

J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*

[The story is told by the Magistrate of a small frontier settlement. The passage corresponds to the end of the novel.]

I stand out in the open watching the coming of the storm. The sky has been fading till now it is bone-white with tones of pink rippling in the north. The ochre rooftiles glisten, the air grows luminous, the town shines out shadowless, mysteriously beautiful in these last moments.

I climb the wall. Among the armed dummies stand people staring out towards the horizon where a great cloud of dust and sand already boils up. No one speaks.

The sun turns coppery. The boats have all left the lake, the birds have stopped singing. There is an interval of utter silence. Then the wind strikes.

In the shelter of our homes, with the windows bolted and bolsters pushed against the doors, with fine grey dust already sifting through roof and ceiling to settle on every uncovered surface, film the drinking water, grate on our teeth, we sit thinking of our fellow-creatures out in the open who at times like this have no recourse but to turn their backs to the wind and endure.

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In the evenings, in the hour or two I can afford at the fireplace before my ration of wood gives out and I must creep into bed, I occupy myself in my old hobbies, repairing as best I can the cases of stones I found smashed and tossed away in the courthouse gardens, toying again with the decipherment of the archaic writing on the poplar slips.

It seems right that, as a gesture to the people who inhabited the ruins in the desert, we too ought to set down a record of settlement to be left for posterity buried under the walls of our town; and to write such a history no one would seem to be better fitted than our last magistrate. But when I sit down at my writing-table, wrapped against the cold in my great old bearskin, with a single candle (for tallow too is rationed) and a pile of yellowed documents at my elbow, what I find myself beginning to write is not the annals of an imperial outpost or an account of how the people of that outpost spent their last year composing their souls as they waited for the barbarians.

“No one who paid a visit to this oasis,” I write, “failed to be struck by the charm of life here. We lived in the time of the seasons, of the harvests, of the migrations of the waterbirds. We lived with nothing between us and the stars. We would have made any concession, had we only known what, to go on living here. This was paradise on earth.”

For a long while I stare at the plea I have written. It would be disappointing to know that the poplar slips I have spent so much time on contain a message as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible as this.

“Perhaps by the end of the winter,” I think, “when hunger truly bites us, when we are cold and starving, or when the barbarian is truly at the gate, perhaps then I will abandon the locutions of a civil servant with literary ambitions and begin to tell the truth.”

I think: “I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?”

I think: “I have lived through an eventful year, yet understand no more of it than a babe in arms. Of all the people of this town I am the one least fitted to write a memorial. Better the blacksmith with his cries of rage and woe.”

I think: “But when the barbarians taste bread, new bread and mulberry jam, bread and gooseberry jam, they will be won over to our ways. They will find that they are unable to live

without the skills of men who know how to rear the pacific grains, without the arts of women who know how to use the benign fruits.”

I think: “When one day people come scratching around in the ruins, they will be more interested in the relics from the desert than in anything I may leave behind. And rightly so.” (Thus I spend an evening coating the slips one by one in linseed oil and wrapping them in an oilcloth. When the wind lets up, I promise myself, I will go out and bury them where I found them.)

I think: “There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it.”

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The wind has dropped, and now the snowflakes come floating down, the first fall of the year, flecking the rooftiles with white. All morning I stand at my window watching the snow fall. When I cross the barracks yard it is already inches deep and my footsteps crunch with an eerie lightness.

In the middle of the square there are children at play building a snowman. Anxious not to alarm them, but inexplicably joyful, I approach them across the snow.

They are not alarmed, they are too busy to cast me a glance. They have completed the great round body, now they are rolling a ball for the head.

“Someone fetch things for the mouth and nose and eyes,” says the child who is their leader.

It strikes me that the snowman will need arms too, but I do not want to interfere.

They settle the head on the shoulders and fill it out with pebbles for eyes, ears, nose and mouth. One of them crowns it with his cap.

It is not a bad snowman.

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

J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1980

Potential starting point: Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958): the novel ends on a commissioner, who embodies imperial authority, taking control over the narrative.

Line of analysis :

How can the narrator's inability to write the history of the settlement in the face of an ominous threat of destruction be read as a challenge to imperial authority?

1. Ending on an ending: a predominant sense of destruction
2. Inaction in the face of upcoming doom: passivity as the only response
3. The narrator telling his story rather than history: authorship as a response to imperial authority

1. Ending on an ending

- a. threatening forces and approaching end
 - i. Bone-white (2) → natural element // skeleton ; "the wind strikes" (7)
 - ii. "already boils up" (5) → outpaced; "these last moments" (3); "when hunger truly bites us, when we are cold and starving, or when..." (31-32) → multiple "when" clauses // multiple threats in near future
- b. Pervading forces: the outside contaminates the inside
 - i. "barbarian is truly at the gate" (32) → liminal space as danger
 - ii. "Great cloud of dust and sand" (5) → "fine grey dust sifting through roof > ceiling > surface > water > teeth" (8-10) = gradual intrusion of external threat
- c. A general sense of loss and dehumanization
 - i. Absence: "no one speaks" (5), "the boats have left" (6), "shadowless" (3), rations (12, 20)
 - ii. Absence of human life: "fellow-creatures" (10), "in my great old bearskin" (19) → confusion animal/human features
"among the armed dummies stand people" (4) → syntax delays emergence of humans amidst fake ones, "snowman will need arms too" (60) → deprived of agency

→ several threats of extinction, but not faced by any form of rebellion or opposition → sense of doom reinforced by inaction in the face of destruction.

2. Inaction in the face of upcoming doom

- a. Retreat
 - i. "I must creep into bed" (13) → further inner retreat as protection (against cold) : also loss of humanity (creeping)
 - ii. "no recourse but to turn their backs" (11) → limited agency (no...but); only action = not facing the danger (+ "to turn one's back on = renounce, neglect)
 - iii. "coating the slips, wrapping...bury them" + parentheses : sense of protection of message // sense of silence
- b. General Silence
 - i. Birds (6) // humans (5); "I do not want to interfere" (60)
 - ii. "we sit thinking" (10) → collective passivity // "I write" → "I think" = inner form of language
- c. A character marked by absence and negation of the present

- i. Magistrate's actions = backward looking: "old hobbies" (13), "smashed and tossed away" (14), "archaic writings" (15)
- ii. Loss: "I leave it feeling stupid" (64), "lost his way" (65) → renounces
- iii. Negation: actions characterized by negative forms or uncertainty / indeterminacy: "write is not" (21), "I never wished" (35), "understand no more" (38), "something staring me in the face, and still I do not see" (50), "I do not want" (60), "may lead nowhere" (65)

→ passivity characterizes the residents, and most prominently the Magistrate, their leader. The one leader is a child building a snowman (ie, sth temporary). The retreat from danger leads to an inward gaze. Yet, that gaze does not enable understanding, so that the reader is left with a feeling of uncertainty and indeterminacy, which questions the very idea of conveying meaning in a narrative.

3. The narrator telling his story rather than history: authorship as a response to imperial authoritarianism

- a. History and language as a form of control
 - i. The duty to testify: "we too ought to set down a record..." (17), "annals... or an account" "to write such a history ... better fitted than" (18) // obligation // descriptive transcription for future ("record")
 - ii. "the history that Empire imposes on its subjects" (35): "subject" as the grammatical object of the clause → deprivation of individuality through history
 - iii. "the child who is their leader" (59) → gives direct order (performative)
- b. The impossibility to use language as a form of control
 - i. "what I find myself beginning to write" (21): writing ≠ controlled act
 - ii. Ambivalence and opacity of language: "decipherment" (15), "as devious, as equivocal" (29);
 - iii. Is language adapted?: "better the blacksmith with his cries of rage and woe" (40); "locution of a civil servant with literary ambitions and begin to tell the truth" (33) → can the truth be told in any language?
- c. Refusing authoritarian authorship
 - i. Ruins and relics > anything I may leave behind (46): relinquishing task of writing history → posterity exceeds individual control.
 - ii. An open-ended tale as an opposition to "imposing history" : unanswered questions ("not the scene I dreamed of", 64; "may lead nowhere" 65; "something staring me in the face" 50, "inexplicably joyful", 56, "eerie" 53; "feeling stupid", 64)

Though the magistrate refuses to abide by his role and to fulfill the task of leaving a trace of the Empire's presence on that land, his story remains told and transmitted. Indeed, by depicting a first-person narrator who renounces writing a story (or rather, history), Coetzee draws the reader's attention to both the form and the purpose of story-telling. Just as his character abandons the historical recording that comes with his position as an embodiment of imperial control, Coetzee seems to reject the expectations of narrative endings, leaving his readers in the dark as to the many unanswered questions of his character. Yet, that lingering ambiguity also points to the specificity of literature as a form of art that remains open to interpretation: contrary to imperial or authoritarian narratives that impose a

meaning onto subjects to better control them, literary authorship is characterized by the leeway it grants to its readers. The passage is thus characteristic of postcolonial literature insofar as it offers a clear contrast with the writings through which imperialism can be enforced.