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**A CULTURE OF LANGUAGE, A LANGUAGE  
OF CULTURE: NIETZSCHE'S MNEMONICS  
IN J. M. COETZEE'S *WAITING  
FOR THE BARBARIANS***

*Kamil Michta*

IN one of the culminating scenes of J. M. Coetzee's third book, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2004 [1980]), there is a moment when the Magistrate (the narrator and main character of the novel) describes the manner in which the new administrators of the settlement he had once been in charge of showed him—as he calls it—"the meaning of humanity" (126). He recounts that during their "lessons," for this is how he refers to that experience, he was humiliated, brutally tortured and subjected to a great deal of pain and suffering. Paradoxically, therefore, although his oppressors claimed to teach him what it means to be a human, a human in presumably the understanding of the Empire they were serving, they in fact deprived him of almost all of his human dignity. After a few sessions in the torture room he thought himself a beast interested solely in satisfying his hunger, thirst and the need to rest and sleep. He became, as Nietzsche would argue, "a man-animal" (41). The Empire, in effect, while fighting barbarians, allegedly for the sake of "humanity," produced its own barbarians.

The aim of the present paper is to examine J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* from the standpoint of Nietzsche's theory concerning the function of violence in the beginnings of the Western civilisation, voiced by the philosopher in his *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1921 [1887]). More specifically, it will look at the novelist's criticism regarding the use of brute force during the colonial period, when the colonial powers frequently used violence in their self-proclaimed mission to civilise the conquered peoples. Furthermore, while adopting Nietzsche's understanding of violence, especially its role in the formation of early communities, the paper will argue that, in light of Coetzee's novel, the empire's brutality, aimed at those who

opposed its rule, can be perceived as a kind of language by means of which the imperial authorities communicated and eventually forced through their political objectives. The paper will eventually conclude that the West's self-conferred mission to civilise the colonised, while frequently serving as an excuse for their brutality, was in fact aimed at legitimising the imperial authority's *status quo* within its own state structures.

In *On the Genealogy of Morals*, especially in its second treatise, "'Guilt,' 'Bad Conscience,' and the Like," Friedrich Nietzsche argues that before the formation of first collectively organised societies the man was "forgetful," that is, as he puts it, he had no memory and, because of this, was "incalculable, undisciplined, not uniform and not necessitated" (Nietzsche 1887, 41) by anything. Surely enough, therefore, he was ignorant of social codes, ethic norms and moral sanctions (1887, 42). What is more, he could not promise. This meant, in turn, that although he could not be held responsible for failing to fulfil his commitments, he could not expect anybody else to keep their promises, either (1887, 41). For these reasons, the "man-animal," for this is how Nietzsche refers to the primitive, uncivilised, and still pre-social human being, must have found it extremely difficult, and dangerous, to co-operate, trade and deal with the others of his lot (1887, 46–48).

Therefore, in order to be able to reach that level of collective stability which would allow people to trust each other, and to call to account those who would infringe upon that trust, man had to acquire for himself memory. It was a necessary requirement because, as Nietzsche claims, only with memory could conscience, sense of civic responsibility and social obedience be developed (1887, 43). However, the philosopher further remarks, the process of evolving that faculty was extremely traumatic. Not only did it require ample time and much effort, but it also involved a great deal of sacrifice, anguish and prolonged misery. Accordingly, Nietzsche writes, "when man thinks it necessary to make for himself a memory, he never accomplishes it without blood, tortures and sacrifice" (1887, 45). The means to memory, then, and, by extension, to rationally organised societies, whose functioning would be based on the ideas of human dignity, pity and compassion, seem to have been surprisingly cruel, ruthless, even barbaric.

The question is whether there is any reason why the beginnings of human memory were thus turbulent. Again, the answer can be found in Nietzsche's work. One can read in it, "perhaps there is nothing more awful and sinister in the early history of man than his system of mnemonics," (1887, 45) which the philosopher explains by arguing that man's memory originated in a feeling of pain so strong, so profound and so traumatic that the suffering it caused could never be forgotten. He states, therefore, "something [must be] burnt in so as to remain in [man's] memory," and then adds, "only that which never stops hurting remains in his memory" (1887, 45). In other words, Nietzsche's argument amounts to the assertion that human memory was founded on intense suffering. Ever since man experienced the first pain, ever since he remembered the first horror of suffering, he became "calculable, disciplined, uniform and necessitated" (1887, 42). In effect, although memory made him able "to distinguish between necessitated and accidental phenomena, to think causally, [and], like a man entering a promise, [to] guarantee himself as a future," in its origin memory was a faculty - or rather, a tool - of oppression. It was an inner power that kept him within the bounds of centrally ruled collective societies (1887, 41-42).

From the perspective of Nietzsche's philosophy, then, violence served as a sort of primeval language which, in the days when shared values were scarce and commonly recognised ways of communication were practically non-existent, everyone would infallibly understand. Violence, in this respect, could be seen as a mnemonic tool, that is, a way to circulate, convey and eventually teach social and cultural norms to those who would subsequently evolve into civilised societies. It was through violence, in other words, that people learnt the principles by means of which they were able to establish rationally governed societies that would be based on mutual trust, civic responsibility, shared norms, common rites as well as common fears. For Nietzsche, then, in addition to being the founding resort of memory, violence seemed also to have served the role of the first widely-recognised means of communication.

It appears that in *Waiting for the Barbarians* J. M. Coetzee adopts some of the above-mentioned ideas in order to explain how he understands the sources of the imperial powers'

recourse to brute force in their dealings with the peoples they had colonised. However, before one proceeds to a more detailed study of J. M. Coetzee's philosophical inspirations, it might be worthwhile to concentrate on his most probable literary inspiration for the novel. One of the first writers that openly criticised the policy of imperialism was Joseph Conrad who in his *Heart of Darkness* (1996 [1899]) very crudely and tellingly depicted the cruelty, ruthlessness and greed that the imperial states exercised in their overseas possessions. Unlike Conrad, however, instead of merely showing the presence of violence, J. M. Coetzee placed particular emphasis on its sources, on those who reach for it as well as on those who passively witness it. In other words, whereas Conrad solely pointed at "the dark chamber of torture," J. M. Coetzee, with the help of Nietzschean theory, tried to probe into the chamber's interior.

The novel begins when Joll arrives to a certain border settlement, which is used as a military outpost of some unspecified empire, in order "to find out the truth" (Coetzee 2004, 3) about the rumours that the neighbouring barbarians, some elusive nomadic people, are preparing for a war. The Magistrate, who is in charge of the outpost, at first welcomes him and then allows him to conduct his investigation. However, he soon finds out that the hearings that the visitor conducts with the barbarian captives are in fact sessions of intense torture and that the people whom he interrogates are in all probability innocent (they are generally primitive nomads and fisherfolk who seem too dispersed to amass any kind of army). Struck by apparent injustice, as well as by Joll's cruelty, the Magistrate decides to intervene. He comforts the prisoners, he tries to ease their torment, he even attempts to persuade their oppressor to abandon further investigations. His efforts are to no avail, however, for Joll is implacable and proceeds with his hearings with even more intensity. Violence, whose scope and escalation reminds of that from Conrad's novel, prevails in the fort.

When the Magistrate enquires Joll about why he is so brutal and how he knows that his interviewee has spoken the truth, he replies that there is a specific tone of voice when people speak the truth and that the most efficient way to make them speak that tone is through torture. Intense pain, then, the

warden seems to suggest, makes people sincere. At a closer look, nevertheless, this is only partly true. It rather seems that violence and ensuing suffering make people obedient to their oppressor. If a torturer, such as Joll, wants something, at the point when the oppressed realise that they can lose their lives by persisting in not satisfying that want, they will most probably obey and fulfil the torturer's demands. Consequently, what torture forces people to is obedience. And it is through obedience that they are made predictable, that is, to use Nietzsche's terminology, calculable, necessitated and uniform.

It seems, in effect, that in *Waiting for the Barbarians* violence functions as a means to achieve obedience. It is hence a manner in which those pertaining to power subordinate the masses to their liking. The query that arises at this juncture is what kind of truth Joll is looking for while tormenting the captive barbarians, that is, whether he really wants to uncover some conspiracy or whether he merely invents the barbarian threat and uses it as a pretext to get to power. In order to answer this question, a reference to Nietzsche might be once again helpful. The philosopher claims that those who are not afraid to use violence, whom he identifies with those who are—as he names it—autonomous of any moral “strait-waistcoats” and social sanctions (1887, 42), deserve to be the sovereigns, because only they boast “unbreakable wills,” share “the feeling of human perfection,” and are given “the mastery over circumstance, over nature, [and] over other creatures with shorter wills” (1887, 42). Such a claim entails that in order to achieve their goals, those in power can feel excused to use violence due to their received sense of superiority over common morality (1887, 43). Since, in turn, a mere claim to power can also be seen as a mark of such superiority, which is what J. M. Coetzee appears to argue in the discussed novel, those who aspire to power can as well feel justified to use brute force while reaching their political ends. Accordingly, as the plot of *Waiting for the Barbarians* evolves, it becomes more and more evident that Joll is not interested in finding out any barbarian secrets. On the contrary, what he really seems to be looking for is a pretext to re-assert his claims to power, and for this purpose he most probably himself invents the barbarian threat. Weak, elusive, almost entirely absent barbarians, who lack any means of defence, and who are very unlikely to fight back, a relatively easy and secure

opportunity to manifest one's military talents, to show one's strength, and to exercise one's – to paraphrase Nietzsche once more – unbreakable and unconstrained will.

In this sense, the search for truth in *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be seen, to quote Dominic Head, as an instance of “the base imperial drive for self-assertion” (2007, 49). What this reveals about Joll's motivations is that he actually needs the barbarians, he waits for them, because they are his means of demonstrating his power to the citizens of the Empire he aspires to rule. The way he reaches that goal, that is, how he makes people remember that he is in power, which is via a spectacle of torture, brings to mind Nietzsche's above-presented idea according to which human memory developed in pain, suffering and mutilation. Violence, pain and humiliation, then, acquire in the novel an overtly Nietzschean sense, that is, they function as the language by means of which Joll endeavours to teach his folk, not the barbarians, his idea of social order, as a language through which he communicates his intentions, and also a language, as Nietzsche would claim, which he could be sure everyone understands. In other words, Joll tortures barbarians not to reveal any truth about their alleged military plans but to forge according to his liking the memory of those who observe the torture.

What is more, while investigating the modes and applications in which the language of violence epitomises itself, J. M. Coetzee suggests in his novel that this language, apart from being merely symbolic, can be recorded in a written form, too. Accordingly, what Joll does in the fort, almost from the beginning of his sojourn, is leaving various marks of his presence. He stains the prison walls with the blood of those he tortures. He lets the wounded barbarians into the streets of the settlement so that its inhabitants can look at them. He wishes to build a new facility for interviewing the future captives.

There is also a moment in the plot when the language, and especially its violent aspects that Joll uses to manifest his claims adopts the written form in almost a literal sense. It is the scene following the one in which the expedition led by Joll to the barbarian territory returns to the fort with a group of captive nomads. The prisoners, who were most probably detained at random from among some encountered nomads, are amassed on a small square and brutally tortured in the presence of a

numerous crowd. When the beating pauses, Joll writes in charcoal the word “ENEMY” on the barbarians’ backs and, together with Mandel, his assistant warden, invites the bystanders to join in the beating. Their task is to continue the lashing until blood washes off the inscription from the captives’ skin. After some initial hesitation, they do join in and begin to beat the barbarians together with the soldiers. Admittedly, then, the fact that Joll writes the word “ENEMY” on the prisoners’ backs and also the fact that the citizens of the settlement understand this inscription, and react to it in the way Joll wants them to, both prove that the language of violence is operational at the level of writing. Moreover, the crowd’s reaction not only signifies that they comprehend the message that Joll communicates to them via his cruelty, but it predominantly means that they follow this message, that is, they recognise Joll’s authority.

To erase these marks, that is, to suppress Joll’s mode of expression, to deaden his message, would stand for questioning his authority. Such an act, therefore, especially when it is aimed at an aspiring and determined claimant to power, such as Joll, would undoubtedly involve a substantial risk of exposing oneself to his wrath. This is what actually happens to the Magistrate. When Joll leaves the fort, he resolves to wash the blood stains off the prison walls. He takes care of the stray nomads and commands to close them off people’s sight. He also tries to arrange for their new accommodation; moreover, he decides to return one of them, a certain severely wounded barbarian girl, to their people. Although the Magistrate does not act directly against Joll’s orders, he is still accused of contacts with the enemy and, consequently, of treason. To put it in simpler words, because the Magistrate has endeavoured to undermine Joll’s authority, he is imprisoned and tortured, and, similarly to the barbarians before him, the reason for the incarceration can be interpreted as one more occasion for the visiting warden to exercise his power before gathered crowds. The other reason why the Magistrate is treated so ruthlessly is most probably to be punished for his attempt at erasing the marks of Joll’s violence in the fort. Or, in other words, he has tried to suppress Joll’s manner of communicating his authority, thus, to use Nietzschean terms, he has dared to eradicate the warden from people’s memory, for which he must be penalised,



or, as he himself euphemistically calls it, be given a “lesson in humanity.”

Once more, then, Joll uses the pretext of finding out truth, this time the truth about the Magistrate’s liaison with the nomads, to exercise violence on others, and, in this way, to consolidate his claim to power. The question is whether he succeeds by adopting these means. As already stated, Nietzsche writes that in the primeval societies the ultimate reason for violence was to make man calculable, obedient and uniform, that is, to make him abide by certain imposed rules so that in shared effort he could build societies based on these “virtues” (1887, 48).<sup>1</sup> As for Joll, it seems to be the episode of the public lashing in which the crowd, children included, are drawn into torturing some captives that shows that his methods yield the desired effect. The gathered people appear to adopt his system of values. In accordance to what Nietzsche argues, then, it is violence and the thread of suffering, no matter whether experienced or witnessed, that have re-formed their conscience, morality and sense of decency. Were Joll to stay longer, it is unlikely that they would ever accept the Magistrate and his old rules again.

Since *Waiting for the Barbarians* is often treated as an allegory of modern-time imperialism, it can be claimed that through the novel J. M. Coetzee wishes to voice his criticism against the use of violence as a state’s method to force and legitimise its political ends. Along with Nietzsche, then, he seems to suggest that the means which the imperial powers referred to in their self-proclaimed mission to civilise the colonised lands were brutal, painful and bloody. To some extent, thereby, he reworks what in *Heart of Darkness* Conrad describes as a “robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale, and men going at it blind” (2012, 47). What he adds to Conrad’s vision, however, is the reflection that this “robbery and murder” was motivated not so much by the colonisers’ will to spread the Western civilisation across the world, not to conquer new lands, not even in order to annex them as new entirely incorporated territorial acquisitions, but rather to confirm and reinforce their political *status quo* within their own

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1. Today, the success of these methods is measured by the success of Western civilisation.

states. In other words, by demonstrating their power outside their countries, the authorities of the imperial states aimed at consolidating their power at home, in their home countries, in the motherland. For these reasons, according to what J. M. Coetzee's seems to imply in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the emperor's allegedly open and simple language, "an hundred times made plain," which Rudyard Kipling mentions in one of his poems, was neither plain nor open, for instead it meant violence and was comprehended solely by those in the colonial empires who by subduing the colonised bade for power solely within the imperial structures.

To conclude, although mainly concerned with imperialism, it might still be claimed that the criticism that J. M. Coetzee voices in his third novel extends to the Western civilisation in general. It seems that the Western tendency to impose its standards on others did not finish with imperialism. On the contrary, with a few exceptions, it comprises nearly the whole history of its contacts with other cultures. Even today, the Western civilisation seems to use a very brutal language to communicate itself to the rest of the world: it is a language of imposition, insinuation and manipulation. What is even more important, violence is still a legitimate way to reach many of its ends: so called peace missions, embargoes and death penalty are frequently legalised forms of violence. Abortion, euthanasia (although sometimes considerably well justified), mass production on animal farms, and vivisection as well as experiments on alive animals do not seem much different.

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## ABSTRACT

In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche suggested that the most effective mnemonic, that is, a way to remember something, for example, a new meaning or even a whole language, is when what must be remembered "does not stop hurting". Is then a good teacher an effective torturer? J.M. Coetzee seems to argue in *Waiting for the Barbarians* that pain can sometimes function as a mnemonic tool used to teach others a language by means of which they would be able to know and communicate with their master, to use Nietzschean terms once again, and to "speak the truth". The language of the culture they are installed to, then, is one of violence. The culture of that language, as Coetzee seems to suggest, is that of the Western civilised world. It appears that the language J.M. Coetzee muses about in the novel is the same "open and simple speech" that Kipling referred to when he wrote on the white man's educative burden in the uncivilised world.

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