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Time without Beginning and End: A Philosophical Implication of ‘Waiting’ in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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Abstract: By assessing the construct of “waiting” in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* with the purpose of defining the novel’s distinct concept of History, this paper attempts to shed new light on both the structural and philosophical implications of the novel that are yet to be properly discussed.

The primary focus of the study is placed on the two main characters, the magistrate and Colonel Joll, particularly on their actions, which revolves around the act of “waiting.” As the magistrate of a city, the protagonist “I” performs various acts of interpretations: He attempts to decipher the meaning of ancient letters on wooden slabs; he tries to interpret the scars on a girl he takes care of. Colonel Joll is also bent on interpreting the unknown, chasing around uncertain rumors and shadowy figures as signs of his enemy, the Barbarians. The actions of the two characters are then juxtaposed with the theme of time, which the novel depicts as being separated between the natural, seasonal/circular, eternal flow of time and the fabricated, vertically oriented, finite time of the Empire.

By relating and contrasting the development of the “waiting” actions of the characters, this paper attempts to maintain that in this novel, arbitrary and unilateral interpretations of events and objects (“not waiting”) accumulate to construct imaginary dichotomy that function to promote the Empire’s history of hostility, and that in order to escape this it is essential for men to refrain from making ungrounded interpretations and in doing so attempt to remain “waiting” in the perpetual present.

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Introduction

There arises a sense of discomfort as we read *Waiting*. This is because we do not really comprehend the meaning of ‘waiting’. Coetzee’s characters are waiting to enter zones of instability, that is, they are ‘waiting-but-not-waiting’.

‘Waiting-but-not-waiting’ is, at a glance, a contradiction, and it has a deep relationship with Coetzee’s theme, a theme of history and narrative. In general, history is a narrative that creates

a group consciousness. Narratives like that in *Waiting* conjure imaginary relations between ‘us’ and others, a dichotomy that is based on the ability to share the narrative. Coetzee proposes a prescription for this. It is not continued indifference, nor does it lie outside the dichotomy; rather, it is a prescription that joins the two opposing sides. It is necessary to involve both us and the others to create spontaneous and connoting harmony.

This paper studies the concept of waiting through its representation in *Waiting* and its philosophical implications. The paper deepens the recent critiques of this workⁱ.

1. Chasing

In *Waiting*, time and again, someone or something is either chasing and being chased. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the act of waiting only appears in the last scene of the novel, when the narrator is waiting for the barbarians to come (Coetzee 167).

The chasing/chased relationships described in *Waiting* create a dichotomy. The Empire pursues its enemies, the nomads or ‘barbarians’, in its efforts to expand the settlement, which is a frontier town of the Empire (54). Colonel Joll, a secret police officer of the Empire sent to the settlement, collects information about the barbarians; he tortures the nomads on suspicion of their being spies. The narrator, who is the magistrate of the town, also seeks out the barbarians, but his aim is to return a girl who was kidnapped and crippled by the Empire’s officers. The narrator clarifies ambiguous meanings in the novel. He is interested in some wooden boards he dug up in the desert; the boards contain unknown and indecipherable words that he attempts to interpret. He also tries to guess the meaning of the injured nomad girls’ injuries. Thus, while the Empire and its representative Joll dogmatically view the nomads as their enemy, the narrator arbitrarily interprets the wooden boards and the girl’s scratches. Therefore, *Waiting* depicts two types of chasing: physical chasing and chasing after coded meanings. The act of chasing, as the antipode of waiting, is significant because it reveals the implications of waiting.

Joll adheres to a dichotomy: he categorically divides everyone into friend or foe. As a result of the Empire’s treatment of the nomads, the latter become their actual enemies. In other words, the determined pursuit of the suspected enemies converts their perceived hostility into real hostility. The magistrate remarks:

There were no border troubles before you came... Those pitiable prisoners you brought in- are *they* the enemy I must fear? Is that what you say? *You* are the enemy, Colonel!!!... *You* 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 Barbarians here! (125)

Joll tortures the natives in pursuit of the ‘truth’ (5). The narrator doubts Joll’s methods and asks him how he distinguishes between a truth and a lie. Joll replies:

First I get lies, you see-this is what happens- first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. This is how you get the truth. (5)

Thus, Joll adds his subjective meaning to the confessions of the captives and refines his dichotomy of friend or foe.

The characters also chase after the meaning of codes. The narrator is preoccupied with decoding the hieroglyphics on the wooden boards he has collected. In addition, he is intent on interpreting the scratches on the girl he rescued: 'It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on the girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her' (33). He perseveres even in the face of the girl's refusal to answer his questions about her injuries. Like Joll, the magistrate is not satisfied until all ambiguities are resolved.

2. Chasing-but-not-Chasing

Joll's relentless chasing ultimately leads him to blankness. Joll leads a military unit to venture beyond the Empire's frontier in pursuit of the nomads with the aim of subduing them. However, they lose their way in the desert, and the unit suffers annihilation by unidentifiable attackers. A survivor reveals the situation: We were not beaten- they led us out into the desert and then they vanished! (...) They- the Barbarians! They lured us on and on, we could never catch them (161). As the yearning to 'catch' the targets grows, so does the difficulty of capturing them.

Perversely, the soldiers become the targets of their quarries. Such merciless pursuits as exhibited by Joll and the Empire have the effect of inverting the relationship between the chaser and the chased.

Similarly, the narrator is lost while deciphering the barbarian girl's wounds and words. After sheltering the girl, he nightly roves a white field in his dreams. The nightmare causes him to confront blankness as he thinks about the girl, as evidenced by the following words: 'no interior, only a surface' (46) and 'There is only a blankness, and desolation that there has to be such blankness' (79). This blankness is akin to the one Joll encounters when he chases the barbariansⁱⁱ.

Chasing ambiguities invites reflection and reciprocation between the two sides of a conflict, but the opposition never dissolves. The solution then lies in chasing-but-not-chasing. The magistrate decided to return the girl to the nomads. While pursuing them, he gets lost in the desert and cannot find them. Suddenly, they appear in the distance. However, when he chases them, he finds himself unable to approach them no matter how much he speeds up. The narrator remarks:

We push on towards them for half an hour before we realize that we are getting no closer. As we move they move too. 'They are ignoring us,' I think, and consider lighting a fire. But when I call a halt the three specks seem to halt too; when we resume our march they begin to move. (74)

At last, he notes: 'We understand now that while they are following us they are also leading us' (76). He decides, 'We must simply ignore them' (75). Thus, he ignores them even as he chases them. This scene illustrates waiting, in the form of chasing-but-not-chasing. The narra-

tor tries to stay in a neutral area between chasing and waiting. Suddenly, the nomads appear: ‘Then, climbing a ridge, coaxing the horses, straining and pushing and hauling, we are all of a sudden upon them’ (76).

Waiting-but-not-waiting is the antipode of chasing-but-not-chasing. It implies not staying at one point but rather floating and drifting between two opposite sides. This prevents the freezing of the frame of the dichotomy; it thwarts fixation on the same relation and keeps one floating between two opposite sides. That is, ‘waiting’.

3. Present Tense

The theme of *Waiting* relates to images of time. The present tense is used throughout the novelⁱⁱⁱ. Therefore, I now discuss the relationships between Coetzee’s tense usage and the concept of waiting. The very nature of the present tense is important: this tense lies between the past and future tenses as a neutral tense.

As mentioned above, the magistrate interprets unknown words and injuries. These marks provide important data about the past^{iv}. He is interested not only in traces of past events but also in all that is indicative of the past of humankind, for example, classical music, literature, and the remains of ancient buildings. Moreover, he hopes to spend the remainder of his life peacefully; he is not interested in the future. An attack on his town by barbarians is a trivial matter for him. The narrator lives in the past, wants to change back to the past, and even his thoughts are based on the past. He orders soldiers to cleanse the room used for interrogations: “‘I want everything cleaned up! Soap and water! I want everything as it was before!’” (26). He also wishes to restore the nomad’s lives:

I order that the prisoners be fed, that the doctor be called in to do what he can, that the barracks return to begin a barracks, that arrangements be made to restore the prisoners to their former lives as soon as possible. (26)

He challenges the soldiers to mend the broken relationship with the nomads by sending the girl back to them, ‘(t)o repair some of the damage wrought by the forays of the Third Bureau’ (62). Further, he reburies the wooden boards as he had found them^{vi}.

Joll, unlike the magistrate, fears future risks for the Empire:

He (Joll) tracks the enemies of Empire through the boundless desert, sword unsheathed to cut down Barbarian after Barbarian until at last he finds and slays the one whose destiny it should be (or if not his then his son’s or unborn grandson’s) to climb the bronze gateway to the Summer Palace.... (146)

The Empire’s ‘new men’, including Joll, are only interested in the future. This is in contrast to the narrator, who is only concerned with ‘the old story’: ‘The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble’ (26). The

Empire's reliance on the future is illustrated by the fact that without any evidence, it encourages the following rumour:

Last year stories began to reach us from the capital of unrest among the Barbarians... The Barbarian tribes were arming, the rumor went; the Empire should take precautionary measures, for there would certainly be war. (9)

Moreover, an unknown offender causes trouble. Someone attacks the town residents on the edge of town (4,134). The narrator, however, insists that these crimes are not committed by the nomads and argues that the barbarians are not hostile. He avers that no one has seen the barbarians or witnessed any attacks by them with the following statements: 'Show me a Barbarian army and I will believe' (9) and 'How can I believe that the night is full of the flitting shadows of Barbarians?' (145). On the other hand, Joll claims that the very reason they struck the town now was that it had thus far remained unassailed.

It is interesting to consider whether the difference of opinion between the magistrate and Joll concerning the barbarians arises only from their respective emphasis on the past and future. Certainly, time influences the two characters in very different ways. However, their differences do not seem to be based on their time frame only. Joll wishes to attack the nomads, while the narrators denies their hostility altogether; Joll cruelly tortures the nomads, whereas the magistrate takes one of them into his care. They seem, by nature, to be antagonistic.

There is, however, one important point. Both of them are a part of the Empire: Joll as an advance guard of the Empire and the narrator as one of its magistrates. They both adhere to the notion of the Empire's colonialism. Thus, despite their antipathy, they team up in the course of the nomads' torture. For instance, when the narrator talks gently to the boy who lost his uncle to Joll's torture, he realizes that he is, in fact, assisting the Empire:

'Listen: you must tell the officer the truth. That is all he wants to hear from you—the truth. Once he is sure you are telling the truth he will not hurt you. (...) You must answer every question he asks you truthfully. If there is pain, do not lose heart.' (...) I cannot pretend to be any better than a mother comforting a child between his father's spells of wrath. It has not escaped me that an interrogator can wear two masks, speak with two voices, one harsh, one seductive. (8)

Even as they each look separately to the past or future, they carry out the same purpose as a team through 'two masks and two voices'. There exists a two-sidedness to the Empire, and Joll and the magistrate each belong to a diametric side. The narrator comprehends that they represent the two faces of the Empire and thereby support its domination:

For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of Imperial rule, no more, no less. (148-49)

Therefore, the magistrate doubts his behaviour. He is a member of the Empire, after all, and could never be a nomad. If he floats in the neutral position, he becomes a wanderer, an unattached person on the borderline of the Empire and the nomads, such as the town he loves^{vii}.

Therefore, as long as he lives in the world, he cannot be neutral. This is supported by the fact that he never seems to be able to find a completely neutral place: he is described as both noncommittal and contradictory. He chases the target while ignoring that he is being chased himself (75). While he looks at himself as the girl's father (88), he sometime acts as her mother (8). He is a 'hunter' but he is 'hunted' (103) by the soldiers. He cannot distinguish between reality and dreams (103), and he insists on the 'miracle of creation' even as he kills many animals and insects (118). Although not afraid of death, he wishes to live (130). Despite being a member of the Empire, he protects barbarians. And though he reviles himself for recording the frontier's history (169), he continues to write the story. The reason for the contradictions is his status of waiting-but-not-waiting.

4. Escape from Time

We now return to the theme of time. History is the interpretation of past events from the perspective of the present. In addition, the future is predicted on the basis of the past. While digging up the ruins, the magistrate ruminates on the time strata that constitute history:

Perhaps ten feet below the floor lie the ruins of another fort, razed by the Barbarians, people with the bones of folk who thought they would find safety behind high walls. Perhaps when I stand on the floor of courthouse, if that is what it is, I stand over the head of a magistrate like myself, another grey-haired servant of Empire who fell in the arena of his authority, face to face at last with the Barbarian. (16)

The past piles up and becomes history. However, the Empire fabricates its history by arbitrarily interpreting the past:

Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. (146)

The 'time of rise and fall'—a fixed notion of history repeating itself in the same rhythm, maintaining the *status quo*—is fabricated by the Empire and inserted into natural time. The Empire's 'time of beginning and ending', times of prosperity and ruin, is fabricated history. Thus, the Empire's past and future are both fabricated. The magistrate notices this.

I think: 'I wanted to live outside the history. I wanted to live outside the history that the Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the Barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them... I think: 'I have lived through an eventful year, yet understand no more of it than a babe in arms'. (169)

This represents the magistrate's attempts to escape from the time created by the Empire. He wishes to live in natural time, with the cycle of the four seasons, and not in the Empire's 'jagged' time of repeated rises and falls, beginnings and endings. In other words, he places himself between two fluid relationships, following the rule of waiting, to escape from the Empire's version of history; he hopes to erase the notion of past and future, and, instead, concentrate on the present as endless and seamless time. This situation is described as swimming in silent and motionless time that is stiller than water:

I lie on the bare mattress and concentrate on bringing into life the image of myself as a swimmer swimming with even, untiring strokes through the medium of time, a medium more inert than water, without ripples, pervasive, colorless, odorless, dry as paper. (157)

Thus, the magistrate is floating in the present without the obstructions of the past and future. It is akin to walking at random in time without beginning and ending:

This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost this way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere. (170)

Imaginary binary opposition based on history as a narrative divides the participants into 'us' and 'others'. This serves to enclose 'us' in the same fold and exclude the others. This is the same as chasing others: similar to Joll's and the narrator's chasing of the barbarians and codes, it creates two categories: the known/unknown and us/others. The chasings are essentially a dichotomy. Coetzee's answer of waiting-but-not-waiting is always to recognize the contradictions inherent in the anatomy of a conflict. It is not in the nature of humans to be objective and consistent. Thus, the differences between natural history and fabricated history as well as the inherent contradictions need to be recognized by imbuing the concept of waiting. The space of time between natural and artificial time is a zone of instability; this is the same as the zone of us/others. Its condition hangs in the balance. This philosophical stance breaks the dichotomy. The ultimate solution is to cease thinking of history solely in terms of beginning and end, prosperity and ruin. With this, humans may learn to live in the natural present, just as the magistrate does.

Note

- i Urquhart states that Coetzee describes an 'African Eden' (125)—a harmony between black and white—in South Africa.
- ii Earlier critics also allude to the blankness in *Waiting*, for example, Olsen.
- iii DelConte mentions that the present tense integrates the readers (440).
- iv The scratches and wooden boards are important for reading the past. The wooden boards that the narrator dug up are symbolic. He coated them with oil and wrapped them in white sheets. In the novel, past persons and things are also scratched and buried: a nomad killed by Joll is covered with white sheets and buried. And his nephew is almost covered with the white sheets along with his uncle. Like the wooden boards, the narrator applies oil to the injured girl and comes up to bury her. The Empire also considers burying its captives.

Moreover, the narrator is tortured and injured when Joll accuses him of treason, and, like the boards, he erodes in jail. Plus, according to rumor spread by the Empire, government officials are killed and buried by unknown enemies. Thus, past events, the girl's scratches, and the burials are correlated. They show that the narrator's attempts to interpret the wounds of the girl and the hieroglyphics on the boards are the same as the attempts to interpret the past.

- v Other critics also emphasize the magistrate's desire for recovery, for example, Jolly.
- vi Critics contend that the narrator is interested in the space of time. Dovey focuses on this point on the basis of Coetzee's allegory: '(I)n Coetzee's novels allegory allows, not for an ideal time, but for a space between past and futures, taking into account both history as discourse and history as event' (140). If the act of waiting is fixed both physically and ideologically, this invites another dichotomy. Neutrality needs relationships with others because of its relativity. To wait is to float permanently between two sides. On the one hand, unless settled in the neutral zone and on the border between the two opposite sides, waiting never happens. On the other hand, this induces fluency, relativity, and fluctuation. It is in the nature of waiting to intentionally and consciously contain contradictions and to continually approach the neutral and unstable zone.
- vii The escape from time is one of Coetzee's enduring themes. As Gitzen mentions, in *Life & Time of Michael K* (1983)—the novel that followed *Waiting*—Michael, the protagonist, tries to escape from a confused South Africa by avoiding the time of human society and living in natural time.

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