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The Excremental as Ethical?: Violence in J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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During the 1970s and 80s the security forces of the white run apartheid government in South Africa gained international notoriety for the various obscenities committed during its interrogation of the political dissidents and revolutionaries of the country. Written and Published during these violent decades, J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) interrogates the impact of the torture chamber on the conscience of a protagonist approximating the subject position of both victim and perpetrator. Named simply the Magistrate, Coetzee's protagonist journeys from being a person obsessed with cleaning up the literal and metaphorical filth littering his imperial outpost to an experience of living through the excremental on an everyday basis. This foregrounding of the excremental, I argue, is seminal to the question of relating ethically to the 'barbarians' traumatized by the 'Empire of pain'(Coetzee 24) in the novel. While Apartheid's administrative measures related to public health—especially of the urban population—was influential in realizing the Afrikaners' dream of separate development, in Coetzee's novel the trope of the dirty, infectious, dangerous native is counterfocalized to reveal contamination of the self by the radically other as the only way of gesturing towards an ethical future. To this end, I draw upon Dominick La Capra's concept of 'empathic unsettlement' to produce a reading of Coetzee's poetics of self-cancellation: a poetics that repeatedly approaches the trauma of the truly 'obscene' other without ever being able to appropriate the same..

Keywords: J.M. Coetzee, excrement, ethics, counterfocalization, trauma.

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Introduction

During the 1970s and 80s, the security forces of the white-run apartheid government in South Africa gained international notoriety for the various obscenities committed during its interrogation of the political dissidents and revolutionaries in the country. Written and published during these violent decades, J.M.Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) interrogates 'the impact of the torture chamber' upon the conscience of a protagonist (Coetzee, "Into the Dark Chamber", 363) approximating the subject position of both torturer and victim. Named simply the Magistrate, Coetzee's protagonist journeys from being a person obsessed with cleaning up the literal and material filth littering his imperial outpost to an experience of living through the excremental on an everyday basis. This foregrounding of the excremental, I argue, is seminal to the question of relating ethically to the 'barbarians' traumatized by the 'Empire of pain' (Coetzee 24) in the novel. While apartheid's administrative measures related to public health—especially of the urban population—were influential in realizing the Afrikaner dream of 'separate development' in South Africaⁱ, in Coetzee's novel the trope of the dirty, infectious, dangerous native is counterfocalized to reveal contamination of the self by the otherⁱⁱ as the only possibility of gesturing towards an ethical future. What makes it pertinent to think the question of bearing witness in Coetzee's novel through the metaphors of contagion, contamination, and pollution are, I believe, the issues of suggestibility and transmissibility Coetzee himself identifies as germane to the thinking of apartheid architects such as Geoffrey Cronjeⁱⁱⁱ. As the initial manifestation of the other and the first extension of the self (Pops 50), shit confounds the distinction between inside and outside in a way similar to someone experiencing trauma at one remove. As Roger Luckhurst puts it in his introduction to *The Trauma Question*, trauma is

...a piercing or breach of a boundary that creates an odd communication between the inside and outside is called a trauma. Trauma forcefully creates bridges between once distinct systems, creating unexpected linkages that can be upsetting or confusing. Furthermore, trauma seems to be extremely infectious: it can spread from one patient to another, between mental and physical symptoms, between patients and physicians through a mysterious process of suggestion or transference, and between victims and the people who watch or listen to them, who are frequently moved to extremes of intense empathy, sometimes even to the point of claiming secondary victimhood. ... (Luckhurst 3-4).

Luckhurst goes on to address transmissibility as a major concern in the study of trauma, paying specific attention to the question of who has the ethical claim to bear witness - primary victim? Secondary victim? The perpetrator? -in the wake of trauma's propensity to collapse and confound distinctions (Luckhurst 3-4). And it is this difficult question we find repeatedly addressed throughout Coetzee's oeuvre : whether be it in Susan Barton's reminder to the reader that the mute slave Friday's silence, punctuating the narrative of Coetzee's *Foe* , holds an ethical weight her own testimony to years on Crusoe's island lacks, or in the dying professor Mrs. Curren's address to her absent daughter in *Age of Iron* that bears witness to the township violence in apartheid south africa in the years 1986-89 while remaining self-reflexively aware of the impossibility of speaking for the black victims dying all around her. As evidenced in the anxieties induced in the Australian novelist Elizabeth Costello, the damning possibility of identifying with Hitler's hangmen while reading Paul West's *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg* drives one to the edge of sanity. The same problem dominates David Lurie's mind as he tries to imagine himself in the scene of his daughter Lucy's gang rape, and finds only the possibility of identifying with the rapist male figure. A way out of this conundrum, Luckhurst suggests, may lie through Dominick La Capra's proposed distinction between empathy, which maintains distance, and identification, which falls into this dangerous confusion (La Capra, quoted by Luckhurst 3-4).

Trauma and Transmissibility

While the question of trauma's transmissibility and suggestibility is never made as explicit in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as it is in "The Problem of Evil" lesson in *Elizabeth Costello*(2003)—a lesson in which Costello, the Australian alter-ego of Coetzee himself, castigates the American novelist Paul West for bringing Hitler's hangman back to life in a novel^{iv}—it is nevertheless present as a threat to the self's limits of reason in Coetzee's depiction of the ways in which the Magistrate relates to the torture of the native fisherfolks and aboriginals populating the edges of his imperial outpost. Roger Luckhurst, in a recent article, has pertinently raised the question as to whether torture 'exemplif[ies] the trauma paradigm or lie[s] beyond it?'(Luckhurst, "Beyond Trauma Torturous times",13). Luckhurst argues against the tendency of trauma theory to read torture in terms of 'the language of transgressed limit or the ineffable sublime' for, as he sees it, torture, as deployed by many nation-states around the world, is a coherent and conscious policy,

backed by legal commentary and detailed operational parameters clearly stated along the chain of command' ((Luckhurst, "Beyond Trauma Torturous times", 14). Yet in expressions like '...perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through'(Coetzee 70), the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* repeatedly foregrounds torture's tendency to effect a radical disjunction between language and lived traumatic experience that stays close to Elaine Scarry's thesis regarding the same in *Body in Pain: The Making and unmaking of the World*(1985)^v while also substantiating Cathy Caruth's contention that the paradigmatic traumatic experience is the one that both 'defies and demands' witness (Caruth 5). Simultaneously fascinated and appalled by the 'cries coming from the granary' in which Colonel Joll, an officer of the Imperial Third Bureau, carries out his obscene acts of torture, the Magistrate repeatedly approaches the site of trauma in this novel yet fails, every time, to reveal to the reader what constitutes the kernel of the traumatic experience^{vi}. While during his interrogation of the barbarian girl later in the novel, the Magistrate's shudder at being touched by the 'taint' of Joll drives home the associations between contagion and transmissibility through which trauma is troped in this novel, it is in the pervasive imagery of shit and stink that attaches to him after he is tortured for 'treasonously consorting with the enemy'(Coetzee 85) that the possibilities for relating ethically to a (seemingly) unknowable other is articulated most clearly. It is instructive here to look at Sara Ahmad's theorization of the black body as 'body out of place'—following Mary Douglas,'s formulation of dirt as 'matter out of place'—in her study of 'racialized bodies'. Through a reading of Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*, she shows how the threat of touching constitutes and unmakes individual and social bodily space for white and black bodies, where dirt becomes a figure for both metonymic contiguity and metaphoric displacement that threaten to engulf the very possibility of differentiation through which race is constituted. She argues memorably that "the lived experience of inhabiting the black body hesitates on the question: 'am I the roach?' or 'am I the dirt which forces me away'" (Ahmed 60). The Magistrate's experience of corporeal depravity after his capture in Coetzee's novel vindicates Ahmed's argument that 'to withdraw from a relation of physical proximity to black bodies is still to be touched by those bodies, in such a way that the white subject is moved from its place'(Ahmed 60). In order to substantiate my argument, one must need to first come to a clear understanding of the intertwining of the excremental and the historical in literatures of Colonial trauma such as *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

The Barbarian Craps where He Pleases

Throughout history, colonized populations have been characterized as dirty bodies and associated with filth, shit, and disorder through a variety of demeaning tropes, as David Spurr has observed in *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Spurr, quoted by Esty 28). These very tropes provide the hinge for the dichotomous construction of the civilized self and barbarian other in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. ‘The barbarian craps where he pleases’ (Laporte 57), writes Dominique LaPorte; and surely, in the Magistrate’s revulsion at the ‘frank and filthy habits’ (Coetzee 20) of the barbarians he holds prisoners ‘incommunicado’ (Coetzee 20) for Colonel Joll, we can discern the same civilizational demands for cleanliness, order and purity. This rage for cleanliness and order is, crucially, linked to the question of the Empire’s weaponizing of history in the novel. After he gets the permission to free the innocent prisoners, the Magistrate’s reflections on the hermeneutics of imperial history make explicit the association between cleanliness, order, and the forgetting of the trauma of imperial victims:

Before I finish the old story, I hope it will explain to me why I thought it was worth the trouble. The new men of the Empire are the ones who believe in new beginnings, new chapters, and clean pages. Therefore, since I am now once again in charge of maintaining law and order in these parts, I give the order to feed the inmates, call the doctor for assistance, reopen the barracks, and make every effort to return the inmates to their previous lives as quickly as possible. (Coetzee, 26)

Later in the novel, a gory spectacle brings together the empire’s obsession with ‘fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages’ and its weaponizing of history as the twelve fisherfolks caught by the imperial army are written onto and written off through a performative gesture germane to the production of imperial history:

The Colonel advances, bending over each prisoner individually, rubs a handful of dust into his nude back, and uses a charcoal stick to write a word. I read the words, ENEMY...ENEMY...ENEMY...ENEMY backwards. He retracts a step and puts on his hands. I stand no more than twenty paces away from him as we stare at each other.

And that's when the beating starts. The prisoners' backs and buttocks are covered in red welts as the soldiers use the sturdy green cane staves to bring them down with loud, rhythmic slapping noises akin to washing pads. Except for the prisoner who had been moaning and was now gasping with every blow, the other prisoners carefully spread their legs until they were flat on their bellies. (Coetzee 115)

Coetzee follows this description with how 'the black charcoal and ochre dust' that are the instruments of the Empire's forging of a history in its own image gets mixed with the 'sweat and blood' of the innocent fisherfolk produced through this spectacle as enemies of the state. This suggests not only how the imperial history is tainted with and underwritten by violence that itself will never become part of history. But as a 'citational practice through which discourse produces the effects it names' (Butler xii), imperial history here could be clearly seen as erasing native pasts to produce the 'fresh starts' and 'clean pages' free of the taint of the other. What makes Coetzee's grim rewriting of Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" in this passage contextually apt is the historically accurate homology between the Jew of Kafka's Bohemia and the black South African of apartheid years in terms of dirt and danger^{vii}. However, the Magistrate's wish to "struggle on with the old story" is indicative of "unhealthy mourning," or melancholia as Freud defined it, which is characterized by the subject's inability to accept loss as a part of consciousness. According to Derrida, grief only becomes moral in this exact moment of integration gone wrong (Durrant 30). The magistrate's melancholic vigil over those lost to history keeps faith not only with the fisherfolks and the barbarian girl maimed by the Empire but also those soldiers of the Empire sent out in the desert to hunt the 'barbarians', only to never come back alive. Even as the meaning of his gesture eludes him, the Magistrate's insistence that the dead soldiers 'must have [their] rites' resists a particular attitude to waste matter prevalent in modernity. This is neatly summed up by Dominique Laporte in his *History of Shit* (1993):

Corpses are just trash that is buried; they are neither more nor less. The smell of shit and corpses has long caused the Christian West to react with equal terror. To keep them both at bay, one finds striking similarities in the morbid effects attributed to their respective odors. (Laporte 60).

While the Magistrate's resolve to mourn those deemed 'matter out of place' –to remember Mary Douglas' famous formulation of dirt—registers a note of ethical commitment, his repeated attempts to return the traumatized to their past lives 'as far as possible' is troped through the

imagery of cleanliness. This is evidenced not only in his order to ‘clean up the room’ (Coetzee 26) in which the barbarians were held prisoners but much more tellingly in his regular, ritualistic washing of the feet of the barbarian girl whose past fascinates him as much as the indecipherable scripts he unearths from the voluntarily undertaken excavations in the sandy dunes at the borders of his outpost. In one sense, then, the excremental in Coetzee’s novel serves exactly the function Joshua D. Esty ascribes it in “Excremental Postcolonialism”(1999). According to Esty, shit serves to ‘diffuse guilt and shame’ in excremental postcolonial literature: carrying a ‘secret charge of self-implication’ for the postcolonial intellectual unable to rid himself of the taint of post-independence corruption and violent abuse of humanity he detests (Esty 34). Translated to the South African context, one could substitute ‘white liberal’ for Esty’s ‘postcolonial intellectual’, not least because of the former’s superfluity to the cause of black freedom emphasized time and again by Black Consciousness leaders such as Steve Biko^{viii}. Perhaps nowhere is this superfluity better dramatized in *Waiting for the Barbarians* than in the image of the Magistrate ‘stand [ing] forgotten with [the] bucket between [his] feet’ (Coetzee 116): a bucket he filled with water from the prison yard to clean up after the ‘patriotic bloodlust’ (Coetzee 114) presided over by Colonel Joll—leading to the production of the twelve fisherfolks as ‘ENEMY’—would come to pass. The magistrate’s motivation for doing this is to avoid becoming contaminated by the impending atrocity nor poison [himself] with hopeless hatred of his perpetrators. (Coetzee 114). It is telling that in the course of the novel, the Magistrate achieves neither of these objectives. Like the protagonists of Soyinka and Armah Esty reads through the trope of the excremental, Coetzee’s Magistrate too is party to the civilizational discourse he condemns: a discourse neatly encapsulated by the dialectic of cleanliness and dirt in Coetzee’s novel. This beholdenness of the Magistrate to the imperial conception of civilization persists to the very end and is made concrete when contemplating the imminence of a barbarian invasion, he recoils in horror at the possibility of the barbarians ‘wip[ing] their backsides on the town archives’ (Coetzee 157). While the image of the filthyng of the archive is placed strategically by Coetzee to suggest the possibility of corrupting the tyrannical weapon called History^{ix} through which empires all over the world established the supremacy of their civilization, shit operates in the novel as a figure for the abject other who survives in spite of the apartheid government’s urge to dissociate itself from the corporeal as such which in South Africa has been, historically, associated with Kaffir work: perpetuating, thereby, the tradition from Greece and Rome, from Plato and Aristotle, that deemed bodily work as suitable for slaves and

political governance the prerogative of the enlightened, ‘civilized’ citizen (Laporte 43-44). To discern how the corporeal and the scatological come together as figures of the abject in the context of trauma’s transmissibility, we need to first counterfocalize the Magistrate’s cultured horror at matters out of place in the novel. To this end, Mieke Bal and Gayatri Spivak’s writings on focalization in narrative art provide me with the necessary theoretical scaffolding.

Counterfocalization and the Advent of the Ethical

In *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985), Mieke Bal introduces the term focalization to ‘refer to the relations between the elements presented [in a narrative] and the vision through which they are presented.’ (Bal 145) Focalization, according to Bal, ‘can lie with a character...or outside it.’ (Bal 149). In a masterly reading of Coetzee’s post-apartheid novel *Disgrace* (1999), Gayatri Spivak, following Bal’s cue, argues that in that novel the chief focalizer David Lurie’s ‘inability to “read” [his daughter] Lucy as patient and agent’—in the wake of her gang-rape—provides the reader the spur to counter focalize: for ‘no reader is content with acting out the failure of reading’ (Spivak 22). It does not take much effort to see that the equation between David Lurie and his racial and gendered others in *Disgrace* is a reworking, both in terms of failure of reciprocity and failure of reading, of the one between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Both David Lurie and the Magistrate grapple with traumatic pasts that simultaneously attract and repel them. Both are warded off by bodies that doggedly guard the secrets of their trauma. And if David Lurie shudders at the thought of identifying with Lucy’s rapists, then, in trying to decode the barbarian girl’s inscrutable body, the Magistrate—much to his horror—finds Colonel Joll’s doubled image cast back at him. Making vivid thereby the question of trauma’s transmissibility, Coetzee treats the problem of identification with the victims of trauma in a nuanced way. If Lurie’s attempt to envision a traumatic past that was never his present halts at the aporetic question of ‘does he have it in him to be the woman?’ (Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 160) Then the Magistrate’s repeated attempts to decipher the soot marks left on the walls of the room in which the ‘barbarians’ were once tortured produces, for him, nothing but interminable frustrations. The spur to counterfocalization in *Waiting for the Barbarians* comes once the Magistrate himself undergoes torture and corporeal debasement at the hands of the Empire’s ‘ministers of pain’. While identification with the Magistrates’ perspective^x would produce nothing but interpretative frustration for the readers of the novel, counterfocalization of

the narrative in passages such as the following can intimate possibilities of establishing reciprocity across the traumatic divide that doesn't risk identification with and approximation of the violated, 'obscene'^{xi} other's suffering:

...I fall into a second sleep, lying quietly against the wall and covering my sore hand with my armpit for comfort. Into a jumble of pictures, from which I pick out one specific image, shoving aside the others that come flying at me like leaves. It belongs to the girl. She's kneeling in front of the sandcastle or snow castle she made, her back to me. I can see that she is working underground in the castle's basements as I get closer (Coetzee 119-120).

In this dream, the Magistrate finds the hooded figure of the girl offering him an 'amorphous lump' that could well recall for the readers the tortured, maimed, disfigured bodies of the 'barbarians' in the opening pages of the novel. What follows is the vision 'that she is holding out a loaf of bread with a coarse, steaming, broken crust that is still hot'. Gratitude overwhelms the magistrate at this offering of manna, and is significantly expressed through its entanglement with an idiom of pain as we find 'tears stinging down the cut on [his] cheek' (Coetzee 119-120). In a certain sense, this dream offers the climax to the Magistrate's seemingly fruitless quest for establishing a relationship with the traumatized barbarian girl. While previously in the novel the dreams involving the little girl remained as opaque to the readers as they were for the Magistrate, reading this particular passage, the canny reader will surely be alerted to Jesus Christ's famous injunction: 'Eat this bread in remembrance of me'. In the context of Coetzee's novel, this translates to an invitation to the Magistrate to establish a community with the tortured barbarians exclusively in terms of what Judith Butler, in *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) calls our 'common corporeal vulnerability' (Butler, *Prekarious life*, 42). However, the Magistrate's admitted inability to 'taste the bread that made [his] saliva run' brings back echoes of a different biblical passage. In John 6:56, Jesus says: 'Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them.' In the context of the sharability of traumatic pain in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this translates into a refusal on Coetzee's part to allow the traumatized Other to be reduced to a version of the Same^{xii}. Coetzee's Magistrate, eventually, is held in a position of what Dominick La Capra calls 'empathic unsettlement': i.e. a middle ground between 'acting out' and 'working through', identification and empathy, that allows the secondary witness to 'affectively and cognitively' relate to victims of trauma 'in compassionate ways that remain respectful of their otherness' (La Capra xxiii-xxiv).

Further, La Capra's contention that empathic unsettlement 'poses a barrier to closure in discourse' (La Capra 41) is useful for reading the ways in which the Magistrate's attempts at relating ethically to the barbarians inscrutable, traumatic past thwart the imperial desire for 'clean pages, fresh starts' that engineers amnesia regarding the native other's humanity. Shit is the figure that helps Coetzee in this enterprise as it serves to remind us of our inescapable material, embedded existence in historical time: an existence that presupposes and desires entanglement with other bodies. 'Not permitted to wash' by the torturers of the Third Bureau after he interrupts their spectacle of 'patriotic bloodlust', the Magistrate's distaste at starting to 'smell of shit' (Coetzee 127) must be counterfocalized to arrive at the idea that as a figure that marks 'the fuzzy boundary between inside and outside, between the self and the not-self' (Esty 34) the excremental in *Waiting for the Barbarians* retains a positive, enabling charge. As a reminder of our corporeal entanglement with other lives—precisely what was disavowed in apartheid's forgetting of black labor and black pain—the excremental in Coetzee's novel produces an immanent critique of the discourse of historicism as it emerged in 18th and 19th c. Europe^{xiii}. Pioneered by the likes of the German historian Ranke, this discourse believed in the production of a disembodied, 'homogenous, empty time' (Benjamin 261)^{xiv}—to remember Walter Benjamin's famous formulation—that leads one to experience exactly the time of crisis, anxiety and imminent catastrophe that the Magistrate rails against in Coetzee's novel. Rather than remaining beholden to this history that believes in producing knowledge of the past from a supra historical vantage point, torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians* teaches us—if not the Magistrate—that relating feelingly to the trauma of racial and gendered others demands a recognition of the corporeal as such as the voiding of history. Consequently, only an embodied, visceral response can fulfill Coetzee's avowed objective of 'writing without authority': issuing in a poetics of self-cancellation that approaches the suffering of the truly 'obscene' other without eventually being able to appropriate the same. As a symbol of both bodily excess and bodily privation, the excremental in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the apposite figure for expressing this. Further, as Joshua D. Esty points out. Shit, 'operating counter-discursively' in excremental postcolonial literature, serves to reveal the gap between 'individual, existential time' and the 'mystified temporality of the nation' (Esty 44). If the 'jagged time of rise and fall' in Coetzee's novel crystallizes the 'mystified temporality of the nation'— i.e. the disembodied temporality of History as discourse—then, as my reading of the novel has hopefully

shown, the ‘individual, existential time’ in *Waiting for the Barbarians* couldn’t be anything but traumatic.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to analyze whether the pervasive imagery of shit and stink in J.M.Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be read in terms of the horizontal transmissibility of trauma one finds in trauma theory formulated by the likes of Roger Luckhurst, Cathy Caruth, Dominic La Capra and the theory of torture and corporeal pain as evinced in Elaine Scarry’s monumental *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. For while the question of ethical alterity in Coetzee’s work has cropped up in many Derridean-Levinasian readings of the novel—exemplified best perhaps by Derek Attridge’s celebrated *J.M.Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (2004)—none of the existing scholarship has so far sought to ground the question of ethics in Coetzee in instancing of the excremental: a surprising choice considering the very real troping of the black, native other in apartheid’s official imagery in terms of dirt, danger, pollution and contamination. The only instance of Coetzee scholarship that foregrounds the excremental in a reading of any of his novels is Jennifer Rutherford’s “Thinking through shit in JmM.Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus* ”. Rutherford masterfully reads the question of the excrement in that novel in the context of the global refugee crisis and shows how dirt and the dirty in that particular Coetzee novel—like the protagonists David and Simon at the beginning of the novel—relates to a haunting of the Cartesian disembodied reason exemplified in the kind of modernity Coetzee’s fictional Novilla embodies (Rutherford 66-69). While like the migrants analyzed by Rutherford, the native other of apartheid represents a constitutive outside of capitalist modernity in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I have sought to address the possibilities of establishing an ethical address across what seems incommensurable distances by thinking the (suffering other’s)body as precisely that which is excreted by the time of History in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. To establish my argument, I have tried to situate Coetzee’s novel in the context of apartheid South Africa by reading it through Coetzee’s analysis of the apartheid artichetct Geoffrey Kronje’s writings on contagion and blood-mixing and critique of the same paranoia regarding black presence in Maynard Swanson’s essay on the sanitation syndrome in early twentieth century South Africa. I argue that the excremental in this particular Coetzee novel must be thought through an immanent critique of the discourse of History and ‘civilization’ in apartheid

South Africa: a discourse that Coetzee’s protagonist, the Magistrate, finds empires of all kinds imposing upon its dead and living subjects. While the Magistrate remains party to this civilizational discourse he condemns to the very end, I argue that the Magistrate’s cultured horror at ‘matter out of place’—to borrow Mary Douglas’s famous formulation of dirt—must be counterfocalized to arrive at the possibility of building an ethical approach to the (seemingly unknowable other) in a way that doesn’t risk usurpation of the other’s unrepresentable suffering in the novel. To this end Mieke Bal and Gayatri Spivak’s arguments regarding narrative focalization have provided me with the necessary theoretical scaffolding as has Dominic La Capra’s conception of ‘empathic unsettlement’: i.e. a middle ground between ‘acting out’ and ‘working through’, identification and empathy, that allows the secondary witness to ‘affectively and cognitively’ relate to victims of trauma ‘in compassionate ways that remain respectful of their otherness’(La Capra xxiii-xxiv). I conclude my analysis by drawing upon Joshua.D Esty’s “Excremental Postcolonialism” to argue that, like in the Soyinka and Armah novels analyzed by Esty, *Waiting for the Barbarians* foregrounds the void between the disembodied time of history and the experiential time of individual trauma that is hardly accounted for in triumphal narratives of imperial nationhood.

i. For a socio-historical and psycho-analytical reading of this problematic, see, respectively, Maynard Swanson’s “The Sanitation syndrome: bubonic plague and urban native policy in the Cape colony 1900-09”(1977) and J.M.Coetzee’s “The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronje (1907-)”(1991).

ii. As my use of the concept of ‘empathic unsettlement’ later in the paper hopefully demonstrates, contamination here does not imply collapse/confusion of self and other.

iii See J.M.Coetzee’s “The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronje (1907-)”(1991) for a masterly reading of ‘contagious suggestibility’ at work in the writings of one of the chief architects of apartheid. Coetzee’s reading of contagious suggestibility in terms of metonymic displacement in this essay inspires me to think of trauma in his fiction in terms of a similar, horizontal transmissibility.

iv Bringing us ‘to the verge of the insight that sanity is based on the ability to cultivate a not-knowing, even an indifference’ (Hartman 274), the following passage from *Elizabeth Costello* attests exactly to the ‘worrying transmissibility’ Luckhurst is discussing in his theorization of the trauma-paradigm:

“Word by word, step by step, heartbeat by heartbeat, I accompany him [West] into the darkness. *No one has been here before*, I hear him whisper, and so I whisper too; our breath is as one. *Ours is the death that will be died, ours the hand that will knot the rope* (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello* 174; emphasis original).

^v As Scarry puts it, ‘physical pain does not merely resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, ...’ (Scarry 4)

^{vi} A reading of Coetzee’s 1986 essay”, “Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African state” reveals that the refusal to reproduce a mimetic account of the experience of the traumatized is strategic on Coetzee’s part. For this essay argues that when faced with the task of the obscenities of torture, the writer must not provide the reader with a voyeuristic experience of looking on violence with ‘horrified fascination’ nor should avert his gaze from the scene of violence. The choice beyond ‘looking on in horrified fascination’ and ‘turning one’s eyes away’ is precisely the one that informs Coetzee’s novelistic ethics in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

^{vii} See Sander Gilman’s *Franz Kafka, the Jewish Patient* (1995) and Linda Munk’s “What Does Hegel Make Of The Jews: A Scato-logical reading of Kafka’s *Die Verwandlung*”(1994) for deployment of the idea of the infectious, dirty Jew in analyses of Kafka’s fiction.

^{viii} See Biko’s *I Write What I Like* (1978) for forceful iterations of this idea.

^{ix} Shit confounds the distinction between self and other, thereby rupturing the dichotomous construction of civilized self and ‘barbarian’ other that helped produce and consolidate Imperial domination all over the world.

^x Quite clearly, the Magistrate in Coetzee’s novel is an example of what Bal sees as the ‘character-as-focalizer’ who is ‘the point from which the elements [in the narrative] are viewed (Bal 149). Since the reader watches the events in the narrative through this focalizer, he ‘will be inclined to accept’ (Bal 150) his perspective. As I have been arguing, this alignment with the character as focalizer must be rejected so that the reader can glimpse the possibilities of the ethical in Coetzee’s fiction.

^{xi} I am taking a cue from Elizabeth Costello’s interpretation of the obscene as ‘*off-stage*’ (Coetzee, *Elizabeth Costello*, 148-149) to describe the violation of the barbarian girl in particular, whose torture in the novel does indeed take place off-stage and thereby provides Coetzee with the opportunity of articulating and interrogating an ethics and politics of rendering the invisible visible.

^{xii} Here I am loosely borrowing the vocabulary Emmanuel Levinas uses to develop his ethics of alterity in *Totality and Infinity*.

^{xiii} South African historians such as Paul S. Landau has shown how this conception of history was exported to and marshalled in South Africa by colonial administrators and missionaries to bolster the ideology of work seminal for extracting black labour for the first wave of industrialization in South Africa during the late 19th century.

^{xiv} For a reading of ‘homogenous, empty time’ as effecting a ‘disembodiment of History from Memory’, see Yi Wu’s “The Historical and Its Discontents: Nietzsche and Benjamin Against “Historicism” “(2020).

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