

Territorial Metaphor in Coetzee's "Waiting for the Barbarians"

ROSEMARY JANE JOLLY

"Every boundary line is a myth."

WILSON HARRIS, *Palace of the Peacock*

WHEN J. M. COETZEE'S third novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, appeared in 1980 it elicited a number of interesting responses which have to do — whether the reviewers realize this or not — with the implications of the setting of the novel. Leon Whiteson criticizes it for an apparent lack of mimetic accuracy: "The geography is garbled; there is desert and snow, lizards and bears. The story is told in that most awkward tense; the historic present. The dialogue is stiff, the writing has the air of a translation. . . . Coetzee's bad dreams have not been earned by any truth. . . . The heart of this novel is not darkness but mush" (27). Irving Howe, in a generally favourable article published in *The New York Times Book Review*, comments that "one possible loss is bite and pain, the urgency that a specified historical place and time may provide" (36). Finally, in an extremely revealing review of *The Life and Times of Michael K.* (Coetzee's fourth novel, published in 1983) Nadine Gordimer praises this novel for its depiction of the reality of violence, but criticizes it for its "revulsion" from history, its lack of recognition of the primacy of politics in a scheme of historical determinacy. She goes on to observe that Coetzee

chose allegory for his first few novels. It seemed he did so out of a kind of opposing desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everyone else living in South Africa, he is up to the neck, and about which he had an inner compulsion to write. So here was allegory as stately fastidiousness; or a state of shock. He seemed able to deal with the horror he saw written on the sun only — if brilliantly — if this were

to be projected into another time and plane. His *Waiting For the Barbarians* was the North Pole to which the agitprop of agonized black writers (and some white ones hitching a lift to the bookmark on the armoured car) was the South Pole: a world to be dealt with lies in between.¹ (3)

I have quoted Gordimer's remarks at such length because, in referring to the indeterminate "time" and "plane" of the novel, she raises not only the question of the setting of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, but also the larger question of what literature can, or in this case, even *should*, be expected to do; what kind of territory it undertakes to explore.

The ambiguities of time and place to which Whiteson in particular has shown such aversion are clearly deliberate. In a rare comment on his own work, Coetzee stated that "The setting is not specified for *Barbarians*, and very specifically is not specified . . . I just put together a variety of locales and left a lot of things vague with a very definite intention that it shouldn't be pinned down to some specific place."² The fact that Coetzee ensures that the Empire remains unnamed, the time unspecific (sunglasses are a new invention, but horses are the means of transportation)³ and the geography indeterminate, indicates that the setting of the novel is something of a key to the working of the narrative.

The geography of the fiction may not correspond to an identifiable geo-political entity, but its depiction is both detailed and comprehensible. To the north of the settlement the river runs into the lake; there is a road that runs from the settlement to the lake, turning north-west along its coast. South of the lake are marshlands and salt flats, and beyond them "a blue-grey line of barren hills" (14). To the north of the lake is the desert. Colonel Joll takes the north-west road to find the nomads; the narrator takes a short cut to the barbarians when he returns the girl, a track that leads off the river road to the east, skirting the lake to the south and then heading off to the north-east, to the valleys of the ranges where the nomads winter. "Two miles due south of the town" (14) are a cluster of dunes, which are stable owing to the vegetation on their surface and the timber ruins which they shroud, ruins that date back to the time before the Empire annexed the western provinces and built the fort (14). The frontier settlement,

for which the narrator is responsible as magistrate of the Empire, is not only the focus of the geographical surroundings: it is also central to the action of the novel. Colonel Joll comes to the settlement from the interior of the Empire, from the Third Bureau, "the most important division of the Civil Guard nowadays" (2); both Colonel Joll and the narrator make excursions from it into the land of the barbarians. Most importantly, the settlement is the home of the narrator.

To reject the strange geography of the novel, to desire it to be immediately recognizable, is to reject the narrative itself, to diminish the fiction. As Lance Olsen points out, any such reading "implies a refusal on the part of the reader to take the fiction as itself," which in turn implies a desire to "change the fiction into something it cannot or will not be" (48). We, as his readers, have to accept the narrator's landscape. After all, it is the narrator's charts Colonel Joll uses to make his first raid on the barbarians: he is the mapmaker; his descriptions of his surroundings are as meticulous as he can make them. We need to inhabit his narrative.

What is the nature of that narrative? The controlling metaphor is again territorial. Just as his home, the settlement, is situated on the frontier of the Empire, facing the land of the barbarians, so the narrator is positioned on the fringes of the Empire's authority, confronted by those who are subject to it. The narrator is obsessed with discovering the meaning of his situation. He tries to explore what it is to be of the Empire, what is to be of the barbarians. He reflects on Joll after the Colonel's torturing of the boy and his father:

Looking at him [Joll] I wonder how he felt the very first time: did he, invited as an apprentice to twist the pincers or turn the screw or whatever it is they do, shudder even a little to know that at that instant he was trespassing into the forbidden? I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean?
(12)

This passage is sprinkled with territorial metaphors. The narrator imagines Joll in the moment of transition, (tres)passing from the

one region to another, from the "clean" to the "unclean," from the innocent to the "forbidden." Later, when Warrant Officer Mandel sets him free, the magistrate asks the torturer how he finds it possible to eat after he has "been . . . working with people." When Mandel turns from him, the narrator appeals to him: "'No listen!' I say. 'Do not misunderstand me, I am not blaming you or accusing you, I am long past that. . . . I am only trying to understand the *zone* in which you live. I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. But I Cannot!'" (126; emphasis added).

With the same urgency the narrator tries to understand the barbarians: where they come from, what they are, what they think of the Empire. His fascination for the blind barbarian girl stems from this curiosity: he treats her body as a surface, a map of a surface, a text. He washes her body, finding in the exploration of her features an ecstasy. Often he falls asleep "as if poleaxed," oblivious, and wakes an hour or so later "dizzy, confused, thirsty." These spells are to him like "death," or "enchantment" (31). When he discovers the torture mark at the corner of the girl's eye, he observes: "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (31). He is not unaware of the position in which he places her by treating her in this manner: "The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible, I shudder" (27). He wants to know of her people, her family; she offers him little information. Whatever he discovers of her, he does so by examining her, by "reading" her as one would a map. The dream in which he tries to remember her as she was before Joll got hold of her, is a measure, a scale of his progress in exploring her.

Eventually the narrator reaches a certain recognition of the "interior" of the barbarian girl, even if it is only that this "interior" exists:

While I have not ceased to see her as a body maimed, scarred, harmed, she has perhaps by now grown into and become that new deficient body, feeling no more deformed than a cat feels deformed for having claws instead of fingers. I would do well to take these thoughts seriously. More ordinary than I like to think, she may have ways of finding me ordinary too. (56)

Instead of the worshipping of a surface — the denial of substance which the washing ritual portrayed — he gains a sense of the girl in her entirety; her form has an essence which is yet to be discovered. Whereas before, in his dream of the child building a snow- /sandcastle, he could not envision the child's face, he now remembers for the first time the girl's face before its mutilation: she becomes the child of his dream vision. Having come this far, he realizes the need — his need — to take the girl back to barbarian land. It is during this journey, when they reach the bed of the ancient lagoon which lies between the sand dunes and the mountains of the barbarians on the far side, that the narrator finally consummates his relationship with her: "I am with her," he says, "not for whatever raptures she may promise or yield but for other reasons, which remain as obscure to me as ever" (64). The reunion of girl and territory is the turning point of the fiction: the narrator returns, resigned, to the settlement as prisoner — not agent — of the Empire. What precisely has been realized?

In his "Author's Note" to the Faber and Faber edition of *The Whole Armour* and *The Secret Ladder*, Wilson Harris identifies Melville's *Benito Cereno* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as "prophetic" novels. He discusses the strange juxtapositions in the image of Negro slaves mistaken for "Black Friars" by Captain Delano and in "Kurtz's manifesto of moral beauty . . . which almost overshadowed the small script at the bottom of the page — 'Exterminate all the brutes'" as "expressionist" or "symbolic" devices, pointing to "a transplanted value or faith which had become such a dominant persona that it ceased to be a homogeneous value or enactment of identity and freedom, and turned into an all-consuming bias" (7-8). We are reminded of the nature of Colonel Joll's quest for truth. When the narrator asks him how he can tell when he is told the truth, Joll replies that "there is a certain tone." The narrator responds:

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

This is the most intimate moment we have yet had, which he [Colonel Joll] brushes off with a little wave of the hand. "No, you misunderstand me. I am speaking only of a special situation now, I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth,

in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see — this is what happens — first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth.
(5)

Colonel Joll's process of divining the truth corresponds to the historical process of colonization, to the relationship between conqueror and conquered: his quest is conquest. In his "Author's Note" Harris describes the implications of "a landscape saturated by the traumas of conquest." He is referring to the particular history and geography of Guyana as he represents it in his novels, but again his observations apply to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and specifically to the position which Colonel Joll occupies:

A bitter thread or scale runs through Carib and Arawak pre-Columbian vestiges capable now of relating themselves afresh to the value-turned-bias-structures of twentieth-century man. Thus, it would seem, we are involved in a peculiar juxtaposition at the heart of our age — renascent savagery and conquest-ridden civilization. (8)

This juxtaposition is the product of historical consequence: to conquer, to colonize, to turn the "transplanted value" into the "all-consuming bias," requires the use of a complex violence, that violence which the Empire represents and with whose meaning our narrator is so obsessed.

From the beginning the narrator is intrigued by violence and anxious to understand the meaning behind the marks it leaves. He caresses the barbarian girl's broken feet, and observes in detail the wound the torturers have left near her eye: ". . . I notice in the corner of one eye a greyish puckering as though a caterpillar lay there with its head under her eyelid, grazing. . . . Between thumb and forefinger I part her eyelids. The caterpillar comes to an end, decapitated, at the pink inner rim of the eyelid. There is no other mark. The eye is whole" (31). He investigates the room where the girl's feet were broken and her eye blinded — the same room where her father was tortured to death. He observes that it is a clean room, marked only by soot on the ceiling above the fireplace and on the wall. He asks her how they blinded her, and she describes to him the instrument they used. Later, once he has returned to the settlement, he reflects on the undeniable desire to

violate. He longs for his impression on the barbarian girl to be as great as Colonel Joll's conquest of her is:

Our loving leaves no mark. Whom will that other girl with the blind face remember: me with my silk robe and my dim lights and my perfumes and oils and my unhappy pleasures, or that other cold man with the mask over his eyes who gave the orders and pondered the sounds of her intimate pain? Whose face was the last face she saw plainly on this earth but the face behind the glowing iron? Though I cringe with shame, even here and now, I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply. (134-35)

In this desire for violence resides the will to bring both poles of Harris's juxtaposition — "renascent savagery" and "conquest-ridden civilization" — together in the act of violence. How far does the narrator come in interpreting t(his) desire? How do we understand the act of it?

The title of Coetzee's novel comes, of course, from Constantin Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians," which depicts a decadent Roman Empire awaiting a barbarian conquest which never happens. The border guards report that "there are no barbarians any longer." The narrator concludes: "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians? / Those people were a kind of solution" (33). The realization that there are no barbarians impresses the problem of the existence of the Empire on the Empire. So in Coetzee's novel. When the narrator explains to the young officer of the new detachment — who thinks that he and his troops have been followed by barbarians *en route* to the settlement — that the barbarians have no plans to destroy the town, that they know that the town will peter out by itself as the lake-water grows more salty, the officer refuses to believe that the imperial troops will ever leave: "'But we are not going,' the young man says quietly. 'Even if it became necessary to supply the settlement by convoy, we would not go'" (52). Ultimately, of course, the troops do desert the frontier town. The point, however, is not only that without the barbarians the Empire has nothing against which to rally, against which it has to defend its territory; if, in addition, the barbarians are not responsible for the decline of Empire — and we are told by one of the few survivors of Joll's final campaign that

"We froze in the mountains! We starved in the desert! . . . *We were not beaten* — they [the barbarians] led us out into the desert and then they vanished!" (147; emphasis added) — who is responsible?

When the narrator is taken into custody on his return to the settlement, he hears of a fire along the river. He surmises that someone has decided that the brush on the river-banks provides too much cover for the barbarians. However, he tells us, the brush is broken by patches of barren land, so someone must be following the fire down the river, rekindling it when it dies out: "They do not care that once the ground is cleared the wind begins to eat at the soil and the desert advances. Thus the expeditionary force against the barbarians prepares for its campaign, ravaging the earth, wasting our patrimony" (82). In addition, the antagonism of the force provokes an attack, allegedly by the barbarians ("No one saw them. They came in the night" [98-99]), on the irrigation wall, which causes the fields to flood. "How can we win such a war?" the narrator asks. "What is the use of textbook military operations, sweeps and punitive raids into the enemy's heartland when we can be bled to death at home?" (100).

When, also on his return to the settlement, the magistrate is immediately charged with "treasonously consorting with the enemy," he responds to the accusation with the same insight that he uses to evaluate the physical deterioration of his domain: "We are at peace here,' I say, 'we have no enemies.' There is silence. 'Unless I make a mistake,' I say. 'Unless we are the enemy'" (77). After Colonel Joll has marked the backs of his barbarian prisoners, their hands wired to their faces through their cheeks, with the word "ENEMY" in charcoal, the narrator accuses Joll:

"Those pitiable prisoners you brought in — are *they* the enemy I must fear? Is that what you say? *You* are the enemy, Colonel! . . . You are the enemy, *you* have made the war, and *you* have given them all the martyrs they need — starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here! History will bear me out!" (114)

The magistrate has come to identify that which is barbarian with the signatures of his own civilization. He has read the signs of violence on the surface, and realizes that, as fellow South African

novelist André Brink puts it, "violence denies not only the humanity of the person against which it is directed but also that of the person who practises it" (72).

This reading of the relationship between violator and violated ties Colonel Joll, the barbarian girl and the narrator together just as surely as if Colonel Joll had connected himself to the other two with the wire he uses to subdue his prisoners. In Harris's terms, the juxtaposition of "renascent savagery" and "conquest-ridden civilization" constitute a kind of synthesis. On the surface this "marriage" appears to be "sinister," but it may become a synthesis which is related to the dire need of the twentieth century for new vision — "vision as capacity to resense or rediscover a scale of community":

That scale, I would think, needs to relate itself afresh to the "monsters" which have been constellated in the cradle of a civilisation — projected outwards from the nursery or cradle thus promoting a polarization, the threat of ceaseless conflict and the necessity for a self-defensive apparatus against the world *out there*.

In some degree, therefore, we need to retrieve or bring those "monsters" back into ourselves as native to the psyche, native to a quest for unity through contrasting elements, through the ceaseless tasks of the creative imagination to digest and liberate contrasting spaces rather than succumb to implacable polarizations.

Such retrieval is vision. (8)

This quest for vision is the quest of the narrator. He moves between Empire and barbarian territory, between present and past, trying desperately to retrieve some sense of original unity in order to liberate his future from history and his territory from conquest. He knows that something from the past needs to be recovered. He digs among the ruins for artifacts that will enlighten him: he never gives up trying to understand the characters on the wooden slips he finds in the bag buried below the floor level of the excavation. When Colonel Joll asks him for the meaning of the slips, the magistrate tells him how to find the signs:

It is recommended that you simply dig at random: perhaps at the very spot where you stand you will come upon scraps, shards, reminders of the dead. Also the air: the air is full of sighs and cries. These are never lost: if you listen carefully, with a sympathetic ear, you can hear them echoing forever within the second sphere.

(112)

He also works against the limits imposed on him by the Empire, but just as he never does learn the language of the signs, he does not learn the language of the barbarians from the girl before she leaves him (72). When he asks her, after her return to the barbarians, to come back with him to the settlement, both stand on the same frontier, each on the fringe of their own territory. But the narrator, as yet, does not understand the depth of his desire for the girl; and she has no way of conceiving it as anything other than that of the conqueror for the conquered. She goes back to her people, but there is one sense in which she stays with the narrator — she continues to appear to him in his dreams, in the vision of her as a child.

Nadine Gordimer's criticism of *Waiting for the Barbarians* seems to undermine to some degree the value of the fiction in its focus on frontiers. The novel deals metaphorically with the meeting point between two territories. The realm of the novel is both familiar and unfamiliar; it is both South Africa and everywhere else; it is the present trying to redeem the past in anticipation of the future. The fiction is not an "allegory" in Gordimer's sense of the word. In its representation it is true to the violent domain of conquest in the present; but it remains faithful to the future in that its crucial locations are those which suggest the potential for transition — not those which make the fiction a "historical allegory . . . — a matter of ticking off fictional events against their literal counterparts" (Shrimpton). This fluidity is necessary to dislocate, to "liberate" the reader from claims of temporal and geographic specificity by confronting her/him with the possibility of transition. The narrator himself is unable to make the transition, to make a new time and a new place for himself — when the possibility presents itself in the desert, "things fall apart": thereafter his only access to the possibility of a new vision, a new "territory," is through his dream-visions. But the reader *is* left with the possibility. The narrator's dream-visions, which indicate his imaginative involvement with the barbarian girl, and less specifically the possibility of a new community, represent the imaginative potential of the reader who is prepared to take a novel such as Coetzee's on its own terms. The relation and distinction or boundary between character/narrator and reader, the material and the visionary, is

revealed in the territorial metaphor of the frontier. The language of a fiction of transition, concerned as it is with the potential rather than the representative, is perhaps a far cry from the language of a Gordimer novel; but the attempt to categorize it as an "allegory" may constitute a dismissal of a crucial development in the form of the novel, a denial of a certain kind of frontier which the *genre* may undertake to explore.

NOTES

- ¹ The reference to "horror . . . written on the sun" is from William Plomer's *Turbotte Wolfe*. The words are of the missionary, Friston: "But wait till you see HORROR, my child, written on the sun."
- ² Quoted from an interview with Coetzee in Penner, 35.
- ³ For more on the strange familiarity, as it were, of the novel's "historical era" see Martin.

WORKS CITED

- Brink, André. *Mapmakers: Writing in a State of Siege*. New York: Summit Books, 1983.
- Cavafy, Constantin (also Kavavis or Kabaphes). *Collected Poems*. Trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Ed. George Savadis. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975.
- Coetzee, J. M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1980.
- Gordimer, Nadine. "The Idea of Gardening." *The New York Review of Books* 2 Feb. 1984: 3-4.
- Harris, Wilson. "Author's Note." *The Whole Armour and The Secret Ladder*. London: Faber, 1973.
- Howe, Irving. "Waiting for the Barbarians." *New York Times Book Review* 18 April 1982: 36.
- Martin, Richard G. "Narrative, History, Ideology: A Study of *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Burgher's Daughter*." *Ariel* 17.3 (1986): 3-21.
- Olsen, Lance. "The Presence of Absence: Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *Ariel* 16.2 (1985): 47-56.
- Penner, Dick. "Sight, Blindness and Double-Thought in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *World Literature Written in English* 26.1 (1986): 34-45.
- Shrimpton, Nicholas. "Cold Feet in Moscow." *New Statesman* 7 Nov. 1980: 30.
- Whiteson, Leon. "Bad Dreams and Murky Motives." *Canadian Forum* Oct. 1982: 26-27.