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"Coetzee in China"

Nicholas Jose

1. "The Nobel Prize in Literature and its Significance"

In April 2013, J. M. Coetzee visited China for the first time as a participant in the second China Australia Literary Forum, hosted by the Chinese Writers' Association.¹ On the agenda was a meeting with Mo Yan, who had been awarded the 2012 Nobel Prize for Literature a few months earlier. A vice-president of the Chinese Writers' Association (CWA), the official writers' union, Mo Yan was the first Chinese author to receive the honour--excepting, arguably, Gao Xingjian, to whom it was given in 2000: Chinese-born Gao, who writes in Chinese, was by that time a French citizen. China's "Nobel complex" has a long history, as explained by Julia Lovell in *The Politics of Cultural Capital: China's Quest for a Nobel Prize in Literature* (2006). Mo Yan's win, for which CWA and other state organs had worked hard, was a game-changer, assuaging Chinese cultural pride and hugely enhancing the author's celebrity. It was a big deal, then, when Coetzee, who won the prestigious prize in 2003, agreed to appear on stage with the new laureate.

In the lead-up to his Nobel win, Mo Yan had travelled widely, building an international reputation that dated back to Zhang Yimou's film of his 1986 novel *Red Sorghum*.² When China was guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2009, the author spoke at the opening ceremony, representing a literary culture that sought recognition on its own terms. He interpreted Goethe's idea of world literature as a means of seeking "mutual understanding and mutual toleration":

Literature cannot be separate from politics, but good literature is larger than politics ... let us allow literature to play its key role in fostering communication between countries, nations, and individuals.

He treads a line between an instrumentalist view of literature as serving political ends and its potential autonomy if authors play their roles properly (*Chinese Literature Today* 20-22).

While acknowledging Western influences on his work, as a Chinese writer Mo Yan looks to the day when influence will travel in the opposite direction. On a visit to Australia for the first China Australia Literary Forum in 2011, he traced his origins as a writer to vernacular traditions of oral storytelling, as he would later do in his Nobel Lecture,

"Storytellers". It's an approach he recommends to his colleagues:

Chinese writers who want to produce novels with Chinese characteristics, not only need to learn from the West, but more importantly they need to be nourished and to gather material from our own cultural traditions (*Sydney Review of Books*).

In Sydney on that visit, Mo Yan asked me whether it was the male or the female kangaroo that had the pouch. It was an intriguing question from a man who has written so much about animals. He calls *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*, his grandest novel, told from the perspective of a man reincarnated as a donkey, ox, pig, dog and monkey in succession, "this lumbering animal of a story" (515). I suggested that he could slip away from the formal proceedings to visit the zoo and find out for himself, but he demurred out of respect for the official business. His name, a pen name, means "No Speech", or more loosely "Stay Silent". While prolific in his fiction, Mo Yan has been restrained in public utterance. He added to the controversy surrounding his Nobel Prize by defending censorship as sometimes necessary for a higher good--like the airport security checks he experienced on his way to Stockholm.³ Literature, for him, remains subject to the needs of the society that produces it, and to which the author is responsible.

For China the recognition of Mo Yan was a great national honour. It might have struck CWA as curious, then, that another Nobel literary laureate, labelled as *Nan Fei* (South Africa), on the covers of his books in China, should visit through a literary exchange with Australia.⁴ Yet if Coetzee and Mo Yan are located differently as authors, that is only one among many points of divergence. For their dialogue in Beijing, it was understood that each participant would deliver some remarks, with discussion mediated by the chair, including questions from the audience. Without a common language, in any case, the two writers could not converse in the full sense of the term, even with skilled interpreters. Where Mo Yan might have preferred to talk about his personal background as a writer, Coetzee suggested a topic that addressed what they had in common, the Nobel Prize. If Coetzee characteristically avoids speaking about his work in personal terms, the Nobel Prize, a vexed subject in China, might not have been Mo Yan's first choice. But "The Nobel Prize in Literature and its Significance" was accepted as the umbrella topic.

China's criticism of the Nobel prizes and their motives reached a crescendo when Liu Xiaobo was awarded the Peace Prize in 2010 for his "non-violent struggle for fundamental human rights in China".⁵ The Chinese authorities regard Liu, ironically also a writer, as a criminal. He is currently serving an 11 year sentence for his dissident activity, handed

down in 2009. China protested against the award in the strongest possible terms. Coetzee joined members of International PEN in calling for Liu's release from detention and can be seen reading Liu's work in a video released by Frontline Defenders in 2012. The subsequent award of the literature prize to Mo Yan, welcomed by China, complicated things.

In the event, when Coetzee and Mo Yan met in Beijing in 2013, each writer read from his own script. Coetzee, speaking first, noted that having "been through the Nobel process" he had "cause to reflect on the gap between, on the one hand, the almost mythic status the Prizes have attained and, on the other, the human and therefore imperfect way in which laureates are selected". According to [Nobel's] will, the prizes were to be awarded to "those people who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit to mankind." In the case of literature, the prize was to go to the person "who shall have produced... the most outstanding work in an ideal direction" (*Proceedings of the Writers' Forum, Beijing* 2013). Coetzee locates such terminology in a nineteenth century argument between a deterministic approach to existence in which the individual has little control, as represented in naturalism (for example, Zola, whom Nobel detested) and an idealistic approach in which human nature could progress and triumph (as exemplified by some early

prize-winners favoured by Nobel, now seldom read). Coetzee notes that the concept of "direction", equivalent to German *Tendenz*, opens the way to a reinterpretation of literary works that actively seeks out the positive, allowing compliance with Nobel's guidelines through redefinition:

If we look at the citations that have accompanied more recent awards, we can detect a striving, if not to turn the laureates into secret idealists, at least to claim an idealistic *Tendenz* in them. Consider, for instance, V.S. Naipaul, awarded the Prize in 2001, whose works, to quote the Academy's citation, "compel us to see the presence of suppressed histories"; or Elfriede Jelinek, winner in 2004, whose works, said the Academy, "reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power." These thumbnail characterizations are not false, yet they are odd, somewhat off the point, as if determined to see the constructive side of a body of work whose *Tendenz* is in each case quite dark.

Coetzee might equally have been thinking of Samuel Beckett, one of his own masters, or indeed himself, cited for an "intellectual honesty [that] erodes all basis of consolation".⁶

Coetzee's speech at the forum calls into question the way merit is assigned to literature as correct or incorrect according to external directives. That is what happens when

literature is asked to serve a particular political agenda, as Mao demanded it do in his Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art in 1942, the text of which was hand-copied by Mo Yan and other notable Chinese writers for a 70th anniversary commemoration in 2012 (Abrahamsen).

Mo Yan, when his turn came, seemingly taking his dress code cue from the senior writer (open-neck shirt and leather jacket), in whose presence he courteously took the role of "younger brother", gave a humorous personal account of the troubles the Nobel Prize had caused for him, both before, when Kenzaburo Ōe, the Japanese laureate for 1994, had suggested him as a future winner, and after. His speech focusses on the way an author's comments on society are scrutinised: "however careful you are, you cannot avoid criticism". He downplays the status of the author and the authority of literature, advocating "writing not for the ordinary people, but as one of them, as a way of criticizing the arrogance of the literati and cautioning myself against making the same mistake." As if mindful of the punishment meted out to those who have spoken out through their literary works in Chinese history, with independence of mind and loftiness of spirit, he wants to preserve a more circumscribed space for himself in which to "write in peace", regarding social or political engagement as extraneous to his calling: "I have neither the ability nor the interest to do anything else" (*Proceedings of the China*

Australia Literary Forum 2013). There's modesty here, part false, part sincere, and a subtle delineation of literature's domain to something less ideal and less transformative than Nobel might have envisaged: the writer as humble servant.

The forum was held at the refurbished Lu Xun Academy, to which chosen writers come from provincial branches of CWA for professional development. The invitation-only audience of several hundred included writers and students associated with the Academy and others from literary, publishing and media circles. It was a chance for Coetzee's Chinese translators, editors and scholars to gather. Media coverage was considerable, with Coetzee's new novel, *The Childhood of Jesus*, released in Chinese translation simultaneously with its first publication in English, making China part of a world literary phenomenon. Translated by Wen Min, Coetzee's main Chinese translator, for Zhejiang Literary and Arts Publishing House, his regular Chinese publisher, and promoted through Shanghai 99 Readers, the popular book club, *The Childhood of Jesus* aroused similar curiosity for its title in China as elsewhere.

The significance of Coetzee's visit was underlined by the honorific reception given him on a tour of the adjacent National Museum of Modern Chinese Literature, which presents an account of the development of literature in China from the May Fourth period to the present. As the climactic Lu Xun

exhibit approached, the docent, a retired actress, recited what sounded like a translated passage from "At the Gate", Lesson Eight of *Elizabeth Costello*, where the titular author faces judgement. This tribute was offered with a passionate conviction that suggested all would be placed by the teleology of history. It opened the way to an even more histrionic, tearful eulogy to the great Chinese author Lu Xun (1881-1936), whose personal sacrifices for the Chinese people were highlighted.

As the tour of the seemingly exhaustive museum displays came to its conclusion, with the inclusion of a number of authors who might be regarded as being on the wrong side of history duly noted, among them a number of overseas Chinese, the absence of 2000 Nobel literature laureate Gao Xingjian prompted a quiet question from the visitor. "I don't know. Ask someone else", came the answer from the museum representatives on hand.

Southern Weekly (Nanfang Zhoubao) had been granted an exclusive interview with Coetzee for the visit, conducted by email and through translation. The interviewer was Shanghai poet and photojournalist Wang Yin, who had previously interviewed the likes of J. M. G. Le Clézio and Orhan Pamuk. An English version of the interview, which appeared in print and online on April 2013, can be reconstructed as follows:⁷

1. WY: When I was reading *The Childhood of Jesus*, it

reminded me of a screenplay. In addition to the scenes and dialogue, it provides vivid cinematic scenes. I wonder if some of the cinematic scenes emerged before your eyes when you were writing.

JMC: The cinema has been with us for a hundred years. Its effect on the way in which novels are written has been enormous. The mark of the cinema on my own writing has been evident ever since *In the Heart of the Country* (1977).

2. WY: Since you immigrated to Australia, you have written fiction related to Australia and immigrants, such as *Slow Man*. How do you interpret and look at this transformation of your creative process, if I can say it is a transformation?

JMC: Not only have I moved from South Africa to Australia but I have aged too. I tend to think that my more recent fiction is recognizably the work of an older man, a man in the twilight of his career.

3. WY: *Disgrace* was adapted into a film with the same title in 2008. Do you like the film? Hemingway once said he could not stand the screening of *The Sun Also Rises*. He found the film so unbearable that he could not finish watching it in one sitting, but had to run in and out of the cinema three times before it finished. Authors often find the films based on their own works unsatisfactory. What do you think about the

film adaptation of *Disgrace*?

JMC: The film *Disgrace* is a work of considerable artistic integrity which, I am glad to say, adheres quite closely to the original. I did not agree with all the casting decisions. But I had no role in the production and therefore I had no say in these.

4. WY: You have written a lot of in-depth and insightful literary criticism on a wide variety of subjects. A fiction writer is not always a critic at the same time. Why are you willing to spend time writing it? What has interested and motivated you to do so?

JMC: I was a professor of literature from 1968 until my retirement in 2004. I find no incompatibility between writing works of the imagination and writing criticism. This is not an unusual position to take - many good writers have been good critics too.

5. WY: I have interviewed other Nobel Prize laureates in literature who complained that the fact of winning the prize had severely impacted their daily lives, especially their writing, but you did not seem to have been impacted greatly. How is this possible?

JMC: Since I won the Nobel Prize in 2003 I have had many demands made on my time, not all of them of a literary nature. I have done my best to shield myself from these demands and give myself enough time for creative work.

6. WY: According to the schedule for your visit to Beijing, you will have a dialogue with Mo Yan, the Chinese Nobel Prize winner. How do you like Mo Yan's works? How does Chinese literature look to you? Where does your first Chinese impression come from?

JMC: I am sorry to say that I know Mo Yan's work only from film adaptations. In fact I know little of modern Chinese literature. It is a deficiency I hope to correct.

7. WY: *Here and Now*, a collection of correspondence between you and Paul Auster, has just been published. I interviewed Paul Auster in Brooklyn a few years ago. He was very active and witty. I learnt that it was you who made the first suggestion that you two exchange letters in a regular way. "If conditions permit, we can both be inspired by this." Can you tell me what the most memorable things to you have been during these exchanges?

JMC: Paul Auster and I are good friends. We see eye to eye on most subjects; where we don't, we respect the other's point of view. Exchanging the letters that constitute *Here and Now* was a source of great pleasure to both of us.

8. WY: In China, some critics compare you to Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese literature, for your stern writing style and uncompromising way toward society. Do

you agree?

JMC: [No comment.]

9. WY: Several years ago a Chinese female novelist commented that, in J.M. Coetzee's books, you can only see one word: sex. No story. No meaning. Does this kind of comment astonish you?

JMC: Yes.

10. WY: It seems that the most intense criticism comes from your motherland's readers and critics. I know that Orhan Pamuk has had a similar experience. Did you ever worry about being denounced before you start to write?

JMC: No.

11. WY: In *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, you said that, broadly speaking, all forms of writing are a kind of autobiography, be it literary criticism or fiction. Everything written by you is writing about yourself. Can we say your books *Boyhood* and *Youth* should be seen as fictionalized autobiographies?

JMC: These two books are usually read as fictionalized autobiographies, that is, as autobiographies whose factual basis is not trustworthy.

12. WY: You are a vegetarian, as well as a firm animal conservationist. What will you do for animals?

JMC: I do whatever I can to make the lives of animals less harsh than they are. I am part of an organization in Australia whose particular focus is the treatment of

farm animals, that is, animals raised to provide food for human beings.

13. WY: I learn that you are very fond of riding a bicycle. Will you try to ride in the streets of Beijing during the visit?

JMC: No, I won't have time for that.

Unfortunately a gremlin got into the copy when it first appeared, with the answers to some questions out of sequence. This mattered for question 8, Coetzee's response to the frequent comparison made of his work with Lu Xun's, on which the visitor had politely not commented. You don't embrace a bracketing with China's officially sanctioned greatest writer of the 20th century, even if the comparison is not entirely far-fetched. Lu Xun, as Mo Yan pointed out in Beijing, famously declined to be nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, for reasons that Julia Lovell (*The Politics of Cultural Capital*) diagnoses as "a combination of inferiority and uncertainty concerning Western recognition". "Chinese writers these days lack the supreme moral integrity of Lu Xun," Mo Yan said. "Nevertheless, it's also unsatisfactory to worship Lu Xun as a deity while despising contemporary Chinese writers as inhuman" (*Proceedings of the China Australia Literary Forum 2013*). Changing expectations for changing times.

The copyeditor put a different answer into Coetzee's mouth for the question of whether he accepted the comparison with Lu Xun: "Yes", rather than silence. This provoked some hostile online commentary, especially since Coetzee admitted he did not know much about modern Chinese literature. It was swiftly corrected in the online edition, with abject apologies. The incident revealed a rivalrous nationalistic subtext to China's literary politics.

Coetzee's visit to China was widely noticed and *The Childhood of Jesus*, with an initial print run of 10,000, sold well, particularly online. The popular *Beijing Evening News* devoted two pages of its weekly cultural supplement to the event, adding to Coetzee's profile in China (B01, B04).

2. "The Chinese Story"

Coetzee had been to China before in his mind. In 1977-78, after abandoning early drafts of what would eventually become *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which was initially set in South Africa, he turned to China for an alternative version of the empire in the story. He researched the border frontier in Central Asia where expansive Han settlement pushed against the nomadic Mongols at the outer limit of China's imperial reach. This was the zone in which a once powerful herding culture (Genghis Khan conquered China in the 13th century) was being

degraded by an opposing agricultural-urban way. In notebook entries in November 1977, Coetzee imagines "A Chinese commander at Lou-lan, on lake Lop-nor, protecting the silk route against bandits. The lake is drying up, the city is dying... two men, M, N, arrive from Peking. They are to conduct future interrogations."⁸ By January 1978 he had consulted books on Central Asia by Sven Hedin, who rediscovered Lou-lan and Lop-Nor in 1901, and Owen Lattimore, whose work charts the precarious co-existence of nomads and settlers under the pressure of China's colonisation along its borders with Mongolia, Tibet and what was then Turkestan, now Xinjiang, which means "new frontier". Lattimore writes of the subtle resilience of nomadism in a way that aligns with the attraction to negative extremity that the magistrate experiences in *Waiting for the Barbarians*: "After all, poverty is the real test of whether you know how to survive as a nomad... In the times of trial ... the vitality of nomadism as an order of life was preserved by those nomads who were already poor enough to touch the edge of nomad survival" (224-5).

The dark glasses of Colonel Joll from the Third Bureau are seen in a photo of "Young Chinese Officers at Khotan" in *The Pulse of Asia* by Ellsworth Huntington (facing p.150). Dark glasses are another Chinese invention, dating back to the 12th century, and became widespread in the early 20th. The revolutionist Peter Ivanovitch, "the wild beast", wears them

in Joseph Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* (1911), as does Jiang Qing ("Madame Mao") in a celebrated photograph taken in 1976 at the height of her power (before her arrest following Mao's death that year, as a member of the reviled Gang of Four).



Fig 1 "Young Chinese Army Officers at Khotan." Huntington, Ellsworth. *The Pulse of Asia*, 1907. Facing p.150.

Coetzee consulted works such as Lattimore's *The Desert Road to Turkestan* (1929) for details of the environment, fauna, flora, seasonal change, and human practices and customs, of which traces remain in the published version of the novel. The Central Asian setting subsequently shifts to a less specific, perhaps more African locale, yet a place where it snows, "on the roof of the world" (*Waiting for the Barbarians* 2). In his notebook Coetzee thinks of Neruda's Macchu Picchu and Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques* as further reference points: "the nomads he meets [are in] the decline of their civilization, corrupted by the civilization they have met. ... It means a false representation of Mongol life, but I

must live with that". (14 January 1978). It is a novel, after all.

Other Chinese and Mongolian elements appear. The name Jargetai appears in draft E, dated 4 December 1977: Jagasatai is a Mongolian place name in Lattimore. In the same draft a few weeks later, "he takes [the girl's] hobble as a sign that her feet had been bound when she was a child. Therefore he assumes that she is Chinese. His mistake prevents him from connecting her with the barbarian prisoners ...", who are Mongolian. The camels of this draft, suggestive of the Silk Road, are eventually replaced by more generalizable horses. The girl's pet, a monkey, becomes "a little silver desert fox" (2 October 1978). Even here a Chinese association lingers. In Chinese tales, the mysterious girl, half dream, half reality, who seduces the scholar, often turns out to be a fox-fairy, a creature impossible for a mortal to possess, as the barbarian girl proves to be for the magistrate.

In January 1978 Coetzee was calling it "the Chinese story" but already wanted to interrogate it further. He had earlier counselled himself not "to recreate history... My knowledge of Asian reality is only a compositional aid" (16 November 1977). In *J. M. Coetzee and the Life of Writing* (2015), David Attwell argues that "the remote setting of *Barbarians* was a solution to the problem of writing about South Africa" and was recognised as such by South African

readers (107). As he begins a new draft in April 1978, Coetzee advises himself to "translate the story out of Asia into contemporary S.A" (26 April 1978). That doesn't happen entirely. Instead the setting remains an elusive creation that evokes empire and the collapse of empire in multiple guises: Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Czarist Russian, British, Chinese, as well as totalising modern states—again China, and South Africa. Who are the barbarians? In English the word "barbarian" is used to translate Chinese words that differentiate non-Chinese, especially Westerners, from Chinese. But in Cavafy's poem, written in 1904, from which the novel takes its title, both the barbarians and the city-state where they offer "a kind of solution" remain unidentified. The world of the novel is a complex imaginative achievement, necessary to the work's form and subject: "the landscape of *Barbarians* represented a challenge to my power of *envisioning*"; "a landscape ... that probably did not exist" (*Doubling the Point* 142; Kannemeyer 336).

The move is toward a new fiction-making capacity that produces realism and non-realism at the same time, and oscillates between the two, as *Elizabeth Costello* will do more boldly two decades later: "Realism ... It is a simple bridging problem, a problem of knocking together a bridge... Let us assume that ... it is done... We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want

to be" (*Elizabeth Costello* 2). The young author diagnoses a central problem for his work and his continuation as a writer: the relationship of place to identity. The key passage here is a note Coetzee makes as he struggles with "Burning the Books" in 1973, a work he eventually abandoned:

The senses of identity and place seem to be linked. That is, the person with a tremulous sense of who/what he is does not have a strong sense of where "he" is. My own sense of place is weak. If I name a place without putting it in quotes (Dalton or Heston) I feel like an imposter or a young man trying to write a novel. Two questions: (1) Why? (2) The true subject should be the question why no sense of place. One observation: There are intimations of a great liberation to be achieved by inventing a place--a galaxy, or a Buenos Aires I confess I have never seen. There is also the possibility of "lifting" a place out of someone with a secure sense of place--Paris out of Balzac (19 October 1973; Atwell 83).

Coetzee's sense of place cannot be secure because that place--South Africa in the 1970s--is not secure either, nor his relationship with it. He will leave, while working on later drafts of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, for an extended period in Austin, Texas, and California. He will later relocate altogether, to Adelaide, where he will take on Australian citizenship in 2006. Later still he will get to know the

actual Buenos Aires, where he will direct the Cátedra Literaturas del Sur at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín from 2015. More profoundly he will achieve the "great liberation" of the imagined place, at once distant and proximate, created in language, where the problems of consciousness can be explored.

The stability and substantiality of the kind of fiction he will be able to write is in question as he works on the drafts. He considers "a fable-like structure ... dependent on turns to the action", with an example from Borges, or a "very synoptic" structure "that allows a variety of variegated episodes, perhaps parodic": "Chinese novels", he adds cryptically (19 October 1973). Some of that variegation is evident in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in its highly condensed plot, its dream logic, its jump cuts, its restless inquiry.

The "Chinese story" is also about mediating language. The account the magistrate leaves is written in the language of the empire, of the classics, for which a formal, precise English stands, with a period flavour, as if translated: "the skills of men who know how to rear the pacific grains, ...the arts of women who know how to use the benign fruits" (169), the narrator thinks. While he understands "the pidgin of the frontier", the magistrate doesn't understand the language of the nomads, the girl's mother tongue (68). Nor can he decipher the archaic writing on the poplar slips he excavates from a

prior civilisation that may have been that of the barbarians. In a wonderful, ludic scene he performs a feigned translation for Colonel Joll, his interrogator:

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 what sense is intended. That is part of barbarian cunning (122).

Early Chinese was written on strips of wood; Chinese characters are "cunning" in this way, not susceptible to interpretation, signs that cannot be read. "I have finished translating," the magistrate says at the end of his performance. Joll is not interested in what the slips say, anyway. Nearby in the draft at this point (version G), Coetzee adds a question: "Why this craving for the exotic?" (Notebook 10, p.131) To which a note on 21 October 1978 suggests an answer: "Is it a 'translation'? On the one hand I am bored with all these distancing effects. On the other it provides an opening for questions ... about things that are missing..." The wooden slips are a way of "smuggling interpretation into the book" (1 December 1978).

Translation can fill gaps of interpretation, making the opaque seem transparent; an illusion, an effect, and for the writer another important and necessary "liberation", a way of

disowning a text that has become composite, a palimpsest, like its setting--a border story. The exotic, translated, is a vehicle for the "pathos of distance" (Coetzee quotes Nietzsche, 14 December 1978; *Beyond Good and Evil* 173).

"It is a matter of moving with ease among the stereotypes", Coetzee tells himself on 10 November 1977, when he was reading widely and had identified the fabulist Dino Buzzati as one reference for his Central Asia. Buzzati's novel *Il Deserto dei Tartari* (1945; translated by Stuart C. Hood as *The Tartar Steppe*, 1952) resembles *Waiting for the Barbarians* in being set in an outpost where military men wait for "the Northerners" to invade. The tone is melancholy rather than paranoid as in Kafka, or harrowing (Parks *Threepenny Review*).⁹ Time passes; life is futile. Buzzati's famous story "I sette messageri" ["The Seven Messengers"] relates a journey outward which extends so far that the messengers sent back to the centre will never return in time with news. Hope can only turn to what lies ahead. "But the more I proceed, the more I become convinced that the frontier does not exist," the traveller concludes (Buzzati 6). In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee discovers that the literary frontier does not exist, neither in geographical or historical reference, nor the procedures of representation, nor the language in which the text is written, which is always open to further translation. "The text is

duister", he writes, using an Afrikaans word: dark, obscure. "The story is all in the interpretation" (25 December 1977).

In a passing reference, Coetzee reminds himself of "the 3-stage translation of the Australian texts in Rothenberg" (25 December 1977), meaning poet and editor Jerome Rothenberg's anthology *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poems from Africa, America, Asia, & Oceania* (1968), a radical sourcebook for the expansion of poetics beyond Western epistemology. In Appendix B, complex layout is used to highlight the difficulty of translating an oral (Indigenous Australian, "nomadic") song into intelligible English (Rothenberg 363-75).¹⁰ Aboriginal song breaks open conventional orthography. Later Coetzee contemplates a text accompanied by marginalia, perhaps under the influence of Derrida's *Glas* (1974), and again gesturing in a "Chinese" direction: "Calligraphy. The burst-out into liberation could be when one releases oneself from print into handwriting", he notes, imagining a further pushback against one-dimensional modes of Western representation (4 September 1978).

The extraordinary thing is that all these influences and impulses are absorbed into the eloquently hefted prose of a novel of modest length, affecting intimacy and stark power: a classic, with ingredients that soon had it up for movie adaptation, returning to what its author worried was its

likeness as something "straight out of the Western!" (25 December 1977)

To unsettle place and form was to unsettle identity, as Coetzee realised. At the centre of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the figure of the magistrate, who is the narrator and the only "I" with which the reader can identify, an "I" who positions himself between the order of the empire's new officers and the other, older way of the so-called "barbarians" who "want their land back" (54): "I grow conscious that I am pleading for them" (4). We share his philosophical enquiry, his sophistication, his irony, his unknowing, as if he is our proxy--up to a point, because there is also a narrative beyond this narrator, unfolding in the turns of the novel's prose. "Of the screaming which people afterwards claim to have heard from the granary, I hear nothing", we are told, for example: where the magistrate hears nothing, we have been told (5). This is partly an aspect of the novel's momentum, as what has been set up is swiftly displaced by what comes next, often in a reversal. We enter the dream life of the narrator, without necessarily understanding it, as Jonathan Lear explains: "The novel offers readers the occasion to share the narrator's consciousness in an activity that bears a resemblance to dreaming... This is the world of a dreamer's imagination" (Lear 4-5).¹¹ We observe the magistrate, without experiencing his desires. As the plot

unfolds he becomes an implausible actor, hiding under a bed "like the cuckold in the farce" (105), creeping about like a ghost, an "old clown" (136) performing tricks, the "One Just Man" who shouts No as if on a stage. If he is a Shakespearean character, the magistrate is part Lear being lessoned in endurance ("we sit thinking of our fellow-creatures out in the open who at times like this have no recourse but to turn their backs to the wind and endure" (168), cf. "unaccommodated man", *King Lear*, III, 4, 103) and also part Lear's riddling Fool, and partly like those meddling characters from the darker comedies, Thersites, who rails in the agora in *Troilus and Cressida* or the tricky, do-gooding Duke in *Measure for Measure*. As the narrative proceeds with its fast forward logic, sometimes before things are fully played out, one question follows another in the magistrate's rapid thinking. The "variegated episodes, perhaps parodic" that Coetzee associated with a "synoptic" approach, and with "Chinese novels", are on display.

The boldest example is when his torturer dresses the magistrate in a woman's smock, covers his head and puts a rope round his neck, as if in preparation for hanging. But that near death turns into a false death, an "as if", as the magistrate is set swinging, as if flying, and in that moment sees the barbarian leader and the girl in his mind, as if in a kind of communion, but too late. He roars instead, in what

passes with the onlookers for "barbarian language" (132). It is the stuff of a Punch and Judy show, and at the same time the most lucid staging of consciousness: "What is it I object to in these spectacles of abasement and suffering and death that our new regime puts on but their lack of decorum?" (131) No matter the extremity of his humiliation or pain, the magistrate rebounds each time.

Even as he is released, denied any trial of his own, he turns the tables on his torturer and asks how it is possible "to eat afterwards ... to return to everyday life" after carrying out such dirty work. In this role reversal, the magistrate seeks to understand the human capacity for inhumanity, a problem that we, as readers, are also concerned with. The crude response comes: "You fucking old lunatic! ... Go and die somewhere!" (138) Already the magistrate is being left behind, a specular remnant in his own narrative, a revenant. As Jonathan Lear's account implies, the novel guides us in a process of dis-identification with its first-person narrator: "We do not identify with him so much as sympathetically refuse to do so. ... we relate to him by rejecting his sincere, sometimes heroic, but flawed attempt at authenticity" (22-3). For Lear, from a psychoanalytic perspective, this constitutes an efficacious work of mourning rather than an experience of melancholy that is doomed to repeat. Carroll Clarkson's probing of the "complex internal dialogue of selves" in *J. M.*

Coetzee: *Countervoices* helpfully illuminates how unresolved this must always be, as the author, "in a self-conscious way, engages linguistic and literary strategies to question the authority of that 'I'" who writes (42). As the narrative tide goes out in the final passages of the novel, we let the magistrate go: the end of our oscillating engagement with and detachment from this equivocal presence.

As the town is abandoned by the subjects of empire and their protectors alike, things revert. The magistrate finds sexual solace with a woman called Mai (another Chinese-sounding name) whose children he cares for, even if he is "always somewhere else" in the moment of intimacy, as he was with the barbarian girl. As his philosophical investigations grow more abstract, he becomes more removed. Contrasting himself with Colonel Joll, he comes up with a neat formulation: "I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh wind blows. Two sides of Imperial rule, no more, no less" (148-9). Yet this admission of complacent liberal complicity seems a little facile. The distancing increases as his claims become more presumptive. Who better than "our last magistrate" to write the record, asks the narrator, wanting something unambivalent. But the narrator's conclusions can only be proleptic: from "this irruption of history into the static time of the oasis ... we will have learned nothing" (157).

The children have built a snowman that is different from the snow figure the magistrate dreamed of earlier with a blank face. This one will have "mouth and nose and eyes", but it "will need arms too", the narrator notes, without wanting to interfere. Arms-human means to pleasure and pain.

3. Awakening to darkness

Disgrace, which won the Booker prize in 1999, was the only novel by Coetzee to appear in China before he won the Nobel Prize in 2003.¹² It was published by Yilin Press in 2002 in a translation by Zhang Chong and Guo Zhengfeng and reprinted in 2003, 2010 and 2014, with a reported total print run of 50,000 copies. Helped by the 2008 film, it remains his best known work in China, with more people claiming to have read it than any other.¹³ It has attracted extensive academic commentary. Since the Nobel Prize in 2003, most of Coetzee's other works have been published in Chinese, including *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 2004, reprinted in 2010, translated by Wen Min, and, also in 2004, *Life & Times of Michael K*, *Foe*, *The Master of Petersburg*, *Youth* and *Elizabeth Costello*. Sales surged, only to slow as time went by. Han Ruihui argues that the audience divided into "professional critics" and "common readers", with the former failing in their duty to guide the understanding of the latter, who subsequently lost interest.

According to Han, the main obstacle for Chinese readers is "differences in cultural and historical background", since "there is neither drastic racial conflict in China as ... in South Africa nor such a long history of colonization". *Disgrace*, for example, requires explication if read in a socially engaged, realist, post-colonial frame.

Translation is identified as an obstacle too, with Chinese readers "separated" from the meaning of the novels as if by a less than transparent window pane. Online criticism is as much directed toward the translation as the work being translated, as readers struggle to distinguish unfamiliar content from seemingly inadequate language, often without much consideration of the formal experimentation that the novels perform. Han relates the problem to the plight of "serious literature" in a newly consumerist society where mass culture and the market dominate, and sees Coetzee as victim of the disjunction between the intelligentsia and the masses--nothing new to a Western reader (Ruihui 119-20).

But there is also a growing volume of admiring commentary and penetrating, engaged critique, including from many readers online. One of Coetzee's best Chinese critics is Lu Jiande, director of the Institute of Literature at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, who has collected several of his essays on Coetzee in *Canvas over the Horizon: Essays without Theoretical Claims* (2011). Lu is aware of the way literature in

translation has worked in China since the May Fourth movement as a way of introducing new and challenging thinking. In his image, translators are messengers, like the god Mercury, bringing the news. They do so by going beneath the "blanket terms" and pointing to "blind spots" in the customary mental habits of Chinese intellectuals. Many May Fourth writers were also translators for whom foreign literature, granted a degree of latitude, had a cathartic effect. It still can, even if nowadays Chinese writers prefer to point to sources of their creativity in Chinese soil.¹⁴

The treatment of animals is one instance. It has been a topic for Chinese intellectuals in their encounters with the West since the 19th century. Lu finds in Coetzee a radical, new conception of ethical responsibility to animals. He focuses on the *coup de grace* in *Disgrace*, "the compassionate action taken to end the suffering of the dying", whether human or animal. Thugs carry out "a crude plan of ravishment and torture ...in grand style" to bring Lucy, daughter of disgraced academic David Lurie, and her property under their control. They do not "even bother to administer a *coup de grace*" to the dog that they have shot and wounded. In such a society, "all respect for the value of life, animal or human" is lost, writes Lu (152-57). What remains is a sacrificial awareness. At the end of the novel Lurie gives up a crippled dog for euthanasia, borne "in his arms like a lamb" (*Disgrace* 220). Reacting to

this moment, Lu takes Coetzee's phrase "negative illumination" and reworks it as an "awakening to darkness" (*Doubling the Point*, 367). Although his reading has a social realist and Marxist underpinning--the thugs are depleted of morality by their material conditions--Lu's response to the novel is more anxiously ethical and heartfelt. "It reminds me too much of Mao's China," says Lurie flippantly when explaining to Lucy why he has refused counselling (66). Lu takes up the comparison, made visible by the dunce's hat--"the tall disgrace hats used in the Cultural Revolution"--to extrapolate from these "rites of punishment" to the vindictive reversals that come with revolution, in China as in post-apartheid South Africa. He adduces Naipaul's aphorism: "Hate oppression, but fear the oppressed." The ominous message is that "history is at risk of repeating itself". If so, Lu concludes, "all humankind ...is in disgrace" (Lu158-66).¹⁵ His reading translates the novel into a Chinese sphere where the bad behaviour of a literary man who is on the way out is less the issue than the moral teleology of history, a "blind spot" for a triumphalist state.

Like other Chinese scholars, Lu particularly admires Coetzee's critical writing, to which he turns for openings into the fiction. The "blind spot" Lu responds to here is the paucity in China of the "critical consciousness" (Han Ruihui's term) that Coetzee's writings manifest. That is also a theme

in the concentrated, knotted commentary on Coetzee by Li Er (b.1966), a critic and author who attended the China Australia Literary Fora in 2011 and 2013. Concentrating on *The Master of Petersburg*, Li is provoked by the rewriting of incidents from Dostoevsky's life, uncomfortably depleted of positive value by Coetzee's apparent scepticism. He expects Coetzee to be rejected by Chinese readers for this. They don't like "novels that critique perplexed real-life experience" because "their own lives have been turned upside down by complicated real-world experience". For Li, it is questionable how such writing can serve the people. On second thoughts, however, he comes to respect Coetzee's "scrutiny of experience" as long as it has "moral principles" and resists the nihilism of a character like Nechayev, the real-life figure Dostoevsky wrote against who acquires, for Li, a "familiar strangeness" in this fictional presentation. Coetzee is praised for exposing Dostoevsky, the master, to scrutiny, and even the pure Matryosha, in the name of harder truths. The critic in Li responds to the critique in Coetzee's writings as an invitation to continue in kind: "the sceptic himself will be 'scepticized' as well ... making the importation of Coetzee's works to China not all in vain" ("Hearing Coetzee Play the Bone Flute"). Li's essay is a roundabout, qualified acceptance of something from outside by a Chinese writer who is himself noted for his experimental fiction and his own sharp commentary on Chinese intellectuals. Coetzee's work gives Li

Er an opportunity to play his role. The same year he published *The Magician of 1919*, a fanciful fiction set among May Fourth literati, a highly Borgesian, almost Coetzeean, work.

What about *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee's erstwhile "Chinese story"? Wen Min's 2004 translation was reprinted in 2010 and 2013, with sales of 13,000 to date. Some of the 3000 or so readers on the popular *Douban* website are puzzled by it. Others respond positively, with one online commentator recognising it as "a political allegory, concise but deep" (not unlike the early South African readers) and another reading it as a reflection on "how 'civilization' injures a civilization in the eyes of the 'civilized'".¹⁶ "Civilisation" is a key term in Chinese discourse, the use of which here hints that the allegory might also be applicable to China.¹⁷ Possible Chinese references are among the things that appear not to translate, as the translator indicates in a postscript. She has translated Summer Palace (146) literally, after clarifying the reference with the author.¹⁸ If she used the Chinese names of the imperial places in Beijing that are called summer palaces in English, the *Yuanmingyuan* (Garden of Perfect Brightness) and *Yiheyuan* (Garden of Restful Peace), it would misleadingly interpolate a highly charged reference to Chinese history. In this act of erasure, however, she is accused by another reviewer of blurring the identification of

empire with China, as if "only foreigners can be imperialists" (*Douban* 21 March 2014).¹⁹

The China that was contemporary with Coetzee's writing of the novel in 1977-78 was as strange and blank to the outside world as China had ever been. Emerging from years of revolution, isolation and chaos after the deaths of Zhou Enlai and Mao in 1976, and before the reversals that followed Deng Xiaoping's return to prominence in 1978, the economic reforms and "open door" policies of 1979, China, seen through variously tinted, refracting Western lenses, was unknowable and unthinkable in its otherness. For a writer who wanted to take his imagination to an extreme, even when writing from within his own extreme circumstances, it had possibilities.

When a novel that seems well-disposed to translation--in this case by an author who is sensitive to questions of translation and a translator himself--is actually translated and finds, however indirectly, points of connection with readers, the achievement warrants scrutiny. Those key points prove all too translatable, as readers invest them with new intellectual energy, adapting potential seeming affinities to local conditions and another language. That happens with key moral and philosophical concepts in Coetzee's writing. Words such as "human", "humane", "humanity", "civilisation", "civilised", "imperialism", and "empire" are re-examined and blind spots illuminated.

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especially in China, who were generous with advice, and the Australian Research Council for support.

Notes

¹ The other invited writers and critics from Australia were Brian Castro, Ivor Indyk, Gail Jones and myself.

² The film won the Golden Bear at the 1988 Berlin International Film Festival.

³ See, for example, Alison Flood. "Mo Yan accepts Nobel Prize, defends 'necessary' censorship." *The Guardian* 11 Dec. 2012.

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/11/mo-yan-nobel-prize-censorship/>. *The Guardian Archives*. Web. 25 Jul. 2015.

⁴ The prevailing practice when publishing foreign literature in China is to categorise the author by nationality: on the cover of *Disgrace*, for example, even in a 2014 reprint, South Africa, in square brackets, precedes the author's name.

⁵ *The Nobel Peace Prize 2010*

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2010/

Accessed 17 August 2015.

⁶ "The Nobel Prize in Literature 2003 to John Maxwell Coetzee - Press Release." *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. Web. 6

Aug. 2015.

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/press.html

⁷ Wen Min's translations of Wang Yin's questions appear here in an edited form.

⁸ All quotations are from the Coetzee Papers at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas, Austin. Hereafter cited by notebook number and date.

⁹ Parks finds Buzzati's affinity with Leopardi rather than Kafka: "Leopardi ... was obsessed by the role of hope in human life, a hope he remorselessly exposed as the product of illusion, yet saw ... as ever ready to flower again even in the most barren places, the most unexpected forms" (*Threepenny Review*).

¹⁰ The texts are taken from R. M. Berndt. *Kunapipi* (1951).

¹¹ Lear's essay was first presented as a public lecture at the colloquium "Traverses: J M Coetzee in the World" in Adelaide, Nov. 2014.

¹² By China here I refer exclusively to the Peoples' Republic of China (PRC). The research for this essay does not cover publication of Coetzee's work in Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong or elsewhere, which would also have circulated in PRC along with original English versions to a limited extent.

¹³ Some 3500 readers on *Douban*, a readers' website, say they had read it and another 2500 want to read it, as of August 2015. While respectable, Coetzee's figures are not yet at the level of Marquez and Murakami, who reportedly earned royalties of 6 million yuan and 3 million yuan respectively in China in

2012. *China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China*. 415.

<<http://ciw.anu.edu.au/publications/ChinaStory2013.pdf>>

¹⁴ Unpublished presentations: Beijing, April 2013, and Adelaide, November 2014. Interview July 2015, Beijing.

¹⁵ First published in *World Literature* [*Shijie wenxue*] 2004, 2.

¹⁶ Li Tang, *Douban*, 17 April 2012; "Ban Tian Yao Yao", *Douban*, 12 November 2014. Names may be pseudonyms.

¹⁷ See, for example, *China Story Yearbook 2013: Civilising China* <http://ciw.anu.edu.au/publications/ChinaStory2013.pdf>

¹⁸ J. M. Coetzee, personal communication.

¹⁹ "rjx", "A Major Mistranslation", *Douban* 21 March 2014.

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