

REVIEW OF J. M. COETZEE'S "WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS"

by John Passmore.

One cannot help but admire J.M. Coetzee for his ability to circumvent many of the problems which afflict a large number of South African writers.

These problems stem from the fact that the process of political polarization in South Africa has reached such a point as to lay the heaviest possible stress on a writer's ideological commitment. Despite the fact that the terms "radical", "liberal" and "conservative" contain within themselves a variety of meanings, they have come to assume an almost claustrophobic power when it comes to analysing works of literature in this country. South African novels, plays and poems undergo a process of the most intense academic scrutinization in terms of ideology and reaction. The reason for this lies in the fact that the areas of conflict in South African society are relatively clearly defined. The need of the politicized South African to take a firmly coherent ideological stance leads to (to coin a crude phrase) 'stances adopted in the name of ideological specifics'.

A brief examination of political and semi-political American literature and films will (I hope) clarify my point. A whole body of 'anti-establishment' American literature sprang to life in the 1950's. Spearheaded by 'beat' luminaries such as Kerouac, Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti this movement (as well as its British counterpart – Osborne and Colin Wilson – the Angry Young Men) aimed at liberating itself from the shackles of WASP – fuelled America / suburbia / materialism and the greyly authoritarian bent of the Eisenhower years. The influx of 'beat' poems, novels and plays into the mainstream of American literature had a healthy and invigorating effect. The inadequacies of the American dream were (at times) cruelly and cleverly exposed. The aim, very often, was true.

Where beat literature fell down though, was in its inability to pinpoint the way out of the American morass. The movement soon got bogged down in a hazy and very generalized vision of an 'alternative' American dream. By 1969 the whole movement was lost, amidst the dreary meanderings of the dourly 'with-it' Woodstock generation. In modern South Africa such generalized literary stabs at an alternative society would, more than likely, be dismissed as meaningless fantasy which has its roots in the escapist tendencies of affluent white liberals or in the disco dreams of a rising black middle class currently engaged in flirting with the 'positivism' of the Black Consciousness movement. Polarization does breed a hardening of attitudes and an insistence on ideologically correct expositions and evocations of the South African 'reality'. Liberal and radical South African writers, readers and critics often feel themselves compelled to take a stand for their particular ideological viewpoints to an extent which the American literati of the beat era didn't.

The American trilogy of Vietnam movies ("Coming Home", "The Deer Hunter" and "Apocalypse Now") provide striking examples of problems thrown up by ideological assessments.

In America "Coming Home" and "The Deer Hunter" were by and large well received. In South Africa initial reaction to both these movies divided (predictably enough) along the lines of liberal and radical ideological opinion.

A number of liberals felt that "Coming Home" and "The Deer Hunter" were brilliant expositions of the futility and ultimate tragedy of war. The relatively simple accounts of the effects of the Vietnam war on ordinary American citizens who had the misfortune to become entangled in a military nightmare, were brilliant in that they reinforced the liberal detestation of violence and crass inhumanity.

Radical opinion held that the two films were subtle and effective attempts at assuaging American guilt. They felt that the incorporation of the Woodstock "peace and love" theme did away with the need to take American involvement in Vietnam to its logical conclusion, viz., the attempted rape of a country in order to gain political and economic hegemony over it. The humanization of Americans in "Coming Home" and "The Deer Hunter" has the effect of leading the viewer to believe that Americans were victims of the war rather than perpetrators of latter-day genocide. As for "Apocalypse Now". Well, it certainly probed deeper than either of the other two films. The message of the film still left the onlooker confused as to the film's ultimate point. We all know that war can make monsters of us and can lead to a situation whereby human-beings can believe themselves to be gods.

Coetzee's novel arrives at a time when the South African liberal/radical debate is sharpening. As I have traced something of the nature of the debate, let me turn to the novel itself. An old magistrate is caught up in a conflict which threatens to lead to the most disruptive and tragic polarization imaginable. For years he has allowed himself to float on the surface of nineteenth century South African life . . .

"We do not have facilities for prisoners," I explain. There is not much crime here and the penalty is usually a fine or compulsory labour . . .".

The touches of humanity he evinces at the outset of the novel (the above extract serves as a good example) succeed in lulling him into a sense of complacency as regards his own specific position in the frontier scheme of things. The comfortable and relatively humane world he has succeeded in creating around him insulates him from the great reality of his day, viz. that the Empire has made devastating and unwarranted inroads into the communal and individual life of the 'barbarians'. The arrival of Colonel Joll, special designate of the Third Bureau, destroys his complacent world and leads him along the thorny paths of self-analysis and personal commitment. The terrible consequences of an ideology of power, determined to arrive at its own perception of the world at the expense of all other perceptions, is brought home to the magistrate during the course of Joll's interrogations –

“ . . . Imagine : to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more! And what a responsibility for the interrogator How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth?”.

From that point Coetzee takes the reader to the moment when burgeoning doubt unfolds into outright (and horrifying) revelation,

“But alas, I did not ride away : for a while I stopped my ears to the noises coming from the hut”.

The magistrate’s long and semi-erotic relationship with a crippled black girl (the victim of Joll’s quest for the truth) highlights another aspect of Coetzee’s art viz. when one realizes that one’s perception of reality is distorted how does one attempt to deal with the knowledge that other realities exist ‘out there’?

The perverse relationship the old magistrate has with the young girl is a relationship based on the desire to come to grips with the hitherto unknown. Small wonder that the affair between the two is something of a “hit and miss affair” in which desire and feelings and longings cannot materialise into concrete form or even attain a reasonable level of articulation.

What the magistrate cannot grasp at the outset of his rebellion is the fact that his attempt at assimilating a new reality — a new perspective — can only occur at the level of dissolution. He cannot grasp the consequences of listening to the noises emanating from the granary without putting his own process of socialisation on trial. His refusal to comply with the practices the empire deems necessary to protect its interests leads him (subtly at first) to the brink of degradation. He yearns for the peace and order of the old without realising that “peace and order” in nineteenth century South Africa can only exist within the framework of overall racial and economic harmony.

His long and nightmarish journey undertaken in the hope of restoring the girl to her people (and thereby restoring some form of humane order) is interpreted by his masters as constituting an act of betrayal. The tortures and humiliations he is subjected to by the agents of the Third Bureau are necessary from the empire’s point of view because any opposition to the empire must be made to seem ridiculous.

In the final part of the book, Coetzee places his finger accurately on the great tragedy of South Africa. Greed and

fear translate themselves into a war mentality. Joll’s expeditionary force — his army of conquest — is badly beaten. That the nomads of the interior should respond in such a fashion to a brutal act of violence is hardly surprising. The reaction of the frontier whites — blind panic — reveals just how the oppressor views a socio-military setback. The townspeople flee (convinced that barbarian hordes are about to attack) and, irony of ironies, the magistrate is, once again, effectively in charge. The “barbarians” attempt at self-preservation is translated by the frontier whites as a horrendous attack. A lack of perspective leads to fear and even more misery.

At the beginning of this review, I said that Coetzee has managed to circumvent many of the usual problems facing a large number of South African writers. His ability effortlessly to present many different perspectives is nothing short of brilliant and makes “Waiting for the Barbarians” the fine book it is.

What Coetzee’s ultimate aim is, however, one cannot say.

Two extracts from the book highlight this problem. In the first extract the old magistrate says: “Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons, but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe.”

This statement seems to preclude all forms of conflict. Even the nomads have indulged in wars to gain their briefly enjoyed independence and natural harmony. Conflict is inescapable, and socio-economic conflict is as old as mankind itself.

The magistrate’s final comment is: “I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago, but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere.”

Is a sense of defeatism implied here, or does Coetzee imply that the struggle for justice is in itself sufficient hope for the future?

One is not quite certain and maybe Coetzee intends it that way. What is certain is the fact that this remarkable book will be the subject of considerable debate amongst liberal and radical readers. Coetzee’s ability to portray South Africa through the different perspectives of its inhabitants lends to his work a depth no other white South African writer has. □