Susanna Zinato*

THE GORGON'S HEAD: ON NARRATION, TORTURE, AND TRUTH-SEEKING IN J. M. COETZEE'S *WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS* AND IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN TRC'S HISTORY-WRITING AND RESTORATIVE UNDERTAKING

This article considers the South African TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission)'s assumptions and practice concerning truth-seeking, narration, and, by implication, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, in the light that J.M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (henceforth: *WB*) can shed on them. The years elapsed between the publication of the novel in 1980 and the inauguration of the historical event of the TRC in 1995 should not forbid, I believe, approaching the latter through points of reflection stemmed from reading the first, not least because art vaunts a privileged, non-progressive though often anticipatory, relation to times. The *rapprochement* between the TRC's historical undertaking and Coetzee's novel has already surfaced in criticism, although pride of place has always and unsurprisingly been given to *Disgrace*, published in 1999 shortly after the conclusion of the hearings, which unmistakably appears to evoke and problematize the confessional 'stage' of the TRC and its tenets in the scenes depicting David Lurie's hearings at the university. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee's misgivings about the TRC, particularly "the religious overtones of the TRC's doctrine of repentance and forgiveness" (Coundouriotis 2006, 860), cannot go unnoticed. As Sue Kossew (2003, 159) observes, "[its] protagonist refuses public repentance, drawing a distinction for the tribunal between a 'secular plea' of guilty, and the more spiritual realm of repentance which David believes to be 'another universe of discourse,' that of the soul."

That said, I believe Troy Urquart's claim that "[a]lthough it predated the establishment of the TRC by 15 years, J.M. Coetzee's *WB* anticipates and challenges […] the basic premises of the TRC" (2006, 2) is wholly tenable. I would even point out that the time gap between the novel's publication and the TRC event increases, rather than problematizing, the value of his assertion as it excludes any re-active polemical intention in the novelist's narrative choices. In Urquart's opinion Coetzee's novel challenges "the TRC's conflation of the quest for truth with the quest for justice" and explores "first, the difficulty of establishing the truth about the experience of the oppressed and, second, the manipulation of their voices to protect the interests of the state" (ibid.). Although my reflections will noticeably differ from the arguments advanced by Urquart throughout his essay, I find his retrospective highlighting of the challenging force of *WB* decidedly opportune; in the same way, his emphasis on the TRC's prioritizing the political interests of the new nation over the victims' voices cannot be easily countered. Nevertheless, Coetzee's challenges are deeper than that: their nature is primarily ethical and philosophical, though they become necessarily political as soon as they are 'thrown' into the arena of *any* exclusive and violent imposition of power that demands moral choices — forcefully so in the apartheid-ridden South African state.

The narrative choices made by Coetzee in *Waiting for the Barbarians* to tackle torture and, broadly, any inhuman exercise of unlimited power on the Other's body, have inspired the main drive of this essay: that of comparatively considering the 'hermeneutical' approaches employed in their truth-seeking practices by, respectively, a) Coetzee's ethically-oriented fiction, b) the perpetrator's inquisitorial torture procedures authorized by state terrorism (here represented by Captain Joll and Mandel), and c) the TRC's rules of procedure espoused in its courageously ambitious, documental and historical undertaking. The discussion entirely invests the relationship between, on the one hand, the torturer and the Magistrate and, on the other, the barbarian girl in the novel; yet it also can be seen to invest the staging and the filing of the TRC's

* *Susanna Zinato is Associate Professor of English at Verona University. She has published on the late modernist novel, on Restoration theatre and culture, on postcolonial literature (mainly on B. Head, J. Frame, J. M. Coetzee), and on comparative literature. Besides articles/chapters, see* Rehearsals of the Modern: Experience and Experiment in Restoration Drama*, intr.& ed. (Liguori 2010);* The house is empty: Grammars of Madness in J. Frame's *Scented Gardens for the Blind* and B. Head's *A Question of Power (Clueb 1999);* Ex-centric Writing: Essays on Madness in Postcolonial Fiction*, co-ed. with A. Pes (Cambridge Scholars 2013);* Poetics and Politics of Shame in Postcolonial Literature*, co-ed. with D. Attwell and A. Pes (Routledge 2019).*

hearings. This horizon of analysis necessarily involves reflections directly bearing on the novelist's responsible representation, reflections that crucially concern the relationship between narration and violence, narration and pain, and the relationship between torture and language, torture and its victims' telling of their stories — if and when the latter occurs at all.

In point of fact, Coetzee's narrative moves in *WB* are able to problematize not only the supposedly infallible healing power of post-traumatic language and story-telling, but also the victim's capacity or will to speak at all. They seriously question the para-religious and para-therapeutic automatism of confession-*cum*-forgiveness and reconciliation, while acutely undermining any ennobling view of physical pain and suffering, which is liable to verge on victim fetishism. Furthermore, they leave the reader in no doubt that reconciliation is impossible without justice and reciprocity, even when the victims' truth receives public acknowledgement. Above all, they put us squarely face to face with the only tragically available certain truth, the truth of the body in pain. Here, the overwhelming challenge for a writer of fiction like Coetzee is to respond to the powerful and blunt claim that the suffering body makes on him to tell "the quasi-ineffable fact of suffering without turning to a mystical, even theological register" (Vermeulen 2010, 278)[1] while lucidly and constantly highlighting the all-too-human responsibilities and complicities. Worth quoting, here, is the author's well-known statement-confession that follows and that, I believe, is a compelling introduction to the 'truth' about *WB*:

> Let me put it baldly: in South Africa it is not possible to deny the authority of suffering and therefore of the body. It is not possible, not for logical reasons, not for ethical reasons […], but for political reasons, for reasons of power. And let me again be unambiguous: it is not that one *grants* the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body *takes* this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable.
> (Let me add, *entirely* parenthetically, that I, as a person, as a personality, am overwhelmed, that my thinking is thrown into confusion and helplessness, by the fact of suffering in the world, and not only human suffering. These fictional constructions of mine are paltry, ludicrous defenses against that being-overwhelmed, and, to me, transparently so.) (1992, 248)

Let us start from the TRC's *history-writing* mandate. In accordance with an Act of the 1993 interim Constitution, this Commission aimed to fulfil two primary functions: truth-telling about apartheid crimes and reconciliation of the nation for the sake of nation-building.[2] In point of fact, the South African TRC resulted from political negotiations that brought an end to apartheid, with a view to writing a history of human rights abuses committed under the regime but also as a way to "sign and seal amnesty as part of the *realpolitik* of the pre-election talks in 1994, between the De Klerk government and the ANC" (Lyster 2000, 185). Starting on 16 December 1995, for three years the widely televised and radio-transmitted hearings were held in key centres all around the country.

In the frame of the restorative justice explicitly recommended by the Constitution Postscript and qualified by former Archbishop Desmond Tutu as the African, *ubuntu*-oriented paradigm of justice (to be distinguished from the Western, un-African paradigm of retributive justice), reconciliation was to be understood from a

[1] While I see James Trevor's point that the novel invites a "religious significance" (1996, 141), I interpret Coetzee's text as inviting this reading in order to rule it out. I believe that the fact that "*Waiting for the Barbarians* remains silent about God" (Trevor 1996, 145) should be taken seriously and not be 'alleviated' by re-entering it into a "postmodernist openness" (144) of meaning. While much appreciating the critic's drawing on the sacred in his analysis of the novel, it remains difficult for me to lead it back exclusively to a "theological" (149) horizon in which being moral amounts to being religious. Far from "celebrat[ing] its own inconclusiveness" and "point[ing] covertly, though perhaps unwittingly" (the latter being an adverb that figures very awkwardly in connection with Coetzee's art) towards the discursive potentialities of "the tropes of the theologian" (ibid.), I deem the novel as quite 'conclusive' in celebrating the sacredness of human life, and the body, especially the Other's life and body, beyond and independently of any transcendental or theological frame.

[2] Two main sources on the subject have been widely consulted for the present article: Villa-Vicentio and Verwoerd (eds.) 2000 and Wilson 2001.

religious-redemptive perspective that emphasized the confessional performativity of the victims' public testimonies and that "aimed at creating meaning for suffering" by making their narratives a "narrative of sacrifice for liberation" (Wilson 2001, xix).

The South African nation was portrayed as a sick body in need of healing; the healing treatment was "truth-telling and, flowing from it, forgiveness and reconciliation" (15). To counter any inquisitorial image of the TRC, its work was "steeped in religious and psycho-therapeutic rhetoric," the choice of Tutu as chairperson being "in itself suggestive of a confessional and the practice of beginning the hearings with prayer, and in particular, the first hearing with a Eucharist, tak[ing] this further" (Young 2004, 148). Incidentally, it is exactly that kind of rhetoric that Coetzee would criticize in *Disgrace* through the 'perpetrator' David Lurie's refuting public confession and the contrition/abasement (much more than truth) that the university hearings would elicit from him.

The TRC's extraordinary undertaking has called for commentary and controversy on an industrial scale and here I cannot but be very selective in quoting from criticism on the subject. One might take as emblematic of the 'negative faction' the title of Mahmood Mamdani's critique of the TRC's Final Report, "Amnesty or Impunity?", levelled at the TRC's playing down apartheid as a crime against humanity, "dehistoricizing" and "decontextualizing" its story, and "individualizing" its wrongs thus losing sight of the institutionalized, legislated crime that apartheid was (2002, 56; 58).[3] It is *how* the TRC dealt with the public testimonies that is of crucial relevance to my argument here. To receive amnesty, the perpetrator applying for it had to fulfil a few criteria, the most important of which was that the applicant had to *fully* disclose all that was known about the crime (its circumstances, context, order of events, etc.). Perpetrators were not required to express any remorse or regret for their actions, with the result that the "much-vaunted truth of amnesty hearings was often the truth of unrepentant serial murderers who still felt that their war was a just one" (Wilson 2001, 25). The mere and, allegedly, complete chronicle of facts could pave the way to amnesty. As to the victims' testimonies, on the other hand, two aspects of their treatment are disturbingly fascinating in the *rapprochement* between historical document and fiction that is being followed here: a) while the perpetrators' narratives were deemed valuable in terms of "forensic or factual truth," the victims' narratives were deprived of it and only considered in terms of "personal or narrative truth," and of "healing or restorative truth": this means that the facts narrated by the victims were valued exclusively for their "transformative" effect of testimonies, for their healing potential both for the individual and the community. This problematically hybrid way of receiving and classifying the hearings, of course, was an integral part of the fact that, in R.C. Morris's words, the TRC "mimicked the structure of a legal trial without being one *and* without entirely relinquishing the paradigm of the trial" (2011, 391, my emphasis).

In other words, only the perpetrators' narrative was granted the epistemological value of historical narrative, whereas the victims' narrative was mainly meant to have "the reality of their suffering" officially acknowledged and their dignity restored through the telling (Wilson 2001, 36 ff.), but it was practically neglected in terms of knowledge and evidence. In this way, testimony, as written in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* (Vol.1, 114), "part[ook] of a larger project of collective memory, an essentially historical task." In the TRC's psycho-therapeutic/redemptive paradigm, what the victims' testimonies were to perform was a cathartic effect that could hopefully help them survive their trauma and participate in the new reconciled nation.

Even more interesting from a literary critic's perspective is the fact that at the end of the first year of the TRC a new software protocol of testimony-taking known as the Infocomm (a large-scale human-rights database project) inaugurated a technological approach to 'truth-seeking' that excluded the original *narrative* section. This technology of statement-processing was designed to break down the victims' narratives into quantifiable minimal units. In the case of the victims, the completeness required from the perpetrators' story-telling with a view to obtaining factual integrity was never insisted on, not even in a healing logic, and was now definitively undermined by the Infocomm. As described by Richard Wilson (2001, ch.2), complex events and people were divided into components: either 48 types of distinct acts in the case of events, or three categories in the case of people, i.e. victims, perpetrators, and witnesses. (But what about cases in which victim and perpetrator coincided?) "Statement-takers were soon replaced first by a checklist then by a questionnaire,

[3] The whole title is "Amnesty or Impunity? A Preliminary Critique of the Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa (TRC)."

not requiring listening" (Wilson 2001, 45, my emphasis). Wilson usefully quotes the chief data processor based in Johannesburg, Themba Kubheka:

> When we started it was narrative. We let people tell their story. By the end of 1997, it was a short questionnaire to direct the interview instead of letting the people talk about themselves […] The questionnaire distorted the whole story altogether […] it destroyed the meaning. (2001, 45)

Many a victim refused to sign their reported statements as these had been reduced to info-units beyond all recognition. They felt that their stories, often devastatingly delivered in a torn and wrenched form, had been stripped of their own time, their context, their vital contents and details. Narrative and the subject's telling of his/her story underwent a dramatic repositioning downwards in the rules of procedure. In fact only narrative units conforming to the coding frame of the system were entered, in a way bearing a vaguely disquieting family resemblance to the inquisitor's *quaestio*, which shapes reality into his pre-determined truth-scheme. In Wilson's words, "What was lost in the data processing […] were the *existential truths* contained within complex narratives. […] What was lost was the arc of a personal history" (2001, 32, my emphasis).
Paraphrasing Wilson through Paul Ricoeur, one might say that what was lost was the "*configuration*" given by the teller to his/her story of events (not of dry, cold facts), a story that was always more than a simple enumeration of units, a story as an existential event, with a time that was not calendar time, with its own context and sequence (Ricoeur 1994), with its "*mise en sense*" (Revault d'Allones 2011, 602). On the contrary, ultimately the Infocomm became a sort of narratological processing of traumatic data deemed processable because it was recognized as such by the system (and one fears that the variable was lost in favour of the standardized units, and that the unrecognized but crucial detail was stifled in favour of the labelled data-base form). The existential uniqueness of the subject's story and suffering disappeared. This was in keeping with the main 'gesture' subsumed in the TRC's project, which was to collectivize suffering, conflating and 'levelling' pain by providing a public theatre for collective catharsis reached through a sort of "secular Eucharist" (Moosa 2000, 185) — a collective sharing in the nation's tortured flesh, truth acknowledged in a performative and ritualistic, even sacrificial sense. In spite of the fact that this historical/documental archive was to be the 'ark' of a new alliance among the people of the new South Africa, it was not so much the single truths collected in it that came to count as the real truth of the TRC's enterprise as, in Ebrahim Moosa's acute diagnosis,

> its performative truth. […] It requires a faith in the *mysterium* of the event, a faith in the rite of reconciliation, a belief in the ritual of confession, rather than an expectation in the outcome of the process. The key to understanding this version of truth and reconciliation lies locked into the drama and performance of the TRC itself. (2000, 117-118)

In this frame, the traumatic narratives/truths of all the individual subjects were to receive their *mise-en-sense* through the rite, and then be made to flow into the anonymized, teleological narrative of South Africa's redemption. In so doing, on the one hand, the TRC has "tended to obscure the systematically abusive social engineering that was apartheid" (Attwell and Harlow 2000, 2), as the anxiety over a hasty reconciliation sacrificed "the opportunity to deal more thoroughly with the more intractable conflicts and social inequalities generated by apartheid as a whole" (Young 2004, 149). On the other, its final '*grand récit*' has tacitly allowed the "deceit of idealism, which hypostatizes concepts," and also, paradoxically, "its inhumanity, which no sooner gets hold of the particular than it reduces it to a moment, a point of passage, and too often compromises with grief and death in the name of a reconciliation that is present only in thought" (Adorno 1951:§46, my trans.).
According to Moosa (2000, 116),

> the truth was not measured but manufactured. To be charitable, we can say that the truth was negotiated. It was this truth that rescued South Africa from a revolutionary abyss. It is also the very same truth that will hover as a spectral figure over the country's uncertain future.

Let us turn, now, to *WB*, Coetzee's novel about torture, about the epitome of inhumanity in history and the most barbarous side of apartheid-ridden South Africa,[4] as testified, with unrelenting horrific abundance, by three years of TRC testimonies. The author has decided to face the subject of torture in the fictional ways he has deemed ethically acceptable. Even more than in his other novels, he has refrained from projecting facile visions of justice and reconciliation; at the end of his *voyage au bout de la nuit*, his Magistrate confesses to his "feeling stupid" (shall we say, evoking Coetzee's own words quoted above, "overwhelmed"?), his only truth being the body in pain. Feeling stupid, as observed by Barbara Eckstein, "is neither despair nor humiliation […]. It is humility, the humility he tried to achieve by the gesture of washing the girl's crippled feet" (198): humility as reparation and response to the humiliation inflicted on her by the torturer. Yet, as keenly put by Carrol Clarkson, "though he speaks from the limited and fallible perspective of [a] prisoner in the [Platonic] cave […] or perhaps precisely *because* [he] is not the shining herald of a new social order, [his] human attempts to articulate a different grounding for the society in which [he] live[s] carry extraordinary affective power" (2009, 190).

The much-debated unspecificity and displacement of the milieu Coetzee stages in *WB* cannot but obliquely invoke the terroristic "total strategy" (Attwell 1993, 74) deployed by the South African state of exception[5] in the years following the Soweto student uprising of 1976, which included mass detention, negation of due trial, torture and killings in detention.[6] In his critical biography of Coetzee, David Attwell has written enlightening pages on the role the author gives to "paranoia" as "the basic condition" of the South African regime and, so, "of the Empire in *Barbarians"*, as well as on the weight of Steve Biko's death by torture on the novel's gestation (2015, 106 ff.). The "Third Bureau" represented by the perpetrator Captain Joll unfailingly brought to South African readers' minds the BOSS, the regime's Bureau for State Security; in the same way, the explanations given by Joll for the death of the first prisoner (that he had died of head injuries) were notoriously those given for Biko's death. So, far from being a stylish metaphysical choice, Coetzee's refusal of specificity is, as argued by Attwell, "the result of being painfully conscious of one's immediate historical location" (1993, 73). That said, the discourse on terror and history, or on authoritarian terror in human history, engages him in a broader context: "the novel's emergence took the form of a simultaneous, seemingly contradictory, two-way process: both a distancing — into an unspecified empire at an unspecified moment in history — and a homecoming into the violence of apartheid in the period of its climactic self-destruction" (Attwell 2015, 113-114). And it is important to emphasize how the unspecified setting is part of a metonymic strategy aimed at disrupting any comfortable illusion of unfamiliarity on the reader's part, by pointing to similar scenarios outside South Africa. In an interview given in 1978, the author remarked that he preferred "to see the South African situation [at that time] as only one manifestation of a wider historical situation to do with colonialism, late colonialism, neo-colonialism" (Coetzee and Watson 1978, 23) — a global perception that cannot be said to have become obsolete. As Jennifer Wenzel, who closely follows in Eckstein's footsteps, already remarked, far from being obsolete it

> exists everywhere; and the unnamed, unhistoricized empire of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*, far from representing an avoidance of the story of South Africa, allows torture to be examined as a phenomenon that could (and does) occur not only in South Africa, but in any place where political power imposes itself upon the human body. (1996, 64)

[4] "Torture, or the possibility of it, was a fact of daily life for many people in South Africa in 1980, and so the representation of it strikes a chilling and literal chord" (Head 2006, 101).

[5] Cp. Giorgio Agamben's *State of Exception*, in which the Italian philosopher examines the traditional definitions, including their respective aporias, of the theoretical-legal posing of the need that suspends the law (*necessitas legem non habet*) and underlines how it has become a political practice that is all but 'exceptional.' In the novel's imperial context emergency and exception become strategies employed to cloak with right its anomic violence.

[6] On the South African historical context Van Zanten Gallagher 1991 (112-118) is still a very useful reference.

The disturbing questions the Magistrate explores in the novel definitely concern 'imperial'/state violence and terror in a way that is not racially confined: interviewed by Richard Begam, Coetzee felt the need to declare that "[t]here is nothing about blackness or whiteness in *Waiting for the Barbarians*," that "the Magistrate and the girl could as well be Russian and Kirghiz, or Han and Mongol, or Turk and Arab, or Arab and Berber" (Coetzee and Begam 1992, 424). So, the issue at stake is the brutal exercise of power and humiliation on the Other's body, as torture brings to the extreme the power relationship in which a human being's life and death are in the hands of a powerful subject. Crucially, therefore, the discourse at the core of the novel is something that, starting from the colonial/imperial context, actually goes well beyond geographical and ethnic/racial boundaries, to advance disturbing questions about human beings' de-humanizing use of power.

A few years later, in his pivotal essay entitled "Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State" (1986), in commenting on the obscure fascination exerted by torture on many South African writers, Coetzee singles out its primary reason in the fact that "the torture room provides a metaphor, *bare and extreme*, for *relations between authoritarianism and its victims*", relations in which "an *unlimited*" (1992a, 363, my emphases) and legally illegal force is exerted on the body of an 'Other' who is the victim of the perpetrator's arbitrary and sadistic fantasies. The words emphasized above highlight the author's full awareness of how torture, much more than killing, is a celebration of narcissistic power, because it reduces the Other to bare impotence, the perpetrators taking 'care' not to kill their victims since, once dead, torture can have no effect on their corpses. "The torturer's triumph can celebrate itself only in the interregnum between life and death" (Di Cesare 2016, 112, my translation), which explains why the phenomenology of torture necessarily calls for the "simultaneous exercise of two distinct logics of power that are conjoined [in it]: sovereign power and biopower. On the detainee's body the sovereign right 'to make live and to let die'", in Foucauldian terms (Foucault 2003, 241), "is literally inscribed. But this power would find a limitation in the detainee's death, which is the reason why he/she cannot be killed, nor let die" (114-115). Perversely, biopower is careful to prevent death in order to safeguard torture.

In the aforementioned "Dark Chamber" essay, *WB* is defined as "a novel about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience" (1992a, 363). In this "man of conscience" one could legitimately see the Magistrate, the author, and hopefully, by extension, the reader. In dealing broadly with torture and extreme violence, and more specifically with state torture and violence, Coetzee deems it necessary to squarely tackle the issue of how fiction can represent all this in a morally responsible way. In so doing, he retrospectively theorizes on the fictional practice carried out in his 1980 novel. He sees the clear need not to make fiction replicate/mimic the exercise of power, the need to carefully consider "how not to play the game by the rules of the state" (364) so as not to assist it through an increase of panic-inducing terror. Consequently, he is also very clear about how not to play the game of those adversarial critics who strenuously advocate realism as the only serious literary option in fighting apartheid.

As Peter McDonald is keen to note, it transpired that, in a substantial and embarrassing way, this expectation ended with playing the game according to the rules of the state censors, in "assum[ing] that form and content are in principle separable" and in "presuppos[ing] that the literary could be defined only relative to a putatively fixed norm of a message-bearing ordinary discourse" (2006, 55). Coetzee's sensitivity to the accusation of a lack of serious engagement in his fiction may be gauged by his 1988 speech entitled "The Novel Today," which is familiar to all his critics due to the light it shines on the author's poetics. In it, he resolutely rejects any aesthetic faith founded on form/content separability and any "instrumental" or "supplementary" view of literature with respect to politics, ethics, sociology, and, above all, history, thus defending the right of fiction to be autonomous and obey its own laws which, by being literary, are no less seriously engaged in the world. Fiction is proclaimed to be not only different from, but "rival" to history and having the power, if not the duty, to "demythologize" it (Coetzee 1988, 3). In "Into the Dark Chamber," he had already vindicated the fact that, as put by McDonald, literature's authority lies in its "irreducible power to intervene in the public sphere on its own terms, since its effectiveness, including its political effectiveness, and its literariness are inseparable" (2006, 56).

It must therefore be clear from the start that what is at stake, here, is no navel-gazing, monistic aestheticism: in Coetzee's pithy words, "storytelling is an other mode of thinking" (Coetzee 1988, 4). And the truth-seeking of fiction, while being "other," is absolutely no less serious and no less ethically accountable. Incidentally, one should not fail to observe, with R.C. Morris, that also "in the aftermath of apartheid's mendacious rule,

South African writers often seem to inhabit a space of radical, Adornian doubt: after such lies, wither fiction?" (2011, 397). She sees in poet-journalist Antjie Krog's *Country of My Skull* (2000) a compelling, if controversial, experiment in suffusing "the boundary between journalistic memoir and fiction while submitting its fictive moments to the demands that they illuminate the historical truth of apartheid" (397-398).
Even more compellingly, *WB* exemplifies how *truth* does not necessarily find its measure in the reproduction of *factual* reality (and of its obscenities). For an author of conscience like Coetzee, the moral dilemma entailed in the fictional representation of torture and in seeking its 'truth' primarily lead him to the rhetorical choice of avoiding precisely the kind of realistic representation and foregrounding that, due to the sheer enormity of the brutality involved, would be mimetic of state terrorism, and would easily flow into Gothic spectacularization at its most sensational. As he states in his essay,

> [f]or the writer the deeper problem is *not* to allow himself to be impaled on the dilemma proposed by the state, namely, either to ignore its obscenities or else to produce representations of them. The true challenge is how not to play the game by the rules of the state, how to establish one's own authority, how to imagine torture and death on one's own terms. (1992a, 364)

More to the point, the question is "how to treat something that, in truth, because it is offered like the Gorgon's head to terrorize the populace and paralyze resistance, deserves to be ignored" (366). In relation to the specific problem of representing torture, the answer has been effectively anticipated in *WB* where, in order to resist and fight terror, he has chosen not to replicate it aesthetically. He has not, as it were, looked directly into the Gorgon's eyes but, like Perseus, has used his narrative shield, polished like a glass, to deflect their look, through the art of distancing and deferring. The reader stops with him and with the Magistrate outside the torture chamber, and is programmatically kept outside of it.
My argumentation, here, can profit by the retrospective, intertextual light that Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello* (2003) shines on the issue of the representation of evil, thus enriching our interpretive perspective. What that novel adds is the deeply ethical instantiation for the author to avoid being complicit in the game of obscenity staged by the state-torturer, by deciding to keep "off-stage" what would taint both him/herself and the reader. "Obscenity/ies" is a key term in Coetzee's moral and political idiolect. It rebounds from his 1986 essay on the torture chamber to Costello's lecture on evil (Coetzee 2003, ch.6: "The Problem of Evil") where Elizabeth phenomenologically reflects on the violence experienced in reading Paul West's *The Very Rich Hours of Count von Stauffenberg*, a very dark and gruesome book about Hitler's would-be assassins in the *Wehrmacht* and their extremely violent execution. She ponders on her own "conspir[ing] in the violation" (Coetzee 2003, 181) through the ugly "excitement" that has led her to keep on reading West's book in spite of the strong revulsion it provoked in her. She equals 'obscene' with 'off-stage' and seals this etymological bearing of the word with the following, crucial statement: "To save humanity certain things that we may want to see (*may want to see because we are human!)* must remain off-stage" (169, emphasis in the text).
Thus, more than twenty years after writing *WB*, the deepest, most ethical reason for avoiding direct, realistic representations of torture and, more broadly, extreme violence, is about keeping oneself at a 'decent' distance from the inhuman that is within us. It has to do with forbidding oneself from stepping into the unholy ground of the spectacular desacralization of human life and of the human body. This would appear to be the fundamental reason why the torture chamber has to remain "forbidden" (Coetzee 2003, 172). Elizabeth turns to her audience and asks them "whether the artist is quite the hero-explorer he pretends to be, whether we are always right to applaud when he emerges from the cave with reeking sword in one hand and the head of the monster in the other" (ibid.). While refraining from conflating *tout court* Elizabeth's voice with Coetzee's, one cannot help but perceive a line of temporal continuity, evidenced by their mutual iconographic recourse to the heads of mythological monsters (the Gorgon's, and the Minotaur's, respectively).
In *WB* we are not shown the barbarian girl's naked body consigned to the hubristic power of Joll. This is Coetzee's answer to what, in the essay on the torture chamber, he sees as another possible pitfall that a responsible writer should avoid: the ambiguously titillating erotic register triggered by the depiction of

violence exerted on a helpless, naked body, especially a woman's — pornographic pleasure exerted on "bare lives."[7]

As to the torturer, in the "Dark Chamber" essay Coetzee also warns against falling into the all-too-morally easy clichés of the "figure of satanic evil," the "tragically divided man" or the banal "faceless functionary" (1992a, 364) obeying orders. Again, in giving his own fictional access to a horror that surpasses imagination and defies the limits of representation while risking un-ethical sensationalism, the challenge for the author is to establish a narrative economy internal to the text, to "imagine torture", as well as the torturer, "on [his] own terms" (364). In *WB*, this challenge has been met by the Magistrate's authentically hermeneutic approach to the perpetrators: to Colonel Joll, the convinced practitioner and 'ambassador' of the aims and means of torture, and to Mandel, whom first and foremost he wants to understand. In his own suffering of torture, just before his mock-execution at Mandel's direction, what sweating with fear and with no provocative intention he can say to him is: "I am trying very hard to understand your feelings towards me […] so that I can come to understand why you devote yourself to this work" (1980, 118). Before or after any moral judgement, he wants to understand how it is possible for a human being, *any* human being, to go back to family and social life after devastating the body and psyche of another human being (quite soon after Joll's arrival, looking at him, he wonders "how he felt the very first time," "whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men," 12). Perhaps, it is exactly this will to understand that has not been given sufficient priority by the TRC. In Villa-Vicentio's measured words,

> [t]he TRC initiated a process of exploration into a process of trying to explain *why* perpetrators committed the dreadful deeds they did. To suggest that a society (above all victims and survivors) still so close to the reality of the past can (or even want to) *understand* perpetrators is to expect too much. (2000, 303)

Again, our mind cannot help but return to the criticisms levelled at the TRC's insufficiently stressing the state's responsibility for apartheid crimes. At the same time, we should not underestimate one of the main results of the TRC's experience, which, as Villa-Vicentio concludes, is that: "[t]he TRC has reminded us of the *capacity of apparently decent people to sink to such a level where they can commit the most atrocious evil*" (203, emphasis in the text). And perhaps the Magistrate's quest may be said to reach a moment of revelation in the words screamed in Joll's face while restraining himself from savagely beating him: "The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves, not on others" (1980, 146) — words that have been surfacing through the gradual awareness of the Magistrate (not by coincidence, an amateur-archaeologist) of how "the distance from <himself> and the torturers […] is negligible" as long as he keeps playing "the jackal of Empire in sheep's clothing" (72), and of how *any* civilization is built on the creation of its barbarian Others. At this stage of the novel, the division between barbarians and civilized people has been totally overturned and deconstructed.

There is another ethical difficulty in need of an adequate aesthetic response, which Coetzee considers in his 1986 essay. It is perhaps the most complex to deal with and one that death-camp literature has made us tragically familiar with: how to avoid a "questionable dark lyricism" (365) in approaching the torture chamber and, by extension, the obscene world of torture and violence. It appears to me that Coetzee tends to concede this possibility of "dark lyricism" to autobiographical texts (I am thinking of his quotations from Breyten Breytenbach's prison memoirs *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, in particular). In other words, only when the narrator is the subject who has gone through the experience of pain. This is the ethical issue also acknowledged by Antjie Krog, who shares with Coetzee a position of historical belonging to the Afrikaans 'tribe.' In *Country of My Skull*, her reportage-memoir of the TRC hearings — whose selective citation of testimony has provoked so many controversies —, to an academic's evoking both Adorno's and Celan's well-known proscription of lyricism after Auschwitz, she says: "let the domain rather belong to those who literally paid blood for every faltering word they utter before the Truth Commission. […] [T]he things told here surpass the wildest imaginings of any writer" (2000, 312).

[7] On the biopolitical concept of "bare life" see Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.*

More broadly, however, this entails the thorny issue of the devastating bearing of torture/violence on language, and, by extension, on narration. In the novel it congeals on the silence of the tortured survivor and on the Magistrate's baffled and frustrating truth-seeking about the story she does not tell. In point of fact, a notable choice Coetzee makes is that of sparing further 'blood,' as it were, to the barbarian girl who has survived Joll's torture: namely, that of respecting her refusal or impossibility, or both, to tell her own story. The reader is made to understand that while the Magistrate does not attempt to learn the girl's language, the barbarian — the 'babbling one,' the one who is supposed to be the ignorant outlaw with respect to the language of the Empire/Western civilization — knows his language, albeit only as a survival strategy. This is apparent not only from the scanty exchanges between the two of them, but, above all, from her chatting with the female servants quartered in the Magistrate's kitchen.

As previously underlined, in *WB* the Magistrate, and, consequently, the reader, are not allowed to enter the torture room while the prisoners are being tortured; they can only hear their cries and howls and 'see' the marks left by torture on their bodies, when not on their corpses (as in the old prisoner's case). Later on in the novel, the Magistrate becomes 'entitled' to describe what is being done to him when he figures as the subject of his own body in pain. The implication, or at least one of the implications, is that the other's pain/suffering can be neither shared nor told faithfully: pain is terribly exclusive.

Here the issue of the unshareability and problematic utterability of extreme pain[8] and, more broadly, the issue of post-traumatic shame and silence, dramatized in the novel through the girl's blank reticence, are worth viewing, contrastively, in light of the TRC's project, which proceeded precisely from the assumption that the victims' telling of their stories was possible and healing, and that it could — it had to — be shared collectively, as a premise for nation-building in reconciliation. A cogent point of view on this uncanny combination of un-utterability and performance comes from Catherine Cole's study of testimony and performance in the TRC ("while no one seemed able to agree on exactly what *genre* of performance the TRC was — ritual, theatre, drama, bioscope, or circus — most seemed to agree that it was a performance," 2010, 27). Imperative for understanding the TRC's "core paradox," namely that "it was devised to express events and experiences that […] are unspeakable" (17), is, to Cole, to approach and interpret non-verbal but essential elements like gestures, weeping, cries, silences, that are part of the hearings' textures.

Referring to Elaine Scarry's classic study of the *quaestio* as an integral part of torture with the common aim of "deconstruct[ing] the prisoner's voice" (1985, 20), Eckstein has opportunely added that the verbs "'dismantle' or 'destroy' would be more appropriate, for the torturer analyzes the prisoner's voice only in so far as that 'analysis' renders that voice powerless, even silent" (1989, 183). Joll's spine-chilling vaunted procedure comes to mind:

> I am speaking of a situation in which I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure to find it. First I get lies, you see — this is what happens — first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth. (1980, 5)

Eckstein has acutely observed that "the political responsibility and spiritual seriousness of the novel lies in its ability to deconstruct the binary opposition of body and voice, even body and soul, demonstrating […] their inseparability" (1989, 185). Physical devastation entails mental/spiritual devastation; the humiliation inflicted by the de-humanizing sovereignty of the torturer is the deepest of the violations and it will haunt the survivor's soul throughout his/her life. As Donatella Di Cesare (2016, 147 ff., my translation) emphasizes, passing through torture is surviving one's own death and the victim of torture needs elaborate "the grief for [his/her] own death", a death coinciding with "the loss and the end of one's world." The extreme, abysmal nature of his/her experience is such that the torture survivor "is not only different, he/she is other than himself/herself." A sense of loss and estrangement prevails and 'returning' to his/her previous world is impossible. In this irreparable plight the silence violently extorted from the survivor through torture may also become his/her means of resistance and subsequent defense against post-traumatic immense vulnerability. If it remains true that only by re-entering language can the victim regain some freedom (142) and that only by recuperating his/her links with a shared world, together with a sense of belonging, may his/her trauma

[8] As phenomenologically approached by the by-now classic study of Elaine Scarry 1985.

possibly be cured (Duterte 2007, 73), it takes time, and the length of this time is subjective. Above all, it is not to be taken for granted as it may never occur.

On the TRC's "rhetoric of healing," which "makes itself available precisely through narrative 'disclosure' and 'acknowledgement,' in the logic of post-Freudian therapeutics" (Young 2004, 151), much has been written, especially as far as the inter-relationship between personal and national healing is concerned. One strong argument that has emerged is that even if through testimony storytellers enter the public domain of history and even if storytelling can bestow on them the subject's agency, not only is this agency depending on discursive conditions and mediations[9] but above all revealing, in itself, may not be healing. In Grahame Hayes's words, "what people have to reveal might not be healable, or at least not healable by means of the one-off revelation before the TRC" (1998, 42).

Then, telling may not necessarily coincide with empowerment (not to be meant exclusively with access to material compensation). Approaching the "exceptional discourse event" that was the TRC along the lines of the relationship between discursive and political inequality, J. Blommaert, M. Bock and K. McCormick have underscored how being offered a space to tell one's story is not necessarily conducive to having access to equality and can even reaffirm past inequalities (66). From this point of view, critics like Fiona Ross and Mark Sanders,[10] among others, have dutifully commented on the gendered hierarchy of suffering that more and more clearly resulted from the Commission's guiding search for political crimes to the detriment of apartheid violence on a daily basis, especially on women, to the point that it was then necessary for it to hold "Special Hearings on Women." And Annalisa Oboe's concluding consideration resulting from her analysis of them is that these tales "go beyond expectations of coherence and unity of either narrative or historical analysis, and […] require that we keep watch over absent meaning" (70).[11]

It must be acknowledged that the TRC was all too aware of the immense psychological and psychic efforts required from the victims' telling of their stories ("various post-traumatic stress disorder clinics were set up to support witnesses during the hearings and afterwards," Young 2004, 152), as well as of the many wounds "'left gaping' as a result of the hearings." The point being made here is definitely not meant to diminish the relief and healing that the TRC's process has facilitated or made possible. However, the narrative choices made by Coetzee in *WB* provide a problematizing view of this issue, one that functions as a cautionary warning against the risk of too glibly staging the scene for the victim's narration and healing process. In the novel, the Magistrate's efforts at having the barbarian girl tell her story are frustrated and resisted by her silent, marked and maimed body. Significantly, a similar answer to the problem of representing coloured guerrilla Dulcie's experience of torture at the hands of her ANC comrades will be given by Zoë Wicomb in her post-apartheid novel *David's Story* (2000). The challenge Wicomb puts to her own verbal art is that of suggesting while obfuscating, hinting at while keeping at a distance that experience. As Kaelie Giffel keenly observes,

> the 'you' [appearing in her text] requires the reader to make the connections and the assumptions because *the text cannot ethically spell them out*. It becomes our job to understand and seek out the vocabulary marked on Dulcie's body. […] Aware of her responsibility to Dulcie, the narrator questions the narrative impulse and wonders about how to preserve Dulcie from more suffering. (2018, 65, my emphasis)

In point of fact, the Magistrate's truth-seeking, as he will realize too late, is forfeited from the start primarily by the fact that he has never tried to learn *her* language. In trying to read the text written on her body by the

[9] By the limiting effect of the committee's interruptions or interventions, for instance, or, as in the case of the Infocomm, by the fact that there might not be space for narratives in addition to the ones pre-set for the hearings.

[10] Fiona Ross, *Bearing Witness: Women and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa* (2003); Mark Sanders, "Hearing Women," in *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission* (2007).

[11] Annalisa Oboe's analysis is based on the written versions of the testimonies of the South African women who stood before the Human Rights Violation Committee during the TRC's special hearings held in Johannesburg on 28 and 29 July 1997.

perpetrator he has kept to the script of the Empire, although only showing its 'lying' face ("I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, [Joll] the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of the imperial rule" (1980, 135).

Joll's truth-seeking through torture has employed the hermeneutics of the inquisitor for whom "reading the body must needs amount to destroying it in order to substitute for an empty signifier the plenitude of inquisitorial signifiedness" (Folena 1989, 228). For Colonel Joll, truth coincides with the prisoner's *a-priori* guilt. As the adept of this perversely reassuring 'metaphysics of presence,' Joll literally grafts onto the prisoners' bodies the living proof of their guilt, "the marks of torture, in the tautological rhetoric of the inquisitor, com[ing] to constitute physical proof of guilt" (Jolly 1996, 128). He carves the answers to his *quaestio*, he looks for what he already knows he will find. For anyone familiar with Coetzee's self-reflexive art, it is not difficult to see in Joll's "set procedures" an oblique and ironic allusion to a literary criticism whose investigations are overdetermined and hypostatized by elevating the critic's method and/or ideology over the individual features of the text. The former are superimposed like a grid, silencing any indeterminacy or resistance the latter might present.

Only when the Magistrate chooses to *act*, first by returning the girl, as a subject, to her people, outside the imperial perimeter of power, then by violently speaking out against the public torture of new 'barbarian' prisoners, does he disengage himself from his shameful complicity with Joll and Mandel, and only then can atonement begin. His choice signifies that he will be tortured in turn, and this will teach him the other's pain on his own skin: it will teach him the "barbarian language", as someone in the crowd of idle watchers describes his bellowing and howling while he is dangling from the tree of his mock-execution in a woman's calico-smock ("He is calling his barbarian friends," "That is the barbarian language you hear" 1980, 121). Yet, once again, his truth-seeking will not be enlightened by the experience of pain since pain, as he lucidly and unchristianly[12] admits, is not ennobling (115): "In my suffering there is nothing ennobling," he acknowledges, evoking the Christological 'axiom' only to deny it. Besides killing language, it does not point anywhere beyond itself ("pain is not 'of' or 'for' anything — it is itself alone," Scarry 1985, 162). That is the only certainty he arrives at: "Pain is truth: all else is subject to doubt" (5).

The Magistrate's existential passing from shameful complicity to moral outrage and morally responsible action against inhumanity is accompanied throughout by a continuous questioning and self-questioning (whereas Joll, embodying power, speaks only through impersonal statements and commands). His truth-seeking — mirrored in his archaeological investigation — is exquisitely hermeneutic for it accepts indeterminacy, paradox and ambiguity: it works with them, rather than shoveling them under the carpet in order to reach a comfortable closure.[13] His 'existential' hermeneutics gradually becomes not only different from but antagonistic to Joll's inquisitorial hermeneutics.

The Magistrate is also all too aware that he has risked becoming complicit with the white liberals' fetishism of the victim, which in his case is not even free of ambiguously erotic innuendoes, although, as already observed by Eckstein , "he can neither penetrate [the barbarian girl] forcefully and willfully nor merge with her sympathetically" (1989, 188). In the absence of reciprocity, the nature of his desire is also opaque and baffling to him. However, the fact that he cannot bring himself to penetrate her body is symbolically crucial, I believe, and it prepares us for his political and moral decision to challenge the Empire's rules and escort her beyond its boundaries. It is no coincidence that "until they left the fort for the mountain, her voice remained as absent in the presence of the magistrate as it was in the presence of Joll's searing fork. But in the presence of the nomad leader she can *interpret* the signs, translating for the magistrate" (191, my emphasis). Not only are we given intimations of the fact that she may be re-entering subjecthood and language, but she also behaves as "the media entre" — to use Magda's words (Coetzee 1977, 133) — the

[12] Elizabeth Costello's repelled reactions and impatience when standing before Joseph's carved crucifixes spring to Coetzee's reader's mind: "Why a Christ dying in contortions rather than a living Christ? A man in his prime, in his early thirties: what do you have against showing him alive, in all his living beauty?" she asks her sister Blanche, or Sister Bridget of the Sisters of Mary (2003, 138).

[13] Concerning this specific aspect of hermeneutics as adopted in the literary textual approach, see Jean Starobinski 2003.

interpreter between her people and the Magistrate. In the same way, once outside the boundaries of the Empire, as a subject she invites him to make love to her.

Whether she has acted out of pity, desire, affection or thankfulness remains unclear to both the Magistrate and the reader: up to the very end Coetzee is faithful to his "wariness of representing the other as intelligible" (Jolly 1996, 153). In any case, the novel does not appear to legitimate the use of the word 'forgiveness.' I contend that the Magistrate is not meant to indulge in, or even think of, the possibility of being forgiven. He does not appear to see the Empire and its subjects, including its lost subjects, as having any right to forgiveness and he is prepared to live with his shame for being complicit. The concept of forgiveness does not surface because this man of the law appears to deem certain crimes as simply inhuman, imprescriptible and unforgivable.

Interestingly, the theme of forgiveness lends itself to establishing a philosophical comparison between Coetzee's novel and the TRC's assumptions, a comparison that might place the Magistrate on Vladimir Jankélévitch's side in Jacques Derrida's *To Forgive: The Unforgivable and the Imprescriptible*. This conference talk, delivered — among few other universities — at the Universities of Western Cape and Cape Town in 1997, was written in dialectic interaction with Jankélévitch's concept of the inexpiable and the unforgivable as applied to Holocaust crimes. Jankélévitch considered these as racist crimes against the human essence and therefore as crimes that cannot be 'measured' — he even goes so far as to talk about "the immorality of forgiving" something that, once forgiven, is bound to be forgotten (1996). This issue would of course require a much larger space of its own, and I do not intend to enter the ground of Derrida's argumentation here. However, some of the French philosopher's suggestions — for example regarding the "sovereignty" implied in the act of forgiving or conceding forgiveness (2001, 58) — lend themselves to being considered in connection with the novel and with the TRC's moral/religious paradigm. It is definitely worth noting that in Derrida's talk the TRC's assumptions concerning the possibility, or better, the desirability of forgiveness for crimes against humanity are given as an example of the non-coincidence between the imprescriptible and the unforgivable.

Derrida and Jankélévitch agree that nobody should be legitimated to forgive the offence or crime committed against another, i.e. to forgive in the other's name, especially when the latter has died. "The comedy of forgiveness" (2001, 50) is the phrase Derrida uses in relation to heads of states legislating on national guilt and forgiveness, which is the epitome of the presumption to forgive on behalf of others. Another important argument in Jankélévitch's defense of the unforgivable is that forgiveness should be conceded only if requested, and out of sincere repentance, which inevitably evokes for us the TRC's 'rule' of procedure according to which the perpetrators' repentance was not 'necessary' when granting them amnesty in return for a full narration of their crimes. On the other hand, Derrida's "hyperbolic ethics" "would command precisely […] that forgiveness be granted where it is neither asked for, nor deserved, not even for the most radical evil" (2001, 29) — marking a clear distance from Hannah Arendt's position on this subject. Whatever one may think of Derrida's hyperbolic ethics of forgiveness, it is definitely worth reflecting at length on a comparison between the South African victims' forgiveness as solicited by Desmond Tutu and his commission, and Derrida's final invitation to take into consideration an idea (ideal?) of "absolutely unconditional," "pure" forgiveness. Though not to be conflated with Christian absolution (as it has been in the TRC's religious frame), the latter is qualified by being uncontaminated by any form of interest or expectation.

Returning to Coetzee's barbarian girl and to her spontaneous search for the Magistrate's sexual embrace under the tent in neutral territory, one interesting interpretive possibility might be provided by the legal scholar and human-rights expert Martha Minow, who has linked the victims' forgiveness with their reclaiming an agency "that redresses their loss of power in their victimization" (1998, 15), thus allowing them to reconfigure the relationship and to have/write the last word on it. From this point of view, fascinatingly, the last word of Coetzee's barbarian girl may be said to be spoken by her desiring body, which requires no words.

Nevertheless, I insist on interpreting the text as affording the view that while the Magistrate does not even think of forgiveness as a possibility for himself, reconciliation with the barbarian girl is what he has succeeded in creating: reconciliation meant as the establishment of reciprocal trust.

In conclusion, considering the ambitious historical/documental narrative archive and performative truth of the TRC alongside an ethically responsible novel like *WB* one is led to wonder: is the latter less respectful of

existential truth? Is the latter less seriously engaged in understanding so as not to repeat, so as to act rather than re-act? The Magistrate's hermeneutical quest may have ended in frustration and failure, but that is a price he has preferred to pay for being respectful of the Other's pain, the Other's truth. For trying to play an other game.

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