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by: Paul Rich

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APARTHEID AND THE DECLINE OF THE CIVILISATION IDEA: AN ESSAY ON NADINE GORDIMER'S JULY'S PEOPLE AND J. M. COETZEE'S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS.

by Dr Paul Rich

White settler political ideology in South Africa has traditionally seen itself as the embodiment of some form of "civilisation" against the threatened "barbarism" of African majority rule. The term has a significance both in its Victorian imperial roots and its facility for acting as a kind of common ideological denominator binding the political discourse of both Afrikaner and English settlers into a common defence of "white civilisation". Moreover, it reflects the essentially *urban* nature of white South African society and thus reinforces the apartheid notion of territorial separation between the white urban race in the city areas and the rural abodes of the African majority in the ("precivilised") tribal "Homelands", though limited economic development in certain sections of these rural slums has brought urban aspects even to this originally pastoral vision.

The "civilisation" idea, however extends in some respects beyond the simple assertion of white racial ideology in South Africa politics, for it has structured a fair degree of liberal political discourse in the post-war years as well. It was the hope of South African liberals in the churches, the Institute of Race Relations and the Liberal Party itself between 1953 and 1968 that a specifically non-racial "civilisation" could be created in South Africa on the basis of western political and cultural values. This view was influenced both by the perceptions of external views of South Africa politics in the years after 1948 and the equation of the Nationalists' policy of apartheid with many aspects of the Nazi "barbarism" which had been defeated in the second world war. "The rest of the world well understand", wrote the historian Arthur Keppel Jones in a pamphlet *What is Destroying Civilisation in South Africa*?, "as too few South Africans do, that civilisation is not defined by the colour bar" [1] Unless, however, a shift in policy occurred to admit "non whites" into this "civilisation" then the conclusion emerged that "the verdict of history on the evanescent European civilisation in Southern Africa would be that it was a flame that flickered for only a few generations, and then became a mere historical interlude between two Dark Ages".[2]

There was thus an underlying cultural pessimism at the core of the liberal view of protecting the values of a non-racial "civilisation" in the South African context that has deepened in more recent years into one of despair.[3] This cultural *Angst* has been reflected in two important recent novels by white South African writers that have pinpointed how far liberal or radical white intellectuals in this society have become cut off

from the main tenets of western liberal thinking. The burden of this paper is to discuss the cultural and political significance of these two works, Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) and J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) in the context of the historical meaning of the western notion of "civilisation" and the decline of this idea in the era of apartheid ideology in modern South Africa. As the first section of this paper will show, the western "civilisation" idea has been closely linked to an historical and teleological notion of progress allied to imperial expansion since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While in many respects the apartheid conception of racial separation was the fulfillment of many of these precepts, especially in so far as it was allied to the continuation and entrenchment of capitalist economic expansion in Southern Africa, it has been accompanied by a growing loss of faith by liberal intellectuals in the continued progress and extension of western humanistic values. The second section of this paper will thus analyse this clutural *Angst* among South African liberals before discussing the significance of the two recent works of Gordimer and Coetzee. Novels in the South African context probably have a greater political and ideological significance than most of those written in the metropolitan societies of Western Europe and North America, for the distinction between artistic imagination and political activity is so much thinner.[4] To the degree, therefore, that many modern novels can be seen as an extension of more common political and ideological discourse, even if it be that of some form of liberal intellectual salon culture, then they throw some light on the ideological climate of the society concerned. The main test of this, though, must be historical and the centreal thrust of this paper will be to see modern novel writing in South Africa in terms of a set of ideas about both progress and "civilisation" that have become sharply undermined in South Africa's mounting political and ideological crisis of legitimacy.

THE WESTERN NOTION OF "CIVILISATION".

Empires throughout history have always sought a legitimating ethic for it is not possible for states to rule by force and violence alone, even in the age of nuclear weaponry and mass terror. Often this search for legitimation reaches out towards some notion of the externalisation of the values of the core imperial society, a civilising ethic through which to bind the territories of the colonised periphery to those of the centre. The culmination of this concept is some form of moral hierarchy through which perfect order is seen to be attained, usually, though not necessarily, by divine sanction.

This search for legitimation via a civilising ethic has been especially strong in the case of the western phase of imperial expansion since the breakup of the medieval moral order in Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the rise of capitalist overseas expansion. In the case of the West, the fissuring of Christendom and the failure of Charlemagne to establish a single European political order, led to a fragmented expansionist process rooted in the entity of the nation-state. There was thus no single capitalist western empire, but a less firmly rooted series of rival imperial entities which could seek legitimation less through appeal to a single western or European emperor (and his embodiment of the divine will) than to a more abstract notion of the western civilising influence as it had come to be defined over the centuries through European cultural self-definition.

The western imperial notion of the civilising process owed much to the original Greek or Hellenic notion of empire, which was itself the product of small, and often rival, city states. Here the heroic conception of Greek state-craft led to the idea of those outside the pale of Greek colonial settlement being foreigners or *barbaros*, which, though not necessarily contemptuous, did imply some difference in cultural attain-

ment.[5] While the Hellenic notion of civilisation was strongly aware of racial differences, it was free of any systematised idea of racial superiority or inferiority, and this was to continue into the phase of Roman imperial expansion too.[6]

The Hellenic civilising notion, however, became subordinated to a defensive attitude in the West in the course of the Middle Ages. Henri Baudet has noted that a dominant theme in the history of Europe is its defense against recurrent invasion from Asia such that the "mixed" attitude of the Greeks of both opposition and orientation towards Asia became transformed into a siege-like cultural hostility towards cultures threatening its eastern borders.[7] Here was probably born the image of "primitiveness" associated with non-western people which became bound up with colour distinctions drawn from the Christian differentiation between light and goodness and darkness and evil. Thus, by the time of the breakup of the medieval Christian order in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was already embedded a strong conception of race which was to grow in the centuries ahead, especially under the impact of the slave trade. As Eric Voegelin has noted, the modern idea of race owed much in the West to the secularisation of the medieval notion of the mystical body of Christ, which itself grew up in the first century A.D. from the Greek idea of *Homonoia* or like-mindedness between the fraternal members of a symbolic group.[8] This secularisation also occurred at the same time as the rise of the nation-state and thus led to the alliance of the secular notion of race to that of the territory of the nation, though race per se can transcend nation-states and *racism* can be an anti-national political ideology.[9]

The result of these cultural and ideological developments in the western conception of empire was to link the notion of "civilisation"from an early date with that of "race". While believing itself to be rational, the "civilising process", as Norbert Elias has termed it, in western history has been mainly related to the growing differentiation of social function in an increasingly complex set of societies, "Civilisation" has actually been an idea centred around the notion of social control and the repression of those psychological impulses which conflicted with the needs of both continued economic accumulation and social growth:

> . . . For it is precisely in conjunction with the civilisation process that the blind dynamics of men interacting in their deeds and aims gradually tends towards greater scope for planned intervention into both the social and individual structures – intervention based on a growing knowledge of the unplanned dynamics of these structures.[10]

It is this concern with the "growing differentiation and stabilising of social functions"[11] which makes the Cartesian revolution in thought in the seventeenth century so important for the later phase of western imperial expansion. Descartes' differentiation between mind and body occurred in the context of the Baroque affirmation of divine kingship. In the phrase "I think, therefore I am", Descartes elevated thinking to the level of the most important human activity; furthermore, he saw thought as equated with the extension of scientific laws by which Baroque power and kingship might be extended. The development of science became subordinated to the quest of men to be "lords and possessors of nature",[12] thus indelibly entrenching in western philosophical thought the idea of man as an absolute lawgiver, The effect of this was to extend still further the notion already implicit within much ancient astronomy of what Mumford has termed the "depersonalized world picture within which mechanical activities and interests took precedence over more human concerns".[13] The danger of a completely mechanised universe was not necessarily apparent while the level of west-

ern technology still remained at a sufficiently low level in the pre-Atomic era; indeed, in many ways, it acted as a vitally progressive force in the breaking down of much medieval superstition and the opening up of new avenues of trade and economic advancement. This Cartesian conception of western technology also distinguished between what Mumford has termed a *monotechnics* "based upon scientific intelligence and quantitative production, directed mainly toward economic expansion, material repletion and mililtary superiority" and a defeated *polytechnics* which was "based primarily, as in agriculture, on the needs, aptitudes, interests of living organisms: above all on man himself".[14] It was on the philosophical foundations of *monotechnics* that a technology was created that was allied to the unlimited pursuit of political and military power, whether inside the European nation-state or on the global terrain of western imperial expansion.

This expansion occurred, too, in a climate of thought that for the first time in the West asserted the notion of "progress" and continuous historical improvement in association with the more classical "civilisation" concept. The medieval theory of the *ecumene* or universal brotherhood of men, which had been taken over from Greek and Roman thinkers, broke down in the face of the growing assertion of western technological superiority. The West thus changed its conception of itself from being what Bury has termed a "universal State and a universal Church" towards being an "intercohesion of peoples as contributors to a common pool of civilisation – a principle which, when the idea of Progress at last made its appearance in the world, was to be one of the elements in its growth".[15] At the same time, though, a complete break was not made with the classical conception of "civilisation" for the Heavenly City of the medieval Christian theologians was brought down to earth in the ideas of progress that reached their apogee in the Enlightment thinking of the Eighteenth Century.[16] "... men (sic) looked to the guidance of Greek and Roman thinkers", Bury wrote:

> and called up the spirit of the ancient world to exorcise the ghosts of the dark ages. Their minds were thus directed backwards to a past civilisation which, in the ardour of new discovery, and in reaction against medievalism, they enthroned as ideal; and a new authority was set up, the authority of ancient writers.[17]

Thus it is possible to see how some of the classical tenets of "civilisation" have survived as part of a *longue durée* of ideas in western political thought, shaping and being shaped by new economic imperatives that moved western capitalist societies eventually into overseas expansion and imperial conquest.[18] Such ideas, too, formed a corpus of mentalities for the construction of a more cohesive ruling class ideology as a capitalist economic and political domination became more firmly established by the late eighteenth centuries. The renewed vogue of interest in ancient remains and classical civilisations then drew on ancient models for the construction of an imperial ideology in the course of the nineteenth century. With the final phase of the European colonisation of Africa and the eventual incorporation of South Africa under British imperial hegemony, these notions at last come into play in the South African context as well.

SOUTH AFRICA AND THE "CIVILISATION" CONCEPTS

As an area subject to more or less continuous western imperial penetration since the seventeenth century, South Africa has reflected this unlimited pursuit by the west of technological and military power to a very high degree. The first two centuries or more

of white colonial power saw only the establishment of an agrarian society based on trading and mercantile links with Europe and the failure, unlike the North American case, completely to subdue the indigenous African societies of the interior. However, even during this phase of slow extension of white settlement, a strong puritan ethic manifested itself both in the cohesive Calvinist creed of the Boer trekkers and the English evangelical missionaries. Here was the assertion of technological control over nature allied to an imperialist spirit of domination and manipulation of alien and non-western cultures. Moreover, it may be said, too, to have manifested itself in an intense puritan individualism which emphasised both a masculine and privatised "imperial self", and the genderisation of imperial technology as a masculine cultural resource and the surrounding African colonised landscape as a passive feminine entity, subject to the will of the white, masculine technological coloniser.[19]

This settler society became increasingly conscious of itself as a particular extension of the "civilisation" of the west especially in the middle and latter years of the nineteenth century. While the years between 1860 and 1880 saw a considerable extension of the technological basis of European colonial control in Africa generally, in South Africa the mining revolutions at Kimberley and the Witwatersrand in the 1870s and 1880s laid the foundation for a considerable extension of white settler colonial power and a localised variant of the western pursuit of unhampered technological control over nature.[20] Indeed, taking the period from the establishment of mining on the Witwatersrand in 1883, the subjection of the remaining independent African societies in the 1890s and early 1900s, the Anglo-Boer War of 1899 - 1902 and the establishment of Union in 1910, a seminal watershed in South African history may be said to have occurred. For it was war and mining, Mumford has argued, which were historically the chief agents in the escalation of western technological progress and both were strongly manifest in the South African experience right at the high tide of European imperial consciousness.[21]

It was thus not surprising that a strongly Victorian definition of this imperial "civilisation" seeped through into the thinking of South African settler consciousness in the latter part of the nineteenth century, laying the foundation for a shaky veneer of political liberalism in the society in the years after Union. The origins of this "civilisation" ideology lay in the thinking of the intellectual aristocracy of Victorian England, which was strongly influenced by the curriculum of Literae Humaniores and Greats at Oxford in the period after 1830. The study of classical civilisations of Greece and Rome reinforced engrained Victorian concepts of "civilisation" as well as providing a useful model by which an educated and cultured ruling elite might see itself controlling a growing urban populace in a period of rapid industrial and economic change.[22] "Hellenism" formed a vital component of Matthew Arnold's concept of Victorian "culture", allied though to the tradition of the people of the book, the rationality of "Hebraism".[23]

This use of the classical model became especially evident in South Africa in the last phase of British imperial intrusion when the apostles of empires such Rhodes and Milner sought to emulate the civilising model of the ancient world: Rhodes even to the extent of taking a fellow of All Souls, Rochfort Maguire, on the expedition to Lobengula in the hope of teaching the classics to Matabele Thompson on the way.[24] In the case of liberal observers such as James Bryce, too, the classical model became a means of understanding the social structure of a community such as Lesotho, whose Pitso he likened to the agora of the Ancient Greeks.[25] These historical analogies were very much the product, though, of the imperial proconsuls and passed only shakily into the small liberal intelligentsia in South Africa in the years after 1910. Already the imperial

assumption of an amateur student of ancient civilisations like Lord Cromer that the British empire emulated that of Rome began to be undermined by the work of younger classical scholars such as Gilbert Murray, whose *The Greek Epic* interpreted Greek civilisation in terms of its tribal origins, thus emphasising the relative rather the absolute nature of the difference between "civilisation" and "barbarism".[26] By the time Olive Schreiner wrote her pamphlet on "The Native Question" doubting the applicability of the classical model, the core of the imperial belief in the classical analogy had been eroded and the official mind in Britian was increasingly turning towards anthropological investigation of societies of the empire in order to understand how to best rest colonial control.[27]

Significantly Olive Schreiner's vision, of a future South African nationalism rejected the classical analogy of the imperial proconsuls, whose ideology she had come vehemently to reject during the 1890s. "We in South Africa", She wrote:

> can never hope exactly to repeat the records of the past. We can never hope, like Greece, to give to the world its noblest plastic art; we can never hope, like Rome, to shape the legal institutions of half the world . . . But the great national parts are not exhausted; and there lies before us in South Africa a part as great and inspiring as any which any nation has ever been called upon to play.[28]

Moreover, in so far as South African society reflected the growing breakdown between continents, whether in Europe, Asia or Africa, and the increase in inter-racial contacts then it was "one of the first peoples in the modern world, and under the new moral and material conditions of civilisation, to be brought face to face with the problem in its acutest form". For Schreiner, this question presented a possible solution very much in the tradition of the revised form of the western "civilisation" concept allied to the notion of "progress". For just as this had led to the breakup of the medieval notion of *ecumene* and the "intercohesion of peoples", so could this concept be applied to the local fragment of the west in Southern Africa. "If it be possible for us out of our great complex body of humanity" she continued:

> (its parts possibly remaining racially distant for centuries) to raise up a free, intelligent, harmonious nation, each part acting with and for the benefit of others, then we shall have played a part as great as that of any nation in the world's record. As we today turn our eyes towards Greece or Rome or England for models in those things wherein they have excelled, nations in the future, whatever their dominant class may be, will be compelled to turn their eyes towards us and follow our lead, saying "Hers was the first and true solution of the problem".[29]

The defeat of the liberal impulse Olive Schreiner had hoped to foster in the political settlement at Union in 1910 led to the entrenchment of an ideology of racial segregation that unfolded itself in government policy over the following decades.[30] As South African liberal political thinking became a pale shadow of the dominant segregationist ethos, so the notion of "civilisation" became fossilised into a technical concept that formed only a vague anchoring point for the defensive campaign liberals increasingly found themselves engaged in with the white settler state. Research and analysis of "the problem" of inter-racial relationships took on an increasingly empirical form within a

strongly functionalised methodology of British social anthropology. This was in many respects a British surrogate for a coherent social theory derived from sociology, which always remained weak compared to its continental or American counterparts, and British intellectual life remained strongly anchored around the twin disciplines of Anthropology centred on the work of Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown or, from the 1930s, the nonconformist moralism of Leavis and his acolytes in literary criticism.[31] In South Africa, literature had only an indirect bearing on liberal political discourse and ideological thinking until at least the post-war period and the emergence of Alan Paton, Jack Cope and Nadine Gordiner.[32] Thus South African liberals for the most part anchored their theoretical understanding of South African society and economy from either anthropology or, by the second world war, a neo-classical economics that asserted the rationality of capitalist market imperatives in contrast to the "anachronism" of racial ideology and the job and wage colour bars, which were seen as the legacies of pre-industrial frontier conflicts.[33]

This functionalist anthropology in South Africa in many ways maintained much of the earlier imperial notions of "civilisation". It was well reflected, for example, in the seminal collection of essays edited by Isaac Schapera *Western Civilisation and the Native of South Africa* in 1934 which set a pattern for the investigation of the interaction between a "European civilisation" based on a market economy and the "tribal" structures of African society which were progressively accommodating themselves to these new economic challenges. While not going as far as the Stallardist precept, which was entrenched in legislation after the 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act that the cities were only "white" areas in which Africans should only come to work, the liberal anthroplogy of the 1930s and 1940s still maintained a close relationship in its thinking between "civilisation", "towns" and the "white race" with the notion of "civilisation" being seen as an effective coded term for "white rule". Schapera, for example, wrote that:

> Under the influence of *European civilisation* many of the Natives have abandoned their original tribal customs, and their social life is being reorganised on a new basis by the adoption of European habits and customs, and by their introduction to the economic and religious systems of the Europeans. On the other hand, the presence of the Natives has so profoundly affected the social and economic development of the Europeans as to have become an indispensable part of the whole structure of *civilisation* in South Africa[34] (emphasis added).

Though, as has been seen, some white liberals like Kepper-Jones tried to develop this notion of "civilisation" by the late 1940s and 1950s into a "non-racial" form, there has been a fundamental doubt as to how far it could be so redefined from its "European" roots as to lose its meaning. In effect, liberals became slowly aware of the depth of race thinking in the west since the Enlightment which eventually led to the Final Solution[35] and also of the colonial status that the "civilisation" concept has in a society like South Africa, where radical black nationalism seeks to secure an African cultural identity free from the ideological hegemony of both "western civilisation" and "white liberalism".[36]

The dilemma began to become especially acute for the more perceptive of liberal intellectuals in the period after Sharpeville, as the white state began to make significant inroads into the remaining political liberties which had been bequethed by the Constitution of 1910; and as apartheid ideology looked increasingly less antithetic to the needs

of the capitalist economy. Liberals found themselves in growing international isolation in the 1960s and the progressive assumptions of both individual character growth and the fostering of inter-personal relationships in the more conventional liberal novel form of the 1940s and 1950s began to be dissolved. The early sign of this was Nadine Gordimer's *The Late Bourgeois World* in 1963, though the theme was not pursued to any significant extent until *The Conservationist* and the dissolution of its central character, Mehring, in 1974.[37] The seeds of the crisis in the conventional liberal novel form were already manifest, though, from the early 1960s and the more recent work of Gordimer and Coetzee represents the culmination of over two decades of progressive dissolution in the conventional novel form. With this has come both a rejection in the western conception of teleological historical progress and a destruction of the cultural roots behind the privatised liberal individual self. How radical a departure this really is will thus be discussed in the remaining part of this paper.

GORDIMER, COETZEE AND THE SHIFT FROM LIBERALISM

Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* is set in a South Africa of the near future and tells the story of a professional white couple, Maureen and Bam Smales, fleeing from a Johannesburg that has suffered a rocket attack from black forces bent on the military destruction of white rule. The novel is structured around two sets of relationships in this crisis situation: that between Maureen and Bam and that of the Smales with their black servant, July, to whose rural home they flee with their children in a holiday bakkie. At one level, this is a study in the changing power relationship between white and black as the structural underpinnings of white rule are removed, leaving the former white employers very much at the behest of their former servant, who now has almost the power of life and death over the fugitive Smales. At a deeper level, though, the novel probes some of the assumptions behind the "civilisation" to which the Smales have been formerly attached and bears some resemblance to the fiction of Doris Lessing who, like Gordimer, was born and brought up in Southern Africa but has written at a more distanced position from London since the early 1950s.

Like the central character of Doris Lessing's *Memoirs of a Survivor,* the educated people who employ their talents as far possible to their best possible advantage and seek to adapt to a rapidly changing situation. The key figure in this enterprise is Maureen rather than Bam who, as a successful architect, would have preferred to have left South Africa before the crisis reached the point it did and take a job in Canada. The semi-autobiographical figure of Maureen, though, who was brought up in the Western Areas Gold Mines, preferred to stay and survive whatever consequences ensured. Maureen represents an interesting position available to former white liberals who recognise they have lost all power to influence the society politically: a form of "middle way" between fleeing the society completely, as Bam would have done, or staying and fighting it out as the more hard line settlers try to do in the Johannesburg from which the Smales have fled. The survivors' position, though, depends very much upon what form of new relationships can be forged with their African protectors, which in turn acts upon their own relationship as white husband and wife from a former colonial society.

The society to which the Smales flee with July is not one of complete crumbling barbarism as in Lessing's *Memoirs* set in an urban England of the near future where city streets are terrorised by tribal juvenile gangs and all law and order has broken down. As with the African farm workers on Mehring's farm in *The Conservationist*, the African society is depicted as relatively cohesive, with the authority of chiefs still intact (though in the short story "Oral History" in the collection *Six Feet in the Country* Gordimer

has shown how this authority becomes undermined in an insurgency war where chiefs and headmen become the paid collaborators of white power). As such, it represents a moral alternative to the crumbling social values represented by the bourgeois Smales, who are products of a sophisticated urban and industrial society – a society rooted in the successful employment of *monotechnics* behind continuous capitalist expansion. Despite having camped before in their bakkie, the Smales have only ever lived in the countryside before as holiday makers from the city. Bam Smale, despite having brought a gun, is not one of the self styled white hunters who go on safari to shoot game for he "would no sooner shoot a buck than a man; and he did not keep any revolver under his pillow to defend his wife, his children or his property in their suburban house".[38] It is technological control over nature rather than the somewhat cruder military conquest over it to which the Smales are orientated: cocooned in their suburban retreat they were twice removed from the harsh logic of the more "primitive" or technologically simple society of rural Africa. Thus, once they have been thrust onto this new terrain the Smales' immediate response is to employ their technological expertise: Bam can help July mend his farming tools and fix up a water tank. This mentality was in the old missionary tradition of seeking to *improve* and *educate* African societies from within, though Bam, as the author once of a paper entitled *Needs and Means in African Rural Architecture*, is very much a modern secular missionary seeking to apply the technological rather than the religious fruits of western civilisation. Maureen, too, as the former suburban wife of Bam, had also shared in this paternalist aim: her response to seeing the interior of one of the African huts where "someone had been there, pucking over beans on one of the mats used as table tops or bowls" was that this "arrangement" was "as broken beads set aside from good ones, choices made by someone momentarily absent – the dioramas of primitive civilisation in a natural history museum contrive to produce tableaux like that".[39]

As Bam settles down into the routine of survival in this new terrain, with his day divided between a more fundamental work and rest with the bourgeois addition of leisure now removed, Maureen confronts the cultural onslaught on their way of life more directly. Her clean, suburban life style is challenged more fundamentally than Bam's: she finds an odour between her legs for the first time in her life while, with the onset of her monthly period, she finds herself using rags like the African women around her, and in turn washing them in the river. Despite a suburban sophistication, Maureen had been very much in a subordinate position to Bam back in Johannesburg, but this relationship too begins to change as Bam's position of male authority begins to crumble. The bakkie in which he had driven them to July's home had been a symbolic yellow colour and this too had been effectively removed from him by July who keeps the keys and learns to drive it. Ultimately, too, the final symbol of Bam's male power, that of the gun, is stolen from the hut where the Smales live, leaving Maureen alone and defenceless. Thus Maureen comes to think of Bam in a different way: "It was not that she thought of him with disgust – what right had *she*, occupying the same mud hut – but that she had gone on a long trip and left him behind in the master bedroom: what was here, with her, was some botched imagining of his presence in circumstances outside those the marriage was constructed for".[40]

Indeed, for Maureen the entire situation is one conducive to a transformed consciousness: reading the one novel she has brought with her, *I Promessi Sposi – The Betrothed* – and appealing to the appetite of romatic suburban love, no longer has any meaning in this new context, for "she *was* in another time, place, consciousness; it pressed in upon her and filled her as someone's breath fills a baloon's shape. She was already not what she was. No fiction could compete with what she was finding she did not know, could not have imagined or discovered through imagination".[41] To this

extent, Gordimer uses Maureen as a vehicle to confront the gender distinctions made by a colonial society which overlie the racial distinctions between white and black, town and country, "civilised" and "barbaric". Maureen finds her relationship to the surrounding African landscape becomes transformed from the tourist perception of tribal Africa to one where she attempts to try and get inside the peasant culture of the African women who work in the fields gathering in vegetables and mealies:

> The sun brought the steamy smell of urine-wet cloth from the bundles of baby on the mothers' backs. The women hitched up their skirts in vleis and their feet spread, ooze coming up between the toes, like the claws of marsh birds; walking on firm ground, the coating of mud dried matt in the sun and shod them to mid calf. She rolled her jeans high, yellow bruises and fine, purple-red ruptured blood-vessels of her thighs, blue varicose ropes behind her knees, coarse hair of her calves against the white skin showed as if she had somehow forgotten her thirty nine years and scars of child bearing and got into the brief shorts worn by the adolescent dancer on mine property. July's unsmiling wife was laughing; looking straight at those white legs: she did not turn away when Maureen caught her at it. Laughing: why shouldn't she? July's wife with those great hams outbalancing the rest of her – Maureen laughed back at her, at her small pretty tight drawn face whose blackness was a closed quality acting upon it from within rather than a matter of pigment.[42]

Gordimer's somewhat idealised portrayal of a humanistic African peasantry can be criticised for its tendency to resort to traditional techniques of naturalist description that associates African "feet spread" with "the claws of marsh birds" and an assumption that female gender association can transcend class divisions between bourgeois white and working class or peasant blacks. Indeed, there is a simplistic assumption that African rural society can be understood substantially within the pastoral idiom appropriate to a fully fledged peasant society, despite some analysis which has questioned this position of the contemporary African rural economy.[43] In addition, the assertion of a humanistic association on a gender basis overlooks the specific position of black women in political struggle: a phenomenon with a deep history of its own relating to differing modes of sharecropping, migrant labour patterns and degrees of family resistance to proletarianisation.[44] Nevertheless, Gordimer's depiction of rural African society continues some of her descriptive writing in *The Conservationist* whereby a peasantry is seen as infused in varying degress by the proletarian life and culture of the urban townships: [45] This is exemplified by the description of a beer drink which synthesises more "traditional" rituals with the electronic rock culture from the towns:

> Laughter and comment flew from people out of their huts and flocked up around the man and July. The *gumba-gumba* was itself the occasion; the dropsical man (whose legs lately were bandaged in rags of a filthy towel), sometimes the presence of a beggar, today – because of the voice of the oracle yelling and retching from its battered red box and dented horn – sat on his stool as an old god carried out among them, the grotesque ceremonial presence without which carnival forgets its origin is in fear of death. Music began swirling

> unsteadily from the amplifier. Already they were passing round the thin beer that was the same colour when drunk and when vomited. Their fun had its place in their poverty. It ignored that they were in the middle of a war, as if poverty itself were a country whose dispossessions nothing reaches.[46]

While having some understanding of this rural "external proletariat", Gordimer's novel tells little of the urban working class, whose position in any future political confrontation with the white state could well be decisive.[47] The figure representative in some ways of this urban proletriat is July, who has a mistress back in Johannesburg while keeping a wife in the rural terrain. July is in some respects a mediator between the two different cultures, a "man of two worlds" who has also learned to survive well in both. The ambiguity of this situation is perhaps best brought out by Gordimer when she has July challenge his former employer, Maureen's, attempt to achieve solidarity with the rural African women. His chief motive for this, though, is less one of a conservative attachment to the former employer-servant relationship than the fear that Maureen, in getting to know his wife, will tell her of his urban mistress. He too is an operator, a "survivor" who has learnt the urban rules of operating and manipulating situations to maximum personal advantage.

In the final analysis, there is a deep and fundamental cultural gulf running through the book between what might be termed the trans-national and postmodernist culture of the Smales and the simpler rural and local cultures of the black South Africans. The Smales are cosmopolitan and well travelled: their suit cases sit incongruously in the African hut they live in with stickers of the Buenos Aires Hilton and they have been away "Overseas" which, to July, can be understood in terms of carrying their travel luggage, receiving "postcards of skyscrapers and snow-covered mountains" and answering telephone calls "where the time of day was different". But for July's wife the idea of "Overseas" remains obscure "as unfamiliar . . . as the shaping of the word by her tongue".[48] Thus while the novel is driven by a general concern by a white writer to break through into a much deeper understanding of African society and culture than many of her predecessors, the central anchorage point remains one of an indecisive and uncertain effort to transcend the superstructure of consciousness bequethed by the trans-national culture of postmodernism. In this respect, it is much in keeping with the indecisive resolutions of Gordimer's two previous novels, *The Conservationist* and *Burger's Daughter* whose central characters, Mehring and Rosa Burger, equally well-travelled and cosmopolitan, fade out as positive forces at the end: Mehring to be superceded by the black farm workers who take over their rightful possession of his land and Rosa Burger in jail waiting her role in the revolution. The technique perhaps pinpoints a certain surviving liberalism in Gordimer's writing and her ultimate failure to move beyond it into some formulated moral alterantive through which to locate the terminal point of consciousness of her characters.

For Maureen Smales is also left at the end of *July's People* in an uncertain state, fleeing from a helicopter bringing the expected black forces of liberation. But fleeing from what and to what? Is this an assertion of the ultimate failure of the white radical hope to break through class, racial and ultimately gender distinctions to achieve a new form of solidarity in a liberated South Africa? Or perhaps a vaguer affirmation of a new relationship to the African terrain through which Maureen has broken? Certainly the novel celebrates the closer relationship enjoyed by the African village to the surrounding landscape than the more alienated culture of the Smales'. Maureen is left with a closer understanding than previously:

> The people had nothing superfluous with which to litter; the shallows sank into the depressions made in mud by their feet and mingled them with the kneeding of cattle hooves. Muslin scraps of butterflies settled on turds. She could name the variety of thorn-tree – Dichrostachys cinerea, sekelbos – with its yellow tassels dangling from downy pink and mauve pompoms, both colours appearing on the same branch. Robert's bird book and standard works on indigenous trees and shrubs were the Smales' accommodation of the wilderness to themselves when they used to visit places like this, camping out. At the end of the holiday you packed up and went back to town.[49]

This is in essence though, more of a negative reaction against the urban civilisation from which Maureen has left than a celebration of any positive new culture. Gordimer has expressed her own viewpoint on this on a number of occasions and in one recent interview described herself as "socialist in my general outlook" though aware of "the greatest failures of socialist experiments". "I think that to be alive is an expression of belief in something", she has stated "Of an unkillable element in human advancement. I don't believe in perfection; I believe in limited goals, Camus' limited goals".[50] But is this a case merely of dissent against postmodernism, stirring in turn desires which remain to be fulfilled? In a recent essay, Ihab Hassan has noted how the "parapolitics" of postmodernism produces an indecisive variety of desire in contemporary culture which will remain until it "transmutes itself into something other than itself";[51] a restatement indeed of the Sisyphus myth, whom Camus considered happy. Thus Gordimer has ultimately been successful in rejecting the cultural foundations of the postmodern urban civilisation and its own heroic conception of historical progress without being able to grasp any coherent moral alternative, an example perhaps of the disinherited nature of much contemporary intellectual thought among radical whites and their indirect relationship to South African political processes.

This crisis in thought is also reflected in the recent novel of J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians.* The theme here is far less historical than Gordimer's and he has approached the South African situation more allegorically, as the embodiment of a more universal phenomenon of imperialism and the crisis of civilised values. Unlike his two previous novels, *Dusklands* and *In The Heart of the Country*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is set in no clearly recognisable time or place: from the description of the nomadic "barbarians", deserts, lakes and cold weather it could be somewhere in the Central Asian steppe or Georgia perhaps, on the fringe of European civilisation, sometime in the nineteenth century for there are guns and glass in the novel but only horse drawn carriages. The novel is the personal narrative of an imperial magistrate posted to the frontier market town on the edge of a lake and a desert, but cut off from the central political and military impulses of the empire to which he belongs and shut out by an impenetrable barrier of cultural misunderstanding from the "barbarians" he is defending the empire against. The magistrate's office is the preservation and upholding of the law of the empire and he is thus expected to maintain certain tenets of "civilised" behaviour. This he breaks when he forms a liason with a "barbarian" woman who has been brought into the town as part of a batch of "barbarian" prisoners, tortured by the town's militia and used as a prostitute.

Coetzee thus seeks to explore how empires seek to rationalise and justify themselves historically. The magistrate is an example of the "old school" of imperial officials, rather like some of the Colonial officials in many parts of British and French Africa

before independence and indeed of the old Native Affairs Department before and after Union in South Africa, who grew genuinely to believe in their work and the promotion of "civilised" values. "All my life I have believed in civilized behaviour", he records early in the novel,[52] though as with the old British philosophy of indirect rule "where civilization entailed the corruption of barbarian virtues and the creation of a dependent people, I decided, I was opposed to civilisation; and upon this resolution I based the conduct of my administration".[53] The magistrate collects artifacts of earlier civilisations in the area and he recognises that this particular empire of which he is a part is merely one phase in a much longer time span of human history during which empires rise and fall.

However, the magistrate gradually comes to lose his faith in empire as he realises he is being eclipsed by the "new men of empire" represented in the novel by Colonel Joll who "are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages".[54] These men believe in the imposition of military force to subdue the barbarians and the magistrate is forced to face the fact that, in doing this, the supposed "civilised"values of the empire in which he has believed have become undermined. While initially tolerating the torture of the barbarian prisoners, the magistrate is unable to form any significant relationship with the girl he has taken for his mistress. He acts in many ways like a Graham Greene character, he is a morose "burnt out case" unable to make love with the girl who remains a passive reflection of his own imperialist ego:

> I am disquited. "What do I have to do to move you?": these are the words I hear in my head in the subterranean murmour that has begun to take the place of conversation. "Does no one move you,"; and with a shift of horror I behold the answer that has been waiting all the time offer itself to me in the image of a face masked by two glassy *insect* eyes from which there comes no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast back at me.[55]

The magistrate decides eventually to return the girl to her own people and this involves crossing the desert in order to meet up with the barbarian tribes, who have retreated in the wake of the spread of the empire. The terrain the magistrate and his party of troopers cross with the girl is a bleak and metaphysical one; this wilderness is almost Bunyanesque in its illustration of the loneliness and isolation of the imperial frontier. In this desolation, though, the magistrate is finally able to consummate his relationship with the girl on the point of her departure back to the barbarians; perhaps though this is due to the fact that by this time the imperial ego can no longer be threatened for the magistrate is "ready to believe that it would not have been done if I were not in a few days to part from her".[56]

Having crossed "the limits of the Empire", the magistrate, in returning the girl, has also crossed a breakpoint in his acceptance of the imperial ethic. Even though he had previously taken his duties seriously, accumulating all the necessary rummage of imperial officialdom in his filing collection, he had been aware of the limits of the civilising mission. "We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire", he had argued with one of the new military conscripts before his departure over the desert:

> our outpost, our settlement, our market centre. But these people, these barbarians don't think of it like that at all. We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes

> and put a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients.[57]

On his return and his arrest by the military for ostensibly treasonous consorting with the barbarian enemy the magistrate realises with elation that "my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man".[58] However, the magistrate is irreparably shut off from the surrounding barbarians in a way Maureen Smales is not and there is no vision within the novel of any way of transcending this cultural division between "civilised" and "barbarian". Instead, the magistrate – in his move towards rejection of empire – becomes an example of what Albert Memmi has termed "the coloniser who refuses". In so far as he is still part of the imperial "civilisation", the magistrate merely cuts himself off from his fellow imperialists, and comes to represent merely himself. "A colonizer who rejects colonialism", Memmi concluded, "does not find a solution for his anguish in revolt. If he does not eliminate himself as a colonizer, he resigns himself to a position of ambiguity".[59]

The magistrate, though, in his new found ambiguous position does attempt some form of revolt when he breaks out of prison to protest at the torture of further prisoners brought in by the military. This is in one sense the one affirmative act left to him in his own destruction and desolation: "If I was the object of an injustice, a minor injustice, when they locked me in here, I am now no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy".[60] Even now his complete faith in the civilisation of the empire has not entirely vanished for, in opposing the "textbook military operations, sweeps and punitive raids into the enemy's heartlands", he fears that "we can be bled to death at home".[61] His period of imprisonment however leads him to begin forgetting about the girl and the decision to mount a protest against the torture of the prisoners represents an additional reassessment of his position morally within the imperial enterprise:

> For me, at this moment, striding away from the crowd, what has become important above all is that I should neither be contaminatedly 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.[62]

Even this view represents in some respects an extension of the western notion of the imperial self, except that now the magistrate in seeking to preserve it not in any sense of its *past* historical legitimacy, which empires do in their bloom, but for its *future* historical legitimacy in generations to come. Even in renouncing the empire, the magistrate realises that he is still dominated by its own ethic. Thus, his protest done and on his release from jail after an expeditionary force has gone out to destroy the barbarians, the magistrate is able to reflect on the essential *unnaturalness* of empires and their destruction of *polytechnics*:

> What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in

> the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it sends it bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation.[63]

For neo-marxist critics this vision of empire has seemed all too simplistic, lacking any understanding of the historical forces that produce actual imperial systems at particular phases of history; failing, above all, to have any understanding of *capitalist* economic processes leading to capitalist imperialist civilisation.[64] All empires, by their very nature, are historical processes and to that extent have "created the time of history". However their divorce from the cycle of the seasons relates more to the mechanistic notions of progress endemic to western thought since the Cartesian revolution in *monotechnics* of the seventeenth century. The magistrate, in some ways, is similar to an earlier and more historical character in Coetzee's fiction: that of the American Eugene Dawn author of The Vietnam Project in *Dusklands*. Dawn too is plagued by doubts and ambiguities about the American imperial enterprise in the Vietnam War and the aim of his report, before he becomes insane and tries to kill his daughter, is to apply Cartesian notions of mind-body dualism towards Vietnamese culture in order to be able to controle it. This apostle of *monotechnics* argues for a strictly technocratic interpretation of Cartesianism; not "the voice of the doubting self, the voice of Rene Discartes driving his wedge between the self in the world, and the self who contemplates that self[65] but the principle of "fragment, individualize" for "our mistake was to allow the Vietnamese to conceive themselves as an entire people huddled under the bombs of a foreign oppressor" thus necessitating the breaking of the resistance of an entire group. The point was rather to apply Cartesian logic to technological power itself so that it could thus establish its own legitimacy:

> If we had rather compelled the village, the guerrilla band, the individual subject to conceive himself the village, the band, the subject elected for special punishment, for reasons never to be known, then while his first gesture might have been to strike back in anger, the worm of guilt would inevitably, as punishment continued, have sprouted in his bowels and drawn from him the cry, "I am punished therefore I am guilty". He who utters these words is vanquished.[66]

This Cartesian monotechnics in the service of imperial power however is ultimately neither shared by Eugene Dawn, who does in effect become split between the self who contemplates the world and the self who contemplates the self, nor the magistrate, who revolts against the torture practised on the barbarians by the imperial army.

What is left, though, is the Cartesian doubting self, that intellectual residue of the western pursuit of the idea of progress, which accepts the terms of the progress idea but not its moral consequences. The result is a form of disembodied idealist mind which was best represented in Coetzee's second novel in the lonely spinster on the isolated farm, Magda, who sought her own form of religious consolation by inventing her own sky gods speaking in Spanish. The magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is not

entirely a disembodied idealism, for Coetzee has moved some way in this novel towards a fuller individual character. It has been argued that this marks a return by Coetzee towards a version of the more conventional liberal novel form,[67] though, if so, it is an individual self striving to come to terms with its own historical past. The magistrate at the end of the novel remains in the frontier town after the defeat of the military expedition against the barbarians. The irrigated fields have been destroyed by the advancing barbarians and the town is ultimately defenceless. The magistrate is thus left very much as a "survivor", helping to gather in what is left of the crops and setting down to write an historical record of what has occurred, though "what I find myself beginning to write is not the annals of an imperial outpost or an account of how the people of that outpost spent their last year composing their souls as they waited for the barbarians" but a pastoral account of the surrounding landscape, its seasons, harvest and bird-migrations: once more the pastoral takes over as the one anchoring point of certainty at a time of social collapse, a theme that dominated *In the Heart of the Country.*

There is thus not a slow retreat before the advancing forces of "barbarism" or national liberation, as in *July's People,* and the eventual dissolution of its central character, as with Maureen Smales. The magistrate acted on the belief that his own tiny protest against the imperial military could have its moral consequences for future history. He thus awaits the arrival of the barbarians as the last effective embodiment of the previous empire's historical mind, aware however that "the barbarians will wipe their backsides on the town archives. To the last we will have learned nothing. In all of us, deep down, there seems to be something granite and unteachable".[68]

This, though, is in many ways a false perspective for the novel to end on, for it twists the nature of historical understanding at the terminal point of imperialism, especially in its western phase. It is the western-imported colonial culture in South Africa which has manifested an absence of historical understanding, while it has been the forces of African nationalism who have been concerned to attain historical awareness. Coetzee was closer to an understanding of white South African cultural attitudes through his depiction of the culturally rootless Magda in *In the Heart of the Country* than he is through the character of the magistrate. Furthermore, it is a crude view of western history to assume that "barbarians" traditionally "wiped their backsides" on imperial archives: much of the cultural legacy of the Roman empire survived in the west into the eight and ninth centuries, while the "barbarian" invasion of Christendom by the Arabs brought immense advances in architecture and mathematics. Coetzee's novel thus reflects the tradition of cultured defensiveness of western civilisation against external invasion and fails to offset this against any wider historical understanding of empires and their rise and fall.

Ultimately, too, there is the dimension of race which *Waiting for the Barbarians* confronts only in the most oblique manner. The western idea of progress and its extension into the imperial sphere also contained, as has been argued, the idea of race right from its earliest phase. It is thus indelibly imprinted on the western imperial impact on world history, though it has been manifested in many varying forms. While Gordimer's novel has confronted it as a salient dimension to the changing relationship between settlers and black Africans at the terminal point of white power in South Africa and has also asserted its transcendence, especially via an association between women on a gender basis, the dimension is virtually suppressed in *Waiting for the Barbarians.* The result is the depiction of the barbarians in the traditionally shadowy, background idiom of the conventional colonial novel, lacking any depth of character or historical meaning. The barbarian mistress of the magistrate remains silent and passive, revealing her feeling only indirectly. The barbarian intrusion against the empire at the end of the novel is

effectively an action of the colonised landscape against the imperial town: is this meant to be a parody of the traditional colonial novel genre, or its simple reproduction to a reading public in South Africa, Western Europe and North America schooled in these conventions? The massive cultural and geographical barrier between "civilisation" and "barbarianism" in the novel can be understood as a coded form of racial barrier, without any understanding of the historical meaning of this. Thus the novel remains flawed by reproducing in a simplistic and ideal form many facets of the western imperial imagination without at the same time being able to perceive any moral transcendence of this, except through the nameless and shadowy "barbarians" who could *indeed* be precisely that (i.e. the Communist of Pol Pot's Kampuchea) or the embodiment of some genuine cultural and moral advancement. Unlike Gordimer's striving towards this issue, Coetzee's novel breaks down at this point.

CONCLUSION

"The relations between city people and country people", the American anthropologist Robert Redfield has written, "form a major separation, a principal frontier of human relations".[69] The two novels discussed in this essay have confronted this theme in terms of the western idea of progress on the imperial plane, though with relative degrees of success. The "frontier" between town and country developed before the western phase of imperiliasm and is continuing after it and ultimately, perhaps, historians of the long duration will be able to assess the era of imperialist capitalist in terms of its speeding up and escalating certain ongoing social trends. But capitalist imperialism is not of course fully over yet for its virulent presence is still manifest in such a geographical context as Southern Africa. Here the moral engagement of forces of popular liberation ensure the resurgance of nationalist history at the very time when in the west itself it has been on the decline.[70] But the retreat of this nationalist imagination produces its own cultural and ideological dilemmas: it leaves English language novelists, as perhaps the most sensitive barometers of this culture's imaginative awareness of itself, in a potential cultural vacuum of transnational postmodernism. This, as has been shown in this essay's discussion of *July's People* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, there are still the possibilities for the survival of concepts of the imperial self, even divorced from the mainstream conception of the western idea of "progress" and "civilisation". Perhaps, white post liberal and radical writing is moving into another literary formulation based upon a deeper understanding of African society and culture and its ultimate anchoring point for a new conception of a post-colonial South African/Azanian culture. There are signs of this in Gordimer's work. Coetzee's novel, though, has failed to suggest such a direction and indicates that literary postmodernism in a post-colonial context as South Africa, burdened by cleavages of race and class and the historical inheritance of western imperialist control, is a moral dead-end.

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NOTES

1. Arthur Keppel-Jones *What is Destroying Civilisation in South Africa?* Johannesburg, S.A.I.R.R., n.d., p. 11.

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14. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

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16. Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*, New Haven and London, 1932.

17. Bury *op. cit.*, p. 30.

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21. Mumford *op. cit.*, "In the capitalist attack upon polytechnics, war was the spearhead and mining the shaft: Both were inured to methodical destruction, both sought to "get something for nothing", both placed physical power above any other human need", pp. 147 - 148.

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39. *Ibid.,* p. 24.

40. *Ibid.,* p. 98.

41. *Ibid.,* p. 29.

42. *Ibid.,* p. 92.

43. See for example Martin Legassick, David Hempson and Jo Morris, "Is there a peasantry in South Africa?" Seminar paper, University of Warrick, 1979 and an unpublished talk by Colin Bundy, London, I.C.S., 1981 arguing for the survival of peasant consciousness in the rural black proletariat.

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47. See for example R.W. Johnson *How Long Will South Africa Survive?,* London, 1979.

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54. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 64.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

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67. Michael Vaughan in conversation with the author.

68. *Waiting for the Barbarians,* p. 143.

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