

Games of gender and power in J. M. Coetzee's fiction

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J. M. Coetzee occupies a prime position among South African writers expressing themselves in English, not only because of the recent surge and popularity of postcolonial writing but also because of the way he presents the basic issues of all postcolonial literatures. Even though, as a descendant of white *Afrikaner* settlers his is essentially the position of the white coloniser, he presents the central problems and repercussions of colonisation from a much more complex perspective.

In this paper I will discuss the transition from the colonial order to the postcolonial one, based on two of Coetzee's novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) and *Disgrace* (1999). The paper is divided into two major parts; the first deals with the various manifestations of the colonial age, with a focus on the hierarchy among characters and the representations of traditional male-female relations. However, as we shall see, Coetzee's subtle irony already indicates that there is perhaps something more to this world than the first glimpse suggests. In the second part, I examine the entry into the postcolonial age and will argue that this phenomenon can be best interpreted through two main motifs: through the changes in language and through the process of becoming animal. In this second part, the emphatic role of language and communication also allows for a Lévinasien reading, which, based on the difference between the saying and the said, tries to grasp and interpret from an ethical point of view the possibilities of entering the postcolonial. Thus, the main concern of the paper is to look at the manifold conflicts originating from this change, eventually arriving at the conclusion that the opposing dénouement of the two novels shows the very much present problem of the postcolonial through two very different but equally valid lenses.

Firstly, however, it is important to settle some questions of terminology. "Colonial" in this paper designates that historical (and with this, ideological) period which is always referred to in a patriarchal spirit and which to some extent maintains its power through the dichotomical arrangement of roles, the most important of these being the male-female, victim-perpetrator and, of course coloniser-colonised dualities. "Colonial" also designates a point of view, a perspective, which, as we shall see it, manifests in several characters of both *Disgrace* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. As opposed to this, "postcolonial" implies that which necessarily comes after the "colonial", not only historically but ideologically as well. I define "postcolonial" in this paper as the period that is dominated by the reversal of these pre-given roles and the conflicts originating thereof. Therefore, the "postcolonial point view" can be

taken as simply implying a critical stance towards what had been previously established as the only, i.e., totalising order, the order of the coloniser. This is a rather crude simplification but one has to bear in mind that both “colonial” and “postcolonial” designate the two extremes of a historical and ideological way of thinking. However, there is something in between these two poles that one might term as the “postcolonial shift”; and this paper will specifically argue that this transitional phase is what best describes the world of Coetzee’s two novels, where, consequently, opposing interpretations might very well prevail.

This “postcolonial shift” is notoriously difficult to define; it is perhaps closest to Homi Bhabha’s term, the “Third Space”. In *The Location of Culture*, he claims that “The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation [i.e., the old colonial interpretation]” and that “such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force.” (37) It also becomes evident that this process finally leads us to a very curious “articulation of culture’s *hibridity*.” (38). Thus, the “postcolonial shift” is that transitory period in history and thinking as well which is both subversive and in a sense (re)constructive of a new order. It is essentially in this sense that I will use the phrase “postcolonial shift” in my analysis of Coetzee’s two novels, emphasising that it is at this moment very much uncertain and even ephemeral.¹

The reflection of traditional colonial relationships

The main aim of this chapter is to show how traditional attitudes towards the colonised remain intact in both novels for a long time and how, despite the fact that both novels were written from a postcolonial perspective, the power relationships of the old colonial world are presented in order to be subverted later on. While *Disgrace* with its South-African setting provides a more particular picture of Coetzee’s own homeland, *Waiting for the Barbarians* can be interpreted as a thorough anatomy of dictatorships all around the globe. Thus, against the chronology of the two novels, the paper will take an approach that moves from the particular to the more general.

¹ Bényei also discusses the problem of terminology at length in his book, *Traumatikus találkozások*. (14-19) He emphasises Bhabha’s (conscious) indebtedness to “Western” ideologies which at first glimpse might be perceived as an inherent contradiction. However, Bhabha recognises the possibilities that such an adoption of Western theories may bring to the postcolonial situation, and in that, he follows Frantz Fanon who was among the first theoreticians to use Western frameworks to describe his own (post)colonial world. (Bényei 18)

Interestingly, the basic structure of the colonial world can be best grasped in both novels in the dichotomies represented by the main characters. In *Disgrace*, the figure of the protagonist, David Lurie embodies the archetypal male coloniser: a successful middle-aged white man and a university professor with considerable authority. However, it becomes clear very soon that the figure of Lurie is presented through several layers of irony, thus, already undermining the traditional colonial representation. As early as the introduction of this character, the reader also learns that David Lurie is a mediocre professor of literature, an expert on English Romanticism, especially Byron. This is already an ironical position since Byron's passionate voice is in huge contrast with Lurie's dry and uncreative style, inadequate for literature and communication alike. The irony continues as the reader also learns that Lurie teaches at the Department of Communication, and it becomes double-edged when Lurie himself reflects on the irony of his own low standing at Cape Town Technical University. This latter is the irony of the insignificant intellectual who believes that he would deserve more than his current position.

Lurie is a very complex figure since he personifies all that can be associated with the image of white settlers who consider themselves morally and intellectually superior to the colonised but who have become over the centuries increasingly isolated from South African reality. This isolation is very well evidenced in his relationship with the various female characters of the novel. In *Disgrace*, almost all archetypal female figures can be found: Lucy, the brave, autonomous and self-sufficient woman; Melanie, the fragile beauty in need of support; Soraya, the exotic prostitute; and Bev, the ugly, middle-aged mother who nevertheless shows the most humane behaviour of all the characters (Cooper 28). Lurie enters into an intimate relationship with all these women one way or another but he remains unable to understand them, and in this, he exemplifies the colonisers who sought to conquer but not to learn.

The story is put into motion by an act of violence, a rape which, in an allegorical interpretation, seems to lay down the basis for the relationship of coloniser and colonised. In this situation, the colonised is represented by Melanie Isaacs, Lurie's student whom Lurie instinctively refers to as the "dark one" (18), emphasising not only the darkness of her skin (as opposed to that of Lurie himself) but also her inherent difference from him.² In fact, he ponders about Melanie this way: "Melanie - melody: a meretricious rhyme. Not a good name

² Bear in mind, however, that Melanie is *not* a black student, this game with her name is merely Lurie's way of establishing a marked difference between himself and the girl.

for her. Shift the accent. Meláni: the dark one.” (18) Poyner points out that Lurie shows his own inherent racism through this involuntary act of naming by which he, as the one in a traditionally superior position (as a coloniser and a teacher as well) not only names but constitutes Melanie’s identity at the same time. (149) Is he making her out as a prostitute (cf. the adjective ‘meretricious’) or simply as the inferior colonised one (cf. the darkness hidden in her name)?

Another important aspect of Lurie’s image of Melanie, which seems to concur with attributes of the colonised land, is his regarding her as an exotic object to be possessed and used. While trying to convince Melanie to spend the night in his apartment, he says the following: “Because a woman’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it.” (14) This seems to mirror his relationship with Soraya as well: an exotic woman whom he enjoys “having” from time to time but perhaps the thrill is not exactly mutual.

This traditional colonial representation seems to culminate in Melanie’s and Lurie’s sexual intercourse which is later claimed to be an instance of rape:

He has given her no warning; she is too surprised to resist the intruder who thrusts himself upon her. When he takes her in his arms, her limbs crumple like a marionette's. Words heavy as clubs thud into the delicate whorl of her ear. ‘No, not now!’ she says, struggling. ‘My cousin will be back!’

But nothing will stop him. [...] She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes. She lets him lay her out on the bed and undress her: she even helps him, raising her arms and then her hips. Little shivers of cold run through her; as soon as she is bare, she slips under the quilted counterpane like a mole burrowing, and turns her back on him.

Not rape, not quite that but undesired to the core. As though she had decided to go slack, die within herself for the duration, like a rabbit when the jaws of the fox close on its neck. So that everything done to her might be done, as it were, far away. (24–25)

Since both parties offer different versions of the events, it becomes increasingly difficult even for the reader to decipher the true meaning of this encounter. There is a continuous shift in focalisation and viewpoint which makes it difficult to give an unambiguous interpretation to the scene. Such textual indices as calling Lurie an “intruder” or the use of the verb “thrust

upon” seem to equate him with a rapist. Furthermore, Melanie’s impassivity is continuously emphasised by her being the grammatical object and also by not referring to her as a whole being. She is constantly described in metonymical terms: it is only her *limbs* that crumple, not her whole body. This metonymical representation becomes complete when by averting two of her body parts (eyes and lips) which are responsible for perceiving Lurie during the act, she averts her whole being. Furthermore, “lips” might also very well constitute a sexual metaphor.

This representation of Melanie as a mere part of something shows that throughout most of this part Lurie is the focaliser. Even though Melanie eventually becomes the grammatical subject, the personal pronoun “him” constantly hovers in the sentences, signalling that the real focaliser is still Lurie, who is telling the reader about Melanie’s weird passivity from his own perspective, emphasising its effect on *him*. He interprets this passivity as consent and even help. He even says “Not rape.” (15), and later on he also claims that “[he] became the servant of Eros” (52). There is a significant difference between what is articulated explicitly (“not rape” and “undesired”) and what is expressed through metaphors. However, even though Lurie recognises the true nature of his act, the contrastive conjunction “but” does not really have force, since the emphasis is on the first part of the sentence. Therefore, it is the “not rape” part that sticks with the reader, while the “but undesired” bit seems to remain underemphasised, this way averting responsibility from Lurie. This can perhaps be interpreted as one of Coetzee’s methods to make the reader doubt the previously accepted paradigms.

During this rape scene, one can see that Lurie becomes much more than a university professor involved in an affair with his student. He comes to represent the power, insistence and violence of the white coloniser who forces himself upon the African native. By raping his student, he comes to embody the cruel and for a long time unquestionable superiority of patriarchy (Cooper 25). This short scene grounds the common Western perception of Africa. Since the body is a pivotal element in postcolonial discourse (Viola 12), Melanie’s passive and helpless body waiting to be eventually subjugated becomes an easy allegory for the land before colonisation. Even more so, since we often speak about land in female terms, as for example Mother Earth, which further gives the act of colonisation (or in this case, rape) a gender dimension. The roles are very much pre-given in this stage of the novel with Lurie being the historical coloniser and Melanie the somewhat naïve and weak colonised giving herself up easily for lack of knowledge.

As it had been seen, the paper essentially favours an allegorical reading of both novels, even if *Disgrace* seems much less prone to it than *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In trauma and war narratives, the traumatic events are most often presented through an individual story

precisely in order to reach the desired effect of empathy and to some extent, identification. It is never through the presentation of large numbers of casualty that people can even begin to perceive the significance of another's trauma but through an individual story that can later be taken on to a more allegorical level. Tímár also draws attention to the fact that according to Gayatri Spivak it is only through allegory that the true and unending otherness of the Other can be perceived at all, even if it is at the same time replaced with something else. (1035)

The same dichotomical organisation of characters can be observed in *Waiting for the Barbarians* that was seen in *Disgrace* as well. Since this novel seems to represent an allegory of dictatorship, the roles of coloniser and colonised (or dictator and subject) do not seem so bound up with specific instances of South African history. As David Lurie is in *Disgrace*, here, the representative of the colonial order seems to be the Magistrate. At first glance, he is curiously in the same position as Lurie: he is a middle-aged white man in a position of authority and even his relationships with women seem to mirror those of Lurie. A crucial difference, however, is that the Magistrate is an actual agent of power and the force of oppression, better known as the Empire. Thus, there is no ironical undermining of his true (or supposed) importance, he truly is in a position of authority.

However, he seems just as detached and isolated from his own world as Lurie, and this is precisely where the reader might detect the same irony that was used to depict the professor of communication. The Magistrate, in fact, is most insecure about his own standing and constantly yearns to understand not only the position of those who are truly in possession of authority (and he clearly does not consider himself one of them!) but of those as well who are subjugated: "I am trying to understand the zone in which you live. I am trying to imagine how you breathe and eat and live from day to day. But I cannot!" (168) and "It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her." (44)

This already separates him from the figure of David Lurie, who is initially too arrogant to even try to understand the colonised or their way of life. Therefore, it would perhaps be more adequate to equate the colonial power with Colonel Joll, who, considering the number of his appearances, is a minor character, but who nevertheless plays a crucial role in the development of events. In fact, the novel opens with the arrival of this agent of the Empire and the introduction of his methods of interrogation, which seem both to appal and to repel the Magistrate. By the very end of the novel, he wants nothing more than to be seen as essentially different from Joll and his men:

For me, at this moment, striding away from the crowd, what has become important above all is that I should neither be contaminated by the atrocity that is about to be committed nor poison myself with impotent hatred of its perpetrators. I cannot save the prisoners, therefore let me save myself. Let it at the very least be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian. (140)

Wenzel calls attention to the fact that neither the Magistrate, nor Joll can “read” (i. e., interpret or understand) the nature of the colonised, who are represented in the novel by the ominous barbarians, therefore, they end up “writing” them, more precisely their story, which is the story of the ever impending barbarian attack. (66) While Joll writes it through torture, the Magistrate writes it through caring for the barbarian girl, this way trying to make amends but not really trying to understand her. Thus, however much the Magistrate seems to desire the true and ultimate understanding of his surroundings, he does not, in fact, make a real effort to do so.³

As for the Magistrate’s relationship with women – to make the parallel with Lurie complete –, he seems remarkably similar to Lurie, regarding the nature but perhaps not the motivation of these relationships. While Lurie seemed to take considerable pride in his “conquests” (paid or unpaid, wanted or unwanted), the Magistrate adopts a more weary and realistic stance: “For years I wore the well-fed look of a prize boar. Later that promiscuity modulated into more discreet relations with housekeepers and girls lodged sometimes upstairs in my rooms but more often downstairs with the kitchen help, and into liaisons with girls at the inn.” (62) He has no illusions about the sincerity of his “relationships” and regards these short escapades with considerable self-irony. Similarly to Lurie, the Magistrate is also very self-reflexive but as opposed to the protagonist of *Disgrace*, he does not idolise or call himself “Eros”. Instead, he puts forward and answers the question Lurie never seemed to account for: “Did I really want to enter and claim possession of these beautiful creatures? Desire seemed to bring with it a pathos of distance and separation which it was futile to deny.” (62)

³ The Magistrate’s fascination with the mysterious writings on the slips he finds during his excavations around the area of the town is also very interesting. Even though he himself does not understand this ancient language of the original inhabitants of the place, he does offer his *own* solution when interrogated by Colonel Joll. Thus, in a way he rewrites not only the barbarian language but the barbarian history as well, similarly to how Lurie rewrote Melanie by renaming her. The Magistrate is very much like Lurie in this respect: instead of truly trying to fathom the other culture, they both (consciously or unconsciously) force their own interpretations on it.

This series of brief affairs is changed by the arrival of the barbarian girl, who along with her tribe seems to represent the other pole of the colonial dichotomy. Initially, these people are presented as “pastoralists, nomads, tent-dwellers” (22), rather simple-minded, which is to say that they are easy to conquer and to rule upon. These characteristics also concur with the traditional attributes of the colonised and receive a further gender dimension by the girl who is the primary representative of the barbarians. Through her character, it is not only the otherness of this group that comes into focus but her sexuality (or lack of it) and female body as well. Eckstein constantly emphasises that “the novel is also about physical torture, the body in pain” (176). Thus, while the barbarians, including the girl, seem to represent the bodily aspect of life, the Magistrate embodies the intellectual aspect. This clear-cut division of the two spheres of life is also the backbone of the coloniser-colonised dichotomy, and, incidentally, one of the main causes of the conflicts.

These two poles of the colonial relationship are both part of the bigger scheme of the novel: the description of a state in a warzone, struggling to survive, and, thus, often resorting to inhuman measures. Much more than in *Disgrace*, which presented a more particular case, here, the different manifestations of a totalitarian regime can be easily pinpointed and accounted for. The clear hierarchy even among those who supposedly stand on the same side becomes evident at the very beginning of the novel. The Magistrate, seemingly the head of the small community shows a sort of fearful fascination towards Colonel Joll as he enters his town and practically orders him about. Even though these two men are the representatives of the same world and share the same standing, the narrating I (the Magistrate) clearly feels subordinate to this obscure man. The rest of the people naturally come below them, and even further down the scale are the peaceful fisher folk and finally, the barbarians. Of course, such a hierarchy needs to be maintained by force, in this case, by an army.

This army will necessarily employ methods of war which are most evident in the treatment of the barbarians: imprisonment and torture. Quoting Eckstein, who had claimed that this novel is partly about unexplained physical torture, at the beginning of the novel, the reader is not given any reflection on the nature of torture, instead a blatant and passionate rejection of it: “There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman's body anything but a site of joy? I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!”

(61) At this point of the novel, the Magistrate denies any knowledge about this specific kind of war violence and flees into a childlike rejection and denial.⁴

The ultimate weapon in the hands of the Third Bureau is keeping the suspense and the sense of an ever impending war, or in other words, keeping the inhabitants in constant fear of danger. The colonial world thus represented in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is one that rests on fear and on the hierarchy among characters, very much like the one shown in *Disgrace*, which, however, to a certain extent, individualises these pre-given roles, endowing them at the same time with an allegorical meaning in the (post)colonial context. What connects the remains of the colonial worlds in both novels is that there is a sense of peril (usually explicit, as a possible barbarian attack or as the expected surge of African settlers reclaiming their land) that perpetually threatens the very fabric of this world and will eventually ruin it. The ironic representation of the two male protagonists also seems to foreshadow the impending doom of the colonial world.

Traditional colonial representations reversed – entering the postcolonial realm

However, this anticipated ruin of the colonial order will do nothing more than bringing forth a world which can be called the realm of the postcolonial, where, to a certain extent, all these previous paradigms will be reversed. When discussing *Disgrace*, Derek Attridge calls attention to the fact that the novel is in fact describing the age of change *par excellence* and the arrival of a new, yet unknown system. (165) This indeed seems to be the grand scheme of the whole novel, the point being not so much the failing of the old system but the arrival of the new one. What is very important is that since the reader is locked up into Lurie's point of view (Attridge 167), this crucial strategy of the novel is left unnoticed for a very long time.

One of the first signs of this shift that even Lurie notices is a curious change in language, which is an extremely important site of meeting and understanding the Other, and whose problems or shortcomings might become an impediment of communication. Cooper draws attention to how Lurie ponders about the “applicability of the Western literary canon to the South African situation” (24) and eventually arrives at the conclusion that

⁴ An interesting comparison is at hand with the previous long quotation from page 140. At this much later point of the novel, when the Magistrate is already being tortured, he finally acknowledges the existence of torture but seeks to evade responsibility or any sort of association with it. Interestingly, he maintains his idealistic attitude towards this whole question: either there is no such thing as torture or he is not inclined to be a part of it, using the very poetic phrase “there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian”. (140)

[...] English is an unfit medium for the truth of South Africa. Stretches of English code whole sentences long have thickened, lost their articulations, their articulateness, their articulatedness. Like a dinosaur expiring and settling in the mud, the language has stiffened. Pressed into the mould of English, Petrus's story would come out arthritic, bygone. (117)

The dryness and lack of practicality of the English language show that while the original alterity of the African native and the coloniser might have been partly grounded in language, this basis is no longer adequate to describe their otherness as language is no longer a suitable representation of the relationship of coloniser and colonised. Note, however, that we are necessarily talking about a certain, creolised version of English that for instance Petrus speaks and which is considerably different from Lurie's own English, an English that he regards superior to any other variety found in his environment. Thus, in Lurie's view, this "New English" is necessarily a degenerate version of the ultimately superior original one, which for this very same reason, could never create a bridge between coloniser and colonised. It seems, then, that there is a need to go further than what the present state of language permits, and that language contributes to the shift in the sense that by becoming an inadequate means of communication, it creates an aching need for a substitute.

This shift embodied by a change in language is precisely the change that Coetzee describes when Lucy, Lurie's daughter is raped by three African intruders. Marais (76) also seems to agree that this second rape scene can actually serve as a structural parallel to Lurie's rape of Melanie. This paper will further argue that these two instances of rape do not merely parallel each other structurally but in an allegorical sense as well: it is in these two scenes that one can essentially detect the shift from colonial to postcolonial.

After his scandalous affair with Melanie, Lurie is fired from the university and seeks refuge on his daughter's secluded farm. He starts working in an animal shelter until they are viciously attacked by a gang of black men. The act of raping Lucy in this brutal manner shows a complete subversion of all the norms that were thought to belong to colonial practices. All the more so, since she sees a personal hatred in the eyes of her attackers:

'I think they have done it before,' she resumes, her voice steadier now. 'At least the two older ones have. I think they are rapists first and foremost. Stealing things is just incidental. A side-line. I think they *do* rape.' [...] 'I think I am in their territory. They have marked me. They will come back for me.'

[...] What if. . . what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? Perhaps that is what they tell themselves.' (158)

Significantly, she is trying to make sense of her rape and her father's brutal assault but at the same time, it seems that a new order has taken the place of the old patriarchal one where Lurie belonged during his time in Cape Town. Accordingly, this second rape scene can be interpreted as mirroring the postcolonial shift in a number of complex ways.

One facet of this shift is the changing of gender roles, which is a very important motif in *Disgrace*, contributing considerably to the understanding of the postcolonial and how it differs from the colonial. Africa is no longer identifiable with the image of the helpless female victim (cf. the bodily images of Melanie Isaacs); instead, it comes to personify the vengeance of a victim awakening from a long sleep. What is more, in the postcolonial age, vengeance comes to be embodied by the male component of the gender dichotomy, this way fully upsetting the original patriarchal organisation. Lurie also talks about an "emasculated institution of learning" (4) and this specific choice of words seems to signal as early as the very beginning of the novel that the already feminised or effeminate whites are gradually taking over the female pole of the dichotomy.

Since Lucy is an experienced South African farmer, she seeks to understand her rape for what it is: the need to pay her old debt (Horrell 18).⁵ She recognises that if she wants to stay in this environment, it is absolutely necessary for her to accept and follow the newly born power, which she does indeed by accepting her farmhand's offer of marriage. It is at this point that the question of agency resurfaces again: has Lucy lost all her agency not only during the act of rape but also as a repercussion of it? That is, has she lost her previous position and agency as an independent female farm owner and free agent of her own will? This paper aims to put forward a reading according to which her decision to keep her rapists' child is, in fact, an act with which she regains the agency she lost during the rape. When she decides *not* to leave the farm, the notion of agency becomes positively connoted once again, signalling that against all odds, instead of giving up on her farm, she (re)achieves agency over her own life.

⁵ Note that even more than in the case of Melanie, Lucy's loss of agency should be taken into account here. Once again, the paper wishes to focus on a more allegorical interpretation of this scene. The question of Lucy's agency will nevertheless come up in the main analysis from a slightly different perspective.

This seems to point beyond mere consolation since, just as the rape itself seems to be more about power (even after taking into account the obvious sexual overtones as well), Lucy's decision is not rooted in her sexual trauma but in her faith and her conviction that her place is in South Africa, on her farm, no matter the circumstances.⁶

Lurie does not arrive at this conclusion immediately; for a long time he has only been capable of thinking in colonial stereotypes. The only sphere where he is able to approach the otherness of South Africa and abandon his own scruples is the animal shelter where he cares for sick and abandoned dogs. Being a very self-reflexive character, he quickly notes – first with bitter irony, later with true compassion – that these dogs are very much like himself. Herron emphasises that Lurie's turn to animals is neither sudden, nor easy (471) since he is a man “corroded with scepticism” (*Disgrace* 102) but it is precisely because of this initial scepticism that his eventual turn will be all the more significant and remarkable. His initial attitude to animals is comparable to his attitude to the colonised: his saying that “Sheep do not own themselves, do not own their life.” (123) seems strangely to echo his previous observation about Melanie's beauty not belonging exclusively to herself. He clings to this rather colonial view of animals for a considerably long time while he slowly transforms into this Kafkaesque “dog-man”.

This, however, is in no way a reduction of his existence to a lower level; instead, as Herron once again suggests by bringing up Lurie's plans of inserting a dog into his rudimentary play about Byron (471), it represents a meeting of two spheres, one initially valued and the other initially looked down upon by the protagonist. These two spheres are in juxtaposition with one another but the postcolonial shift discussed above seems to account not only for the changes in the value and nature of language but for Lurie's slow transition into an animal-being, opening brand new perspectives for him.

To talk about issues of language and approaching the Other, especially in connection to Coetzee's two novels, I will rely on Lévinas' distinction of the *saying* and the *said*.⁷ He essentially claims that “the said arises in the saying” (46) but also that the said is “not simply a sign or expression of a meaning; it proclaims and establishes this as that.” (35) With this, he lays emphasis on the creative force of the saying, without undermining the – perhaps more

⁶ The ending note of the novel uttered by Lurie proves an interesting comparison: “Yes, I am giving him up.” (220) which can similarly be interpreted as an act *in favour* of the dying animal, thus, an act of mercy rather than an act of giving up (very much like the murder of Mary Turner in *The Grass Is Singing*). This way, both Lurie's and Melanie's decision seems to signal a step towards the previously ungraspable Other represented by the colonised, rather than a step backwards.

⁷ Interestingly, Bényei also mentions this distinction in his book, *Traumatikus találkozások* and further elaborates on a Lévinasian reading of several postcolonial texts.

inert – nature of the said. As to the concrete definition of the saying, he is a lot less clear. However, he does claim that “the saying extended toward the said and absorbed in it, correlative with it, names an entity” (37) and that it “states and thematizes the said [and] signifies to the other.” (46) Furthermore, he also claims that “the saying is both an affirmation and a retraction of the said.” (44) This is all the more important since he also establishes a dichotomy between the saying and the said, claiming that these two respectively represent the subject-object opposition, the subject defining (“naming” or “thematizing”) the object in a sense. On the other hand, it is very important to emphasise that the saying holds the possibility of being absorbed in the said, while it also has the power of either creating (“affirming”) or destroying (“retracting”) the said. Thus, the saying and the said are inevitably linked to one another somewhat in the fashion of cause and effect but as this paper will argue, the situation is more complex and perhaps even more contradictory than that.

Lévinas argues that what can be conveyed through language is only the said and, therefore, language and linguistic expression (which necessarily operate with the said) always already constitute a betrayal as to the true meaning they aim to communicate to the Other. From this it follows that in order to get the true message through, language cannot be the only solution. Lévinas claims that language is “not reducible to a system of signs [...] [it is] an excrescence of the verb [and it bears] sensible life” but that it “is also a system of nouns.” (35) This double nature of language can be best seized in the dichotomy of the saying and the said and if one is to take a Derridean interpretation of binary oppositions, the favoured one here is obviously the saying. The saying is that part of language (and note that here language can be interpreted in a much broader context than mere linguistic expression) that is connected to the verb, thus, the part that is *dynamic*.

It is only in this dynamic part (in the saying) that a true change (such as the above discussed postcolonial shift) can occur. Lévinas further claims that “to say is to approach a neighbour” (48), what is more “saying uncovers” (49), which clearly designates a *gesture* towards the Other. Thus, I would argue that Lévinas’ famous concept of the saying is in fact a gesture which needs to be grasped in order to become a real act and, consequently, bring forth the change static language would not be able to do.

A crucial moment in Lévinas’ philosophy is when he claims that “saying is inseparable from patience and pain” (50), signalling that any sort of change brought forward by this gesture is necessarily an agonising, traumatic one. If “saying is denuding, exposedness to the other, [which] absolves me of all identity” (50), one might detect some implications in connection to *Disgrace* which go beyond the interpretation of Lucy’s rape as the allegory of

the postcolonial shift. Apart from the physical and spiritual denuding and exposedness that occur during the rape, Lucy's identity becomes absolved in a very different way as well, as a result of her trauma:

"Go back to Petrus," she says.

"Propose the following. Say I accept his protection. Say he can put out whatever story he likes about our relationship and I won't contradict him. If he wants me to be known as his third wife, so be it. As his concubine, ditto. But then the child becomes his too. The child becomes part of his family. As for the land, say I will sign the land over to him as long as the house remains mine. I will become a tenant on his land." (204)

Thus, verbalising her debt towards Africa (quoted earlier) belongs, in fact, to the realm of the said event but the fact that she is willing to literally approach her neighbour and have her previous identity if not entirely, then partly absorbed by him is a gesture of the saying. In line with the previous analysis which established that Lucy's decision to keep her child and stay on her farm is neither consolation, nor reduction but an essentially positive, self-asserting act, it also seems that one can draw the same conclusion in Lévinas' system. She steps over the empty nature of the said in order to commit herself to the more meaningful gesture of the saying. This is very much in parallel with Lurie's almost unconscious gesture of inserting a dog into his imaginary opera, which is also a gesture in the colloquial sense of the word and in the Lévinasian as well. Much more than verbalising his dog-like nature ("Well, now he has become a dog-man: a dog undertaker; a dog psychopomp; a *harijan*." 146), his musings about his future opera constitute an act of the saying.

Similarly, there is also an intriguing linguistic side to the postcolonial shift that occurs in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the word "language" being used here to denote the general processes of communication, including non-verbal tactics as well. However, despite Eckstein's insistence on the novel being primarily "about language and the body in pain" (177), Attridge emphasises the drawbacks of an exclusively allegorical reading. He argues that one cannot simply equate the Empire with South Africa because the main concern of the novel is not political but is, in fact, connected to the act of writing (34). He also claims that a purely allegorical reading would displace the literal meaning. Thus, while pursuing an allegorical reading of the novel (as it had been done in the previous chapter as well), I also wish to remain faithful to the idiosyncrasies of the changing world represented in *Waiting for*

the Barbarians. Nevertheless, I had argued previously that some instances of the allegorical reading are especially important in light of *Disgrace*, which is overtly concerned with the South African situation, this way supplying the reader with a more particular case, whereas *Waiting for the Barbarians* opts for a more general representation.

Language, then, if taken at its face value, is one of the major factors and initiators of the postcolonial shift already discussed above. Contrary to *Disgrace* where the shift can be best perceived in the deterioration of English, here, language seems to work in the opposite manner: by slowly discovering each other's language, communication between the Magistrate and the girl (and her people as well) seemingly becomes possible and seems to foreground the change in his attitude towards the conspicuous Other.⁸

The indeterminacy of language as mentioned by Wenzel (64) or perhaps even more importantly, silence are key elements in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Wenzel also claims that torture creates a "discursive space" between the girl and the Magistrate and, consequently, one of the Magistrate's main frustrations in the novel is that he is not given explanations about anything. (64) Lurie has no such doubts since he supplies his own very much colonially based explanations for everything and perhaps this is one of the reasons why in *Disgrace*, the shift comes about in a much more ironical way. The Magistrate keeps asking the girl about her family, her scars and the torture she had to live through, so much so that she becomes irritated with him ("You want to talk all the time," she complains." 56) and then "The simplicity of the moment is over; we separate and lie side by side." (56) Silence and the trauma lying behind it are also key moments in both novels, being themselves elements and peculiar manifestations of communication and eventually language.

Interestingly, one of the most significant scenes between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl is when he invites her once again into his room to spend the night there, cuddling and caressing her, and eventually trying to decipher her secret. This ritual is one of the most interesting modes of interaction between these two characters. On one occasion he sets out to wash and care for her broken foot, which slowly becomes a habit of interaction between the two. This sort of interaction is what can be taken for a distinct form of language,

⁸ Note how from the beginning (as is shown in the analysis in the previous chapter), the Magistrate is much more prone and susceptible to this change than Lurie. However, as we shall see in the end, it is but an illusory moment of understanding.

all the more so, since in the absence of an actual linguistic means of communication, one resorts to such tactics.⁹

“Show me what they have done to your feet.”

She neither helps nor hinders me. I work at the thongs and eyelets of the coat, throw it open, pull the boots off. [...] Inside them her feet are swaddled, shapeless. [...] She begins to unwrap the dirty bandages. I leave the room, go downstairs to the kitchen, come back with a basin and a pitcher of warm water. She sits waiting on the carpet, her feet bare. They are broad, the toes stubby, the nails crusted with dirt. She runs a finger across the outside of her ankle. “That is where it was broken. The other one too.” [...]

I wash slowly, working up a lather, gripping her firm-fleshed calves, manipulating the bones and tendons of her feet, running my fingers between her toes. I change my position to kneel not in front of her but beside her, so that, holding a leg between elbow and side, I can caress the foot with both hands. I lose myself in the rhythm of what I am doing. I lose awareness of the girl herself. There is a space of time which is blank to me: perhaps I am not even present. When I come to, my fingers have slackened, the foot rests in the basin, my head droops. (39-40)

Eckstein argues that the humility the Magistrate shows in this scene towards the barbarian girl is in fact the “beginning of a deconstructive process” (198) or as this paper put it forward, the first step of the postcolonial shift. The scene can easily be interpreted as a Biblical paraphrase, echoing Mary’s washing of Jesus’ feet with her tears and perfume, and then wiping them with her hair.¹⁰ Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this interpretation is taking account of the gender shift that occurs in Coetzee’s reworking of the original Biblical scene. Much like in *Disgrace*, one of the most pivotal moments of the

⁹ This, then, seems to signal once again that the importance of language and common forms of communication do not merely lie in their ability to change the established order around themselves, but also in the fact that if they fail, they do create the need to find alternative ways of interaction.

¹⁰ Common belief identifies this woman as Mary Magdalene but, in fact, in most canonical versions of the Bible it is another Mary, Mary of Bethany, the sister of Lazarus who was restored to life by Jesus. However, yet others stipulate that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene were actually the same woman, hence the common identification of the two. Bényei draws attention to the phenomenon of *biblical mimicry* which he discusses in relation to Kipling’s “On the City Wall” but which I think is very adequate here as well. In his analysis, Bényei claims that the stable meaning of the Biblical text is turned into a storehouse of changing references which are no longer suitable for reassuring self-identification. (190)

postcolonial shift can be traced to the reversal of gender roles: just as it is no longer Africa that plays the helpless female victim, it is not the woman who washes the man's feet. Similarly, just as Lucy's rape, a central manifestation of the postcolonial shift, is more about power than an actual sexual intercourse, here, the feet-washing can be read as being more about penitence and redemption than sexuality.

Curiously, the scene quoted at length above is full of sensuality, and the rhythm and swift undulating movements of the Magistrate seem to echo the movements of an intimate sexual intercourse. However, this is only used to imply how close one can get to another, damaged human being and how one can "lose awareness" of the Other without actual penetration, thus, how the Magistrate penetrates the girl in the non-physical sense. Accordingly, the paper would argue that instead of near sexual intercourse or sexuality, 'intimacy' would be a more adequate term to describe this encounter between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl. Even more so, since the actual "consummation" of their relationship only happens towards the very end of their acquaintance and it proves to be an extremely disappointing affair. Consequently, this whole scene is an act of redemption for the Magistrate and if one is to pursue an allegorical interpretation (which Attridge warned against so vehemently), one can see that his original guilt stems from a communal sense of wrongdoing. The guilt he feels is the guilt of the coloniser having wronged the indigenous people of the land and he is but making penitence for this age old debt.

Interestingly, the reader does not get the girl's perspective as the Magistrate is the sole narrator and focaliser of the whole novel, very much like David Lurie in *Disgrace*. An important difference is that while apart from a few instances, the barbarian girl is not given a voice at all, Lucy does have her own voice and agency, which she loses but – as it was argued above – manages to reclaim. Similarly, this redemption of the Magistrate is also further developed on another level, just like in the case of Lurie. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, there is no identification with animals as a more direct identification is at hand: the barbarians are frequently referred to and regarded as animal-like beings, even the girl is described as an animal when the Magistrate jokingly says that "People will say I keep two wild animals in my rooms, a fox and a girl." (48), and those who show any kind of sympathy towards this savage people are also regarded as rather animalistic ("the animal that skulks within every barbarian-lover" 165). Thus, the same process of reduction can be detected in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as was observed in *Disgrace* in connection to Lurie, but, here, it is not necessarily related to animals all throughout the novel.

One significant difference between the two novels in this respect is while in Lurie's case, the reader may discover a process of reduction that is fundamentally positive and leads to the ultimate understanding of the Other, the Magistrate's reduction is depicted in a very negative light, as an actual reduction:

From my throat comes the first mournful dry bellow, like the pouring of gravel. [...] I bellow again and again, there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright. [...] "He is calling his barbarian friends," someone observes. "That is barbarian language you hear." There is laughter. (162)

This scene is inevitably negative for both the reader and the other characters who bear witness to this cruel display of the oppressive power. Even though the Magistrate's humiliation and torture could be interpreted as Christ's suffering, I would argue that another explanation is more at hand here, namely, that this is the ultimate humiliation of the coloniser. It is all the more ironic because it is not the colonised that humiliates the protagonist but *another* coloniser.

Hanging from a tree, he is unable to maintain his dignity and in torture and suffering, he becomes one with the barbarians. Interestingly, it is in language that this unison comes about and once again, irony is used to draw attention to the significance of this moment. He utters what is (mockingly) perceived to be words, or rather exclamations in the barbarian language. This could be regarded as the ultimate alliance with the previously unknown and unknowable Other but it cannot be, since his "speaking" barbarian is seen as an entirely deplorable thing. Thus, contrary to Lurie, becoming like the barbarians does not open a new horizon of perspectives for the Magistrate, it rather emphasises a sombre prognostication about the possibility of understanding the conspicuous Other, represented here by the barbarians.

The reader may find that there is the same sort of obvious physical exposedness in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as the main motif of the Magistrate's and the barbarian girl's relationship as was discussed in Lévinas. The Magistrate describes how he "lose[s] awareness" (40) of himself and of the girl as well, as he performs his daily routine of washing her body and how this is a completely asexual activity: "I feel no desire to enter this stocky

little body glistening by now in the firelight. [...] There used to be moments when she stiffened at certain intimacies; but now her body yields [...] to everything.”¹¹ (43)

This may seem like the same sort of meaningful gesture that made the rudimentary steps of understanding each other in *Disgrace* possible but, surprisingly, at the end of the novel, it turns out that this was but an empty gesture. The Magistrate muses this way long after he had returned the barbarian girl to her people: “If she had told me then, if I had understood her, if I had been in a position to understand her, if I had believed her, if I had been in a position to believe her, I might have saved myself from a year of confused and futile gestures of expiation.” (180) Not only is there no such verbalisation as Lucy’s ponderings about the meaning of her rape (which would constitute the ‘said’ part of the dichotomy), the reader finds at the end that there never was any true communication between the Magistrate and the girl, thus, there never was a true opening towards the saying. Instead, they choose elusive ways of communication, such as the body washing and later on, the actual sexual intercourse.

The very same difference can be detected between the two novels on a more general, historical level as well. As it has been mentioned before, much like Lucy’s regaining of her agency, Lurie’s becoming a dog is ultimately a positive process, a process of understanding and finally finding their place in the changed (postcolonial) society. Both Lurie and Lucy, being ultimately very (self-)reflexive characters ponder about the implications of the more abstract concept of history on their lives. Notably, it is Lurie who makes the ultimate connection between Lucy’s rape and its historical significance: ‘It was history speaking through them,’ he offers at last. ‘A history of wrong. Think of it that way, if it helps. It may have seemed personal, but it wasn’t. It came down from the ancestors.’ (156) It has to be remarked, however, that Lucy’s immediate answer contains the painful truth: ‘That doesn’t make it easier. The shock simply doesn’t go away. The shock of being hated, I mean. In the act.’ (156). This seems to suggest that, once again, mere verbalising is not enough and a solution is needed that would combine the personal and the historical spheres.

What could offer some sort of reconciliation in the historical sense is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which, as LaCapra observes, was, in fact, “in its own way a trauma recovery center” (qtd. in Urquhart 1). This paper will not delve into historical observations of the importance of this institution, the focus will be on the theoretical possibilities such an establishment could offer for actual reconciliation. All the more so, since

¹¹ Note how this description echoes the discussion on page 14 as to what extent the words ‘sexual intercourse’ and ‘intimacy’ should or could be mingled. In line with the previous analysis, the Magistrate’s words also seem to confirm that both in the bodily and the spiritual/emotional sense the more adequate term is intimacy and not sexuality, no matter how suggestive the sexual overtones are.

as Tímár emphasises as well, not only Coetzee himself but others criticise the Committee's work because it forces people to retell the story of their trauma which is essentially not a coherent narrative and gives way to more frustration than help. (1035) Thus, while Lurie feels that Lucy had been wronged in the historical sense, this way giving a more abstract reading to her rape, one may wonder whether it is an actual historical institution that can offer her the much needed solace.

A little later, Lurie himself seems to supply the answer to this question: "You wish to humble yourself before history. But the road you are following is the wrong one. It will strip you of all honour; you will not be able to live with yourself. I plead with you, listen to me." (160) He is reflecting on Lucy's previous verbalisation of her "debt" towards Africa and he is explicitly warning Lucy against accepting Petrus' marriage offer, and, thus, he does not yet grasp the difference between these two, which had been previously established to be essentially a difference between the said and the saying. Later on, however, he does realise that his own decision to stay on and help Bev run the animal shelter and his musings about including a dog in his opera constitute a genuine opening towards this other reality, which seems so different from a historical perspective. More importantly, he no longer feels that he or his daughter are "stripping themselves of all honour".

It seems, then, that historical perspective or consciousness (which should not be equated with the TRC!) can, in fact, help the characters move forward in *Disgrace*. However, it is the personal and the historical level combined that achieves this reconciliation and eventually makes a more positive reading of the novel possible. Lucy does not only regain her agency by her decision to stay on the piece of land she owns but also by her willingness to act on the historical impulsions her situation forces on her. In a combination of a genuine gesture towards the Other (saying that she is willing to be partly "absorbed" by Petrus) and her historically imbued recognition that this must be so, she makes the first steps on the road of reconciliation, thus giving a positive reading to the novel.

Envisaging an institution in the imaginary world of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which would operate on similar terms as the actual TCR seems all the more adequate since there are just as many reflections on history by the characters as in *Disgrace*. Most notably, there is a desperate outcry by the Magistrate at the very end of the novel, declaring his wish to be torn out of the course of history: "I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame?" (206). Interestingly, this is exactly the opposite effort as what is

described in *Disgrace* where Lurie is trying to incorporate themselves and what has happened to them into a historical perspective.

Waiting for the Barbarians seems to offer different interpretations in other aspects, too. Urquhart claims that critics have tended to regard this novel as essentially playing on the notion of “retributive justice by erasing the distinction between Empire and barbarian, between the oppressor and the victim” (4). This is very much in parallel with the erasure the Magistrate seeks by the end of the novel, even more so, since his wish comes about as a result of the actual erasure of his difference from the barbarians. It seems, however, that reducing the reconciliation to this erasure of the previous dichotomy of coloniser and colonised does more harm than good. Perhaps this erasure can be seen as a coping method which, however drastic it may seem, is clearly not enough to make sense of the postcolonial shift. Similarly, while Van Zanten Gallagher suggests a relatively positive interpretation when she says that “in storytelling – impotent, opaque, and uncertain as it might be – oppression and torture may be unveiled” (281), I argue that mere “unveiling” is not enough to achieve the reconciliation mentioned in connection with *Disgrace*.

One of the mottos of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is that “there must always be a place for penance and reparation” (109). Even though this utterance would suggest a fundamentally positive reading that might allow for the possibility of reparation, I argue that the novel is stuck with the act of revealing and never achieves reconciliation. This is due partly to a lack of real communication between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl (discussed above as never truly entering the realm of the saying in Lévinasian terminology), and partly to a lack of deeper historical reflections as for example seen in the case of *Disgrace*. It seems that there is a circle of violence repeating itself after the army leaves the town and the Magistrate is (possibly) reinstated into his old office, starting the process all over again. Furthermore, there is no learning, or as the Magistrate puts it: “There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it.” (206) All this suggests that *Waiting for the Barbarians* can rather be interpreted as a case study of dictatorship and war with an ultimately negative and pessimistic overtone.

It seems, then, that through the subversion and even reversal of previously given roles, Coetzee aims to show us the basic interplays of the colonial and the postcolonial, with a heavy emphasis on the transitory space between the two, which has been referred to in this paper as “the postcolonial shift”. Coetzee’s concern with the question of gender and animal being seem also to be linked very closely to this process, these motifs being crucial in his entire œuvre as

well. His choice of sexuality (and especially the rape allegory) and gender shifts is all the more important since rape is a notoriously difficult crime to define. While the intimacies between the Magistrate and the Barbarian girl have been analysed as essentially pertaining to the old world and not being able to bring forth a change, Lucy's rape merits a more positive reading. Part of the old rape script is preserved here (Lucy's self-blame) but as there is a true opening *gesture* towards the Other, it is adequate to claim that while some features of the old world are preserved, a new one seems to be coming into power at the same time (echoing the double nature of the postcolonial shift as well). This possibility for a positive change is very well reflected in Lurie's historical ponderings: "History repeating itself, though in a more modest vein. Perhaps history has learned a lesson." (62)

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