EMPIRE, MONSTERS AND BARBARIANS: UNCANNY ECHOES AND RECONFIGURATIONS OF STOKER’S DRACULA IN COETZEE’S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

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While Dracula has been examined as figuring anxieties about reverse colonization, the reworking and re-contextualization of ideas such as civilization, barbarism, and transgressing boundaries into postcolonial geographies has received scant attention. This article examines Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians as a reconfiguration of Dracula by explicitly interrogating the complex interplay of history, geography, gender, the body, Self and Other as defining Empire and its periphery. In Coetzee’s text the monster is not a figure from the periphery seeking a diabolical and violent entry into the heart of civilization; rather the monster is a product and agent of Empire who travels to the frontier to maintain the status quo but ironically destabilizes the categorical imperative of Empire. Also of interest is how Coetzee rewrites the three-fold structure of Dracula, redefines monstrosity, foregrounds ethical consideration, reconsiders the crisis of the liberal imagination and articulates a utopian vision.

Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians (1980) occupies a seminal place in postcolonial studies. It explores, from the perspective of the strategic positionality of the narrator as a colonial administrator, the colonizer/colonized, or civilized/barbarian trope through interlocking narratives of Empire, history, torture, and the crisis of the liberal subject with an intensity of self-reflexivity that has rarely been achieved in postcolonial writing. It is therefore not surprising that writing, torture and the body have featured prominently in the scholarship on this text.1 Coetzee himself has said that the novel is “about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of

conscience”. David Attwell observes that Waiting for the Barbarians marks a “pivotal” stage in Coetzee’s oeuvre because “history emerges not as a priori structure but as an object in itself, objectified History … as a discursive field”.

Beyond the explicit reference to Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” (1904) from which the novel takes its title, critics have examined how the text redeployed themes and motifs from Franz Kafka’s The Penal Colony (1919) and Samuel Beckett’s The Unnamable (1953) and Waiting for Godot (1956) in order to weave a complex interplay of semiotic polysemy and radical intertextuality. David Attwell has also convincingly shown that in addition to eighteenth-century prose, to which Coetzee himself has acknowledged his indebtedness, eighteenth-century historiography, particularly Edward Gibbon’s The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire “provided the essential distinction between civilization and barbarism used by Coetzee – and no doubt by Cavafy before him … – in his fictive displacement of the dominant forms of contemporary South African thinking”.

Furthermore, the Gothic elements in the novel have also been commented upon. For instance, pointing to repression, terror and torture as standard Gothic motifs, Dominic Head argues that “the treatment of torture in Barbarians reveals the extent or limit of Coetzee’s Gothicism”. While the focus on the Gothic dimension of Waiting for the Barbarians has yielded valuable insights into the recirculation of the Gothic genre in postcolonial imaginary, it has done little, in my view, to address the more complex comparative task of how Stoker’s Dracula (1897) in particular may be said to be reconfigured in Coetzee’s novel.

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4 See, for example, Maria Boletsi, “Barbaric Encounters: Rethinking Barbarism in C.P. Cavafy’s and J.M. Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians”, Comparative Literature Studies, XLIV/1-2 (Spring-Summer 2007), 67-96.
5 Attwell, J.M. Coetzee, 75.