Present Tense Narration, Mimesis, the Narrative Norm, and the Positioning of the Reader in Waiting for the Barbarians

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The Simultaneous Present in Waiting for the Barbarians

The elderly magistrate-protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians narrates a painful and remarkable tale, the story of his complicity with torturers as well as his own experience of being tortured; of his attempts to expiate the pain of one tortured woman, attempts that actually perpetuate her pain and oppression; of his humiliation by the forces of his Empire and his continued complicity with the Empire. He is a man who is self-reflective but not fully aware of what he is doing and why, who wants to have his heart in the right place but is very attached to the pleasures of the body. This character and these experiences would lend themselves very well to a retrospective first person narration in the manner of Great Expectations. The magistrate could occasionally judge his former self from his perspective at the time of narration, and part of the narrative tension for the reader would be
the question of how the experiencing-I evolves into the narrating-I. Of course, Coetzee could still indicate that the narrator-I's understanding of himself and his situation is severely limited. Such a treatment of the narrative perspective would allow Coetzee, first, to use the magistrate's retrospection to highlight some of the thematic import of the narrative, especially concerning complicity, and, second, to involve the reader in seeing beyond the magistrate, building upon or even revising the narrator's conclusions.

Coetzee, however, has the magistrate tell the story not retrospectively but "simultaneously." That is, the magistrate tells the story in the present tense—not the historical present after the fact, but the simultaneous present as events are happening. This narrative strategy, the homodiegetic simultaneous present, places the reader in a very different relationship to the magistrate and to the events of his narrative than would any kind of retrospective account. The strategy takes teleology away from the magistrate's narrative acts: since he does not know how events will turn out, he cannot be shaping the narrative according to his knowledge of the end. Consequently, we cannot read with our usual tacit assumptions that the narrator, however unself-conscious, has some direction in mind for his tale. Instead, as we read any one moment of the narrative we must assume that the future is always—and radically—wide open: the narrator's guess about what will happen next is really no better than our own. In fact, our guess is better because we read with the assumption that Coetzee has shaped his novel, has given it some kind of teleology, and we habitually make tentative inferences about that as we read, inferences that remain subject to radical revision as the magistrate's narrative moves in its necessarily unpredictable direction.

What kind of experience is it to read the account of a self-reflective narrator who is unable to use that power of reflection to shape his tale? How does the present tense position and reposition the reader as the magistrate recounts his series of remarkable events, his year of change which brings him to a position very similar to the one from which he started? And why would Coetzee want to position his reader in these ways rather than in the more
common positions fostered by retrospective narration? These ques-
tions, I believe, are central to understanding the effects of Coetzee's
remarkable novel, and they are the questions with which this essay
is ultimately concerned. Before I address them directly, however, I
want to situate them in the larger context of recent theoretical
discussions of simultaneous (as opposed to historical) present
tense narration because that placement will contribute to our
understanding of the special quality of Coetzee's achievement. As
we will see, some theorists have serious doubts about the efficacy
of Coetzee's strategy.

Mimesis and the Narrative Norm

Suzanne Fleischman concludes her recent illuminating study Tense
and Narrativity by building on Gérard Genette's discussion of the
inherent instability of present tense narration. Fleischman argues
that narrative, by nature, uses the past as the dominant tense. The
presence of the present, then, moves a discourse toward the genres
in which present tense is dominant—either the lyric or the drama.
Fleischman concludes her discussion with her strongest claim: the
"metalinguistic function" of the present tense is "to announce a
language that cannot be narrative according to the rules of narra-
tive's own game" (310). Fleischman's position is well-argued, provo-
cative, and, I think, inadequate. It is inadequate because it does not
take sufficient account of actual narrative practice, the way in
which many recent narrative artists have experimented with the
homodiegetic simultaneous present. Consider the range of styles,
audiences, and interests in just this short list of experimenters:
Coetzee, Bobbie Ann Mason in In Country, Margaret Atwood in The
Handmaid's Tale, and Scott Turow in Presumed Innocent.¹

The gap between Fleischman's theoretical account and the prac-
tice of many storytellers suggests that we could profit from a closer
look at her "rules of narrative's . . . game." From the perspective of
these rules, the problem with present tense narration is that it
violates a mimetic standard that says one cannot live and narrate at
the same time. But the critical and in some cases popular success of recent present tense narratives invites us to reexamine that standard. In the rest of this section, I will explore the relations among standards of mimesis, theoretical explanations of narration, and fictional practice. This discussion will lead to a new account of the relation between mimesis and fictional narration, which will serve as the backdrop for discussing my questions about Waiting for the Barbarians.

Among the many important tasks Fleischman takes up, perhaps the most significant for my purposes is her attempt to make the production and comprehension of narrative part of adult linguistic competence. Just as competent speakers internalize rules about what constitutes grammatical and ungrammatical sentences, so too, Fleischman proposes, they internalize "a set of shared conventions and assumptions about what constitutes a well-formed story" (263). Fleischman calls this set of conventions and assumptions "the narrative norm," and this set is what she means by the rules of narrative's game. The norm has four main rules or tenets:

1. "Narratives refer to specific experiences that occurred in some past world (real or imagined) and are accordingly reported in a tense of the PAST" (263). Note here that the norm does not distinguish between fictional and nonfictional narrative. Note, too, that making past tense the norm means that present tense narration will be the marked case.

2. "Narratives contain both sequentially ordered events and non-sequential 'collateral material' [such as description and evaluation] but it is the events that define narration" (263). Note here that this tenet reinforces the formalist-structuralist distinctions fabula/sjuzhet and story/discourse and that it privileges fabula as the defining element of narrative.

3. "The default order of the sjuzhet in narratives is iconic to the chronology of events in the fabula they model" (263). Again the assumption is that fabula is the core of narrative.

4. "Narratives are informed by a point of view that assigns meaning to their contents in conformity with a governing ideology,
normally that of the narrator" (263). This tenet gives the sjuzhet its due, reminding us that fabula alone does not determine the meaning and effect of narrative.

Throughout her book, Fleischman emphasizes that although "the tenets of the norm are commonly infringed, the rhetorical or stylistic effects produced by infringements are possible only because the norm is in place" (263). Thus, for example, breaking the default order of the sjuzhet does not make a narrative "ill-formed" but it does foreground the sjuzhet's role in creating a narrative's effects. Given this emphasis, we might expect Fleischman to apply the same logic to the use of the present tense and to argue that infringing the norm about the past tense might produce, say, an immediacy effect, rather than a move away from narrative. We need a closer look.

Tenet 1 (narrative refers to a set of experiences in the past) and tenet 4 (a narrative has a speaker from whose point of view the story is told) allow Fleischman to emphasize that the narrative norm implies "two temporal planes, the present of the speaker (and hearer) and the past of the narrated events" (127). Present tense narration is "inherently unstable" for Fleischman because it erases this distinction between the two temporal planes, causing the text to move in one of two directions. Either the narrator will disappear and the events will be presented as if without a filter, thus moving the text toward drama; or the narrator will become supremely important and the events will be merely an occasion for the discourse, thus moving the text toward lyric. Fleischman uses Genette's commentary on the ambiguity of Robbe-Grillet's La Jalousie to demonstrate the rule: Genette argues that the novel can be read either as a wholly objective behaviorist account of events or as a completely subjective projection of the narrator's jealous perspective.

On its own terms, this view is persuasive. If we think of narrative as requiring these temporal planes, then it follows that erasing the distinction between them will make narrative unstable. But ultimately the insistence on the distinction between the two
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planes and this understanding of the interpretive options for present tense texts depend on an assumption about the way mimesis controls the occasion of narration. As noted briefly above, the present tense is such a problem because it violates the mimetic standard that says a speaker cannot tell her story and live it at the same time—“live now, tell later,” as Dorrit Cohn puts it. Stipulating that texts which erase the distinction will be either unfiltered or completely subjective allows the mimetic imperative to be preserved. In the first case, we say that the form of the text means that it has no speaker, no narrator in the usual mimetic sense: the concept of a “narrative perspective” drops out and we seem to have the verbal equivalent to “objective” drama. In the second case, we preserve the strict mimesis by seeing everything as revealing a subjective consciousness. But what happens if we question the standard? Let me first give a warrant for this question by a look at some past tense homodiegetic narration that violates a different mimetic standard.

When the two temporal planes are present, narratives that follow the third tenet of the norm (i.e., that the default order is for *sjužet* to follow *fabula*) establish a complicated relation between the “retrospective perspective” of the narrative and the “temporal orientation” of the events narrated. As Fleischman points out, the events remain in the past for the speaker, but the temporal orientation of the narrative is “prospective”—it traces the events as they happened. For the reader, this double temporal perspective means that she has a tacit awareness that the account is retrospective but an overt experience of the events as unfolding prospectively. In homodiegetic narration, the double orientation leads to the separation between the experiencing-I whose acts are being retraced and the narrating-I who is doing the retracing. According to the mimetic standard that says “knowledge alters perception,” whenever a narrating-I unself-consciously tells the story of his or her change in consciousness or understanding, the new understanding should inform the retrospective narration.

For example, in Hemingway’s “My Old Man” Joe Butler unself-consciously recounts a series of events that suddenly lead him to give up his belief that his father was “one swell guy” and to
entertain the idea that his father was actually a "son of a bitch." According to the standard that knowledge alters perception, Joe's unsophisticated retrospective account should be informed by his present suspicions. But it is not. What's more, this apparent violation of the mimetic standard does not undermine but rather makes possible the effectiveness of the narrative for Hemingway's audience, because that effectiveness depends (in part) on the suddenness of Joe's realization. The violation is not a problem because the reader's temporal orientation is always prospective. Since we do not know what Joe ends up learning (or suspecting) as a result of the experience he is narrating, we cannot know as we read that Joe's narration does not square with what he learns.

This example has three important implications for our understanding of mimesis and present tense narration. First, it suggests that mimetic standards may be violated without destroying a narrative's effectiveness or altering its generic status. More generally, it reminds us that mimesis is not a product of faithful imitation of the real (whatever that is) but rather a set of conventions for representing what we provisionally and temporarily agree to be the real. In other words, in this larger view Joe's narration violates a narrow standard of mimesis, one based only on imitation-of-the-real ("knowledge alters perception"); but it is consistent with a broader standard of mimesis, one that looks both to the real and to conventions for imitating it. Second, the example of "My Old Man" suggests that these conventions are motivated in part by what they make possible: "My Old Man" is a much more powerful story as a result of its violation of the narrow mimetic logic. If Hemingway followed that logic by having Joe's doubts and suspicions inform the narrative, he would have eliminated the shock accompanying the suddenness of Joe's new understanding and the poignancy accompanying its arrival moments after Joe's father's death; he would, in short, have destroyed much of the story's emotional power. If Hemingway had respected strict mimetic logic by telling the story through a heterodiegetic narrator, he would have sacrificed much of the intimacy between Joe and his audience, an intimacy crucial to the narrative's effect.
Third and most important, both the reader's judgments about mimesis and the sense of what is possible depend upon the reader's tacit awareness that she is reading fiction, that the characters and the events are what I have elsewhere called synthetic constructs. Or, perhaps better, this example suggests that we may construct mimetic standards too narrowly because we do not allow for differences between fictional and nonfictional narrative. Despite all that recent experiments with nonfiction narrative by Tom Wolfe, Joan Didion, Hunter Thompson, and others have taught us about the permeability between fiction and nonfiction, some significant differences remain. If "My Old Man" were nonfiction, then one of three things would happen. (1) A real Joe Butler would not tell the story the way the fictional Joe does, but would have his knowledge inform his narration and, thus, give us a different text. (2) Joe's unreliability, which stems from the fact that his narrative is not informed by his knowledge, would undermine his telling—we would come to feel that the narrative stance was insincere and would therefore feel manipulated. (3) Alternatively, we would come to regard the narrative stance as a highly self-conscious performance by Joe, one that was so skillful he could brilliantly feign unself-consciousness. In each of these cases, we would have a very different relation to the story and its narrator than we do in Hemingway's "My Old Man."

Because we read Hemingway's version with the tacit knowledge that it is fiction, two consequences follow: (1) Joe's unreliability functions effectively as part of a dual communication from Hemingway—a communication from Joe to a narrative audience, which is contained within Hemingway's communication to his authorial audience; and (2) the deviation from the narrow mimetic standard does not undermine the story's mimetic power.

Something similar—but not identical—happens, I believe, in fictional homodiegetic present tense narration. The situation is not identical because the deviation is experienced differently. In "My Old Man," the deviation is not registered as we read, and therefore the synthetic remains in the background. In the case of present tense narration, the fictionality of the text is foregrounded, but this
foregrounding does not impede our mimetic engagement with the characters.

These considerations lead me to question the adequacy of Fleischman's formulation of the narrative norm on the grounds that it does not address our acquired competence with fictional narrative. I would like, therefore, to propose the following revisions of Fleischman's first and fourth tenets:

1. Nonfictional narratives refer to specific real experiences that occurred in the past and are accordingly reported in a tense of the PAST. Fictional narratives refer to imagined experiences presented as if they were real, sometimes through imaginary instances of narration.

4. Narratives are informed by a point of view that assigns meaning to their contents in conformity with a governing ideology, normally that of the narrator. In fictional narrative, the relation of the narrator's governing ideology to that of the author is always a part of the narrative's meaning.

Such revisions would recognize that the use of an instance of imaginary narration such as the present tense need neither undermine mimesis nor move a discourse away from narrative.

These formulations are subject to the same caveats as Fleischman's. They do not mean to rule out, say, the use of the simultaneous present in nonfictional narrative but rather to emphasize that such a technique will achieve its effect in part by its deviation from the norm—and to suggest that the effect is likely to be different from the effect of the present tense in fictional narrative. These formulations also do not address the question of the effects of present tense narration in fiction. To talk of effects, as we shall see, we also need to look more closely than Fleischman does—or, indeed, as I have done so far—at the audience who feels the effects.

On Effects and Audiences

Like many other critics, I have often discussed how technique X produces effect Y in "us." And like others, I typically have two bases
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for the effects I claim "we" experience: (1) my own set of responses, and (2) the sources in the text I can point to that evoke those responses. Because I privilege the second basis over the first, the search for sources of response can—and often does—lead to a revision of response. Because of that hierarchy among these bases, I go ahead and claim that my sequence of responses, properly grounded in their textual sources, forms the "experience of the authorial audience."

However, as anyone who has followed the reader-response movement even in passing must already recognize, this mode of analysis depends on the repression of one crucial fact: different readers bring different subjectivities to texts and therefore sometimes have different experiences of the same textual phenomena. Once I acknowledge this fact, I have several directions in which to go. I may decide to establish a hierarchy among readers' experiences—some are more valid/true/legitimate than others. But this direction soon leads to a reproduction of the problem: How can I establish the hierarchy without injecting my own subjectivity into the decision and in effect claiming that it is superior to others'? Alternatively, I may decide to celebrate difference and argue for the incommensurability of different accounts of the reading experience: because you and I are different, we will of course read complicated narratives differently, and the best we can do is compare notes. This solution, though it has the advantage of validating different responses, has the significant disadvantage of endorsing a prison-house of subjectivity.

There are of course middle positions that are far more attractive than either of these extremes; Wolfgang Iser's notion that each of us fills in a text's gaps in her own way is the most well-known, and recently Robert Scholes has elegantly argued that effective reading must be both centripetal and centrifugal, that is, grounded in the text and spinning away from its center. But I would like to offer a model that tries less to compromise between the two extremes than to embrace their differing first principles. In embracing both, I realize that I am also necessarily modifying each; but the modification is motivated less by the impulse to correct than by the desire to
maintain as much integrity toward each first principle as possible. To be specific, I want to insist on the effort to enter the authorial audience as a worthy-but-unlikely-to-be-achieved goal, even as I recognize and, indeed, celebrate the inevitable subjectivity of my reading self. Rather than trying to find either the objectively best reading or the subjectively most honest, I collapse the distinction between subject and object, intrinsic and extrinsic. The text is in the reader and the reader is in the text like the fish is in the sea and the sea is in the fish. More specifically, I maintain the concepts of authorial audience and authorial reading as a heuristic to allow me to question my subjective experiences; at the same time, I both recognize and value the subjectivity of my readerly experience because it opens up a two-way street between the life experiences that have gone into shaping my subjectivity (including my reading of other texts) and my experiences as a reader of this text. This model invites me as a reader to seek both comprehension and evaluation, sympathetic understanding and, where necessary, strong resistance.

Perhaps the most striking consequence of this model is that it makes reading endlessly recursive. The more I study the text, the more I am able to interrogate and complicate my understanding of how it works on me; the more I have experiences that are in some way related to those in the text, the more my experience of the text will change. Furthermore, because I read within a community, my discussions with other readers can affect both ends of my transaction; other readers may show me things in the workings of the text that I had not fully accounted for, or they may explain their subjective experiences in ways that allow or require me to reexamine mine.

Criticism based on this model of audience and effects might be presented in such a way that it resembles traditional accounts of "the way the text works" because the critic may regard the specific influences of her subjectivity—if indeed she is able to identify them—as things that she need not inflict on her reader. Alternatively, criticism based on this model might move in a "confessional" direction, where the critic calls attention to his subjectivity.
either to let his reader beware or to invite the reader into a more personal dialogue with himself and the text under consideration. My own subjectivity leads me to develop the rest of this essay in the first, more traditional direction. But I hope that what I have said here will serve as a reminder of the messy, complicated subjective and intersubjective responses compressed within my subsequent shorthand use of the first person plural.

The Present Tense and Audience Experience in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

In the light of the preceding discussion, I find it helpful to restate my initial questions. (1) How does the narration affect us if we seek to participate in the authorial audience’s role in the dual communication of the narrative? How do we enter that audience and negotiate our relation to the magistrate and to Coetzee as implied author? How, in other words, are we positioned and repositioned as we move through the narrative? (2) What does the imaginary occasion of narration in *Waiting for the Barbarians* make possible—that is, what does it allow Coetzee to accomplish that he could not accomplish with a realistic past tense narration? Let us begin with the opening of the narrative:

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. “They protect one’s eyes against the glare of the sun,” he says. “You would find them useful out here in the desert. They save one from squinting all the time. One has fewer headaches. Look.” He touches the corners of his eyes lightly. “No wrinkles.” He replaces the glasses. It is true. He has the skin of a younger man. “At home everyone wears them.” (1)

It will be apparent, I think, that there is neither any plausible “occasion of narration” here nor any violation of narrativity. This
narrator is doing the impossible—living and telling at the same time. Furthermore, his discourse locates us in the genre of narrative: his subjectivity is obvious, and his account directs its audience’s attention toward the other character and the dynamics of their interaction. The subsequent parts of the text strengthen this location, as the preponderance of criticism about it indirectly attests: most commentators ignore the tense and focus on the thematic component of the narrative.

Perhaps the most notable immediate effect of this imaginary instance of narration is that it accentuates the difference between the magistrate’s relation to the text and Coetzee’s. As noted earlier, because he is telling as he is living, the magistrate is not at all able to design his narration; the narrative situation puts teleology beyond his control. Yet we approach the narrative assuming that it has a teleology, that Coetzee has imposed a design upon this imaginary narration. For example, we read the magistrate’s first paragraph as Coetzee’s introduction of a thematic issue about vision and blindness and expect that this issue will be prominent throughout the narrative, but we do not conclude that the magistrate is deliberately building this motif into his narrative so that he can do more with it later.9

As the narrative progresses, Coetzee combines this effect of present tense narration with one of the magistrate’s traits as a character-narrator to create a very powerful representation of the magistrate’s dilemma—and to complicate the audience’s positioning in relation to the magistrate. Coetzee creates the magistrate to be a reflective individual, but he puts the magistrate in a narrative situation that deprives him of the distance from his experience necessary for his reflection to make coherent sense of it. As a result, the magistrate’s understanding comes in pieces and is always subject to revision. At the same time, the absence of any retrospective perspective—even the latent one of a Huck Finn—places the authorial audience’s prospective experience of the narrative very close to the magistrate’s ongoing experience. This positioning has two very significant effects. First, just as the magistrate’s understanding comes provisionally and in pieces, so too
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does ours. Second, although our awareness of Coetzee behind the magistrate means that our understanding can exceed the magistrate's, we frequently must struggle to attain the necessary distance from the magistrate's views and actions. It is this second effect I will explore first.

Our struggle to see beyond the magistrate becomes progressively greater because Coetzee makes the magistrate much more sympathetic than Colonel Joll, Mandel, and the other officials from the Third Bureau, and because Coetzee shows the magistrate being led by his powers of reflection to oppose these representatives of the Empire and to make some progress understanding the situation in which he lives and acts. Indeed, near the end of the narrative the magistrate reaches conclusions that have the appearance of a final truth, a place of understanding where he and the audience can rest. Through the positioning provided by the present tense narration, Coetzee uses the authorial audience's reading experience up to and after this moment as a way to exemplify one of his major thematic points about complicity. This moment in the magistrate's understanding is so important because it is part of the development of the central instability of the narrative, his relation to his own complicity in the Empire's oppression of the barbarians, especially as that complicity is reflected in his treatment of the woman whom he takes into his apartment.

When the magistrate first invites the woman into his rooms he does not understand his motives and frequently describes his puzzlement at what he is doing. "For the time being, perhaps forever, I am simply bewildered. It seems all one whether I lie down beside her and fall asleep or fold her in a sheet and bury her in the snow" (43). But Coetzee asks us to see beyond that puzzlement and recognize that the magistrate's ritual washing of her body has a double significance. Especially in the early stages when the washing is restricted to the woman's broken feet, the ritual is the magistrate's attempt to atone for the woman's torture, and a tacit admission of the way his complicity with the Empire makes him responsible for what happened to her. Like Christ's washing of the feet of his disciples, it is an act of humility and respect, something
that arises out of his feeling for her pain and something that acknowledges her equality with him. At the same time, however, the magistrate's actions continue her oppression, an oppression that becomes greater as he washes more of her body: the woman is with him by his command—he is the official of the Empire; she has no choice but to submit—she is the "barbarian." Coetzee gives several signs that the magistrate is too close to his complicity with the Empire to recognize how his confused effort at expiation actually perpetuates her oppression. These signs include the magistrate's shifting without comment from calling her "woman" to calling her "girl" as well as his protesting too much when he briefly thinks that he is trying to "move her" more than Joll did. "I shake my head in a fury of disbelief. No! No! No! I cry to myself. . . . I must assert my distance from Colonel Joll! I will not suffer for his crimes!" (44).

Moreover, the very manner in which he carries out the expiation derives from the habits he has developed in his easy life as magistrate during times of peace. That easy life is filled with sensual pleasure; his drive toward that pleasure leads him to move beyond the washing of the woman's feet toward the giving and receiving of erotic pleasure in his washing the rest of her body. She becomes an object for both his attempted expiation and attempted pleasure. In sum, the effort at atonement is corrupted by the magistrate's complicity—and that very complicity prevents him from recognizing what he is doing.

Significantly, however, after the magistrate has himself been tortured by the forces of the Empire, he is forced to move further away from it, and, as a result of this movement, he acquires a new understanding of his actions toward the woman, an understanding that Coetzee highlights by the length and occasional eloquence of its articulation:

From the first she knew me for a false seducer. She listened to me, then she listened to her heart, and rightly she acted in accord with her heart. If only she had found the words to tell me! "That is not how you do it," she should have said, stopping me in the act. "If you want to learn how to do it, ask your friend with the black eyes." Then she
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should have continued so as not to leave me without hope: “But if you want to love me you will have to turn your back on him and learn your lesson elsewhere.” If she told me then, if I understood her, if I had been in a position to understand her, if I believed her, if I had been in a position to believe her, I might have saved myself from a year of confused and futile gestures of expiation.

For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less. But I temporized, I looked around this obscure frontier, this little backwater with its dusty summers and its cartloads of apricots and its long siestas and its shiftless garrison and the waterbirds flying in and flying out year after year to and from the dazzling waveless sheet of the lake, and I said to myself, “Be patient, one of these days he will go away, one of these days quiet will return: then our siestas will grow longer and our swords rustier, the watchman will sneak down from his tower to spend the night with his wife, the mortar will crumble till lizards nest between the bricks and owls fly out of the belfry, and the line that marks the frontier on the maps of Empire will grow hazy and obscure till we are blessedly forgotten.” Thus I seduced myself, taking one of the many wrong turnings I have taken on a road that looks true but has delivered me into the heart of a labyrinth. (135–36)

This moment of insight is so powerful because in it the magistrate so clearly articulates the view of himself that Coetzee has asked his audience to adopt. Furthermore, in that articulation, the magistrate is fulfilling one aspect of our desire, a desire that develops out of several converging aspects of the reading experience. As noted above, because our prospective reading experience is so close to the magistrate’s moment-by-moment lived experience, we frequently must struggle to see beyond his limited vision. At the same time, our fundamental sympathy for the magistrate moves us to want his vision to be as clear and honest as possible. Once the magistrate’s struggle to see clearly leads him to a place where his vision matches ours, we take a certain satisfaction in his achievement, even as we recognize that the truth he voices is a chilling one. Indeed, because we are always positioned so closely to
the magistrate's developing consciousness, because we struggle to see beyond his vision, his articulation here is likely to advance our understanding of his situation: he expresses better than we could what we have been feeling.

Strikingly, however, Coetzee does not leave his audience with the satisfaction of fulfilled desire very long. And here we can see the consequences of the way the tense positions us to make our understanding, like the magistrate's, provisional and partial. The magistrate's apparent breakthrough in understanding is not followed by significant changes in his behavior. Once he is freed from his exile, once the forces of the Empire flee the town after their unsuccessful campaign against the so-called barbarians, the magistrate steps back into the role he had before the arrival of Colonel Joll. "In all measures for our preservation I have taken the lead. No one has challenged me. My beard is trimmed, I wear clean clothes, I have in effect resumed the legal administration that was interrupted a year ago with the arrival of the Civil Guard" (145).

The precise nature of the magistrate's position relative to the Empire is not entirely clear, because the Empire's relation to the outpost is no longer clear. Mandel says that the forces will return in the spring, but there is also evidence that the Empire may be on its last legs (no merchant will take the coin of the Empire), that, indeed, we have been reading about the desperate actions of an Empire about to fall. The effect of this uncertainty is to shift our attention from the details of the political situation to the interior consciousness of the magistrate. And the manner in which he takes up his former role shows that he has maintained his complicitous consciousness. Once the magistrate reassumes his role, he returns to thinking of the woman as object. Once his sexual desire returns, he tries to "invoke images of the girl who night after night slept here with me. I see her standing barelegged in her shift, one foot in the basin, waiting for me to wash her, her hand pressing down on my shoulder. . . . From the depths of that memory I reach out to touch myself" (149). That he is unable to arouse himself to orgasm does not alter the fact that he is once again objectifying the woman. His turning to Mai for sex is also a resumption of old habits, his
Coetzee also uses the magistrate’s interaction with Mai to underline his failure to follow through on his understanding about the woman. Mai tells him, “Sometimes she would cry and cry and cry. You made her very unhappy. Did you know that?” Before defending himself to her, the magistrate tells us, “She is opening a door through which a wind of utter desolation blows upon me” (152). This glimpse of the woman’s pain at his hands gives the magistrate pain—sorrow, emptiness, desolation—but he soon puts it aside and moves on. The force of our negative judgment becomes greater.

But this account of the magistrate’s falling back into his complicity is incomplete. It leaves out a significant countervailing force in the reading experience, something that works against our recognition of the meaning of the magistrate’s movement. That force is our own sympathy with the magistrate, and our responses to his situation as the prisoner who is tortured and made an outcast among his own people. While he is being tortured, we share his pain; while he is an outcast, we cringe at his humiliation. And the present tense heightens the effect because it contains no promise of any change; as we read, we recognize that the magistrate’s submission to torture could become a permanent condition. When this sympathetic, reflective magistrate conveys his pleasure and satisfaction in resuming his place of consequence (“In all measures . . . I have taken the lead”), we are inclined to share his satisfaction and, therefore, overlook or not fully register the perpetuation of his complicitous consciousness. In other words, we are inclined to be complicit with his complicity. Eventually, however, the evidence of that complicity becomes too great to ignore.

Nevertheless, even as the evidence of complicity mounts, another realization builds within us: in the magistrate’s present situation, he cannot act otherwise. He can momentarily feel the woman’s pain and his sorrow but he can no longer relate these feelings to his complicity with the Empire and its representative, Joll. To do that would mean that he could not return to his post without some misgivings about his possible relations to the Empire or its successor, and
that he could not so automatically resume his pursuit of the easy, sensual life he had before Joll's arrival. He does not experience such misgivings or give up the pursuit of sensual pleasure because his complicity cannot be so easily escaped. Nevertheless, he does register a vague sense of self-division—he feels some things that he cannot fully articulate. The penultimate section of the narrative ends with him telling his audience: "I think: 'There has been something staring at me, and still I do not see it'" (155). And the whole narrative ends with the sentence, "Like much else nowadays I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses along on a road that may lead nowhere" (156).

These remarks actually serve a double function for the magistrate. While they show some awareness of his failing, some evidence that he cannot completely eradicate the experiences of the last year, they also allow him to maintain his complicity. Like a white professor who admits to his black students that he is racist in ways that he might not always recognize and then does nothing else about his racism, the magistrate admits that a problem exists, but that admission substitutes for any effort to face it or to solve it. Again, however, because the magistrate has been complicit with the Empire for so long, we must recognize that he is in too deep to do otherwise.

The relation of Coetzee's audience to these developments is extremely complicated. As I have indicated, Coetzee asks us to have a two-fold response to the magistrate's behavior: to recognize that the magistrate's inability to escape from his complicitous consciousness is a grim lesson about the power of complicity, something in the magistrate to be resisted rather than forgiven; and simultaneously to recognize that the magistrate, given who he is and how he has lived his life, cannot do anything else. Even more important, however, is that Coetzee asks us to turn the experience of our progressive relationship with the magistrate back upon ourselves. And here the present tense plays a crucial role. When the magistrate achieves his insight that he and Joll are two sides of Imperial rule, it is natural for us to believe that the intellectual knowledge of his complicity will translate into action to change
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that complicity. But the later experience of the narrative asks us to go back and recognize that, however natural, the expectation was also unfounded. Similarly, when the magistrate resumes his position of importance in the town, it is natural for us to share his satisfaction. But the accumulation of evidence of his complicity leads us to recognize our own complicity.

In the first case, the satisfaction of our desire to have the magistrate recognize his similarity to Joll seduces us into believing that once the magistrate articulates his complicity he will be able to escape it. Our seduction depends upon our underestimating the nature and power of complicity and the depth of the magistrate's. The subsequent experience of the narrative emphasizes that complicity works without the conscious awareness of the complicit individual and that the magistrate's whole adult life has been based on his complicity. If his moment of insight offers us the satisfaction of fulfilled desire, the subsequent events present us with the frustration of thwarted desire. But upon reflection, we can recognize that the frustration we feel is partly at our own blindness, the underestimating or perhaps even forgetting that made our seduction possible. In the second case, when we feel some satisfaction in the magistrate's return to prominence, we have a very powerful experience of the insidious working of complicity: in feeling that satisfaction we unwittingly participate in the magistrate's complicity—but we do so from the best of motives, namely our sympathy and fellow feeling.

Our double experience of complicity—in the events and in our activity of processing them—is, I believe, the most important effect that Coetzee's use of the present tense makes possible. It is above all the magistrate's own lack of perspective on his behavior and our immersion in that behavior as it happens that leads to our complicity. A retrospective narration with even a partially more enlightened magistrate would interfere with our experiencing that complicity. Furthermore, given the magistrate's habits of reflection, he would have to become either more enlightened or more clearly deluded: in either case, we would move further away from the experiencing-I and all his halting, faltering steps. Our own halting and faltering would not occur as effectively as it does here.
By the end of the narrative, we reach a complex judgment of the magistrate that combines resistance to his resumed complicity with an understanding of its inescapability. However, because this judgment is only part of our double experience of complicity, we move away from the effort to achieve a final, definitive evaluation of the magistrate's actions and toward the unsettling recognition of the power of complicity. Because complicity is so insidious, and because we see it and experience it in our reading of this narrative, we must be very wary of adopting any stance based on our moral superiority to others whom we might consider complicit in the perpetuation of racism, sexism, or other dehumanizing ideologies. This wariness does not mean that we ought not make distinctions between, say, the Ku Klux Klan and the average white liberal academic; but it does mean that the average white liberal academic, rather than comforting himself with his moral superiority to members of the Klan, ought to examine his life for evidence of his complicity in the perpetuation of oppression and then do something about it. Coetzee's narrative insists—and our experience of it leads us to agree—that we all are complicit in some way or other. The narrative also insists that, despite the inescapability of complicity, we must seek to eradicate it and the oppression it perpetuates. To do anything else is, in effect, to be complicit with complicity.

Given what I have said earlier about the endless recursiveness of reading, I cannot (and do not wish to) claim anything like definitiveness for this account of the present tense and the positioning of the reader. Indeed, as this examination of Coetzee's technique has led me into a discussion of the narrative's and the reader's ethical stances, I want to recognize that this discussion itself implies a particular ethical imperative: This reading of domination, oppression, and complicity in Waiting for the Barbarians cannot be presented as the truth that other readers should accept. Consequently, I offer it to my readers as my current best effort at articulating the melding of my experiences as a flesh and blood and authorial reader of Coetzee's challenging narrative. I offer it with the knowledge that it is tentative and with the hope that it makes
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some useful connections with Coetzee's text and with the experience of other readers.¹⁰

Notes

1. The "historical present" poses no theoretical problem precisely because it implicitly (or even explicitly) acknowledges that the narrator actually has knowledge-after-the-fact even as it employs the present tense for the effect of immediacy. The heterodiegetic present, as employed, for example, in Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, presents related but different theoretical problems from those of the homodiegetic present. When I discuss the present tense in this essay, I will be concerned with the homodiegetic simultaneous present.

2. Fleischman is not alone in her assumption about the unsuitability of the present tense for narrative. See also Genette, Rimmon-Kenan, and others. After hearing a much abridged version of this paper as well as one on present tense narration by Dorrit Cohn at the International Conference on Narrative in Nice in 1991, Rimmon-Kenan said that she would "take back" her assertions in Narrative Fiction.

3. For a fuller account of the reader's relation to Joe's narrative and of the workings of that narrative, see my "What Hemingway and a Rhetorical Theory of Narrative Can Do for Each Other: The Case of 'My Old Man'" (forthcoming).

4. See Reading People, Reading Plots.

5. I use the terms "narrative audience" and "authorial audience" as defined by Peter J. Rabinowitz in "Truth in Fiction: A Re-examination of Audiences," and discussed further in his Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation.

6. Of course a heterodiegetic simultaneous present (such as the broadcast of a horse race) is much more likely than a homodiegetic one in nonfictional narrative, but I don't think we should categorically rule out the use of the homodiegetic simultaneous present for a particular effect. One of the lessons writers of the so-called New Journalism have taught us is how effectively many techniques of fictional narration can be employed in nonfiction narrative.

7. I am drawing here on the concept of "coduction" developed by Wayne C. Booth in The Company We Keep.

8. For a persuasive discussion of the impossibility of locating any plausible occasion of narration, see Neumann. At the same time, it is worth
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noting that occasionally Coetzee moves from the simultaneous present to the historical present, as in this sentence: “Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing” (4–5). I take these moves to be deliberate rather than inadvertent, necessary for Coetzee to accomplish certain local tasks in the narrative. The dominant mode of narration, however, is the simultaneous present.

9. For an extended and insightful discussion of vision and blindness in the novel, see Penner.

10. Here I acknowledge the connections and help that other readers have already given me, especially Peter J. Rabinowitz, Jamie Barlowe, Elizabeth Patnoe, Robert Caserio, Nicholas Howe, and Miriam Clark.

Bibliography


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