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The Magistrate as the Passive Medium in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

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ABSTRACT

Ghosts are figuratively roaming in J. M. Coetzee's well-known postcolonial novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which is set in an undefined time full of strife and unrest. In the novel, being mysterious and threatening to the Empire, the barbarians represent the spectral others. This paper is concerned with the question of how to approach the figurative ghosts of the barbarians and deal with their haunting when they usually appear in a horrified, irrational or obscure way. I will suggest that the concept of a medium, which refers to a person who acts as go-between between the living and the spiritual world, can be used more figuratively as an attitude that presupposes a mode of negotiation through which a person approaches the spectral other and establishes a mutual understanding with it. In addition, I will argue that the protagonist, the Magistrate, plays the role of "passive medium," which refers to a person who originally belongs to the class of the authorities, or is restricted to the dominant cognitive frame, but is haunted by the foreignness of the repressed other and forced to establish identification with this ghostly other. By examining how the Magistrate experiences his emotional and social ambivalence in his encounter with his inner otherness as well the external otherness, I investigate how the concept of passive medium functions productively to challenge the hierarchy between the Empire and the barbarians, self and other, and to re-imagine a dialogic world to come.

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柯慈《等待野蠻人》中之靈媒角色與他者翻譯

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摘要

在文學和文化研究領域中，幽靈的概念已被廣泛引申為他者（如土著、移民、罪犯、少數族裔、邊緣人），被壓迫的、不可見的、被消音的族群以及歷史，近年來受到德希達《馬克思的幽靈》一書的啟發，陸續有研究強調霸權永遠無法驅逐被壓抑的幽靈，因此這些幽靈會不斷纏繞當下，迫使主體反思並追求正義的可能。但是，纏繞主體的幽靈往往處於邊緣，無法被看見以及被理解，因此，本文將提出「靈媒」此一概念，證明它不僅作為連結自我與他者，當權者與被壓迫者、文明與蠻荒、主流與非主流之間的中介者，也可以被視為企圖建立多元社會的原則與態度，提供不同情境下對立與鬥爭的解決之道。

筆者將以南非作家柯慈著名的後殖民作品《等待野蠻人》為例，分析書中主角，即管理帝國邊界的地方官，如何在面臨帝國對土著的剝削和酷刑中，以及與野蠻人的交涉中，重新檢視自我身分和帝國二元論述的正當性，進而轉換立場，扮演起靈媒的角色；由於地方官在思想和語言上還是受制於帝國的固有思維，因此無法真正了解野蠻人的歷史、語言與想法，但透過深入蠻荒、遭逢酷刑以及夢境等脫離主體意識的過程（trance）以及消極反抗（negation）和誤讀（mistranslation）等策略，主角被動地保留及傳達了野蠻人的聲音，並赤裸地呈現帝國論述本身的幽靈性，筆者將稱他為「被動的靈媒」（the passive medium），並深入探討此一特定概念如何提供讀者另一種自我與他者對話的模型與希望。

關鍵詞：鬼魂、靈媒、通靈、柯慈、後殖民

The Magistrate as the Passive Medium in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

... every period has its ghosts, its own experience, its own medium, and its proper hauntological media. (Derrida 193)

Many experts in the fields of literary and cultural studies have already discussed how the concept of a ghost is used as a designation for the invisible, unspeakable, or fearful other as well as for the denied and unknown history of traumatized subjects or oppressed groups. Recently, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the role of specters, a synonym for ghosts, in representing the return of the repressed that haunts the living and urgently calls for justice in Derrida's *Spectre of Marx*. Borrowing Derrida's notion of a specter as "a question of repetition" that never disappears but is always revenant and always reappears, many scholars have assumed that ghosts are unassimilable (Derrida 11). They are "real and terrible," always haunting the subjects through their effects and reminding us "of the dead ... and of our own dead, to assert a terrible continuity between the omnipresent past and the already vanishing present" (Punter 64). They can never be exorcised completely or be fully integrated into the present.

A problem arises when one reflects on the question of how to approach a ghost when it usually appears in a horrifying, irrational, or obscure way. Is there a kind of bridge between the worlds of binary domains? How can people learn to understand the voice of the ghost and the meaning behind its haunting when it refuses to be incorporated into men's consciousness? Since analyses of the dialogue between an unassimilable ghost and the living are still under-theorized, I will explore in this essay how the dialogue comes out. I will suggest that the concept of a medium, which refers to a person who acts as go-between between the living and the spiritual world, serves as a narrative device to interpret the messages of ghosts and works to bring the ghostly aspect of our own culture to light. Mediums usually play an important role in religious and cultural beliefs since they are able to receive

messages from the spirits of the dead and thus bridge the two worlds. Here I will use the term more figuratively as an attitude that presupposes a mode of negotiation through which a person approaches the spectral other/otherness and establishes a mutual understanding with it. Since every ghost or instance of haunting has its own specificity, mediums also come in many varieties. The aim of this essay is to examine a specific kind of medium, one which I call a passive medium in my analysis of J. M. Coetzee's well-known postcolonial novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

Waiting for the Barbarians is set in an undefined time of strife between the Empire and the barbarians. Though both the setting and characterization are highly allegorical, the novel is taken to represent a very distant pre-history to apartheid in South Africa. By dealing with the colonial period in South Africa, where the natives and the colonizers encounter and struggle with each other, the novel depicts a kind of transitional phase in which figurative ghosts linger. In the novel, the barbarians and their history have spectral qualities as perceived by the Empire. They are regarded as mysterious and threatening others that need to be suppressed.

Though the Empire keeps repressing the barbarians in order to sustain a false sense of its authority, the protagonist, the Magistrate, by experiencing his emotional and social ambivalence in his own encounters with his inner otherness as well the external otherness, plays the role of medium and challenges the hierarchy which exists between the Empire and the barbarians. At the beginning of the novel, the Magistrate appears at the borders in the role of a careless official of the Empire. He has no intention of learning about the barbarians who live and do business there. However, the coming of Colonel Joll forces the Magistrate to face a crisis caused by the nation's new policy toward the barbarians. After witnessing Joll's torturing of the barbarians, the Magistrate is weighed down by a sense of guilt, shame, and sympathy. These complex emotions impel him to bring a barbarian girl back to his place and undertake different acts of mercy, such as feeding her, healing her, and washing her. These emotions also compel him to search for the causes of the girl's broken body and a way to return her to her people. Based on his various efforts to

establish a connection with the barbarians, I will argue that the Magistrate acts as a medium in the novel.

Since the Magistrate lacks access to the culture and language of the barbarians and has been restricted to the dominant linguistic or cognitive frame, he can never gain access to the barbarians and their ways of life in his normal, daily life, and can only passively serve as a bridge between the self and the other. Thus, I will call him a “passive medium.” This term refers to one who originally belonged to the dominant class, but is haunted by and comes to identify with the ghostly other through a condition of trance. In addition, by beginning to act in ways which negate aspects of the dominant narratives, the passive medium re-locates his or her self in relation to the other, and provokes readers into re-imagining an open-ended and dialogic vision of culture and identity. I will examine more clearly how the Magistrate becomes a passive medium, and the ways he plays that role in the novel. I will also investigate how the concept of a passive medium functions figuratively to initiate “the process of change” that will symbolically or literally “bring into being a dialogic society” (Bell 95).

The Magistrate’s encounter with the tortured bodies of the barbarians serves as the catalyst causing him to transform into a passive medium. Though he first tries to deny what is happening in the torture chamber by stopping his ears. However, the screaming of the tortured barbarians intrudes upon his consciousness and provokes a sense of guilt in him. After witnessing Colonel Joll implanting the marks of torture upon the barbarians to assure their identity as enemies, his sense of guilt is strengthened and transformed into the undefined desire for the barbarian girl. He especially feels obsessed by her “twisted feet” and “half-blinded eyes” and is compelled to uncover what happened to her in the chamber (Coetzee, *Waiting* 70). Her broken body is “a rune for him, like the enigmatic scripts he discovers in the desert” (Masse 169). He says, “It has been growing more and more clear to me that until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 33).

As the Magistrate is epistemologically and ethically constricted within an

imperial cognitive frame, his efforts to uncover the secrets of the body fail. During his ritualistic washings of the girl's feet, a ritual that shows his effort to find the answers to the questions about the scars on the girl's body, he invariably drifts into a dream state and falls asleep. He says, "I lose awareness of the girl herself. There is a space of time which is blank to me: perhaps I am not even present" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 30). As time goes on, he realizes that he is unable to solve the mysteries of the marks on the body of the girl, and therefore cannot integrate them into his discursive understanding of the world: "The body of the other one, closed, ponderous, sleeping in my bed in a faraway room, seems beyond comprehension" (45). By acknowledging his impotence as well as the absence of his own subjectivity, the Magistrate experiences a "spatial-temporal dislocation" in his self (Craps 64). He feels that "time has broken, something has fallen in upon me from the sky, at random, from nowhere" (Coetzee, *Waiting* 47). This moment of contradiction causes the ground to shift under his feet and impels him to re-position himself in relation to both the barbarians and the Empire.

In this case, I will suggest that a concept of trance serves figuratively as an important phase when the Magistrate mediates the alterities of the barbarians. When he fails to integrate the body of the barbarian girl into his consciousness, he enters a condition that can be called a trance. *Oxford Dictionaries Online* defines *trance* as "a half-conscious state characterized by an absence of response to external stimuli, typically as induced by hypnosis or entered by a medium." Regarded as an important strategy which mediums employ to communicate with the spirits from the other world, a trance also refers to the condition of letting the spectral other take over one's body as well as entering a foreign space outside the realm of rational knowledge. Here I will use a trance more figuratively as a means for the passive medium to identify with the spectral other or otherness, as a condition of simultaneously entering a foreign domain and becoming the other, perhaps even unwillingly.

In some respects, the trance state is similar to Kristeva's idea of "abjection," which refers to the experience of being thrown out of oneself, a "descent into the foundation of the symbolic construct," a re-experiencing of the moment of our separation, in order to arrive at a place where self and other are "inseparable" (Kristeva 18). Samuel Durrant elaborates upon the concept further and claims: "Abjection is the reduction of the self to the body in which the body becomes radically defamiliarized.... The abject body is auto-referential: no longer operating as a sign of the human, it accrues its own weight or pathos and becomes an image of its own pain" (Durrant 36). Likewise, trance can also be assumed as the process of "becoming-animal," which represents the degradation from an individual's status to that of a minoritarian other. Deleuze and Guattari state that "becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, peopling, in short, a multiplicity." They also claim that "we do not become animal without a fascination for the pack, for multiplicity" (Deleuze and Guattari 264). With this in mind, I will suggest that a medium has usually become fascinated by the "pack" of the other or otherness before leaving his or her own "pack." By identifying with or metaphorically becoming this other, a medium can become receptive to its voice as well as to his/her otherness within the self. Therefore, the threshold is irrevocably crossed. However, this state may not be active because the medium "can be thrown into a becoming by anything at all, by the most unexpected, most insignificant of things" and may be unable to ever return to the community of origination (264). The medium is usually transformed from a majoritarian into a complete exile or into the minoritarian forever.

Lacking appropriate and sufficient knowledge of the barbarians, the Magistrate is unable to consciously interpret and assimilate the stories of the barbarians. The fatal consequence is that he is continuously haunted by the enigmas and gaps embodied by the bodies of the barbarians and feels confused by the autonomy of his own identity. This spiritual and moral turbulence leads him to simultaneously undergo different forms of trance, including (1) literally entering the zone of alienation in the journey to return the barbarian girl to her people; (2) experiencing

himself as other in cases of torture and imprisonment; and (3) falling into states of hallucination and dreams. I will elaborate how these three kinds of trance prompt the Magistrate to leave his familiar community and impel him to reduce his status, so that he can identify with the barbarians and serve as a negotiator between self and other.

The first kind of trance in the novel is the Magistrate's entry into foreignness when he delivers the barbarian girl to her people. The confrontation with the unfamiliar environment during his journey provokes in him a sense of alienation from his people and from "the tranquil familiarity of his interpretive community" (Saunders 225). It makes him rethink the Empire's definitions of nation and history and leads him to gain an awareness of their questionable legitimacy. He says:

We think of the country here as ours, part of our Empire -- our outpost, our settlement, our market centre. But these people, these barbarians don't think of it like that at all. We have been here more than a hundred years, we have reclaimed land from the desert and built irrigation works and planted fields and built solid homes and put a wall around our town, but they still think of us as visitors, transients. (Coetzee, *Waiting* 55)

By illustrating how transient the Empire seems to the barbarians, he redefines the hierarchy between the barbarian perspective of cyclical time and the Empire's notion of linear and progressive time. He questions the Empire's concept of "the time of history" and its pursuit of immortality:

Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era. By day it pursues its enemies. It is cunning and ruthless, it sends its bloodhounds everywhere. By night it feeds on images of disaster: the sack of cities, the rape of populations, pyramids of bones, acres of desolation. (Coetzee, *Waiting* 146)

He learns that the essence of history is nothing but violence. The Empire constructs its civilization and history through its oppression of the barbarians. Entering the zone of foreignness awakens within the Magistrate a moral sense of time. It urges him to challenge the credibility of the Empire's definition of history and to revise his conception of the relationship between the past and the present, self and other.

The Magistrate undergoes the second kind of trance as a result of being tortured by his men. Hania Nashef claims that the Magistrate's entering the foreign land "propels him into a process of deterritorialization resulting in a change in his state" (Nashef 25). The journey does change his position in his community. After he returns from the journey, he is arrested, accused of treason, and forced to experience the life of barbarians by enduring imprisonment, torture, and humiliation. During this period, he is not only forced by his people to wear a woman's calico smock and be degraded into a dirty, stinking clown, but is also tortured severely in the public square. Through his own suffering, he gradually comes to identify with the barbarians and gains a critical awareness of the brutal quality of the Empire's categories.

For example, his experience of imprisonment makes him acknowledge the otherness and barbarity within himself. He claims:

Nevertheless, I am not taking easily to the humiliations of imprisonment. Sometimes, ... finding as I pace the room that I am counting one-two-three-four-five-six-one-two-three, ... or brushing my hand mindlessly over my face, I realize how tiny I have allowed them to make my world, how I daily become more like a beast or a simple machine.... Then I respond with movements of vertiginous terror in which I rush around the cell jerking my arms about, pulling my beard, stamping my feet. (Coetzee, *Waiting* 92-93)

He learns that barbarianism is a part of humanity. He is not superior, saner, or more competent in coping with pain than the barbarians.

The experience of torture also forces the Magistrate to confront his otherness and allows him an insight into the nature of humanity. When the rope tightens

around his neck, the pain reduces him to unconsciousness. Durrant argues that this is “a moment of ... ‘negative transcendence,’ a descent that ... brings the self into an abject, bodily relation with itself” (Durrant 48). The torture not only reduces him to basic and feral needs, but also completes his entry into foreignness. He is degraded from a thinking human being into a gibbering and helpless body, “a pile of blood, bone, and meat” that is not different from the tortured bodies of the barbarians (Coetzee, *Waiting* 93).

Living through torture and imprisonment, he gains a critical awareness of the brutal quality of the Empire’s categories. He learns that the Empire’s hysteria regarding the barbarian is a kind of psychological illness. By violently mythologizing and falsifying the distinction between barbarity and civilization, the self and the other, the Empire tries to establish its authority and to enable the manipulation of the other. Thus, he argues that it is the Empire itself that is barbaric instead of the natives and responds to his interrogator: “We are at peace here,” “we have no enemies.... Unless I make a mistake.... Unless we are the enemy” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 85).

He also realizes that nothing is certain but the clamoring body in pain. He says:

They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. (126)

The Magistrate’s insight shows that every true story remains “subject to doubt” before history (Coetzee, *Doubling the Point* 5). The imperial words and narratives are impotent as instruments which could be used in interpreting the world and are at all times completely oblivious to the suffering of the other. The Magistrate can only get closer to the truth of otherness by living through those experiences that cannot be articulated: “perhaps whatever can be articulated is falsely put.... Or perhaps it is the case that only that which has not been articulated has to be lived through” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 70). By acting out the pain that represents “the realm

of the inhuman, a prelinguistic zone, an area outside categories of language,” he grapples with the material and bodily truth of history and presents it to the readers (Craps 65).

The Magistrate falls into the third form of trance by figuratively entering foreignness and communicating with the other in his dreams. Durrant argues that the dreams can be regarded as “a site of witnessing.” It is a place where “our own desire is suspended” and where “other voices make themselves heard in our lives” (Durrant 35). Accordingly, I will suggest that dreams act as a liminal zone where the passive medium encounters the specter of the other. Since the spectral other is inaccessible for somebody who belongs to a majority in his or her waking life, as it lives outside the realm of dominant knowledge, his or her dreams serve to “open up the possibility of an object identification with the other” (36).

In addition, the specter that the passive medium confronts in his or her dreams also represents the otherness of the self. In one of Coetzee’s other novels, *Foe*, the protagonist Foe asks Susan, a woman who had been trapped on a deserted island, about the function of dreaming: “would we be better or worse ... if we were no longer to descend nightly into ourselves and meet ... our darker selves, and other phantoms too” (Coetzee, *Foe* 137-38). Pursuing this thought a bit further, Durrant asserts that descending into our unconscious marks an encounter with “our own encrypted otherness” that enables us to “relate -- ethically -- to the otherness of those we encounter in our daily lives” (Durrant 35). In other words, by falling into an abnormal, dreamy and hypnotic state, a member of the majority group can temporarily withdraw from his or her rationality and gain insight into the traces of the repressed other/otherness within his or her body of constructed knowledge. Being in this state of alternate consciousness simultaneously prompts him or her to mediate between the self and the other and to re-imagine a vision of mutual understanding in his or her relation to every form of otherness.

In the novel, the Magistrate’s dreams function as a space outside of his realm of rational knowledge where he confronts the barbarian other and the otherness of the self. By falling into his dreams, he not only builds a connection with the

barbarian girl, but also evokes memories of the indigestible pains of the body. For instance, “the hooded figure of the girl” which appears repeatedly in his dreams can be regarded as the symbol of the barbarian girl whom he has no access to and is unable to communicate with in his waking life (Coetzee, *Waiting* 57). Standing for a site of torture as well as for the suffering of the barbarians, the body of this figure appears fragmented. The Magistrate narrates: “The feet lie before me in the dust, disembodied, monstrous, two stranded fish, two huge potatoes” (95). Though the Magistrate has no access to the body in his waking life, the body appears to him and prompts him to build a connection with it on a subconscious level. He dreams that he carries the girl, considering her body to be “the only key I have to the labyrinth” (95).

The Magistrate also symbolically receives a transmission and establishes a mutual understanding with the barbarian girl in his dreams. When he drifts into a state of alternate consciousness during the ritual of washing her feet, he dreams that the girl is constructing a fort out of snow. Durrant argues that “the construction of the fort is a mute indication of the place where her history went down, providing the Magistrate with a topographical map of her pain, one that will eventually allow him to navigate his own experience of torture” (Durrant 46). The dream not only provides the Magistrate with a channel for understanding the pains of the barbarians, but also provokes his ethical tendency to identify with them. On the one hand, compared to his earlier ignorance of the cries from the granary, he attunes his hearing “to that infinitely faint level at which the cries of all who suffered here must still beat from wall to wall” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 87). On the other hand, the reception of the voices of the barbarians in his dream urges him to replace the otherness from the barbarians with his self. He allows the torture to take place in his life and experiences his identification with “the unbearable proximity of other lives” that is suppressed within the dominant discourse (Durrant 44).

Through his identification with the barbarians in his dreams and during the time he is being tortured, the Magistrate symbolically establishes a connection with the barbarian girl whom he had seen in his last dream. In this dream, he is

offered a loaf of bread by the girl, who is dressed like a priestess. The girl also symbolizes the barbarian girl, but in this dream, she is building an oven rather than a snow fort. The disembodied feet in the earlier dream are transformed into a “shapeless lump” -- the loaf of the bread -- which Durrant asserts as “the bread of remembrance, eaten in remembrance of another scene of torture and as a promise of salvation” (48). Based on his argument, I will suggest that the bread marks the signs of communication and peace offerings that do not take place in the Magistrate’s waking life. Thus, his dream holds out hope for salvation and for the coming of a new collectivity, the coming of the new community established by the mutual recognition between self and other, as well as by the acknowledgement of difference and foreignness within dominant historical and cultural narratives.

During the three different forms of trance he experiences in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, namely entering into the wilderness, living through indigestible pains, and falling into the realm outside of consciousness, the Magistrate tends to become enmeshed in uncertainties, doubts, and mysteries. As he is ostracized he undergoes a transformation and enters “an apparently permanent exile” away from the confines of the empire (Saunders 226). In other words, by falling into a trance and entering unfamiliar territory, the Magistrate temporarily lives in a trans-historical space/time and arrives at a momentarily ethical understanding of the other and the otherness of the self. It opens him up to the repressed alterities and provokes his inconsistent oscillation between self and other, unity and fragmentation. Through such “an oscillatory process of transposition,” the Magistrate is transformed into a passive medium in the novel (Peeren and Horstkotte 12).

It is when the Magistrate is in these altered states of consciousness that he develops the skills of negation and mistranslation to mediate external and internal otherness, and revise the hierarchy embodying the Empire and the barbarians. For instance, he openly shouts the word “No!” when he witnesses the Joll publicly torturing the barbarian prisoners. The Magistrate’s “No!” here marks a counter narrative to the Empire’s physical and linguistic exploitation of the barbarians that attempts “to coerce the natives into assuming the identity of ‘barbarians’

and ‘enemy’... in order to assert its existence” (Craps 62). And his reading of the barbarian as “miracle of creation” or “Men” later also questions the Empire’s values of its absolute superiority in which he has been steeped (Coetzee, *Waiting* 117). Saunders claims:

... the magistrate’s word creates a hiatus, a disruptive and defamiliarizing lacuna, in the empire’s performative reiteration. It transforms the empire’s statement about itself into an uncertainty, into a question that can be answered affirmatively or negatively, into a proposition inhabited by truth or by error. (Saunders 230)

Though the Magistrate’s words only appeal to the crowd momentarily, they succeed in bringing uncertainties into the discourse of the Empire. His practices of negation and ambiguity unveil the problematic of imperial language and question its binary definitions of civilization and barbarianism, self and other.

Mistranslation, or what Maria Boletsi’s calls “the infelicitous translation,” is another useful strategy which the Magistrate employs to negotiate the binary relationship between the Empire and the barbarians (Boletsi 62). When he is interrogated by Colonel Joll, the Magistrate employs this strategy to invite a radical rethinking of the epistemological framework of the Empire. Assuming that the Magistrate is communicating with the barbarians, Colonel Joll asks him to translate the meaning of the wooden slips that he excavated from the site of an ancient barbarian civilization. In the beginning, the Magistrate stands confused in front of those slips, having no idea what the lines of characters mean. However, he decides to give a mistranslation of the wooden slips:

Now let us see what the next one says. See, there is only a single character. It is the barbarian character *war*, but it has other senses too. It can stand for *vengeance*, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read *justice*. There is no knowing which sense is intended.

This is part of barbarian cunning. (Coetzee, *Waiting* 122)

By juxtaposing the term *justice* with the concepts of *vengeance* and *war*, the Magistrate imbues this “favorite imperial category” with an ambiguous meaning

and makes it appear “foreign” to the Empire (Boletsi 66). Boletsi suggests that his improvised translation of “the similarity” instead of “the difference” of the three terms not only challenges the fixed definitions of the words but also exposes the brutality of the imperial language, which has constructed its own authenticity and the pre-constructed myth of a barbarian threat (67).

Going beyond this, the Magistrate invents numerous versions of the barbarian characters on the slips and turns them into “signifiers of linguistic uncertainty and foreignness” in his translation (Boletsi 64):

“It is the same with the rest of these slips.” I plunge my good hand into the chest and stir. “They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as history of the last years of the Empire -- the old Empire, I mean.” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 122)

His act of mistranslation not only preserves the foreignness and the plurality of “barbarian cunning,” but also reassesses the Empire’s fixed definitions of categories (Boletsi 64). He also relocates the relation between self and other in the process of translation. When he interprets the characters on the slips as “a history of the last years of the Empire -- the old Empire, I mean” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 122), he sarcastically analogizes the ancient barbarian’s empire with the current Empire and in this manner underscores the transience of both. His practice of mistranslation deconstructs the established division between the settler and the native, civilization and barbarity. It directs the readers’ attention towards how the Empire’s linguistic code is as “impaired” as the noises of a barbarian language, full of internal gaps and confusion.

The final strategy through which the Magistrate attempts to re-position his relationship with the barbarians is to abandon the imperial practices of interpretation and narration. In the beginning of the novel, the Magistrate shows great interest in deciphering the ancient history of the barbarians. He frequently lingers among the ruins of the barbarian civilization, sitting there in the dark to

wait “for spirits from the byways of history to speak to him” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 17). He is also writing a memorial consisting of the story of himself and the barbarians. However, through his trance experiences, he comes to realize that he will never be able to interpret the foreign bodies of the barbarians or understand the true meaning of their stories when he is constricted within the imperial cognitive frame. That’s why he is unable to receive a complete transmission from the other and to see any sign and feel any “tremor of ghostly fear” among the ruins (17). He reflects, “I think: ‘There has been something staring at me in the face, and still I do not see it’” (170). Gaining awareness of his incompetence to solve the gaps in the dominant linguistic frame and to access the barbarians, the Magistrate decides to give up his hope to achieve a deeper understanding of history as well as his plan of writing the story. He assumes that what he has written is just like the barbarian slips, and that they contain “a message as devious, as equivocal, as reprehensible” as what he claimed the slips contained (169). In order to preserve the foreignness of the other and to avoid the distortion of its meaning, he ultimately chooses to resist every form of interpretation or narration.

Though the Magistrate feels confused and stupid, “like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (Coetzee, *Waiting* 170), after struggling along his errant path, his nonverbal strategy enables him to get closer to the material truth of pain and to establish a connection with the barbarians. Rather than translating the barbarian other and his internal otherness into the imperial language, he preserves the absence of the truth in its original foreignness. By conducting the practices of negation and mistranslation, he directs our attention to a continual existence of the noise of the barbarians. Craps reads it positively as “the promise of an ethical future”:

Having left behind the familiarity of his interpretive community, having departed from the identity mapped out for him by the Empire, the Magistrate ventures forward into uncharted territory, an ethical space which opens up the possibility of a non-appropriative encounter with the other. (Craps 65)

The Magistrate's rapprochement with the other and his departure from his previous interpretative community do not guarantee him a better life. However, they do enable him to redefine the boundary between self and other and to imagine a not-yet-realized ethical space where the self and the other might achieve some sort of mutual understanding. Therefore, I will assume that his strategy of negation is pregnant with positivity. It functions to disrupt the hegemony of imperial narratives and leads to a symbolic and momentary glimpse of hope.

The novel ends with a scene in which the Magistrate comes across some children who are building a snowman in the square. The strong presence of children here marks a "psychological closure" for the Magistrate in its "exorcism" of dreams and suffering. Durrant says, "While the dreams begin as a futile attempt to reconstruct, and to make reparations for, the past, the children's work, which makes the Magistrate feel 'inexplicably joyful,' is emphatically directed toward the future" (Durrant 49). Though the novel doesn't provide us with any real redemption in life, the final scene is symbolically messianic. As a witness and as the narrator of the scene, the Magistrate contributes to re-imagining a dialogic society to come in the promising future.

The established division between the past and the present, self and other, fills our world with social and emotional contradictions. A ceaseless dialogue or a perpetual oscillation between the binary entities is significant when one confronts various forms of otherness and settles the conflicts and pains of life. The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* serves as a model of a medium that is born as part of the majority and constrained by the dominant cognitive frame. Lacking access to the other's culture and language, this kind of medium is reduced to passively falling into a trance as its only means to confront the otherness of the self as well as the plurality of the other's life. Though he is still unable to free himself from the dominant framework, his identifying with the other/otherness in a condition of trance leads to his awareness of the limits of self-knowledge and prompts him to question the authenticity of the constructed narratives. It also urges readers to look for the gaps concealed within the hegemonic discourse of their own age. In sum,

the concept of the passive medium represents a useful principle in mediating the otherness that is manifested by figurative or non-figurative ghosts in contemporary political, social, and cultural contexts. It functions to destabilize the constructed hierarchy or a simplistic binary thinking and urges us to re-imagine a dialogic society.

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