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perspectives

Acts without Agents: The Language of Torture in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract: This article draws from J. M. Coetzee's linguistic work on the passive sentence to analyze his representation of torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. It argues that Coetzee's complex use of the short passive (also known as the "agentless sentence") counters the transparent connection between truth and language in the novel by creating critical gaps in the narrative that disrupt the process of interpretation. Given how the torturer in the novel, Colonel Joll, perceives "truth" as having a certain "tone," the question of how truth is represented in language becomes critical to undermining the logic of torture Joll explicates. Throughout the novel, Coetzee exploits the ambiguity created by the short passive to not only illustrate the grammatical fictions that undergird our assumptions while reading the text but also challenge the linguistic certainties of "truth" to which the torture chamber owes its existence.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, torture, passive voice, agency, representation

In his 1980 essay, "The Rhetoric of the Passive in English," J. M. Coetzee asks, "In the hands of writers who use the passive in a complex and systematic way, what can it be made to do?" (159). By examining the works of writers such as Swift, Hume, Gibbon, and Newton, Coetzee concludes that the passive voice can be used either as "a vehicle for ironic understatement" (in the case of Swift, Hume, and Gibbon) or to postpone the question of agency (in the case of Newton) (168).

He argues that the passive can function in these two ways precisely because of the "grammatical fictions" that underlie our interpretation of sentence semantics (168). For example, the short passive can convey irony if both the author and reader "share an understanding of how short passives are to be decoded" (168); that is, the author had an agent in mind but deleted the agent, thus transforming a long passive (e.g., "The town was attacked by barbarians") to a short passive (e.g., "The town was attacked"). The author directs his reader to infer the appropriate agent by establishing context. However, the process of decoding the short passive, of inferring the agent, depends upon the assumption that the short passive is derived from the long passive. Coetzee argues that the agentive *by*-phrase (e.g., "by barbarians") is added to short passives, as opposed to deleted from long passives.[1] Thus, our interpretation that the process works the other way around is what he calls "folk grammar" or grammatical fictions that "establish themselves as widespread shared conventions between writers and readers" (169).

Coetzee's argument about grammatical fictions establishes a deconstructive framework that calls into question the relationship between syntactic structure and semantic meaning. His illustration of the "unarticulated intuitions" (168) that underscore our interpretations of texts proves useful for examining how the passive voice functions in his 1980 novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians.*[2] I argue that Coetzee's rhetorical use of the passive in the novel articulates the crisis of representing torture in literature by demonstrating the linguistic breakdown of agency.[3] Drawing from his work on the passive sentence,[4] I suggest that Coetzee exploits what he calls the "area of vagueness" that opens up in the short passive (also referred to as the agentless sentence) to subvert the relationship between language and "truth" that can be the pretense for torture ("Agentless" 174). As he explains in "The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device," "the short passive, despite its convenience, leaves an uneasy feeling: it opens up an area of vagueness that can be simply skated over . . . but that can be explored and exploited for their own ends by writers who take seriously the question of whether language is a good map of reality" (174). In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, where the torturer Colonel Joll perceives truth as having a certain "tone," the

question of "whether language is a good map of reality" becomes critical to undermining the logic of torture Joll explicates. Throughout the novel, Coetzee simultaneously employs and challenges the grammatical fictions of the passive voice so that passives in his work can be read as both ironic understatements and obfuscations of agency.[5] In this way, he manipulates the literary "recovery" of the agent we enact in the process of reading his work, showing on one hand the linguistic determinism of discourse and on the other hand the process through which defining agency is an act of complicity between the writer and reader. In doing so, he opens up a space where uncertainty in language shows both its contingency and its political potential.

From the beginning of *Waiting for the Barbarians*,[6] Coetzee establishes uncertainty in the narrative by making the setting of the novel geographically and temporally vague. Though Coetzee scatters details about where (in a frontier town of an unnamed empire) and when (after eyeglasses were invented) the events in the narrative take place, he does not provide many specific markers, choosing instead to let the setting remain ambiguous. I want to stress, specifically with respect to Coetzee's work on the passive, not a notion of omission or deletion of time and place in the setting upon which scholars have concentrated[7] but rather what is added to the null/open space that Coetzee creates. As another layer of complexity, Coetzee's lack of temporal and geographical determination is coupled with a rather straightforward, linear narrative structure. The novel is divided into six chapters, starting at the end of summer and ending approximately a year later, at the beginning of winter. The novel details a year in the life of the protagonist, the Magistrate, who grapples with the acts of torture conducted by a fellow agent of the Empire, Colonel Joll; forms a relationship with one of Joll's victims, whom he calls the "barbarian girl"; travels into "barbarian" country to return the girl; is arrested and tortured for allegedly conspiring with the barbarian enemy; and resumes his post as Joll and others flee in anticipation of the arrival of a barbarian army.

The novel is determined by two overlapping linguistic structures: the Magistrate's narration and Coetzee's narration. The Magistrate narrates the novel in the first person and the present tense, which scholars[8] have

argued engenders an immediate, affective response to the text so that readers undergo the "complex unfolding of feelings and associations" that the Magistrate experiences (Attridge 44). In this respect, the temporally and geographically situated narration of the Magistrate, who uses the present tense, converges with the teleological, temporally and geographically dislocated narration of Coetzee, whose position as a writer is, in a sense, at a remove from the text. What emerges from this doubling of narration is, in the case of the passive voice, a complicated engagement with the issue of torture. The passive voice highlights the complexity of representing torture, which Coetzee has famously discussed in his essay "Into the Dark Chamber." As he states in reference to a flogging scene in Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*, "It is important not to read the episode in a narrowly symbolic way. The driver and the donkey do not stand respectively for torturer and tortured. 'Torture without the torturer' is the key phrase" (367). What Coetzee articulates here is the problematic of power within acts of torture. The torturer does not exist outside of the dehumanizing power relations that constitute the torturer as torturer. To that end, as Coetzee points out, if a writer is to avoid clichés in representing the torturer (e.g., as "a figure of satanic evil" or "a faceless functionary"), his options are limited ("Into the Dark" 364). By evading representation of the subject altogether, the agentless sentence thus provides an ironic means to engage with the obscenity of torture without undermining its seriousness or reproducing the logic that enables its existence. In this way, Coetzee creates a linguistic opening that allows him to deconstruct the power relations in the torture chamber and represent, in a fashion, acts without agents, or "torture without the torturer."[9]

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, short passives are strategically placed in scenes that engage with torture and its physical effects. The first appearance of the word "torture" in the text appears after a "barbarian" boy and his grandfather are "questioned" by Colonel Joll. After a night of pretending to not hear anything ("[o]f the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing" [4–5]), the Magistrate nonetheless brings up the topic of torture with Colonel Joll:

> When I see Colonel Joll again, when he has the leisure, I bring the conversation around to torture. "What if your prisoner is telling the truth," I ask, "yet finds *he is not believed*? Is that not a terrible position? Imagine: *to be prepared to yield*, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, *to be broken*, yet *to be pressed to yield* more! And what a responsibility for the interrogator! How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth?" (5; emphasis added)

I have added italics to this scene to illustrate the number of short passives the Magistrate uses while questioning Joll. As I have discussed, there are two levels of narration at work within this novel, the Magistrate's and Coetzee's. Notably, the first question posed to Joll is split into two sections, broken up by the phrase "I ask." In the first clause of this question, the Magistrate assigns ownership of the prisoner to Joll by using the possessive pronoun "your" before "prisoner." However, in the second clause, the Magistrate employs the short passive to finish his question: "yet finds he is not believed?" The agentive *by*-phrase ("yet finds he is not believed [by you]") appears missing in this clause, yet we decode how to read the short passive by the context in which Coetzee (not the Magistrate) frames the question (i.e., the Magistrate is speaking to Colonel Joll; the word "your" in the first clause informs how we read the second clause). On one level, we can read the passage as the Magistrate asking Joll what happens when he does not believe the prisoner, with the short passive indicating an omission of agency even as agency is implied. In this respect, the Magistrate uses the short passive to question torture while also evading the attribution of agency.[10] The short passive therefore allows the Magistrate to take a middle approach between explicitly accusing Joll of torture (a word which, critically, the Magistrate does not use in his conversation with Joll) and completely ignoring the question of torture.

However, I want to complicate this interpretation of this short passive by considering the parenthetical immediately before this scene: "(At a certain point I begin to plead my own cause)" (5). Coetzee employs parentheticals[11] throughout the novel to ironize the Magistrate's claims.

For example, prior to this particular parenthetical, the Magistrate details how he could not have possibly heard any screaming from the granary because of the granary's architecture ("with heavy doors and tiny windows"), the granary's distance from his residence ("beyond the abattoir and the mill"), and the noise from the townspeople ("the noise of life") (5). Thus, when the Magistrate begins questioning Joll, his questioning could also be a continuation of pleading his own cause, asking, through the short passive, what it means if he is not believed by the collective "you," the readers to whom his thoughts are directed. The question that follows—"Is that not a terrible position?"—therefore articulates his own "terrible position" as complicitous in this torture as an agent of the Empire. Critically, within this scene, it is the Magistrate who assumes the role of interrogator; his questioning of Joll using short passives suggests that his interrogation is nothing more than a rhetorical performance, a way to "plead" his cause by challenging Joll's notion of truth. In other words, the other short passives in this scene can be interpreted as describing the state of the prisoner as well as the state of the Magistrate, who, it can be inferred (the text confirms this later[12]), did hear the screaming from the granary.

The Magistrate's questioning of Joll thus deconstructs the Magistrate's own position of "truth" within the narrative. While the Magistrate recognizes that there is little distance separating him from Joll (as he asks in another parenthetical, "who am I to assert my distance from him?"), he nevertheless attempts throughout the novel to assert this distance (5). Coetzee, however, complicates the Magistrate's attempts by exploiting the ambiguity of the short passive. For example, the Magistrate takes in one of Colonel Joll's victims, a girl who is part of a group of fisherfolk that Joll sends to the Magistrate's settlement in his first expedition to find more barbarians. The "barbarian girl," as the Magistrate calls her, has been blinded and crippled by Joll's acts of torture. The Magistrate finds her after "[s]he was left behind" and compels her to come live with him (25). Noticing that she is crippled, the Magistrate asks her, "Show me what they have done to your feet" (28). The girl does so and responds to his imperative by "run[ning] a finger across the outside of her ankle" and stating, "That is where *it was broken*. The other one too"

(28; emphasis added). The passive in her statement is noticeably agentless; the space that Coetzee creates in this agentless phrase enables the reader to draw a parallel between Joll and the Magistrate. In this respect, the agents of the Empire are dynamic because their subject positions are moveable (a point that undermines what Coetzee notes as "the fiction that nouns are static, verbs dynamic" ["Rhetoric" 168]). Both Joll and the Magistrate arguably derive pleasure from her physical body, one in the form of torture and the other in the form of washing her feet, and the Magistrate is not unaware of his closeness to Joll. As he states, "When she looks at me I am a blur, a voice, a smell, a centre of energy that one day falls asleep washing her feet and the next day feeds her bean stew and the next day—she does not know" (29). By ventriloquizing what he imagines the girl seeing, which is essentially non-human, he erases his sense of agency. This removal enables him to overlook his position of authority in his relationship with the girl as well as absolve himself of some sense of responsibility for her wounds. In doing so, he is able to continue his ritual of washing her feet, night after night, while attempting to decipher her body, which ultimately proves undecipherable.

The undecipherable nature of the barbarian girl's body becomes an obsession for the Magistrate, who sees her marks in much the same way as the poplar slips he excavates from a site of barbarian ruins. As he states, "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; emphasis added). The short passives here evoke an earlier description of the poplar slips that the Magistrate provides: "The characters on the new slips are as clear as the day *they were written*. Now, in the hope of deciphering the script, I have set about collecting all the slips I can, and have let the children who play here know that if they find one it is always worth a penny" (15; emphasis added). The link between the poplar slips and the barbarian girl is reinforced in a dream that the Magistrate has after he questions a guard about what happened to the girl in the torture chamber. In this dream, the Magistrate sees a "blank, featureless" face reminiscent of the girl's blind stare. He holds out a coin to this face, reproducing in this gesture the payment he would make for a poplar strip (37).

The Magistrate's attempt to decipher both the poplar slips and the barbarian girl not only underscores his similarity to Colonel Joll but also problematizes the relationship between "truth" and language in the novel. While Joll asserts that there is "[a] certain tone" to truth (5), the agentless sentences throughout the novel destabilize the linguistic certainties that ground such a claim. We see this destabilization most clearly in the Magistrate's attempt to plead his own cause, as the ambiguity the agentless sentences create ultimately subverts his argument. This subversion not only brings into question the Magistrate's narration and information but also how the reader interprets the Magistrate's story. As the passages above illustrate, short passives work ironically in the sense that, much like the Magistrate, we are compelled to "add in" the agents that we perceive as having been deleted. In the process of "recovering" the agents in these passive sentences, we perform the same interpretive work as the Magistrate: we infer meaning and agency without questioning why we assume that meaning and agency exist. While, on the one hand, the short passive might prompt us to "skate over" the ambiguity it creates (which, as Coetzee notes, many of us do in the process of reading ["Agentless" 174]), I suggest that the uneasy feeling engendered by Coetzee's selective passivization disrupts the interpretive process. Just as the marks on the barbarian girl's body and the poplar strips elude the Magistrate's ability to decipher them, so do these passive sentences thwart the certainty of agency that an active construction would suggest. In this way, Coetzee illuminates how the "barbarians" in his novel become linguistically constructed, not as active subjects just beyond the gate, but as imagined agents added into the discursive "truth" of the narration.

In the case of torture, ascribing agency can become problematic when we insert an agent or when we treat the noun (the torturer) as static and the verb (the act of the torture) as dynamic. This problem speaks to a lack of understanding of the power relations that shape the actions of the torturer and invent the space (the torture chamber) where torture can take place. As Coetzee states in "Into the Dark Chamber," the reasons torture "has exerted a dark fascination on many other South African writers" are twofold: "the first is that relations in the torture room pro-

vide a metaphor, bare and extreme, for relations between authoritarianism and its victims" and the second "that the torture room is a site of extreme human experience, accessible to no one save the participants" (363). Torture therefore creates a crisis not only of interpretation for the Magistrate and the reader of *Waiting for the Barbarians* but also of representation for Coetzee. As he explains, there is a danger of "following the state" in its creation of the torture chamber and falling into the double-bind that the state proposes: "either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them" ("Into the Dark" 364). Coetzee proposes that the writer's "true challenge is: how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms" ("Into the Dark" 364).

What does it mean "to imagine torture and death on one's own terms"? I suggest that "terms" has a loaded meaning in this sentence as a word that speaks to not only a writer's need for autonomy but also the writer's tools—particularly the grammar—that create the representation of the torture chamber. While the structure of a sentence may seem relatively inconsequential when discussing the cultural reproduction of torture, Coetzee demonstrates how critical this structure is to articulate the nuances of the act and its dehumanizing power while undermining its theoretical force. Colonel Joll posits that the primary purpose of torture is to yield the truth; Coetzee, however, questions the logic that sustains the torture chamber's existence by depicting the uneasy relationship between language and reality. If, as the premise of torture assumes, language is a barometer for truth, then the justification of the act becomes compromised as the relationship between truth and language is challenged. In the novel, Coetzee's complex use of the short passive counters the transparent connection between truth and language by creating critical gaps in the narrative that disrupt the process of interpretation. In this way, he not only brings attention to the grammatical fictions that ground our assumptions while reading the text but also counters the "truth" these assumptions engender. For Coetzee, then, representing the impossible truth of torture becomes possible through the deconstruction of the linguistic fictions upon which representations of truth stand. This deconstructive strategy complicates readers' access to the torture

chamber, as we are neither positioned tantalizingly beyond its closed door (where we can obsess over its contents like the Magistrate) nor invited in as voyeurs to its brutality (where we can see the subject and his direct "object" become linked through the act of torture). Rather, the ambiguity that the agentless sentence creates opens a space where we can see ourselves in relation to the dark chamber, not to fantastically imagine what it contains or to see its obscene spectacle but to consider where we lie—ethically—outside of it.

Notes

1 As Coetzee states, "there are several further empirical reasons why the *by*-phrase should be thought of as added rather than deleted: (1) While there are languages that have short passives only, there are no languages that have long passives only. Considerations of universal grammar therefore argue that the short passive should not be thought of as derived from the long. (2) Where both forms exist in a language, what historical evidence we have suggests that the long passive is of later date, and perhaps a literary invention. (3) Dates on language acquisition do not support the prediction that follows from deletion analysis, namely that children should acquire the long form before the short" ("The Rhetoric" 157).

2 While other scholars have examined this novel from an allegorical or sociopolitical perspective, my decision to perform a linguistic reading has been informed by scholars such as Begam, Clarkson, Macaskill ("Charting"), and Moses, all of whom have demonstrated how Coetzee's linguistic performance is central rather than peripheral to the politics of his novels.

3 Scholars such as Eckstein, Gallagher, Moses, and Wenzel have written specifically about writing and torture in *Waiting for the Barbarians*; however, none have connected Coetzee's scholarly work on the passive voice to the representational problem of writing about torture. Additionally, Attwell briefly connects Coetzee's scholarly work on the passive to *Barbarians* but does not discuss this connection at length or relate it to torture. Though Coetzee states in an interview with Attwell that he doesn't "see an immediate connection between *Barbarians* and the linguistic work [he] was doing in 1979," he later qualifies this statement by adding, "[e]xcept perhaps that it may be a telling fact about me that I spend some of my time (too much of my time?) in occupations that take me away from the great world and its concerns" ("Syntax" 142). I suggest that this latter statement is ironic: to set up a dichotomy between linguistic pursuits on one hand and politics on the other is a false dichotomy that Coetzee undermines in his work.

4 This work includes "The Rhetoric of the Passive in English" (1980), "The Agentless Sentence as Rhetorical Device" (1980), and "Isaac Newton and the Ideal of

Transparent Scientific Language" (1982). These works have all been reprinted in the edited collection *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*.

5 In this way, I see my work as looking at the "middleness" of Coetzee's writing that Macaskill discusses in his essay on Coetzee's middle voice. While I'm specifically looking at how the short passive is functioning in his work, this is not to say that Coetzee chooses one voice over another but that the passive is operating in a complex way that is informed by Coetzee's own linguistic work.

6 This title comes from a poem by Constantine Cavafy of the same name; see Maria Boletsi's "Barbaric Encounters: Rethinking Barbarism in C. P. Cavafy's and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*" for a discussion of the relationship between the two texts.

7 This assumption posits that there was a *there* to the novel that was eliminated, an assumption that is analogous to the grammatical fiction that the agentive *by*-phrase is deleted from the long passive rather than added to the short passive.

8 See Phelan and DelConte for a discussion of present tense narration in the novel.

9 Coetzee responds to a question posed by Attwell about "agentlessness" with the following: "As to your question about agentlessness, let me restate what I see as the dilemma raised by a sentence like 'A shot was fired.' Either agency is *not thought*, or agency is thought and then deleted. In this second case, where, so to speak, is it deleted *to*? Where is the unconscious of syntactic operations? Is it an unconscious whose contents can be recovered? But it is the first case that really teases thought. For one can say act without agent, but how does one *think* act without agent" ("Syntax" 145)?

10 According to Coetzee, "Where modern studies have recognized the agentless passive as a resource of rhetoric, they have tended to see it less as an ironic device than as a means of evading attribution of agency" ("Agentless" 179).

11 Parentheticals appear on pages 5–6, 11–12, 38, 43, 50, 64, 73, 81–82, 84, 130, and 133–4.

12 Durrant traces the Magistrate's denial of hearing to his active refusal to hear: "Although he does his best to deny what is happening—'Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing' (4–5), a structure of denial that later modulates into an active refusal to hear ('I stopped my ears' [9]), then into an admission of failure ('I would like to be able to stop my ears' [21]), and finally into confusion ('straining my ears to hear or not to hear sounds of violence' [22])" (452).

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