

# J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the Ethics of Testimony

## Stef Craps

*human beings are human  
insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman*<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this article is to analyse the testimonial task assumed by J. M. Coetzee in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a novel whose reflection on imperial paranoia, pre-emptive warfare, torture and prisoner abuse seems even more topical in this post-9/11 day and age than when it was first published twenty-five years ago, at the height of the apartheid era. *Waiting for the Barbarians* does not recover history as a fully narratable subject, but bears witness to it by refusing to translate the suffering produced by colonial oppression into historical discourse. In “bringing to speech an impossibility of speech”,<sup>2</sup> in maintaining rather than negating the unsayability it says, the novel can be seen to embrace an anti-historicist ethics of remembrance, an ethics of testimony as theorized by Giorgio Agamben, who will be my main interlocutor here. Instead of colluding with the production and silencing of bare life, instead of taking for granted the existence of “a damned, dehumanized world” separate from “the sphere of humanity”, the text looks forward to “a time when humanity will be restored across the face of society”, to borrow some phrases from Coetzee’s essay “Into the Dark Chamber”.<sup>3</sup> *Waiting for the Barbarians* opens up the possibility of the creation of a new, truly inclusive collectivity, a community that would not be dependent on the affirmation of identity or sameness but founded on a recognition of our infinite difference.

In *Remnants of Auschwitz*—the third instalment of the *Homo Sacer* series—Agamben attempts to articulate an ethics adequate to the challenge of Auschwitz, which he sees as radically undermining or delegitimizing all pre-existing ethics and all post-war discourses relying on traditional notions of ethics. *Remnants of Auschwitz*

---

Dr Stef Craps is affiliated with the English Department at Ghent University, Belgium, as a postdoctoral research fellow of the Flemish Research Council.

<sup>1</sup>Agamben, *Remnants*, 121.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 164.

<sup>3</sup>Coetzee, “Into the Dark Chamber,” 368.

takes the form of a commentary on the work of Primo Levi, whom Agamben refers to as “a perfect example of the witness”.<sup>4</sup> However, being a perfect example of the witness is not the same thing as being a perfect witness. According to Levi, his testimony is constitutively incomplete because of the fact that he has survived the Holocaust: “we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses.”<sup>5</sup> The “true witnesses” are those who, unlike the survivors, “touch[ed] bottom”; those who “saw the Gorgon” and “have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute”: “the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses”.<sup>6</sup> “Muslim” or “*Muselmann*” was camp slang for the exhausted, malnourished inmate no longer capable of thought or self-preserving action, who was considered by fellow inmates to be no longer quite alive or even quite human. What Agamben calls “Levi’s paradox” is the observation that this figure, the drowned victim who cannot bear witness for him- or herself, is the complete witness.<sup>7</sup> Testimony, according to Agamben, is the action taken by the survivor, the incomplete witness, to speak for the *Muselmann*, the integral witness, who lacks the capacity for speech. The *Muselmann* being unable to give testimony, he or she needs to be supplemented by the survivor, who is paradoxically forced to bear witness to the *Muselmann*’s impossibility of witnessing:

The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. And yet to speak here of a proxy makes no sense; the drowned have nothing to say, nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted. They have no “story,” no “face,” and even less do they have “thought.” Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness.<sup>8</sup>

The post-Holocaust ethics that Agamben calls for is an ethics that will not avert its gaze from the *Muselmann*, whom he regards as a limit figure troubling received conceptions of what constitutes the human as well as traditional notions of ethics based on such conceptions. Agamben sees Auschwitz as a historical crime aiming to separate the inhuman, the bare biological life, from the human, *zoe* from *bios*. The *Muselmann*, as the extreme form or instance of *homo sacer* (the abandoned subject upon whom the violence of the state is exercised with impunity), would be the end point of this ambition, were it not for his or her intimate connection with the witness. In the *Muselmann*, the Nazis sought to produce “a survival separated from every possibility of testimony”; “a bare, unassignable and unwitnessable life”.<sup>9</sup> Testimony, however, demonstrates the impossibility of the separation between human life and inhuman survival: “With its every word, testimony refutes precisely

<sup>4</sup>Agamben, *Remnants*, 16.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Agamben, *Remnants*, 33.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 157.

this isolation of survival from life.”<sup>10</sup> The ethics of testimony thus expands and redefines limited understandings of the meaning of human being in light of the figure of the *Muselmann*.

Throughout *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Agamben insists on the affinity between testimony and poetry: “the witness’ gesture is also that of the poet”.<sup>11</sup> The notion that literature can bear witness to the *Muselmann* is also taken up by Dominick LaCapra in *History in Transit*. In a critical commentary on Agamben, LaCapra makes the intriguing suggestion that Samuel Beckett can be seen as staging, “in an incredible series of radically disempowered characters, the—or at least something close to the—*Muselmann*’s experience of disempowerment and living death”.<sup>12</sup> What I hope to demonstrate is that bearing witness to the figure of the *Muselmann* is also an overriding concern in a novel by one of Beckett’s most prominent literary heirs, namely Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Agamben’s phenomenology of testimony can be seen to shed light on the witnessing work undertaken by Coetzee in this text. On the one hand, the tortured barbarians are comparable to the *Muselmänner*, the true witnesses who cannot speak their suffering. On the other hand, the narrator-protagonist is in an analogous position to the survivor who, like Levi, bears witness and gives testimony.

The narrator-protagonist of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a man known only as the Magistrate, the chief administrator of a small town on the frontier of an unnamed Empire skirted by nomadic barbarian peoples. When the novel opens, Colonel Joll, a representative of the Third Bureau (the Empire’s internal security service), arrives to investigate rumours of a barbarian uprising which have begun to circulate in the distant imperial capital. As Joll interrogates and tortures barbarian prisoners, the Magistrate becomes increasingly sympathetic towards the victims. When the Colonel leaves the outpost, the Magistrate takes in a young barbarian woman left crippled and partially blinded by torture. Later, he journeys into barbarian territory to restore her to her people. Upon his return, he finds that the army has arrived as part of a general offensive against the barbarians. The Magistrate is imprisoned for “treasonously consorting with the enemy”<sup>13</sup> and subsequently tortured himself. Having failed to engage the barbarians successfully, the army abandons the town, leaving the freed Magistrate to resume his official functions. At the close of the novel, the Magistrate and the remaining inhabitants of the outpost anxiously await the arrival of the barbarians.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* records the Magistrate’s search for understanding of the disruption that has occurred in his normally ordered life-style following the Empire’s declaration of a state of exception—the paradigmatic situation, according to Agamben, in which sovereign power abandons subjects, reduces them to bare life. Equipped with “emergency powers”,<sup>14</sup> Colonel Joll and his men have come from the

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 161.

<sup>12</sup>LaCapra, 187.

<sup>13</sup>Coetzee, *Waiting*, 85.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 1.

capital to defend the Empire against the perceived threat posed by the native inhabitants of the frontier area. As in the poem by Cavafy from which Coetzee's novel takes its title, the Empire affirms and rationalizes its existence through a process of "othering" the "barbarians". As the literary critic Rosemary Jolly explains, "Coetzee's Empire depends upon the operation of the imperialist manichean opposition, whereby it can identify itself as just(ified) by identifying the 'barbarians' as the enemy."<sup>15</sup> Colonel Joll's practices of inquisition and torture can be seen as an attempt to coerce the natives into assuming the identity of "barbarian" and "enemy" that the Empire requires of them in order to assert its existence. While Jolly purports to be concerned with discovering "the truth", the prisoners' guilt is a foregone conclusion for him. Through torture, he inscribes this preordained "truth" on their bodies. Moving in a hermeneutic circle, Joll produces marks of torture on the bodies of his victims only to read these marks as signs of guilt. The only truth that he extracts from the barbarians is the one he has projected onto them. The Empire's desire or need to "author" the colonial other, to impose an identity upon them, is revealed most clearly in the scene in which a group of barbarians is herded into a public square to be whipped and beaten. Before inviting the crowd in attendance to join the soldiers in thrashing the prisoners, Joll grabs a piece of charcoal and inscribes the word "enemy" on their naked backs.

Critics have tended to focus their attention on the Magistrate's growing awareness of his implication in the imperial mindset which he is trying to break out of.<sup>16</sup> Haunted by the suffering of Joll's victims, he wants to understand what the scars on their bodies mean. The violated body of an old man who has been tortured to death, the wounds suffered by the boy accompanying the old man, and—especially—the barbarian girl's damaged eyes and broken ankles all stimulate the Magistrate's hermeneutic interest. He recognizes that his fascination with the barbarian girl stems from her body as a site of torture. When he discovers the torture mark at the corner of her eye, the Magistrate 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."<sup>17</sup> Like her interrogators, the narrator engages in a quest for truth involving torture. As Rosemary Jolly points out, "Both Joll and the magistrate . . . turn the 'girl' into a text from which they believe the truth will originate, Joll through implanting the marks of torture upon her and reading the result as proof of her guilt, and the magistrate by attempting to possess the truth behind torture by reading the 'script' that Joll has 'written' on her body".<sup>18</sup> Considering his behaviour to be benevolent and humane, the Magistrate initially insists on his distance from Joll and the activities of the Third Bureau. However, he gradually becomes aware that his treatment of the barbarian woman participates in the inhumane imperial writing and reading

---

<sup>15</sup>Jolly, 124.

<sup>16</sup>See, for example, VanZanten Gallagher, 112–35; Moses; Jolly, 122–37; and Kossew, 85–107.

<sup>17</sup>Coetzee, *Waiting*, 33.

<sup>18</sup>Jolly, 127–8.

practised by the likes of Joll: "The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible; I shudder."<sup>19</sup>

What sets the Magistrate apart from Joll and his men, however, is his acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the imperial values and practices in which he has been steeped and educated. He finds that the barbarians exceed the terms, categories and definitions in which the Empire is trying to enclose them. The failure of the Magistrate's interpretive endeavours with regard to the barbarian girl reveals the colonial other's resistance to the Empire's self-affirmatory endeavour to impose an identity upon him or her. Try as he might, the Magistrate cannot decipher the girl's torture marks: her abused body stubbornly refuses to be translated into language. Though he "cast[s] one net of meaning after another over her",<sup>20</sup> she retains her mystery. Her body remains impenetrable, unwilling to yield its secrets: it "seems beyond comprehension".<sup>21</sup> So unknowable is she that the Magistrate cannot even remember what she looks like when he is away from her: "I cannot even recall [her] face."<sup>22</sup> Like Levi's *Muselmann*, then, the barbarian girl has no story and no face; she is "untestifiable".<sup>23</sup> The Magistrate openly challenges the Empire's hermeneutic authority by shouting the word "No!" during the grotesque spectacle of imperial power that is Joll's public display and torture of his prisoners.<sup>24</sup> His "No!" denounces the Empire's denial of the prisoners' humanity and denaturalizes or defamiliarizes the distinctions and categories upon which the Empire is founded.<sup>25</sup>

The Magistrate's alienation from the interpretive community to which he belongs is caused by the confrontation with acts of state-sanctioned torture, which provokes in him a traumatic awakening to the suffering of the colonial other. Though he initially tries to deny what is happening under the harsh administration imposed by Colonel Joll, the Magistrate appears to have experienced a blow that has shattered what Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, refers to as "a protective shield against stimuli".<sup>26</sup> His self-absorbed mind is opened up to the existence of otherness. At the beginning of the narrative, he denies hearing the screams of Joll's victims: "Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing."<sup>27</sup> Later on, however, he admits that he actually "stopped [his] ears"<sup>28</sup> to these sounds of violence, whose reality he now no longer disputes. His attempt to block out these disturbing sounds turns out to be futile: his assertion that "I would

<sup>19</sup>Coetzee, *Waiting*, 29.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>Agamben, *Remnants*, 41.

<sup>24</sup>Coetzee, *Waiting*, 116.

<sup>25</sup>As Rebecca Saunders points out, "the magistrate's word creates a hiatus, a disruptive and defamiliarizing lacuna, in the empire's performative reiteration. It transforms the empire's statement about itself into an uncertainty, into a question that can be answered affirmatively or negatively, into a proposition inhabited by truth or by error" (230).

<sup>26</sup>Freud, 27.

<sup>27</sup>Coetzee, *Waiting*, 5.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

like to be able to stop my ears”<sup>29</sup> implies failure. The suffering of the torture victims intrudes upon his consciousness. The realization forces itself upon him that “Somewhere, always, a child is being beaten.”<sup>30</sup> His ears become attuned to the “sighs and cries” of abused prisoners, which “the air is full of” and which “are never lost”, as he tells Colonel Joll: “if you listen carefully, with a sympathetic ear, you can hear them echoing forever within the second sphere.”<sup>31</sup> The Magistrate experiences the ethical change that is taking place inside him, his assumption of responsibility for the fate of the colonial other, as a spatio-temporal dislocation: “time has broken, something has fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere.”<sup>32</sup> It is through the unsettling of the co-ordinates of his world that the Magistrate can bear witness to “the second sphere”, the zone of untold, inhuman suffering which underlies his world.

At some point during the journey to return the barbarian girl to her people, the Magistrate reflects: “perhaps it is the case that whatever can be articulated is falsely put. . . . Or perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through.”<sup>33</sup> While he himself does not pursue these thoughts any further, it seems to me that these (non-mutually exclusive) hypotheses go to the heart of the testimonial project that Coetzee is undertaking in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The novel can be seen to bear out both propositions. The inadequacy of imperial articulations makes it impossible for the Magistrate to narrativize the history of suffering which he has witnessed. Sitting down to write an account of his experiences, he finds that none of the discursive forms available to him are adequate to the task he has set himself. When, at the end of the novel, he makes another attempt to set down a record of his times, he finds himself beginning a pastoral celebration of existence in his “oasis”: “No one who paid a visit to this oasis,’ I write, ‘failed to be struck by the charm of life here. . . . This was paradise on earth.’”<sup>34</sup> He instantly dismisses this history as “devious”, “equivocal” and “reprehensible”.<sup>35</sup> He realizes that, instead of “tell[ing] the truth”,<sup>36</sup> he has been mythologizing and therefore falsifying the past. By using “the locutions of a civil servant”,<sup>37</sup> the Magistrate has effectively obliterated or erased the suffering of the victims of the Empire. Their traumatic history refuses to be translated into “civilized” language: to the extent that it can be articulated, it is falsely put.

This realization leads the Magistrate to abandon his plan to commit his experiences to paper. The envisaged testimony remains unwritten—except, that is, in the Magistrate’s private monologue that constitutes *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Indeed, Coetzee’s text manages to engage with history without falsifying it by bearing

---

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 22.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 123.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 168–9.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 169.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

witness to its own incapacity to recover history, to articulate it in writing. As Samuel Durrant points out, it is through their refusal to provide a direct articulation, through their resistance to the process of verbalization, that Coetzee's novels "relentlessly force us to confront the brute, indigestible materiality of the suffering engendered by apartheid".<sup>38</sup> To speak with Agamben: "Testimony takes place in the non-place of articulation."<sup>39</sup> Coetzee has his would-be storyteller "live through" what cannot be articulated, both literally and figuratively. Literally, in the sense that he undergoes the same fate as the barbarians in being tortured by the men of the Third Bureau. Thus, he is forced to confront their suffering and to feel their pain. Torture teaches him a lesson in "the meaning of humanity",<sup>40</sup> as he himself puts it. At the most extreme moment of physical suffering, he produces bellows of pain which lead an onlooker to exclaim, "That is barbarian language you hear",<sup>41</sup> an involuntary testimony to the transformation the Magistrate has undergone.<sup>42</sup> Experiencing himself as other, as abjected beyond the social order that grounds his subjectivity, he gains access to the realm of the inhuman, a prelinguistic zone, an area outside the categories of language, and becomes a witness to the untold and untellable suffering of the barbarians.

At the close of the novel, the Magistrate, who earlier on had already compared himself to "a storyteller losing the thread of his story",<sup>43</sup> still feels "stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere".<sup>44</sup> Though this line has been marshalled as evidence that Coetzee's novel ends with a sense of despair,<sup>45</sup> I read it more positively as holding out the promise of an ethical future, in which "humanity will be restored across the face of society".<sup>46</sup> Having left behind the familiarity of his interpretive community, having departed from the identity mapped out for him by the Empire, the Magistrate ventures forward into uncharted territory, an ethical space which opens up the possibility of a non-appropriative encounter with the other. The inclusive community which I see *Waiting for the Barbarians* as endorsing remains on the level of a promise rather than a fully realized representation. There is little indication of any actual change for the better in the Magistrate's world by the novel's end, but a rapprochement with the other has been powerfully enacted in his dreams, most of which focus on his relationship with a hooded figure closely resembling the barbarian girl. The

<sup>38</sup>Durrant, 460.

<sup>39</sup>Agamben, *Remnants*, 130.

<sup>40</sup>Coetzee, *Waiting*, 126.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>42</sup>The Magistrate's earlier inability to gain access to the girl's experience is at least partly due to the fact that he never bothered to learn the barbarian language, contenting himself with using the patois of the frontier in his conversations with her. Only at the very last minute, when he is about to lose her forever, does he realize the opportunity he has missed: "What a waste, I think: 'she could have spent those long empty evenings teaching me her tongue! Too late now'" (Coetzee, *Waiting*, 78).

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>45</sup>See Castillo, 90; and Martin, 20.

<sup>46</sup>Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber," 368.

Magistrate's desperate attempts to connect with this figure, from whom he is kept radically separate at first, result in the emergence of genuine contact in the later dreams, in one of which he is offered a loaf of bread as a sign of communion. Thus, *Waiting for the Barbarians* gestures towards "the coming community" envisaged by Agamben, a community which, based on the idea of "an *inessential* commonality"<sup>47</sup> between members of humanity, affirms difference rather than identity.

## References

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Translated by Michael Hardt. Minneapolis, Min.: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.
- . *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 2002.
- Castillo, Debra A. "The Composition of the Self in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction* 27, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 78–90.
- Coetzee, J. M. "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State." In *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell, 361–8. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- . *Waiting for the Barbarians*. 1980. Reprint, London: Vintage, 2000.
- Durrant, Samuel. "Bearing Witness to Apartheid: J. M. Coetzee's Inconsolable Works of Mourning." *Contemporary Literature* 40, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 430–63.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated and edited by James Strachey et al., vol. 18, 7–64. London: Hogarth, 1968.
- Jolly, Rosemary Jane. *Colonization, Violence, and Narration in White South African Writing: André Brink, Breyten Breytenbach, and J. M. Coetzee*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996.
- Kosew, Sue. *Pen and Power: A Post-Colonial Reading of J. M. Coetzee and André Brink*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Martin, Richard G. "Narrative, History, Ideology: A Study of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Burger's Daughter*." *Ariel* 17, no. 3 (1986): 3–21.
- Moses, Michael Valdez. "The Mark of Empire: Writing, History, and Torture in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *Kenyon Review* 15, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 115–27.
- Saunders, Rebecca. "The Agony and the Allegory: The Concept of the Foreign, the Language of Apartheid, and the Fiction of J. M. Coetzee." *Cultural Critique* 47 (Winter 2001): 215–64.
- VanZanten Gallagher, Susan. *A Story of South Africa: J. M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991.

<sup>47</sup>Agamben, *Coming*, 17.