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The Word and the State

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J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* begins with a visit from Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau to a fort at the outpost of the Empire.¹ The story is told from the perspective of the fort’s magistrate, whose name we never learn. As Joll prepares the drowsy village for an attack that seems more and more unlikely, the reader understands that the magistrate and the Colonel, both servants of the empire, have two different understandings of imperial law. Colonel Joll uses force, including torture, to “protect” the empire against enemies and preserve order. The magistrate, on the other hand, “surveys his realm with a lax good nature.”² The colonel is a military man, the magistrate a corrupt humanist.

By the end of the novel, Joll has expanded his authority at the expense of the bureaucrat. As he gains in power, the fort devolves into chaos. Both colonizers and colonized suffer. “A paranoid society stands revealed as its own destroyer,” one reviewer concludes.³

The geographical and temporal setting for the story are never clearly identified. Explains the author, “I just put together a variety of locales and left a lot of things vague with a very definite intention that it shouldn’t be pinned down to some specific place.”⁴ This “no-place” setting leads to an allegorical interpretation of the novel.⁵

Considering the climate of the author’s native South Africa at the time the book was written in the late 1970s, *Waiting for the Barbarians* has been widely interpreted as a political allegory about the use of torture in a security state. This interpretation, though valid, limits the story’s significance. The novel has a broader theme that transcends apartheid and European

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² Irving Howe, *A Stark Political Fable of South Africa* N. Y. Times Book Rev. 1 (Apr. 18, 1982).
³ Walter Clemons, *The Enemy Within* Newsweek 72 (May 31, 1982).
⁵ Id.
colonization of Africa in the twentieth century. Coetzee broadcasts a universal message: when words are divorced from truth, the law will not serve justice. This insight applies to contemporary America’s war on terror.

No doubt, torture is an important part of Coetzee’s novel. The theme is explored from many angles. First, the magistrate is cognizant of the torture of an old man and his nephew by Joll and his men. The two came to the fort seeking medical treatment. The old man is tortured to death and his nephew is forced to serve as a guide for an attack on barbarian camps. The magistrate feigns ignorance of their plight: “Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have come from the granary, I hear nothing.” Yet he is also drawn to the tortured and presses Joll about his methods of interrogation. “What if your prisoner is telling the truth, yet finds he is not believed?...How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth?” he asks Joll. The magistrate sees the evidence and knows perfectly well what is going on, but he does nothing to stop it.

More barbarian prisoners in wretched conditions are dragged back to the village. There they are tortured into confessing Joll’s imagined conspiracy against the Empire. This continues until, as Webster Schott puts it, “the village commons becomes a field of broken human beings.”

The reader identifies with the narrator as someone who has witnessed torture. His is “the predicament of the liberal conscience” according to one critic. Coetzee builds on the reader’s identification with the magistrate to force the audience to consider torture from other perspectives, as well.

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6 Coetzee, supra note 1, at 4-5.
7 Id. at 5.
8 Webster Schott, At the Farthest Outpost of Civilization The Washington Post Book World 2 (May 2, 1982).
9 Peter Lewis, Types of Tyranny Times Literary Supplement 1270 (Nov. 7, 1980).
While Joll is out trolling the countryside for more victims, the magistrate begins a relationship with a barbarian girl whose body has been ravaged by torture. She is uncommunicative. Their relationship consists in large part of the elderly bureaucrat washing and oiling the girl’s broken feet in scenes reminiscent of the washing of Jesus’ feet by Mary and the disciples’ by Jesus. This hints at the magistrate’s guilt and potential redemption. It is this guilt that motivates him to make an arduous journey through the desert to barbarian territory where he delivers the girl to her people.

Upon returning to camp, the magistrate is arrested on charges of treasonous dealings with the enemy. After he speaks out against the barbaric treatment of the prisoners by the military, he is tortured. Of his suffering at the hands of Joll and his men, the magistrate explains, “[M]y torturers were not interested in pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice as long as it is whole and well…” He tells us early on that “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt.” By the end of the novel, we know the full meaning of this statement.

Thus, by the end of the story, readers have heard the excuses of a torturer, felt the guilt of a witness to torture, and heard the explanations of a torture victim. Coetzee describes the book’s theme as “the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience” His interest in that subject stems from the author’s real-life experiences, for the story is widely understood to be a direct response to the death of anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko in 1973, a death that highlighted apartheid’s reliance on torture to maintain state security. The roots of Waiting for

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10 John 12:1-8; John 13:4-5; Penner, supra note 4, at 60.
11 Coetzee, supra note 1, at 115.
12 Id. at 5.
the Barbarians are clearly in apartheid South Africa, but the careful reader will find the book bears universal fruit.

The torture running rampant in the fort on the outpost of the Empire in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is symptomatic of the colonial regime’s commitment to divorcing language from truth. Joll claims that his tactics are meant to force the truth out of the barbarians. He tells the magistrate, “A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone…First I get lies, you see—this is what happens—first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth…”¹⁵ Yet we know that the confessions forced by Joll’s tactics are not the truth.

It is a myth that the pain of torture will elicit the truth, notes Jennifer Wenzel in her article on *Waiting for the Barbarians*.¹⁶ In fact, torture does just the opposite – it eliminates the voice of the victim entirely.¹⁷ This is its value to the government. As Michael Foucault has noted of modern states “the establishment of truth [is] the absolute right and the exclusive power of the sovereign and his judges…”¹⁸ Torture enforces this right.

The relationship between language, truth, and power is intimately wound up with the law in today’s governments. In a healthy state, the foundation is a strong relationship between words and truth. It is a given that a healthy modern society must have a functioning justice system. A functioning justice system is legitimized by and upholds the just laws of the state. The just laws of the state are formed of words. When the objective correlative between words and reality is

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¹⁵ Coetzee, *supra* note 1, at 5.
¹⁷ Id.
undermined, the whole system can crumble. This is the more universal message of Coetzee’s book.

In his famous essay *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell argues that language is an instrument we shape for our own purpose and not just a natural development over which we have no control.\(^\text{19}\) He connects the decline of language to politics and economics, complaining particularly about political speech that is full of canned phrases the user can repeat to avoid the burden of thinking. His description of those who parrot the hackneyed catchphrases of politics is eerily reminiscent of the opening passage of *Waiting for the Barbarians* that describes Colonel Joll in his sunglasses. Orwell writes:

> When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases -- *bestial atrocities*, *iron heel*,
> *bloodstained tyranny*, *free peoples of the world*, stand shoulder to shoulder -- one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy: a feeling which suddenly becomes stronger at moments when the light catches the speaker's spectacles and turns them into blank discs which seem to have no eyes behind them.\(^\text{20}\)

Orwell posits that a speaker substituting overused political phraseology for words he chooses himself “has gone some distance toward turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his

\(^{19}\) George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*, http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm. (accessed on 5/2/07).

\(^{20}\) Id. Compare with the opening paragraph of Coetzee’s book which describes the magistrate’s first encounter with Colonel Joll porting a pair of sunglasses, an invention new to the bureaucrat: “I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind?...The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them.” Coetzee, *supra* note 1, at 1.
words for himself.” While Orwell does not make this connection, in *Waiting for the Barbarians* we see that torture supports this process. It allows the state to silence voices using words it does not like. Through torture these words can be eliminated and replaced with phrases chosen by the state, thereby turning people into dummies.

We see this in Coetzee’s novel. Torturing the barbarians allows the settlers to retain what the narrator describes as their “litany of prejudice: that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, and stupid.” These words – lazy, immoral, filthy, and stupid -- and words like “enemy” (written on the backs of the captured barbarians), can be repeated as needed to justify almost any atrocity perpetrated by the colonizers on the barbarians. These are words that cannot be refuted and need not be connected to reality since anyone likely to challenge them will be -- like the barbarian girl and later the magistrate – tortured into silence. Words repeated over and over, says Orwell, may lead to a reduced state of consciousness which in turn makes political conformity possible.

We are introduced to the Empire’s thought control early in Coetzee’s book. While everyone in the camp knows that the uncle and nephew have been tortured, the magistrate is naturally unable to put this in his report. His official account of the incident reads as follows:

> During the course of the interrogation contradictions became apparent in the prisoner’s testimony. Confronted with these contradictions, the prisoner became enraged and attacked the investigating officer. A scuffle ensued during which the prisoner fell heavily against the wall. Efforts to revive him were un-

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21 Id.
22 Coetzee, *supra* note 1, at 38.
23 Id. at 105.
24 Orwell, *supra* note 19.
What is discussed in terms of truth and lying when Joll and the magistrate converse is now alluded to as a “contradiction.” The aggression of Joll is transferred to the prisoners. The dead man has a beard caked in blood, his teeth are broken, one eye-socket is no more than a bloody hole. The damage that caused this was a “scuffle” and a fall. The words in the magistrate’s report have lost their relationship to reality.

After – not before – he writes his report, the magistrate interviews the guard who repeats the unbelievable story of the prisoner attacking the visiting officer. He says the prisoner became uncontrollable and he, the guard, was called in to subdue him. “Did the officer tell you what to say to me?” the magistrate asks him. “Yes, sir,” he replies. “Were the prisoner’s hands tied?” continues the magistrate. “Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir.”26 In this early passage we are introduced to the operating of the state security system which brutalizes those who do not say what it wants them to.

The novel is full of images that suggest the impotency of language to suggest reality.27 After the magistrate finally consummates his relationship with the barbarian girl, he cannot find the words to make sense of it:

No thought that I can think, no articulation, however antonymic, of the origin of my desire seems to upset me. “I must be tired,” I think. “Or perhaps whatever can be articulated is falsely put.” My lips move, silently composing and recomposing words…The words grow more and more opaque before me; soon they have lost all meaning.28

25 Coetzee, supra note 1, at 6.
26 Id.
27 See Gallagher, supra note 13.
As the story progresses, Coetzee links words, law, and injustice more intimately. As critic Anne Waldron Neumann explains of the story, “Empire depraves its people by power to perform and redefine speech acts.”

She points to the scene which takes place after the magistrate has been arrested, when Joll and his men drag a fresh group of prisoners back to the camp. Parading the suffering bodies through the village commons, the soldiers enjoy degrading the barbarians. The word “enemy” is written in dust and charcoal on the prisoners’ backs. Then they are beaten until their backs are clean. The children are urged to join in the “game.”

Explaining the significance, Neumann writes: “[A]n offense is imputed by language but expiated in the flesh.”

The torture of the prisoners continues. Joll raises a hammer over his head threatening to inflict some new pain on these victims. The magistrate finally explodes, letting out the words he has been holding in for years. “No! No!” he yells and shouts to the colonel “You are depraving these people!”

His words are immediately met with a crushing blow from behind. The magistrate tries to plead for the humanity of himself and the prisoners: “We are the great miracle of creation! Look at these men! Men!” he pleads. But his use of the word “men” to replace “barbarians” causes another blow to land upon him.

Soon the magistrate finds himself in Joll’s office discussing the poplar wood strips with mysterious characters that he has spent the law few years collecting and trying to decipher as a hobby. They come from an excavation site at the edge of the village predating the Empire’s expansion into the region. Though the magistrate has no idea what the ciphers mean, Joll is

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28 Coetzee, supra note 1, at 64-65.
30 Coetzee, supra note 1, at 105-106.
31 Neumann, supra note 29, at 71.
32 Coetzee, supra note 1, at 106.
convinced the old man can read them. The magistrate mocks the colonel by “reading” from the strips which he says recount the torture of barbarians in the village. The old man’s final act of rebellion is to point to one character and claim it represents both “war” and “vengeance” to the barbarians, as well as “justice” when read upside down.33 “T]he fact that the magistrate creates [literal meanings] rather than discovers them…[has]…troubling political implications,” explains Michael Valdez Moses.34

Joll knows he has been mocked. Days of torture follow for the magistrate. Throughout his ordeal the old bureaucrat tries to reach his tormenters with language: “I am trying very hard to understand your feelings towards me,” he tells one. “I [would] appreciate a few words from you. So that I can come to understand why you devote yourself to this work. And can hear what you feel towards me.”35 But the situation makes a mockery of conversation.

Standing in a woman’s frock with a salt bag slipped over his head and a noose around his neck, perched on a ladder leaned against a tree, the magistrate tells his torturer, “I want to say that no one deserves to die. I want to live…No matter what.”36 The language of the magistrate falls on deaf ears. “That isn’t enough,” comes the cold reply of the soldier.37 As the crowds gather to watch his suffering, the magistrate makes the connection of language to injustice for the reader: “A scapegoat is named, a festival is declared, the laws are suspended: who would not flock to see the entertainment?”38

While Coetzee’s novel is a response to the situation in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, the message of the book has relevance to America today, as well. The Bush

33 Id. at 112.
35 Coetzee, supra note 1, at 118.
36 Id. at 119.
37 Id.
38 Id. at 120.
administration skillfully manipulated the language used to describe the war on terror. We are now able to talk about torture and killing without having to imagine or think about them. As we know from *Waiting for the Barbarians*, when words lose their power to evoke the truth, they can no longer legitimize the law. This can only lead to injustice.

Every war has its euphemisms. This one has spawned, among others, the terms “extraordinary rendition,” “enhanced interrogation techniques,” “sectarian violence,” “insurgents,” and “surge in troops.” These now familiar words and phrases describe the war in a way that covers reality rather than conveys it.

In 2004 allegations of torture at Abu Ghraib prison surfaced in the U.S. media. CBS’s “60 Minutes” broadcast photographs of G.I.’s taunting naked Iraqi prisoners who were forced into humiliating positions. This prompted a national debate about the use of torture in the war on terror. In an interview on January 27, 2005, President Bush assured the world that the U.S. does not condone torture nor does it turn people over to countries where they would be tortured. (To do so would be in violation of the United Nations Convention Against Torture, to which the U.S. is a party.)

The very next month, the *New Yorker* published an article detailing the C.I.A.’s secret program of “extraordinary rendition.” This practice came to the public’s attention because of the case of a Canadian, Maher Arar, who was mistakenly put on the terrorist watch list, picked up at Kennedy International Airport, flown by C.I.A. operatives to Syria to be tortured, and later returned to Canada when that country took up his case. Arar sued the U.S. for human rights

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abuses and gave interviews recounting the pain he suffered at the hands of American operatives and Syrians. This included being shackled in hand and leg irons, a deportation to a foreign country of which he was not a national, days of threats followed by days of beatings, whippings with two-inch thick electrical cables, and detention in an underground windowless cell Arar likened to a grave.\(^\text{42}\) Arar referred to the process as “outsourcing torture.” In government circles it is commonly referred to as “extraordinary rendition,” a term that evokes no mental image of what it actually entails for the prisoner.

Soon it was revealed that the CIA employed a litany of “enhanced interrogation techniques” to “gain operational knowledge.” These include “the attention grab,” “the belly slap,” “long time standing,” “the cold cell,” and “waterboarding.” While the first two terms more or less convey the action to which they refer (grabbing and slapping the prisoner), the last three terms, though negative, may not communicate the full horror of the process for which they are shorthand.

This is how two ABC reporters who interviewed CIA officials about these techniques describe “longtime standing”: “Prisoners are forced to stand, handcuffed and with their feet shackled to an eye bolt in the floor for more than 40 hours.”\(^\text{43}\) A prisoner subjected to “the cold cell” is left naked in a cell kept at near 50-degree temperature and regularly doused with cold water.\(^\text{44}\)

Waterboarding, which may sound like a sport to those unfamiliar with the term, refers to a process that begins with fastening a man to an inclined board, legs raised with head below the


\(^{44}\) Id.
feet. His face is wrapped in cellophane while water is poured over him. Inevitably he gags and is overcome with a terrifying fear of drowning until he begs for the “waterboarding” to stop.

Referring to any of the above as “enhanced interrogation” or by one of their shorthand terms allows one to think (sort of) and speak of torture without engaging the senses. This makes it easier to justify and legalize the abuse. Torture is certainly illegal, but isn’t “enhanced interrogation” necessary, even justified, to obtain vital information necessary for state security?

In February of 2007 portions of a classified National Intelligence Estimate on Iraq were partially disclosed. The report uses the term “civil war” to describe some elements of the struggle in Iraq. Nonetheless, the White House continued to insist that Iraq was not at war with itself, referring to conflicts between Shiites and Sunnis as “sectarian violence.” This put the administration at odds with reality as perceived by most Americans. The majority of those surveyed indicated they understood the U.S. to be in the middle of a civil war in Iraq.45 By repeating the term “sectarian violence,” the White House was able to cover, or at least avoid acknowledging, the escalating violence between Sunnis and Shiites. This allowed people to “think” about the situation there without having to ponder the possibility that things were getting worse for Iraqis, not better.

Those who oppose the coalition forces46 in Iraq (both now when they are there with the permission of the Iraqi government and before) have been consistently referred to in the media and by the Bush administration as “insurgents.” Merriam-Webster’s defines insurgent as “a person who revolts against civil authority or an established government.”47 The use of “insurgent” has implied that the U.S. presence in Iraq was a civil authority or established

46 Critics have claimed the term “coalition forces” itself is misleading since it implies there are more nations participating in the “peacekeeping” of Iraq than there truly are.
government and that those who oppose it subvert law and order. This allowed the Bush administration to sidestep the issue of whether the U.S. was an occupying power. Occupier is not how the Bush Administration wanted to see or present itself. So apparatchiks adopted terms that allow them to avoid the unpalatable. By repeating the word “insurgent” over and over, they were able to forget that at root, it refers to a human being, who happens to oppose the U.S. forces in Iraq. Language separates from reality. A noun no longer conjures up a concrete image.

In 2007 the commander in chief proposed sending 20,000 more troops to Iraq to quell the “sectarian violence.” President Bush and his military advisers referred to this as a “surge.” Washington Post reporter Paul Farhi questioned the use of that term. “Surge” evokes, he says, “the rush of the ocean tides. Or what a young person feels upon the first blush of love. Or what a sports team does late in the game.” As an alternative to the Democrat’s term, “escalation,” surge is “a euphemism for a euphemism,” explains Farhi.

Lewis Sorley, a retired Army officer, suggests “surge” was favored by the White House because it connotes something temporary, passing. “If you’re trying to engender support from those who have doubts about the war, it’s a useful word,” says the military historian. If it suggests a temporary event, “it might be more palatable.”

The word falls into “the Orwellian zone between language and politics” says Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism. It has a positive connotation and suggests a powerful solution that will only require temporary commitment. It does not bring to the mind of the user or the listener a picture of boots on the ground or bodies in bags. Thus it allows one to talk about sending more men to fight without imagining such a scenario.

49 Id.
50 Id.
51 Id.
“In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible,” wrote Orwell in 1946.52 “[P]olitical language has to consist largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness.” Those statements are no less true today. We did not need Coetzee to point this out. Waiting for the Barbarians adds to our understanding of this concept, however, by connecting language to thought and power to torture.

When we replace words that evoke concrete images with vague catchphrases or code words, we cloud our thinking. Explains the distinguished linguist Noam Chomsky, “It's almost impossible to go through a moment of time without internal dialogue taking place...we have no real access to thought or consciousness, except through language.”53 In the Empire, torture is referred to as interrogation, justice is a name for war, and men can be called barbarians. The euphemisms of the state corrupt thinking and disrupt feeling until the whole society is unable to function. The only voice is the voice of the government and when it is wrong the community has no answer, for no one can think for herself.

Torture plays an important part in the state’s thought control. While those who employ such techniques claim they are used to get to the truth, in fact they silence the voices of any who speak out against the regime. It is a form of mind control practiced on the body. It destroys those who experience it, those who witness it, and those who perpetrate it.

Like the Empire, the United States government shaped the thinking of its citizens through the manipulation of language during the Bush years. In waging the war on terror, the administration replaced nouns and verbs that evoke clear images and carry moral implications with vague or abstract words that cannot be associated with an image or a feeling. This deadens the senses.

52 Orwell, supra note 19.
As a consequence, the war could exist in a kind of alternative reality. People are “rendered” and “interrogated,” but not tortured. “Insurgents” are engaged in “sectarian violence.” Iraqis do not resist the foreign and at one time unlawful occupation of their country or kill each other over historical enmities. The answer to the “situation in Iraq” was a “surge” in troops, which does not sound as bad as sending more American boy and girls into the middle of a civil war. By manipulating language the government manipulated thoughts about the war until it was and perhaps still is difficult to communicate about what was really going on in Iraq.

Perhaps the analogy of the Empire and the United States falters when we consider the use of torture to suppress dissident voices in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. To date, I am not aware of any American who has been tortured by the U.S. government for speaking out against the regime’s policy. But Coetzee’s work shows us that such a happening is not outside the realm of possibility.

In his introduction to the works of Shakespeare, scholar Harry Levin explains the value of the worlds created by writers. They are “necessarily smaller than the one we live in; otherwise they would not help us much to understand it; like a map, they locate situations by reducing them to a comprehensible scale.”54 In connecting for us the relationship between reality, language, truth, law and justice, Coetzee shows that a world where words are divorced from reality is the foundation of a society that condones the use of torture to suppress non-conformity.

Barack Obama was elected amid growing discontent with the war in Iraq, a cornerstone of Bush’s war on terror.55 The nation’s first African-American president has promised a new

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strategy in fighting terrorism, including closing Guantanamo Bay\textsuperscript{56} and pulling troops from Iraq.\textsuperscript{57} As the Obama administration moves away from the polices that supported -- or at least tolerated -- torture, we may see that the first step is a new paradigm formed of words that reflect reality. Such words have the power to give effect to laws already on the books.

Coetzee calls on us revive the relationship between words and reality. Only when a society has that correlation reasonably correct can laws uphold justice. In \textit{Waiting for the Barbarians}, the protagonist came to this insight too late. It was not until after the brutality of the Empire had advanced to torture that the magistrate regrets he did not see the relationship to language earlier. Though he did not participate in the physical torture of the barbarians, he supported the policy through his use of words and law:

\begin{quote}
I had no doubt, myself, then, that at each moment
each one of us, man, woman, child, perhaps even the
poor old horse turning the mill-wheel, knew what was just:
all creatures come into the world bringing with them the
memory of justice. “But we live in a world of laws,” I said
to my poor prisoner, “a world of the second-best…All I can
do is uphold the laws, all of us, without allowing the memory
of justice to fade.” After lecturing him, I sentenced him…I
remember the uneasy shame I felt on days like that.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{58} Coetzee, \textit{supra} note 1, at 138-139.
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