ISSN 2249-4529

Lapis Lazuli -An International Literary Journal (LLILJ)

Vol.4 / NO.1 /Spring 2014

Poststructuralist Theory in Postcolonial Contexts:

J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Sebastian Chalres Galbo

ABSTRACT:

This paper considers the role of poststructuralist theory in the postcolonial writings of South African novelist, J. M. Coetzee. In recent years, literary and critical theorists, particularly American philosopher, Judith Butler, have voiced provocative responses to ethical objections raised in opposition to poststructuralist theory. In light of Butler's influential work at the intersection of ethics and poststructuralist theory, this paper concentrates on how these ethical iterations are addressed and elaborated in postcolonial contexts, specifically ways in which perpetrators of colonial violence and occupation make sense of their identity and role in the perpetuation of imperialism. Against this backdrop, this paper understands the robust scholarly

dialogue that has emerged between postcolonial and poststructuralist theory as hinging on a peculiar but often overlooked metaphor: the palimpsest. As a rich metaphor that occupies the border of fiction and criticism, the palimpsest raises critical questions concerning ethical accountability and the pernicious patterns of imperial hegemony.

KEYWORDS: *Literary theory, Poststructuralism, Postcolonialism, Coetzee, Butler, Foucault, Derrida, Metaphor, Modernism, Ethics*

Continental philosophy of the 1960s and 1970s witnessed the groundswell of a provocative school of critical-literary theory known as Poststructuralism. The philosophical work formulated by the school's most vocal exponents, namely Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, has theorized the radical instability of human identity. Rather than understanding the subject as a 'center' and autonomous originator of meaning, they claim that the self is a 'site,' divided by the vicissitudes of complex sociopolitical systems outside of it. Poststructuralist theory treats the self as an ongoing construction—no longer the sole author of its formation (as purported by humanism), but constantly assembled in relation to a nexus of inescapable forces, namely the processes of socialization and discourse. As John Culler elaborates: "Even the idea of personal identity emerges through the discourse of culture: the 'I' is not something given but comes to exist as that which is addressed by and related to others" (Ashcroft 224). Clearly stated, the subject must inhabit the social world in order to learn the laws of the symbolic and social order before it can possess a singular identity, or a sense that it is an 'I.' Indeed, if the 'I' is constituted by discursive systems that always precede its existence, the origins of its formation in the social world are, in a word, opaque.

Recalling Foucault's amusing analogy of the toolbox as a metaphor for literary theory—enclosed its myriad applications for analyzing and parsing out literary texts—poststructuralism may well be the screwdriver that twists the bolts from humanist conceptions of subjectivity. That the production of human identity is rooted and constructed inscrutably in the broader social discourse continues to provoke intense critical consternation, especially in discussions of ethics and notions of responsibility. Having jettisoned autonomy, the anti-foundational stance articulated by poststructuralism raises serious ethical questions concerning the thresholds of

responsibility—that is, if the production of the 'I' is radically obscured by the social discourses according to which the self is constructed, how can subjects be held accountable for their actions or the decisions they make in life? Such a poignant question receives trenchant analysis in Judith Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), in which she asks if it is possible to devise an ethics that does not presuppose, or recognize that the self is transparent. Sharply contrasting dominant academic criticism, Butler contests that our acceptance of poststructuralist theory does not concede a resignation from ethics; in fact, she says, it possesses strong ethical bearings in that our being 'given over' to discourse fosters an uniquely flexible ethical praxis that urges subjects to acknowledge self-incoherency as a fundamental human commonality rather than an ontological rupture inaugurating ethical paralysis. "If we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us," Butler elaborates, "then that opacity seems built into our formation and follows from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency" (Butler 11). For Butler and others outlining poststructuralist ethics, opacity is the defining quiddity of selfhood, and ultimately affords a fresh ethical perspective grounded in human commonality and interdependency.

Elucidating the interrelations between subjectivity and ethics, poststructuralist theory provides rich interpretive strategies for reading ways in which literature represents and negotiates the vexed conditions of selfhood. The urgent ethical questions raised by poststructuralism are grappled with in Coetzee's postcolonial novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), which explores the acute existential anguish of a colonial functionary struggling with the complexities of ontological incoherence. Through the lens of this novel, this paper explores the dynamic interplay between poststructuralism and the literary trope of the palimpsest in order to tease out the ethical quandaries inaugurated by the former's theory. The novel follows the narrative of an anonymous colonial official in an anonymous place and time who, is continuously confronted by the realities of his self-incoherency, and, in struggling to reconcile that his political life is imbricated in the remote events of colonial empire, realizes that his life-story and identity cannot be disentangled from the historically determined configurations of imperialism. He is, to invoke Butler's lexicon, inextricably 'bound-up' with the colonial order in which he implicitly sustains by virtue of his occupation. Though the spectrum of literary theory and its applications vast,

Poststructuralism provides an especially useful lens for considering how subjectivity is produced and maintained within the discursive web of colonial empire, and, crucially, how subjects are to live ethically under social conditions above and beyond their immediate control.

As a point of departure, it is useful to consider Foucault's seminal essay "What is Enlightenment?" to illustrate Coetzee's rather progressive understanding of modernity as an "attitude" rather than a "period of history." Modernity, says Foucault, is "a choice made by certain people in the end, a way of thinking or feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task" (Foucault 309). For Coetzee, modernity transcends genre, trend, and historical era to an attitude that practices a "permanent critique of our culture"; modernity is not a narrow taxonomy of sorts, but an attitude of critical thought (312). In prescient fashion, Charles Baudelaire clarifies that the critical task of modernity is "tied to an indispensable asceticism" that cultivates "a mode of relationship…with oneself [because] to be modern is not to accept oneself as one in flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of complex and difficult elaboration" (Baudelaire quoted in Foucault 311). According to Foucault and Baudelaire, the ascetic tenor of modernism is an applied interiority that seeks to understand the self in relation to the very social discourses that render it unintelligible—stated differently, clarifies Baudelaire, its described task is imagining "reality otherwise than it is, and to transform it not by destroying it but by grasping it in what it is." Therefore, for Foucault (Baudelaire and Butler), the modern subject is not simply one who accepts that s/he is without total self-coherency, but one who "tires to invent himself…to face the task of producing himself" despite chronic ontological fragmentation (311-12). Understood as a timeless posture of intense analytical scrutiny, modernity locates its ethical sensibilities in its status as an attitude of critical thought, scrutinizing at once the sociopolitical forces determining selfhood and taking up the Baudelairean task of self-invention, which seeks to claim identity and ethical agency within the ambits of discourse.

For Coetzee, iterations of the modernist attitude are creatively expressed through the versatile metaphor of the palimpsest, a term historically employed to describe parchment evincing earlier text that had been overwritten by more recent inscriptions. Rooted in both Latin and Ancient Greek—respectively palimpsēstus and palímpsestos—the term translates as "scratched or scraped again," ancient Romans are recorded to have written on wax-coated tablets

that could be smoothed and reused (Ashcroft 174). The Guyanese novelist and critic, Wilson Harris, defines the palimpsest in terms of a kind of "fossilization," an accretion of biological decay on the rainforest floor that signifies nota infertile, ossified mass, but the forms of the 'living' past that haunt the present moment. Thus, the 'palimpsestis' is an extended poststructuralist metaphor for a "fossil bed", registering earlier historical traces that are now ghostly features of the present moment. The consecutive rewritings produce the striated layering of a culture's history, embodying a telluric and spectral presence that charts the rise and decay of that civilization. Intensely archeological in scope, the palimpsest concentrates on recovering that which has been written over or obscured by larger hegemonic discourses and changing ideologies, recalling and bearing witness to histories that are unavailable to us or that we no longer remember. In the contexts of postcolonial literature, the palimpsest typically conjures images of some lost subterranean world or necropolis, summoning chthonic images of skeletons, mass graves, artifacts, fossils, and ghosts—the palimpsest's keen fascination lies in what dwells or haunts ruins and burial sites, what remains entombed, embedded, hidden from the view of the seemingly monolayered contemporary world. The palimpsest metaphor enriches the scope of poststructuralism by actively engaging a writing that sifts through the cultural and discursive debris of history to recover what lies beneath the complex stratification of narrative. Coetzee dramatizes the dynamic interplay between poststructuralist theory and the palimpsest trope in an effort to not only disinter, so to speak, the voices and histories of colonial subjects that have been overwritten by larger discursive narratives of imperial hegemony, but to suggest the way subjects, despite the complex layering of social discourse and ontological incoherency, are ethically related through a shared colonial history.

As a metaphor that touches upon the claims of poststructuralist theory and directs readers' attention to the text as a striated artifact of cyclical erasure and construction—similar to the induction of the self into the symbolic order—the palimpsest understands the 'I-figure' in relation to dominant symptoms of modernity. The protagonist of Coetzee's novel engages the powerful metaphor of the palimpsest to interrogate colonialism's discursive fabrications constituting Western and non-Western identity. Significantly, the palimpsest metaphor avers that the social-symbolic world is a site of clashing discourses, abstractions, and epistemic systems

without an organic relation to the material world it functions to represent. The palimpsest appears to be yet another abstruse term within the bewildering argot of postmodernism, but, importantly, its a direct of textual expression of the modernist attitude as it takes up the unstable identity of it subject(s) as its focus of elaboration, though not by positioning the subject outside of discourse (for Foucault says any attempt to do so is futile), but in understanding the fragmented 'I-figure' as a striated, discursive construction, probing the difficult question of how the self may claim some degree of coherency through ethical agency.

The ethical quandaries posed by poststructuralism—how subjects are to live ethically in a social world govern by discourses beyond their control—are addressed within the web of literary theory supported by the palimpsest metaphor. The poignancy of Coetzee's novel, however, is not its bold affirmation of poststructuralist theory's claims, but how his protagonist comes to claim some self-knowledge in his encounter of larger cosmic narratives of colonial history embodied in the palimpsest. *Waiting for the Barbarians* follows the narrative of an anonymous middle-aged political functionary, the Magistrate, who manages an far-flung outpost of an unnamed Empire. Often hearing rumors of the merciless torturing of colonial subjects at the hands of Colonel Joll, the commanding officer of the Empire, the Magistrate develops contempt for his superior and his cruel disciplinary policies. He spends his free time reading the classics and scouring the native burial grounds where "ruins of houses that date back before the western provinces were annexed" (Coetzee 14). It is difficult work disinterring the structures from the sand dunes, he notes, but "the most recently excavated stands out like a shipwreck in the desert, visible even from the town walls" (15). Among the crumbling ruins he finds "a cache of wooden slips on which are painted characters in a script I have not seen the like of [,]" an long-extinct language he believes once belonged to ancient "barbarians" (15). As he puzzles over the cryptic text, he wonders if he has uncovered only one strata of a palimpsest of infinite depths: "Perhaps ten feet below the floor lie the ruins of another fort, razed by the barbarians, people with the bones of folk who thought they would find safety behind high walls" (15). The Magistrate's curiosity in the inscrutable language is sharply intensified after overhearing the barbarian children exchange traditional native folklore and tales of paranormal communication. The mythology wields such a magnetizing effect on the Magistrate camps out that night at the burial site waiting, with "his ear to the ground," to "hear what they [the barbarian children] hear…the spirits of the byways of history to speak to him…: thumps and groans under the earth, the deep irregular beating of

drums." After hearing nothing, except perhaps for the wind, he concludes in disappointment that "what lay beneath my feet, was not only sand, the dust of bones, flakes of rust, shards, and ash. The sign did not come. I felt no tremor of ghostly fear" (Coetzee 15). While the native children can hear the palimpsestic din of their ghostly ancestors, the subterranean world remains inaccessible to the Magistrate. That he listens for the utterances of a vanquished civilization suggests that he seeks to recover a coherent narrative that will illuminate the enigmatic history of the occupied country and his identity that remains bound-up with the larger tectonic shifts of colonial history.

Encountering the cold, empty void of the burial site rather than its rumored ghostly music, the Magistrate, as an outsider and facilitator of colonization, observes a silence reflecting the interrupted narratives of the native histories that were buried, histories that were interrupted and stymied by the blows of colonial power, therefore. Informed readers, here, may sense vague adumbrations of French philosopher Jacques Derrida's "hauntology," a notion that enriches poststructuralist theory and is currently enjoying fresh interdisciplinary application today. Speaking of the curious and intense role of poltergeists in postcolonial fiction, critic Justin D. Edwards astutely notes, "Although ghosts are sometimes imagined to be internalized entities, things that haunt our individual psyches, postcolonial writers also speak of collective hauntings" (Edwards 121). In Coetzee's novel especially, the palimpsest represents a larger historical, indeed 'collective,' population of lost figures and voices that have been silenced by colonial ideology. Particularly germane to the discussion of postcolonial specters is Derrida's apposite claim that "haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony," and, in effect, because we understand (colonial) hegemony to be built around a spectral presence, "the hierarchies of power that structure our lives are themselves ghostly" (Derrida quoted in Edwards 121). Unpacking Derrida's remark hints to, in part, Foucault's well-known diagnosis of power as perennially elusive—power exists'everywhere but nowhere,' its centers invariably shifting—but also a nuanced understanding of what 'embodies' or 'speaks through' hegemony—that is, hegemony utters a kind of polyphony as it does not solely speak its dominant articulation of power, but, in an ineradicable lower octave, the ghostly histories and voices it has forcefully eclipsed.

The vital connection between poststructuralist theory and the palimpsest are fleshed out in Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), which helpfully throws some light on poststructuralist ethics and its capacity to interrogate oppressive sociopolitical discourses. Arguing that historians have often studied history as a monolithic narrative of linear progress, Foucault posits that examinations of history must begin to assess the "phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity" rather than temporal constructions, namely terms like 'century' and the 'era' (Foucault 12). "Archaeology," he expounds, "tries to define not the thoughts, representations, images, themes, preoccupations that are concealed or revealed in discourses; but those discourses themselves, those discourses as practices obeying certain rules." (12) For instance, in the Foucauldian vein, historians should eschew from simply rendering colonialism, or other major shifts in hegemony, in terms of rigid temporal categories (e.g. imperial rule existed from — to—) and focus instead on the critical social factors, or prevailing 'phenomena' that gave rise to such change in ideology. Foucault's archaeological approach to studying history is closely related to what Butler has outlined as her poststructuralist ethic: as the I-figure struggles to define itself in relation to a complex set of social processes, such as colonialism, its call to ethical action stems not from seeking an elaborate mapping of its original social constitution, but rather the nexus of historically specific discourses that constitute it within its social world.

Despite spells of compassion for the Empire's subjects, the Magistrate nevertheless remains in the adamantine grip of bureaucratic responsibility, unable to repudiate his allegiance to the Empire and vouch for the suffering, displaced native community. Indeed, he feels implicated in the broader destructive process of overwriting a former civilization, culture, and way of life. His reflections on the palimpsestic burial site lead him to a fantasize a solution for aborting the colonial mission of the Empire, one that is unabashedly genocidal. It is worth quoting his despairing reflection at length:

> It would be best if this chapter in the history of the world were terminated at once, if these ugly people [the "barbarians"] were obliterated from the earth and we swore to make a new start, to run an empire in which there would be no more injustice, no more pain. It would cost little to march them out into the desert…to have them dig, with their last strength, a pit large enough for all of them to lie in (or even to dig it for them!), and, leaving them buried there forever and forever, to

> come back to the walled town full of new intentions, new resolutions. (Coetzee 24)

While the so-called "new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages" the Magistrate, on the other hand, "struggles with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble" (25). Here, the Magistrate evokes the palimpsest metaphor by drawing out an unsettling correlation between effacing unbearable historical evidence and replacing it with "clean pages":

> I said to myself, Be patient, one of these days he [Colonel Joll] will go away, one of these days quiet will return: then our siestas will grow longer and our swords rustier, the watchman will sneak down from his tower to spend the night with his wife, the mortar will crumble till lizards nest between the bricks and owls fly out of the belfry, and the line that marks the frontier on the maps of Empire will grow hazy and obscure till we are blessedly forgotten. (136)

Significantly, his dream of the Empire's ultimate demise is not realized in the gory clash between colonized and colonizer, but in a kind of dreamy somnolence in which the Empire vanishes from the earth and is absorbed into the palimpsest on which it sits, perhaps one day being unearthed, studied, overwritten by another political power.

In conclusion, the culminating events of the novel include the sudden barbarian resurgence and the mass evacuation of the Empire's settlement. The Magistrate has been imprisoned for perfidy after the Empire's authorities learned that he has returned a torture victim to her former tribe and suspected the language slips suggested his covert collaboration with rebel natives. In prison, he notes that there are "terrible rumors everywhere…that the [Empire's] force has been lured out into the desert and wiped out" (130). After the Empire is overrun by the natives and the prisoners are liberated, the Magistrate becomes slowly absorbed in the local native culture and begins to acculturate the barbarian lifestyle. Here, in the final pages, Coetzee embeds the novel's ethical thrust. Walking back at night, a stranger forcefully collides into him: "Someone runs past me down towards a lake; then another body cannons into me…" (134). Though this small scene appears inconsequential, the accidental collision keeps the Magistrate

from sleeping: "I would like to sleep, yet I am disturbed by the resonance of that soft impact on me in the road. Like a bruise my flesh retains the imprint of the body that for a few seconds rested against me" (134). Of course the collision marks a jarring violation of privacy and personal space, but, on a deeper level, it draws a significant ethical implication. This corporeal impact is elaborated in Butler's *Precarious Life*: *The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), in which she speaks of the prospect of the "touch" which acknowledges the Other and inaugurates people into an inclusive ethical community:

> It would be difficult, if not impossible, to understand how humans suffer from oppression without seeing how this primary condition is exploited and exploitable, thwarted and denied. This condition of primary vulnerability, of being given over to the touch of the other, even if there is no other there, and no support for our lives, signifies a primary helplessness and need, one to which any society must attend. (Butler 32, my emphasis)

Though Butler does not elaborate extensively on the notion of the 'touch of the other' (for there are reasonable objections to what the 'touch' signifies, what ethically constitutes the touch, and the glaring potential for violent modes of 'touch'), her poststructuralist notion of responsibility traces a similar ethical gesture expressed in the novel. Truthfully, it would be a mistake to interpret the final scene of *Waiting for the Barbarians* as representative of any concrete ethical praxis, but it does, however, remains hopeful that, despite the given opacity of selfhood and intense sociopolitical conditions sustained by oppressive discourse, subjects recognize that they are ethically bound to others in mutual vulnerability and interdependency. The isolated event of the physical collision stands as one of the most poignant and puzzling scenes in Coetzee's fiction and its deliberate positioning at the end of the novel perhaps suggests that future exchange between poststructuralist and postcolonial theory may consider the body as a critical point of departure in the elaboration of Butler's ethics.

Endnotes:

1. This paper is an elaborated chapter of a larger work entitled, "Transnational Fictions: Historicizing Self-Representation in J.M. Coetzee and Virginia Woolf," which is shelved at Niagara University Library, Lewiston, New York. My heartfelt thanks to Dr. Jamie Carr of Niagara U. for her unflagging support and dedication. This paper is affectionately dedicated to Kelsey Wright.

Work Cited

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.

Attwell, David. "On the Question of Autobiography: Interview with J M Coetzee." *Current Writing* 3.1 (1991): 117-22. Print.

Begam, Richard. "An Interview with J.M. Coetzee." *Contemporary Literature* 33.3 (1992): 419-431. Print.

Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005. Print.

——. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004. Print.

Coetzee, J.M. *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1982. Print.

Edwards, Justin D. *Postcolonial Literature*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

—— and Paul Rabinow. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. New York: New, 1997. Print.

James, David. *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. Print.

Poyner, Jane. *J.M. Coetzee and the Idea of the Public Intellectual*. Athens: Ohio UP, 2006. Print.

About the Author:

Sebastian Chalres Galbo is a Graduate Student of English/Cultural Studies, Dartmouth College, USA.