

A Space for Translation: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the Language of J. M. Coetzee

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Abstract

This essay argues for the significance and centrality of translation in J. M. Coetzee's early novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), outlining Coetzee's multilingual aesthetic and its ethical implications. In the novel, translation manifests in real and metaphorical spaces in three key respects. Firstly, the allegorical quality of the work, which both invites and resists interpretation (Derek Attridge 2006), denotes an indeterminate, unstable quality that is also characteristic of translation. Secondly, translation manifests stylistically in terms of the language of the novel and the manner in which Coetzee employs an already translated narrative to mark an effaced and absent (native) language. Lastly, translation functions thematically, governing the gendered colonial encounter and its economy of power. The thematic reading reflects the complicit (racist and sexist) position that translation occupies in the colonial endeavor. Translation is key in regulating and exerting power, and includes the view of the sexualized female body as a text to be deciphered. However, when the role of the translator changes hands this economy is upset, and also further problematized by notions of untranslatability, allowing room for resistance.

The multifaceted engagement with translation in *Waiting for the Barbarians* thus creates a space that encompasses the novel's complex ethical vision, prefiguring the investment in translation evident in Coetzee's later works.

Keywords

translation, barbarians, torture, gender, colonial encounter

I do not like the way in which English is taking over the world. I do not like the way in which it crushes the minor languages that it finds in its path. I don't like its universalist pretensions, by which I mean it's uninterrogated belief that the world is as it seems to be in the mirror of the English language. I don't like the arrogance that this situation breeds in its native speakers. Therefore I do what little I can to resist the hegemony of the English language. (Coetzee 2018)

These remarks were delivered by J. M. Coetzee in an interview with Soledad Costantini, his Argentinian publisher, at a literary festival in Columbia in January of 2018. The call to “resist the hegemony of the English language,” from a writer who writes exclusively in English¹ and has been much revered and rewarded for his mastery of English prose, points to Coetzee's long and complicated relationship with the language. Born to an English mother and an Afrikaner father and raised bilingually in South Africa, he moved through various English-speaking countries: from South Africa to England and later to the US, until settling permanently in Australia in 2002. In the same interview, Coetzee outlines the trajectory of his multilingualism, stating that he became aware very early on that access to the English language would liberate him from “the narrow world-view of the Afrikaner”; he also describes the spell of the English language and particularly the modernist poetry of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, which prompted him to write. At the same time, Coetzee also characterizes his approach to the English language as distant, one fitting a “foreigner's sensibility” and notes his alienation from the language. “I write in English but I have never felt that English is my language,” he says, contrasting his sense of the language to the way that English must have felt to Shakespeare, Hardy, or Melville (Coetzee 2018). This outspokenly critical stance regarding the English language in which he creates, and voicing of the political and ethical implications of its usage, coincides with an engagement with multilingualism and translation in Coetzee's most recent novels.² Indeed, his trilogy *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), and *The Death of Jesus* (2019), is presented as three works entirely *in translation*, or in Rebecca Walkowitz's formulation, as “born translated” novels.³ For while the narrative is rendered in English, it presumably takes place—and

therefore is translated from—Spanish, the language that the characters are forced to speak after they arrive in their adopted country. Moreover, in an interesting reversal, the Spanish translation of Coetzee’s concluding novel, *The Death of Jesus*, was released a month prior to the English original, a gesture that can be regarded as further undermining the primacy of an original (Coetzee 2019). While intra-textual translation has proved a major point of interest in this post-2002, or “Australian” stage of his career,⁴ translation has been present throughout Coetzee’s oeuvre, appearing from the outset.⁵ In fact, Coetzee casts himself as translator in his debut novel, *Dusklands*, and translation features prominently in his early work as part of an aesthetic expressive of his broader ethical vision.

Translation holds a unique position in *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), a work entangled with notions of complicity, power, and language, and one that afforded Coetzee his first major international success. The space of translation in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is both real and metaphorical. The present paper will outline the manner in which translation manifests in the novel: metaphorically due to the novel’s allegorical qualities; stylistically in terms of the language of the work, the employment of already translated text and numerous uses of intertextual allusion; and finally, thematically, as translation governs the gendered colonial encounter and its economy of power.

Narrated by “the Magistrate,” an official of an unnamed “Empire” placed in charge of a rural outpost on the frontier, the plot describes the disruption of the Magistrate’s quiet life with the arrival of Colonel Joll, an officer of the “Third Bureau” sent to thwart a suspected revolt of barbarian tribes against colonial rule. To this end, Joll captures and tortures the natives, among them a woman referred to as the barbarian girl. The Magistrate frees Joll’s prisoners, takes in the barbarian girl and begins an erotic attempt to investigate her scarred body and maimed eyes, which captivate his imagination as she is kept—captive-like—in his quarters. The Magistrate later embarks on a dangerous expedition to return the girl to her people, for which he pays dearly upon his return. His antagonist, Colonel Joll, possesses clear convictions and epistemological certainty succinctly stated as: “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt.” As opposed to Joll, the Magistrate, who is the focalizer of the novel, is often confused and riddled with doubt, and his short-sightedness, or the limited nature of his rational powers, results in the frequent sense that he

(and therefore the reader) is unable to access meanings, which remain impenetrable and obscure.

As Derek Attridge has pointed out, the novel's enigmatic characters and the indeterminate space and time of its setting, coupled with a minimal plot, all encourage the reader to look for meanings beyond the literal, and read the novel as an allegory (2006, 63). Additionally, Coetzee's allusions to Kafka, specifically "In the Penal Colony," add to the readers' allegorical impulse.⁶ The novel invites thematic readings, encouraging interpretation and tempting a consideration of the "universal truths" that govern this work, such as "the human condition," or global truths like "conflicts and abuses that characterize the modern world" (van Alphen 2008, 26), and even inspiring allegorical readings fitted to a contemporary political climate such as America in the age of Trump.⁷

Yet at the same time, as Attridge has argued, *Waiting for the Barbarians* also thwarts interpretation with numerous examples of irreconcilable uncertainty and open-endedness, such as the Magistrate's enigmatic recurring dream, the indecipherable scripts, or the ambiguous ending to the narrative and, as could also be argued, even the character and moral quality of the Magistrate himself, which serve to complicate tidy interpretations of the work. Rather, Attridge maintains that Coetzee's novels necessitate kinds of readings that do not "claim to tell their truths, but ones that participate in their inventive openings" and calls for "literal readings" (Attridge 2006, 79) that focus on the experience of the work and stress reader involvement.

This analysis is also a response to a specific kind of interpretation that Coetzee's fiction elicits, due to the assumption that as a "responsible and principled" South African writer during the apartheid years, Coetzee must be chiefly concerned with the historical situation of the country, which Attridge finds is behind the impulse to "*translate*" the distant setting into the South Africa at the time of writing, or treat the fictional characters as representatives of South African types or individuals (Attridge 2006, 64, *italics mine*). In fact, *Waiting for the Barbarians* was attacked on precisely these grounds close to the time of its publication; it was charged with evasiveness and political irresponsibility, with *displacing* the location of the South African events through allegorization and dehistoricization, and with refusing to acknowledge "historical sources or to make any allusions to the specific barbarism of the apartheid regime" (JanMohamed 1985, 73).⁸

What's more, any appeal to the author of the work on this matter proves fruitless, for Coetzee's own statements (both public and private) about the setting and events that inform the novel are purposefully contradictory and obfuscating, and his insistence that the novel is not set in South Africa leaves ample room for ambiguity (Wittenberg and Highman 2015, 108). Unsurprisingly, Coetzee's ambiguous and ironic stance is presented in his fiction as well. In *Diary of a Bad Year* (2007), the political circumstances in South Africa that inform *Waiting for the Barbarians* are directly stated, yet at the same time also undermined, for they are attributed to an author-double in a novel that is preoccupied with interrogating its own state as a work of fiction.⁹

Coetzee's equivocal remarks illustrate the manner in which the deliberate open-endedness that Attridge identifies within the work carries over to a world extraneous to it (whether intertextual or epi-textual), while still allowing for the possibility that the actual historical events taking place in South Africa at the time—events such as the Soweto Revolt in 1976 or the murder of anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko—shaped and informed *Waiting for the Barbarians*.¹⁰ Various studies of the novel demonstrate the possibility and richness of a reading that considers a historical or local perspective without compromising an insistence on the unique language of the novel and its undetermined nature.¹¹

Thus the allegorical aspects of the novel, which are characterized by an attempt to “translate” the locale of the novel and its characters to a South African context, also hint at the major role of translation within this work, implying not merely the kind of impasse that colors many of Coetzee's fictional works but also the complex interpretive movement that governs them. For rather than an act that pins down the meaning of the novel to a single identification, translation can also be considered with the gamut of implications that it invites, which entail its inherent instability, the fact that translation and interpretation are often employed interchangeably and the assertion that they perform the same meta-linguistic function. The form of readerly activity demanded in this novel relates directly to its metaphorical treatment of space and thus indirectly also to translation, as translation is defined via a spatial metaphor (carrying across) and they share a common etymological origin in the Western tradition.¹²

It is therefore fitting that the novel's indeterminate space has proved a source of difficulty for its translators. And while scholarly work has

been devoted to mapping out the central influence for the locale in *Waiting for the Barbarians*,¹³ the novel deliberately alludes to both Western and Eastern milieus and imperial powers, which has led to various interpretations of its setting and posed a particular challenge for its translation (Coetzee 2008). For example, while the Chinese translator deduced that the novel's mentioning of the "Summer Palace" clearly referred to the nineteenth-century summer palace in Beijing, Coetzee admits to no such conscious intent.¹⁴ Uncoincidentally, it was the French translator of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Sophie Mayoux, who was first to point out that the unique quality of the language in the novel, (removed, distant, neutral) makes it seem as though the work is "already a—very good—translation" (1986, 8).¹⁵

Along with the metaphorical and stylistic use of translation, the novel's intertext also most prominently engages with translation. The title of the work is taken from Constantine P. Cavafy's modernist poem *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1904), which revolves around the anticipated event of a catastrophic barbarian invasion upon civilized society. In both the poem and the novel, the event governing the narrative does not occur, the barbarians never appear. Maria Boletsi examines the reciprocal intertextual dynamic of the two works, and also illustrates the manner in which both works destabilize—not merely reverse—the binary of civilization/barbarism by questioning the very terms of the dichotomy. She notes the various similarities between the works, including their indeterminate settings (the poem refers to the Roman Empire but does not specify the locale), and use of the present tense, which she aligns with a performativity that serves to challenge the modes of historical discourse and within the title(s), and also indicates a process of indefinite waiting, as the arrival of the object of waiting is eternally deferred (Boletsi 2007).¹⁶ By repeating Cavafy's title, claims Boletsi, Coetzee's novel makes the act of waiting even more alluring and further stresses the omnipresence and, yet, the absence of the barbarians as the title is re-embedded within a post-colonial framework (ibid., 76).

Nonetheless, in her analysis as in others, the fact that the title of the original Greek poem is repeated in English *translation* seems to be minimized, despite the acknowledgement of its translators, the presentation of the poem in bilingual Greek/English form, and the analysis of lines from the original alongside their English translations.¹⁷ Translation is ingrained in Coetzee's repetition of the title, and due to

the fact that the poem is not originally in English, the obscure identity of the barbarians is further highlighted, for the original poem refers to βάρβαρος, not barbarians, and the term itself hinges on such linguistic difference. Because repetition takes place in translation, it is necessarily an alteration of the title and name of the poem, as deconstruction decrees: translation includes the notion of repetition, and *différance* takes part in every repetition.¹⁸ It seems even more pertinent that repetition in translation is mediated by an additional shadowy figure—the translator (always in footnotes, always in parentheses), whose involvement inevitably subjects the translation to instability, rupture, or in some views, even betrayal. In this case, it is even demonstrated in actuality, as one of the translations of the poem to English renders the title in a slightly different manner as *Awaiting the Barbarians*,¹⁹ thus actualizing the potential for change inherent in every instance of translation. Finally, the translated, intertextual title pertains to the Magistrate's own failed attempts at translation—towards the end of the novel he attempts once more to decipher the ancient script on the wooden slips, as the few remaining inhabitants of the settlement await the arrival of the barbarians with a sense of impending doom. The Magistrate's ultimate inability to translate the slips (they remain Greek to him?) involves an awareness of their obliteration, either by abandoning them to oblivion in the sand dunes from which he has dug them out, or by relinquishing them to the external destructive forces that “write history” as in the scene in which he is called to translate them (and offers a series of false translations), until finally Joll simply drops the attempt to figure out their meaning and pronounces them “gambling sticks” (Coetzee 1980, 123). One of the Magistrate's final acts involves his attempt at conservation as he carefully coats the slips in oil, wraps them in cloth, and vows to return them to the site from which he excavated them (*ibid.*, 169), suggesting both that they may be redeemed at some distant point in time and perhaps translated by a hand more capable than his own, but equally that they shall remain impenetrable, untranslatable, the ancient culture a lost relic buried in the sand.

The stable identity of the barbarians, which is disrupted in translation, is also thematically challenged in the novel as the question of who the barbarians are continuously shifts and proves contradictory. On one hand, the term is employed by the Magistrate most broadly, denoting any native of the land who is not a settler on the outpost nor part of the Empire (such as the boy and the old man, the prisoners, and the barbarian girl) while at

the same time, the Magistrate also insists on the differences between the various native peoples. The barbarian girl belongs to the second group of prisoners rounded up by Joll, the nomads, described by the Magistrate to the young officer as “the people we call barbarians” (ibid., 54). Throughout the arduous journey the Magistrate undertakes to return the barbarian girl to her people, the “barbarians” who follow them are fleeting figures in the landscape, eluding the expedition team. When at long last these “northerners” are encountered, it is “on their own ground, on their own terms.” However, they are described as yet another kind of barbarian, a kind the Magistrate has never seen before (ibid., 78), an apparent contradiction to the fact that the barbarian girl and her father are of these people.

Upon his return to the settlement the Magistrate is branded a traitor to the Empire, and the most significant shift in the term occurs, as for the first time “barbarians” denotes representatives of the Empire. First the Magistrate uses it to describe an officer as “one of the new barbarians” (ibid., 85) and subsequently the Magistrate himself is marked a barbarian. The term is employed with the most literal precision when attributed to the Magistrate as he hangs from a tree, exposed in his nakedness, tortured and broken. His screams of pain are described by the onlookers as “barbarian language” and they remark that, “he is calling his barbarian friends” (ibid., 133). Finally, the novel’s closing chapters find the settlement abandoned and on the brink of disaster. The threat of the arrival of the barbarians is employed by the terrified townspeople almost conceptually: children see “fierce barbarians faces” in their dreams and the townspeople attribute crimes to the invisible barbarians. Yet these crimes are most likely committed by the soldiers charged with defending the few remaining settlers from the “barbarians” who are said to come out at night (ibid., 134). In a final reverberation of Cavafy’s poem, the Magistrate ruminates about his inability to write a history of the people of the Imperial outpost who “spent their last year composing their souls as they waited for the barbarians” (ibid., 168).

As the definition of barbarian shifts from fisherfolk to nomads, to officers of the Empire, to the Magistrate, and finally to an invisible—even internal—enemy, so the role of translator changes hands, marking the shifts in the balance of power throughout the novel. While the Magistrate exemplifies failed and subversive translation, the barbarian girl manages to both successfully translate and ultimately reject being an object of translation.

The first encounter with translation and “already translated” narrative proves an instance of failed translation. The Magistrate initially presents himself as a translator, a guide to Joll: “If you want to speak to them I will of course help with the language” he says as the two inspect the unfortunate pair of prisoners rounded up—the boy and an old man, whom Joll later mistakenly refers to as grandfather and grandson. His position as a translator is also assumed to be that of one in power, and the language the Magistrate employs with the prisoners is a non specified, “patois of the frontier” (ibid., 3), presumably a local form of the original language of the Empire, which remains like its origin, unspecified and obscure. In this scene, the Magistrate is translating (or rather interpreting) for Joll. The simplified syntax and lexicon, as well as the stiff, wooden form in which the dialogue is rendered indicate to the reader that she is reading a translation. The Magistrate pleads with the elderly prisoner to cooperate with Joll:

“*Father*, do you see this gentleman? This gentleman is visiting *us* from the capital. He visits all the forts along the frontier. His work is to find out the truth. That is all he does. He finds out the truth. If you do not speak to me you will have to speak to him. Do you understand?” (ibid., italics mine)

The Magistrate attempts to create an affinity with the prisoner, addressing him respectfully, filially, as “father,” using the term “us” and communicating a sense of danger suggestive of the rough treatment to ensue. Yet despite his efforts this exchange ultimately fails, revealing the translator as powerless. The Magistrate cannot create the trust necessary for an exchange and successfully mediate between the prisoners and Joll. He is disinvited to the second interrogation, in which a guard is taken on as translator and the old man is killed. The Magistrate is thus unable to fulfill either a filial or a paternal role (as his colonial position entails) and protect the old man from further interrogation, which brings about his death.

The scene depicts the “bad faith” and skewed power dynamic that govern translation within a colonial setting. Translation and colonization have enjoyed a close relationship, as has been subject to scrutiny since the post-colonial surge in theory in the 1990s, which has included the investigation of translation as a political act and the role it has had in shaping asymmetrical power relationships of colonialism in various parts

of the world (such as India [Niranjana 1992]), or the manner in which European colonizers relied on ethnographic translation as a tool for domination in America (Cheyfitz 1997). Translation was for centuries a one-way endeavor, with European norms dominating literary production, deciding which kinds of texts would come to be translated, and texts being translated into European languages for consumption rather than as part of a reciprocal process of exchange. Moreover, the colony itself has also been seen as a metaphorical translation, a copy of an “original” located elsewhere on the map, and evaluated as less than its source (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999, 1–9).

This scene of translation operates solely as the exertion of power. It is one-directional and does not depict an exchange, or an act of communication between the prisoners and Joll. Further underscoring this point is the fact that the translation (or rather interpretation) is displaced and disembodied: despite the fact that the reader accesses the old man’s testimony to the Magistrate immediately, in “already translated” English, the Magistrate offers the testimony (and his interpretation of it) to the recipient, Joll, only after the two men have left the prisoners’ cell. Due to the fact that the Magistrate’s report to the officer—his act of interpretation—does not occur in the presence of the old man, it can be argued that the Magistrate comes to replace the old man, speaking (or rather pleading) on his behalf just as a literary translation speaks in the absence of the original. In this case, the Magistrate’s failure of translation results in disaster, as both he and the old man become superfluous. His translation services are henceforth rejected and the old man is killed in the second interrogation, a point which is later driven home by the laconic testimony of the illiterate guard, who dryly recites the old man’s cause of death for the Magistrate’s official report.²⁰

By contrast, a successful translation (or interpretation/mediation) in an unequal power situation involves a performance of dual affiliations, as in the memorable family story Naomi Seidman vividly recounts in the introduction to her book *Faithful Renderings* (2006) titled “The Translator as Double Agent.” In Seidman’s story, her father served as a translator and managed to smooth over a misunderstanding and defuse a potentially dangerous situation by aligning himself with both parties and gaining their trust through a creative, quick-thinking feat of linguistic and cultural proficiency.²¹ Both Seidman’s father and the fictional character of the Magistrate aim to mollify a tricky situation and act on behalf of

the more vulnerable party. However, the Magistrate proves incapable of aligning himself with either side, though not for lack of effort. His gentle words to the old man stress his affiliation with the barbarians by virtue of a shared community, an “us” (“This gentleman is visiting *us* from the capital”), but the gesture is quickly proven empty as he makes no move to prevent the further interrogation of the prisoners and their torture. On the other hand, the Magistrate also fails to establish good faith with Joll, arousing wariness and suspicion and marking his position as interpreter as precarious, as when his explanations of the prisoner’s behavior are met with Joll’s stony silence. The scene thus constitutes an example of failed translation, as the Magistrate’s interpretive skills as well as his loyalties are called into question and the movement of translation is stifled. Power governs this scene of translation, in which Joll is uninterested in any communicative exchange with the barbarians, and the Magistrate’s precarious and perilous situation reflects one that is all too familiar to translators operating in dangerously unequal zones of power.²²

The second scene depicting the Magistrate as a translator constitutes a subversive attempt at (mis)translation, as he is interrogated by Joll following his return from the barbarian lands and imprisonment. The Magistrate delivers his interpretation of the ancient slips in a provocative, metafictional manner, echoing events described on the frontier town from the perspective of the barbarians, such as the capture and torment of family members and the encounter with a cruel and indifferent regime. The Magistrate’s “translations” consist of an indictment of the crimes the Empire has perpetrated against the barbarians, including their indifferent bureaucratic apparatus. This scene has been argued to enact the novel’s overall formal allegorical structure, as Coetzee is similarly drawing upon particular fragments of the past (depictions of colonialism) in order to construct a narrative that refers to a present situation (Wade 1990). Moreover, the Magistrate describes the barbarian script as constantly shifting—a single character can mean *war*, *vengeance* or, turned upside down, also *justice*, he explains to Joll: “It is the same with the rest of these slips...they form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each slip can be read in many ways...There is no agreement among scholars about how to interpret these relics of the ancient barbarians...” (Coetzee 1980, 122). The point driven home relating to the instability of language, and the apparatus of allegory and interpretation, is delivered via translation: “Thank you, I have finished translating” says the Magistrate

by way of conclusion. The figure of the translator (the Magistrate) is again aligned with that of an author, or creator, alluding again to the openness and instability inherent in the act of writing. Yet Joll's swift forceful dismissal relieves any ambiguity, for he had no real interest in the slips, and the metafictional moment in the novel quickly reveals the systems of power at work in the realm of translation, and by implication, also history, which the Magistrate declares will "bear [me] out!" (ibid., 125). Subsequently, the Magistrate's torture involves his dehumanization and emasculation, and he "dies one death" on the tree, babbling incoherently as his capacity for language disintegrates altogether. But upon his rebirth, set free in the town, begging for his sustenance, the Magistrate arrives at the fisherfolk camps and, as a beggar, learns "a few words in their language" (ibid., 142). Like the other unnamed native tongues, the language of the fisherfolk is unspecified, and it remains unclear whether it constitutes a form of "barbarian" language, the "patois of the frontier" or an entirely different language.

The violence of translation, whether seen as an inherent or symbolic function of language²³ or regarded in terms of its central role in colonization or the institution of war,²⁴ is demonstrated with the arrival of the barbarian girl. The barbarian girl presents the Magistrate's view of the sexualized female body as a text to be deciphered:

All this erotic behavior of mine is indirect: I prowl about her, touching her face, caressing her body, without entering her or finding the urge to do so...with this woman it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry.... I behave in some ways like a lover—I undress her, I bathe her, I stroke her, I sleep beside her—but I might equally tie her to a chair and beat her, it would be no less intimate. (ibid., 46)

Passages such as these present the Magistrate's erotic fetishization of the barbarian girl's body and her injuries, his curious ritual of dominance, power, torture and desire and the religious undertones to his obsession with the girl (the washing of her feet as well as his hanging cross-like from the tree, both evoking Jesus). The Magistrate encounters the limit of his interpretive powers with the barbarian girl. He draws a blank, as suggested by the blanks in his memory when he strains to remember the first time he saw her, rounded up with the rest of Joll's prisoners, as well

as the elusive recurring dreams of the blank-faced child in the snow that plague him.

In the depiction of the barbarian girl, the trope of the sexualized female body is entwined with a racist vision: the Magistrate makes much of her “straight black eyebrows” and “glossy black hair of the barbarians” (ibid., 27), her short, sturdy legs with their “strong calves” (ibid., 32), as well as her table manners and “robust appetite of a countrywoman” (ibid., 31). He likens the barbarian girl to the wild fox cub he buys on a whim and repeatedly describes her in animal-like terms (ibid., 37). The Magistrate’s attempts to “domesticate” the barbarian girl can be regarded as a violent and racist form of the act of translation. Critiques of the “domesticating” tendencies in translation and their imperial functions have existed in the Western tradition, ranging from Nietzsche’s critique of Western thought and Roman imperialism in the translation of Greek texts to Lawrence Venuti’s critique of the nineteenth-century German translation theories foreignizing translation (Schleiermacher in particular) for its ideological slant and nationalist agenda (Venuti 2008, 57–59). Moreover, translation theorists have also pointed to the gendered and sexist tropes that have prevailed in the discussion of translation, from the seventeenth-century *les belles infideles* (the marriage of paternity, fidelity and legitimate translation) to the conventional figuration of the text in feminine terms (Chamberlain 1988). The Magistrate’s sexualized attempts to translate the barbarian girl harness such notions of violent textuality.

Moreover, the barbarian girl also endures conditions comparable with those suffered by black South African women, particularly in terms of their relegation to domestic labor and subjection to sexual abuse. In order to relieve her from “the shame of begging,” the Magistrate installs the barbarian girl in the barracks kitchen to work as a scullery maid. As Gabeba Baderron has pointed out, female domestic labor is such a familiar trope of sexual exploitation that in *Waiting for the Barbarians* the soldiers in the barracks are quick to comment: “From the kitchen to the Magistrate’s bed in sixteen easy steps” (Coetzee 1980, 34; see Baderron 2014, 173–188). In addition, by repeatedly referring to the barbarian girl as a “girl,” emphasis is placed on the fact that the term has been used as a racist insult for a black woman of any age in South Africa (and elsewhere), serving to both infantilize and make her age uncertain, simultaneously removing authority and the protection of childhood. Yet the barbarian girl’s captivity becomes a continuous source of pain for

the Magistrate; he becomes bound to the ritualistic oiling of her body but is unable to probe any further. He cannot access her suffering, of which her account leaves him dissatisfied, or his pleasure, which is not consummated sexually. In this sense, the barbarian girl—who is regarded as a text for consumption, whose marks on her body spell out a mystery the Magistrate is unable to decipher—also cannot be subsumed into his liberal narrative; she remains “untranslated,” entirely Other. The inability of translation provides the backdrop, perhaps even the impetus, for the Magistrate’s initial act of responsibility (returning the barbarian girl to her people), which also allows for the possibility of communication between the two.²⁵

It is unclear which language the Magistrate and the barbarian girl use to communicate. Their exchanges are brief, utilitarian and seemingly transparent and he repeatedly encounters ambiguity in the barbarian girl’s body, rather than her words. Only much later in the narrative, after the boundaries of the frontier have been crossed, at the moment of the barbarian girl’s release to her people, does the Magistrate lament, “‘What a waste’, I think: ‘she could have spent those long empty evenings teaching me her tongue! Too late now’” (Coetzee 1980, 78). Thus, in hindsight, the language the “ill-matched couple” has been using, presumably the “patois of the frontier” used with the prisoners, is relatively new to the barbarian girl, who must have rapidly acquired it during the course of her captivity. It could also be considered the language of her torturers, for likely it was spoken by the guards participating in her torture, and the men she relied upon after being abandoned and left to fend for herself in the frontier town.

This late discovery colors their exchanges in a different light, particularly the Magistrate’s repeated demands that the barbarian girl put into words her physical suffering, and his emphasis on the importance of nuance, language and “story.” The significance of the act of translating her pain into narrative can be conceptualized as a form of Jakobsonian “intersemiotic translation.”²⁶ However, its documentation in the language of an oppressor has been described as complex and conflicting; since the language of the oppressor implies the language in which the testimony of pain will not be believed, while at the same time, oftentimes is also the only means through which it could be acknowledged.²⁷ Seen in this light, the barbarian girl’s refusal to “translate” her pain into the language of the frontier also marks her movement from text—a body to be translated

or consumed—to agent, a translator in her own right, as depicted in the novel's expedition scene.

As the party crosses the physical boundaries of the frontier on the expedition, the Magistrate and the barbarian girl consummate their sexual relationship, and experience an intimacy that now takes place on equal ground. He becomes attentive and considerate, and displays a willingness to challenge cultural norms, which goes as far as to hint at the possibility of a mixed-race relationship. This is evident when the barbarian girl menstruates on the journey and the Magistrate displays a nonconformist stance in the face of the men assigned to accompany them in his readiness to cross ingrained cultural taboos regarding menstruation (Coetzee 1980, 75). However, when the barbarian girl takes on the role of the translator, the balance of power shifts entirely. She gains the upper hand as she manages to negotiate a higher payment (compensation?) upon her return to her people. Her return, which requires a rejection of the Magistrate's entreaties, reverses the trope of the native female translator who is loyal either to a conquistador or to a benevolent or sympathetically portrayed colonizer.

The barbarian girl rejects both his offer and the familiar narrative conventions it represents in terms of the native female translator. This kind of narrative is present in popularized stories of female translators such as "La Malinche" in sixteenth-century Mexico, who served as a translator for Cortés and was depicted as sexually promiscuous and considered a traitor to her people. The figure of La Malinche has also been regarded as an "icon," a reminder that a dominant metaphor of colonialism was that of rape, of husbanding "virgin lands," tilling them and fertilizing them and hence "civilizing" them (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999, 4).²⁸ In addition, the Powhatan girl known as "Pocahontas" in the seventeenth-century narrative of the American frontier served a similar role as an unofficial emissary, but unlike La Malinche, Pocahontas was portrayed as a savior (in the European narrative), willingly embracing British civilization and marrying an Englishman.²⁹

Perhaps the most pertinent figure exemplifying the trope of the native female translator is Krotoa/Eva in South African culture, who is described in the seventeenth-century *Journal of Jan van Riebeeck*. Krotoa/Eva was taken into the van Riebeeck household and became a servant and a translator in the dealings between the Dutch and the Khoikhoi. She married a Danish-Dutch surgeon and traveler and after his death,

reportedly fell into “drunken and shameful” behavior, was imprisoned and died five years later. Eva/Krotoa’s story was repeated many times throughout South African history, and her death took on different versions and interpretations in the subsequent narratives of her life. Among the versions of her story, some portrayed Eva/Krotoa’s downfall and death as “evidence” of her deficient “inborn qualities” that civilization was unable to defeat, while others attributed her tragic end to the personal affliction that was caused by moving between two cultures (Conradie 1998).³⁰

Unlike Eva/Krotoa, the barbarian girl rejects her role as a servant/translator even when afforded with the possibility of its evolution into a presumably more equal partnership. Thus, not only does she refuse to be a translator, but also refuses to perpetuate as text to be interpreted. Accordingly, when the barbarian girl leaves the Magistrate, he is faced with a “blankness,” and she is regarded as a “stranger” (Coetzee 1980, 79). However, this blank space is not filled by narrative, whether authored by the Magistrate or anyone else; rather, it remains empty, unclaimed, and therefore arguably unconquered. For the barbarian girl, becoming a translator has marked the moment that she ceases to be the object of translation; it is the space of her freedom and the movement of her release.

Thus, Coetzee’s multifaceted engagement with translation in *Waiting for the Barbarians* creates a space of resistance that can be seen to encompass the novel’s complex ethical vision. On one hand, translation reflects a general state of complicity, as it enables the colonial encounter and its gendered economy of power. This manifests both stylistically and thematically. Firstly, the style with which the absent (fictitious) barbarian language is presented is already translated and therefore effectively effaced. In addition, translation appears thematically in overt forms of violence within the novel, such as the devastation caused by the Magistrate’s failed attempts at translation as well as his sexualization of the barbarian girl and repeated demands that she “translate” her pain into his language. Nonetheless, at the same time, translation also serves to problematize the colonial encounter, surfacing as a form of resistance, as indicated by the shift in the balance of power when the barbarian girl negotiates the terms of her release to her people. The barbarian girl’s successful negotiation and subsequent rejection of the Magistrate thwarts any relegation to a subordinate role, whether as a loyal female translator or as an object (body and corpus—body/text) to be fetishized or deciphered.

Finally, the insistence on untranslatability correlates with Coetzee's aesthetic in *Waiting for the Barbarians* in terms of the allegorical reading that the novel invites. As argued, the novel's indeterminate space fosters interpretative readings of its metaphorical elements, while at the same time it also undermines any determinate, stable meaning. This interpretative movement corresponds with a conception of translation that is inherently unstable, a point further underscored by the intertextual (translated) title *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Consequently, translation emerges as a metaphorical, stylistic and thematic feature of this early work, prefiguring Coetzee's later aesthetic engagements with translation as part of the author's ethical vision.

Notes

- 1 Apart from his second novel, *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), which was also published in a bilingual English/Afrikaans edition, all of Coetzee's novels appear in English. However, his involvement with translation is multifarious; he has written on Kafka's translations into English, and he is a translator himself, having translated from Dutch and Afrikaans and written commentary on his own translations as well. See Coetzee (1992, 2001 and 2005).
- 2 In an earlier interview from 1986, Coetzee seems more enthusiastic about the English language, stressing its historical layer and receptiveness to neologisms and the macaronic (see Clarkson 2009, 112).
- 3 Walkowitz (2015) has coined this form of writing as a "born translated" work.
- 4 For a recent argument on untranslatability and Coetzee's post-2002, or "Australian" works, see Boehmer, Ng, and Sheehan (2016). Interestingly, the authors concede that Coetzee's "minor turn," which they recognize in his post-2002 writing, constitutes a continuation of the untranslatable present in his earliest writings, giving *Waiting for the Barbarians* and its engagement with Asia as an example.
- 5 Critics have hardly overlooked questions of language within Coetzee's work, yet relatively few regard translation and multilingualism as key aspects of his early works. Notable exceptions include Carrol Clarkson's excellent discussion of ethics and the limits of language in *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. See Clarkson (2009), Barnard (2009), and Wicomb (2002). Steven Kellman (2000) includes Coetzee in his survey of

writers with a multilingual sensibility. Two recent notable examples are in López and Wiegandt (2016).

- 6 The gruesome scene alluding to Kafka's "In the Penal Colony" involves Joll's inscription of the language of the Empire onto the bodies of his prisoners, writing the word "ENEMY" on their backs in chalk, which his soldiers then whip until the word is erased by their blood (Coetzee [1980] 2004, 115).
- 7 A *New York Times* Op Ed read the American midterm elections in 2018 against the backdrop of Coetzee's novel, with Trump's regime appealing to the "barbarian within" (Cohen 2018).
- 8 Nadine Gordimer's famous review of *Life and Times of Michael K*. claimed that Coetzee's choice of allegory in his first novels derived from his desire to escape the "daily, grubby, tragic" consequences of life in South Africa (1984).
- 9 The author-double "Senior C" bears a close likeness to J. M. Coetzee, and his "strong opinions" are purposefully conflated with those of latter. He describes a talk he delivers on "my novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*," which he claims, "emerged from the South Africa of the 1970s, where the security police could come in and out and blindfold and handcuff you without explaining why" (2008, 171). Senior C recounts that his comments at the reading were misreported by the Australian press, an incident that did occur in reality, in almost exactly in the manner that the fictional character describes it. For the differences between the actual events and the narrated ones see Peter D. McDonald (2010, 495).
- 10 See Coetzee's brief piece devoted to South African novelists and the difficulties of representing torture (1986, 13). Also see Attwell (2014).
- 11 For example, Rebecca Saunders (2001) focuses on the relationship between the concept of the foreign and "foreignization" in literary analysis, and the "literal" treatment of foreigners. She also examines the language of apartheid, particularly as it was used in the official documents of the death of Steve Biko.
- 12 For an analysis of the interrelatedness of metaphor and translation, see Guldin (2016).
- 13 For example, Wittenberg and Highman (2015) locate the terrain of Central Asia as a central influence, and specifically cite Sven Hedin's exploration narrative, *Central Asia and Tibet: Towards the Holy City of Lassa* (1901) as the base text for *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

- 14 As to be expected, Coetzee does not supply the translator into Chinese with any definite answer: "... I as author am powerless to say. The words are written; I cannot control the associations they awaken. But my translator is not so powerless: a nudge here, a nuance there, and the reader may be either directed towards or headed off from the Beijing of 1848" (2018, 410).
- 15 Interestingly, the same already-translated style was pointed out in an early unfavorable review by Leon Whiteson and used to demonstrate the novel's stylistic inferiority. "The dialogue is stiff, the writing has the air of a translation" (Whiteson 1982, 27). Rosemary Jolly cites Whiteson's review among others that found fault with the novel for its lack of a specified setting (Jolly 1989, 69).
- 16 It also bears mentioning that Cavafy was multilingual, and has been characterized as an "outsider" occupying an ambivalent position both as a Greek living in Egypt and working in the service of the British empire, and also due to his marginal position as a homosexual (Boletsi 2007).
- 17 Boletsi uses the translation of the poem by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard in *C. P. Cavafy, Collected Poems*. In the revised version of this essay, the poem is rendered only in English translation, and despite its luminous analysis of the term "barbarians"—including a passage devoted to the Magistrate's mis-translation of the poem—translation is not the focal point, nor is it mentioned in the context of repetition (2013, 139–176).
- 18 "Translation is not the *same* text as the source text but it is not a *different* text either. It deconstructs the opposition between sameness and difference" (Koskinen 1994, 450).
- 19 Of C. P. Cavafy's numerous translations, John Cavafy's translation from 1912 renders the title of the poem as *Awaiting the Barbarians* (2003). The original manuscript is now available in the online Cavafy archives: <https://cavafy.onassis.org/object/u-471/>. In fairness, this translation would not have been able to be used by Coetzee for it appeared in print after the publication of his novel; nonetheless, it is indicative of the inherent instability of translation.
- 20 The close correlation between the guard's report of the death of the old man in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the official report on death of South African activist Steve Biko in police custody, as well as their causes of death (injuries to head), has been raised by Attwell (1993, 74) and others. See also Saunders (2001, 238). Christopher van Wyk's well-known poem "In Detention" (1979) is a response to the bland language of the report, which

South African officials used to cover up deaths of political prisoners. See Coetzee (1986).

- 21 Seidman's father was raised in a Hasidic home and also had a PhD in French history. He managed to successfully negotiate a difficult situation between the French authorities and Jewish refugees at a train station in post-war Paris. His knowledge of both cultures managed to assuage tension as he (mis)translated between them. See Seidman (2006, 1–35).
- 22 For example, the difficult role of interpreters/translators during the Iraq War has been commented upon by critics from theoretical viewpoints as diverse as Bassnett (2011, 100) and Apter (2006, 12–22). In addition, literary translators have also been faced with danger and subject to real physical harm, as in the horrifying case of Hitoshi Igarashi, who was murdered by Islamic militants in 1991 because of his Japanese translation of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*.
- 23 In Lawrence Venuti's account, inspired by Derrida, there is violence in the "very purpose and activity of translation," in reconstituting a foreign text according to the "beliefs, values and representations of the translating language and culture which are always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality..." (Venuti 2008, 14).
- 24 For an analysis of the manner in which translation and interpretation participates in the construction of the narratives of conflict by all parties (warmongers and peace activists alike), see Baker (2006).
- 25 Other readings have regarded the Magistrate's return of the barbarian girl to be inadequate. Wade (2013) sees it as characteristic of the liberal political activity that aims to "restore equilibrium" but is doomed to fail. However, his reading effectively disregards gender and the shift in the balance of power (exemplified by translation) in the scene of the expedition.
- 26 For example, Jakobson's typology has been employed in such a manner in Madelaine Hron's discussion of representations of immigrant experiences in literature. Hron argues for an expansive conception in which "pain can be conceived as a system of signs...the translation of pain may be deemed to be a form of 'intersemiotic translation'" (Hron 2009, 40).
- 27 This point is expressed by Anton Shammas (2017), writing on translation, torture and Palestinian pain. Shammas examines the impossibility of translating Palestinian pain into Hebrew.

- 28 The Magistrate displays a reverence for the land and its natural rhythms and inhabitants. When the Empire's soldiers set fire to the land, he repudiates them for "ravaging the earth, wasting our patrimony" (90).
- 29 Notably, both La Malinche and Pocahontas were silent and illiterate and their stories and myths were shaped and relayed by others (Downs 2008).
- 30 See Conradie (1998) and Wicomb (2002).

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