The Allegorical Text and History: J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Summary

This article attempts to move beyond what are perceived to be the limitations of both Lukácsian Marxist and Deconstructionist accounts of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

If a Lukácsian Marxism has correctly introduced the category of "history" into the analyses of the novel, it has done so only to berate Coetzee for its absence. Teresa Dovey's Deconstructionist analyses have helpfully focused attention on the novel's intertextual critique of the South African liberal novel. However, her criticism is deformed by its inability to confront the complexities of the text's meditation upon its relationship with "history".

The linguistic theory of Saussure, and Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory, are used to analyse that relationship. While the allegoric form acts as a critique of "classic realist" writing, this does not signal the text's refusal of "history". Rather, it affirms its location as a signifying "interpretation" of the real that recognises its discursive specificity.

The novel examines the South African formation when, in a reaction to the Soweto Uprising of 1976, the apartheid State turned to the military option. Coetzee identifies this transition as a systemic crisis of the colonial order that proclaims the superannuation of liberal discourse.

The article hopes to invigorate South African Marxist criticism with elements of post-structuralist theory that will enable a break with outmoded notions of "truth" and "history".

Opsomming

In hierdie artikel word daar gepoog om die beperkings te deurbreek wat aan sowel 'n Lukács-Marxistiese as a dekonstruktivitiese lees van J.M. Coetzee se *Waiting for the Barbarians* ten grondslag lê.

Alhoewel Lukács-Marxisme tereg die kategorie van "geskiedenis" in romananalise invoer, word dit slegs gedoen om die afwesigheid daarvan by Coetzee te betreur. Eweneens is Teresa Dovey se dekonstruktivistiese analise – ten spyte van die tydige uitwys van die roman se intertekstuele kritiek van die Suid-Afrikaanse liberale roman – ontoereikend, weens haar onvermoë om die kompleksiteite van die teks se besinning oor sy verhouding met "geskiedenis" die hoof te bied.

In hierdie artikel word so 'n verhouding geanaliseer met behulp van sowel Saussure se linguistiese teorie as Walter Benjamin se teorie van die allegorie. Alhoewel die allegoriese vorm as 'n kritiek van "klassiek-realistiese" skrywe funksioneer, is dit nie sonder meer 'n aanduiding van die teks se verwerping van "geskiedenis" nie. Dit is eerder 'n bevestiging van die teks se posisie as betekenende "interpretasie" van die werklikheid, waardeur juis erkenning verleen word aan die diskursiewe spesifiekheid van die teks.

Die roman ondersoek die tydperk in Suid-Afrika toe die apartheidstaat in reaksie op die Soweto-opstand van 1976 'n militêre opsie uitgeoefen het. Vir Coetzee is so 'n wending 'n teken van die koloniale opset se sistemiese krisis, waardeur die uitgediendheid van liberale diskoers blootgelê word.

In hierdie artikel word 'n poging aangewend om Suid-Afrikaanse Marxistiese kritiek op so 'n manier met post-strukturalistiese elemente te vernuwe, dat weggebreek sal kan word van uitgediende opvattings oor "waarheid" en "geskiedenis".

> It was a time when we were experiencing the most incredible and exceptional events, when we were reminded of many forgotten and decayed institutions by the sound of their downfall.
>
> Berthold Niebuhr (1776–1831)

Nadine Gordimer's novel, *The Conservationist*, published in 1974, contains the central metaphor of the buried Black body gradually rising to the surface through the progress of the narrative. What is allegorically prefigured is the ending of that long political "silence" that followed the repression of the mass democratic opposition in the early 1960s, a "prophecy" based on the advanced anti-colonialist struggles in the neighbouring States, and on the development of a Black Consciousness ideology amongst young Black intellectuals (the Black body rises to consciousness). These processes are alluded to in the novel, but in the absence of any visible internal political activism, the novel, as Stephen Clingman has argued (Clingman 1986: ch.5), can only "symbolically" articulate a similar demise of colonialism within the South African formation. In "reality", the African body largely remains politically dormant, awaiting its imminent resurrection. Two years after the appearance of Gordimer's novel, that resurrection would be named: the Soweto Uprisings of June 1976.

J.M. Coetzee's third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, first published in 1980, which shares many of the thematic concerns of Gordimer's novel, is nevertheless written from within a very different historical context: the mass insurrection which began on the Witwatersrand in 1976 and soon spread throughout the country, suddenly rejuvenating the political opposition and leading to the transformation of the State apparatus to meet this challenge. For Coetzee, what Gordimer had hoped would happen had now become a reality.

This essay will examine, in the light of critical disputes over Coetzee's writing, the model the novel proposes for the fictional text's relationship to history/reality, which is seen as a critique of both "classic-realist" fictional writing, and of "realist" literary theory; and, secondly, an analysis of Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory will see the novel's form as a way of writing within a historical crisis. As such, this essay hopes to be a critical intervention into debates about the status of "history" within contemporary literary theory in South Africa.

Stephen Clingman's analysis of Gordimer's *The Conservationist* is indebted to the Marxist-Mimetic theory of Lukács. His method is to give an account of the "history" of the period the novel is concerned with (the anti-colonial agitation in the Portuguese colonies and Namibia; the political homogenisation of white South Africa under the hegemony of capitalism; the beginnings of political agitation at home), and then to compare Gordimer's novel to that given extratextual reality: "Gordimer's work registers crucial realities relating to the moment from which it emerges" (p. 160). The relation of text to history is seen fundamentally as one of "representation". Thus Mehring is "a representative member of his *class*" (p. 152); and "there are some striking *correspondences* between Gordimer's novel and the South African move-

ments of opposition in this time" (p. 168, my emphasis). Novels "measure", "trace", and "embody" a reality external to the text.

What Clingman's Lukácsian analysis suppresses is the way Gordimer's text itself *constitutes* that "history" which Clingman then projects outside of the text, into the "real" world. This is of course one of the central rhetorical strategies of "classic realism": to produce a *version* of the real whose constructedness disappears in its claim merely to "reflect" the truth of its object. To read Clingman therefore against the grain of his Mimetic model is to demonstrate that his analysis is determined by his agreement (as a political radical) with Gordimer's *interpretation* of 1970s South African history/reality which is articulated internally in her novels. To that extent, Clingman's analysis is a "repetition" of the Gordimer text.

That I largely happen to agree with Gordimer/Clingman's political analysis is, within the context of this discussion, beside the point, and neither am I arguing for a return to idealist readings of texts. Rather, I find the following point argued by Laclau & Mouffe helpful:

> The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of "natural phenomena" or "expressions of the wrath of God", depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence.
>
> (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 108)

It is not surprising that the Lukácsian school of criticism has been resolutely critical of Coetzee's writing. Behind comments such as the following by Michael Vaughan:

> As a consequence of the prominence given to a state of agonised consciousness, material factors of oppression and struggle in contemporary South Africa achieve a subordinate attention.
>
> (Vaughan 1982: 126–127)

lies Lukács's attack upon Modernism as an anti-realist abandonment of History that wallows in its mystified universalisation of the crisis of the late-bourgeois individual. It is a criticism that the Lukácsian Gordimer has also levelled at Coetzee (1978: 3–4). Indeed, literary theory that has fetishised the literary form of the nineteenth century realist novel can only have great difficulties with the writings of Coetzee, because "history" in the old sense has certainly disappeared. Indeed, symptomatic of this are the assumptions that lie behind this question directed at Coetzee:

> Has the existence of a highly repressive censorship apparatus in South Africa had anything to do with the structure and setting of your fiction?

> *Coetzee:* The South African censorship apparatus is repressive but not "highly repressive". The apparatus has as yet been little but an annoyance to me as a writer (touch wood) . . .
>
> (Sjambok 1982: 3–4)

This reading assumes that there is a realist novel hidden away in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (realism plus the censor equals allegory), and that we must therefore look through the formal veil of the novel to liberate that repressed "truth" narrative which cannot now speak in all its "clarity". And in the process of course almost the entire novel disappears, but what this mode of criticism ultimately testifies to is its resolute inability to deal properly with the allegorical form.

These criticisms of Lukácsian accounts of Coetzee's novels can be helpfully connected to Coetzee's article, "The Novel Today" (*Upstream,* Summer 1988) where, in dealing with "the novel and history in South Africa today", he argues against "the colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history" by pointing out that the novel "occupies an autonomous place" with its "own procedures" to the extent that the novel can be seen to be a "rival" to history. He furthermore points out that "history", like the novel, is a discourse, whose "truths" can claim no higher authority than literature.

In the light of this, it may be somewhat rash to argue, as I will, that *Waiting for the Barbarians* is very much concerned with "history", in both common senses of the word: the notion of reality as changeable (it is not "natural" or immutable: the sense expressed in the opening quotation by Niebuhr, writing during the period of the French Revolution), and in the sense of accounts of what happened: historiography.

However, I would argue that Coetzee's critique is aimed specifically at Lukácsian accounts of his novels, and that these are not criticisms that can easily be aimed at Marxist studies produced within a discourse opened up by that conjunction of Althusser and Semiotics. Fundamentally, Althusser's concept of the "relative autonomy" of the various elements of a social formation, including that of Literature, has enabled a break with "Hegelian" notions of a single historical essence of which literature is merely a passive "reflection", and instead made possible a perception of literature as a space, with its own history and procedures, that does not so much "reflect" reality as bear an active and complex relation to the terrain of hegemonic struggle in which the activities of ideological discourses are vital.

Coetzee argues against those accounts of literature that see the novel as "imaginative investigations of *real* historical forces and *real* historical conditions" (p. 2, my emphases), and here his criticism can be aimed as much at Althusserian as at Lukácsian methods, for both continue to work within a notion of the science of historical materialism as the "truth". However, recent Marxist work – and here I am thinking of the work of Tony Bennett (1986) – has very much abandoned the notion of "absolute" truth (and here we can briefly allude to its Stalinist authoritarianism that should have no place in Marxism) and instead taken on board the discursive nature of historiographical writing, or, as Coetzee puts it, its status as "a certain construction put

upon reality".[1] Indeed, a main point of this essay is to argue that Coetzee's notion of history as a signifying interpretation of reality, demonstrated in the allegoric form of his novel, is something that Marxists should welcome rather than dismiss, because it enables the fundamentally *political* nature of Marxist criticism, foregrounded in the declaration of its own discursive procedures and underpinning ethics, to emerge from behind the mask of "scientific knowledge". An awareness of the discursive nature of historiography enables Marxism to have a far more sympathetic relationship to Coetzee's novels that has been apparent in the past.

Teresa Dovey's (1988a) recent sophisticated analyses of Coetzee's novel are written from within a Deconstructionist problematic hostile to the "mimetic pretensions" of much Coetzee criticism:

> Common to all these criticisms is a view of language as a transparent medium for transmitting the realities of an empirical world, and a failure to see language itself as constitutive of those realities we are able to perceive.
>
> (Dovey 1988a: 53)

For Dovey, Coetzee's novel does not even have any relation to South African liberal ideology in general:

> Coetzee does not engage in either a critique or an endorsement of the liberal humanist position itself, but in a deconstructive reading of the liberal humanist *novelistic discourse*.
>
> (Dovey 1988a: 210)

The recent debate in the *Journal of Literary Studies*[2] over Coetzee's usage of the allegoric form in *Waiting for the Barbarians* focuses in part on the issue of that novel's relationship to history. While Teresa Dovey agrees with Lois Parkinson Zamora that the novel "uses the form of allegory to undo the traditional referentiality of allegory, undermining and ultimately dismissing interpretive determinancy within his own allegorical fable" (Zamora 1986: 7), Dovey criticises Zamora for assuming that "allegory, in the work of a writer like Coetzee, can be translated by means of reference to an extratextual reality, such as the power relations between oppressor and oppressed" (Dovey 1988b: 133).

For Dovey, Coetzee's use of allegory is best understood in terms of post-structuralist interpretations of Walter Benjamin's anti-"Hegelian" study of seventeenth century allegory in *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. Here "allegory announces its connection, not to the world, but to other texts" (p. 134), these other texts belonging to the tradition of liberal South African writing that Coetzee deconstructs, revealing them to have an "inauthentic" desire for a "symbolic" plenitude of meaning dependent upon a historicist notion of the "progressive amelioration of the human condition".

The value of Dovey's intervention is her affirmation of the textual presence of the novel as a signifying practice that actively resists any mimetic analysis, and of its intertextual dialogue with the liberal South African novel. Allegory

is no longer a mystifying attempt to "capture the real", but a form that foregrounds its discursive productivity.

The weakness of Dovey's analysis lies in her inability to deal successfully with the notion of "history", with, that is, the novel's conscious and complex relationship to the political events of the late 1970s, and the manner in which that specific historical conjuncture is seen as the determining space for that crisis of liberal discourse which the novel examines.

An index of the problematic status of "history" in Dovey's account is her rejection of the novel's interest in the "extratextual reality" of "the power relations between oppressor and oppressed". On the one hand, the text is correctly turned away from any simple "reflectionist" account to its autonomous practices, but it is also then damagingly severed from any relationship at all to anything outside of itself, and moreover, the "textuality" of those very power relationships is ignored. (Surely it is the manner in which "power relations" are inscribed within discourses that has fascinated Coetzee: "The myths of a tribe are the fictions it coins to maintain its powers" he would write in *Dusklands* (1974: 26).) If the South African liberal novel has autonomously produced its own myths, it does not follow that they are wholly explicable on their own terms. Although there is no space to pursue this point at length, the liberal novel has altered considerably in the light of differing political-historical circumstances, and has a complex but analysable relationship to a broader South African liberal discourse, itself continually reconstructing itself as the "war of position" has shifted within those varying circumstances.

Moreover, her argument is somewhat surprisingly contradicted when she writes that the outpost of the novel "*clearly represents* a particular phase of South African colonial history" (1988a: 209), and that "the Magistrate's language performs the function of *representing a historical situation*" (1988a: 212. My emphases). While her earlier "textuality" is here abandoned in favour of the most mimetic of analyses, Dovey plays down the novel's relation to history as obvious and unimportant, and instead focuses on its "allegoric" reading of the "liberal novel".

In what follows I will propose a way of reading *Waiting for the Barbarians* that seeks to overcome the limitations of the two schools so far examined, for if one has a disabling inability to come to terms with the text as a signifying practice, the other is unable to articulate the text's complex relationship with history.

Despite the setting of the novel, South African readers recognise many allusions to contemporary South Africa. The narrative of an imperial frontier suddenly becoming embroiled in military campaigns against an increasingly organised indigenous enemy has every relevance to South Africa in the late-1970s where, in reaction to internal mass resistance and external decolonisation, the apartheid regime began developing its concept of "Total National Strategy" to withstand the "total onslaught", as the unidentified author of *The Apartheid War Machine* (1980) argues:

> Military force and control is now at the centre of the strategy to preserve apartheid, rather than being one aspect among several . . . What can be described

> as a "war psychosis" is in the process of being created amongst the white civilian population, with other political and economic goals being subordinated to the needs and demands of the Defence Force.
>
> (p.4)

The incessant torturing of the "barbarian" captives is a fictionalised account of well-documented atrocities performed by the SADF and the SAP in the "operational areas" of Namibia and Angola which Coetzee very likely was aware of.[3] The killing of the old man during interrogation by the security police at the beginning of the novel contains many (deliberate) allusions to the death in detention (in 1977) of the Black Consciousness leader, Stephen Biko. Colonel Joll hands the Magistrate the report of the "cause" of the prisoner's death:

> During the course of the interrogation contradictions became apparent in the prisoner's testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, 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.
>
> (p. 6)

At the Biko inquest, the security police put forward the theory that Biko had sustained those injuries that would lead to his death during a "violent struggle" in which he had "hit his head against a wall". The scuffle had broken out, Major Snyman alleged, after the police had told Biko they had proof of his revolutionary activities: "I confronted him with these facts. He jumped up immediately like a man possessed. I ascribe that to the revelations that I made to him".

In the novel the doctor who "does not ask how the boy sustained his injuries" bears a similarity to the doctors who were called in to examine Biko after the police were "forced to overpower him", particularly Dr Lang who, when asked, "Why didn't you ask any questions about (his injuries)?", replied, "I can't answer that." (Woods 1979: 322). When the Magistrate is imprisoned and tortured he realises that any appeal to the rule of law would be futile:

> They will use the law against me as far as it serves them, then they will turn to other methods. That is the Bureau's way. To people who do not operate under statute, the legal process is simply one instrument among many.
>
> (p. 84)

During the inquest, Colonel Goosen was questioned about the legality of keeping Biko in chains in the police cell, to which he replied, "We don't work under statutory authority".

However, if *Waiting for the Barbarians* examines South African apartheid society at the moment of its transition from a "police state" to a "military state", it nevertheless, in the indeterminate space and time of the novel's world, disrupts any easy, direct passage between itself and the social reality referred to above. This strategy is also for example evinced in a list of wild

birds that the Magistrate watches arrive with the spring: none of them are found in South Africa (p. 57).

Instead of abandoning the referent, or the fictional presence of the text, I will argue that it is more helpful to examine Coetzee's use of allegory at the affirmation of a complex relationship between the two that enables the novel to foreground its *processes of interpretation* of the real. Coetzee's use of the allegorical form can thus be seen, in part, as an example of his continuing critique of Realist/Naturalist writing, for if the latter typically dissolves its status as fiction into its "real" referent (and here ironically the criticism of "disguise" is most apposite), *Waiting for the Barbarians* by contrast, by making explicit the distance between the fictional narrative and its referent, draws attention to itself as an active signifying presence. By contrast, Gordimer's allegory of the buried black body is not foregrounded self-consciously as *an interpretation* of political reality, but is instead subsumed within her larger "realist" project which, while it uses a Modernist "stream of consciousness" technique to undermine the referentiality of Mehring's "white" discourse, nevertheless obliterates the discursive status of her own political interpretations.

Coetzee's use of allegory interestingly follows Saussure's (1974) definition of language closely, for, like language, allegory is an autonomous fictional order that declares, in its very difference from its referent, the "conventional" relation between itself and that referent (in this case, contemporary South Africa). The radical difference between the fictional world of the novel (the system of signs) and present-day South Africa (the referent), the refusal that is to reduce the textual signifiers to those by which that real is traditionally signified, emphasises that the novel does not "reflect" but *signifies* the real, and that if this is so then it must be granted its autonomous space as a fictional presence that *constructs* meanings. And allegory not only enables the reader to consider the meanings offered, but also, crucially, to observe the *processes* of their construction, thus preventing the possibility of the reader misrecognising them as being "naturally" given by the real.

Something of the novel's formal strategy is suggested by the Magistrate's enthusiasm for archaeology. A few miles from the town he has discovered the ruins of an ancient settlement which he has spent many years excavating, including a collection of hieroglyphic wooden slips. Since all historic continuity with what are now merely ruins has been lost, none of the fragments can reveal anything of that culture of which they were once a part. Despite strenuous efforts, he makes no progress in deciphering the slips: all that is visible to him is a series of enigmatic signifiers. What is missing is what Saussure would call the "langue", the rules that govern the language as a system, the relations of difference through which meaning is produced.

If the history and meanings of this ancient community have disappeared, then what the Magistrate begins to do is to *produce* a reading of those fragments. When he is confronted with the wooden slips by the police, who allege that they contain coded messages to the enemy, he invents a narrative on the spot, claiming it to be a story written by the "barbarians" concerning their growing opposition to their colonisation.

Allegory is seen by the Magistrate as a form of writing "open to many interpretations" (p. 112) precisely because its meaning is neither transparent nor univocal. In allegories, signs are used in unfamiliar ways: signifiers are detached from their customary signifieds, the multiplicity of meanings of particular signifiers are exploited, signifiers are arbitrarily joined to signifieds, the conventionality of the relation between sign and referent is flaunted by an unusually emphasised difference between the two. That for critical theory inspired by Saussurean linguistics the above serves equally well as a definition of language generally is of course part of Coetzee's point: allegory reveals the conventionality and instability of all writing.

The Magistrate and his interpretations of the slips therefore function as a model for the formal structuration of the novel as a whole. Coetzee is similarly drawing upon certain fragments of the past (the many colonial images) in order to construct a narrative that has reference to his situation *in the present*. Like the script, the colonial images have been extracted from their original context and have instead become portable signs reconstituted by the allegorist (Coetzee) into a fictional narrative of the "last years of the Empire".

Similarly (this point will be examined in more detail later), unfamiliar new events that have erupted into the life of the Magistrate (Colonel Joll – his military campaigns, his torturing, the mutilated woman) force him to devote a large part of the narrative to attempt to give significance to these "empty" signifiers. For Coetzee, events in reality (the killing of Biko, the militarisation) are seen as "empty" signifiers (at the level of connotation) whose novel presence the text actively interprets and signifies. The meaning the novel offers is that the South African social formation is a colonial one, and that the militarisation and brutality of the regime can be read as signs of a fundamental crisis pointing to the imminent and inevitable collapse of imperialist domination. This is not a case of the novel "reflecting" the "truth" of an already-given social reality: to see the South African formation in this way is to offer a particular explanation that does not exhaust the possibilities of interpretation that may exist. Dovey's argument that the novel "clearly represents" these political developments radically simplifies what is going on in the novel.

Dovey's anti-referential textuality therefore fails to see how Coetzee's interrogation of the "liberal novel" is performed at a specific historical conjuncture (Coetzee seeing his present as the final days of colonialism) which forms the necessary basis for the critique of that discourse. Dovey fails to register the extent to which Coetzee's deconstructive writing is occasioned by the novel's identification of the post-1976 political conflicts as a *systemic crisis of the colonial state*, which throws the limitations of that ideology into stark relief.

Liberalism's central political activities (as demonstrated by the Magistrate) – "restoring" social equilibrium, minimising social conflicts through local reforms, directing a sympathetic philanthropy to the "disadvantaged" – are seen by Coetzee as hopelessly inadequate responses to this systemic crisis. Once the Magistrate recognises this (the mutilated woman remains "unre-

stored"; the act of reparation of returning her to her people does nothing to soften the polarised political struggle between the Empire and its Other), and begins his active opposition to Colonel Joll, that is itself shown to be doomed to failure. Unable to actually join the "barbarian" enemy (for all his sympathy for their suffering, they remain beyond the pale of civilisation: when he is given the chance to escape to their ranks, he decides instead to remain within the fortress), the Magistrate becomes a marginal dissident force within the settler society, fatally bereft of a sustaining popular base, his only consolation, as Dovey points out, the martyrdom of the defeated.

Thus Coetzee will also show how liberal discourse depends upon a *naturalisation* of the colonial order, to whose "excesses" the liberal turns his or her reforming attention. Roland Barthes (1972) wrote of the manner in which "myths" serve to "naturalise" political hegemony by de-historicising it, deflecting attention away from social dynamism in order to reify the status quo into an unquestioned immutability. It is the Magistrate who is located within such a "naturalising" myth, the man who wanted to "live outside history", and what more "naturalising" a way is there of seeing the social system than in the "smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons"?

Indeed, the metaphor of the seasons occurs throughout the novel, its status as naturalising myth increasingly undermined by the progression of the narrative. The novel opens with the ending of summer, for the Magistrate a time to be concerned about the granary. But it is not only summer that is in decline: Colonel Joll, too, has arrived, signalling the decline of the years of peace on the frontier. As winter approaches, the episode with the tortured woman unfolds, a harsh time for him, whose rituals of purification also speak of the desire for regeneration and restoration. As spring is on its way, the Magistrate begins his "hard journey with an unsure guide in a treacherous season" to return the woman to her people.

The act is clearly a regenerative one, an act of penance that will be followed by the hope and bounty of the spring. But at this point the metaphor begins to break down: he returns to be arrested, and as he ironically says, it is now "time for the black flower of civilisation to bloom", and he spends the subsequent summer in prison. The ideology the Magistrate has lived within for so many years can no longer resolve the social contradictions inherent in the system, and the final winter of the novel promises no redeeming spring for the Empire, but is instead replaced by the linear time of the narrative, on "a road that may lead nowhere". The settlers can only "turn their backs to the wind and endure". Ironically, the historic process has here been re-naturalised, taking on, as far as the settlers are concerned, all the inevitability of nature: in their defeat their fate becomes inexorable.

Thus for Coetzee the systemic crisis of the period of the novel's production unearths the historicity of the colonial order, and equally reveals liberalism's own historicity: its status as a complicit colonial discourse that is dying along with its host.

I agree with Dovey that Walter Benjamin's theory of allegory, found in his remarkable book, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1977), is most

illuminating with regard to Coetzee's own use of allegory in the novel, and indeed it is clear that Coetzee borrowed much from that study. Yet I would disagree with the way Dovey has interpreted Coetzee's reading of Benjamin, who has been unproblematically inserted into the school of deconstruction. Dovey also – and this is a general difficulty with her book – underestimates the extent to which Coetzee typically "manhandles" other theories for his own purposes.

Benjamin, living within the "catastrophic" history of early twentieth-century Germany, rejected all theories of historical progress (including the Marxist version, which Dovey ignores) in favour of a painfully negative view of the past as a "single catastrophe which ceaselessly heaps rubble upon rubble". In this regard, he established a "constellation" with the seventeenth-century German Baroque dramatists of the "Trauerspiel" ("plays of mourning"), "this age drunk with acts of cruelty both lived and imagined" (Benjamin 1977: 185) whose theatrical allegories mourned the "destructive effects of time, of inevitable transience" (p. 92).

> The word "history" stands written on the countenance of nature in the character of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.
>
> (Benjamin 1977: 177)

This has, as Dovey also points out, every relevance to the Magistrate lurking amongst the ruins of a previous civilisation, and also informs his awareness of the crisis through which he is living:

> What has made it impossible to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire: Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginnings and end, of catastrophe.
>
> (p. 133)

Benjamin once wrote ("against the grain" of historicism) that to

> articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.
>
> (Benjamin 1968: 257))

If this is precisely what the twentieth-century Benjamin was doing with the Baroque Trauerspiel, then Coetzee (and the Magistrate) is similarly forging such a relation with the past in order to produce a "knowledge" of the present. In "seizing hold" of the "memory" of past collapsed empires in this "moment of danger", Coetzee portrays South African colonialism by the end of the novel as being in ruins. As the war with the "barbarians" reaches a

climax, a well is sunk within the parameter walls. Instead of water they dig up the bones of children: if water offers healing and restoration (the washing of the feet), here it has been replaced with death, the revelation of finality.

Dovey argues that Coetzee aligns himself with the "Benjaminian" view of the "irresistible decay" of history, nature and art against the "liberal notion of the progressive amelioration of the human condition" that the Magistrate voices. But the view of time articulated by the Magistrate is of the "smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons", which is of course at odds with linear progression, and indeed if a pre-1948 liberalism defended an optimistic view of historic development, Coetzee seems to argue that contemporary liberalism at best acts to prevent things from getting worse (the Magistrate's continual need to "restore" things to what they were before recent disruptions). I would therefore argue that the usage of Benjamin in the novel is not to make some general point about human history, but to articulate the collapse of a very specific history.

It is often startling when reading Benjamin's work to see how much *Waiting for the Barbarians* has in common with it. Benjamin describes the Baroque thus: "as an antithesis to the historical ideal of restoration it is haunted by the idea of catastrophe. And it is in response to this antithesis that the theory of the *state of emergency* is devised" (Benjamin 1977: 66). For the heroes of the plays, "the only response to the call of history is the physical pain of martyrdom" (p. 91). The "restoration of the timelessness of paradise" is "opposed to the disconsolate chronicle of world-history" (p. 92).

Benjamin's theory of the allegorical sign is also helpful, if the differences between the two writers is recognised. For Benjamin, the rigid transcendentalism of an antinominian Lutheranism which informed the Trauerspiel, in combination with the devastating history of the period, led to a vision of an evacuated world from which all meaning had departed: "the hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest breath of this world" (p. 66). Allegory therefore arises as the attempt, in stoic contemplation, to give the world meaning:

> Language functions for the Baroque allegorist as a means of imposing significance upon a silent world bereft of its own language and thus of immanent meaning.
>
> (Jennings 1987: 107)

But because objects now "lack any natural, creative relationship" to people, "any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else" (Benjamin 1977: 174). And it is here that the "conventional" relation between signs and their referents is flaunted in the "obviously constructed quality" of the aesthetic form.

For the Magistrate, the new situation he is confronted with is similarly devoid of meaning: it appears to him (much like the ancient scripts he unearths) as a collection of hieroglyphic marks that need to be "interpreted": the hidden world of the torturer, the "blank" face of the mutilated woman, the impenetrable sun-glassed eyes of Colonel Joll; and it is a similarly

"contemplative" attitude that the Magistrate will assume: not so much action, but the "interrogation" of his actions, and all this in a world that is perceived to be in inevitable decline. To this extent, Coetzee is foregrounding the novel's own process of signification, that the novel is an "interpretation" of the signifiers of a political transition within the South African formation, but it equally refers to a political practice that presents itself to liberalism as an enigma to be deciphered, since it is fundamentally alien to the "decent" values of that ideology.

In conclusion, in reading Coetzee's novel in South Africa in 1990, when, after years of unprecedented repression that failed to crush the "mass democratic movement", the apartheid regime is now opening negotiations with its erstwhile enemy, and both sides are demonstrating a willingness to compromise to facilitate that process, one is struck by the historically-specific context of *Waiting for the Barbarians* that in important ways is no longer with us. Moreover, the novel's total dismissal of "white liberalism", and its "Africanist" stark contrast of African and coloniser (these are of course related), speak of the strong influence of Black Consciousness ideology upon the text's interpretations of its historical context. A Marxist interpretation would suggest that this is a simplification of the political contest, which leaves aside the relations of domination *within* the ranks of the colonised, and the extent to which certain Black organisations and individuals – the Inkatha/ Kwazulu-Indaba is a flagrant example – have become complicit with the colonial order. To see that element of the political struggle requires a "class" analysis about which Coetzee has been unfortunately silent. Furthermore, as the political struggle moved into the 1980s, Black Consciousness ideology faded in the light of the resurgence of the African National Congress and its allies, with its "popular front" politics in which the leftwing of "white liberalism" found something of an active place.

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Notes

1. For interesting analyses of the discursive status of historiography, see for example Roland Barthes (1981), Hayden White (1973/1978) and Derek Attridge et al (1986).
2. See Lois Parkinson Zamora (1986) and Teresa Dovey (1988b).
3. See for example *The Guardian* newspaper (1976; 1981). Trevor Edwards, a SADF soldier, provided this account of the behaviour of the SADF in Angola which has a resemblance to the scene in the novel dealing with the boy and the old man who are tortured (it appeared after the publication of the novel):

   Sometimes you have to do it to the children to make the adults talk. There was a 12-year-old boy. We wanted to know what was going on. We wanted his mother to talk so we tied him up like a chicken with his wrists up behind his back, strapped to his ankles.Then we played water-polo with him, put him in this kind of dam and pushed him about, let him sink. Every so often we took him out. He

wouldn't cry. He just wet himself. The mother didn't tell us anything. In the end we just left him in the water and he drowned.

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