

# **Cosmic, Imperial, and Fluxless Time in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians***

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The Tale, if it is any good, has to deal with Being in flux, however differentiated the insights into the complex structures of reality may be.

Eric Voegelin in a letter to Robert Heilman, August 13, 1964

Time, then, and the heaven came into being at the same instant in order that, having been created together, if ever there was to be a dissolver of them, they might be dissolved together. It was framed after the pattern of the eternal nature-- that it might resemble this as far as was possible, for the pattern exists from eternity, and the created heaven has been and is and will be in all time. Such was the mind and thought of God in the creation of time.

Plato, *Timaeus*, 37b

I'd like to begin this exploration of Eric Voegelin's analytical phrase "Time of the Tale" by focusing on historiogenetic symbolization. We will recall from Voegelin's discussion of historiogenesis in *The Ecumenic Age* and elsewhere that historiogenesis is a speculation on the origins of society whereby the present order is "extrapolated to its absolute point of origin in divine-cosmic events," and then gradually unfolds in consequence of a meaningful series of events carefully arranged on a "timeless line of time that comes to its end in the everlasting

meaning of the author's present" Requisite to this construction are (1) sufficient duration in time to render credible the "extrapolation toward an absolute point of origin" and (2) a sense of "irreversible time where opportunities are lost forever and defeat is final." Since it prompts distrust of "rituals of foundation and renewal," the "anxiety aroused by the vicissitudes of imperial order" must be considered one of the immediate motivations for historiogenetic speculation.<sup>1</sup> [1] J. M. Coetzee's 1980 novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, is surely a tale of imperial vicissitudes and anxiety. But the perspectives of its first-person narrator may be said to be anti-historiogenetic; there are no origins, and, accordingly, no fulfillment in the present. This essay will explore other symbolizations that the anxiety motivates, particularly with reference to the understanding of time and the tale, if not the Time of the Tale.

Coetzee's narrator, never identified by name, is the magistrate of an imperial settlement in "an indeterminate time and place," as Dick Penner has observed, "sometime after the invention of eyeglasses and gunpowder."<sup>2</sup> [2] Three existential puzzles attend his twilight years as a civil servant on the frontier of the Empire. The first is what to do with the knowledge he acquires by observing too closely the methods of the Third Bureau of the Civil Guard, which, allegedly under threat from barbarians, has emergency powers he must acknowledge if not respect. The second is how to understand his own relationship both to the military authority (embodied in Colonel Joll) that has supplanted his own and to the Empire behind it. The third puzzle is how to

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1 [1] Eric Voegelin, *The Ecumenic Age*, Vol. IV of *Order and History*, Volume 17 in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited with an introduction by Michael Franz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000)113-115.

2 [2] Dick Penner, *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J. M. Coetzee* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989) 76.

animate--and authenticate--an admittedly antiquarian love of history: how to tell a true story of place and time.<sup>3</sup> [3] Although he clearly recognizes the heart of darkness as "the submerged mind of Empire," he cannot tell this truth as an historian.<sup>4</sup> [4] When he attempts to write a "record of settlement to be left for posterity" he finds himself, paradoxically, to be an historian of the idyll, a prelapsarian paradise.<sup>5</sup> [5] He can only write, nostalgically, of the general desire to maintain the charm of the frontier oasis at any cost, "had we only known what." (WB 154) But in fact the cost is constantly before him: it is imperial vigilance manifested in the creation and objectification of an enemy, the taking of prisoners, and the excavation of "truth" through torture.<sup>6</sup> [6] When the Magistrate himself becomes a victim of the Third Bureau, he is denied justice under law: military authorities, under no obligation to permit him a trial, stage a mock execution instead. The lawless military procedures of the Third Bureau--directed both against

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3 [3] The Magistrate's diversions include the excavation of, and attempt to decipher, artifacts from a previous settlement in the desert.

4 [4] This allusion has been noted by many critics and calls for a few remarks on Coetzee's intellectual biography. Coetzee is a scholar-teacher as well as a novelist. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Texas, writing a dissertation on Beckett. Numerous critics have reported on Coetzee's ubiquitous intertextuality. See, for example, Stephen Watson, "Colonialism and the Novels of J. M. Coetzee," in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, with a preface by Nadine Gordimer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) 24, and Patricia Merivale, "Audible Palimpsests: Coetzee's Kafka," *Critical Perspectives*, 152-167. David Attwell stresses the "awkward consequences" of being known as a "learned author," but praises the resultant ability to "bring into creative tension the grandeur and skepticism of nineteenth-century philosophy, and the formal instability and inventiveness of the eighteenth-century novel." David Attwell, "Afterword," *Critical Perspectives* 213; 215.

5 [5] J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980; New York: Penguin Books, 1982) 154; hereafter cited in the text as WB.

6 [6] Critics often point to the barbarians as an invention. See, for example, Judie Newman, "Intertextuality, Power and Danger: *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a Dirty Story," in *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Sue Kossew (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998) 128.

those arbitrarily identified as barbarians and against the Magistrate--compel him to a meditative interrogation of his own. By what rites can a torturer recover his humanity? What is truth? What is justice? As a clash of this individual life in time with the invented time of empire, the interrogation gradually opens to the Magistrate's observation that "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." (WB 135) His efforts as well to tell the story of this imperial periphery, partly as a revolt against his complicity in imperial atrocities, falters on his own imperial acquiescence and, accordingly, on the ease with which he is objectified as a human specimen whose only wish is "to be fat again." (WB 129)

The term Tale/tale appears often in Voegelin's discussions of literature, generally with tale as a reference to myth and cosmological styles of truth. At one level, one could argue that Voegelin's Time of the Tale is something the storyteller must enter in order successfully to communicate an intuition of origin from a divine ground, to tell a tale that is "any good." More specifically, it is the time of the cosmogonic myth that "expresses the experience of a lasting cosmos permeated by the divine mystery of its existence and articulates the truth of a cosmos that is not altogether of this world." The Time of the Tale is, thus, a "time out of time:"

The reality of things, it appears, cannot be fully understood in terms of the world and its time; for the things are circumfused by an ambience of mystery that can be understood only in terms of the Myth. Since the divine Beginning, though experienced as real, is not an event in the time of the world, the imaginative creation story is the symbolism necessary for its expression. Moreover, the adequacy of the symbolism to the experience points to the miracle of a mythical imagination that can produce the adequate Tale. We

are touching on the problem of an imagination and a language that is itself perhaps not altogether of this world.<sup>7</sup> [7]

In the medium of the tale, Voegelin seems to suggest, a reciprocity exists between a symbolism in its adequacy and the experience that issues in the adequate tale, itself analogous to the line that runs from time to eternity expressed in the divine pull and the human response. "The Tale, if it is any good," wrote Voegelin to Robert Heilman in August, 1964, "has to deal with Being in flux." <sup>8</sup> [8] With his postscript to the letter on Henry James's *Turn of the Screw* in January of 1970, Voegelin was ready to flesh out the critical problems of imputing adequacy and goodness or their opposites to a work of fiction. The specific problem at hand was the "dustiness" encountered in symbolist works, which Voegelin traced, not to James's failure, but to "certain deformation of personal and social reality that was experienced as such by artists at the turn of the century and expressed by means of symbolistic art." Symbolism produced "the imagery of a self-creative, self-realizing, self-expressing, self-ordering, and self-saving ego that is thrown into, and confronted with, an immanently closed world."<sup>9</sup> [9]

Because he casts himself as a would-be author, I would like to suggest that the Magistrate of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* presents a case of the symbolistic dustiness the discovery of which clarified Voegelin's thinking on the adequacy of the tale to the experience.

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<sup>7</sup> [7] Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, trans. M. J. Hanak, Vol. 6 in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 175.

<sup>8</sup> [8] Charles Embry, ed., *Robert B. Heilman and Eric Voegelin: A Friendship in Letters 1944-1984* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004) 223.

<sup>9</sup> [9] Eric Voegelin, "On Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*," in *Published Essays 1966-1985*, Volume 12 in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990) 151.

The Magistrate can easily write a letter to the provincial governor explaining his approaching "brief visit to the barbarians." But he is less certain about another document whereby he will leave "A testament? A memoir? A confession? A history of thirty years on the frontier?": "All that day I sit in a trance at my desk staring at the empty white paper, waiting for words to come. A second day passes in the same way. On the third day I surrender, put the paper back in the drawer, and make preparations to leave." (WB 57-58).

Early in the story, the Magistrate seeks to distinguish himself from the methods and techniques of Empire with a faint gentility that shames him: his first farewell to Colonel Joll reminds him that "he and I have managed to behave towards each other like civilized people. All my life I have believed in civilized behaviour; on this occasion, however, I cannot deny it, the memory leaves me sick with myself." (WB 24)<sup>10</sup> [10] After freeing Joll's prisoners, "a hopeless little knot [of] nomads and fisherfolk together, sick, famished, damaged, terrified," the Magistrate indulges himself in a disingenuous vision: "It would be best," he muses,

if this obscure chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these ugly people were obliterated from the face of the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. It would cost little to march them out into the desert (having put a meal in them first, perhaps, to make the march possible), to have them dig, with their last strength, a pit large enough for all of them to lie in (or even to dig it for them!), and, leaving them buried there forever and

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<sup>10</sup> [10] The Magistrate "reports" in the first person present: an autodiegetic narrative that foregrounds the event of its telling, a metafictional device. As Teresa Dovey has observed, the entire narrative should be "enclosed, as it were, by quotation marks at the beginning and end," in citation and subversion of the liberal humanist point of view. This narrative style also ironizes the Magistrate's failure ultimately to cast his account of "waiting for barbarians" as a tale in writing. Teresa Dovey, "Waiting for the Barbarians: Allegory of Allegories," in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, with a preface by Nadine Gordimer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996)141.

forever, to come back to the walled town full of new intentions, new resolutions. (WB 24)

The horror of this magic operation<sup>11</sup> [11] inspires only the thought that "that will not be my way. . . . 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." (WB 24-25)

The magistrate's official status on the frontier has to do with the observance of and transgression against law: he embodies practical justice. When the Third Bureau arrives, his role becomes ambiguous and then irrelevant due to the "emergency" of the barbarian threat. But because Colonel Joll's first departure briefly restores the rule of law under the Magistrate's jurisdiction, it will be useful at this point to examine the Magistrate's views on what "the old story" constitutes. Notably, the "old story" only faintly, perhaps perfunctorily, lays claim to a life in tension toward a divine ground. There are, for example, both embodied and metaphysical references to justice in the magistrate's actions and words. At first the Magistrate orders only that the prisoners let to his jurisdiction by the departure of Colonel Joll be fed, doctored, and restored "to their former lives as soon as possible, as far as possible." (WB 25) Later, after the Magistrate himself has become a victim of the Third Bureau, he recalls the justice he administered to a deserter who had "wanted to see his mother and his sisters again:" "◆We cannot do just as we wish,' I lectured him. ◆We are all subject to the law, which is greater than any of us":

You think you know what is just and what is not. I understand. We all think we know." I had no doubt myself, then, that at each moment each one of us, man, woman, child,

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<sup>11</sup> [11] See "Wisdom and the Magic of the Extreme: A Meditation," for a configuration of activist dreaming as magic, "the terror at the core of the magic dream," and its ultimate failure. Eric Voegelin, *Published Essays 1966-1985*, Vol. 12 in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990) 325.

perhaps even the poor horse turning the mill-wheel, knew what was just: all creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice, "But we live in a world of laws," I said to my poor prisoner, "A world of the second-best. There is nothing we can do about that. We are fallen creatures. All we can do is to uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice to fade." (WB 138-9)

The speech produces, characteristically, "an uneasy shame." But the Magistrate's "old story" endures "until one day events overtook me." (WB 139) At that point he will observe that "a body ♦ can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well." (WB 115) It is worth noting, however, that before the memory of justice is overcome by the imperatives of the body, the Magistrate's convictions suggest the imputation of a ground to existence, rooted in the idea of a higher order ruptured by the "fallen creatures." Even so, the Magistrate impresses the reader as an emblem of "existence when it has become shadowy through the loss of its ground."<sup>12</sup> [12]

As he lives the old story in uneasy observation of the "new men of Empire," he invokes, nevertheless, symbols of salvation and then creation as the unseen evidence of a divinely ordered life. When the Third Bureau identifies him as an enemy of Empire, and he is imprisoned, the Magistrate joyfully imagines himself freed, even saved: "I am aware of the source of my elation," he thinks,

my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man. Who would not smile? But what a dangerous joy! It should not be so easy to attain salvation. And is there any principle behind my opposition? Have I not simply been provoked into a reaction by the sight of one of the new barbarians usurping my desk and pawing my papers? As for this liberty which I am in the process of throwing away, what value does it have to me? Have I truly enjoyed the unbounded freedom of this past year in which more than ever before my life has been mine to make up as I go along? . . . from the oppression of such freedom who would not

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12 [12] Eric Voegelin, "Anxiety and Reason," in *What is History and Other Late Unpublished Writings*, Vol. 28 in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited with an introduction by Thomas A. Hollweck and Paul Caringella (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990) 85.



welcome the liberty of confinement? In my opposition there is nothing heroic--let me not for an instant forget that (WB 78).

As the old story is overtaken by the new, he witnesses the systematic torture of prisoners, during which bystanders, even children, are invited to participate until the chalked word "enemy" on the prisoners' backs disappears in a flow of blood and sweat. His most defiant moment, the cry, "You are depraving these people!" brings the wrath of the Colonel on the Magistrate. The Magistrate reacts: "I raise my broken hand to the sky. ♦ Look, . . . we are the great miracle of creation! But from some blows this body cannot repair itself! . . . Look at these men! . . . *Men!*"" But he quickly recovers his ironic posture: "What, after all, do I stand for besides an archaic code of gentlemanly behaviour towards captured foes, and what do I stand against except the new science of degradation that kills people on their knees, confused and disgraced in their own eyes?" (WB 107-108) The Magistrate is well described by Voegelin's "man who contracts himself to a Self." Such a man, writes Voegelin, "can be so much aware of the open world outside that he symbolizes his own state as incarceration. He is not afflicted with blindness for the open cosmos, but deforms its reality while being conscious of deforming it."<sup>13</sup> [13] The "dangerous joy" of an easy salvation reveals the Magistrate's sense of the inadequacy of stories old and new. The telling of a true tale is a path cluttered with obstacles, beyond his reach.

To a considerable degree the obstacles can be linked with the Magistrate's confusion over the meaning of time: idyllic time and time "after;" the time of youth and the time of old age; flow and ebb of sexual desire and arousal; abundance and scarcity; and the time of the round of the seasons and irreversible, linear time. The magistrate wishes above all to identify himself with

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13 [ 13] Ibid., 163.

barbarian time, the time of seasonal cycles. As Voegelin has observed, the historiogenetic association of cyclical time with pagans and linear time with Judaeo-Christian history is itself a symptom of ideological deformation: "it survives, because it carries the ideological overtones of a progress from the cyclical to the linear conception. Cyclical time is more primitive, suitable for pagans like Plato who did not have the benefit of either Revelation or Enlightenment; linear time is more advanced, the true time of history in which God reveals himself to Christians and the ideologists reveal themselves to mankind."<sup>14</sup> [14] The following meditation by the Magistrate amplifies the ideological motivation he observes in the machinations of the Third Bureau to perform the "imaginative conversion of a temporal gain into a possession forever":<sup>15</sup> [15]

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. 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. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. (WB 133)

One way, paradoxically, "to live in history and to plot against history" is "to sublimate the contingency of imperial order in time to the timeless serenity of the cosmic order itself."<sup>16</sup> [16] That is the Magistrate's wish, a feature of the featureless old story. Even imperial time is to a degree aligned with seasonal rhythms: "For the duration of the winter the Empire is safe: beyond the eye's reach, the barbarians too, huddled about their stoves, are gritting their teeth against the cold." (WB 38). But the Third Bureau's Colonel Joll is more a manipulator of time. Having

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<sup>14</sup> [14] <sup>14</sup> Voegelin, *Ecumenic Age* 129.

<sup>15</sup> [15] <sup>15</sup> Ibid., 115

<sup>16</sup> [16] Ibid.

virtually invented the limitless catastrophe posed by the barbarian threat, he also abolishes the time of the seasons, replacing the town's granary with a prison. He eventually persuades the townspeople that soldiers are "all that stands between us and destruction." (WB 131) When his forays into the desert reveal that barbarians are not invented so easily, or rather that they also stubbornly, infuriatingly, invent themselves, he abandons the effort to extinguish "the one whose destiny it should be to climb the bronze gateway to the Summer Palace and topple the globe surmounted by the tiger rampant that symbolizes eternal dominion." (WB 133-134) When it is convenient, he recasts the threat as transitory: "These border troubles are of no significance. In a while they will pass and the frontier will go to sleep for another twenty years." To the magistrate's appeal, "History will bear me out!", the colonel responds, "There will be no history, the affair is too trivial." (WB 114) The Colonel's pragmatic rocking between linear and cyclical time is the necessary historiographic posture of one "doomed to live in history and plot against history." It is his method, using the barbarian threat, and counter to the dictum of Anaximander, to "hypostatize historically passing societies into ultimate subjects of history."<sup>17</sup> [17] The colonel's dismissive "who is going to put you in the history books?" suggests that the magistrate can neither constitute, nor can he tell, a tale of any importance. (WB 114) The Magistrate is neither martyr nor historian.

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<sup>17</sup> [17] Ibid., 232; 231. Coetzee's title *Waiting for the Barbarians* is frequently traced to the 1904 Greek poem by Constantin Cavafy. According to this poem, the loss of barbarians to oppose is also the loss of a way to live: "And now what will become of us without Barbarians?/ They were a kind of solution." Quoted in M. N. du Plessis, "Towards a True Materialism, a review of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in *Critical Essays on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. Sue Kossew (New York: G. K. Hall & Company, 1998) 121. Although Dick Penner has argued that the loss of barbarians is the loss of "the means by which it [a decadent Roman Empire] defined itself as a superior, civilized culture," in Coetzee's *Empire*, the problem to which the barbarians are a solution is the problem of going in and out of existence. Penner, *Countries of the Mind* 76.

Unlike the Colonel, the Magistrate's self-invention as a storyteller falters on a self-conscious failure to locate the predicate of his would-be account. He illustrates the suspense Voegelin has described "between the assumption that history must be the history of something--empires, city-states, nation-states, civilizations, or ecumenic mankind--and the uneasy suspicion that the process of history cannot be predicated on societies that appear and disappear in its course."<sup>18</sup> [18] Even the vicissitudes of his sexual appetites reflect the loss of the tale he must tell. "Not only were there unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story. . . . Desire seemed to bring with it a pathos of distance. . . . sometimes my sex seemed to me another being entirely, a stupid animal living parasitically upon me, swelling and dwindling according to autonomous appetites, anchored to my flesh with claws I could not detach." (WB 45) The association of narrative with intercourse as entities with beginnings, middles, and ends marks the Magistrate's curious relationship with the barbarian girl. "It seems appropriate," he thinks, "that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write." (WB 57-8) He tells her a story of an abortive hunting trip that had left him "the feeling of not living my own life on my own terms." In effect, she responds with the story that he, as the imperial partner, should be inscribing on her: "I do not see. . . . If you want to do something, you do it." (WB 40) In the final words of the novel, earlier dreams of a snowy landscape come to life in the reality of children who build a snowman instead of the snow castle of his dreams: "Like much else nowadays I leave [the scene] feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere." (WB 156) As one critic has suggested, "To think and to think to no end,

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<sup>18</sup> [18] Voegelin, *Ecumenic Age* 231.

no purpose, is the typical fate of Coetzee's characters."19 [19] This persistent loss of direction points also to the old story with which the Magistrate distinguishes himself from Empire.

Virtually all the symbolic complexes of the novel turn on the premise of what Voegelin has referred to as a "variety of times" correlative with reality experienced in the various modes of compactness and differentiation, of existence in truth as well as of existence in a state of alienation and deformation."20 [20] Arguably, the most important of these symbolic complexes is ritual, a phenomenon by which time can be abolished, adjusted, or restored. As he struggles to differentiate himself from Empire, ritual recovery is foremost in the consciousness and conscience of the Magistrate. His own rituals constitute an alternative to the activist dream of a "new start." The first part of the novel is focused on the relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl, whose interrogation by the Third Bureau has left her ankles broken and her vision compromised to the point that she can only see shapes, and then only peripherally. The Magistrate is "a blur" to her. His attempts, using her, to address and atone for the atrocities of Colonel Joll have several facets. He bathes and oils her feet and legs, embracing the broken places and moving beyond them to intimacies that she does not resist but that do not lead at first to intercourse. Instead they lead "outside time" to "dreamless spells" in which he is "overcome

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19 [19]19Watson, "Colonialism" 29; Watson also observes that "all of Coetzee's novels contain passages which express a great longing for history. They are unfailing in their desire for a world of event, for a narrative in which there is direction and purpose, a story which has a beginning and end, in which character has some continuity in time. From this perspective, history is nothing less than God: it promises salvation, a release from the purgatory of personal isolation and political stagnation. . . . At the same time" history is not only a saving God; it is also the great Satan himself. . . . the history that might confer a pardon is also the history that condemns." Watson, "Colonialism" 32.

20 [20] Voegelin, *Ecumenic Age* 129.

with sleep as if poleaxed◆sprawled upon her body." (WB 31) The rituals call, inevitably it would seem, for meditation on his diminished capacity for arousal. He realizes that, beyond healing and atonement, the rituals embody a desire for knowledge: "It has been growing more and more clear to me," he muses, "that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her." (WB 31) Eventually he realizes that together with the interrogations of the Third Bureau, his "year of confused and futile gestures of expiation" have "marked [her] for life as the property of a stranger" and doomed her, even after her return to her people, to a life of the "lugubrious sensual pity that she detected and rejected in me." (WB 135). The magistrate's rituals of healing have continued, not stopped, the tortures whereby Empire plots against history.

In accordance with his insight that his ministrations toward the girl are as much an extension of imperial interrogation and torture as they are rituals of healing, the Magistrate also tries to recover a memory of the girl before she was tortured. These efforts take the form of a recurrent dream about a snowy waste in which he approaches a hooded figure and tries, but fails, to see its face. The desire to see her as she was "before" the torture is amplified by the Magistrate's reflections, not on the death of her father, but on his annihilation *as* a father:

All I see is a figure named *father* that could be the figure of any father who knows a child is being beaten whom he cannot protect. To someone he loves he cannot fulfill his duty. For this he knows he is never forgiven. This knowledge of fathers, this knowledge of condemnation, is more than he can bear. No wonder he wanted to die.

I gave the girl my protection, offering in my equivocal way to be her father. But I came too late, after she had ceased to believe in fathers. . . . Thereafter she was no longer fully human, sister to all of us. Certain sympathies died, certain movements of the heart became no longer possible to her. I too, if I live long enough in this cell◆will be touched with the contagion and turned into a creature that believes in nothing. So I continue to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her. (WB 80-1)

The rituals inevitably detour into attempts to decipher the girl while deciphering himself as well: "with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. Is this how her torturers felt hunting their secret, whatever they thought it was? For the first time I feel a dry pity for them: how natural a mistake to believe that you can burn or tear or hack your way into the secret body of the other!" (WB 43)

In the public sphere of his office, the Magistrate takes the position that rituals are crucial: the bodies of Third Bureau deserters must not be left where they are found, frozen in the desert. "◆They must have the rites,' I say, ◆Besides it is good for the morale of their comrades. They should not think that they too might die in the desert and lie forgotten. What we can do to ease their dread of having to leave this beautiful earth must be done.' It is impossible, even for him, to tell whether he believes in what he is advocating. To himself, he observes, "by insisting on correct treatment of the bones I am trying to show these young men that death is no annihilation, that we survive as filiations in the memory of those we knew. Yet is it truly for their benefit alone that I mount the ceremony?" (WB 54) It is difficult, thus, to determine whether the Magistrate's convictions on this point are exclusively directed toward the recovery of social, in this case military, order. When, as the magistrate journeys to take the girl back to her people, she menstruates, he counters the bad luck her flux will bring to the company: "I go through a brief purification ceremony with the girl (for I have made myself unclean by sleeping in her bed): with a stick I draw a line in the sand, lead her across it, wash her hands and mine, then lead her back across the line into camp." (WB 70)<sup>21</sup> [21] Such rituals are sensible both to the magistrate and

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21 [21] Judie Newman has analyzed *Waiting for the Barbarians* as a "dirty story," using Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger* as a theoretical framework. Judie Newman, "Intertextuality, Power and Danger" 128.

the barbarian girl. "◆You will have to do the same again tomorrow morning,' she murmurs."

(WB 70) On the other hand, she is mystified by, if acquiescent in, the rituals by which the Magistrate seeks to restore her and himself.

The Magistrate's ideas about restorative rituals extend to the guardians of Empire. As the Magistrate learns of Colonel Joll's interrogation methods, he finds himself "too disturbed by his presence to be more than correct in my bearing towards him." He wonders if his sense that the colonel's methods have rendered him "unclean" is only a provincial intuition:

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

By the time the Magistrate himself has been tortured, he is able to pose the question directly to an officer of the Third Bureau:

Do you find it easy to take food afterwards? I have imagined that one would want to wash one's hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial of cleansing, don't you think? Some kind of purging of one's soul too--that is how I have imagined it. Otherwise how would it be possible to return to everyday life--to sit down at table, for instance, and break bread with one's family or one's comrades? (WB 126)

This second reference to cleansing refers beyond the physical act itself to the need for sacerdotal mediation and its meaning: the recovery of the soul. Yet the magistrate's own return to the community after his own arrest, torture, and trial is unmediated, lacking the support that ritual provides: simply, "word gets around," he reflects, "that the old Magistrate has taken his knocks and come through." (WB 126) The suggestion that a man can be invented who would move in



and out of the community without the rites of renewal suggests a rupture in time that has rendered the rituals inadequate, ineffective, or opaque. Similarly, the Magistrate finds his own experiences suggestive of a rupture in time:

It is not that something is in the course of happening to me that happens to some men of a certain age, a downward progress from libertinage to vengeful actions of impotent yearning. . . . I am the same man I always was, but time has broken, something has fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere: this body in my bed, for which I am responsible, or so it seems, otherwise why do I keep it? . . . It seems all one whether I lie down beside her and fall asleep or fold her in a sheet and bury her in the snow. (WB 43)

The relativity of ritual restorations of order intrudes on the Magistrate's consciousness in the course of his own public punishment at the hands of Empire: "if the crowd is not satisfied," he thinks, "the rules are changed. But of what use is it to blame the crowd? A scapegoat is named, a festival is declared, the laws are suspended: who would not flock to see the entertainment? What is it I object to in these spectacles of abasement and suffering and death that our new regime puts on but their lack of decorum?" (WB 120).

But as the Third Bureau departs, ritual recoveries give way to the survival prohibitions of the magistrate's dream life: a dead parrot reveals the presence of "poisoned water": "I must be careful not to drink here. I must not touch my right hand to my mouth." (WB 149) All the rituals, his own and the putative rites of cleansing for torturers, have referenced a return to, or a sustaining of, the community. But they have no cosmogonic anchor.<sup>22</sup> [22] Voegelin presents us

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22 [22] "This type of imputation of a ground, imputation of existence and manner of existence to a ground, one can now more closely formulate as: imputation toward another intracosmic object or action. There is a general experience of the cosmos; everything in *within* the cosmos, including the gods, and if you want to explain anything in the cosmos you can explain it only by telling a story: how it originated from something else in the same cosmos. That is what we might call intracosmic relating of things to their ground, to other things and actions within the cosmos; there is nothing outside the cosmos. Thus *myth* can be defined, I think fairly exactly and there are no exceptions to it, as imputation to other intracosmic things of a ground. It is myth when you

with the sense in which ritual re-enactment and myth are mutually supportive: "Only if joined in the festival will cosmogonic story and ritual together have the function of restoring the order of existence in society; and only the joint phenomenon, together with its restorative function, is "myth" in the fullest sense."<sup>23</sup> [23] According to Voegelin, the tale is a "dead truth" without the ritual.

The magistrate's ritual references and actions are just the opposite. They are rituals unsustained by the myth.

Another important metaphorical constellation relates to sight and sound. I will suggest that like the rituals, it too, is closely linked with the Magistrate's multifarious formulations of time. The Third Bureau's Colonel Joll wears dark glasses, even indoors, an affectation admired and copied by his soldiers. This and the barbarian girl's impaired sight tend to focus the Magistrate's deciphering activities back on himself; both pairs of eyes are a mirror to him.<sup>24</sup> [24] But *Waiting for the Barbarians* focuses often on moments out of time defined by a mutual gaze. A mutual gaze defines the time of waiting: "this year a curtain has fallen along the frontier. From our ramparts we stare out over the wastes. For all we know, keener eyes than ours stare back"

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tell a story of an intracosmic ground. Eric Voegelin, "In Search of the Ground," in *Published Essays 1953-1965*, Vol. 11 of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, edited with an introduction by Ellis Sandoz (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000) 233.

<sup>23</sup> [23] Eric Voegelin, "Anxiety and Reason" 86.

<sup>24</sup> [24] Michael Marais has, persuasively, categorized "the metaphor of the gaze" in Coetzee's novels as "a metaphor which is used to portray not only the imperialist, but also the writing and reading subjects' attempts to master and possess the other," Michael Marais, "The Hermeneutics of Empire: Coetzee's Post-colonial Metafiction," in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, edited by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, with a preface by Nadine Gordimer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) 71.

(38) At his mock execution, he finds himself staring "into the blue eyes of Mandel." (WB 121)

When a waterbuck he is hunting returns his stare through the sights of a rifle, a timeless moment, or a moment of limitless time, compels meditation:

with the buck before me suspended in immobility, there seems to be time for all things, time even to turn my gaze inward and see what it is that has robbed the hunt of its savour: the sense that this has become no longer a morning's hunting but an occasion on which either the proud ram bleeds to death on the ice or the old hunter misses his aim; that for the duration of this frozen moment the stars are locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves but stand for other things." (WB 39-40)

"Time for all things," the suspension of time, stalled time, is for the magistrate a lens through which the meaning of moments should become transparent. But as with the reflective eyes of the Colonel and the girl, he finds himself mirrored. He tells the girl, who counters, "You should not go hunting if you do not enjoy it" (WB 41). Oddly, it is the barbarian girl who must remind him that he hunts for diversion, not for survival. "That is not the meaning of the story," thinks the magistrate, "but what is the use of arguing? I am like an incompetent schoolmaster, fishing about with my maieutic forceps when I ought to be filling her with the truth." (WB 41)

We find also a significant distinction between hearing and sight. When the Third Bureau first appears, the Magistrate does his best to block the sessions of torture from his consciousness by refusing to hear them, first claiming that "my ear is even tuned to the pitch of human pain," but then admitting, rather, that "I stopped my ears to the noises coming from the hut by the granary." (WB 7, 9). When he finally explores the "holy or unholy ground, if there is any difference, preserve of the mysteries of state," he begins with a lantern. (WB 6) At the moment of his mock execution, one of his torturers tells him that he will be flying, a word that "whispers itself somewhere at the edge of my consciousness." "◆He can't hear you,' someone says. ◆He can hear,' says Mandel" (WB 121). The Magistrate's mock execution brings a flashback to an

image of his negotiations with the barbarians at the point of a gun, as he and his fellow travelers reach and cross "the limits of the Empire. It is not a moment to take lightly." (WB 70) The Magistrate recalls: "I watched his lips. At any moment now he will speak: I must listen carefully to capture every syllable, so that later, repeating them to myself, poring over them, I can discover the answer to a question which for the moment has flown like a bird from my recollection" (WB 120). A conflation of sight and sound, the recovered memory reveals also that he cannot even recall the question with which he will interrogate what he has seen and heard.

The mutual gazes underscore the Magistrate's insight that "I wanted to live outside history." (WB 154). An act of listening always makes that impossible. But if sound occurs in time, the gaze can stop time altogether. After the garrison leaves and the town is left nearly deserted by its frightened populace, the old story proves unsustainable. The Magistrate remains, along with others who don't believe in the end of the world and with some who refuse to see that the barbarians have, in effect, defeated the imperial army. He envisions himself as caught in the act, as barbarians arrive to end the time of waiting, of eating fig preserve from the last bottle in the pantry as he loses his head, his expression "a look of hurt and guilty surprise at this irruption of history into the static time of the oasis." (WB 143) In this climate, "life-giving illusions" are important: "Is there any better way to pass these last days than in dreaming of a saviour with a sword who will scatter the enemy hosts and forgive us the errors that have been committed by others in our name and grant us a second chance to build our earthly paradise?" (WB 143) Turning from this magical dream, the Magistrate tries, rather, to activate his own life-giving illusion, "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, colourless, odourless, dry as paper." (WB 143) This is not the old story in which he avoids, rebels against, or

recasts the movement of time.<sup>25</sup> [25] The first illusion echoes the new story of the new men of Empire. In the second, there will be no story old or new; time has become a medium that stands still.

In the wake of this vision the Magistrate experiences one final mutual gaze--"There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it." (WB 155) Teresa Dovey has suggested that this is a trap for the reader, who is sent in dangerous interpretive pursuit of the "something:"

In the Magistrate's comment is implied the promise that what has not been seen or grasped may yet be understood and interpreted. It leads us as readers into the trap of saying what it is that the Magistrate has failed to see; we attempt to understand, to make his narrative meaningful through our own interpretation. The novel thus encourages us to make our own allegorical interpretations, interpretations which are inevitably subject to the same failures as those articulated by the novel itself.<sup>26</sup> [26]

Dovey has argued that *Waiting for the Barbarians* employs allegory both structurally and thematically, first "registering its desire to interpret and resist the coloniser's discourse, and to interpret and give meaning to the history of suffering and oppression of the colonized," while ultimately problematizing that enterprise and leaving the impression of the "difficult, qualified freedoms" that are attributed to Coetzee's novels in general.<sup>27</sup> [27] Dovey's thesis provokes the question of whether one can expose the failures of liberal humanism while still writing in the time of the tale, i.e. observing the necessity of combining human, cosmic, and divine elements

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<sup>25</sup> [25] This vision is forecast by moments of clarity which occur as the Magistrate wades in water outside the walls of the city. See for example WB 132-133.

<sup>26</sup> [26] Dovey, "*Waiting for the Barbarians: Allegory of Allegories*" 148.

<sup>27</sup> [27] Dovey, "*Waiting for the Barbarians: Allegory of Allegories*" 142; Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson, "Introduction," in *Critical Perspectives*, 5.

into one story that is, consequently, adequate to the experience it symbolizes of being in flux.<sup>28</sup>

[28] The Magistrate's revolt against the derailed historiogenetic thinking that created *Empire* from *empire* has issued in a vision of time that is neither cyclical nor linear. The vision abolishes origins and, with that, historiogenetic fulfillment in the present. It does away with the Fall and the Time of the Tale. In fact, in the Magistrate's solution to the anxiety of waiting for barbarians can be glimpsed an escape that abolishes eternity along with its *eikon*. It is a chilling vision of time without flux.

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28 [28] It is tempting to ask whether the Magistrate, whether Coetzee, has achieved the "critical distance to his want" that Voegelin ascribed to Henry James. Voegelin, "On Henry James's *Turn of the Screw*" 164.