

Concrete Cushions: Re-Imagining Empire in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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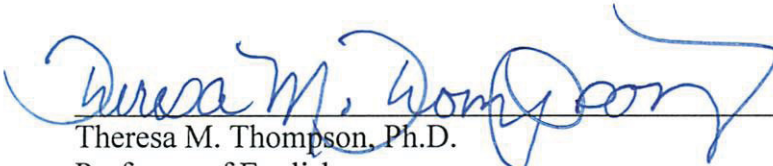
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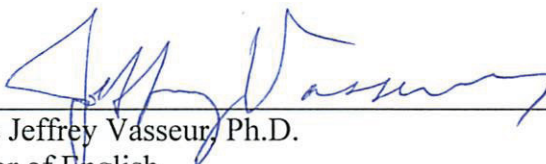
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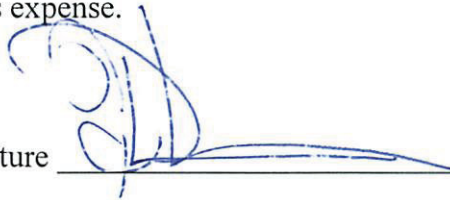
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## ABSTRACT

J. M. Coetzee's 1981 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* chronicles the problematized relationship between a deliberately ambiguous empire and its marginalized subjects. This paper examines the novel's narrative practice through a combination of (post)dialectical lenses: Foucault's heterotopia, Lacanian theory, and various Twentieth Century ideas on indeterminacy, economics, and knowledge. The text begins with the Magistrate as integrated-subject; he is part of the empire. The text ends with the Magistrate as a physical artifact of the empire's history. To resist the empire presented in Coetzee's text, its protagonist—the Magistrate—follows a debilitating trajectory toward alterity (a state of otherness) as means of escaping the Empire/Subject system. The Magistrate 'alters' himself (physically and psychically) by recording his empire's unspeakable 'history.' The Magistrate records a specific expression of his imperial history on his body; to resist empire's hegemony, the Magistrate becomes a physical marker of his empire's (not-spoken-about) brutality.

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## PREFACE

HANDS, do what you're bid;  
Bring the balloon of the mind  
That bellies and drags in the wind  
Into its narrow shed.

– W. B. Yeats, “The Balloon of the Mind”

*Caveat emptor*: the thesis that follows, while serious scholarship, results from my eclectic fascination with words and other interchangeable objects. I revere craft. I profess faith in the innate splendor of each unique word and in each text as an expression constructed from a shared, but finite palette of objects/words. I believe, too, that criticism is also creative. I have no pretense of being an artist; I believe in the words, and I want to find the new ways they put together what I observe and perceive. My thesis spans many ideas and compartmentalizes, fragments, and re-associates those ideas in hopes of describing an alternative lens. Words and Lego bricks (or other interlocking construction blocks) share many similarities. They are modular; they have some synthesis of form and function; and, while finite in possible connections between any given type of word or brick (regardless of language, brand, or construct) capable of producing infinitely complex constructs and apparatuses. Meaning is the slippery substance of a text, and my thesis assumes no specific meaning for Coetzee’s spectacular novella to realize. My atomistic wonder at Coetzee’s craft leaves me enthralled by his mechanics. Behind/between the stories Coetzee and his Magistrate tell, I perceive some indescribable quality that appeals to my sense of aesthetics and captures my insatiable curiosity. The thesis that follows is *heteroglossic*; it is of ‘many tongues’ because Coetzee’s tremendous

novella invokes many places, many spaces, and many voices.<sup>1</sup> The close reading that is the core of my thesis draws on these many voices and many threads; it tries to find the indiscernible middle of Coetzee's technique and craft; it seeks to find out the 'how' and 'why' of the Magistrate's *catharsis*. I highly recommend obtaining some crayons, blank paper, and a finite, but substantive distribution of Lego (or similar) bricks before beginning.

\* \* \*

I cannot express the full depth and breadth of my gratitude to the people and entities that made this thesis possible. I thank my thesis committee: Dr. Theresa M. Thompson, as committee chair, for absorbing this rollercoaster with grace, containing the chaos of my confusion and learning process; Dr. Thomas Jeffrey Vasseur for 18 years of academic and artistic mentoring; and Dr. Michael Stoltzfus for jumping into the abyss so fluidly at the last moment.

Likewise, I wish to thank the VSU English Department, its faculty past and present, and Valdosta State University in general for all the help along the way. Particularly, O. B. "Buzzy" Wynne and Bill Filtz relentlessly encouraged me to pursue not only vocational opportunities but also my love of literature and education. Likewise, I thank Dr. Joshua McKinney for demonstrating "every word matters."

I must also thank my mother, Elizabeth Williams, for her unfailing hope and optimism; my brothers for their ceaseless bickering and competitive natures (I'm joking, mostly); and my father, Emil Dular, for his irrepressible logic. To Thaddeus Agar, lifelong friend and comrade-in-arms against static toys everywhere, thank you for your

---

<sup>1</sup> David Richter provides an excellent condensation of Bakhtin's use of the term *heteroglossia*: "the notion that the meaning of language is socially determined, that utterances reflect social values and depend for their meaning on their relation to other utterances" (576).

interest, insight, and inquiry. I thank Peter Failor for his instructive and constructive comments and proofreading. Finally, I must thank my dear friend, Dr. Suzanne Page (of Houston, Texas), without whose unending, unwavering, and infallible support, I would not have been sane enough to write pages.

Please read the fine print.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Have fun.

To the storytellers.

## Chapter I

### REFLECTED CORPSES: AN INTRODUCTION

Here is history, how it sounds: what  
Do I love, remind me?

— Bin Ramke, “When Culture was Popular”

J. M. Coetzee’s novella *Waiting for the Barbarians* chronicles the problematized relationship between a deliberately ambiguous empire, its subjects, and the other people/persons that empire affects. The text begins with the Magistrate as integrated subject; he is part of the empire: “I am a country magistrate, a responsible official in the service of the Empire, serving out my days on this lazy frontier, waiting to retire” (8). The text ends with the Magistrate as a physical artifact of the empire’s history: “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” (156).<sup>1</sup> To resist the empire presented in the text, the Magistrate chooses alterity as means of escaping the Empire/subject dynamic. Alterity is a conceptually improbable solution; because, as Emmanuel Levinas states in *Alterity and Transcendence*, “The other is alterity” (103).<sup>2</sup> Levinas’s use of ‘alterity’ is transitive both syntactically and conceptually; he invokes the Lacanian other as the inverse of identity (*Écrits* 806-7). Alterity is transactional: the subject transposes part of the self onto the other. Alterity is not the pure other or the big Other. Alterity requires a transaction between the other and the subject/self. Alterity is the post-structural sign for the subject’s transactional relationship with the other; alterity is the

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<sup>1</sup> The Magistrate is talking about a snowman.

<sup>2</sup> The French phrasing is: “l’autre est alterité.”

otherness of the required exchanges between self and other. The Magistrate transforms himself (physically and psychically) into the other by recording a specific expression of his empire's history on his body: the torture of the barbarian girl. The Magistrate becomes a physical document of that specific empire's (not-spoken-about) brutality.

In delivering the Magistrate's story, Coetzee's novella employs two discrete, but paradoxically inseparable, narratives. These dual narratives are also dual texts.<sup>3</sup>

Coetzee's authorial narrative exists simultaneously with the oral narrative of the Magistrate. Each narrative is its own text; a third text exists (perhaps) as the vector-sum of both: the textual meta-narrative. This complex duality allows the novella's earthy prose to evoke multiple discourses, while Coetzee's craft elegantly attunes the reader to the complexities of the texts and their content. Coetzee's poetics, despite the prose narrative most novellas require, smoothly integrate this narrative simultaneity with an economy of language that vibrates with artifice. Coetzee weaves diverse philosophical, political, and social conversations into a cohesive dialogue, while the Magistrate delivers his own oral history in parallel: "It is not a bad snowman" (*Barbarians* 156).

Using a craft-oriented, meta-theoretical approach, this thesis argues that Coetzee's representation of Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is both post-dialectic and emblematic of a peculiar thematic commonality in literature of Empire. More specifically, I argue that Coetzee's narrative technique enables an expressive simultaneity and peculiar thematic concept common to the literature of empire. Through dual narratives, Coetzee's novella places two texts—the authorial meta-narrative and the Magistrate's oral narrative—into a non-dialectical apparatus that challenges Empire.

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<sup>3</sup> Because of the dual primary narratives, I use 'novella' to refer to the book as a whole unit when necessary.

This textual performance also shares expressive qualities with the various manifestations of punk in the late Twentieth Century.<sup>4</sup> My argument requires two defensible premises. First, Empire can be abstracted as a character-like concept. Specifically, I define Empire as that extant pressure to conform present in all communication, all trade, all transactions, and all spaces; even if there is no specific empire, Empire occupies space-time in its entirety, and as such possesses its own power. In this sense, Empire is omnipresent, omnidirectional, and perpetual. Throughout the text, Coetzee develops a meta-narrative involving Empire by delivering the Magistrate's oral history. Second, that while written in prose, Coetzee's authorial language is more like poetry than prose. Critics like to put things, in this case texts, into nice little boxes. Taxonomies and classifications can be useful tools and fleeting comforts. Critics, however, can be over-reliant on the distinction between mode, genre, and type. Coetzee's language is markedly poetic: it possesses rhythmic, symbolic, and allegorical mechanisms that rely on the thickness of words-made-heavy-with-meaning as opposed to the contingency of prose.

In the essay "Verse vs. Prose/Prosody vs. Meter," Lewis Putnam Turco offers a valuable distinction between prose and verse: "more than merely the existence of 'lines' in the genre of 'poetry' distinguishes verse from prose, which are the only *modes* of language in which any *genre* (fiction, drama, poetry) may be written" (249).<sup>5</sup> Turco defines verse as "metered language" and prose as "unmetered language," arguing most readers suffer the "cultural bias that poetry must be written in verse" (250). The inverse of that cultural bias is that fiction must be written in prose. Coetzee's authorial language

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<sup>4</sup> Dick Hebdige does not capitalize punk to invoke the broader socio-political concentration from the individual actors—punks. I maintain Hebdige's convention throughout this thesis, as much as possible.

<sup>5</sup> The emphasis in this quote is Turco's. Substantively, Turco describes several key distinctions between verse and prose in this essay.

is thick with craft and attention reminiscent of language poetry. Coetzee's prose displays a certain kinetic spark that deftly exploits the duality of text and the stories' shared center. Coetzee focuses his narrative through the novella's formal constraints and spatial limitations. This textual limitation requires a narrative structure filled with words-made-heavy-with-meaning. The nameless Magistrate from the nameless outpost on the "lazy frontier" of "the Empire" tells a story about himself and his empire; simultaneously Coetzee delivers the Magistrate's narration through Coetzee's own *well wrought urn*.<sup>67</sup>

... the language of poetry is the language of paradox. Paradox is the language of sophistry, hard, bright, witty; it is hardly the language of the soul. We are willing to allow that paradox is a permissible weapon ... Our prejudices force us to regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational ... apparently the truth with the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox. (Brooks 3)

The poetic density of Coetzee's prose also allows for the structural and thematic deviances that invite a morphological approach to the text. The poetic nature of Coetzee's language is critical to the textual apparatus itself: it is part of the text's expressive quality. Paradox and irreconcilable juxtapositions are the territory that the novella embraces. *Waiting for the Barbarians* contains a dialogue between a man and Empire that occurs in-between the multiplicity of texts: the authorial narrative, the Magistrate's oral narrative, and the meta-narrative of almost all discourse.

Based on those two premises, this thesis examines Coetzee's use of Empire and narrative method to develop a thematic commonality I call \*punk.<sup>8</sup> This introductory chapter develops \*punk and frames the novella for the reading that follows. The break

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<sup>6</sup> "We shape clay into a pot; //but is the emptiness inside." (Tao 11.4-5)

<sup>7</sup> Brooks's title is an allusion to Keat's "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

<sup>8</sup> The \*punk convention I employ throughout this thesis is a portmanteau of punk and the POSIX (Portable Operating System Interface) standard wildcard – the asterisk ( \* ) – for matching character strings recursively.

between Chapters 2 and 3 is mostly procedural and hinges on the plot turn during the Magistrate's quest. When Magistrate and barbarian girl consummate their sexual relationship, the novella's narrative direction shifts. This shift firmly connects *Waiting for the Barbarians* to punk expressions of literature and spectacularly demonstrates the core of the thematic commonality \*punk describes. The second chapter uses \*punk to engage the novella by tracing the Magistrate's development as a punk protagonist. The second chapter also situates the novella within the critical discourse. The third chapter crystallizes the Magistrate as punk (and \*punk) protagonist, particularly as he relates to the barbarian girl romantically. The fourth chapter ties together \*punk and Coetzee's narrative method to illustrate the commonality I see in the literature of Empire. This thesis concerns itself as much with how Coetzee's words come to mean as it is with the theoretical and philosophical discourse's it engages, particularly the notion that *Waiting for the Barbarians* expresses and possesses punk qualities itself.

Punk has specific connotations, both in the popular and in the academic senses of the word. In her essay "Punk Identities in Post-Apartheid South Africa," Laura Basson provides the standard definition of punk: "punk was not only a music and fashion phenomenon of the 1970s, but the embodiment of non-conformity, discontent and a do-it-yourself '(DIY)' culture that has continued to inspire the alternative youth of successive generations" (70). First, legend has it that Pete Townsend was the first person to play a Marshall Amp.<sup>9</sup> Second, Johnny and Dee Dee are both dead. Britain and the United States both had punk movements during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. Punk

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<sup>9</sup> This is actually a popular urban myth that cannot be verified one way or the other. Coincidentally, and most tragically, Jim Marshall—the inventor of the Marshall Amp—died 5 April 2012. The Marshall Amp was the guitar amplifier of choice for punk bands like the Clash and the Ramones. Guitar amplifiers magnify the sound output of the instrument; 'amp' is an extremely broad colloquialism for guitar amplifier. The Marshall Amp is a specific type of guitar amplifier noted for its aggressive and edgy sound.

became an identifiable socio-political phenomenon: a subculture. In *Subculture: the Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige documents punk's origins concisely:

It was during this strange apocalyptic summer that punk made its sensational debut in the music press. In London, especially in the south west and more specifically in the vicinity of the King's Road, a new style was being generated combining elements drawn from a whole range of heterogeneous youth styles. In fact punk claimed a dubious parentage. Strands from David Bowie and glitter-rock were woven together with elements from American proto-punk (the Ramones, the Heartbreakers, Iggy Pop, Richard Hell), from that faction within London pub-rock (the 101-ers, the Gorillas, etc.) inspired by the mod subculture of the 60s, from the Canvey Island 40s revival and the Southend R&B bands (Dr. Feelgood, Lew Lewis, etc.), from northern soul and from reggae. (36)

The Marshall Amp matters because music drove the emergence of this subculture. Punk had a soundtrack and it was aggressive. While Major Tom's spaceship knew which way to go, the Clash declared "London Calling."

More importantly, punk was and still is expressive. Punk combines the intensely personal and the intensely political. As Hebdige notes, "The tensions between dominant and subordinate groups can be found reflected in the surface of subculture – in the styles made up of mundane objects which have double meanings" (2). Punk embraces alterity; punk chooses alterity as means of resisting hegemonic structures and systems. As a subculture, punk resists hegemony through style: the point of conflict and the resolution, if it "magically appears" are reached "obliquely" (17). Fusing Roland Barthes and Jean Genet, Hebdige suggests that punk's resistance lies in rejecting the polarity of the Empire/subject dynamic: "No subculture has sought with more grim determination than the punks to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms, nor to bring down upon itself such vehement disapproval" (19). Punk is self-critical; punk is rebellious; punk bleeds.

Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony is central here. The section, "On Italian History," in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*, describes cultural hegemony as the social inertia present in the material apparatus: power and wealth rises from the subaltern to the hegemonic (212-220). Hegemony, in this sense, is Empire: the system gravitates towards the mass at its center. Power consolidates power; wealth accumulates wealth. The power associations are tautological. Indeed, Gramsci's definition of the subaltern is also instructional and aligns nicely with punk, particularly as revised by Gayatri Spivak: "everybody thinks the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed, for Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie" (de Kock 45).

The word subaltern is a subversive idiom: Gramsci hyper-imposes the power dynamics of social constructs and groups onto the relational hierarchy of military ranks. Contemporary uses filter Gramsci through Spivak and Edward Saïd's cultural structuralism in *Orientalism* (Richter 1206). Consequently, as Spivak states, "Everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern—a space of difference" (de Kock 45). There's an actual historical simultaneity here; a certain hybridity in punk's deployment of subaltern expression. While Saïd and Spivak and the cultural theorists developed subaltern in the critical sense, punk chose alterity and subaltern spaces as sites of resistance and knowing. Punk takes the notion of the subaltern and runs with it—soaks it into its bones and sublimates alterity into its expressions. Punk ties alterity to the geography of thought and self: "Punk reproduced the entire sartorial history of post-war working-class youth cultures in 'cut up' form, combining elements which had originally belonged to completely different epochs" (Hebdige 37). Punk rejects the Empire's requirement to visibly conform. Punk locates

resistance in choosing alterity. Punk trades inclusion in the sociocultural norm for expressive individuality: “In punk, alienation assumed an almost tangible quality. It could almost be grasped. It gave itself up to the cameras in ‘blankness,’ the removal of expression (see any photograph of any punk group), the refusal to speak and be positioned” (27).

Punk also involves a fluid, perhaps modular, concept of space. Personal space, institutional space, living space, performance space, etc., all overlap and combine. Boundaries become sites of resistance. Public spaces become liminal. In “Betwixt and Between: the Liminal Period in Rites of Passage,” Victor Turner defines the liminal as the threshold of transitional spaces. The liminal is a fluid barrier; it is, according to Turner, “a realm that has few or none of the attributes of past or coming state” (94). Turner develops the liminal in the context of an anthropological study of rites of passage, but the concept extends nicely: liminality can be abstracted more fully onto geography. Transitional geography—swamps, forests, caves, water (bodies and flowing), deserts, savannahs, steppes—displays liminality; these in-between spaces become social apparatuses. Transitional geography drifts: swamps bubble, forest creep, caves delve, water erodes, etc. Rites of passage are liminal transactions—transitional exchanges (96-98). Achieving alienation is the punk rite of passage.

Rites of passage also take place in liminal spaces, specifically the heterotopias Michel Foucault describes in his lecture, “Of Other Spaces.” Foucault defines heterotopias as counter-sites:

There are also ... real places – places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society – which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented,

contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to discern their location in reality. (“Other” 24)

Foucault further identifies six principles to which all heterotopias adhere: first, heterotopias are universal; second, heterotopias can be repurposed; third, heterotopias can juxtapose several (even incompatible) sites in a “single real space;” fourth, heterotopias associate themselves most often with specific “slices in time;” fifth, heterotopias are penetrable but not always accessible; and sixth, heterotopias either affirm the “desert of the real” or heterotopias project an ‘othered’ space (23-27). In the essay, “Foucault, Borges, Heterotopia: Producing Knowledge in Other Spaces,” Robert J. Topinka crystallizes heterotopias as “spaces that provide an alternate space of ordering while paradoxically remaining both separate from and connected to all other spaces” (55). Heterotopias are both inherently liminal and hyper-connective: they function as associative apparatuses that bind even the irreconcilable together.

There’s a problematic intersect between ontology, epistemology, history, and ‘text’ in this syrup of structural theory, cultural geography, and nihilism. Foucault’s heterotopias possess both hybridity and simultaneity, and the idea complicates itself in its origination. Intangible, but certainly concrete; loosely defined, but discrete; physical, but incorporeal; heterotopias are simultaneously conceptual and actual, just like the space society inhabits: “The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time, and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws [sic] at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space” (23).<sup>10</sup> Heterotopias occupy multiple functions and roles; they come in various forms and expressions; they exist fluidly, much

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<sup>10</sup> The misspelling of ‘gnaws’ here is either Foucault’s or the translators; I’m not convinced it’s significant but I do preserve it in case I missed something.

like the swamps of South Georgia.<sup>11</sup> Heterotopia is an a-structural sign: the thing it signifies cannot be real. According to Foucault, structuralism is part of the ‘procession of simulacra:’ “structuralism does not entail a denial of time; it involves a certain manner of dealing with what we call time and what we call history” (23). Foucault represents Time and History as simulations: hegemonic thought-constructs give the illusion of time while obfuscating its actuality.

In the movie *The Matrix*, when Neo (Keanu Reeves) first sees the actuality outside the Matrix construct, Morpheus (Lawrence Fishburne) says, “Welcome to the desert of the real.” Morpheus, like Slavoj Žižek’s seminal collection of essays *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, refers to Baudrillard’s Lacanian re-configuration of perception in the text *Simulations and Simulacra*.<sup>12</sup> The overlap of theory here is molasses-like: Baudrillard, Foucault, and Žižek all realign Lacan’s ‘structure of the symbolic’ as an anti-dialectical apparatus: imaginary effects “are related to the symbolic chain that binds and orients them” (*Écrits* 11); the real is the actual *Thing* reified into “a trait by which [the seekers] might be able to distinguish that object from all others” (25); and the symbolic—the place “where the indestructible persistence of desire is situated” (52). In *How to Read Lacan*, Žižek crystallizes the ‘structure of the symbolic:’ “the symbolic acts like a yardstick against which I can measure myself” (9).<sup>13</sup> Thought and expression are governed by unstated, hegemonic rules in the various systems human beings navigate.

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<sup>11</sup> There’s a neat aspect to the swamp’s (we’re mostly talking about the Okefenokee Swamp) persistence in South Georgia: whenever you stop using the land, the swamp creeps its way back to the surface; the water and life crawl back to the edges of civilization.

<sup>12</sup> The name Morpheus is a combination of ‘morph’—to change—and ‘Orpheus’—who went into Hades and crossed the River Styx to retrieve Eurydice. How delightful that Orpheus was a storyteller. Tite Kubo’s manga *Bleach* provides a fantastic contemporary handling of the Orphic myth in the ‘Soul Society’ Arc.

<sup>13</sup> Žižek’s text *How to Read Lacan* is a brief, but invaluable introduction (through narrative examples) to Lacan’s key concepts and formulations.

When Neo and Morpheus exit the physical apparatus (the computer network) of the Matrix, the visual separation between something normal (to the audience) and something post-apocalypse is staggering. Actuality (the real) is barren, scorched, and devastated. The rules within the Matrix no longer apply. Inside the Matrix, rules relegate certain thoughts and utterances to unmentionable spaces. These rules obviate the animal actuality of being human (*HTRL* 10-11). Heterotopias become spaces in which these rules and their consequences collide with indeterminacy of time, space, and history. These spaces are identifiable, but their locations are fuzzy: “Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (“Other” 24). Perception is simulacra; places of knowing are beyond definitive perception: they are heterotopias where knowledge comes into being, exists, and disappears:

[Abstraction] is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are no longer those of the Empire, but ours. The desert of the real itself. (Baudrillard 1)

The punk looks at the desert of the real and says, “That’s where I thrive.” \*punk encodes the emptiness of consumerist materialism in its expressions: the opportunity-costs of alterity include isolation, prejudice of the subaltern, and a magnetic impulse that attracts conflict. The “desert of the real” exudes abjection; the actualities that inhabit the desert of the real connect to nothing: “they were already purged of their death, and better than when they were alive” (8). Rather, because of the heterotopic filter and mechanistic nihilism of this particular space, actualities only reflect simulacra back at the observer:

“The simulacrum is never that which hides the truth – it is the truth that hides there is none. / The simulacrum is true. – Ecclesiastes” (1).

The staggering emptiness of the simulacra is abjection incarnate. Julia Kristeva’s text, *Powers of Horror*, inscribes Baudrillard’s semiotic void on the self—on person(s) and subject(s):

There looms, within abjection, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. (1)

Abjection renders the inevitability of the sign’s emptiness onto the subject. It extends beyond otherness, even beyond alterity: abjection is the aphanisis caused by touching the actual, by breaching the threshold of Baudrillard’s desert. The punk is fantastic because the punk seeks that contact with the other.

Punk expresses desire and resistance transactionally; punk engenders a marketplace of expression: an economy of thought. Punk’s congregation of consumerist, materialist, and expressive resistance needs an audience; it needs someone to receive the expressive text of punk. Alterity, after all, requires the other in the binary pair of the self-other to exist. In the 1949 text *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, Ludwig von Mises defines praxeology as a general theory of human behavior using the poles of desire and fulfillment as the operative boundaries for all choices (8-10). Choice presumes some degree of mutual exclusivity between options—decisions between possibilities that cannot be synthesized: “All ends and all means, both material and ideal issues, the sublime and the base, the noble and the ignoble, are arranged in a single row and subjected to a decision which picks out one thing and sets aside another” (3). Dialectical material obviates choice; hegemony denies choice; Empire destroys choice. The

reification of the self occurs because the physical trappings of consumer materialism obfuscate and confuse the animal actuality of living with its various simulations. Commodities are the simulacra people trade; commodities are markers for value, but they neither possess nor present any inherent value. Commodities are the perfect “circulatory operators” in a system that exchanges illusions of the real (Baudrillard 18). Punk is inherently economic; everything in the “desert of the real” is economic: Baudrillard recognizes the commodified though as endemic to Empire. Significantly, market-spaces are heterotopic and sites of knowledge: “heterotopias make legible the ground on which knowledge is built by complicating that ground” (61). The “desert of the real” contains actuality and produces knowledge, but it only permits fleeting access to its contents. The resources of knowledge originate in Baudrillard’s ‘desert,’ but access restricts supply. The demand curve is not real; supply is displaced by Empire’s mass and controlled by Empire’s whim. Commodified thought is not free. Opportunity costs become moderators in the dynamic of exchange: choice precludes the mutually exclusive pair and exists in its own in-between-ness.

Through choice, heterotopias intensify and reconfigure knowledge by demonstrating reproducible, repeatable outcomes; they assist in the decentralization of political, intellectual, and material knowledge; they allow new knowledge to alter hegemonic values by eschewing normal phenomenological pressures.<sup>14</sup> The marketplace of thought enables an ontological genesis that expresses itself as resistance to hegemonic authority and transactional control. Knowledge-spaces become sites of resistance and

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<sup>14</sup> The Internet is the obvious heterotopia of the Digital Age.

distribution.<sup>15</sup> If markets exist to trade thought-objects as commodities, then language and thought also precede Empire; and Empire complicates everything. Empire's history, politics, and -isms complicate the spaces they infect. Omnipresent authority (even in its most abstract form), serial and intrinsic evil (perhaps 'not goodness'), and existential persistence dominate popular expressions of Empire in the Twentieth Century. Alterity encodes itself in isolation and the impossibility of self-reconciliation with Empire. To resist Empire is 'aphanisis:' self-obliteration through transactional and deleterious encounters with the pure other (Lacan, *FC* 222). Empire is that extant pressure to conform present in all communication, all trade, all transactions, and all spaces; even if there is no specific empire, Empire occupies space-time in its entirety, and it brings its own power.

Empire is a dirty word. Empire possesses a certain cadence: the slow rhythm of hegemonic behemoths drumming themselves into being and then passing into the reverberations of history. Because Empire exists, it simultaneously displays the threat of force and exerts its social, economic, and military will on the entities, peoples, and things around it; the hegemony of Empire is tautological, inasmuch as hegemony is something that one observes. Empire is. Empire exists. Empire persists. Through peculiar and curious power apparatuses and force mechanisms, Empire pulses with its own organic energy; it creates and consumes anything it needs to continue. Empire is the perpetual motion of social and material phenomenology (in the broadest sense). Empire thrums with disparate and competing energies; it tears at itself and its frontiers. Empire thrives

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<sup>15</sup> I'm well aware of the "Marketplace of Ideas" concept that originates in American intellectualism—Oliver Wendell Holmes being the individual responsible for that particular coinage. I do not, however, feel that Holmes's utterance quite expresses the same level of commodification for thoughts and the idea of thoughts as objects.

in spaces conflict and the unknown (the unknowable) inhabit; Empire reaches into such liminal spaces precisely because Empire beats back the underbrush of societal limitations and plods its way forward. Empire lumbers onward, even if the name or specifics of a given empire pass.

At the edges of Empire—or “a galaxy far, far away” or “a long time ago” or “once upon a time”—in those spaces where things are neither Manichean nor perfectly indeterminate, the places where the ambiguity of boundaries and borders cast shadows, Empire has few requirements: maintenance, barbarians, frontiers. The (in the popular sense) postmodern response to the Twentieth Century’s dissipating boundaries and frontiers produced punk (and all subsequent iterations).<sup>16</sup> \*punk is a mode of literature in the way that romance and pulp noir are modes of fiction. \*punk is something material; it is a vibrant collection of thought objects that work as a thing in a sense completely distinct from the consumerist reality of commodified information. That said, even something as distinctly fringe as \*punk borrows from established literary methods and the structures of its colonizing Empire. \*punk is an ontological response to the hegemonic forces encoded in language and literary arts, because language is central to our preservation of knowledge, values, and systems. Incidentally, the notion that \*punk is literary requires a somewhat broader sense of texts and literature: \*punk is, quite specifically, an ontological response to disappearing frontiers through various types of performances. These performances include appearance modification: liberty spikes, piercings, alternative fashion, etc.; these “things” derive their meaning from the display and presentation to an audience. As a mode of expression, \*punk has its seeds in the

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<sup>16</sup> The various types and “sub-genres” of punk (steampunk, magepunk, fuelpunk, cyberpunk, etc.), constitute differing deployments of this particular mode; e.g., William Gibson’s novel Neuromancer represents the original work of “cyberpunk.”

dystopian traditions of Modernist fiction and the twentieth century's spectacular intimacy with Empire. \*punk has a driving bass line and a soundtrack in the popular and musical expressions of punk. \*punk possesses a point of origination somewhere in the history of Western thought (the Enlightenment or dialectic itself, perhaps); that point, however, does not coincide with the emergence of the label punk or its iterative social and popular movements.

\*punk is an evolution of expressive ontology; it is the material manifestation of ideas that evolved in the liminal spaces of phenomenology. Punk is the product of Empire; punk is, in point of fact, the product of very specific imperial history: the Twentieth Century's physical consumption of all non-technological frontiers. The Twentieth Century, which we can now discuss in the past tense, exhausted all terrestrial frontiers. This absence of physical frontier (the most primal liminal space) effected an abrogation of the necessary unknown and drove expansionist pressures along new trajectories. Empire evolved new frontiers; and in these new frontiers, Empire deployed new mechanisms to sustain itself. Territory-based military empires played second string to the rising economic titans. Currency, consumerism, and planned obsolescence became instruments of oppression and sublimated warfare: entire subject groups have been pacified by the newest, the shiniest, and the always next best thing. Persons and other entities created, produced, and enabled new methods of expressing their own liminality, individuality, and conformity within any hegemonic system. As technological and intellectual frontiers replaced physical boundaries, progress obviated liminal geographies; artistic and literary expressions of identity gravitated toward new expressions of our

instated knowledge and beliefs. Agents constructed new spaces to replace the frontiers consumed by Empire.

Accordingly, while ideas may transmit themselves following Hegelian principles and phenomenology, dialectic fails to account for all the disparate and unexpected possibilities all these innovated heterotopia display. \*punk, on the other hand, occupies the multitudinous territories that constitute history, narrative and literature. Rather than providing synthesis, \*punk explores the simultaneity that hegemonic regression places on individuals. \*punk breaks dialectic and allows a Foucauldian reimagining of history through the concept of location-as-memory. Spatial-objects and concepts are dynamic, but not in the sense they metamorphose or transmogrify themselves into something different. Rather, the heterotopic insight projects indeterminacy in a very quantum manner:

... despite all the technologies for appropriating space, despite whole networks of knowledge that enables us to delimit or to formalize it, contemporary space is perhaps still not entirely desanctified ... And perhaps our life is still governed by a certain number of oppositions that remain inviolable ... These are oppositions that we regard as simple givens: for example between family space and social space, between cultural space and useful space, between the space of leisure and that of work. All these are still nurtured by the hidden presence of the sacred. (“Other” 23)

These ‘inviolable oppositions’ are topographic markers for spaces in which \*punk is possible; spaces wherein value oscillates between two asymptotic voids. This makes \*punk; it can transition to, move between, orbit, bypass, or resonate with any such ‘inviolable opposition’—any fixed set of limiting values that need not be binary to \*punk.

Historically speaking, the British, Ottoman, Russian, Soviet, and American empires carved up the colonial world Europe’s Age of Exploration created and placed

their own colonies (sometimes) on top of already colonized or recently “liberated” locales. In some cases, former colonies (the United States) transmogrified into emergent empires while their colonizers ‘declined’ (Britain).<sup>17</sup> The (post/trans)colonial narrative of the Twentieth Century is not post- as much as it transient: Empire passes through the Twentieth Century, not over it. Colonies are always colonial. Empire and colonization do not cease (did not cease); rather, the process of hegemonic growth and contraction follows its own phenomenological path into the paradoxically indeterminate and predictable future. New empires replace old empires; new hegemonies replace old hegemonies; and, yet, these “old” things continue to sound their own cadence into the future. \*punk exists in the liminal spaces and places where Empire and hegemony simultaneously possess too much reach and not enough force.

The Twentieth Century narrative suggests that informational heterotopias produce resistance by liberating information.<sup>18</sup> As such, \*punk manifests in expressions of the desire to push back against the power structure, its agents, and hegemonic force. The “desert of the real” is perpetual; the desire to access its contents is infinite; \*punk is what happens when expression mirrors the inevitable truth of Empire’s monolith: “nothing moved except / the way it was already moving; / nothing spoke / except the voice in back of time;—” (“Loose Sugar” 4-7).

\* \* \*

Somewhere cold, it began as much like this as you would never imagine. Last night (any ‘last night’), I walked out of my home, got into my car, and drove with no

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<sup>17</sup> Decline here is mostly in terms of visible military presence, hence the scare quotes. The British Empire still dominates much of the world through its control of non-American English language and trade agreements.

<sup>18</sup> The Arab Spring, particularly Egypt’s recent regime, comes to mind as a prominent expression of this narrative.

fixed destination. I'm fortunate that my part of the world still has long stretches of smooth asphalt without street lights, houses, or strip malls (even if those spaces are getting smaller). The roads here allow for the 'in between-ness' something like a monster might need. At dawn, when the sun decides to amble over the tree line, there's a peculiar greenness from the fog of late March when mornings are still cool enough to be cheerful.

\* \* \*

A person (or agent) leaves their home (or another fixed place) and employs their mode of transportation to go from 'the place where they are' to 'the place where they currently are not.' The above abstraction is, for the most part, the morphological core of travel. Someone starts in one place and goes to another. The individual translocates their physical form between positions through some method of locomotion. The tale, syntagmatically presented, can be reduced as such: an agent moves from the point of origin to the point of termination; however, a paradigmatic presentation of a tale complicates the 'words as things' with 'words as signs and structures:' the clerk drove his car to work. These structurally parallel statements present very different meanings, because the syntagmatic structure can be extracted from the paradigmatic expression (Austin 8). Tales are necessarily systematic acts designed to transmit meaning through a combined series of signs. Although persons, places, and objects can be reduced to procedural values; and the various things in a text can follow certain patterns or display certain organizational principles; the total effect of any text relies on its ability to transmit meaning. Meaning is slippery. Meaning is transactional: meaning is the result of some

exchange between author and audience.<sup>19</sup> The author's tools are tropes, schemes, and literary devices; the author's colors are history, time, space, and approximations of the audience's experiential knowledge. The author attempts to transmit meaning with the text as his medium. In this, the text is a relational device that instates itself between author and audience. Mieke Bal's study of craft and form, *Narratology*, defines a narrative text as "a text in which a narrative agent tells a story" (16). A story is a thing,<sup>20</sup> in that a text is possibility manifested as creative or mimetic expression. The practice of narratology primarily considers the tale as an object and focuses on a methodological analysis of the tale's constituent thought-objects. By comparing similar paradigmatic structures and devices, narratology can permit morphological analysis of how a story's structures and mechanisms transmit meaning. It is a synthetic combination of syntagmatic ideals and paradigmatic practices: a dialectic resolution for 'how' a text comes to mean (12-3).

Of particular interest in any tale are the text's characters, for "the functions of the *dramatis personae* are basic components of the tale" (Propp 21). What a character 'does,' that is action, situates itself in multiple relationships; action enters motion, consequence, and motive into the narrative framework. Propp, however, cautions care when abstracting a text's actors and defining their actions: "First of all, definition should in no case depend on the personage who carries out the function. ... Secondly, an action cannot be defined apart from its place in the course of narration" (21). While Propp's particular brand of hyper-technical morphological formalism seems dated, it remains

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<sup>19</sup> Texts are not limited to print examples in this paper, so author can be taken to represent the general creator information that is exchanged with an audience (e.g., a film, television show, monologue, performance). Likewise, the audience comprises all recipients of a given text, intentional or otherwise.

<sup>20</sup> What a gloriously slippery word to capture the ontological (as quantum) incoherence of stories and texts in the Digital Age.

useful: Coetzee's narratives' simultaneity requires some way of measuring each narrative against the other. Likewise, because concepts are characterized within the novella's textual methods, Propp's reductions of the *dramatis personae* in a story to their actions invites the use of Iris Murdoch's narrative philosophy, as developed in the essays "The Sublime and the Good" and "The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited." Textual events, performances, and actions are contextual, defined by their locations in and relationship to the course of events, images, and expressions Coetzee's texts produce ("Good" 206-8). More importantly, characters can be abstracted into types only insofar as they are part of the predictable patterning and structure of events (Propp 115). Morphology is reductive, but the principle is sound: similar structures perform similar functions. This narratological examination presupposes a bit of Iris Murdoch's contingency: "The modern novel, the serious novel, does tend toward two extremes: either it is a tight metaphysical object ... or it is a loose journalistic epic" ("Revisited" 278). Accordingly, the "good" novel in the sense Murdoch describes lies in being between the polarized extremes of expression.

The fantastic thing about texts, then, is their extant possibility.<sup>21</sup> Texts are liminal apparatuses that transport/translocate/transubstantiate (communicate) meaning between the most terrifying space of all: the space that exists between persons. Texts are the vehicles by which meaning and ideas transport themselves. Indeed, a specific text possesses the simultaneity of being 'all the things it is' and 'all the things it is not.' In an eerily economic way, texts are the commodified products that the raw materials of 'ideas' and 'thought objects' allow. Because meaning is transactional; that is, it requires both the

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<sup>21</sup> I use fantastic here in the sense Murdoch invokes the Kantian sublime: "...reason imposes upon us as a law the comprehension of what is before as totality" (Murdoch 208).

performative utterance of the author and the receptive decoding of the audience; meaning requires that a text present itself as a reified and transportable object that can be exchanged for some determinable value (Austin 144-45). While the value may not be decipherable to anyone outside a given exchange, that value can be expressed in some normalized manner—as currency in the economy of thought. Tales and texts allow people to transact an exchange of thought and ideas the same way we contract services and produce complex machinery as means of transacting solutions to material needs and desires. To produce a text is to make meaning something real, tangible, and portable. In this economic model of thought, ‘texts-as-objects’ possess some degree of fungibility: they are traded; meaning, however, constitutes a primarily individual transaction limited by the fuzziness of language and communication. Texts present an approximation of meaning; the recipient decodes an approximation of understanding; and some indescribable vagueness makes it significant. This particular ‘vagueness’ might be what Iris Murdoch reads in Kant’s *achtung*, in the sense that it generates experiential knowledge by confronting the Sublime:

Whereas beauty is not connected with emotion, the sense of the sublime is. Strictly, whereas objects may be beautiful, no object is ever sublime. It is rather that certain aspects of nature occasion feelings of sublimity in us. Whereas beauty results from harmony between imagination and understanding, sublimity results from a conflict between imagination and reason. (“Good” 208-9)

Or, more dialectically speaking, this vagueness could be *jouissance*: “I want to tell you, too, that after the freedom of a state of grace there also comes the freedom of imagination. As this very moment I am free” (Lispector 75). *Jouissance* is the empty satisfaction produced by some interminable loss ... almost. Even in French, *jouissance* serves only as an approximate marker of confrontation with the ‘self-reflected-as-corpse.’

*Achtung* and *jouissance* express the acquisition of some specific and spectacular knowledge produced by short circuiting the boundaries of perception and intuition.

*Achtung* and *jouissance* are liminal truths: they exist in a space where things can be true despite their inherent and obvious contradictions to the axiomatic framework that produced them. In approximating these truths, texts gain significance; significance precedes valuation.<sup>22</sup> Valuation leads to commodification. Commodification leads to the “desert of the real” and then all hell breaks loose: “...the hero is alone, with no company, or with only other parts of himself for company” (“Revisited” 279).

In the article “A Further Study of Present Tense Narration: The Absentee Narratee and Four-Wall Present Tense in J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Disgrace*,” Matt DelConte explores the deviance in the novella’s simultaneous voices and narrations. Coetzee’s authorial method relies on ‘absentee narration,’ which DelConte defines as “the illusion (maintained by both narrator and author) that someone within the story world is listening to the narrative even though the structure does not accommodate that someone” (433). The Magistrate tells his story to someone, somewhere, some when. The magistrate’s audience is not necessarily any reader or the author. Simultaneously, Coetzee narrates the meta-fiction and meta-narrative with Empire. Coetzee’s narrative deviance creates a novella that is two texts in a binary system; both of which narrate in the present tense.

Present tense narration complicates storytelling: “it eliminates the time between experiencing and narrating, it all but prevents retrospective analysis” (429). Coetzee’s novella must engage history, but its narrative mode disallows the historical: the

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<sup>22</sup> There are any number of reasons a text can be valuable to a given recipient; significance is simply a broad individual economic motive.

Magistrate lives the story he tells; Coetzee tells the story the Magistrate lives. This duality produces a ‘parallax gap,’ which Slavoj Žižek defines as “the confrontation between two closely linked perspectives between which no neutral common ground is possible” (*PV* 5). The Magistrate’s narrative resists the depressing totality of Coetzee’s meta-narrative with the humanity of his characters; Coetzee’s meta-narrative complicates the Magistrate’s story-telling with the mass of actuality. History, meaning, and all the complex discourses that go with Empire happen somewhere in-between. Žižek configures the ‘parallax gap’ and ‘short-circuit’ as exegetical tools in *The Parallax View*:

A short circuit occurs when there is a faulty connection in the network—faulty, of course, from the standpoint of the network’s smooth functioning. Is not the shock of short-circuiting, therefore, one of the best metaphors for a critical reading? Is not one of the most effective critical procedures to cross wires that do not usually touch: to take a major classic (text, author, notion) and read it in a short-circuiting way, through the lens of a ‘minor’ author, text, or conceptual apparatus (‘minor’ should be understood here in Deleuze’s sense: not ‘of lesser quality,’ but marginalized, disavowed by hegemonic ideology, or dealing with a ‘lower,’ less dignified topic. (ix)

Juxtaposing Coetzee’s authorial narrative with the Magistrate’s oral narrative ‘short-circuits’ both texts. The authorial narrative and the Magistrate’s oral narrative hyper-impose upon each other; the dual narratives orbit a shared space; they vibrate with each other’s gravity. The truth of both narratives exists in the shared space in-between.

There are two remaining elements of postmodern theory to discuss. First, Jacques Derrida’s undecidability is foundational for \*punk and punk exegesis. Undecidables are those things which resist situation in the fixed poles of established dichotomies.

Undecidability is the always vibrating state of the undecidable: the spectres, the ghosts, the apparitions, the zombies—the things which possess uncomfortable simultaneity.

Derrida develops this idea in *Plato’s Pharmacy*: “this *pharmakon*, this ‘medicine,’ this

philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its ambivalence” (70). Self-abjection assumes undecidability willfully for the actor. Likewise, punk embraces this sort of self-imposed liminality: the idea that becoming other also inscribes undecidability in the self. Slippery is perhaps harder to confine than insurgent.

Second, the \*punk short circuit in *Waiting for the Barbarians* allows the Magistrate access to the “desert of the real.” After the consummation, the Magistrate’s trajectory through the novella’s multiple texts turns his body into a historical document and focuses the meta-narrative development on the perpetuity of Empire. \*punk short-circuits expressions of rigid duality (e.g., Empire/subject; self/other; polar dichotomies in general). \*punk is not synthetic. \*punk is not dialectic. \*punk is descriptive of the commonalities punk and other literatures of empire share. \*punk is not a new concept; the concept exists and predates this thesis. \*punk, rather, is a sign that points to expressions of alterity as rebellion and resistance.

Empire requires frontiers, barbarians and maintenance; that is, Empire cannot exist without unknown spaces (frontiers), the other (barbarians), and hegemony (maintenance). \*punk manifests in the chasms between Empire and Individual—spaces where no possibility of self-actualization exists. \*punk creates alterity and champions individuality at the cost of inclusion in the hegemonic socio-political collective. To this end, \*punk represents intentional self-obliteration: the punk (as person) distances oneself from the “normalized forms” of society through body modification, behavioral modification, and value non-conformity (insomuch that Empire allows non-conformity). The punk is abject, marginal, and isolated from the social collective. The punk chooses

to be the other: an object onto which society projects all manner of negative values and imagery.

The economics of Empire and the commodification of thought complicate this notion of the punk and all things \*punk. Consumerism commodified punk (subsumed punk) into the hegemonic system. The masses accepted punk as a superficial set of trappings and settings; the punk is no longer a strict other; being punk is no longer rebellion. Empire made punk useful to itself in the absence of real barbarians and real 'parts unknown.' \*punk, on the other hand, persists as an expression of the liminality and undecidability critical to negotiating the contradictory desires of independence and inclusion. \*punk is a peculiar narratological expression that is practiced throughout literature; it is not limited to specific mechanical modes of arranging of words (prose or verse); nor is \*punk confined to particular genres or literary types. \*punk is expression of the knowledge gained by imagining new spaces and modes to resist existing creative hegemonies.

## Chapter II

### CLOCKWORK OSCILLATIONS: RE-THINKING EMPIRE

#### OUTSIDE DIALECTIC

She first told him he couldn't stay because he would  
not wear dark glasses and she did not like to look at  
the mess he had made in his eye sockets.

— Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*

Normally, a close reading would begin with something in the physical artifact's text; this \*punk reading starts with what's missing. Coetzee's authorial narrative, the Magistrate's oral narrative, and the novella's meta-narrative discourse all fail to name the specific empire in the novella. None of the narration reveals any "real world" site to encumber the text. There is geography, but it is descriptive of the narrative world the text inhabits. The events in the novella happen somewhere; the conversations take place in some space; the action has location. Coetzee (as author), however, leaves almost all of the details out. Ayoabami Kehinde argues that Coetzee employs "ambivalent mimesis:" an allegorical mode that combines realism and fabulation (71). Through allegory, Coetzee obviates most agency and moral questions surrounding authorship: "[Coetzee's] novels do not seek to charge history but to dramatise ... dissonance in society (sic)" (71). Allegory is the ambiguous paint on Coetzee's already ambiguous hyper-narrative: "The novel ... is structured as an allegory; and allegory is a kind of language in which a text's literal meaning is foreign to itself" (Saunders 223). Before a single word can be read, Coetzee's craft already encumbers the text with the absence of specificity. Coetzee foregrounds language by rendering it poetically, paradoxically, non-specifically. In "The

Presence of Absence: Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," Lance Olsen argues language functions as a first-order simulacrum:

One can argue that they [the Magistrate and Joll] are speaking the *same* language, that everyone in the text is speaking the same language, that everyone's means of expression, of humanity, of individuality, of personality, of identity, has been deactivated, neutralized. We are in a monologue with nowhere to go, nothing to say, no one to say it to, a web of linguistic misfirings that disintegrate before anyone has heard, a field of blankness and a desolation that there has to be such blankness. (56)

Because the events happen in a someplace that is no place, the absence of identifying markers inundates not only the setting of the novella, but also its characters. The absence that Coetzee intentionally creates simply reinforces the spatial metaphors that drive personal conflict and drama throughout the narrative suspension (Jolly 71).<sup>23</sup> *Waiting for the Barbarians*, even if you focus on a specific narrative text within the novella, tells a story that happens somewhere without a name to a nameless Magistrate of a nameless Empire in a nameless time. The characters, the space, and the narrative are all identifiable forms made abstract: they are simulations. Appropriately, this means the texts are not literally expressive. The texts present a sort of quantum snapshot of the Empire/subject dynamic and \*punk's vibrating resistance to it.

Coetzee preconfigures the textual apparatus of the novella as a heterotopia. The allegorical engine, which relies on the absence of identifying markers, manifests the combinatorial liminality of everywhere and nowhere: the places without names where monsters really do live in our reflections. This lack of structural coherence, in the semiotic sense, creates a void in the narrative suspension: there are molecules which neither adhere nor dissolve nor float or sink or interact at all with the rest of the texts. It is in this 'parallax gap' that the \*punk genesis emerges; it is this expression of "the desert

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<sup>23</sup> I use suspension here in the chemical sense.

of the real” that mirrors the novella before it speaks that meaning resides. Coetzee’s craft opens up connections to the simultaneity this absence possesses. \*punk is the sign; Coetzee’s art is the signifier that possesses quantum uncertainty. The dialectical resolution of the structural is already impossible. The text must produce a solution. The hyper-narrative method Coetzee deploys allows for a comparative reading against the texts themselves. The allegorical engine of the texts infuses the narrative threads and meta-narrative with ambivalence and undecidability. Without identifying markers, the novella broadcasts its \*punk nature: the text’s allegorical engine directly engages the political and historical encumbrance that informs it without ever addressing anything by name or directly (Birks 13-4). The novella ignores the very thing it rejects by abstracting Empire and hegemony.

Fortunately, Coetzee also broadcasts the comparative apparatus—the \*punk oscillation between two discrete narratives—with his titular allusion C. P. Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians.” In “Barbaric Encounters: Rethinking Barbarism in C. P. Cavafy’s and J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*,” Maria Boletsi delivers a deep comparative reading of Coetzee’s novella and Cavafy’s poem through the lens of J. L. Austin’s performative theory (as modified by the post-structuralist insights of Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler) (72). Boletsi’s reading relies on the barbarian’s role as the institutional other of civilization:

Consequently, the term barbarian entails a collective construction of the other in a way that helps define the civilized subject itself—by specifying its negative limits. In this construction, the other is supposedly invalidated because it can never speak back and question its construction (its language would not be understood). The barbarian thus appears as an abjected outsider, which, according to Judith Butler, is always inside the subject “as its own founding repudiation.” (68)

Boletsi invokes the multiple discourses that encumber Coetzee's text: the discourse of intertextuality; the discourse of the self and other; the discourse of the colonizer and the colonized. Acknowledging the self-implicating status of the author—Coetzee as white South African<sup>24</sup>—Boletsi examines the relational construct between 'Civilization' and the 'Uncivilized.' This dynamic perpetuates the sort of societal blindness that impairs the Magistrate's personal relationship with the barbarian girl as sexual other: "His approach, however, is incurably marked by the logic of understanding as penetrating and deciphering" (79). The barbarian girl's institutional alterity allows the Magistrate's relationship/pursuit to implicate the text in its own discursive simultaneity. Reading Coetzee's hyper-textual novella against Cavafy's poem, Boletsi contends that *Waiting for the Barbarians* engages the discourse on the nature of otherness and alterity relative to Empire as broadly as possible (94).<sup>25</sup>

Between Boletsi, Olsen, and Žižek, Coetzee's novella always vibrates with possibility and heterotopic qualities: the unread text is framed by the titular allusion, the impending narrative simultaneity and authorial omissions, and the word 'barbarian' itself. Boletsi suggests that 'barbarism' as a deontological state unto itself:

Finally, barbarism conceptualized as a promise for another kind of knowledge, which is not based on epistemological certainties, but springs out of the constant tension with negation, misunderstanding, mistranslating and stuttering.

*Barbarism* and *barbarian* are not just objects of analysis, but can also be mobilised [sic] as tools that point to alternative ways of knowing. ("Barbarism" 58)<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Coetzee's 'whiteness' doesn't necessarily obviate his alterity relative to the British Empire and South Africa's particular colonial and post-colonial history.

<sup>25</sup> This footnote is an amusing aside: I still haven't mentioned the first line of the novella.

<sup>26</sup> I've preserved Boletsi's paragraph break in this quote.

Broken communication manifests as an irreconcilable schism in the chain of being. Barbarians function as screens: they receive the projections of Empire. "... the barbarians serve to reveal not what is inimical to Empire so much as what ails it: in misconceiving the barbarians, Empire misconceives its own nature and condition ..."

(Wood 132). The text screams with heterotopic structures and spaces: deserts, oases, empires, mountains, foothills, marshes, barbarians, language, structuralism, etc. The textual density of Coetzee's poetry makes the 156 page novella a conceptual black hole. You can get lost in its discourse before you even open the book.

Notions of Empire and imperial hegemony are crucial to criticism of the text. Wendy Harding argues that, "*Waiting for the Barbarians* testifies that writing from within the conceptual boundaries of Empire dooms the artist to reproduce an image of the self" (217). The act of writing, particularly in a text already complicated by simultaneous narration, further encumbers the written "thing" with issues of agency and authority. If, as Robert C. Young argues, (post/trans)colonialism offers "... a language and politics in which your interests come first and not last," then issues of agency and authority emerge as principle among textual considerations (Young 2). Whereas Empire will validate its own voice, the (post/trans)colonial consideration frustrates the text: how can the colonizer speak for the colonized while exerting force upon them? Michael Valdez Moses argues that agency and authority introduces new narratorial and ontological complications for the text:

... were the complicity of the Magistrate in the history of Empire merely a matter of his personal culpability, ...[or] an indictment of his particular caste, class, or faction – the liberal element within a repressive regime – Coetzee's novel would be significantly less disturbing ... (122)

Suddenly, because the person speaking (the Magistrate) possesses authority, he acts as vocal agent for the person(s) who needs to speak (the barbarian girl or barbarians). Christine Wenzel argues that torture invokes (post/trans)colonial, moral, philosophical, and political questions that problematize the texts' performative ambiguity: "On the surface, torture appears to be a kind of conversation in which physical and mental pain are used by one person to encourage another to speak" (Wenzel 63). The ambiguity of torture as means of communication makes difficult any reconciliation between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl, just as it makes impossible any reconciliation with the Empire.

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A bucket of Legos can be terrifying, if you are not appropriately acquainted with the concept of possibility. Discrete objects that have limited possible connections but unbound combinations produce a weird sense of totality: these are everything I need. Creation is difficult even when novelty is unnecessary. I build objects to remind me of the spaces history turns into memory. My non-specific destination is a past not possible after spaces get repurposed. Words are Legos in the abstract.

\* \* \*

\*punk involves a certain degree of mechanistic apatheism.<sup>27</sup> Insofar as a text is concerned, the structure's 'deities' are known: the author is 'God.' The author is the discrete entity responsible for the present artifact: be it a single person (a self-printed poem or flyer or whatever) or group of persons (assuming the text is more complex than a book or article). The author creates an object to express something using various tools: language, images, movement, performance, etc. Just as with more physical objects, the

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<sup>27</sup> Apatheism combines religion and resignation into a spiritual apathy.

tools and natural resources impose limits on the possible outcomes. As this is a thesis primarily concerned with a single printed textual artifact—the novella *Waiting for the Barbarians*—this mechanistic view of items and their structure exhibits component modularity. Literary devices, tropes, schemes, even specific and novel turns of a single word are all bricks in the finished apparatus that is the novel. This atomization of a text’s components allows me to organize the text’s various thematic, structural, and narrative elements into systems and arrays without severing their associative axioms and threads (Propp 115-6). If I can take apart (deconstruct) the text through linguistic, idiomatic, structural, and dialectic means, then I can reassemble its components to produce something else; there is a fundamental interchangeability among words and literary structure. As such, I see \*punk as a peculiar type of brick; \*punk is descriptive of a particular apparatus or function involving a text’s protagonist and the hegemonies opposed to that protagonist. Specifically, \*punk is the intensified resistance to authority that a transitional existence creates in a text’s protagonist; \*punk space is that area which exists between ways of knowing; and the \*punk apparatus is the mechanism by which a text’s protagonist manifests his/her humanity, as hero, anti-hero, or something else indeed. \*punk, however, is not dialectic. Instead of producing synthesis out of combinatorial processes, \*punk remains descriptive of the indecipherable middle in which certain inexplicable axiomatic truths exist (Hawking 159-61).<sup>28</sup>

*Waiting for the Barbarians* maintains remarkable discursive power because the text exhibits a rich simultaneity and an interpretive openness to multiple theoretical frameworks. Focusing on human interactions and the multivariate relationships between

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<sup>28</sup> I’ve condensed Stephen Hawking’s explanation of Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem. He explains it in an approachable manner in *A Brief History of Time*.

characters and other objects in the tale(s), the text engages the expected discourses (politics, (post/trans)colonialism, gender dynamics, etc.) without committing itself to any specific taxonomic position. Ambiguity is critical to both exploratory exegesis and the major academic conversations about Coetzee's novel and method. Narratological inquiry appears alongside gender dynamics; psychoanalysis and (post/trans)colonial issues fuse into a transitive discussion about justice and subaltern politics; agency presents itself as a problematic representation of voice and actualization; and mirrors reflect the doll-like stillness of a corpse.

The Magistrate begins his narrative by foregrounding his inevitable failure as a performative agent: "I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind?" (*Barbarians* 1). The sunglasses separate Colonel Joll's visual space from that of the Magistrate; second, the sunglasses highlight vision and obstruction simultaneously—both sight and secrets are ways of knowing; finally, the sunglasses express the disparity between appearances and actuality. The Magistrate finds the sunglasses novel. This realization complicates his oral narrative because his tale occupies a space in some past; it is a history; but it is delivered as it happens: "We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (Foucault 22). Second, the sunglasses physically separate the Magistrate from Colonel Joll and consequently a subject from his empire. The sunglasses obstruct the Magistrate's sight while occluding the Colonel's gaze: "Spectacles are defamiliarised [sic] in this passage, so that, interestingly, they appear not as an aid/prosthesis, but as a problem—a stain—in the field of vision ..." (Veres 242). The sunglasses create a psychic crisis in the Magistrate: he

cannot see the gaze that objectifies him. An actual darkness exists between the Magistrate's eyes and Colonel Joll's eyes: "I try to subdue my irritation at his cryptic silences, at the paltry theatrical mystery of his dark shields hiding healthy eyes" (*Barbarians* 4).

The Magistrate chafes because the sunglasses disrupt his gaze, his desire to look at the other, and obscure Joll's gaze. In "On Looking and the Gaze in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," Ottilia Veres explores the Lacanian gaze and its functions in the novella's textual apparatus: "Colonel Joll of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bureau—the major representative of the Empire and thus, the representative of power—exerts his power also by means of looking (the gaze) ... Joll's opaque glasses function as objects of violation and aggression against the other" (242). Political, social, and personal violence encumber the Magistrate from the first sentence of the novella, which is also the Magistrate's first narratorial utterance. As Empire's subject, the Magistrate simultaneously experiences its disapproval and excommunication without being able to 'see' his attacker: "At home everyone wears them" (*Barbarians* 1). The Magistrate's outpost is not 'home:' it is an ambiguous somewhere that disconnects the Magistrate from 'everyone.' The sunglasses initiate the Magistrate's realization that he is no longer part of the imperial 'us.' The expected exchange, the sizing up of each other, is vacated: Colonel Joll takes measure of the Magistrate, but the Magistrate merely feels the violence of Joll's gaze: "We do not discuss the reason for his being here. He is here under the emergency powers, that is enough." The Magistrate is socially oppressed by Joll's sunglasses: the commodified visual filter is an emblem of power. Joll dominates the Magistrate. Empire dominates the Magistrate.

Concurrently, Coetzee's meta-narrative surfaces his lyric prose. The outpost's interiority and spatial presentation instills a sense of high desert and big skies in the textual reader:

I carry my sleeping-mat out on the ramparts where the night breeze gives some relief of the heat. On the flat roofs of the town I can make out by moonlike the shapes of other sleepers. From under the walnut trees on the square I still hear the murmur of conversation. In the darkness a pipe glows like a firefly, wanes, glows again ... From the sky thousands of stars look down on us. Truly we are here on the roof of the world. Waking in the night, in the open, one is dazzled (2).

The outpost is a heterotopia: its functions are multivariate, diverse, and legion. The outpost is a place of communication, a place of living, a place of dying, a place of sleeping, a place of summer and walnut trees. As the authorial text subjects the Magistrate to Empire's gaze, it juxtaposes Joll's eyeless—sightless—gaze with the knowledge intensifying apparatus of the heterotopia. Joll's sunglasses fix the Magistrate as subject in the Empire/subject pair; expansive 'space' impels the Magistrate to look slightly askance.

Initially, the \*punk apparatus presents itself in Coetzee's meta-narrative. Coetzee frames the Magistrate's oral narrative with the conceptual devices needed to unwrap it. Coetzee's authorial narrative introduces heterotopic concepts and spatial references early, as demonstrated by "darkness" and "dazzling:" the basic light/dark dichotomy presupposes the Empire/subject dynamic that suppresses the Magistrate. He is not yet a punk. The complete textual artifact, however, resonates with \*punk rhythms. James Phelan argues that the simultaneity of narration (two present tense accounts) complicates the text immensely: "...the most notable immediate effect of this imaginary instance of narration is that it accentuates the difference between the Magistrate's relation to the text

and Coetzee's" (Phelan 234). The first-person narration provided by the Magistrate, beyond being divided within itself, becomes meta-fictional: the Magistrate considers how to tell the story for best effect and philosophical truth, not as a perfect account of history.<sup>29</sup>

The Magistrate cannot exert his alterity yet, because he does not possess it; nor does he even know he will choose alterity. The Magistrate cannot remove himself from the position of privilege and power that Empire simultaneously grants to him and overshadows through its institutional hierarchy. How can the Magistrate empathize and connect with the big (or the sexual) other when he is blind to his own reification? Veres suggests he cannot: "Positing himself in the hierarchically defined power position of the panoptical gaze, the Magistrate hides in the 'comfort' of invisibility" (240). The Empire objectifies the Magistrate; the Magistrate objectifies himself and in doing so serves the Empire. No matter how uncomfortable the sunglasses make the Magistrate; no matter how violent the "dark shields" appear to him; the Magistrate's sudden awareness of Empire paralyzes him in the sightless expanse of Joll's glasses. The occluded gaze prevents the object from knowing its observer; it sets the object outside the space of reciprocity. The Magistrate receives none of Joll's perceptions. The sunglasses obscure the physical "tells" Colonel Joll's eyes might provide—the quick shifts or sideways glances. The Magistrate receives filtered, altered information—information scrubbed from sight: "... last year stories began to reach us from the capital of unrest among the barbarians. ... A party of census officials had disappeared and been found buried in shadow graves" (*Barbarians* 8).

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<sup>29</sup> Phelan's article primarily concerns itself with reader-response criticism, but certain arguments are justifiably appropriate for this paper.

Coetzee's authorial narrative deploys vision and imagistic visualizations of geography as an allegorical apparatus throughout the novella (it affects all three narratives). Vision and perspective share and divide roles in the delivery, reception, and interpretation of information (Veres 242-3). Colonel Joll demonstrates that the Empire looks through the Magistrate. Joll's occluded gaze reduces the Magistrate to the 'phantasmatic kernel' of his being: the Magistrate is simultaneously the Empire's anterior projection of itself onto colonial spaces, the lens by which the Empire knows its physical neighbors, and the Empire's marginal view of its constituents. The sunglasses obfuscate the reciprocal nature of the Empire's inward gaze and isolate the Magistrate from Empire's bosom. Colonel Joll's gaze is the Magistrate's gaze mirrored in the opacity of those "dark shields:"

(On the other hand, who am I to assert my distance from him? I drink with him, I eat with him, I show him the sights, I afford him every assistance as his letter of commission requests, and more. The Empire does not require that its servants love each other, merely that they perform their duty.) (*Barbarians* 5-6)

The Magistrate's dilemma is the dilemma of existing within a hegemonic structure. Denied his provincial authority (but not his administrative responsibility) by the Third Bureau, the Magistrate tries oscillating between his institutionally prescribed role and his self: he fails. However, the Magistrate begins taking punkish steps: he becomes non-expressive with Joll and performs his duty.

Joll's torture of the barbarian girl complicates the Magistrate's narrative and impels him to undertake a quest to return the barbarian girl to her people. This is the Magistrate's initial act of resistance. Northrop Frye's definition of myth as "the central informing power" for narrative structure and method also includes a sufficient definition

of the quest for this thesis: Coetzee's authorial narrative frames the Magistrate's oral narrative along Frye's seasonal table (*AoC* 698).

The Magistrate's narrative begins just before a metaphorical winter: "From horizon to horizon the earth is white with snow. It falls from a sky in which the source of light is diffuse and everywhere present, as though sun has dissolved into mist, become an aura" (*Barbarians* 8). Coetzee's authorial narrative illuminates the hyper-textual focus and the liminal quality of the Magistrate's dream-state. The Magistrate, in reciting this dream as it happens, inscribes lucidity on the transitional dream-space. The authorial narrative mirrors the conceptual apparatus and theoretical discourse the texts address. The quest, alternatively, takes place in spring, because "Winter has settled in" (37). This winter confines the first part of the novella to the outpost and the interiority of the barracks, the granary, and Empire's grasp. Winter is Frye's dissolution phase. During this time—this slice of time—the Magistrate reads the barbarian girl and learns her body.

Winter is also the textual season in which the Magistrate comes to see torture as Empire. Although he witnesses torture indirectly during Colonel Joll's campaign of investigation, the Magistrate does not come to see torture until he reads it on the barbarian girl's body. Still dumbstruck by the *achtung* of his encounter with Empire, the Magistrate obsesses over the barbarian girl in a frustrated romance: "I feel no desire to enter this stocky little body glistening by now in the firelight" (30). The Magistrate's identity is still oscillating, but he hasn't committed himself to alterity. The Magistrate looks at the sexual other, a naked woman, and feels no compulsion except for the ritual of washing.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> There's a disturbing inversion of Christian myth here. I feel I should mention its obviousness, but it's tangential to the direction of this thesis. Heterotopias carry the remnants of the sacred.

The ‘dark shields’ resonate, react, strike against the expansive, sound-filled, life-filled, light-filled night sky of an imperial outpost on the edge of nowhere discernible. Ambivalence provides more information and more opportunities to know than the rigidly closed field of Joll’s glasses. The Magistrate is the subject at the novella’s beginning. Beyond being the subject of Coetzee’s meta-narrative, the Magistrate as subject of Empire: he is the compliant hegemonic automaton in the hegemonic apparatus. Colonel Joll initially keeps the Magistrate in his place—on the frontier; at the threshold of the liminal and the deontological; at the edge of the desert. The Magistrate is also simultaneously an object from Empire’s perspective. It is ‘barbarism’ as anti-hegemonic knowing that complicates the Magistrate’s position as subject. The barbarian girl’s appearance precipitates a frustrated romance that forces the Magistrate to close breach the space of the pure other. This breach, which Slavoj Žižek calls a radical transgression, suggests that certain choices lacerate the psychic construction of the self, causing the subject to pursue reconciliation with the pure other contrary to all impulses for self-preservation (“Deeper” 197). The barbarian girl and ‘barbarism’ force the Magistrate to experience the totality of Empire and remain conscious of it forever. The Magistrate’s oral narrative foregrounds the barbarian girl’s arrival and significance in the text.

Coetzee’s authorial narrative elevates the presence of ‘barbarism’ and ‘barbarians’ in conjunction with the oral narrative’s preparation for the barbarian girl: “I last saw them five days ago (if I can claim to ever have seen them, if I ever did more than pass my gaze over their surface absently, with reluctance)” (*Barbarians* 24). The ‘barbarians’ are already gone and the Magistrate is an ex post facto witness to torture; he has seen its marks on Joll’s first victims: “What did they do to him?” (10). Remember,

the Magistrate does not like looking at the barbarians; their appearance, as external other, disturbs him. In this instant, the Magistrate starts to connect and slowly begins to separate from the viscous suspension of Empire's lapping-compounds. The Magistrate starts to oscillate between the poles of Empire and 'barbarism,' specifically 'barbarism' in the sense Bolesti deploys it, as deontological way of knowing (58). Conversely, Bolesti argues that Empire imposes hegemony by appropriating knowledge:

Empires translate based on the law of sameness: its translations appropriate every barbarian (i.e., incomprehensible and foreign) sign to the imperial code and regulate meaning by delimiting the context in which it can take place. The Empire's relation to knowledge is not steered by the expansion, but by the reproduction, perpetuation, and conservation— "[t]he concern of the State is to conserve ... translation is simply an excuse for the reinforcement of imperial knowledge" (65)

Bolesti appropriately cites Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's "Treatise on Nomadology" here: "The people we call barbarians are nomads" (*Barbarians* 50). Empire appropriates the roaming barbarians as a tool. The commodified barbarian is a screen or slave labor or some other negative expression of Empire's will. Empire only needs barbarians insofar as they provide useful focuses for Empire's *eros* ("Barbarism" 70-74). That the barbarians are nomadic means they pass between transitional spaces and conceive of the land as a whole juxtaposed to Empire's oppressive, omnipresent fabric (75).

In "The Subject of Reading and the Colonial Unconscious: Countertransference in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," Yuan Yuan argues that 'barbarians' represent the "constituted other" necessary for a civilized society to exist: "Within a colonial context, Coetzee explores the relationship between subject of reading and ... the sovereign subject of the state in decoding the abject bodies of the natives" (76-7). The Empire, most explicitly through Colonel Joll and the Magistrate, projects its image of

barbarity and barbarism onto the other to satisfy its own *eros*: the drive to fulfill Freud's *pleasure principle*; *eros* is the drive to satisfy the self's desire (Lear 145). Yuan Yuan explores this imposition of textural alterity vis-à-vis the gaze by the manners in which a colonizer reads the colonized. Empire possesses an *eros* that drives it to exist. Alterity exists because it legitimates the existing personal and social hierarchy; alterity exists because it allows the colonizer to inscribe their external validation on the colonized (Yuan 78). Yuan's reading aligns pleasantly with \*punk. \*punk resists being read, in that it uses an expressionless or undecidable appearance to obfuscate associative assimilation: that is, \*punk says, "Fuck you, I'm me."

Empire reads the barbarians as other, but Coetzee's meta-narrative also reads the Magistrate as other. The Magistrate's *eros* drives a slow, tactile reading of the barbarian girl against the back drop of her return. In learning the barbarian girl's body, the Magistrate both frustrates his own desire (particularly sexual) and commits himself to treason: principled violence against the state. As spring approaches, the Magistrate steels his resolve and commits himself to returning the barbarian girl to her people. He commits to a quest that requires he find Empire's projection of otherness past the thresholds of frontier. The Magistrate commits himself to the "desert of the real." Appropriately, the quest passes through marsh, desert, foothills, and mountains before its completion.

The quest's spring is perfunctory, as is the heroic/marriage moment in the tale.

Before the quest beings, the Magistrate explicates a brief history:

There have been no barbarian visitors this year. It used to be that groups of nomads would visit the settlement in winter to pitch their tents outside the walls and engage in barter, exchanging wool, skins, felts, and leatherwork for cotton goods, tea, sugar, beans, flour. We prize barbarians

leatherwork, particularly the sturdy boots they sew. In the past I have encouraged commerce but forbidden payment in money ... Where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilization; and upon this resolution I based the conduct of my administration. (I say this who now keep a barbarian girl for my bed!) (38).

This fantastically dense passage pronounces the Magistrate's intent and his alterity. It is the moment of the Magistrate's self-actualization.

The Magistrate momentarily grasps his position relative to Empire; he announces his alterity proudly: "I say this who now keep a barbarian girl for my bed!" Spring has arrived, *les sacre du printemps* echoes in some background soundtrack. The Magistrate has chosen to reject Empire's command and return the barbarian girl to her people: "Commerce is at an end" (38). The Magistrate, having touched the pure other, suddenly attunes himself to the transactional nature of Empire's relationship with its subjects and all adjacent peoples, persons, and things: "All this erotic behavior of mine is indirect: I prowl about her, touching her face, caressing her body, without entering her or finding urge to do so" (43). But even so, the Magistrate cannot commit the human action. He's already preconfigured his resolution to return the barbarian girl via rationalization with the economic; the Magistrate, however, is paralyzed by the contact with the pure other. This moment precipitates the events that follow in his narrative. To return the girl, he must also occupy the girl.

The Magistrate's ancillary history complicates. He pre-projects the barbarians as transactional partners only after he has committed himself to a taboo relationship. In "The Composition of the Self in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," Debra A. Castillo provides a point summation of the space in the history's simultaneity emerges:

Coetzee invites his readers to reexamine the essential nature of both history and the self in history, to see anew the perversions of a power ploy as it breaks down in a situation of crisis, and to witness the powerlessness of the historical sense in the face of atavistic fear. (78)

The fear Castillo mentions exerts itself in the competing social and individual relationships with law, law enforcement agents (and agencies), and legal mechanisms. As the material apparatus of power, legal systems in Western thought simultaneously represent the individual's hope for justice (and Justice in the abstract, personified sense) and reflect the 'System's' authority in its subjects' collective will. In "Civilization and the Two Faces of Law: J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*," Sinkwan Cheng further explains the paradoxical simultaneity produced where Law and History intersect: the history of Empire is the history of 'civilization' in the sense that contemporary Western society still determines which things, people, and structures are 'civilized;' "some of the ideals driving the West's concepts of civilization and law demand materialization by any means necessary—including ultra-violent means" (2349). Cheng personifies 'civilized and 'civilization' as thought-objects, as opposed to references of any specific states of civilization or being civilized. The words themselves are slippery and problematized by (post/trans)colonial theory in general.

History informs the multiple narratives and it exists within the novella as an objectified thing unto itself. As David Atwell notes in his book-length study of Coetzee's fiction, *J. M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing*: "... history emerges not as the *a priori* structure that it tends to be ... but as an object itself—that is as a discursive field ... history becomes objectified as History" (72). Coetzee's peculiar handling of History produces a text that is simultaneously transformational and divergent: the text marks a pivotal shift in Coetzee's narrative practice and method (71).

Coetzee's invocation of history as pseudo-character also allows Troy Urquhart to read the novel through the retrospective focus of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Urquhart situates the text in the broad epistemological discourse that history (as chronicle) provides without obviating the significance of alterity-as-concept as encoded in Coetzee's fiction itself. Urquhart's essay "Truth, Reconciliation, and the Restoration of the State: Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*" explores the various ways alterity presents itself through the novel: in the relationships between the Magistrate and the Empire, Barbarian and Empire, Barbarian and Magistrate. Within the skeins of this web alterity produces, the Magistrate seeks to escape Empire's hegemony only to find himself defeated: "In the face of his own complicity, he begins to confuse justice with penance; he confuses his desire to save the victim of Empire with his desire to the save himself" (Urquhart 12). Coupled with Urquhart's appropriation of Spivak—"The subaltern cannot speak" (qtd. 10)—the implication for Coetzee's text becomes unsettling: the hegemonic actor needs the legitimizing function alterity provides. Power (or Authority or 'The Man') requires the existence of the other to oppress. In this, Urquhart concludes, "Restorative justice is finally not about the victim but about restoration of the state" (16). That is to say, Justice serves Empire (authority).

The Magistrate's quest to return the barbarian girl is his self-heroic expression of 'restorative justice:' the quest is a moral point of pride that stems from no real rational origin. But Justice serves Empire; the quest marks the Magistrate a traitor: "Before I can leave there are two documents to compose" (*Barbarians* 57). This statement is sly. While the Magistrate specifically refers to a procedural formality—the letter to the governor—and an undecided text, the novella already presents the barbarian girl as

already a document. The Magistrate's tactile possession of the girl's body as text has rendered her as a historical document of Joll's torture:

... to see sexual passion ... as a simple fact of life with the clearest of means and the clearest of ends; so that the confused actions of an aging foreigner who picks her up off the streets and installs her in his apartment so that he can now kiss her feet, now browbeat her, now anoint her with exotic oils, now ignore her, now sleep in her arms all night, now moodily sleep apart, may seem nothing but evidence of impotence, indecisiveness, alienation from his own desires ... she may have ways of finding me ordinary too. (56)

The frustration extant in the Magistrate's utterance, his confession to perversion and sadism and objectification and reification and othering—raw, unadulterated othering—complicates the authorial/agent dynamic. Coetzee's craft here goes beyond simply conceit: the narrative simultaneity of two self-implicating narratives sounding off Empire's hegemonic breast; the novella's parallel "I" annihilates the agent/author apparatus. Sexual frustration provides the Magistrate with a cathartic epiphany: the barbarian girl is a person, "actual and whole" (*Serenity*).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Just for clarity's sake, this is a citation for Joss Whedon's movie *Serenity*.

### Chapter III

#### CINDERBLOCKS AND GARTERS: COURTLY LOVE AS CONFRONTATION WITH THE PURE OTHER

Courtly Love is a strange device, particular in its ubiquity. Indeed, as thought-object, Courtly Love is particularly suited to demonstrating the economic diaspora of ideas, particularly as they related to the (post/trans)colonial dilemma. As an example of \*punk, Courtly Love frustrates romantic goals with arbitrary, even whimsical constraints that exacerbate the vulnerability and nakedness of ‘love.’ Courtly Love might be considered obnoxiously persistent among literary structures. Despite its origins in the Chivalric Tradition and romances of the medieval epoch(s), Courtly Love continues to appear in literary and popular expressions of romance and love. Courtly Love demonstrates the deeply situated existence of \*punk conditions and structures in literary expression. The mechanism, for instance, humanizes Troilus’s now epic frustration and sacrifice during his romance with Criseyde. When Troilus states, “O quike death, O swete harm so queynte,” Troilus invokes the figurative death of an obliterated heart (*TC* I. 411).<sup>32</sup> A “living death,” love requires the unapproachable other to complete itself in Troilus. Love, the personified ‘love,’ erects a substantive barrier between Troilus and Criseyde by vibrating without finality endlessly between them. If either touches/meets/embraces the other, then both Troilus and Criseyde inevitably die. The frustrated dynamics of Courtly Love create liminality in concepts and ideas. The

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<sup>32</sup> “O quick death, O sweet harm so quaint ...” (translation mine)

structure, particularly as imagined by Slavoj Žižek in the essays “Courtly Love or Woman as Thing” and “Deeper than the Day Could Read,” allows for a \*punk reading of the dynamic and the mechanics of resistance that Courtly Love produces.

More contemporarily, Hattori Bisco’s manga *Ouran High School Host Club* offers a spectacularly \*punk deployment of Courtly Love at the fringes of multiple empires. The serialization’s protagonist—Haruhi Fujioka—is quite androgynous and indifferent to expressions of her own sexual or gender identity. Femininity, masculinity, female, and male are all simply expressive labels determined by socio-affective limitations and rules. Sexual and gender identity are heterotopically considered through the inevitability of Haruhi’s scripted romance with Suoh Tamaki.<sup>33</sup> The manga *Ouran High School Host Club* employs visual and auditory puns quite extensively. There’s a delightful playfulness in the serialization’s language that emphasizes the very ‘in-between’ nature of its protagonist. As \*punk expression, Haruhi Fujioka’s humanity exists precisely because Haruhi aligns with no element of the various polar apparatuses used social description. Everything stereotypically unique about Haruhi in the taxonomic sense (gender, sexuality, romantic preference, sexual preference, passion) is stripped away by the duality of her existence: Haruhi pretends to be a boy in a debutante host club (extremely Victorian in its Twentieth Century trappings) for the purpose of paying back a debt. Typical high school comedy ensues, only brilliantly delivered. Haruhi’s humanity becomes visceral because the text strips away her labels. Haruhi, unlike the Magistrate,

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<sup>33</sup> There is also an anime of this fantastically creative and entertaining series. Incidentally, the Japanese use of honorifics and very rigid relational language ostensibly preconfigures a narratological predilection for Courtly Love’s particular type of relational narrative. Likewise, Japanese narratives possess independently developed mirrors for Courtly Love; mirrors that originate with Japanese literary traditions. The interpretive translation is fascinatingly heteroglossic in its own right.

is not a simulation; she's not a simulacrum. Haruhi is real because her presence manifests in the absence of hegemonic associations.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl is emblematic of both his existential liminality and the indecipherable frequency at which he resonates in the Empire/subject pair. While both relationships present the Magistrate's alterity relative to Empire or hegemonic structures, Coetzee's peculiar deployment of Courtly Love exacerbates the Magistrate's separation. Nominally, Courtly Love is a relational apparatus that dictates modes of behavior and reciprocation between the Knight and the Lady. Within this apparatus, the Individual—the subject—is reified: the subject is made *thing* and transitions from subject to object.<sup>34</sup> The reification transfigures the subject into object, just as desire transfigures the real into the *Thing* (*Écrits* 25). The Courtly Love apparatus reifies the Knight and Lady as the material expressions of their roles in a fixed system. As literary device, Courtly Love allows the participant characters, both Lady and Knight, to manifest as procedural objects instead of mimetic representations of actual persons. Courtly Love presupposes the actors exist in reified states; that is, the participants are the commodified objects Empire demands its subjects be.

Courtly Love is a constituent element in literary expressions of 'libidinal dynamism:' ("Courtly" 91) the operation of the *pleasure principle* by which the subject is "objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other" (*Écrits* 76). Courtly Love is a "strict fictional game formula, with a social game of 'as if,' where a man pretends his sweetheart is the inaccessible Lady" ("Courtly" 91). Indeed, Courtly Love's primary

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<sup>34</sup> Freud's *das Ding* or *Thing* is "the ultimate object of our desires in its unbearable intensity and impenetrability" (*How to Read* 43).

axiom states that love is an act of radical transgression which suspends all socio-symbolic links and, as such, has to culminate in the ecstatic self-obliteration of death” (“Deeper” 197). By ‘radical transgression,’ Žižek suggests that ‘love’ breaches the psychic construction of self, causing the Subject to pursue reconciliation with the pure other contrary to all impulses for self-preservation. Moreover, because “true love can only happen in the guise of adultery,” (“Deeper” 197) Courtly Love problematizes ‘love’ by expressing the relational construct in reflexive identifications:

For the total form of this body, by which the subject anticipates the maturation of his power in a mirage, is given to him only as a gestalt, that is, in an exteriority in which, to be sure, this form is more constitutive than constituted, but in which, above all, it appears to him as the contour of his stature that freezes it in a symmetry that reverses it, in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the Subject feels he animates it. (*Écrits* 76)

The Knight reconstitutes himself by transferring desire onto the Lady as object. The Lady becomes a material *thing*, while the Knight becomes the ‘split-subject,’ in that the Knight both knows and believes in his need of and pure love for the Lady. The Knight’s transference of desire reifies the Lady as both love-object and aesthetic ideal, thus elevating the Lady above his reach. This elevation functions not as “spiritual purification ... [but] points toward the abstraction that pertains to a cold, distanced, inhuman partner” (“Courtly” 89). Furthermore, ‘love’ is trauma; ‘love’ is a radical transgression; ‘love’ is a parallax gap. The Knight and the Lady can neither truly express nor realize their ‘love’ without abrogating both their identity and the operative framework of their relationship: “This means that true love is performative in the sense that it changes its objects—not in

the sense of idealization, but in the sense of opening up ... a gap between the object positive properties and the *agalma*, the mysterious core of the beloved” (*PV* 355).<sup>35</sup>

The erotic dynamic that exists between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl conforms to the Žižekian model of Courtly Love. More importantly, this relationship projects violence: the Magistrate is not interested in the barbarian girl as sexualized woman; rather, as threefold other (racial, sexual, and physical), the barbarian girl provides a Gothic mechanism that impels the Magistrate into direct confrontation with the other. Partially blind and crippled by torture, the barbarian girl combines the Gothic and Grotesque into a singular entity that simultaneously vexes and erotically charges the Magistrate:

The foot stirs in my grip, comes alive, pokes gently into my groin. I open my eyes to the naked golden body on the bed. She lies with her head cradled in her arms, watching me in the indirect way I am by now used to, showing off her firm breasts and her sleek belly, brimming with young animal health. Her toes continue to probe; but in this slack old gentleman kneeling before her in his plum dressing-gown they find no response. (*Barbarians* 55)

The description juxtaposes the sexual virility of the barbarian girl with the mental and physical impotence of the Magistrate. The overt invitation to sex meets a flaccid penis. Presented with an attractive, sexually willing body, the Magistrate sees the physical memory of her torture: the infirmity that manifests the Empire’s oppressive reality. Rather than seeing the barbarian girl as a complete and sexual being, the Magistrate massages her swollen ankle and reduces the barbarian girl to the disconnected part; he reduces the barbarian girl to her trauma. The foot metonymically represents the

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<sup>35</sup> Žižek uses the term “performative” here mostly in Butler’s sense; there’s a ludic misogyny in his broader implication that’s not particularly useful to this paper. He’s kind of a punk like that.

Magistrate's fascination with her torture—her physical and emotional pain. The foot stands in, scarred and mutilated, for the sexually complete and desirous body.

The Magistrate concerns himself with the barbarian girl as object, making her something simultaneously more and less human by his refusal to possess her as sexual other. Torn between empathy for the barbarian girl's injuries and the enigma of her broken body, the Magistrate idealizes the barbarian girl as Bakhtin's grotesque body: the body reduced to expressions of its physical needs. The grotesque body is a peculiar heterotopic expression: "the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world ... it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (Rabelais 26). The Magistrate's palpable disgust at the barbarian girl's otherness mirrors her inversion of his gaze. The Magistrate reduces the barbarian girl to body parts, disrupting the *eros* complicated by the impassable space between them. The barbarian girl sees the sexually interrupted Magistrate as her object of desire. The simultaneity of the mirrored other makes both gazes impenetrable. In her blindness, the barbarian girl can see the Magistrate, but only insofar as the Magistrate reflects himself in her body (Veres 244). The Magistrate's tactile reading of the barbarian girl is reciprocal: the barbarian girl knows the Magistrate's physicality by touch, not desire. The sensual element is clinically sterile. The Magistrate's \*punk development is frustrated by his break with desire. He cannot fulfill his stated goal; his alterity exists without function, at least momentarily.

Moreover, the Magistrate's relationship with the barbarian girl engages the Gothic in the sense, as Michelle Massé states, "that the Gothic's central concern is the enactment of subordination and domination, an enactment that traces the attempted fusion of power and eroticism, and whose goal is the delegation of individual will to another in the name

of love” (157). The Magistrate fails to physically love the barbarian girl, because he cannot recognize in her body the personhood that disrupts his gaze. The barbarian girl belongs to a part of the apparatus that neither defines nor liberates the Magistrate. In that the barbarian girl can identify the Empire as ‘not us’ (itself an expression of the most basic antithesis of identity—‘not me’), the barbarian exists in a corporeal, institutional manner the Magistrate lacks. The lack of physical reciprocation (the absence of coitus) demonstrates the Magistrate’s inability assimilate himself into the Empire/subject system:

But even as he undertakes corporal acts of mercy—feeding her, clothing her, healing her—she remains significant only insofar as she can reflect her identity. She learns his language; he does not learn hers. Her broken body is a rune for him, like the enigmatic scripts he discovers in the desert, a rune that make tell him about himself, not her ... (169)

The impenetrable gaze becomes self-reflexive; the Magistrate fails to connect with the barbarian girl. Forcing the wounds from his torture to mirror hers, the Magistrate lets his eye go blind; he lets his ankles remain hobbled. This near miss with the other—the perfect other so abject the Magistrate simultaneously desires her and what she can read into him—shatters the Magistrate and psychically severs his connections to the cultural hegemony in which he exists. He becomes the abject marginalized victim of his own social reality (170). The Magistrate rebels against his society by removing himself from its social laws, not the procedural boxes of statutory constraint. Accepting his punishment and choosing to exist outside the pretty little box of social normalization constitutes the Magistrate’s act of rebellion. The result is a Magistrate who exists as a screen for the negative gaze of the Empire. The Magistrate takes onto himself the negative aspects he previously projected onto the barbarian girl and supplants her.

Here, the \*punk apparatus expresses itself in the Magistrate's intransitive position as an asexual, transparent filter through which the barbarian girl and the Empire (but not the Magistrate) carry on a conversation about the nature of desire and fulfillment. The Magistrate cannot realize himself as a sexual being; nor can he project sexual dominance onto the simultaneously subaltern and willing barbarian girl. Within the text, Courtly Love simultaneously fulfills its purposes while breaking its own dialectic construction because the Magistrate exists as neither subject nor object within the existential space the barbarian girl inhabits. The sexual progress arrests not because the rules are disobeyed, but because the Magistrate's function in the \*punk apparatus obviates his participant identity. The Empire "breaks" the barbarian girl. The instance of her torture is actual, if not explicit: "... she is not there. I speak to the gatekeeper: 'There was a woman sitting over there all of yesterday, begging. Where does she come from?' The woman is blind, he replies. She is one of the barbarians the Colonel brought in. She was left behind" (*Barbarians* 25). The Magistrate "kills" the barbarian girl by infusing her with his absence of sexual satisfaction. The Magistrate's impotence not only invokes castration, it makes impossible the fulfillment of the barbarian girl's desire. The Magistrate, in his oscillations between Empire/subject, self/other, whole/object, cannot interact with the material world around him. The Magistrate's abjection exceeds that of the barbarian girl. As a (formerly) complicit agent of authority, the Magistrate's abjection instates itself in his impotence, both sexual and otherwise. The text presupposes the barbarian girl's torture and injury, but overt violence occurs in the Magistrate's attempts to appropriate a new institutional identity through sexual congress with the Empire's victim. In doing, the Magistrate simultaneously appropriates the barbarian girl as his own victim and becomes

the screen onto which she projects her understanding of Empire. Colonel Joll's physical violence pales against the psychic violence that the Magistrate's physical and emotional rejection produces in the barbarian girl.

The Magistrate's path toward alterity, at least at the level of sexualized self, forbids him from 'touching' the concrete, material woman he desires. Within the \*punk apparatus, the Magistrate must be something that is not nothing; this something rejects labels. The Magistrate must simultaneously exist while being the interiority that threatens to short-circuit, even compromise reflexive identity. The Magistrate chooses to travel away from a space in which he possesses a voice (the Empire) and attempts to install himself in a space that is voice (barbarism). The Magistrate's interrupted sexual conquest of the barbarian girl represents one aspect of the \*punk apparatus: isolation from definable states within any system precludes the resolution of desire. The Magistrate, however, functions as a lens or filter or screen: the Empire's images pass through him and emerge altered, perhaps even translated. While it is true that the Magistrate can no longer assimilate into the hegemonic collective or approach the institutional other, the Magistrate can approximate an understanding of both. His liminality, the very heterotopic space he inhabits, permits the Magistrate to receive knowledge from and transmit knowledge to groups that inhabit spaces he cannot enter: "Put another way, it means that there are lives not sustained by *desire*, as desire is always for objects. Such lives are based on *exclusion*" (Kristeva 6). The Magistrate's exclusion is existential.

The Magistrate's communication as \*punk apparatus works omni-directionally; that is, there are no limits to the transactional exclusion or informational abrogation

possible when he chooses to traverse a space's interior borders. The Magistrate, first in invoking a courtly pursuit, then in his progressive reification of the barbarian girl, isolates himself from human contact; he fails to communicate a meaningful physical expression because "the barbarization of real others, whether it is conditioned on radical difference or on threatening similarity, is a means of disempowering them" ("Barbarism" 59).

Exclusion denies the controlling hegemon new paths to knowledge; exclusion expresses abjection. The Magistrate's barbarism, as presented by the failures of his quests, is the elocution of his willful abjection. Foucault reminds us that:

The space in which we live, which draw us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time, and our history occurs, the space that claws and knaws [sic] at us, is also, in itself a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. ("Other" 23)

The predominantly dialectic structures that encode and permit the transmission of meaning coexist, collaborate, contradict, confound, and complicate each other as if they were multiple threads on a loom. The spaces people occupy are connected, dynamic spaces that interact with and move through, around, and beyond other spaces. The space the Magistrate inhabits aggregates the entire gamut of spaces around him without imposing them on his being; that is, in achieving self-obliteration, the Magistrate becomes transparent to the apparatus that controls him. The Magistrate becomes invisible to Empire because Empire can no longer fit him into a preconfigured box:

"There are other dreams in which the figure I call *the girl* changes shape, sex, size. In one dream there are two shapes that arouse horror in me: massive and blank, they grow and grow till they fill the space in which I sleep. I wake up choked, shouting, my throat

full” (*Barbarians* 87). Through transitive connections—those which touch, but pass through the filter the Magistrate provides, Empire encroaches on the solitary, disconnected state the Magistrate now seeks. The Magistrate is now fully \*punk; he can survive the inevitability of his treason; he has willfully chosen a path and executed his desire. The Magistrate sexually possessed the barbarian girl; returned her to her tribe (ostensibly); and did so in defiance of Empire’s will. That the Magistrate will inevitably exit the text oscillating uncomfortably on the periphery of Empire’s gaze matters very little; his oscillations separate him from the suspension of lubricants and binding agents the lap Empire’s cogs. Torture can no longer harm him; he’s already other and he knows the truth: “A certain tone enters a man’s voice when he’s telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone” (5).

The spring and summer of Frye’s quest archetype resolve almost instantly: the Magistrate possesses the barbarian girl, she begins menstruating, and she is left with her tribe. As the text progresses, isolation and silence sublimate the noisy throng associated with belonging. The Magistrate longs to touch the history carved in the barbarian girl, and in doing so, seeks redemption because he does not, yet, understand the reality of his violence: “Though I cringe with shame, even here and now, I must ask myself whether, when I lay head to foot with her, fondling and kissing those broken ankles, I was not in my heart of hearts regretting that I could not engrave myself on her as deeply” (*Barbarians* 135). Although the Magistrate can no longer directly affect the barbarian girl, the construct of Courtly Love binds them in a force-feedback loop. Negative existential pressures cycle between the Magistrate’s non-identity, his non-agency, and the actuality the barbarian girl possesses. Even as institutional other, the binary logic of

Empire and Subject legitimates the existence, thoughts, and performative utterances of the barbarian girl. She exists and possesses power, however marginal. The Magistrate, however, must accept the realization that no matter what, he is “the lie the Empire tells itself when times are easy” (135). As lens or filter or screen, the Magistrate transmits what the Empire broadcasts. Being \*punk, the Magistrate amplifies it with his own indecipherable, unquantifiable alterity. Truly abject, because he has no place in relation to the system that produced him except as tool, the Magistrate “toyed more than once with the idea of resigning [his] post ... but then, [he] thought, someone else will be appointed to bear the shame of office, and nothing will have changed” (139). The Magistrate’s existence as \*punk apparatus denies him the fulfillment of human contact, while situating him in a space that continually aggravates that failure.

Returning the barbarian girl to her people becomes emblematic of the Magistrate’s transitional relationship with the Empire. Beyond being a vehicle to humanize and document the Magistrate’s inherent ambivalence, the barbarian girl’s return causes the Magistrate to oscillate between barbarism and integration. The Magistrate’s quest allows him to locate critical events in a convergence of heterotopic spaces and structures; Coetzee’s authorial narrative and the Magistrate’s narrative collide as a storm, the Magistrate’s journey, and the aftermath of sex combine into a revelatory event: “Only with deliberate effort can I reinsert myself into time and space: into a bed, a tent, a night, a world, a body pointing east and west” (*Barbarians* 64). The insertion metaphor is deliberate: the sexual act is transactional. The sexual act is a transitive contact with the other. Courtly Love problematizes the text most when the Magistrate consummates his relationship with the barbarian girl. In the middle of nowhere’s

nowhere, “five months of senseless hesitancy are wiped out and [he is] floating back into easy sensual oblivion” (63). The text surrounds this pivotal transaction with liminal imagery and heterotopic concepts: “When I wake it is with a mind washed so blank that terror rises in me” (64). The conjugal act takes place near a well and a “mound of earth [they] dug;” it happens in a tent—a transient, temporary structure (65). Innately, the Magistrate knows he has touched the other (and the real) and recognizes that neither the person he currently is nor the barbarian girl can remain; the physical component of his desire has been met (to a degree), but the emotional/expressive consolation the Magistrate seeks remains elusive: “It is done, I am content. At the same time I am ready to believe that it would not have been done if I were not in a few days to part from her” (64).

The conjugal campsite creates a performative heterotopia: a stage. By breaking the fourth-wall, the Magistrate addresses his authorial audience, but reaches the textual audience of Coetzee’s meta-narrative and Coetzee’s authorial narrative instead. Through the sexual act and the utterance of his content, the Magistrate gains knowledge of himself and the barbarian by psychically, as well as physically expressing consummation; indeed, the Magistrate galvanizes his resistance and prepares for resignation in the process.

Narratologically, the sex and journey serve as precursors to an exchange; the Magistrate remains intent on returning the barbarian girl to her people. That said, the transformational act has already occurred. Everything after the sex is inevitable: it plays out by the rules of the Courtly Love axiom. The Magistrate touched (came into direct contact with) the sexual other; he violated the Courtly Love dynamic; he broke the magnetic polarity of the Knight/Lady (subject/object) pair: self-obliteration is beyond

mandatory. What follows for the Magistrate is the descent into oblivion, while the barbarian girl orbits a space at Empire's edges. The Magistrate who loved too late and too physically abandons her to anonymity as a blind hag the moment he is vacated of responsibility: "The girl is bleeding ... She does not question her exclusion" (69-70). For a brief instant, the Magistrate understood the barbarian girl's incipient humanity; but his desire fulfilled, he failed to resist the axiomatic pressures of their romance. He abandoned love in a moment of false triumph. Coetzee's authorial actions here are expressly \*punk, in a wickedly subversive way. Contemporary romantic configurations include a *deus ex machina* that allows for a happy ending: none of the narratives in the novella even allow such a possibility. The \*punk expression manifests in the depressing frustration of a perpetually failed romance.

The Magistrate's failed romance is a \*punk document itself: just as Colonel Joll left physical evidence of torture on the barbarian girl's body, so too did the Magistrate transcribe that evidence onto his own body. Because the Magistrate could not retain the barbarian girl sexually, because his conscience and fractious morality interrupted his desire, the Magistrate rewrote her terror and horror into his own flesh. A certain sublimity exists in the Magistrate sacrificing his own health to record the history of the barbarian girl's suffering:

Throughout a night without images but buffeted by black sounds; amidst a throng of forsaken bodies beset with no longing but to last against all odds and for nothing; on a page where I plotted out convolutions of those who, in transfer, present me with the gift of their void—I have spelled out abjection. Pass through the memories of a thousand years, a fiction without scientific objective but attentive to religious imagination, it is within literature I finally saw it carrying, with its horror, its full power into effect. (Kristeva 207)

\*punk also allows for more positive expressions of love and the desire/fulfillment structure. Simultaneity is indigenous to heterotopias; its presence manifests in the very ontological fabric of those spaces between the established, rigid structures used to organize things and express notion. Art is an organizational process, even the most haphazard and ‘random’ of exhibits. The ‘organic poetry’ of Clarice Lispector springs to mind as counterpoint to the human but all too depressing romantic conclusion the Magistrate finds. Of creation, Lispector writes:

I create material before painting it, and wood becomes as indispensable to my painting as it would be to a sculptor. And the created material is religious: it has the weight of convent beams. Compact, closed like a locked door. But gaps have been torn in the portal, ripped out by fingernails. And it’s through those open breaches that one can see what’s inside a synthesis, inside utopian symmetry. Coagulated color, violence, martyrdom are the beams that hold up the silence of religious symmetry. But now I’m interested in the mystery of mirrors. (63)<sup>36</sup>

By writing the barbarian girl’s torture into his text, the Magistrate creates memory and preserves the history of her suffering as evidence against the Empire he resists. In sacrificing his own flesh, the Magistrate assumes an altered state and marks the cruelty of the Empire for all to see. The barbarian girl will return to her people, but the Magistrate remains as a visible reminder of the price Empire exacts. The Magistrate’s zombified, hobbled state represents the short circuits that the interpretive expectations of dialectic produce. The Magistrate does not synthesize the barbarian girl’s pain into the Empire; the Magistrate positions her torture and physical debilitation at a particular point in space. Then, he broadcasts that space to the world. The Magistrate transfigures himself (sculpts himself) into the living memory of the Empire’s mechanical brutality.

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<sup>36</sup> I’ve preserved Lispector’s indentation here.

## Chapter IV

### \*PUNK AND EVERYTHING AFTER

And here things could be counted, each one. He knew the number of grains of sand in the construct of the beach (a number coded in a mathematical system that existed nowhere outside the mind...)

— William Gibson, *Neuromancer*

\*punk structures inject resistance into the spaces they occupy. Indecipherability and undecidability complicate the semiotic resolution of metaphor and words-as-objects just as they problematize non-literary events and relationships. To the textual individual, Empire appears monolithic, oppressive, and complete (in all its extant glory). The totality of Empire's physical presence prevents escape, and the impossibility of flight results in paralysis or resistance. Conflict and antagonism develop systems of negotiating new spaces or frontiers: values emerge which allow individuals to situate themselves, at least temporarily, outside or adjacent to the fundamental organizational apparatus. The omnipresence of Empire may prevent physical escape because its umbrella extends into liminal geographies, \*punk's ontological heterotopia translocates knowledge and understanding instead of transmitting knowing through Empire's moderating filters. In this way, technology and perception can expand, producing new economies of understanding and short-circuiting the procedural limitations of dialectic. Indeed, the saturation of Lacanian concepts ensures \*punk's post-dialectical frame. In the abstract, Lacan is (post)dialectic, as Frederic Jameson notes in the essay "Lacan and the Dialectic:" "... Lacan left both Hegel and Hegelian existentialism behind – first for

structuralism, and then for his own inimitable formulations on the impossible, on *jouissance* and the *objet petit a*, and on gender” (367). Assent and abjection are the only possible outcomes in Empire’s false dilemma. Politics, language, culture, identity, alterity, all of it: the entire morass of materialist and consumerist expression is predicated on the absence \*punk achieves. Empire presumes the negation of choice. Empire is a purely mechanistic view of the universe; there is no uncertainty. \*punk is the sign that points to the choice obviated by all this post-everything, even post-punk.

The Magistrate’s trajectory through the novella combines multiple pathways and mechanisms for inducing alterity in his character. Rather than occupy a specific type of othered-space, the Magistrate ultimately becomes a \*punk implement himself. As \*punk tool, the Magistrate develops into the text’s condensed, purified expression of the other that Empire creates and needs to continue its existence. The persistence of the Empire relies on the Magistrate’s ability to demonstrate the contradictions and impossibilities inherent in the system. The Magistrate displays cognizance of his position relative to Colonel Joll, but his first person narrative also effaces Joll’s hegemonic presence. Their initial conversation is procedural and full of pleasantries; it is an expected interaction whose rituals and symbols are meaningless because of their ubiquity. The mundaneness of this encounter, curiously, prefigures the primary space of conflict in the text: the territory between the Magistrate-as-person and the Empire (through its agents). The outpost represents a space at the periphery of Empire, but not completely divorced from it; the stilted exchanges between the Magistrate and Colonel Joll magnify this effect: “I awake before dawn and tiptoe past the sleeping soldiers . . . From the sky thousands of stars look down on us. Truly we are here on the roof of the world. Waking

in the night, in the open, on is dazzled” (2). The authorial invocation of space here is significant: the text associates expansive, outside or in-between spaces with knowledge and wonder. Such spaces function significantly in the textual method as well: the barbarian girl is returned to (and in) a liminal/transitional space; the Magistrate’s territory is literally on the edge of the Empire’s territory—a border town; the Magistrate regains his humanity in the ruins of an empire past. The text’s pivotal events are framed by their spaces; change and growth require room and freedom; violence and harm happen in dark, enclosed spaces—tents and pantries.

However, other apparatuses within the novel, ‘barbarism,’ most prominently, become means of ‘(not) knowing’ that disrupt normal dialectic. Specifically, ‘barbarism’ “ruptures the epistemological premises of other discourses and performs a radical critique that enables envisioning other modes of knowing” (“Barbarism” 58). Vision provides access to the text’s heterotopic spaces; vision marks entry to territories where things can happen or change. The Empire is static: it exists as it has and as it always will. The spaces between fixed positions—the deserts, the swamps, the bodies of water, the caves—the places Empire cannot see become places of power and knowing. New knowledge becomes possible when the Empire’s vision is blocked; conversely, blindness prevents the Magistrate from acquiring information. The Magistrate, indeed, chooses blindness and moves toward barbarism as a method of resisting Empire’s gaze. The \*punk apparatus allows the Magistrate to short-circuit normal labels and functions by decentralizing and scattering perceptions. If expectations are broken (like a dropped mirror shatters), then reconfiguring perceptual filters generates new pathways to

understanding: the Magistrate's "act of translating has a knowledge producing potential and results in a radical reassessment of Empire's categories" (63-4).

After the Magistrate returns to the outpost, is himself tortured, and then pardoned, he begins his archaeological endeavors in the ruins at the edge of his empire's territory. Colonel Joll forces the Magistrate to translate the barbarian texts he finds. Empire makes a disturbing spectacle of the Magistrate's mock execution and public punishment: "From my throat comes the first mournful dry bellow, like the pouring of gravel" (*Barbarians* 121). Joll's comments about the truth here in a richly macabre way, as the Magistrate recites his agony: "I bellow again and again, there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a boat that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright" (121). The Magistrate suffers the consequence of his treason. His body is broken; physically altered; a grotesque, the Empire discards as him as a reminder of its power; the Magistrate, in this instant fully realizes his \*punk function:

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons, but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. (133)

Ironically, the Magistrate entered the desert of the real outside Empire. This utterance, this dream-sequence that closes the novella, makes the Magistrate's rebellion real. The Magistrate is object; the Magistrate is the institutional other; the Magistrate is the lens that shapes the Empire's view of its exterior peoples. As this realization situates in the Magistrate's mind; as the Magistrate processes the sublime terror that is Empire, the Magistrate broaches the unspeakable: "There is a whole side to the story you don't know,

that she could not have told you because she did not know it herself;” his lover responds with perfunctory dismissal, “It’s none of my business” (152). The Magistrate’s failure as a hero lies not in his \*punk trajectory, but in the subversion of expectations in Coetzee’s meta-narrative. The Magistrate ends the novel divorced of all external associative ties: only alterity remains. The Magistrate, however, has touched the other; he knows the real; he has seen actuality and he understands. The end of a beautiful novella leaves a frustratingly character contemplating the cost of his choices: “I wanted to live outside history ... How can I believe that cause for shame ... There has been something staring me in the face and still I do not see it” (155). Coetzee’s authorial method closes the novella with a flourish of color previously absent in the monochromatic trajectory of the texts. The Magistrate is other; the Magistrate is \*punk; the Magistrate rejects empire by pursuing the confrontation with the other that triggers his own aphanisis. This act places the Magistrate in ‘good’ company. In 1715, Lemuel Gulliver departs the Island of the Houyhnhnms and returns to the world of the Yahoos, where he chooses a life near horses “stranger to bridle or saddle” (Swift 339). Near or after the turn of the Third Millennium, Professor Malik Solanka bounces higher and higher until his son (or the Sun) finally sees. It is unclear whether or not Solly dies or disappears: “[Asmaan’s] only true father taking flight like a bird, to live in the great blue vault of the only heaven in which had ever been able to believe. ‘Look at me!’” (Rushdie 259). In an alternate history, Winston Smith embraces Big Brother:

He gazed up at the enormous face. Forty years it had taken him to learn what kind of smile was hidden beneath the dark moustache. O cruel, needless misunderstanding! O stubborn, self-willed exile from the loving breasts! Two gin-scented tears trickled down the sides of his nose. He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother. (Orwell 308)

The Magistrate's \*punk status lies in remaining outside the Empire/subject system: he's adjacent to it and human: "it is real if it bleeds."<sup>37</sup>

There's a specific quality to \*punk, and consequently Coetzee's novel, I must mention to close this paper. It is not observable, at least not directly, when considering the problematic nature of alterity, choice, and transactional spaces. Liminality, transformation, myth, quest, romance, narrative form, poetics: these things all encumber *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The novella is replete with hyper-textual, hyper-real, hyper-critical connections. Yet, beneath all of that, below the layered fabrics in the heterotopic quilt of inquiry, \*punk expresses and manifests its most deviant resistance of all. There is a final element to \*punk. This specific element is completely obviated by the alchemical suspension of postmodern theory and (post/trans)colonial politics separate. Beneath all the metaphysical and epistemological morasses that accompanies this novella, \*punk is Modernity's quixotic last stand against materialism: "The extent of uncertainty is not, itself, at all uncertain: it is precisely defined" (Calder 143). \*punk is inseparable from the *eros* of inquiry: it is the innate drive toward new means, spaces, and ways of knowing. Like the Formalism of the Modernist, like Einstein's quest for a general theory of relativity, like the Enlightenment or the sophists or the entire canon of human conversation before the commodification of labor and fiat currency and marketplaces that trade in simulations. \*punk has faith in the hyper-connectivity of ideas and language and performance and economy; \*punk is social. And, as first principle, \*punk believes in the fierce and vibrant truth of individual exceptionalism. This is not an exceptionalism in the sense that American Exceptionalism is encumbered with high-level

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<sup>37</sup> This statement is commonly attributed to George Bataille.

political disparities. No, this is an earthy, primal exceptionalism: the belief we must explore. Lastly, \*punk may be aggressive, but it does have a conscience:

“Strange!” said Oyarsa. “You do not love any one of your race—you would have let me kill Ransom. You do not love the mind of your race, nor the body. Any kind of creature will please you if only it is begotten by your kind as they now are. It seems to me, Thick One, that what you really love is no completed creature but the very seed itself: for that is all that is left ... I see now how the lord of the silent world has bent you. There are laws that all *hnau* know, of pity and straight dealing and shame and the like, and one of these is the love of kindred. He has taught you to break all of them except this one, which is not one of the greatest laws; this one he has bent till it becomes folly and has set it up, thus bent, to be a little, blind Oyarsa in your brain. And now you can do nothing but obey it, though if we ask you why it is a law you give no other reason for it than for all the other and greater laws which it drives you to disobey ... (Lewis 137).

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I fell in love with the object of a poem I wrote, because it was easier to love an ideal than to idealize love. That’s a poor explanation for why the word love should never appear in a love poem. Objects are far more discernible in the aftermath a zombie invasion. Speaking of which ... That particular stretch of highway which started all this figures (only slightly) prominently in a montage in the movie *Zombieland*. It connects two similar roads that lead between different places on the edge of this swamp-like not-quite-anywhere I adore.

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