Waiting for “the black flower of civilization to bloom”

Shades of Modernity in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Mathias Rosenqvist
810329-0196
PK Degree Project Literature
Spring Term, 2008
Supervisor: Claudia Egerer
To realize the relative validity of one's convictions, and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.

-Joseph Schumpeter

Detachment is one of the most striking features about J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* (*WFTB*). The frontier fort, in which the novel is set, is geographically placed on the fringe of a nameless Empire in an unspecified era, thus detached geographically, culturally and historically. The protagonist, the fort’s Magistrate who throughout the novel also remains nameless, is a self-absorbed man with no wife or children, and thus lacks any biological attachments. A common reading of the novel is to reattach the detached, i.e. to place it in a South African context. While this is an interesting, albeit expected, approach, I feel that the stand taken by Barbara Eckstein that “defends Coetzee’s novel as a postmodern fiction misunderstood by its prescriptive reviewers who seek a specific historical setting in the novel” (175) is a far more rewarding one. However, to claim that the novel has values that transcend time and nation boundaries is not entirely unproblematic. In his essay *Colonial Criticism*, Chinua Achebe raises an issue that has important consequences for any reading of *WFTB*. In this essay, Achebe justifies his skepticism towards “universality and other concepts of that sort” (1191). He argues quite persuasively that within a great deal of the European critique of African literature lay residues of a colonial mindset. This mindset includes the notions of Africans as essentially “unfinished Europeans” (1192) and that African literature should rise above its parochial discourse and instead deal with issues that transcend continents and focus on universal matters. It should preferably produce texts in which the names of characters and places easily could be substituted for those of another culture or region without altering the essence of the work. Achebe notes however, that the search for the transcendent, more often
than not, is the search for the occidental and that the process of finding the universal, exclusively, is a one-way-street: “Does it ever occur to these universalists to try out their game of changing names of characters and places in an American novel, say, a Philip Roth or an Updike, and slotting in African names just to see how it works?” (1193) *WFTB*, obviously, is one of those un-African African novels. Coetzee, in discussing this fact argues that any ethnicity that we find in the text, whether it be European or not, is the one that we project unto it: “The Magistrate and the girl could as well be Russian and Kirgiz or Han and Mongol, or Turk and Arab, or Arab and Berber.” (Begam 424) The task of justifying any projections then falls upon the projector, i.e. the reader. This essay relies almost exclusively on European, white, male authors as references, and sees the whole novel as a transition process from modernity to post-modernity – essentially European movements, and thus aspires to prove the existence of these movements and to justify the ethnocentric stance that such a reading entails.

Let us take a closer look at the alleged European tendencies in Coetzee’s novel. These are mainly found in Empire and its fundamentally modern traits. Michel Foucault defines Modernity “in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition” (39). This detachment from tradition, rooted in the Enlightenment, entailed a rejection of superstitious beliefs e.g. kings being endowed with a certain divine right to rule. New movements, based on empiricism, such as positivism, sprung up while older ones, such as bureaucracy and militarism, were transformed to adapt to the new rational ideals. Tendencies towards all three of these movements are found in *WFTB*. The bureaucratic tendency serves as a good point of entry for an in-depth analysis. The Magistrate’s statement that Empire “does not require that its servants love each other, merely that they perform their duties” (6) is a testimony to the bureaucratic favoring of rationality and efficiency. Bureaucracy is by virtue of its collectivized rationality, its strict hierarchy, its standardization and its reduction of subjective expression, analogous to the tendencies of militarism and positivism previously
mentioned. Modern administration, as described by Max Weber, further emphasizes the common traits within these three movements:

   Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal cost – these are raised to the optimum in the strictly bureaucratic administration

   … The ‘objective’ discharge of business primarily means a discharge according to calculable rules and ‘without regard for persons.’

   (Qtd in Bauman 14)

Colonel Joll, the representative of the Third Bureau, sent out to the colony to investigate the rumors of a barbarian uprising, provides us with a good example of these traits in the report that he gives to the Magistrate after his initial interrogations:

   ‘During the course of the interrogation contradictions became apparent in the prisoner’s testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigating officer. A scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were unsuccessful’. (6)

The standardized format through which the murder is justified is written in passive form in all cases except for those actions performed by the prisoner, which includes the heavy falling against the wall. The investigating officer is thus grammatically exempted from responsibility. The prisoner, being a victim of his own irrationality, is to be blamed. The standardized report reduces the event to a cliché. The format governs the recipient’s possibility to react to it. This is similar to what Herbert Marcuse in his book One-Dimensional Man calls technological reasoning. Where the noun “governs the sentence in an authoritarian fashion, and the sentence becomes a sentence to be accepted - it repels demonstration, qualification, negation of its codified and declared meaning. … Hammered and re-hammered into the recipients mind,
[these propositions] produce the effect of enclosing it within the circle of the conditions prescribed by the formula” (88). The standardized bureaucratic language of Empire, in some respects, also resembles Newspeak, the fictional language in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where language has been reinvented “to meet the ideological needs of Ing-Soc” (312): the totalitarian form of socialism that completely dominates society in the novel. The ideological needs are to eliminate the possibility of producing unorthodox thoughts, but also to increase efficiency and clarity. Vocabulary is divided into three different categories. The description of the A vocabulary, presented below, holds true for most of Newspeak in general.

In comparison with the present-day English [the A vocabulary] number was extremely small, while their meanings were far more rigidly defined. All ambiguities and shades of meaning had been purged out of them. So far as it could be achieved, a Newspeak word of this class was simply a staccato sound expressing one clearly understood concept. … It was intended only to express simple, purposive thoughts, usually involving concrete objects or physical actions. (314)

These qualities are not only similar to standardized bureaucratic vernacular but it could also very well serve as a definition of the ideal positivist language. Positivist language, as defined by Mark J Smith in *Social Science in Question*, requires that scientific statements are “seen as pictures or snapshots of the things they refer to, like reflections in a mirror” (Smith 97).

Positivism, which has a substantial influence in *WFTB*, “places an exceptional emphasis upon sensory perception and the role of observation in research as the foundation of knowledge” (Smith 97). Any non-sensory data is disregarded, as it is literally non-sense. The movement was founded by Auguste Comte in the early industrial age, in the wake of Enlightenment, and initially sought to replace the belief system of Roman Catholicism, a system that could not stand up to the empirical and logical scrutiny that the Enlightenment
Comte regarded positivism as the ultimate goal in the predetermined progression of history. Science was to replace religion as the provider of ultimate Truth. The scientists would be the new priests in the pursuit of the universal laws that govern not only the spheres of natural science but also all spheres of human life. This, of course, included the social sciences and humanities. Although these ambitions, which culminated in the creating of a religion of science, have been widely disputed, positivism is still extensively influential. One of these influences is that on linguistics. This requires also that language be adapted to suit the worldview positivism holds, as noted above. Smith observes that the stated aim of the logical positivist approach is “to cleanse scientific knowledge of speculative thinking, for it is not tied in a direct and demonstrable way to experience” (97).

Positivist propensities cannot only be found in the language of Empire but also in its underlying moral structure. Colonel Joll is in many ways a perfect representative of the positivist ideal that Empire would like to project: efficient and emotionally detached. The very first page of the book gives us some vital clues about his character. The introductory conversation between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll revolves around Joll’s sunglasses and hunting. The sunglasses are strongly connected to the concept of blindness. Debra A. Castillo has noted that the blinded colonel is “the emblem of the estrangement of knowledge and law, of law and justice” (79). While this is true, the blinding and reflecting qualities of the glasses are also emblems of Joll’s general lack of subjectivity. The black discs refuse access to the eyes of the owner while they reflect the gaze of the beholder. Joll’s asserts that: “At home everybody wears them” (1), and hints that the qualities of the sunglasses could be shared by the inhabitants of Empire overall. These qualities are analogous to the previously mentioned report that Joll gives to the Magistrate after his first interrogations. In the face of Empire and Joll, one’s own subjectivity and imperfections are reflected back, while they remain impenetrably objective. The emotional detachment and lack of subjectivity are also noticeable
in the hunting anecdote that Joll relates, “about the last great drive he rode in, when thousands of deer, pigs, bears were slain, so many that a mountain of carcases had to be left to rot” (1). The tendency of a rational society to produce irrational amounts of waste as a means to extend its power is also noted by Marcuse: “The power which this society has acquired is daily absolved by its efficacy and productiveness … the destruction of resources and the proliferation of waste demonstrate its opulence and the “high levels of well-being”; “the Community is too well off to care!”” (84-85).

Colonel Joll is at the fort “under emergency powers, that is enough” (1) to justify his taking command and completely setting aside the authority of the Magistrate. The gradual militarization of society that takes place in the novel further imprints the marks that bureaucracy sets. The uniform itself is a means of purging its wearer of subjectivity, to reduce the person to a position in a hierarchical system, but also a way to defer responsibility to the ranking officer. The word of a superior is to be obeyed regardless of consequences. The reduction of subjectivity leads to a unification of perspectives. The individual autonomy is restricted to obeying or disobeying orders. Militarization also imposes the binary oppositions friend/enemy and us/them on the inhabitants. This act of labeling and consequently polarization takes its crudest and most savage form when a group of barbarian prisoners are taken to the square, tied together by a “simple loop of wire [that] runs through the flesh of each man’s hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks” (113). Joll proceeds to take a charcoal stick and inscribe the word ENEMY on the naked backs of the prisoners. The captives are then flogged, not only by the military; the civilians are also encouraged to join. Assimilating the civilians into the military hierarchical structure is an act that affects them in the same way as equipping them with a uniform would have. The individual is stripped of subjectivity and therefore exempt of responsibility. The relabeling of the captives serves another important function – to place them outside of the ‘universe of obligation’. Zygmunt
Bauman describes this social construction, as “designating[ing] the outer limits of the social territory inside which moral questions may be asked with any sense. On the other side of the boundary, moral precepts do not bind, and moral evaluations are meaningless. To render the humanity of victims invisible, one merely needs to evict them from the universe of obligation” (26).

Herbert C Kelman, professor of Social Ethics notes that:

Moral inhibitions against violent atrocities tend to be eroded once three conditions are met, singly or together; the violence is authorized (by official orders coming the legally entitled quarters), actions are routinized (by rule-governed practices and exact specification of roles), and victims of the violence are dehumanized (by ideological definitions and indoctrinations). (Bauman 21)

All three of these conditions have been met in the discussions above. What is more interesting; there is nothing intrinsic in our modern society that prohibits the fulfillment of these conditions. Rather, authorization, routinization and dehumanization are all qualities that characterize it. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School having analyzed European totalitarianism, summarizes this in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* noting that with the arrival of modernity, an era that sought to eliminate superstition and savagery, “mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (xi).

The third instance of positivism is found in a perverted form in the practice of torture since it in a way is an empirical search for the truth. It indeed pertains some of the ritualistic, almost religious character that the early positivism entailed. The standard scientific way of reaching the truth is for the scientist to analyze his/her own sensory data. By analyzing the world objectively and emotionally detached, it is possible to find the universal laws that govern the universe. Subjectivity is purged and emotions disregarded as the scientist puts on
the white coat: the uniform. Torture, though it stays true to most of the basic premises, perverts the empirical search. However, instead of being filtered through his/her own sensory experience, the “scientist”, i.e. the torturer, achieves Truth by imposing sensory data, i.e. pain, upon the subject of investigation. The binary opposition subject/object is hence reversed. The ideal objective position of the empiricist is achieved as truth is produced externally to the empiricist. This objective position is, of course, a false one. It is a mere surface, a darkened, opaque and reflecting surface, but a surface nevertheless. Behind this façade, the shades of objectivity, lies the shielded but inescapable subjectivity of the empiricist.

The Magistrate too, participates in a form of an empirical search for the truth. A barbarian girl, tortured and orphaned by the investigations of Empire, is taken in by the Magistrate. He becomes obsessed with disclosing her story. However, as she is unable to relate it to him, he is forced to abandon his initial hermeneutic approach in favor of a bodily exploration. His ritualistic washing of her feet as a way of empirically getting to truth bears a close resemblance to the torture that has injured them. The Magistrate himself becomes conscious of this. Just before one of the washing ritual he realizes that the “distance between [him]self and her torturers … is negligible” (29). There is one vital difference between the Magistrate and the torturers though. Whereas the torturers seek to perpetuate their power and merely confirm their own notions of Truth, the Magistrate undergoes a process of self-reflection during his encounters with the girl. The eyes of the girl, damaged by the torture she has endured, have become foggy and reflective. The “two black glassy insect eyes” (47) yield “no reciprocal gaze but only [his] doubled image cast back at [him]” (47). Even though this process of self-reflection leads to a point where the Magistrate starts to describe himself in third person, it does not seem to take him any closer to self-understanding. His attempts do instead render him drowsy. He finds himself “overcome with sleep as if poleaxed [and] fall[s] into oblivion” (33).
The final positivist influence in the novel is found within the field of legal philosophy, wherein there exists two distinct traditions: natural law and legal positivism. Dennis Lloyd’s *The Idea of Law* defines natural law as “claim[ing] divine or natural origin” (70), i.e. a law that either is a part of a theological conception of the world, or based on a theory that claims universal validity, e.g. Kant’s categorical imperative. Legal positivism rejects both of these versions of natural law. The first version is disregarded on the basis that it is mere superstition. The second version is disregarded on the basis that it is founded on metaphysical speculation and therefore holds no empirical validity. Legal positivism seeks to separate the study of law into two distinct fields: law as it *is* and law as it *ought* to be. The study of law is thus distinctly separated from the study of ethics. The Magistrate, being the sole judicial authority of the fort colony prior to the arrival of Colonel Joll, is very much a part of the traditional conflict between the two approaches. At one instance he recalls “a young peasant who were brought before [him on trial]” (152) charged with having attempted to desert the army in order to return to his mother and sister. The Magistrate, when justifying his sentence to the convicted, knowing that it will lead to unjust suffering, gives the following reason:

‘We cannot do as we wish.’ … ‘We are all subject to the law, which is greater than us.’ … ‘You think you know what is just and what is not. I understand. We all think we know.’ … ‘But we live in a world of laws’ … ‘a world of the second best.”’(152)

The Magistrate holds the firm belief that everybody, perhaps even animals, know what is just: “all creatures come into the world bringing with them the memory of justice…. We are fallen creatures. All we can do is to uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory of justice to fade” (152). The Magistrate clearly works within a judicial system that is based on legal positivism, but he himself holds strong natural law affiliations. The fact that the
Magistrate is forced to act contrary to his own moral beliefs gives him at that moment only an uneasy shame, nevertheless it foreshadows his falling out with Empire.

The Magistrate, being a natural law judge stuck in a system he considers unjust, constitutes an interesting example of a difficult ethical position. Lloyd expands on this notion:

Take, for instance an anti-Nazi judge in Hitler’s Germany, or an anti-apartheid judge in South Africa. In the natural law view, such a judge, should refuse to apply the unjust laws as being invalid. This, however, both theoretically and in practice, seems to place him in an impossible situation since he would have, so to speak, to declare himself ex cathedra as an authoritative exponent of natural law, and to decide that its decrees compel him to ignore his own municipal laws. (104)

The Magistrate, since he does not rely on any religious doctrine, is unable to create any moral platform from which he can criticize the actions of Empire. There is no place to stand on from which to lever the Imperial monolith, to use an Archimedean metaphor.¹ In fact, when he has gotten to the point that he takes the stand to criticize the Imperial actions, the Magistrate has already lost his cathedra. After an arduous journey to return the barbarian girl to her people, the Magistrate is imprisoned, alleged to have been “treasonously consorting with the enemy” (85). The break with Empire constitutes a vital turning point in the story since it, at this point is possible to notice a reaction against the modernity that Empire represents. The Magistrate’s incredulity towards the values of Empire and his awareness of the difficulties in creating alternatives perfectly encapsulates this postmodern stance.

Jenifer Wenzel notes that the Magistrate is “more [a] poststructural literary critic rather than [a] fictional political figure” (65). Her and other Derridean readings tend to

¹ Archimedes is said to have made the following statement about the remarkable power of the lever:”Give me a place to stand on, and I will move the Earth.”
confine themselves to the literary/linguistic elements of the postmodern Magistrate, while the political aspects, as hinted in Wenzel’s quote, tend to be shunned. A Lyotardian/Foucaldian-poststructural perspective shows that a political reading not necessarily needs to be reduced to ‘mere allegory’ and that such a reading, rather than being in strict opposition to, is intimately connected with the literary/linguistic perspective. Jean-François Lyotard defines the postmodern condition as “incredulity towards meta-narratives” (xxiv). This incredulity includes a realization that meta-narratives, e.g. Truth, Rationality and Justice, are not only narrative but also highly normative and that they are, by virtue of their unitary nature, essentially repressive. It is at this point of incredulity that Lyotard, Foucault and the Magistrate intersect. The fact that the Magistrate becomes subjected to the procedures of the apparatus he himself represents, being a condemner that becomes condemned, seems to invite a Foucauldian reading in itself. Thrown into a cell, being deprived of all human rights except that to food and sleep, being reduced to “a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy” (93), the Magistrate has reasons enough to be incredulous of the meta-narratives of Empire. Ironically, it is the incredulity towards meta-narratives that both enables and disables his resistance.

Let us return to the example of the public torture of the captured nomads. The Magistrate chooses to stand up to the flogging, what he calls “the new science of degradation” (118). He does this by rejecting the labels that Empire chooses to ascribe to its captives. By calling the men instead of enemies he is not only recognizing their, but also, his own subjectivity. Yet, as Castillo observes: “The Magistrate’s partial glimpses of meaning, his tentative visions of correspondence, are always accompanied by self doubt” (80). Even though he is beaten down before being able to argue against the cruelty, he realizes that to dislocate the nomads in the Imperial hierarchy would be merely to restructure it. To reconstruct it would entail relying on a meta-narrative foundation; therefore, he cannot, as he initially intended to, call them miracles of creation.
"A miracle of creation – I pursue the thought but it eludes me like a wisp of smoke. It occurs to me that we crush insects beneath our feet, miracles of creation too, beetles, worms, cockroaches, ants, in their various ways”

(117-118)

The self-reflection that opens his eyes to the injustice also makes him realize the impossibility of resistance.

Lyotard introduces a metaphor of games to form an alternative to the totalizing meta-narratives. Using a game metaphor is an interesting one since it, besides posing as an alternative to, also illuminates the super-structural meta-narratives that govern any interaction. It is very applicable to the linguistic aspects of the novel. In the previous discussion regarding the seemingly objective bureaucratic language, it became apparent that behind the objective veneer lay a power structure with clear subjective intentions. The magistrate, having become a victim of the Imperial machinery, realizes this: “To people who do not operate under statute, legal process is simply one instrument among many” (92). At one instance, the Magistrate is brought from his cell into his former office that now serves as the headquarters of the Third Bureau. There, he is presented with a set of wooden slips that previously was uncovered in the nearby desert. The slips are written in an ancient barbarian language and therefore unintelligible to both the Magistrate and Joll. However, the fact that they both interpret them makes their exchange an interesting example of a Lyotardian language-game. Joll perceives the slips to be just another example of the treasonous consortion that has taken place between the Magistrate and the barbarians. However, the move that the Magistrate makes is a far more interesting one. His reading of the slips presents us with the story of a barbarian man who comes to a fort to collect the tortured body of his brother. By doing this, he actually makes two moves. The first one rehumanizes the barbarians. By giving them a voice, he tries to transform them from mere enemies to cognitive and emotive entities. The second one is a
meta-move – a move to establish himself as a player. By reminding Joll of the subjectivity of the barbarians, he is also reaffirming his own. It becomes a means for him to tackle the objectiveness of Empire. The Imperial monopoly of perspectives, nonetheless, does not allow any competing players. In fact, the assistant secretary chooses not to record the Magistrate’s words. It is clear that the men of Empire, by occupying a position of power, have the privilege of formulating the rules of the game and, furthermore, to disregard any given move arbitrarily.

Michel Foucault when asked to describe history, uses a metaphor of war\(^2\). History in itself has no “meaning” but rather “relations of power … with the intelligibility of struggles, … strategies and tactics“ (56). Foucault’s war-metaphor is evidently very similar to Lyotard’s game-metaphor; it moreover coincides with to the idea of history as it is perceived in the novel. Not only is history written by the victors (or as Joll shows us, those in position of power), it can be disregarded by remaining unwritten. When the Magistrate claims that history will absolve him, Joll replies: “Who is going to put you in the history books … There will be no history” (125) The Magistrate when later having the opportunity to write down the annals of the Imperial outpost, he instead produces a sentimental account of its provincial life: “This was paradise on earth.” (169) He quickly disregards this relapse into the religious, pre-modern, meta-narrative as devious, equivocal and reprehensive. It becomes as elusive as his natural law platform.

There is an even grander meta-narrative towards which the Magistrate has plenty of reasons to be incredulous: the foundation of modernity - rationality. Michel Foucault summarizes this incredulity in the following way: “The relationship between rationalization and excesses of political power is evident. And we should not need to wait for the concentration camps to recognize the existence of such relations.” (13, my emphasis) The Magistrate, however, as he is locked in his cell is left with no other options than that of

\(^2\) Foucault 56
waiting. From outside he hears “the chop-chop of picks … the faraway rumble and shouts of labourers” (86). The guard that brings him his food tells him that “they are going to extend the barracks and build proper cells” (86). These proper cells are built to quarter barbarian prisoners not yet captured. They are in a sense the essence of modernity - the hierarchically, bureaucratically and irrationally rational. It is, as the Magistrate puts it, “time for the black flower of civilization to bloom” (86). The metaphor of the flower is interesting since it, in accordance to Foucault’s idea of rationalization, entails certain inevitability. It makes it impossible to disregard what Bauman considers the prevailing standpoint on moral atrocities such as the holocaust: an “interruption in the normal flow of history, a cancerous growth on the body of normal civilized society, a moment of madness among sanity” (viii).

The reflective façade of Empire, concretized in Joll’s sunglasses, leads to the inevitable realization of the Magistrate’s complicity in the Imperial project. He learns that he is the reflection rather than the “pleasure loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. [He is] the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, [and Joll] the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow.” (148) Even though the Magistrate is never able to penetrate the veneer that Empire has created, Joll’s glasses do get destroyed. The Imperial illusion is shattered by the fact that Empire never achieves victory. An expedition, lead by Colonel Joll, is dispatched to defeat the barbarian army. As no news from the expedition is heard, a growing sense of unrest spreads through the colony. The remaining soldiers begin to take advantage of their position. Families pack their belongings and start a journey to a motherland they have never seen. At this stage, the moral debasement of the soldiers begins to affect even the civilians of the colony. This culminates in a well-prepared “retreat in the name of the Imperial Command” (154) i.e. a migration of the remaining soldiers together with a collection of supplies that have been gathered through a campaign of looting. Joll later returns with his carriage from the battlefield accompanied by “famished, exhausted men who have done more than their duty in
hauling this policeman to safety” (160). Through the window of the carriage, the Magistrate faces the naked eyes of Joll, giving him a long awaited chance to give Joll a lesson he long has meditated:

I mouth the words and watch him read them on my lips: ‘The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves’ I say. I nod and nod driving the message home. ‘Not on others,’ I say: I repeat the words, pointing at my chest, pointing at his. He watches my lips, his lips move in imitation, or perhaps in derision, I do not know. (160-161)

Joll remains opaque and imitatively reflective to the Magistrate even though his glasses have been smashed. He is as undecipherable as the barbarian girl is.

This instance of Derridean aporia is a state where almost all poststructural readings of *WFTB* end. It is a state virtually identical to the one that the Magistrate finds himself in at the final line of the novel, where he feels “like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (170). It is a road on which all poststructural readers, even the author of this essay, must tread. However, I would like to round off at a place that may seem insignificant but in fact is quite revealing: the center of the fort square where the Magistrate encounters a group of children constructing a snowman. The scene concretizes the subconscious and irrational world of dreamy oblivion that the Magistrate has encountered throughout the novel. The Magistrate, who during the book is never able to produce any accounts of the fort society, or even to produce anything at all, takes the role of a critic in this scene. The snowman itself, being the only work of art that is produced in the novel, is by its ephemeral nature the antithesis of the supposedly eternal meta-narratives of Empire.

However, what is interesting here is not the work of art itself, which is as unintelligible as the girl or Joll, nor is it the effect it produces, which both is inexplicable joy and a sense of stupidity. Rather, it is the fact that the Magistrate here encapsulates the ideal that Achebe calls
for in his essay: detached and incredulous but also humble, emphatic and willing to reattach. He is, in the spirit of poststructuralism, well aware of the relative validity of his convictions. This awareness enables the Magistrate to be incredulous towards while also unavoidably being a part of the Imperial project. This seemingly contradictory position is what justifies the eurocentricity of and consequently perpetuation of Colonial Criticism in this essay. It occupies a position that intrinsically leads to a cultural bias. This is the lesson to ponder while pursuing to tread on a road that may lead nowhere: it is crucial to know that any interpretation, whether of some ancient wooden slips, a snowman or *Waiting for the Barbarians*, inevitably is going to reflect one’s own perspective. For to deny one’s ethnocentricity would be to simply hide behind the opaque and reflective shades of universality.
Works Cited


Castillo, Debra A. "The Composition of the Self in Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians."

Critique 27.2 (1986): 78.


