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The coming of the barbarians

Abstract

J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the barbarians* has, paradoxically, both some of the most sublimely touching images in the Coetzee canon and some of the most convincingly vicious. It remains one of Coetzee's most thought-provoking novels because it examines the universal phenomenon of man's belief that his significance can only be validated through his repression of others who are different from him. The apparently *historical* account of the events occurring in and around a once-strategic fort, reduced to an outpost on the frontier of "the Empire" is belied by the complexity of the presentation of the account by the magistrate. The magistrate's dilemma is that of a liberal humanist official in an oppressive society. Although he abhors the Empire's methods and its attempted genocide, his official status and his citizenship deny him escape from moral complicity in his society's actions. The Empire itself proves to be caught in the Hegelian master/slave syndrome: the oppressive master fears his oppressed servant.

Barthes' codes and Todorov's propositional moods are all textual signifiers in the inter-textual game which constitutes the reader's experience of the text as an eternal *becoming*.

The novel reflects Coetzee's unabated concern with the insidious, perpetual and *universal* revivification of colonialism and its concomitant, inevitable oppression of its own people and its vassal-status by the imposition of the myth of an infallible ideology. Related to this concern is the effect on a liberal humanist as a man in such an oppressive society: be he a worker, an official or, like Coetzee, an academic who is also a novelist.

1. Barbarians – "a kind of solution"

The novel, *Waiting for the barbarians*, tells of the way in which a society, in terror of the loss of its superiority and thus of its significance in its own eyes,

is forced to become more and more oppressive. Inevitably, the nation as a whole becomes brutalised; an irony in the light of its claim that it has to fight to preserve “civilisation”. The magistrate recognises early on that Joll and Mandel are symbolic of the new breed of imperial servants, and as such are in fact the “new barbarians” precisely because they have lost sight of their common humanity and see only the figment of their infallible culture which is a manifestation of a mythically-based infallible ideology. Equally ironic is the fact that such an ideology supposedly *guarantees* the freedom of *all* men. The term *all men*, however, is a gross exaggeration, because in practice it applies only to *own* kind not to *other* kind. The quandary of the magistrate is that in his placid twenty years on the frontier, he has come to realise that the so-called, primitive *other* kind is inherently no different from his *own* kind. The *other kind* offers no threat to him or to the Empire. In fact, its culture is as viable as the Empire’s, and its personal needs and desires and drives are the same as those of all human beings.

But, into what the magistrate considers an idyllic world of “live and let live”, come the “new men” of the Empire; there to *protect* and *save* the Empire from the ever-present threat of the “marauding barbarians” through the use of the gun. The magistrate, not able to see any threat to the Empire, is unable to align his perceptions of the barbarians as a peaceful nomadic people with the Empire’s perception of them as dangerous uncivilised hordes out to destroy its civilisation. Unlike the magistrate, the Empire conceives of *different* as *other* and *other* as a threat.¹ Furthermore, it entrenches its control over its own people by cultivating a fear of a barbarian invasion. The term *barbarian* is always used pejoratively as a symbol of a threatening darkness and chaos:

The barbarians come out at night. Before darkness falls the last goat must be brought in, the gates barred, a watch set in every lookout to call the hours. All night, *it is said*, the barbarians *prowl* about bent on *murder* and *rapine*. Children in their dreams see the shutters part and *fierce* barbarian faces *leer* through. “The barbarians are here!” the children scream, and cannot be comforted. Clothing disappears from washing-lines, food from larders, however tightly locked. The barbarians have dug a tunnel under the walls, *people say*; they come and go as they please, take what they like; no one is safe any longer. The farmers still till their fields, but they go out in bands, never singly. They work without heart; the barbarians are only waiting for the crops to be established, *they say*, before they flood the fields again.

Waiting for the barbarians: 122.
(my emphasis)

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1. Compare Coetzee’s own comment (in the Watson interview, 1978:23) that the colonialist (/imperialist) is:

“... living among people without reciprocity, so that there’s only an ‘I’ and the ‘You’ is *not* the same basis, the ‘You’ is a debased ‘You’” (my emphasis).

Watson (1986:376), himself, sums up:

“Just as Western man conquers nature in an effort to conquer his own self-division, so he cannot desist from enslaving other human beings who necessarily confront him as that Other, alien, forever threatening.”

The indefinite clauses – “it is said” (line 3), “people say” (line 9), “they say” (lines 12–13) – communicate to the reader the manner of the mythological voice. The voice is omniscient, oracular and prophetic and, even more crucially, perceived by the people to be the voice of truth, the voice of the loving, caring guardian (father-protector) of their lives within the state. The lexical items “prowl”, “murder”, “rapine”, “fierce” and “leer” (lines 4–5) used attributively (in Todorov’s sense)² of the barbarians are all derogatory and reflect through their abusive denigration the fear in which the people (brainwashed by the Empire in order to maintain its hegemony) hold the barbarians. In their terror and gullibility, the people use the barbarians as the scapegoat for infractions of the social code. It is not surprising then, that the magistrate in his rebellion against the Empire’s atrocities should become the community’s scapegoat. The people denigrate and abuse him out of fear of both their terror of the barbarians and their (never articulated) fear of their own punishment and abandonment by the Empire. Joll, of course, exploits the people’s fear and uses the magistrate as a warning to them in the same way that his treatment of the barbarian prisoners is to serve as a warning to the other barbarians of the might and terrible wrath of the Empire.

The juxtaposition of the following sub-narrative passage with the, previously quoted, mythologising passage emphasises to the reader the way in which victims, oppressed through fear, rationalise the responsibility for their every bad experience to the object of their fear: the barbarians:

Three weeks ago a little girl was raped. . . . nothing would induce her to tell her story. . . . Her friends *claim* a barbarian did it. They saw him running away into the reeds. *They recognized him as a barbarian by his ugliness.* Now all children are forbidden to play outside the gates, and the farmers carry clubs and spears when they go to the fields.

Waiting for the barbarians: 123.
(my emphasis)

The word “claim” reflects the narrator’s doubt about the validity of the evidence proffered against the (supposed) barbarian man. The ludicrous reason given for the certainty that it *was* a barbarian, the person’s “ugliness”, foregrounds the tragic farce of imperial justice and emphasises the awful success of the imperial mythologised propaganda, which functions as a code of the *initiated*; the code of the imperial culture.

2. Reading the new barbarians

An awareness of Barthes’ theory of codes³ makes the literary competent reader (Culler, 1975:113–130) conscious not only of the codes which function in the narrative, but also of the codes which function between the narrative and its narrating (discourse) and the reader in his reading experience of the

2. Compare Todorov (1971:109–112).

3. Compare Barthes (1970:18–20); and Barthes (1981:155–157) and (1988:191–193).

text. The perceptions of the Empire and its planned eradication of what it conceives of as the “barbarian problem” are parroted and executed by men like Joll and Mandel, who epitomise the “new men” of the Empire. They represent the *new* code of colonial/imperial oppression; a code which strikes a chord in the mind of, for example, the post-Nazi era reader. The reader thus brings to his reading all the accumulated, accreted knowledge of his culture which he has accrued through his reading and living. Obviously then, each reader reads from more or less cultural consciousness,⁴ but each reading adds repeatedly and inter-textually to each subsequent reading (Barthes, 1970: 10–11). Joll’s character articulates for the reader, through the discourse presentation, the rationalising blind patriot (of the ilk of Jacobus Coetzee in the second novella of *Dusklands* (Coetzee, 1974) and Oosthuizen in *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1983)). In Mandel is encoded a typically brutal, sadistic instrument of state oppression. Through the subtle juxtaposition of the magistrate’s *old*, *courtly* imperial code and the *new*, *authoritarian* imperial code of Joll and Mandel, the reader senses the *author’s* bias and philosophical stance: Coetzee’s codes, too, thus inevitably(?) infiltrate the text. All writing is coloured by its pre- and post-existence; “white-writing”⁵ is the myth the propagandist (of whatever ideological persuasion) exploits to delude his readers into believing in the infallibility of his account.

Ironically, the propagandist frequently dupes himself and comes to believe his own propaganda, for without it, he and the cause for which he propagandises becomes insignificant. Eugene Dawn in “The Vietnam project” (Coetzee, 1974) and Colonel Joll are representative of such characters. Such men are unaware that they are as oppressed as those whom they help to oppress; for *should* they come to a new understanding, they would be punished in the same way and for the same reasons as those whom they, themselves, had formerly punished. As noted earlier, once the magistrate gives up his observer status and becomes an “activist”, he suffers the same tortures as those which the imperial prisoners have suffered. Ironically, his earlier mere contemplation of the possibility that other ideological codes may be equally as significant and as valid as the Empire’s would have made him a traitor in the eyes of the Empire – if it had been able to read his mind. Only when he puts thoughts into action, however, is the Empire able to “read” him – then it goes into action to “preserve and protect” itself from his treachery. Ultimately, the magistrate realises that he can never escape his own imperial involvement. In a sense he is his own accuser and tormentor. He has always been privileged by his imperial citizenship and can never escape its dominance of him. His code is the imperial code, be it *old* or *new*, and to reach the other significant worlds, he must learn their codes.

4. The term “cultural consciousness” is here to be understood in a Barthesian sense: the *cultural code* in effect subsumes *all* other codes. Compare Barthes (1981:155) and (1988:191); and Barthes (1970:20–21).

5. The Sartrean term *l’écriture blanche* (white writing) is used by Barthes in his discussion of the inherent bias of all language use (1953:xvi and 68).

3. Reading the sub-text

Codes, however, are also effective, as noted earlier, on the reader/narrative level. Via what Barthes calls the “code of communication”, the reader perceives the magistrate’s attitude to Joll and his attempts to dissociate himself from Joll and all he stands for. The magistrate’s contempt for the minions of the Empire and for the Empire itself is revealed through his frequent use of the personal pronouns *he*, *it* and *they* (instead of proper names) and by his frequent omission of Joll’s and Mandel’s ranks, when he does use their names. Significantly, the magistrate is himself not known by name but by the *function* he fulfils as an official of the Empire. Even more significantly, none of the other characters in the novel (barring Joll and Mandel, that is) is named. This deliberately enigmatic ploy not only highlights the magistrate’s conflict with himself as a result of his conflict with the likes of Joll and Mandel, it also *universalises* the themes of the novel to times and places beyond the immediate.⁶

Through what Barthes calls “the symbolic code”, the reader experiences the import of the progressively more detailed dreams and their culmination in the (diegetically) real snowman. The repeated instances of blindness or near-blindness in the narrative are also perceived as symbolically significant. The association of Joll’s dark glasses with blindness suggests the inner blindness of both the magistrate’s earlier *turning of a blind eye* and Joll’s inability to perceive the inhumanity of his masters. Joll’s *blinkerred eyes* epitomise the tunnel-vision of many military and bureaucratic servants of totalitarian imperialism. Ironically, Joll believes the glasses “protect” his eyes; they do, from seeing anything that might undermine his belief in himself as an honourable servant of an honourable Empire. Joll also hides behind his glasses, as the magistrate perceives. In Renaissance terms, the eyes being the windows of the soul, Joll is isolating his soul (his being) from the world. He remains, inevitably, an imperial automaton.

Joll’s automaton-status and the Empire’s perversion of the truth and its, paradoxical, insistence on its history and ideology as absolute truths are strikingly revealed through the following dialogue between the magistrate and Joll:

“What if your prisoner is telling the truth,” I ask, “yet finds 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 when 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 recognize that tone*.” “The tone of

6. Interviewed by Stephen Watson (Watson, 1978:23), Coetzee asserts:

“... I still tend to see the South African situation as only *one* manifestation of a *wider historical situation* to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism.”

(my emphasis)

truth! Can you pick up this tone in everyday speech? Can you hear whether I am telling the truth?"

"No you misunderstand me. I am speaking only of a *special situation now*. I am speaking of a special 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*. That is how you get the truth."

Waiting for the barbarians: 5.
(my emphasis)

The magistrate's response, "Pain is truth; all else is doubt" becomes deeply ironic in the light of the magistrate's attempts later in the novel to deny Joll's accusations that he had been conniving with the barbarians against the Empire. In his frustration, the magistrate tells the "truth" Joll wants to hear, but makes it ridiculous by pretending to interpret the signs on the bark strips. The reader soon comes to see that Truth in the Empire is all relative; relative to the Empire's mythology and to its power-broking needs. The whole question of colonisation as an expression of a nation's search for the validation of its significance is progressively revealed through the magistrate's narration of his story.

4. Ideological intransigence – the new barbarism

Through the magistrate's narrative the reader becomes aware that the imperial characters are all locked in a philosophy which is man-centred and thus logocentric. Such a philosophy denies its adherents the freedom of a limitless, pre-existing and post-existing universe which exists without the need for an ontology and a teleology as the validators of significance. The new barbarians are those who in the name of freedom for mankind reject true freedom – the right (and rite?) of the mind to participate in the endless "play of signifiers" – and insist upon there being only one way to think and be, *their way*. Nor do the new barbarians make any effort to encode the silence of those for whom they claim to be seeking freedom in order to know how the *oppressed* see their oppression. Patronisingly, prescriptively, the new barbarians claim to *know* (instinctively/intuitively?) what the needs, desires, frustrations, ambitions of the oppressed are, and subsequently claim to be the only ones capable of addressing oppression. Ironically, under the guise of altruistic concern for the oppressed, such self-appointed omniscients often high-jack the cause of the oppressed (*perhaps* unconsciously) and in so-doing bolster their own self-esteem and significance. What is most reprehensible and disturbing in such a process is that the *promise* of freedom from oppression is broken, even as it is made. Despair is shown to be the counter-side of hope. The language of freedom (in itself a paradoxical expression) is subverted not only by so-called liberal, political opportunists, but also by political opportunists within the oppressed group.

Too easily then, the ideals of emancipation and enlightenment become the prescriptions of the new hegemony – always, of course, for "the greater good". One cannot but wonder whether *megalomania* is not as much a part of

the general human condition as is oppression, in the attempt of each human being, each nation, to validate its significance. Whatever the answer to this question, the new so-called enlightenment proves daily to be only a new migration of totalitarian barbarians who threaten to engulf humanity in a new darkness of spirit as they invade, and attempt to order, the territory of its mind – perhaps precisely because they are unaware that they are themselves encoded *and codified* in their culture.

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