

# *Narrative, History, Ideology: A Study of "Waiting for the Barbarians" and "Burger's Daughter"*

RICHARD G. MARTIN

Ideological forms, to be sure, are not straightforward systems of "ideas" and "discourses," but are manifested through the workings and history of determinate practices in determinate social relations. . . .

E. BALIBAR AND P. MACHEREY<sup>1</sup>

**I**N A REVIEW OF J. M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, Nadine Gordimer situates Coetzee's earlier work, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, at the extreme (north) pole of a literary-political continuum at the other end of which lies the "agitprop of agonized black writers."<sup>2</sup> She characterizes the novel as allegory written in reaction to "events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everyone else living in South Africa, [Coetzee] is up to his neck," a projection of the "horror" he sees around him "into another time and plane."<sup>3</sup> She goes on to praise *Michael K* for its exploration of the (real) world between the poles of her continuum, but to criticize it too for its "revulsion" from history (that is, for its refusal to recognize the role of politics, of political solutions) and its consequent lack of understanding of what blacks are doing politically in South Africa.<sup>4</sup> This review lays bare in a preliminary manner the differences between the writing practices of Coetzee and Gordimer, differences which I would like to explore more fully in a discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*.

Although these novels differ in almost every formal and literary particular (Coetzee's is a symbolic and evocative parable, while Gordimer's is a detailed representational history) and so render comparison difficult, they do offer sufficient historical and theoretical grounds for comparison. They were published within a year of

each other by white South Africans, and in the sense that each is about politics, history, and the relations between these and the individual (in particular the privileged white individual), each is a response to the political/historical/social situation out of which it arises. In each case, the protagonist/narrator is confronted by and involved in a political crisis and attempts to discover and understand (at least in part through the very act of narration) his or her own responsibility within that crisis. In each case as well, the crisis is conceived of as momentous in that it is no longer controlled by traditional forces or able to be appropriated by received conceptualizations; not only are the political contexts re-defined, the old solutions no longer applicable, and old assurances (whether bourgeois liberal or Marxist-Leninist) no longer available, but truth itself and language as its medium (and thus, indirectly, literature) are also thrown into question. But, despite these fundamental similarities, the ways in which this political situation is executed, dramatized, and resolved in the texts — the ways in which it is textualized — are radically different, and it is in this difference, it seems to me, that we can isolate the ideological differences of the texts, their own political positions within the historical context out of which they are produced and which they attempt to represent.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* is, if at all, only indirectly “about” the political and social struggles of South Africa. As Gordimer says, it projects the particular “horrors” of our contemporary world “into another time and plane.” The story which it tells takes place (places itself) in some indeterminate geographical location and historical era, in an outpost of an unnamed Empire at a time when sunglasses are a new invention<sup>5</sup> and horses the primary means of transportation, when muskets confront bows and arrows and spears, and yet tea and lemonade (p. 75), tobacco pipes (p. 2), and any number of other “modern” objects are familiar. In other words, the setting is both familiar and unfamiliar; while it cannot be located definitively in either time or space, it is clearly not an entirely fantastic world, for every detail is drawn (realistically) from the world we know, the history we live in. The effect is a slight dislocation in which the familiar is made unfamiliar and *vice versa*.

It has been suggested that the narrative of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a sort of dream text,<sup>6</sup> and the dream-like quality can be attributed, at least in part, to this dislocation of the “real” (geographical, historical) into an indeterminate plane. Indeed, it is precisely through dream mechanisms (displacement, condensation, substitution, ellipsis, and so on) that the “real” is represented in the text, thus making the precise relations between “reality” and the represented world themselves indeterminate, open to interpretation. Every character, object, and event is thus highly charged with signification, but its precise significance is never quite clear: the magistrate/narrator, for example, can be read realistically as simply this particular individual involved in these events (although this is not easy), or metaphorically as “an analogue of all men living in complicity with regimes that ignore justice and decency,”<sup>7</sup> or allegorically as the representative of liberal humanism faced with the collapse of the bourgeois era.

However they are read, Coetzee’s “history” and “geography” are abstractions from “real” history and geography, abstractions which are re-textualized in new configurations, but which yet retain their relations to our world. What is being explored is not history in any particular phase, not history in the specificity of its ever-shifting complexity, but History in general, in the abstract, the ideal essence of history rather than the diffuse material practices and structures which constitute real history. What is foregrounded in this narrative, what stands out in sharp relief against the indeterminate setting, are the (existential) realities of birth and death, pleasure and pain, power and victimization — that is, the “reality” of human experience. But because they are not dealt with in terms of the determinate social and material practices in which they find themselves bound up in history, they too are treated in a generalized, abstracted manner, as constant, trans-historical or a-historical continuities in human existence.

*Burger’s Daughter*, on the other hand, situates itself in a determinate time and space — in South Africa, France, and England during the late 1970’s. Rosa Burger’s personal history (the primary focus of the narrative) is located within (is articulated within and through) an account of the history of South African political and racial conflicts which extends (through her father’s history)

back to the 1920's. It is also placed within the complex structures of contemporary South African life, a complexity which is registered in the social, cultural, and political differences between the rural dorp where her Nel relatives live, Fats' "place" in the black township, and Brandt Vermuelen's fashionable suburb in Pretoria, for example, as well as in the numerous ideological positions represented by the various characters with whom Rosa comes into contact. The social realities of South Africa are also placed into larger context with the movement to France and England. Thus the depiction of the individual subject (which is itself a history) is located within a synchronic depiction of South African society, which is in turn depicted as the determinate product of a diachronic development of specific events, social relations, and political practices.

Because it thus meticulously situates itself within a precise spatio-temporal matrix through the citation of innumerable historical, geographical, and social references, *Burger's Daughter* resists abstraction or generalization; it refers at every point to a particular historical juncture, thus limiting its own significance, binding itself irrevocably to its own historical position.<sup>8</sup> While Coetzee's text implicitly draws us away from history in order to give us a vantage point outside of history from which to view its "contents" (as the dream by resisting the mundane details and relations of daily life exposes the "true" significance of that life), Gordimer's draws us into the midst of history, implicitly as well as explicitly suggesting that there is no outside, that truth itself is bound up in the material particularities of history.<sup>9</sup>

Up to this point, my discussion may seem simply to be drawing distinctions between a realist and an aestheticist text (and thus to be merely a re-iteration of the debates of the thirties), but that is not entirely the case, for realism, as Terry Eagleton argues, is not a simple matter. In "Text, Ideology, Realism," Eagleton suggests that there are borderline or limit cases, that "you can have non-realist 'content' presented in 'realist' form — a realism of the signifier and a non-realism of the signified," as is the case with "some surrealist painting and certain types of science fiction."<sup>10</sup> In other words, despite the fact that a work may not "re-present" the world as we know it, may not depend upon the Lukacsian

notions of “typicality” and “totality,” it may relate its content using the rhetorical devices of realism — chronological continuity, consistent psychological characterization, metaphorical description, and so on, all of which function to direct attention away from themselves (the signifier, the material medium of representation) and toward the represented “content” (the signified). And, according to such theorists as Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, it is precisely in these (formal) devices that we find ideology at work; they are intrinsically “humanistic,” for they all function to situate man (in a particular sort of configuration) at the centre of the universe, to render the world (the “other”) familiar, and so to appropriate it for man. On the other hand, according to Eagleton, it is possible to have “non-realist form presenting realist content” (he uses Brecht’s alienation effect as an example), in which case the familiar is rendered unfamiliar, and form asserts itself as a significant element in our relations to the “other.”<sup>11</sup>

Now it seems to me that both *Burger’s Daughter* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* are such “mixed cases,” although in different ways. While the “terrain” of Coetzee’s imagined world is unfamiliar (because of the displacement discussed above), the elements of which it is composed, and especially (as I suggested earlier) the “human” events (characters and their actions), are familiar enough. The displacement of these in terms of history and geography *does* produce something of an alienation effect: we read these objects differently than in a more rigorously realistic text; they are endowed with added significance because of their abstraction from their “ordinary” context, the texture of the quotidian, and because of the “vividness” with which they can be articulated because of this abstraction. The very methods used to narrate the “story,” however, serve to re-naturalize, to re-domesticate what is narrated. The fact that there is a continuous chronology of events (which are related to each other in recognizable ways — cause and effect and so on) and a realistic (if unlocated) geography (replete with familiar geological formations, weather patterns, directions, sorts of communities, and so on) gives us access to this world and the events dramatized there with a minimum of disruption: our “normal” modes of conception

(which are inscribed and reinforced by the realist novel) are challenged hardly at all.

But even more than this, the narrator, our sole means of access to the events narrated and to the world in which they occur, as well as the true "subject" of the narrative, is constituted in a realistic (if modernist) manner, and hence in humanistic terms. As he narrates, he reveals a "character,"<sup>12</sup> an autonomous and centred subject "behind" the narrative and embroiled in the events recounted (both its source and its subject matter), filled out with a body and a psychology, a past, a present, and a (projected) future. The "I" of this narrative is the true locus of events no matter their geographical and historical dislocation, and it is here that the "realism" of the text resides. As Eagleton says, "in certain conjunctures, it will be only certain kinds of signifier and not others that will produce the 'reality effect' at the level of the signified,"<sup>13</sup> and for modernism "reality" resides on the level of the individual psychological response. The individual consciousness behind the "I" of the text, the consciousness which experiences, reflects, and narrates, is in this sense the "centre" or transcendental signified of the narrative structure, that which holds it together, orders it, and so on.<sup>14</sup>

Because of its very consistency, its identity with itself, the narrative voice of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (and all that it entails) effaces itself, naturalizes itself, and along with it the historical conjuncture which produces it. In other words, it suppresses the arbitrariness and conventionality of its modes of reflection, reaction, conception, and articulation, giving the impression that it is a direct and immediate (unmediated) transcription of "reality." Consider, for example, the following passage from Coetzee's text:

I hold the lantern over the boy. He has not stirred; but when I bend to touch his cheek he flinches and begins to tremble in long ripples that run up and down his body. "Listen to me, boy," I say, "I am not going to harm you." He rolls on his back and brings his bound hands up before his face. They are puffy and purple. I fumble at the bonds. All my gestures toward this boy are awkward. . . . I chafe his hands between mine. He flexes his fingers painfully. I cannot pretend to be any better than a mother comforting a child between his father's spells of anger. It has not

escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh and one seductive. (p. 7)

The language here is highly referential, its rhetorical simplicity and precision lending it an aura of unquestionable authority. The "content" or signified of the words "boy," "lantern," "mother," and even "fumble" and "painfully" are fixed not by the (literary) context, but by our usual associations: we fill them in with concepts drawn from our own (historical/linguistic) experience, without reference to the voice which speaks them or the situation out of which that voice speaks. Indeed, the signifier is so unobtrusive that we are drawn into the characters and events, easily visualizing the episode. This is, of course, the signifying function of realism as Robbe-Grillet describes it:

. . . it is certain that such descriptions [as in Balzac's novels] have as their goal to make the reader see, and that they succeed in doing so. It was then generally a question of establishing the setting, of defining the context of the action, of presenting the physical appearance of the protagonists. The weight of things thus posited in a precise fashion constituted a stable and certain universe, to which one could then refer, and which guaranteed by its resemblance to the "real" world the authenticity of the events, the words, the gestures which the novelist would cause to occur there.<sup>15</sup>

But, as Robbe-Grillet goes on to argue, this particular form of "seeing" is loaded with a particular ideological weight. It is a reinforcement of a certain way of construing the universe and the position of the individual within it. And this is the case with Coetzee's text as with Balzac's, for here, too, history (in its particularity), and especially the historicity of language and the modes of conception it embodies and (re)produces, is rendered irrelevant as even the historically unlocated is made immediately accessible and familiar by the signifying practice of the text: events, relations, and "human nature" itself are depicted and so appropriated as a-historical; historical *difference* is suppressed by the citation of concepts with given content.

There is more to be said about this narrative voice, however. The rather peculiar use of the simple present tense serves to dislocate the act of narration itself, to make its (temporal) relationship to the events narrated and even its nature indeterminable.

The "voice" seems in most part a sort of pre-linguistic registering and monitoring of the events as they occur, a direct expression of a Cartesian "*cogito*." This becomes particularly evident at moments when the voice recounts the narrator's speech or writing:

"We do not have facilities for prisoners," I explain. "There is not much crime here. . . ." (p. 2)

"To repair some of the damage wrought by the forays of the Third Bureau," I write, "and to restore some of the goodwill that previously existed, I am undertaking a brief visit to the barbarians." (p. 57)

The "doubleness" inherent in narrative language — its re-presentation of voices or events anterior to it — is here almost indecipherable, for the use of the present tense ("I write"; "I explain") collapses the re-presented speech or writing into the representation itself. Hence the sense of a pre-linguistic "voice": the (linguistic) act and its re-presentation in language by the actor himself can only be simultaneous if the representation is mental, rather than "actually" written or spoken (unless, of course, the language is paradoxically self-reflexive, which is certainly not the intention, at least, here). But there are several instances in which the distance (the difference) within the narrative language opens up. One of these occurs (significantly) when the narrator sits before a blank page, unable to write: "All that day I sit in a trance at my desk staring at the empty white paper, waiting for words to come" (p. 58). The distance between the narrative present (when words, we must assume, come freely) and the event narrated (when they do not) is registered in the words "that day": history thus inveigles its way into the text, producing a rupture in the syntactic structure (between "that day" and "I sit"), and exposing the narrative as some (indeterminate) sort of linguistic re-construction rather than the direct and immediate transcription it generally seems to be. But the point I am making is that this is a rare exception in the text, that in almost every instance the text suppresses history and the differences it makes even in its own language, thus creating an impression of immediacy, of self-presence of language, event, and narrative consciousness. The language thus suppresses itself as a distinct historical event, a mediation of the events it relates, and attempts to neutral-



ize itself, to efface itself before its referents, which are thus given an aura of authenticity otherwise unavailable.

But let us return to the issue of realism and to *Burger's Daughter*. It is clear that this novel is representational, that we are meant (and can hardly do otherwise than) to understand it in terms of "real" events occurring in South Africa, in terms of the "real" world outside the text. And yet its narrative strategies from the outset function to resist any illusion of direct access to the "real," insist that the real is always mediated by language, conception, and ideology, and that these (and thus this text as well) are themselves historically determined and constituted. The opening scene (Rosa and the others standing before the prison door), for example, is narrated three times, in three different (literary) styles, from three different (ideological) perspectives. The first account is an indirect description of the event as seen by an anonymous observer, with certain privileged information (Rosa's name, the fact that she is a member of the "1st hockey team," and so on) supplied by the anonymous narrator; the second is an objective relation of contextual information derived from official (school) reports; the third is a "memoir" produced after the event by one of the "party faithful" who was with Rosa at the prison. These are connected to the following narrative(s) by Rosa's own question, articulated many years later in the "present" of this narrative, about what others saw in her at that time. The effect of this multiple reflection is not to give a deeper or more accurate understanding of the event (to produce, as in a trial, the "truth" out of a number of accounts), but rather to de-centre the event itself, to expose the role of ideology, of interpretation, of narrative devices, of history itself, in our understanding. Even Rosa herself, the central actor (in this account, at least: there could be others in which she would be marginal), does not have a definitive knowledge of the event, for not only must she conceive of herself at least in part in terms of conceptualizations which precede her, but history itself (the differences it makes) intervenes; she writes: "I shall never know [what they saw]. It's all concocted. I saw — see — that profile in a handheld mirror directed toward another mirror."<sup>16</sup> The double reflection of which she speaks is not only the literal one by which

she is able to see her profile, but also the figurative one, the linguistic one, by which she has access to that past event and her own role in it. In either case, there are at least two accounts, two perspectives, two "versions" as she calls them later (p. 16), and the relations between these and "reality" itself are always a mediation, a concoction, which is by definition a distortion. Even the subject's self-perception is mediated (differentiated) by history, which is registered in the double verb tense of that first sentence ("I saw — see"). While the signifiers of this text do refer to concepts, objects, or events external to themselves, then, they make themselves felt as signifiers operating within complex modes of discourse which are themselves historical and ideological, and which, as such, confer particular sorts of meaning on the referents.

The narrative of *Burger's Daughter* is thus de-centred, distributed across a number of voices or discourses which in some ways work at cross purposes, since they articulate their subject in different ways. And the "subject" herself is de-centred, distributed in and through the multiple and discontinuous text and across history. She is not constituted as a consistent and self-present individual "behind" the "I" or "she" of the text, but rather composes herself in the text, in her attempts to articulate not only her self-identity, her sameness, but also the discontinuities produced by her difference from herself across history and across discourse.

Unlike the narrative voice of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, to which it is similar, Rosa's own narrative is situated both historically and conceptually; it presents itself as a determinate historical event: "My version and theirs. And if this were being written down, both would seem equally concocted when read over. And if I were really telling, instead of talking to you in my mind the way I find I do . . . One is never talking to oneself, always one is addressed to someone" (p. 16). This is then a private discourse, a "subjective" meditation on the past and the present which is, nonetheless, always directed toward another, thus fundamentally establishing the linguistic and social nature of even mental discourse: the subject is not self-present or completely autonomous, but is constituted in its relations with others and in language itself. This is also a discourse whose motivations and relations

to present events are always apparent. The death of Rosa's father and the break this produces in her identity (her history) generates the narrative, and it is constantly transformed by the events it narrates; that is, the "present" of the act of narration makes itself felt in the direction and nature of the narrative, and the "past" events which are narrated and the direction of the narrative itself affect (effect?) the direction of Rosa's "present" activities. It is Rosa's discourse with Conrad, for example, her meditation upon previous discussions with him and her consciousness of how he would respond to her present activities, that allows her to see her father, herself, her comrades, death, and suffering in a new way, and so allows her to feel "free" (her words) to leave South Africa, and so on. The narrative thus presents itself as an historical event which is related dialectically to both the events it narrates and the "consciousness" which produces it: it is constituted by them, but also is constitutive of them. And again, this discourse (Rosa's own) is always "read" by both Rosa and the reader in the context of the others which surround it, as well as those it contains — Conrad's, Katya's, Lionel's and so on. The vast web of language and other events which evade, invade, and pervade any single discourse, any single subject, is thus continually present.

While Coetzee's narrative suppresses at every point the mediation of history and language, then, Gordimer's asserts it; the result of this difference is that the two texts signify, make meaning, in different ways. But this difference is already implicit in the interpretive practices of the two protagonist/narrators, in the sorts of meaning they seek.

The narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an inveterate seeker out of signs and significances. He is an amateur cartologist, archeologist, and historian, who excavates the ruins of an old village which "date[s] back to times long before the western provinces were established and the fort was built" in order to reconstruct and understand this society which preceded his own (p. 14). He attempts to decipher the wooden slips he finds there, hoping that they will provide the clue not only to the civilization which produced them, but to his own position as well (pp. 15-16). He also attempts to decipher any other marks he finds any-

where: he searches the prison for any "traces" of what happened during Colonel Joll's operations there (p. 35), and later for some clue to his own position as a prisoner (pp. 79-80); he searches faces for some hint of the character which lies behind them (p. 105); he reads weather and the movement of wildlife as "signs" of approaching spring (p. 57). Most importantly, he attempts to read in the barbarian girl's body both "a hint of an old free state" (p. 34) and the significance of the events that are passing: she is the embodiment of the clash between the old barbarians and the new, her wounds the traces of the violence inherent in Empire (pp. 31-32, 64). Because she is in his view the "only key to the labyrinth" in which he finds himself (p. 87), he "continue[s] to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her" (p. 81). Everything, in short, is reduced to its irreducible objectivity, conceived of as a sign, as bearing some intrinsic significance, as representing some eternal order, and so as able, if understood, to reveal to the narrator the truth, to situate him definitively in an order beyond that of mere appearances.<sup>17</sup> But despite his interpretive drive throughout, the narrator cannot discover the truth: his archaic "codes" no longer suffice. In the end, however, although he admits defeat, he still believes in some hidden significance: "I think: 'There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it'" (p. 155).

In the light of this obsessive interpretation recounted in the narrative, the narrative itself can be read as a new attempt by the narrator to come to terms with the events narrated, another attempt to "see" what is "staring [him] in the face," finally to "tell the truth" (p. 154). The function of the present tense in this reading is to enable the speaker to come as close as possible to the events themselves, to distort them as little as possible, in a sort of dream analysis technique. The act of narrating is in this sense not an interpretation of events, but a means of access to the events themselves in the hope that their significance will phenomenologically reveal itself.

Because the narrator, through this technique, constitutes every object and event as something bearing intrinsic significance and is himself driven to interpret (at the level of content, if not at the

level of narration), the reader can hardly do otherwise. Through the narrative-as-phenomenological-enquiry, the reader is given the illusion of direct, unmediated access to the events and objects and is invited (almost compelled) to interpret them as well. And the significance that emerges from this narrative (for the reader at least, since here the narrator draws no conclusions) is the lack of significance, or rather the impotence of old systems of interpretation before a whole new sort of experience. What stares *us* in the face is precisely the narrator's inability to discover the significance of anything he encounters. And the reason for this inability is the enormity, the monstrosity, of the events themselves: they lie outside the boundaries of his interpretive system, transgress the well-defined limits of his vision. For the narrator, this alienation is a new development, a fall from old certainties, with the result that the definitive condition of the narrative's signifying strategies is a mixture of alienation and nostalgia.

*Waiting for the Barbarians* is thus, in Robbe-Grillet's terms, a sort of existential tragedy in which the significance of objects and events is their lack of significance: man is defined not by his central position in the world (as in an older humanism), but by his alienation from that world, from others, from himself. The transcendental meaning is the paradoxical one that there is no transcendent order which endows everything with meaning; the significance of every object is its resistance to significance. As Robbe-Grillet writes: "Tragedy therefore appears as the last invention of humanism to permit nothing to escape: since the correspondence between man and things has finally been denounced, the humanist saves his empire by immediately instituting a new form of solidarity, the divorce itself becoming a major path to redemption."<sup>18</sup> And again: "Under the appearance of a perpetual motion, [tragedy] actually petrifies the universe in a sonorous malediction."<sup>19</sup> Coetzee's text, it seems to me, constitutes itself precisely in this rift between a (lost) plenitude of meaning and a new-found solidarity in divorce, in alienation; its voice is the "sonorous malediction" of an idealistic humanism finding itself in alien territory.

Rosa Burger is a very different sort of interpreter than the narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians*. For her, events (and she

is, significantly, much more interested in events than in objects) are significant only in terms of their historical context (that is, in their specificity, their difference from and their complex relations to other events) and their relationship to her own position. When she comes upon the scene of the donkey being beaten by the drunken black, for example, she does not see it simply as the sign of something anterior or intrinsic to it, but as a specific product of historical forces in which she too is entangled:

I had only to career down on the scene with my car and my white authority. I could have yelled even before I got out, yelled to stop! — and then there I would have been standing, inescapable, fury and right, might, before them, the frightened woman and child and the drunk, brutal man, with my knowledge of how to deliver them over to the police, to have him prosecuted as he deserved and should be, to take away from him the poor, suffering possession he maltreated. . . . I could have put a stop to it, the misery; at that point I witnessed. What more could one do? That sort of old man, those people, peasants existing the only way they knew how, in the “place” that isn’t on the map, they would have been afraid of me. . . . I drove on. I don’t know at what point to intercede makes sense, for me. . . . I drove on because the horrible drunk was black, poor and brutalized. If somebody’s going to be brought to account, I am accountable for him, to him, as he is for the donkey. (pp. 209-10)

It is her recognition of the complexity of social and historical pressures upon this single, simple incident and of her own position within them that prevents Rosa from intervening. What is viewed at first as “the infliction of pain broken away from the will that creates it” (p. 208), that is, as a highly-charged existential symbol, comes to be read as the manifestation of determinate structures of power, as a historical event on the level of other events (the cleaning woman’s child “whose make-believe is polishing floors and doing washing” [p. 210]). And her own initial impulse (to intervene) and, indeed, her final response (not to intervene) are viewed finally as not simply “natural” responses but themselves articulations of the socio-political juncture in which they are produced, as actions which are significant only in terms of their position in the history of South African social relations and in the history of Rosa Burger within them.

For Rosa, then, there is no direct access to objects or events, no existential confrontation between subject and object, for every event is inseparable from the number of discourses within which it can be situated. Rosa is continually not only interpreting events or characters (which are defined as series of events [cf. the epigraph, p. 5]), but also considering the systems through which such events and characters may be and are interpreted. Her response to the dead man on the park bench, for example, includes a recognition of other responses against which hers is, necessarily, articulated:

The evening newspaper spread across three columns a photograph taken of the dead man on the bench by some keen amateur who happened to have the good luck to be in the right place at the right time. The space was as much as was customarily given to a daily series of girls on beaches from Ostia to Sydney. The caption drew upon the melodramatic romantic platitude of the "heartlessness" of the city. (The two boys were in the picture, mouths open, gazing.) But there was nothing cruel and indifferent about our eating our lunches, making love or sleeping off a morning's work while a man, simulating life with one leg easily and almost elegantly crossed over the other, died or was dying. . . . The whole point was that I — we — all of us were exonerated. What could we have done? Nothing could change the isolation of that man.

. . . But this death was the mystery itself. . . . Circumstantial causes are not the cause: we die because we live, yes, and there was no way for me to understand what I was walking away from in the park. . . . The revolution we lived for in that house would change the lives of the blacks who left their hovels and compounds at four in the morning to swing picks, hold down jack-hammers and chant under the weight of girders, building shopping malls and office towers in which whites like my employer Barry Eckhard and me moved in an "environment" without sweat or dust. It would change the days of the labourers who slept off their exhaustion on the grass like dead men, while the man died. . . . But the change from life to death — what had all the certainties I had from my father to do with that? (pp. 78-80)

By recognizing in this way that events and her responses to them are always bound up in discourse, in interpretation, Rosa resists (consciously) any sort of idealism or essentialist reduction. Neither

the (false) sentimentality of the popular (liberal) press nor the (limited and limiting) idealisms of her father's and the Terblanche's Marxism (pp. 109-111) and Conrad's Freudian existentialism (pp. 47, 52, 86) suffice, for they all posit significance outside history (and discourse) in the thing itself or in terms of some totalizing theoretical framework. For Rosa, this sort of gesture is itself historical, a resistance of the complex historicity of events and their interpretation for particular ideological purposes. For her, the only way to understand any event is through a radical historicization of the act of interpretation itself, which is in effect a politicization of interpretation.

*Burger's Daughter* is just such a politicization. It is an exploration not of the events of South African history themselves, but of ways of ordering, of understanding those events, which are themselves characterized as implicitly political. Rosa's prolonged attempt to understand herself and her society is dramatized in an extended dialogue between the (Leninist) Marxism which Rosa has inherited from her father (pp. 50-52) and the Freudian existentialism of Conrad, the hedonism of Katya, the liberalism of Bernard Chebali, the progressive conservatism of Brandt Vermuelen, the radical black nationalism of Duma Dhladhla, and so on. Rosa's narrative is her attempt to articulate a (political) position within this multiplicity of discourses, a process not at all different from her attempts to speak out at the various parties she attends (at Fats' place, at Flora Donaldson's, in London) except in that it is carried on in her mind and subsumes these latter dialogues into its flow.

While it constitutes itself (rightly, in my view) as a discursive event, the novel registers at every point the dialectical relations between discourse and other sorts of events, between language and that to which it refers. It demonstrates that discourse is an effect of real historical events and also produces real historical effects. It is, for example, the real effects of racial discrimination (a discursive ordering) which cause Lionel Burger to adopt Marxist principles, which in turn cause him to engage in specific sorts of activities which bring him into conflict with the repressive legal structures; this conflict (manifested in the trial, a highly



ritualized discourse) results in his imprisonment and finally his death, an event which (in part, at least) gives rise to Rosa's inquiry (which is the novel) as well as to her response to other events (such as the beating of the donkey or the death of the vagrant) and finally to her own imprisonment. For Rosa, a consistent dialectical materialist, truth, history, and discourse are inextricably bound together; her search for "herself," then, is necessarily a search in and through language and events, present and past. And the novel, at its outer limits, presents itself not as a revelation of universal or existential "Truth," but as a real response to real events which are occurring in South Africa, an intervention in real history. As an "anatomy" of political responses to those determinate historical events, the text addresses the reader historically, as a reader and as someone who has already assumed an implicit attitude toward South African history, and demands a political response.

At the end of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the narrator is stalled: he can neither act nor write, can only wait for the barbarians (either old or new) to "extinguish" the "world of tranquil certainties into which [he was] born" (p. 143) and hope that the suffering he expects will force him to "abandon the locutions of a civil servant with literary ambitions and begin to tell the truth" (p. 154). The destruction of the old order — the "irruption of history into the static time of the oasis" (p. 143) — has left him with a sense of alienation from both events and language, from himself. The consequent mixture of despair, horror, sentimentality, and nostalgia — of hopelessness — with which the book ends dominates the whole text, not only its content, but its form, its signifying strategies, as well: from the outset it is a frustrated attempt to regain old certainties of self-presence, of significance, of order. The "solitude" the narrator experiences at the end of the narrative has infused the entire structure of the narration, constituting itself as a definitive condition of (fallen) human nature: the fall from significance (truth) into the (circum)locutions of the civil servant, from the seasonal cycles of Nature into the linearity of History, from self-presence into de-centred and alienated consciousness, is registered at every point in the very

act of attempting to overcome it (which is the narrative). Robbe-Grillet's discussion of tragedy is again relevant:

Whenever there is distance, separation, doubling, cleavage, there is the possibility of experiencing them as suffering, then of raising this suffering to the height of sublime necessity. A path toward a metaphysical Beyond, this pseudo-necessity is at the same time the closed door to a realistic future. Tragedy, if it consoles us today [by providing meaning, the connection of dis-connectedness], forbids any solidier conquest tomorrow.<sup>20</sup>

In the absence of any hope of super-natural redemption, the presupposition that History and language are unnatural, that our present condition is a fallen one, can only result in despair, in "waiting for the barbarians," since in this fallen state we can conceive of redemption only historically and linguistically. This alienation from itself, from its linguistic and historical constitution, marks the text of *Waiting for the Barbarians* at every level and prevents it from transcending itself.

*Burger's Daughter* escapes such suffocating despair precisely because it holds no such nostalgic illusions about self-presence, about a state of Nature, and consequently suffers no such revulsion from history and language. Although Rosa is dis-located from the outset and at the end finds herself in prison, she is never alienated from herself, since for her significance is not a (lost) absolute, intrinsic to objects, events, and characters, and in need of recuperation: it is rather something produced in language, in history; it is thus something produced in and directed toward action, toward a future. There is no attempt to raise historical conditions to the level of a metaphysical necessity, for the insistence on the historicity of language, of consciousness, of meaning, on the dialectical relationship between discourse and events, resists any movement to metaphysics: although there is a recognition that much has changed — that the structures of power have shifted decisively both in South African society and in Rosa's personal life — this is seen as a historical development rather than a metaphysical one, and as such open to historical solutions, solutions in which discourse will of necessity be involved. Because it is at home in history and in language, the text can take its place in the struggle for just such a solution.

## NOTES

- 1 E. Balibar and P. Macherey, "On Literature as an Ideological Form," in *Untying the Text*, ed. Robert Young (Boston and London: Routledge, 1981), p. 84.
- 2 Nadine Gordimer, "The Idea of Gardening," *New York Review of Books* 31, No. 1 (February 1984), 3.
- 3 "The Idea of Gardening," p. 3.
- 4 "The Idea of Gardening," p. 6.
- 5 J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 1; further references included in parentheses in the text.
- 6 I am indebted for this idea to my colleague Bill Rankin, who suggested it during a seminar discussion.
- 7 From the advertising "blurb" on the back cover of the Penguin paperback edition.
- 8 The text is, in fact, so closely related to its own history that Gordimer changed the ending of the novel to conform with new developments produced by the Soweto riots; see Stephen Gray, "An Interview with Nadine Gordimer," *Contemporary Literature* 22 (Summer 1981), 265.
- 9 Gordimer characterizes the historical and political commitment of her work as follows: "That, I suppose, sums up how I see it: that you can't opt out altogether. You are either running away from your inevitable place, or you are taking it on" ("An Interview," 267).
- 10 Terry Eagleton, "Text, Ideology, Realism," in *Literature and Society*, ed. Edward W. Said (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 171.
- 11 "Text, Ideology, Realism," p. 171.
- 12 On the ideology implicit in the traditional conceptualization of "character," see Alain Robbe-Grillet, "On Several Obsolete Notions," in *For a New Novel*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 27-29.
- 13 "Text, Ideology, Realism," p. 169.
- 14 Cf. Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 278-94.
- 15 Robbe-Grillet, "Time and Description," in *For a New Novel*, p. 146.
- 16 Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 14; further references included in parentheses in the text.
- 17 Fredric Jameson calls such interpretive strategies, grounded in the question "What does it mean?," "ethical thought." He writes: "In its narrowest sense, ethical thought projects as permanent features of human 'experience,' and thus as a kind of 'wisdom' about personal life and interpersonal relations, what are in reality the historical and institutional specifics of a determinate type of group solidarity or class cohesion" (*The Political Unconscious* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981], p. 59).
- 18 Robbe-Grillet, "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy," in *For a New Novel*, p. 59.
- 19 "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy," p. 61.
- 20 "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy," p. 61.