ariel: a review of international english literature
Vol. 48 No. 2 Pages 1–23

"The Coming of the Storm": Imperial Empiricism and Ecological Indifference in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Tom Z. Bradstreet

Abstract: This article rereads J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* through an ecocritical lens, eschewing a postmodernist interest in a "metaphysics of absence" (Olsen 53) in favour of a materialist engagement with ecological presence. Readings of the novel that cite the absence of the eponymous "barbarians"—and Empire's refusal to acknowledge this absence—as a central feature of the text routinely fail to recognize the presence of ecological forces that ultimately undermine Empire's colonial project. By rectifying this critical oversight, this article's rereading avoids endowing Empire with a problematic surfeit of narrative agency; moreover, it illuminates a relationship between Empire and ecology that cannot be reduced to the simplistic terms of binary difference and is better conceptualised as a dynamic of what I call "ecological indifference." Finally, the article highlights parallels between the myopia of Coetzee's Empire and a brand of critical imperialism that persists in "seeing through" literary ecologies. In this way, *Barbarians* can be read as a cautionary tale for the Anthropocene.

Keywords: J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, postcolonial ecocriticism, ecological indifference, materialism

I. Beyond the Settlement: Barbarians as "Other," or Other than Barbarians?

As the environmental turn has gathered pace, ecocritical interest in the works of J. M. Coetzee has intensified substantially. It is little wonder

that this should be the case. Coetzee's commitment to exploring the physical and conceptual treatment of nonhuman animals—advertised by *The Lives of Animals* and evident throughout his body of work[1]—is well documented, as is his enduring fascination with the landscape of his native South Africa.[2] By and large, it is to these features of his work that the burgeoning ranks of Coetzee's ecocritics have responded. *Disgrace*, in particular, has attracted a daunting array of animal studies readings—many of which revisit long-established resonances between Coetzee's fiction and Emmanuel Levinas' ethics of the Other—while David Attwell grounds a chapter of his recent *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* in an analysis of the short story "Nietverloren," whose preoccupation with the Karoo, South Africa's vast, arid interior, is repeatedly echoed in Coetzee's autobiographical writings. Meanwhile, *Life & Times of Michael K*, arguably Coetzee's most sustained reflection on environmental concerns, has given rise to a sizeable body of ecocritical work by (among others) Mike Marais,[3] Dominic Head, and Anthony Vital.

Although even a brief survey of the field correctly suggests that Coetzee's oeuvre represents fertile terrain for the environmental reader, closer scrutiny reveals certain imbalances in the landscape of Coetzeean ecocriticism. The first concerns the relative scarcity of environmental readings that account for ecological materiality as a feature of his fiction. This lack is hardly surprising: Coetzee's characteristically "neomodernist"[4] interrogation of the viability of signification inevitably threatens to render any discussion of ecological materiality moot before it has even begun. Even Head's attempt to locate a literal physical environment in *Life & Times* by identifying its ecology as "necessarily extratextual" (Vital 89) is finally, fatally qualified by the admission that "[n]ature . . . has necessarily to be nature-signified, a discursive construct, and nature-as-literal is not exempt from this rule" (90). In other ecocritical readings—and roughly in keeping with the trajectory of ecocriticism's "second wave"[5]—Coetzee's engagement with the material environment is enlisted in analyses that are principally interested in the postcolonial questions with which his work has traditionally been associated. Many of these analyses, however, warrant classification as examples of postcolonial ecocriticism only in a technical sense. Rather than interrogat-

ing dynamics whereby postcolonial and ecocritical concerns intersect, complicate, and mutually reinforce one another—as is the case in the scholarship of self-identified postcolonial ecocritics such as Rob Nixon, Graham Huggan, and Helen Tiffin[6]—Coetzee's critics often engineer a different dynamic: in geological terminology, the convergence of postcolonial and ecocritical vectors in a Coetzeean context regularly sees the latter subducted beneath the former.[7] While many critics have come to stare Coetzee's nonhuman animals full in (what Levinas would call) "the face,"[8] other ecological existents have seldom been addressed *as such* in the same way. Indeed, much Coetzee criticism tends to obscure those existents' literal materiality by charging them with some metaphoric or metonymic function, thereby tacitly denying those existents value as entities in themselves. Readings of *Life & Times*, for instance, are liable to address the novel's literary ecology only insofar as it is relevant to broader discussions about K's otherness, his problematic ontological status, and his evasion of inscription or definition by a range of third parties—discussions which are regularly referred back to the political situation in (post-) apartheid South Africa.

If Coetzee's ecocritics have tended to concentrate on specific ecological features of his texts, they have also gravitated toward particular texts in his body of work. Unlike novels such as *Life & Times* and *Disgrace*, for example, *Waiting for the Barbarians* has commanded comparatively little ecocritical attention. This is another curious lacuna in the field of Coetzeean ecocriticism, and one less readily explicable than the imbalance in theoretical priorities noted above. Even if one accepts that *Barbarians* does not actively encourage the "animal studies" brand of ecocritical reading to which many of Coetzee's other works have been subjected—a suggestion that might yet be disputed[9]—the lack of attention paid to *Barbarians*' broader literary landscape remains peculiar. As I will demonstrate, a long second look at Coetzee's third novel reveals substantial ecological concerns hiding in plain sight. If we do not see them, it is perhaps because we, like the forces of Empire, are preoccupied with the spectre of the barbarian masses hording just beyond the horizon. Although the "barbarians" are not purely imaginary—as Attwell notes, "fictive constructs do not return imperial horsemen strapped dead on

their mounts, as a warning" (*Politics* 71)—their failure to materialise *en masse*, or in any form that conforms to imperial expectations, has engendered readings of the novel that posit or assume a barbarian absence as a central feature of the text. I do not intend to debunk this perspective so much as build upon it, demonstrating its limitations in the process. If the barbarians of the imperial imagination do not reside beyond the settlement walls, what does? Assuming something is there, how have we managed to miss it?

By virtue of its position at the extreme periphery of Empire, the settlement over which the Magistrate presides purports to mark the boundary between that which is Empire and that which is not. On the understanding, however, that this negative definition of what lies "beyond" is insufficient—insofar as it persists in rendering an Other in terms of the imperial Self—a question arises: Of what does this realm of "not-Empire" consist? I argue that the threshold separating the settlement from this problematic "beyond" is not an articulation of binary "difference" between imperial Self and barbarian Other, but a door opening onto a no man's land that is not nearly as vacant as it might initially appear. Representatives of Empire may indeed be justified in their concern that threatening forces percolate in the brush beyond the imperial gates; their mistake, I suggest, lies in their flawed understanding of what those forces comprise. By means of an act of "ecological foregrounding,"[10] this close rereading focuses overdue attention on climate and physical terrain, whose neglect in many critical responses to the novel is symptomatic of the aforementioned tendency to keep literary ecologies in "symbolic servitude" (Freedgood 11).[11]

Although postcolonial discourse has long since deconstructed the simplistic opposition of Self and Other, my rereading explodes this crude distinction in such a way that the debris falls into an unfamiliar pattern. In "When was the 'Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit," Stuart Hall appropriates the Derridean concept of *différance* in order to describe the dissolution of colonialist binary thinking. I suggest that integrating an ecological vector into an intersectional approach to *Barbarians* leads instead to the concept of ecological indifference: a literal, material ecology that is irreducibly present, that is simply *there*,

irrespective of its recognition—or, rather, the lack thereof—by the imperial forces that confront it.[12] In doing so, I admit my subscription to a brand of ecocritical practice that presupposes a stable relation between word and world. In the parlance of Possible Worlds theory, my focus remains on what Lubomír Doležel terms the "extensional" (201). That is, I am interested in the storyworld as a material domain constructed by the text and navigable without undue fear of falling into poststructuralist limbo, although not without the necessary care. While the question of how to read literary ecologies in the present era demands prompt attention, a sense of urgency cannot be allowed to ride roughshod over those critical faculties that have been developed in response to the specific qualities of the literary medium, particularly in the context of a novel whose postmodern credentials are well established. As Louise Bethlehem argues in her treatise on the relationship between "urgency" and modes of representation in apartheid-era South African protest fiction (365), the equation of literary activism and representational transparency does not account for the particularities and potentialities of the communicative act. To paraphrase Elizabeth Costello, when Coetzee writes about a desert, I understand him to be talking in the first place about a desert,[13] all the while remembering that a "first place" presupposes the existence of a second.

In *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, Derek Attridge notes that the lack of spatio-temporal specificity in many of Coetzee's novels, *Barbarians* included, is apt to invite allegorical readings of his work,[14] yet mine is by no means the first to adopt a more literal approach. Indeed, Attridge does exactly this in *Ethics of Reading*. Citing "encouragement from the fiction itself" (35), Attridge asks, "[W]hat happens if we *resist* the allegorical reading that the novels seem half to solicit, half to problematize, and take them, as it were, at their word[?] Is it possible to read or discuss them without looking for allegorical meanings, and if one were to succeed in this enterprise would one have emptied them of whatever political or ethical significance they might possess?" (35; emphasis in original). Attridge's definition of "literal" differs somewhat from my own: "[B]y a literal reading," he writes, "I mean a reading that occurs as an event, a living-through or performing of the text" (60).

My definition, by comparison, refers more explicitly to the materiality of the signified. For the purposes of this essay, however, the differences between these conceptions of the literal are less relevant than a congruence between what they each problematise: namely, the tendency of allegorical readings to refer back to conceptual paradigms that are always "already known" (Attridge 64).

Having identified an ecological presence in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, I argue that a failure to acknowledge this presence betrays a tacit allegiance to imperial reading practices whose inherent anthropocentrism demands close critical scrutiny. Parallels between Empire's failure to properly recognise the presence of certain forces which constitute and/or populate *Barbarians*' literary ecology and the failure of many critics of the novel to recognise the presence of those forces on the level of discourse suggest that one might productively read *Waiting for the Barbarians* not only as a complex and damning critique of colonial violence and self-delusion but as a cautionary tale warning its reader against sleepwalking into precisely the kind of two-dimensional anthropocentrism in which Empire specialises. This is precisely the reading I elaborate below.

II. Beyond Absence: Imperial Blindness and Ecological Presence

The question of absence and presence in *Waiting for the Barbarians* has been the subject of much critical attention. In one notable example, first published in *ARIEL* some thirty years ago, Lance Olsen proffers a Derridean reading of *Barbarians* as a work of postmodern fiction in which Colonel Joll functions as a "misreader, a false reader, a believer in the metaphysics of presence" (53). Olsen argues that Joll still "longs for the 'truth' behind every sign," a practice that assumes the viability of the kind of "stable 'meaning'" (49) that poststructuralism has long since cast into doubt, and thus "believes in interpretation, in the absolute, in stability. For him, behind every signifier there is one and only one signified" (53). This misguided conviction accounts for Joll's unflinching belief in a barbarian onslaught that ultimately fails to materialise: the barbarians are visible "only once, very briefly, and then only in a small force, when the magistrate returns the blind girl to them in the mountains. Otherwise, the barbarians remain only a gap that the Empire fills

with its own panic" (Olsen 50). According to Olsen, the logic that motivates Joll's dictatorial insistence on the viability of "stable meaning" ultimately leaves us "in a monologue with nowhere to go, nothing to say, no one to say it to, a web of linguistic misfirings that disintegrate before anyone has heard, a field of blankness and a desolation that there has to be such blankness" (55–56).

In "The Body, the Word, and the State," Barbara Eckstein critiques this argument, suggesting that Olsen "leaps to conclusions of irresponsibility and despair" because he deems these conclusions to be "inherent in the method" of the deconstructive approach he adopts (177). But while one may on this basis dispute the bleak destination that Olsen's argument finally reaches, his foundational distinction between a "metaphysics of presence" and a "metaphysics of absence" (53) is both relevant and valuable. There is certainly a "gap" (Olsen 50) where the barbarians are supposed to be, and this act of supposition—coloured by a trite, magical brand of colonialist thinking—leads Coetzee's Empire to its blind faith in the imminence of a barbarian uprising. "Immanence" may be a more appropriate term, since what is seen is the alleged physical manifestation of a presence that is ultimately unverifiable. As Olsen notes, the thematics of seeing are a recurring feature of the novel; indeed, Coetzee's investigation of imperial myopia begins in the novel's very first sentence, with the Magistrate discussing Joll's glasses: "I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind?' (Coetzee, *Waiting* 1). He quickly corrects himself; the impression, he realises, is engendered by the darkness of Joll's lenses. "[T]hey look opaque from the outside," he says, "but he can see through them" (1).

The seed of doubt, however, has already been sown. What "presence" might be perceived through the darkness of the imperial perspective? The answer seems straightforward: that of the barbarians. But the longer this distant "presence" refuses to appear, the more Empire's powers of perception are revealed to be less objectively empirical than subjectively imperial. This is as true of Empire's hearing as it is of its eyesight: "The barbarian tribes were arming, the rumour went; the Empire should take precautionary measures, for there would certainly be war" (8–9). This

sentence embodies the psychological process by which Empire confirms its own misbegotten suspicions: rumour translates into certainty by means of the dubious link of a semi-colon. Upon their arrival at the settlement, one of the "new conscripts" (52) insists that he has been "trailed at a distance by barbarians" (53). "Are you sure they were barbarians? I ask." The conscript's response is telling: "Who else could they have been?" he asks (53). The question is rhetorical, but its premise demands a response. "Who else" presupposes the presence of a malevolent force for whose existence there is precious little proof. In this way, Empire sees and hears only what it wants to. To admit the absence of a barbarian enemy would be tantamount to admitting that the settlement represents the end of Empire—an admission that is almost literally unthinkable.

Empire's need for an Other against which it can define itself is such that it will actively seek one out. The nearby "river people" (19), the "barbarian girl" (41), and even the Magistrate become "barbarians" by proxy, the visible synecdoche of an invisible whole. In reality, they are mere substitutes temporarily bestowed with a poisoned signifier wrenched from a signified that never was. None of them represents the barbarians for whom Empire is waiting; rather, they become a barbarian presence constructed in the absence of the anticipated assault. Indeed, one might productively consider the barbarians who populate and motivate the colonial consciousness as an "imagined community," albeit not in the sense intended by Benedict Anderson. Whereas Anderson's communities are made real by means of the collective native imagination, this barbarian community is a product of the colonial imagination. But it is beyond even the considerable powers of Empire to make this community real; only the barbarians—made conspicuous by their prolonged absence—can effect this transformation. One cannot fail to note the irony of an Empire more heavily invested in a native rebellion than the natives themselves.

All of the above confirms the conclusion reached by George Steiner, who, "in his review of Coetzee's novel, reads the book as a Hegelian parable about the interdependence of the master and the slave; the Empire cannot exist without the presence of its opposite" (Olsen 48). Moreover, this reading would appear to corroborate the premise upon which Olsen

constructs his own argument. Evidence that supports the notion of barbarian absence—the "gap" filled by imperial neurosis and spurious conjecture—is ample. But Olsen's discussion of "presence" and "absence" nevertheless remains limited. Once he establishes the barbarians' physical absence, Olsen's attentions are confined to questions of presence and absence at a metaphysical level—that is, to questions regarding the (im) possibility of effectively determining presence, of seeing something and calling it by its own name. While this train of thought may be productive on its own terms, it overlooks the possibility that an alternative physical presence may be identifiable. This possibility is not hypothetical. With their focus settled on the distant barbarians, the agents of Empire fail to acknowledge the omnipresent powers of the local climate.

Early in the novel, the Magistrate remarks that "[t]he sun is up and glares so *savagely* . . . that I have to shield my eyes" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 14; emphasis added). Several months later, he remarks that "[t]he *siege* of winter is on" (40; emphasis added). Time and again, the Magistrate refers to the climate in terms one might expect to be more readily applied to the barbarians. It is ironic, then, when he proceeds to describe the harsh conditions as a guarantee of security: "For the duration of the winter the Empire is safe: beyond the eye's reach the barbarians too, . . . are gritting their teeth against the cold" (40). This is by no means the only occasion on which the Magistrate conceives of the physical landscape as a simple backdrop against which the cold war with the barbarians is played out rather than as an active player in a more complex conflict. Indeed, the imperial authorities repeatedly fail to acknowledge that the threat posed by the physical landscape is more urgent than that of the imagined community on which they struggle to focus. The journey to meet the northern nomads is a case in point. The travelling party led by the Magistrate is woefully unprepared and brutalised by the elements on several occasions: a horse falls through the ice that covers a lake the party thinks they had long since left behind (66) and a ferocious storm descends, spiriting away a tent in a matter of seconds (73).

At every turn, the landscape and its weather systems make their presence more keenly felt—but to no avail. Indeed, even when the Magistrate is actively seeking out a geographical landmark—the moun-

tains in which the nomadic people are said to reside—the figures of the imperial obsession continue to cloud his vision. Noting that the shapes he perceives may not be mountains after all, the Magistrate declares that "[t]he specks . . . in the distance are men, men on horseback: who but barbarians!" (74). Again, Coetzee's use of punctuation—the progress of the comma, the sudden conviction of the colon, the exclamation mark—betrays a circular colonial logic. The Magistrate's desire to see the barbarians translates into a certainty that barbarians can be seen. Perversely, even the barbarians' invisibility is invoked as proof of their continued presence: "When we halt to rest, or lose sight of the strangers[,] . . . it is without fear of their vanishing" (76). By virtue of its being imagined, the barbarian Other cannot disappear. The searching eyes of Empire remain perennially trained on its foggy, distant profile, all the while seeing right through the elemental forces that threaten to decimate their mission.

In the closing stages of the novel, the most concerted imperial effort to hunt down the barbarians is revealed to have ended in abject failure. As the dregs of Empire's forces crawl back to the settlement, the Magistrate grabs one of the troops by the arm. "How could it be that the barbarians did this to you?" he asks. (Note that the question assumes barbarian responsibility.) "We froze in the mountains!" the soldier replies. "We starved in the desert! Why did no one tell us it would be like that? We were not beaten—they led us out into the desert and then they vanished!" (161). The soldier is so close to identifying the cause of their failure that it is almost pathetic. But instead of acknowledging a lost battle against weather and terrain, he insists that Empire has fallen victim to circumstances engineered by a cowardly foe. "Who led you?" asks the Magistrate. "They—the barbarians!" says the soldier (161). Although there is no way to prove that this hypothesis is false, the volume of examples demonstrating Empire's selective vision strongly suggests that it is.

III. Beyond Binary: Difference, *Différance*, and Indifference

This close rereading is significant for two reasons. Firstly, it represents safe passage out of the crude opposition of Self and Other—a distinc-

tion that, as I demonstrate, is not successfully elided simply by acknowledging the barbarians' absence. But having thus recast binary difference as something closer to *différance*, the rereading does not stop there; rather, it gestures towards a concept of ecological indifference. This is the second way in which this rereading is important: it points to a discursive space in which one can advocate for a discernible ecological presence without implying that it is a straightforward substitute for a human equivalent. I will elaborate these two points one by one.

It is tempting to subscribe to the position that the barbarian uprising is a figment of the limited colonial imagination and that Empire, overstretching itself in an attempt to discern a hostile presence, begins to unravel in its refusal to countenance the possibility of its absence. In this way, one can read *Barbarians* as a treatise on a colonial psyche whose need for an Other turns the tide toward imperial self-destruction. This is in many respects a compelling reading; from a postcolonial perspective, it is certainly an important one. The fallibility of a colonialist conception of "difference" has long been established; as I have mentioned, Hall describes the "move from one conception of difference to another, . . . from difference to *différance*," which "[obliges] us to re-read the very binary form in which the colonial encounter has for so long itself been represented" (247). The term "post-colonial," Hall argues, "is not merely descriptive of 'this' society rather than 'that', or of 'then' and 'now'. It re-reads 'colonisation' as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural 'global' process—and it produces a decentred, diasporic or 'global' rewriting of earlier, nation-centred imperial grand narratives" (247). As I have shown, acknowledging the absence of the barbarians necessarily destabilises the kind of binary oppositions that undergird colonialist discourse. But even if readings predicated on this conclusion "decentre" the "grand narrative" in which Coetzee's Empire is so heavily invested, the new "centre" of the narrative remains squarely in imperial territory. In other words, a reading that does nothing more than posit a barbarian absence tacitly admits the problematic premise that Empire is the singular entity of agency and consequence in the novel. Absent a fully-fledged barbarian presence, the battle between Empire and "not-Empire" is entirely one-sided; Empire's successes—and, significantly, its

failures—can be ascribed only to Empire's own modus operandi. This interpretation effectively endows Empire with a *hamartia*—a fatal flaw that allows it to retain control even over its own prospective demise—whose decisive import thus relegates all third-party agents of resistance, human or otherwise, to relative insignificance. Such a reading therefore diminishes the potency of its own argument by tacitly adhering to a colonial mindset whereby the only alternative to the barbarian Other is the absence of that Other. By consenting to play within the boundaries of established colonialist discourse, this reading is only as enlightened as the supposedly well-meaning Magistrate; despite its anti-colonial pretensions, it reinforces imperial authority. My rereading of the novel, by contrast, suggests that an absence of barbarians is not equivalent to absence. Illuminating the ecological forces at work in *Barbarians* decentres the imperial narrative without inadvertently granting Empire a measure of agency incommensurate with the thrust of Coetzee's postcolonial critique.

It would be easy to lapse into a reading whereby the central conflict of the novel is deemed to be neither between Empire and the barbarians nor between Empire and itself, but between Empire and the ecological forces it encounters in the hinterland beyond the settlement. We must tread carefully here. Again we are confronted with the simple "between" which Coetzee's work studiously obfuscates and which postcolonial thinkers have done so much to dismantle. Fortunately, however, the text does not ask its readers to reinstitute this reductive oppositional dynamic, since neither Empire nor ecology participates in direct conflict with the other. I have shown how the defeated imperial soldier deems the climate circumstantial, rather than pivotal, to events as they have unfolded; by granting the local geography and its climate instrumental value (as a weapon in the barbarian arsenal), he automatically denies it final value (as an entity in its own right). But Empire has the capacity to rectify this oversight—at least in theory. When Colonel Joll finally removes his opaque glasses, is his apparent admission of defeat also an acknowledgement that his forces have been *weatherbeaten*? Though such an epiphany seems unlikely, the prospect is not inherently implausible; in principle, Joll can see his Empire's folly for what it is. The mate-

rial environment, on the other hand, has no equivalent opportunity to recognise the conflict in which it is inadvertently implicated. Such recognition is, bluntly, impossible. According to the terms of a materialist reading that resists the allegorising impulse, weather and terrain cannot reasonably be characterised as consciously engaged with an antagonist. An acknowledgment of the destructive power of the climate cannot be considered tantamount to an ascription of ecological intentionality.

This point bears repeating, if only because the text provides its reader with ample opportunity to make exactly such an ascription. Consider, for example, the Magistrate's evaluation that Empire is "ravaging the earth" and "wasting our patrimony" in its search for barbarian forces (Coetzee, *Waiting* 90)—an act of violence easily counterposed against the subsequent punishment handed to the imperial expedition by an unforgiving climate. It is but a short jump from this observation to a reading whereby Nature (whatever that may signify) reacts angrily to Empire's ecological transgressions. Again, we must be wary: even suggesting the possibility of ecological intentionality can encourage the adoption of a mode of magical thinking, the logical conclusion of which is an interpretation implying the wilful vengeance of Mother Nature. This, I suggest, is a particularly extreme example of the kind of allegorical reading whose limitations Attridge is eager to highlight. Indeed, if Empire's determination to read allegorically—to galvanise its brittle, precious "grand narrative" (Hall 247)—is responsible for its failure to engage with climate as an entity in its own right, our refusal to do likewise renders impossible the reverse: the prospect of climate engaging meaningfully with Empire. Such is the indirect (yet nevertheless tangible) relationship between climate and Empire that cannot be characterised in terms of difference, or even *différance*, but is better described as indifference.

Once the imperial forces have beaten a track back in the direction of the colonial centre, the Magistrate returns to the business of waiting: "I stand out in the open watching the coming of the storm" (167). Can I be the only reader to have initially understood the coming storm as metaphorical? On first reading, I felt certain that here, finally, the barbarian onslaught would materialise; that the literal storms of earlier pages

would give way to the figurative tempest implied by the novel's title; and that the word "storm" would elegantly articulate this final transition. Upon reflection, of course, I found that I was wrong. The coming storm is exactly that: wind and sand and blasted brush wreaking havoc on the forgotten outpost of an Empire in retreat. There is no difference here, but rather a great indifference: of weather and terrain blindly chasing a myopic Empire from the colonial periphery, burying the settlement just as the dunes once covered the remnants of other, long-lost civilisations, and rapidly turning the imperial present into a history fit for future excavation.

IV. Beyond Fiction: Critical Imperialism in the Era of Climate Change

Thus far, I have performed a rereading of *Barbarians* that illuminates the inextricability of Coetzee's postcolonial concerns from ecological issues largely overlooked in the novel's critical reception. Moreover, I have done so without resorting to the colonialist principle of difference, thereby decentring the imperial grand narrative while avoiding the inadvertent perpetuation of Empire's preferred interpretative procedures. I cannot conclude my analysis, however, without noting that this grand narrative has not just been decentred. By highlighting the significance of ecological forces beyond the imperial settlement—that is, by properly accounting for meaningful, nonhuman existence in Coetzee's storyworld—I have elaborated a different conception of *Barbarians*' literary geography. In fact, as a result of expanding the cognitive map according to which the novel can be navigated, the narrative has by definition been *re*-centred, *away* from the settlement. The location of the new centre may be uncertain—perhaps chronically so—but it can no longer be located in territory under imperial control. Indeed, one could not reasonably conclude that this indeterminate locus falls under human control at all.

What remains, then, is a more democratic, less anthropocentric conception of *Barbarians*' literary landscape than traditional postcolonial readings of the novel tend to allow. Such readings are prone to treat literary ecologies as so much window dressing, framing a human subject

whose centrality is unquestioned. Consider, for example, T. Kai Norris Easton's suggestion that "[i]t is very appropriate that Coetzee invents his imperial landscape in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, for it represents both the artificial (i.e. imaginary) war that the 'barbarians' are engaged in and the artificial possession by Empire of their land" (591).[15] I have several qualms with this assertion, but only one need detain us here: the enforced symbolic subservience of the landscape to the basically anthropocentric concerns of war and colonial occupation. By presuming the centrality of the imperial settlement in a discursive sense, this reading legitimises the very idea of a colonial centre; meanwhile, ecological forces—whose very real presence in the novel I have established—are automatically relegated to mere metaphorical significance. The act of panoramic refocusing this essay performs calls into question the notions of "centre," "periphery," and "frontier" and eschews the self-serving colonialist principles by which a given geography is arranged in an arbitrary hierarchy of meaningfulness.

Rather than negotiating the novel's geography by relying (as Colonel Joll does) on maps "based on little but hearsay," "patched . . . together" according to imperial guesswork (Coetzee, *Waiting* 13), one might instead allow "the line that marks the frontier on the maps of Empire" to "grow hazy and obscure" (149). I am reminded of Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay*, which rereads the settlement of Australia in terms of "spatial history" (Carter 33). Carter argues that "[i]t was the names themselves"—that is, the place names with which the colonisers punctuated the Australian landscape—"that brought history into being, that invented the spatial and conceptual co-ordinates within which history could occur. For how, without place names, without agreed points of reference, could directions be given, information exchanged, 'here' and 'there' defined?" (46). By Carter's rationale, the project of Coetzee's Empire must be read as contingent upon the construction of a necessarily artificial (and evidently self-serving) framework of "spatial and conceptual co-ordinates." By illuminating the conditionality of colonial (mis)adventure in this way, Carter furnishes the reader of *Barbarians* with grounds on which to reconsider the legitimacy of granting the novel's landscape its "imperial" appellation. Like the eponymous protago-

nist of *Life & Times of Michael K*, one might reread the hard boundaries of a landscape that has been divided in the name of colonialist comparison and definition—and therefore material and conceptual ownership[16]—as mere petrifications of the "airy barriers" (Carter 68) upon which those boundaries were originally founded.[17] In this way, one can work backwards (or forwards) toward a pre- (or post-) colonial conception of the novel's literary ecology.

This fresh conception bears comparison to Timothy Morton's concept of "the mesh,"[18] which is a paradigm of ecological interconnectedness that is both infinitely large and infinitesimally detailed. While the concept of the mesh, like so much of the object-oriented philosophy that informs it, may be somewhat abstract—Morton's own term is "unthinkable" ("The Mesh" 24)—it also remains deeply practical. In the midst of a field of discourse populated by terms such as "posthumanist" and "antihumanist"—whose claim to challenge the boundaries of anthropocentrism is undermined by their persistence in retaining the "human" as their key reference point—the mesh represents a useful conceptual framework insofar as it has no central reference point, human or otherwise. Absent an identifiable centre or periphery, the mesh cannot be traversed with the arrogance of colonial explorers for whom a place only exists once they have seen it (and appropriated it) for themselves.

In this respect, the mesh also represents a timely corrective to wilful ignorance regarding humans' recent graduation to a status of "geological agency."[19] In the present era of anthropogenic climate change, humans are being forced to relearn the countless ways in which we are connected to all other features of our global ecosystem—an acknowledgement that requires a paradoxical pairing of mental processes. We must recognise ourselves as beholden to the ecology of the planet on which we live (rather than vice versa), but we must also recognise that, as a species recently self-endowed with the capacity to effect geological change, we are powerful enough to endanger the planet's habitability and therefore have a duty of stewardship that entails reversing this trend if at all possible. The mesh helpfully articulates the sum of these seemingly incompatible assertions. Just because humans are interconnected with every other facet of their ecology does not make us central to that ecology,

but just because humans are not central to that ecology does not mean we do not remain present (and highly influential) within it. In other words, decentring "the human" need not entail humans' disappearance or annihilation; indeed, only climate change itself—and, by extension, a failure to recognise it as such—could have such fatal consequences. As this rereading demonstrates, *Barbarians* dramatises the consequences of failing to (re)learn these fundamentals of ecological thinking. Limited by its characteristically colonialist tunnel vision, Coetzee's Empire illustrates what is liable to happen when one pursues anthropocentric concerns without understanding those concerns in their proper ecological contexts.

In the case of Empire, this pursuit is myopic in a literal sense. Evincing a vision both highly selective and basically flawed, it searches for a human Other that refuses to be found and in doing so falls foul of the nonhuman forces to which it has given scant consideration. Refusing to acknowledge these forces, it attributes its ultimate failure to the wiles of an imaginary enemy rather than its unexpected, indifferent adversary. But the confrontation between Empire and environment is not only unacknowledged by its participants in the narrative; it has also remained unacknowledged by many critics of Coetzee's novel. As is also true of the text's imperial forces, the collective critical vision of Coetzee scholars has proven limited, trained primarily—and often exclusively—on anthropocentric textual concerns. If ecocriticism can assist in the development of a nuanced critical awareness of the (overtly human) risks of anthropogenic climate change, then persisting in limiting oneself to reading practices which fail to legislate for the tangible impacts of a volatile, (re)active environment increases the risk of falling victim to potent ecological forces. Those forces may be characterised by indifference but we remain indifferent to those forces at our own peril.

As despicable or derisory as one might find Colonel Joll—or, indeed, the Magistrate—his tendency to "misread" is one that might easily be shared by Coetzee's own readers; after all, in material terms, it is naïve to assume that dealing in the "metaphysics of absence" should be preferable to dealing in the "metaphysics of presence." Both approaches suffer from a shortsightedness that discourages the expansion of one's perspec-

tive beyond the perimeter of the settlement, where even the inhumane remains inherently human. To perform a second reading is to expand one's view beyond this perimeter and beyond the humanist frontier. I am not advocating a wholesale departure from anthropocentrism, as if humankind could be exhausted as subject matter or somehow made irrelevant. Indeed, it is important to remember that climate change does not necessarily threaten the existence of the planet as a whole, but of humans' place within it. However, as literary and cultural scholars grapple with the role of narrative in the era of environmental crisis, the act of ecological foregrounding this article performs may prove to be not merely thought-provoking but fundamental. It is only when one refocuses a camera lens that the background is thrown into relief, and it is only by means of this same act that one can hope to see the world for what it is and, by extension, what it might become.

In *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, Lawrence Buell argues:

> For technological breakthroughs, legislative reforms, and paper covenants about environmental welfare to take effect, or even to be generated in the first place, requires a climate of transformed environmental values, perception, and will. To that end, the power of story, image, and artistic performance and the resources of aesthetics, ethics, and cultural theory are crucial. (vi)

The crucial word here, I suggest, is "perception." Absent the development and popularisation of a fresh mode of seeing—that is, of reading, in the broadest sense of the term—environmental values and will may remain entrenched in untenable positions. While its performance is by no means a panacea, "ecological foregrounding," if adopted on the proper scale and with the proper care, can help to muster meaningful action regarding what may be the defining issue of this century—a scale that extends far beyond the limits of anthropocentrism. It is easy to stay inside one's settlement—too easy, in fact. There is a whole world out there; Coetzee offers his readers a window onto it, if only we are inclined to look. Our old spectacles, those "two little discs of glass suspended . . . in loops of wire," look opaque from the outside. Just how well can we expect to see through them?

Notes

1 See also Coetzee's responses to Cavalieri's Socratic dialogue *The Death of the Animal* as well as his patronage of the Australian animal rights organisation Voiceless.

2 This fascination was already clear at the outset of Coetzee's career: *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* wear their geographies on their sleeves. Not confined to his fiction, this preoccupation has also manifested itself in Coetzee's critical writings—his 1986 essay "Farm Novel and *Plaasroman*" is one prominent example—as well as in his *autre*biographical works.

3 While Marais' work may not obviously warrant an ecocritical designation, the attention he pays to the land of *Life & Times* suggests otherwise (see especially "Literature and the Labour of Negation").

4 To claims that Coetzee's work should be defined as "postmodernist," Attridge replies that "neomodernist" or "late modernist" would be more appropriate since "Coetzee's work follows on from Kafka and Beckett, not Pynchon and Barth" (6). I agree with Attridge but prefer "neomodernist" to "late modernist" on the basis that the latter tacitly threatens to overlook postmodernism entirely.

5 According to Buell, "first wave" ecocriticism was characterised by a conscious break from humanistic tradition and sought to refocus critical attention on the environment as (material) environment. More recently, however, the general trajectory of ecocritical theorising has not led further away from humanism so much as it has returned towards it after this initial departure; indeed, "second wave" ecocriticism has increasingly acknowledged the manifold intersections at which environmental and humanist concerns meet (Buell 21–22). The rapid emergence of intersectional disciplines such as postcolonial ecocriticism and ecofeminism represents evidence of this shift in critical emphasis.

6 Huggan and Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* remains indispensable, while Nixon's work requires little introduction. Although it falls beyond the remit of the present article, one might fruitfully read *Barbarians* in terms of Nixon's concept of "slow violence" (elaborated in depth in the magnificent *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*), especially in light of the systematic ecological degradation committed by the forces of Empire in their search for the "barbarian" peoples.

7 It could hardly be otherwise: the development of the canon of Coetzee criticism predates the genesis of ecocriticism—in its current form(s), at least—by roughly a decade. From this, in combination with the fact that the physical environment has always been a prominent feature of Coetzee's fiction (and has been recognised as such by many critics), it follows that the subduction of ecological concerns has characterised a good deal of Coetzee criticism, especially prior to the late 1990s. Indeed, a list of exceptions to this rule would be significantly shorter than a list of examples that prove it.

8 In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas defines "the face" as "[t]he way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me" (50).

9 It is worth remembering that *Barbarians*' cast of nonhuman animals remains large in number: "a mountain of carcases" (Coetzee 1) frames the reader's introduction to Colonel Joll and is later juxtaposed against the Magistrate's adoption of the "little silver-fox cub" (36), his decision not to shoot the waterbuck (43), and the compassion he experiences as a stricken horse is euthanised (67). While a deeper consideration of the role of nonhuman animals in *Barbarians* might therefore prove to be a worthwhile undertaking, such an analysis falls beyond the scope of this essay.

10 The significance of the foreground/background distinction within ecocritical discourse is well established; Morton, for example, draws on this distinction in his critical work (see especially his *Ecology Without Nature*). Although my term "ecological foregrounding" owes a debt to Morton's preference for the term "ecological," this is not a preference I necessarily share; Buell, for example, makes a persuasive case for the use of the term "environmental" instead. Although the two terms should not be considered interchangeable, I use both throughout this article with the understanding that their respective emphases and connotations are appropriate to different contexts.

11 In *The Ideas in Things*, Elaine Freedgood argues that "the object as metaphor loses most of its qualities in its symbolic servitude" (11), an observation that might equally be applied to the ecological objects that populate literary landscapes, particularly in the case of texts that invite allegorical readings.

12 Given the heterogeneity of the "new materialisms" that have accrued such currency in recent years—notably speculative realism and, more specifically, object-oriented ontology—the proposal to perform a broadly materialist reading of *Barbarians* may appear to lack theoretical specificity. Although I think that an object-oriented ecocritical analysis of Coetzee's fiction (and *Life & Times of Michael K* in particular) might productively be reconciled with the problematics of textuality to which Coetzee self-reflexively draws attention, this essay aims to emphasise the material environment as an entity of tangible consequence on the level of text. The ontological status of this literary ecology may be disputed insofar as it is a literary ecology, but its physical presence is palpable to the novel's characters—even if, as I argue here, those characters remain indifferent toward it.

13 Discussing Red Peter from Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" in the context of a conversation about realism, Costello states: "When Kafka writes about an ape, I take him into be talking in the first place about an ape" (Coetzee, *Lives of Animals* 32).

14 See Attridge 32–33.

15 Although Easton is correct in asserting that the landscape of *Barbarians* is "invented" (591)—corroborated as this is by Coetzee—recent work by Wittenberg

and Highman makes the persuasive case that "the frontier landscape of *Barbarians* was carefully created out of various descriptions that Coetzee found in Asian travel books and exploration narratives, . . . reworked in such a way as to create a fictional world in which geographical markers of place are left indistinct and unrecognizable" (105). But Wittenberg and Highman do not simply locate a geographical precedent; they also elaborate a socio-political parallel by "considering how apposite [*Barbarians*'] portrayal of the logic of Empire and the discourse of 'the Barbarian' is to the central Asian region that first inspired it, the Tarim basin that now forms part of Xinjiang Autonomous Region" in China (105).

16 *Life & Times* is structured by K's repeated internment in (and escape from) the boundaries of physical and discursive encampment. Upon his release from a gang of conscripted labourers, walking across the open veld, "[t]he anxiety that belonged to the time on the road began to leave him" (Coetzee 46) and his inherited conception of land-as-property gives way to the prospect of its opposite: "[H]e wondered whether there were not forgotten corners and angles and corridors between the fences, land that belonged to no one yet. Perhaps if one flew high enough, he thought, one would be able to see" (47).

17 Citing Darwin's account of a voyage to Australia, Carter suggests that the "definite points" that Darwin identified in order to gauge the progress of his return journey were

> nothing more than names and outlines on maps. They bore no relation to reality, but without them travelling was impossible. Whether or not they deceived with their promises of water and anchorage, they did not deceive in harbouring 'resting places for the imagination'. Without those airy barriers, how could the traveller measure his progress? Indeed, without *their* shadowy advance, as they slipped away from him like horizons, how could he know he was travelling at all? (68; emphasis in original)

18 Morton elaborates on this in *The Ecological Thought* (see especially 33–38).

19 I use both this phrase and "anthropogenic climate change" as Chakrabarty understands and employs them in his seminal article "The Climate of History: Four Theses." Not incidentally, Chakrabarty's understanding of the two terms roughly accords with their usage in popular discourse.

Works Cited

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso, 1991. Print.

"anthropocentrism, n." *OED Online*. Oxford UP, June 2016. Web. 12 July 2016.

Attridge, Derek. *J. M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004. Print.

Attwell, David. *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing: Face-to-Face with Time*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015. Print.

——. *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1993. Print.

Bethlehem, Louise. "'A Primary Need as Strong as Hunger': The Rhetoric of Urgency in South African Literary Culture under Apartheid." *Poetics Today* 22.2 (2001): 365–89. Print.

Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination.* Oxford: Blackwell, 2005. Print.

Carter, Paul. *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010. Print.

Cavalieri, Paola. *The Death of the Animal: A Dialogue.* New York: Columbia UP, 2009. Print.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Climate of History: Four Theses." *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 197–222. Print.

Coetzee, J. M. *Disgrace*. London: Vintage, 2000. Print.

——. *Dusklands*. London: Vintage, 2004. Print.

——. *Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons*. London: Penguin, 2004. Print.

——. "Farm Novel and *Plaasroman* in South Africa." *English in Africa* 13.2 (1986): 1–19. Print.

——. *In the Heart of the Country*. London: Penguin, 1982. Print.

——. *Life & Times of Michael K*. London: Vintage, 2004. Print.

——. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001. Print.

——. "Nietverloren." *Three Stories*. Melbourne: Text, 2014. 25–43. Print.

——. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. London: Vintage, 2004. Print.

Doležel, Lubomír. *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000. Print.

Easton, T. Kai Norris. "Text and Hinterland: J. M. Coetzee and the South African Novel." *Journal of South African Studies* 21.4 (1995): 585–99. Print.

Eckstein, Barbara. "The Body, The Word, and the State: J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 22.2 (1989): 175–98. Print.

Freedgood, Elaine. *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010. Print.

Hall, Stuart. "When was the 'Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the Limit." *The Post-Colonial Question.* Ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti. London: Routledge, 1996. 242–60. Print.

Head, Dominic. "The (Im)possibility of Ecocriticism." *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*. Ed. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells. New York: Zed, 1998. 27–39. Print.

Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Oxon: Routledge, 2010. Print.

"humanism, n." *OED Online*. Oxford UP, June 2016. Web. 12 July 2016.

Kafka, Franz. "A Report to an Academy." *Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Ed. and trans. Michael Hofmann. London: Penguin, 2007. 225–36. Print.

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991. Print.

Marais, Mike. "Literature and the Labour of Negation: J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K*." *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 36.1 (2001): 107–25. Print.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010. Print.

——. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. Print.

——. "The Mesh." *Environmental Criticism in the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Stephanie LeMenager, Teresa Shewry, and Ken Hiltner. Oxon: Routledge, 2011. 19–30. Print.

Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2013. Print.

Olsen, Lance. "The Presence of Absence: Coetzee's 'Waiting for the Barbarians.'" *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 16.2 (1985): 47–56. Print.

Vital, Anthony. "Toward an African Ecocriticism: Postcolonialism, Ecology, and *Life & Times of Michael K*." *Research in African Literatures* 39.1 (2008): 87–106. Print.

Wittenberg, Hermann, and Kate Highman. "Sven Hedin's 'Vanished Country': Setting and History in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*." *Scrutiny2* 20.1 (2015): 103–27. Web. 4 July 2016.