll—the leader of the Empire’s Civil Guard—has brought in a new group of barbarian prisoners to the town. The Magistrate positions himself against Joll when he says (speaking of the barbarian prisoners): “If you want to speak to them I will of course help with the language” (3). It is clear the Magistrate accepts his role as a moderator and translator. The Magistrate even becomes agitated by the apparent lack of understanding Joll and the guards possess when he exclaims, “Did no one tell him the difference between fisherman with nets and wild nomad horseman with bows? Did no one tell him they don’t speak the same language?” (19). While the Empire qualifies all people who live outside the town’s boundary as barbarians, the Magistrate is sympathetic to the differences between the peaceful river nomads and the barbarian horsemen (who the Empire fear will rise up and attack the town at any time). As literary critic Maria Boletsi writes: “[for] the Empire and its practitioners, everyone who produces meaning alien to their language is reduced to a barbarian” (80). It is this refusal by the Empire to recognize the nuances in the nomadic languages that inhibits basic means of communication—an issue that only becomes more complicated as the novel progresses.

The novel's first instance of strained communication exists between the barriers in spoken language between prisoners and guards and continues when the Magistrate begins a relationship with a barbarian woman. In fact, one of the major elements of the novel is this relationship. While their relationship represents an important symbolic theme in the text—namely between meaning and physicality—the initial importance of their relationship is built around how they communicate.

The Magistrate quickly becomes enthralled with uncovering the woman's experience. He even thinks, "I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her" (94). When the Magistrate sees the woman begging in the town one day, he offers to take her in—even though they presumably do not understand each other. The Magistrate describes one scene where "she holds up her forefinger, grips it, twists it," to which he adds, "I have no idea what the gesture means" (31). There is some indication that they are able to communicate—albeit in a difficult manner—through a "makeshift language" (45). However, when the Magistrate buys a pet fox cub, he jokingly states, "I keep two wild animals in my rooms" (39). Although they share intimate moments like when the Magistrate cares for her injuries, she is still likened to a voiceless animal.

The Magistrate persistently seeks to understand the woman by questioning her about the details of her torture and interrogation. At first, she remains passive and undecipherable to his constant questions. When she eventually discloses a few scenes of her torture, there is an atmosphere of miscommunication when the Magistrate thinks, "Is this the question I asked? I want to protest but instead listen on" (46). One factor for such strained communication stems from the Magistrate's position within the Empire. Maria Boletsi explains, "As long as he remains trapped in the Empire's logic of violating its subjects in order to construct them on its own terms,

the Magistrate's communicative attempts will not be gratified by the girl" (79). Thus the Magistrate's penetrating questions—which ask the woman to divulge her personal experience at the hands of her torturers—are similar to the same sorts of interrogations she has already undergone. He may understand the nuances in barbarian language enough to be able to converse with the woman, but he is still identified under the structure of Empire.

It is understandable that a barrier exists between the woman and Magistrate because they do speak two inherently different languages. However, the presence of her physical body creates the most dysfunctional communication between them. Part of the Magistrate's inability to connect with the woman stems from the fact that he believes her physical body can communicate a deeper meaning. The Magistrate is aware of his own aging body (and impotency) and thinks, "I feed her, shelter her, use her body, if that is what I am doing, in this foreign way" (35). Rather than using her body as a means for "knowing" his own sexuality through intercourse, the Magistrate instead believes her body can be read, both figuratively and literally.

The only way her body can be read is through leftover scars and marks—painful physical results of the woman's torture at the hands of Joll and his guards. The nature of their relationship is intimate and the Magistrate is quite aware of these marks the woman carries on her body: "One evening, rubbing her scalp with oil, massaging her temples and forehead, I notice in the corner of one eye a greyish puckering as though a caterpillar lay there with its head under her eyelid, grazing," he observes (35). The intimacy they share has afforded the Magistrate the notion that the woman's body—especially her scars—holds a significant and deep message about the pain and suffering the Empire has created (and will no doubt continue to create). He believes he can attain a symbolic meaning of her experience through reading her scars, like when he observes, "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body

are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (35). These attempts by the Magistrate to communicate with the woman through this act of reading are problematic in many regards.

Literary critic Jennifer Wenzel argues the Magistrate embodies the idea that “torture has transformed her into a text to be read” (65). Her physical body, in some ways, represents the “Other” and a physical vessel that can be “decoded in the same way as the characters on the wooden slips he has excavated,” as critics like Benita Parry have noted (48). Wenzel adds further to this point when she states, “The suffering body cannot be reduced to ‘civilized’ language” (69). The Magistrate’s attempts to read such scars are inherently flawed because the act of reading the woman’s body not only undermines her voice, but also supports the inscription of pain and power—through torture—on the body. If it were possible for the scars to be literally read (like a text), it would be likely they could only communicate the Empire’s logic of power.

French theorist Michel Foucault examined the ways the physical body is used within power systems and how these bodies function as agents of communication. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault addresses his notion of the “body politic,” which situates the body as a political vessel. Foucault explains that the body is “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...[and] emit signs” (173). Critic Michela Canepari-Labib, who has examined the role of language across Coetzee’s novels, embeds Foucault into *Waiting for the Barbarians* when she argues:

Foucault writes that torture is a form of writing...on the body through pain and by leaving the individual with just an injured body...it deprives the person of the ‘essence of humanity,’ thus creating his/her Otherness and turning full human beings into the ‘sub-humans’ the systems have been waiting for. (108)

Therefore, torture leaves a unique form of inscription on physical bodies—as well as alienating and degrading the barbarians. As Foucault insinuates, the inscriptions (marks, burns, scars, injuries) that torture writes on the body emit a very distinct message of power and oppression.

It is clear that torture has inscribed power onto the woman's body (even if the Magistrate cannot literally read it). Although the Magistrate searches for a deeper meaning, her scars are only able to emit the sign of Empire. Critic Derek Attridge parallels the physicality of their relationship with the intimacy of torture by arguing, "The fascination with the body that characterizes erotic attachment cannot...be separated from the fascination of the body evident in the torture chamber" (43). Even the Magistrate is quite aware of his liminal and problematic position (in regards to the woman) he admits, "The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible" (32). Indeed, even though the Magistrate is somewhat sympathetic with the barbarians, his consciousness is filtered through the Empire's ideology of oppression. As literary critic Barbara Eckstein explains: "It is because the existence of torture first presents the Magistrate with the fact that 'pain is truth.' He mistakenly believes that because torture inflicts pain, there is some sort of hidden truth behind physical scars" (193). As Eckstein implies, the Magistrate frighteningly encompasses the same ideas as Colonel Joll—or even all interrogators. The Magistrate's attempt to read the woman's scars would seemingly *validate* the acts of torture because reading them—even in a figural sense—would support the idea that pain warrants any sort of symbolic truth.

Indeed, the position of the Magistrate is often ambivalent. Critic Stephen Watson calls the Magistrate a "dissenting colonizer" (379). Through Watson's description it is clear the Magistrate's liminal position within the Empire impedes his ability to communicate and limits his own understanding. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that within the Empire all

forms of language and communication are ultimately coded by inescapable power implications. This notion suggests that language can be manipulated under Empire and threads of communication are ultimately dictated by the Empire's logic. Because the Magistrate cannot readily escape his position within the Empire, he is subject to believing he can extract an ultimate truth from the woman as seen through these early interrogative questions and attempts to read her body.

Foucault posits that the body can become a vessel for communication under power systems. The text's other instances of torture support the notion that torture works to inscribe on the physical body but also works to control, reduce, and destroy verbal (spoken) language as well. Elaine Scarry's 1985 study, *The Body in Pain*, accurately displays how torture oppresses verbal language. Scarry argues that intense bodily pain is so destructive that it becomes world destroying (35). When intense pain is inflicted onto someone, his or her world is literally unmade and "as the content of one's world disintegrates, so the content's of one's language disintegrates" (Scarry 35). Because of his interactions with the barbarian woman, Colonel Joll eventually places the Magistrate under arrest. He is stripped of his title and (without a trial) placed in a cell, tortured, and eventually mock executed. As a prisoner he experiences Scarry's concept of "unmaking" firsthand when he realizes: "The flow of events in the outside world, the moral dimension of my plight...even the prospect of defending myself in court, have lost all interest under the pressure of appetite and physical functions and the boredom of living one hour after another" (101). The experience of imprisonment may alienate him from the outside world, but it is the experience of intense visceral pain that finally disrupts his ability to use language.

The scene of the Magistrate's mock execution is the pivotal point where he becomes estranged from words and language. Mandel, one of Colonel Joll's guards, removes the

Magistrate from his prison cell and leads him inexplicably to a tree. With the help of other guards, Mandel ties a noose around the Magistrate's neck and begins to feign his execution. In that fleeting moment between life and death, the Magistrate considers his own language: "Thinking of him, I have said the words *torture...torturer* to myself, but they are strange words, and the more I repeat them the more strange they grow, till they lie like stones on my tongue" (135). After months spent in prison awaiting an imaginary trial, the Magistrate eventually loses the last fragment of his identity and agency as pain—and the fear of death—corrupts his language. He is rendered alienated from words and as someone pushes him forward with the noose still around his neck, all he can manage is a guttural scream (139).

It is not impossible to imagine how the Magistrate loses his language at this moment of extreme pain when Scarry explains: "The goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent*" (49). Scarry also argues that torture often unfolds like a sadistic game of question and answer between victim and torturer. While the torturer seeks some kind of answer from the victim, she explains that "the answer, whatever its content, is a scream" (46). Words and language then ultimately fail to express this experience for the Magistrate and for the barbarians before him. The physical pain of torture effectively debases the victim to the point that language is fully undermined.

What proves even more troublesome about this scene is the Empire's acceptance of the barbarian language as constituted only by screams of pain or, as critic Michael Moses says, by the "subhuman roar of a tortured animal body" (127). As the Magistrate is screaming—under the impression that this is a real execution—an observer sadistically comments, "He is calling his barbarian friends...That is barbarian language you hear" (139). To employ Scarry's terminology,

the novel therefore suggests that physical pain unmakes the world around the victim, leaving their experience unable to be expressed and largely uncommunicative.

Torture is inherently difficult to express, describe, or understand for the victim. This inability to accurately express such an act exists within the novel's diegetic world, but also within the level of the author as well. Coetzee has referred to *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a book about torture in his essay "Into the Dark Chamber," but there are only a few scenes where torture is depicted in the novel (364). Scenes of intense violence are kept primarily from the reader's direct experience and even scenes of the Magistrate's torture and suffering are often only implied. However, the Magistrate is not ignorant of the Empire's use of torture when he admits: "I am aware of what might be happening, and my ear is even tuned to the pitch of human pain" (5). Coetzee's authorial restraint from depicting vivid scenes of torture could suggest a universal difficulty in writing about—or expressing—visceral pain. These direct experiences of torture are absent because depicting them, from Coetzee's perspective, could fail to represent an experience that is seemingly impossible to express.

However, the novel does depict torture but Coetzee leaves these scenes absent until after the Magistrate has experienced torture himself. One critic, Susan Van Gallagher, argues that through *Waiting for the Barbarians*, "Coetzee demonstrates that the final impact of the dark chamber upon people of conscience is paradoxical: they realize the need to write and to proclaim the truth about this kind of oppression, but they also realize their own instability to do so completely and effectively" (285). Critic Dominic Head connects torture to the South African context by stating: "Coetzee outlines the basic dilemma in the treatment of torture in context like apartheid South Africa, where the writer fails either by ignoring it or by 'reproducing' it through representation" (101). Head and Van Gallagher both express the extreme difficulty an author

faces when trying to write effectively about such an experience. Coetzee has even explained his own struggle to accurately write about torture by saying: “The true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one’s own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one’s own terms” (“Into the Dark Chamber” 364). Coetzee, therefore, realizes his own obligation (perhaps as a South African writer) to attempt to convey such an experience—whether politically motivated or not. This obligation is paralleled by the Magistrate’s awareness of his desire to understand the woman’s experience—even if he is never completely successful and especially if she can never express them accurately.

Even if Coetzee avoids playing by the “rules” of the state—which he implies could undermine the experience of torture—the implication that language ultimately fails to convey such an experience still exists from these absent scenes of torture. Coetzee creates a metafictional atmosphere within the text, in the sense that for both characters and author, torture evades an easy interpretation. Readers are largely withdrawn from the interior of the dark chamber (or torture room) because of this futility in language. When torture *is* depicted in Coetzee’s novel, the significance of such a scene becomes undeniable.

After the Magistrate’s own experiences at the hands of Empire, some of his blindness as a servant of Empire begins to diminish. It is only after his dehumanization in prison that the novel presents the Magistrate (and readers) with a visceral representation of torture. The Magistrate uses a key to escape from his prison cell and finds the town congregated around Joll and his guards. The Empire has brought in a new set of prisoners and arranged them for the gathering crowd to see. In one of the text’s rare moments of grotesque imagery, the Magistrate watches on:

The kneeling prisoners bend side by side over a long heavy pole. A cord runs from the loop of wire through the first man’s mouth, under the pole, up to the third loop, under the

pole, through the fourth loop. As I watch a soldier slowly pulls the cord tighter and the prisoners bend further till finally they are kneeling with their faces touching the pole.

(121)

Although torture has occurred earlier on, this is one of the first explicit scenes of barbarian torture in the text. Besides the shocking nature of the scene, the most symbolic weight is placed on what Colonel Joll does to the prisoners next: “The Colonel steps forward. Stooping over each prisoner in turn he rubs a handful of dust into his naked back and writes a word with a stick of charcoal. I read the words upside down: *ENEMY... ENEMY... ENEMY...ENEMY*” (121). When the physical beatings begin, the barbarian bodies become vessels to be inscribed on. The Magistrate realizes: “The black charcoal and ochre dust begin to run with sweat and blood. The game, I see, is to beat them till their backs are washed clean” (121). When the rest of the crowd begins to join in Joll’s brutality, the Magistrate is the lone voice shouting, “*No!*” (122). The “game” becomes more about a communal effort to *erase* (or manipulate) the written message of power. This shockingly evocative scene solidifies the Magistrate’s awareness to the extent of Empire as writers, inscribers, and manipulators of communication. Someone in the crowd lands a blow against the Magistrate’s face and the scene ends with him in a momentary blindness.

The importance underlying the act of Joll etching “ENEMY” onto the barbarians can be interpreted as the most obvious scene in the text where the Empire act as the writers and inscribers of power. Coupled with the following use of torture (intensified by the communal effort evoked by those watching on), this act perpetuates inscription and oppression even further. Michael Moses explains, “The power and skill of the Empire, its *art*, lie in its capacity to generate and then interpret its own signs” (121). The very literal writing of “ENEMY” in black charcoal communicates an effective message to the townspeople, the Magistrate, and even the

barbarian victims themselves. As Moses says, the Empire simultaneously generates and identifies the sign “enemy,” as well as using ultimate power to manipulate and destroy that sign. In this scene, the Empire undoubtedly controls communication through writing and—by effect—reading as well.

Torture may be a method used by the Empire to control the barbarians at the present time in the novel but there are implications that this power and domination has a dark and lengthy history. In the beginning of the novel, it is implied that the Empire has only recently begun their expeditions that travel out to collect barbarians. The Magistrate is aware of the history of Empire when he thinks, “once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians” (9). He comments later to a similar effect: “One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era” (154). The Empire may be anxiously awaiting a barbarian attack, but the presence of the slips the Magistrate uncovers implicates the Empire as systemic oppressors of language and communication on a deep historical level.

As a hobby, the Magistrate spends time excavating ruins on the outskirts of the township—ruins he believes to be of ancient barbarian origin. His efforts have not only discovered wooden slips (also referred to as tablets) “on which are painted characters in a script I have not seen the like of” but even domestic ruins of houses (*WFTB* 16). Of course, the record or history of these ruins is essentially unknowable and instead the Magistrate imagines his own, “Perhaps when I stand on the floor of the courthouse, if that is what it is, I stand over the head of a magistrate like myself, another grey-haired servant of Empire,” he thinks (17). Instead of imagining a barbarian culture, he imagines a similar world of Empire. He finds and counts over two hundred of the slips, which contain writing he is even less sure of: “I have even found

myself reading the slips in a mirror, or tracing one on top of another, or conflating half of one with half of another” (17). His efforts are inherently futile because no living record exists (within the realm of the Empire) of what the slips may mean. He describes himself as waiting for the “sign” that will illuminate the truth behind the ruins. That sign can never come and he waits in vain.

The appearance of Colonel Joll finally reveals the thematic implications behind the slips. After his imprisonment, and stripped of all the power he once had, the Magistrate is interrogated about the slips by Colonel Joll (who now sits at the desk of the Magistrate’s office). However, the Magistrate is no closer to understanding the characters and under the pressure of Joll he appropriates his own story about what they may mean. He explains to Joll:

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. (129)

The Magistrate is the only voice within the Empire who believes the slips contain intelligent barbarian writing—even if that writing is merely a domestic journal, as he states. There is no way the Magistrate could know this, but rather this scene parallels earlier themes of the Empire as writers and controllers of language.

If readers understand these ancient hieroglyphic scripts to be of barbarian origin then the basic fact that no one can understand the writing, especially the Magistrate who does have some awareness of barbarian language, implicates the Empire as the oppressors of language once again. Michael Moses writes that essentially, “the fundamental distinction between civilization and barbarism is...between the lettered and the unlettered” (117). Moses references and

paraphrases Hegelian philosophy by saying, “For Hegel, there can be no history in any meaningful, progressive sense, without a written record” (117). When the Magistrate is released from his prison sentence, Mandel coldly explains to him: “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. So you must be a free man” (*WFTB* 144). Mandel not only insinuates the power of the Empire to control the records of history but also the ability to *manipulate* those records as well. Even the Magistrate’s personal “history” and his time in prison are erased (or perhaps not even written down to begin with) in the Empire’s official records. This manipulation of written history has even deeper and darker implications for the failure of the barbarian language on a systemic and long-lasting level.

The Empire can define the Other and oppress the barbarians because they possess the power of writing, basic literacy, and the tools to keep written records. Moses writes that, “Those who do the writing make history...those who make history are the only ones in a position to write it” (120). It is wrong to assume the barbarians cannot read or write because the presence of the tablets suggests at some point throughout history, the barbarians possessed the ability to read and write (and still could for all the Magistrate and members of Empire know). Rather, this issue intersects with the earlier example of the Empire’s refusal to acknowledge the Other’s language. Without a translator, a mediator, or a comparable text, no one in the Empire can fully decode or transcribe the meaning written on the tablets. Moses is correct to argue that the act of writing (and reading) has undeniable power connotations and he summarizes this dark implication by stating:

For what Coetzee’s novel strongly suggests is that writing- and we may include legal codes and historical narratives under this rubric- is necessarily implicated in and

complicit with the worst excesses of Empire. Most distressingly, Coetzee renders writing (inscription and interpretation) as a form of torture. (120)

Thus, writing (which closely connects with the inscription of “ENEMY”) in the text becomes another way—like torture—to systemically oppress the barbarians and deny their language. If the only existing records that can be read and interpreted are those propagated by the Empire, then essentially any record written outside the world of Empire is considered illegible and meaningless. Even though the ruins are evidence of a past culture and the characters strongly suggest a past *literate* culture, without a way to decode the tablets, a fragment of barbarian history has effectively been wiped away.

Further, the Magistrate’s complicit position complicates the importance of the archeological tablets. When Joll demands that the Magistrate explain the slips, the Magistrate thinks to himself:

Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman...? Does each sign represent a different state of the tongue, the lips, the throat, the lungs, as they combine in the uttering some multifarious unimaginable extinct barbarian language? Or are my four hundred characters nothing but scribal embellishments of an underlying repertory of twenty or thirty whose primitive forms I am too stupid to see? (127)

Ironically, the Magistrate both perpetuates and subverts the binary of primitive barbarian and advanced civilian (echoing Cavafy’s poem) through this passage. He is aware the symbols might stand for larger, abstract signs of the now extinct barbarian language. However, he undermines the notion of the advanced—and presumably more “intelligent”—civilian by admitting to his own ignorance in understanding the characters. The slips may never be translated into a language

that members of the Empire can understand but through the Magistrate's attempts to understand the writing, some slivers of his morality and decency shine through.

The morality of the Magistrate becomes essential to the final interpretation of the text. The Magistrate is often painfully aware of the brutality of the Empire and therefore not a thoroughly guilty member of Empire. Critic Dominic Head argues that the Magistrate embodies a complicit role, a role that "may often identify the guilt of the colonizer, or of those who can be associated with this guilt on historical grounds" (100). As stated before, the Magistrate is both a servant of Empire and a sympathizer to the oppression of the barbarians. In Coetzee's essay, "Into the Dark Chamber," Coetzee refers to the Magistrate as "a man of conscience" (363). In that sense, the Magistrate is capable of a moral consciousness and not completely subject or blind to the power of Empire. Colonel Joll—the figure synonymous the destruction of language—could stand as an opposing figure to the morality of the Magistrate.

Critics have debated on the oppositeness of Joll and the Magistrate. In some regards, both Joll and the Magistrate are consumed with seeking out an ultimate truth through language. It would seem for Joll, however, that this truth can only arrive through torture. One of Joll's guards summarizes this point: "His work is to find out the truth. That is all he does. He finds out the truth" (4). Joll believes that pain elicits ultimate truth and, in some ways, assigns the validity of truth to the physicality of pain.

Barbara Eckstein argues that the Magistrate "becomes" Joll when the Magistrate questions the woman about the signs on her body (193). Eckstein explains, "As a man of the 'first world,' he is accustomed to assigning meaning to sentient signs" (193). As argued before (through the Magistrate's problematic act of "reading" the barbarian woman's scars), the

Magistrate also falls into this structure of thought that connects meaning with pain until he experiences his own torture at the hands of Joll.

While some similarities exist between the Magistrate and Joll, it is important to note the overwhelming sense of blindness associated with the figure of Joll. The novel's opening scene introduces the blindness that Joll may encompass. In the earliest scene, the Magistrate is intrigued by Joll when he appears wearing sunglasses: "The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them," the Magistrate describes (1). Although the Magistrate often fails to effectively communicate, he is still able to "see" that meaning can exist apart from the dominant power of the Empire. Colonel Joll is intrinsically bound by the Empire's logic and subsequently blind to the suffering of the barbarians. Indeed, when Joll interrogates the Magistrate about the writing on the slips, Joll can barely fathom that barbarians could have produced intelligent writing: "A reasonable inference is that the wooden slips contain messages passed between yourself and other parties, we do not know when. It remains for you to explain what the messages say and who the other parties were," Joll states (127). The ideology of the Empire is all encompassing, blinding Joll from accepting that the tablets are of barbarian origin. By the end of the novel, the slips remain unreadable and the Magistrate appropriates his own story to what they may mean. In addition, the woman's experience and story remains largely misunderstood. However, the Magistrate is unlike Joll in that he constantly strives to reconcile his morality with the destruction the Empire has created.

Through this contrast with Joll, readers can see that the Magistrate is basically a moral figure. Derek Attridge defends the Magistrate and writes he "is...not some kind of floating, self-determining subject; he is the precipitate of a familiar history of oppression and exploitation, but that history is experienced as an individual" (45). The Magistrate may embody a difficult role but

the majority of his guilt and inability to ascertain much meaning, as Attridge implies, arises from his subjection in the world of colonialism and Empire. Through all of his faults and failures (especially with the woman), he is still a figure that readers can align with.

Yet the decency of the Magistrate does not completely alleviate the struggle for interpretation at the end of the novel. The Magistrate's attempts may be inherently decent but the end of the novel presents readers with an undeniable sense of ignorance, failed meaning, and ultimately failed communication. The expeditionary force—which included Joll and his men—has fled the town, fearing the barbarian's impending attack. Yet with the presence of the Empire effectively gone, the Magistrate's musings turn bleak: "To the last we will have learned nothing. In all of us, deep down, there seems to be something granite and unteachable" (165). Although he has "learned nothing," the Magistrate attempts to write a new record of the town's history, presumably devoid of the influence of Empire when he states:

It seems right that, as a gesture to the people who inhabited the ruins in the desert, we too ought to set down a record of settlement to be left for posterity buried under the walls of our town...But when I sit down at my writing table...what I find myself beginning to write is not the annals of an imperial outpost or an account of how the people of that outpost spent their last year composing their souls as they waiting for the barbarians.

(178)

Instead, the Magistrate writes a largely ambivalent and metaphorical account and pens surprising statements like, "This was paradise on earth" (178). However, his is plagued by his own self-doubt as a "writer" and thinks, "There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it" (179). Indeed, critics have speculated on the post-modern context of the novel, a context that stresses the delay—and impossibility—of meaning. Critic Lance Olsen suggests that

“Waiting... points to the lack of something that will not show itself, an unfulfilled desire, deferredness of meaning, [and] the inability to know fully” (49). The Magistrate is convinced he has “lived through an eventful year, yet understand[s] no more of it than a babe in arms” (178). The overwhelming sense of ignorance ripples through the end of the novel. This suggests that through all the experiences the Magistrate has faced—from his relationship with the woman, his own torture and dehumanization, and his awareness of the true extent of the Empire’s oppression—he has learned very little.

As frustrating as the Magistrate’s comments may be, it is still possible for the reader to produce their own meaning from the text. In fact, it should be argued that while the ending of the novel seems to suggest an impossibility of meaning, it more so *refuses* to provide a singular or conclusive meaning. Coetzee aligns readers with the Magistrate, through the focalization of the narrative and through his position as a man of conscience (and language). It becomes clear that readers are implicated as complicit sympathizers much like the Magistrate is. Barbara Eckstein summarizes this point when she writes, “All readers of Coetzee’s text are, through the very act of reading, also people of language. We share the Magistrate’s complicity” (192). Michael Vaughan, an early critic of Coetzee argues, “Coetzee implicates himself and his readership” (127). After all, the Magistrate is a man of conscience and able to discern right from wrong, express morality, and fluctuate between his role as dissenting voice and as a Magistrate who longs to retire and simply “perform his duty” (*WFTB* 6). Yet the Magistrate also admits, “I know somewhat too much; and from this knowledge, once one has been infected, there seems to be no recovering” (23). By placing the narrative frame so squarely upon the Magistrate, readers are implicated (like Vaughan and Eckstein argue) as similar agents infected with a knowledge that we cannot escape from.

Perhaps this inescapable knowledge is simply the realization of the workings of oppressive structures. *Waiting for the Barbarians* challenges readers to not only identify where complicit or problematic identities may form, but also to realize when threads of communication are being controlled or manipulated by powerful forces. The authority of the Empire lies in its ability to communicate a singular message of power: perpetuated through the use of torture, the denial of spoken language, and the oppression of barbarian voices. For figures like the Magistrate, who seek to find the truth of the oppressed story or experience outside the Empire's logic, meaning and communication ultimately break down. The moral and ethical implications that the novel suggests urges readers to be extremely critical of when communication and meaning are filtered through an oppressive system. As the novel shows, these systems often systemically oppress many voices.

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