J.M. Coetzee landed in New York in September 1965 to pursue graduate studies on a Fulbright fellowship. He was impressed by the national faith in continued American prosperity and world leadership. President Johnson was proclaiming his vision of a Great Society, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 suggesting that racism might be abolished through legislation. Coetzee remained in the United States until 1971, first as a graduate student and later as an Assistant Professor of English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, witnessing the social and political upheavals. American military involvement in Vietnam was increasing dramatically as President Johnson and the military began acting on the Gulf of Tonkin resolution passed in 1964. The secret war turned into an open war in early 1965. America had 148,300 troops in Vietnam and the first mass demonstrations against the war had begun. The relatively new medium of television, which expanded its evening news broadcasts from fifteen minutes to half an hour displayed memorable coverage of both the war and the protest.

The images of war and the heated public discourse surrounded Coetzee when he was exploring the world of literary criticism and linguistics as a graduate student. His research into Beckett and his seminar paper on the morphology of Nama, Malay, and Dutch prompted him to read the popular seventeenth and eighteenth century form:
the travel narrative. He found the reports on the territory of South West Africa by explorers, dissertations on the physical anthropology of the natives, makeshift grammars written by missionaries, and word lists compiled by sailors. He even found one narrative written by a distant ancestor, Jacobus Coetse. These simultaneous encounters with the two worlds of America and Africa form the context for Coetzee’s first book, *Dusklands*, which was drafted while he was in the United States.

In *Dusklands* (1974), Coetzee exposes the white writing of eighteenth century colonial history and the mythological use of this history by the “fathers’ of South Africa. His second novel, *In the Heart of the Country*, reflects a later stage of South African history in its account of a crazed woman, Magda, who lives on an isolated sheep farm in the Cape desert at the beginning of the twentieth century. President of the U.S, Johnson was proclaiming his vision of a Great Society, and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 suggested that racism might be abolished through legislation. But underlying this optimism lay the reality of the burgeoning involvement in Vietnam, which the American public was just beginning to recognize. Vietnam represented the most important social and political context in which Coetzee found himself during his early years as a writer. Media gave an extensive coverage of Vietnam and the Television coverage was governed by some common assumptions about the value of war. It is a national endeavour; war has been an American tradition, harking back to the frontier days; war has been almost characteristic of the country, have given them the chance to show their mettle, their toughness and
professionalism, since winning is what counts. Finally, the media consistently depicted the enemy as Other, dehumanized the enemy, drained him of all recognizable emotions and motives and thus banished him not only from the political sphere, but from human society itself. Magda’s story in *In the Heart of the Country* is set during a crucial period of South African history: the decades of change at the conclusion of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. *In the Heart of the Country* evokes a certain epoch in Afrikaner history, an epoch most notable for witnessing the formation of Afrikaner national identity. Looking back to colonial ancestors, the Afrikaners at the turn of the century began to construct the myths of their national identity. From exposing the way historical discourses have worked to construct and reinforce the hierarchical systems of oppression in South Africa, Coetzee in *Waiting for Barbarians* turns to a more allegorical rendition of the dynamics of contemporary life in South Africa. Apart from continuing to echo certain elements of Afrikaner discourse in *Waiting for Barbarians*, Coetzee in the novel is more concerned with a specific issue looming over South African political life: the question of torture.

(*i*)

*Dusklands* opens with *The Vietnam Project*, the first-person narrative of the mental disintegration of Eugene Dawn, a minor functionary in a RAND-like corporation preparing propaganda for use in Vietnam. The second half contains *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee*, the first person account of a South African explorer who travels into the interior in 1760 on an elephant hunting expedition, and who later
returns to revenge himself on the servants and natives whom he believes have humiliated him. Together, the two stories explore the common psychology of colonialism and oppression, the dark mentality that informs the United States’ involvement in Vietnam and the Dutch colonization of southern Africa. In “Colonialism in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee” Stephen Watson says with linguistic playfulness, the two narratives suggest that “the master myth of history” (1986: 376) – the central story providing coherence to world events – is the myth of masters, the story of domination and oppression.

In Dusklands, The Vietnam Project opens with a quotation from Herman Kahn, the former Rand Corporation consultant, defense strategy advisor to the Pentagon, and popularizer of the “megadeath” concept:

…films of fighter-bomber pilots visibly exhilarated by successful napalm bombing runs on Viet-Cong targets, react with horror and disgust. Yet it is unreasonable to expect the U.S. Government to obtain pilots who are so appalled by the damage they may be doing that they cannot carry out their missions or become excessively depressed or guilt-ridden. (1)*

Daniel C. Hallin, who has conducted an extensive study of media coverage of Vietnam, estimates that more than half of the television coverage from 1965 – 1967 focused on such day-to-day military operations. Kahn’s statement establishes one of the major themes of Dusklands, and indeed, of most of Coetzee’s works: the failed

*J.M. Coetzee, Dusklands, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1974. All subsequent references to the text are to this edition.
dialectic, the distinct realms of consciousness which separate those who reject murder on ethical grounds from those who concentrate upon the most effective techniques for achieving dominance.

*The Vietnam Project* is divided into five sections, four of which appear to be diary entries recounting events in the life of Eugene Dawn. In the opening section, Dawn recounts all of his paranoia: his supervisor – Coetzee does not like his writing style, he suspects his wife, Marilyn is having an affair; he loathes and feels trapped in his body. The second section, written in bureaucratic jargon with sub-headings and references, contains Dawn’s report for the New Life Project, a propaganda plan that he is preparing for the Department of Defense. An expert in mythography, Dawn argues that the United States should concentrate on forming a counter-myth to the current Vietnamese myth of the sons. In the traditional Vietnamese myth, the sons rebel, mutilate the father, and fertilize the earth with the “father’s rain” (25). In Dawn’s application of the myth to Vietnam, the sons are the brotherhood of earth-tillers who want to take the land for themselves by overthrowing the sky-god (U.S. bombers); the earth-mother conceals the sons from the thunderbolts of the father; at night while he sleeps, the sons unman him. Dawn must revise the traditional myth because it makes the father vulnerable. His point of attack is against the idea that the earth-mother and sky-father live in symbiosis, and that neither can exist alone. His solution is to dispose the earth-mother by means of what he terms “meta-historical consciousness” (26). After turning this report in, Dawn is convinced that J.M.Coetzee is avoiding
him, and he is troubled with bad dreams. Attempting to grasp reality, he runs away with his son, Martin, to a motel in the mountains. When Marilyn and the police come to reclaim the child, Dawn, in his sense of dissociation, stabs Martin. In the final section of the novella, Dawn writes from a psychiatric hospital in which the doctors are analyzing his childhood and attempting to discover what made him perform such an atrocious act.

The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee has five sections, four of personal recollection and one official document. Dawn’s story has numerical divisions; Jacobus gives his sections different narrative titles. In addition, the second half of Dusklands is accompanied by a framing device, a preface by a presumed translator, J.M. Coetzee, and an afterword by a South African academic historian, S.J. Coetzee. This framing device directs our attention to the ongoing propagation of the Afrikaner master myth of history.

An eighteenth-century Dutch explorer and hunter, Jacobus Coetzee, opens his narrative with a discourse on the Bushmen and then describes his “Journey Beyond the Great River,” accompanied by his six Hottentot servants. His “Sojourn in the land of the Great Namaqua” occurs when he becomes ill and delirious with a fever and finds himself being taken to a Nama village and nursed in a menstruation hut. While recovering, he is bathing in the river when a group of small boys steal his clothes and begin to mock him. Furious, he falls upon them and in the ensuing fray bites the ear off a boy. The Nama physically punish him and then expel him from the village for
this savage act of mutilating a child. Accompanied by his faithful servant Klawer, who dies during the journey, Jacobus makes his way back to civilization, only to return with a small armed force to avenge himself on the people who had humiliated him. The final section of his personal narrative, “Second journey to the land of the Great Namaqua,” unrelentingly details his cruel punishment. A final account of the first journey appears in the Appendix, which contains the deposition of Jacobus Coetzee, taken down in 1760 at the Castle of Good Hope to serve as the official governmental report. This deposition tells an entirely different personal account, detailing the days of travel, the various natural resources found in the country, and several peaceful encounters with the Nama.

The placing of the two narratives side by side invites comparison. Both Eugene Dawn and Jacobus Coetzee are explorers. Dawn explains “Had I lived two hundred years ago I would have had a continent to explore, to map, to open to colonization” (31-32). In the twentieth century, what remains to be explored is the human psyche instead of mapping rivers and mountains. Dawn sets down body language, dreams, and myth. In their respective roles as government servants, Dawn explores the psychological interior of the Vietnamese rendered in their mythology, and Jacobus journeys into the physical interior of Africa. As explorers, both are driven to know the unknown, to encompass the unknown both mentally and physically.

During the course of their narratives, both Dawn and Jacobus physically harm a child, which indicates their disturbed estimation of human life. They are not only
unmoved by the physical atrocities performed by their respective colonial powers, but also contribute to or encourage this kind of violence themselves. Dawn repeatedly examines three photographs that are part of his material for the Vietnam report: a Vietnamese prisoner in a tiger cage, a onetime Texas linebacker copulating with a tiny Vietnamese woman, two Special Force sergeants holding the severed heads of Vietnamese “taken from corpses or near corpses” (15). Dawn’s final solution to the problem of Vietnam is to destroy the land physically by intense bombing and chemical warfare, to “show the enemy that he stands naked in a dying landscape” (29).

Similarly, the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians is filled with hatred for the sadist, Colonel Joll, and wishes to drag his body through jagged glass, but then perceives Joll’s “pale high temples” and imagines Joll’s “memories of his mother’s soft breast, of the tug in his hand of the first kite he ever flew, as well as those intimate cruelties” (1980:146) which Joll inflicted on the native population. Through his willed imagination, the magistrate overcomes the hatred that arises from the vast ethical gulf that separates him from Joll. Dawn has a failed imagination and because of his hatred he advises rape: “assault upon the mothering earth herself” (28).

While Dawn’s violence is confined to discourse, Jacobus actually practices violent destruction. Returning to Nama village, he coldly watches his troops kill, rape, and burn. He personally supervises the punishment of the four servants who had abandoned him, and recounts the cruelty of these deaths in horrible detail:

I pushed the muzzle against his lips. ‘Take it,’ I said. He would not take it. I stamped. His lips seeped blood, his jaw relaxed. I pushed the
muzzle in till he began to gag. I held his head steady between my ankles. Behind me his sphincter gave way and a rich stench filled the air. ‘Watch your manners, hotnot’, I said. I regretted this vulgarity. (104)

The phallic suggestiveness of this scene typifies the sexual terms in which the violent assault on interiors is described throughout both novellas. The rhetoric suggests the integral connection between political, economic, racial, and sexual oppression, a connection that Coetzee explores further in his later works.

_Dusklands_ takes several oblique potshots at the materialistic focus on Marxism. Jacobus’s animal references suggest the inhumanity of pure materialism. His dogs eat the flesh of the hare, but he obtains “metaphysical meat” from the death of the hare (79). Dawn notes the inadequacy of understanding all human behaviour in Marxist terms, complaining about his supervisor,

> His career has been built on the self and its interests. He thinks of me, even me, as merely a self with interests. He cannot understand a man who experiences his self as an envelope holding his body-parts together while inside it he burns and burns. (32)

Beyond economics and self-interest, which Coetzee never completely discounts, are other human drives.

Both Dawn and Coetzee suffer from an ontological problem: they are uncertain about the nature of their own existence in relationship to the external world. Michael Vaughan in “Literature and Politics: Currents in South African Writing in the Seventies,” observes
They are identical, not in character or experience, but in the mode of consciousness by which they perceive their world, and their relation to this world. (1998: 55)

As they struggle to understand the relationship of their own subjectivity to the objectivity of the world around them, both turn to exploration as a means of breaking through their philosophical impasse. Gun to both of them stands for hope and defence against isolation. Jacobus claims,

The gun stands for the hope that there exists that which is other than oneself. The gun is our last defence against isolation within the travelling sphere. (79)

The absence that looms for both protagonists is the failure of transcendence, the missing superstructure that controls the relationship of subjects and objects. Dawn says about the American presence in Vietnam,

Our nightmare was that since whatever we reached for slipped like smoke through our fingers.....We landed on the shore of Vietnam clutching our arms and pleading for someone to stand up without flinching to these probes of reality. (17)

He realizes that his desire for someone to stand up to reality, to draw a clear line of demarcation between the controlling subjectivity and the controlled object is actually a tragic reach for transcendence. The subtext of his meditation is the loss of God:

We lined them up in ditches. If they had walked toward us singing through the bullets we would have knelt and worshipped; but the bullets knocked them over and they died as we had feared. We cut their flesh open, we reached into their dying bodies, tearing out their livers, hoping to be washed in their blood; (17-18)
The same religious meditations appear in Dawn’s search for a father. His advice that the United States employ “the father voice,”

…the voice of authority, in its propaganda broadcasts to the Vietnamese reveals his own longing for transcendent authority. (21)

The fatal loss of transcendence, the obsessive drive to explore, and the recourse to violence are common elements in the colonialism of both the propagandist and the elephant hunter.

As Vaughan has rightly puts it “Dawn is the contemporary intellectual enmeshed in the “doom-laden projects of latter-day imperialism,” and Jacobus “the early explorer-colonizer, living out the anarchic individualism of ….the youthful vigour of Western imperialism.” (122)

_Dusklands_ also demonstrates how the practice of colonialism takes different forms in different times and places. The differences in the depiction of Dawn and Jacobus are as significant as the similarities. Their contrasting reactions to the loss of transcendence are particularly noteworthy. Jacobus takes upon himself the role of the missing God, exalting in his strength and solipsistic power, but Dawn physically and psychologically disintegrates with the loss of the father. Each is a metonymy of his era and country. Jacobus typifies the physical dominance and religious arrogance of the Afrikaner settlers; Dawn typifies the rhetorical dominance and psychic disturbance of contemporary American society.
In his journey with six Hottentots at the beginning, Jacobus is supremely confident of his superiority. It is he, who plans each day’s march, conserves the oxen, provides the food and maintains order among his charges. When they reach a village of Namaqua people, his self-importance reaches its pinnacle:

Perhaps on my horse and with the sun over my right shoulder I looked like a god, a god of the kind they did not have yet. The Hottentots are a primitive people. (71)

As he waits for their chieftain to receive him with ceremonial rituals, he imagines that he looks like an “equestrian statue” (72). Jacobus falls from this lofty heights as the villagers humiliate him by ransacking his goods and “hiss” at him in derision. Though Jacobus threatens them with the rifle, his falling sick, developing a huge carbuncle near his anus, makes him fall at the mercy of the Namaqua people who quarantine Jacobus in one of the huts ordinarily occupied by menstruating women.

Jacobus’s desperate need to re-establish his identity takes him on a psychic journey in which the explorer of unknown lands becomes an explorer of his own unexamined interiority. The journey begins with an hallucination of his deceased mother reading about his death and evolves into an apocalyptic revelation confirming his existence and beliefs. In his first vision, a sun-dazzled stone desert speaks to him telling him that behind every exterior there lies a “black interior quite, quite strange to the world” (77). Yet when any interior is penetrated, as with a hammer smashing a stone, the interior transforms itself into exterior, so that there is no certainty that
interiors exist. In another vision, he is an environment of space and solitude pervaded by sun. His senses, all but sight - are in a vacuum:

I became a spherical eye moving through the wilderness and ingesting it...I am all that I see, Such loneliness!...What is there that is not me? (79)

With convulted logic, he perceives the gun to be “our savior” because, by producing death, it gives evidence of life and saves us from “the fear that all life is within us” (79). He views the carnage of the animals he has killed as his “dispersed pyramid to life” (79). Reflecting that a gun is useless in annihilating trees and bushes, he imagines some kind of “flame-throwing device” (coupling him with Eugene Dawn’s Vietnam). The need for the gun, he concludes, is metaphysical rather than physical. The gun produces the death of the hare, which is Jacobus’s “metaphysical meat” because it keeps his “soul from merging with the world” (79-80). He reasons that he must also kill the Hottentot because “he threatens to have a history in which I shall be a term. Such is the material basis of the malady of the master’s soul” (81).

Jacobus’s psychic journey can be interpreted as follows: the solitary mastering soul maintains its interior in a depth of darkness unknown to the Others. When its interior is revealed to light, it can no longer exist in solitary darkness. Brought up from the depths, it is exposed to a brilliance of light that is blinding, and then, to all that the light illumines. The soul, an Eye, at first perceives all that is illumined to be part of the soul’s dream, to be part of the soul itself. Then separateness occurs to the dreamer. What the soul perceives is not I, but the Others. The dream of union is shattered with
a blast of thought, and of a gun. The solitary soul asserts its mastery over the Other, and the paradoxical relationship of master and slave is born. This is the heart of the paradox that all of Coetzee’s fiction explores.

Jacobus’s delirium gradually subsides, and he begins to regain his strength and senses, but he finds that he has lost his position of mastery over his servants. Only fifty-year-old Klawer, who had shared his boyhood with Jacobus, remains loyal, because the “habit of obedience is not easily broken” (88).

Before he leaves the village with Klawer, Jacobus undergoes a ritual eversion that marks a transformation in him, a kind of reverse acculturation in which he divests himself of his gloss of civilization and becomes increasingly savage. During his infirmity, he regards his carbuncle as a companion as well as a disease. Jacobus goes to a stream where he squeezes his ‘pus-knob’ and undergoes pain. Immediately following this purging, he savagely attacks a group of boys who stole his clothes as a joke. He catches one of the boys, grinds his face into stone, kicks him, curses him, and in the melee that follows, comes up with hair and a human ear in his mouth. Shocked at such barbarism, the villagers banish him from the village.

Jacobus travels with his servant Klawer and adapts readily to the “Bushman” life. Klawer, ironically, is less adaptable and soon falls ill. Unable to move, Klawer urges his master to proceed without him, which Jacous does, falsely promising to return. Travelling alone and exultant “like a young man whose mother has just died” (95), Jacobus resumes the psychic metamorphosis that he had begun during his illness.
In a state of euphoria, free to initiate himself into the desert life, he growls, hisses, screams, dances and spins. He identifies himself with an intrepid black beetle that tries every route of escape until captured, and then will feign death so resolutely that it will not flinch even if its legs are pulled off one by one.

Jacobus, Narcissus-like, longs for a reflecting pool in which to see himself. With unconscious irony, he ponders over the nature of savagery, and wonders whether or not the Namaqua and Hottentots qualify as savages. Failing to see his own reflection, he defines true savagery as “a way of life based on disdain for the value of human life and a sensual delight in the pain of others” (98).

Jacobus’s brief final narrative is a vivid enactment of his earlier reflection “entombed in its coffer my heart too had lived in darkness all its life” (78). Entitled “Second journey to the land of the Great Namaqua [Expedition of Captain Hendrik Hop, 16 August 1761-27 April 1762],” this narrative depicts Jacobus’s wrathful punishment of his humiliators. He wastes no time on preliminaries. The tale opens with his first kill, “a girl, a pretty child on the way to the stream.” After placing a shot neatly between her shoulder-blades, he addresses his most durable deity: “I will not fail you, beautiful death” (100). Upon locating his four unfaithful servants, he enacts his own definition of savagery, disdaining human life and taking a sensual delight in the pain of others. Like a cat with doomed mice, he prolongs his sadistic pleasure, first with “a brief sermon” in Dutch. His version of the gospel demonstrates how
distorted his understanding of traditional Christianity is. The sermon is based upon the text of Matthew 10:29,

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.” (101)

As a Christian explorer, Jacobus tells his captive audience, he has always attempted to preach the gospel of the sparrow. With the exception of the misleading citation of the passage in Matthew, most of the Jacobus’s biblical allusions refer to the Pentateuch and emphasize God’s power and knowledge, rather than the love and mercy revealed in the Prophets and Gospels.

By way of a benediction, he pronounces upon his parishioners the sentence of death. Jacobus is not without self-awareness in these acts. He reflects:

My despair was despair at the undifferentiated plenum, which is after all nothing but the void dressed up as being. (101)

These thoughts of self-awareness are followed by prolonged executions, the rape of a child by a Griqua, and the general torching of the village. Whereas the violence in “The Vietnam Project” was largely distant, abstract, filtered through Eugene Dawn’s imagination, Coetzee makes the slaughter here concrete, inescapable. As Peter Knox Shaw in “Dusklands: A Metaphysics of Violence,” observes:

Nothing offsets the sadistic agency of the narrator: in so far as the suffering of Coetzee’s victims is recorded, it is through the gloating eye of their killer. (33)
His revenge and blood-lust sated, Jacobus has after thoughts. He wonders if he may have slaughtered “an immense world of delight closed off to my senses? May I not have killed something of inestimable value?” (106). He quickly rejects the possibility, arguing to himself that if the Hottentots are a world of delight, it is an “impenetrable world” to men like himself. In any case, he reasons, after his expulsion from the village, he became a “pallid Symbol” (106): his revenge reasserted his reality.

In posing as the “editor” of The Vietnam Project and the “translator” of The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee, Coetzee exposes his own role as the constructor of discourse. Although Jacobus Coetzee may present himself as a reliable, omniscient, and objective narrator, his twentieth-century son is very much aware, as the epigraph to The Narrative states,

What is important is the philosophy of history. (Epigraph)

A closer examination of Coetzee’s own myth-making and his own structuring of the work demonstrates how the discourse of history, particularly the discourse of the travel narrative is controlled by ideology and structure of the perceptions of reality.

Coetzee drew on a number of historical sources to write “The Narrative of Jacobus Coetze”, many of which are noted in its footnotes and references. The primary source is The Relaas of Jacobus Coetse Jansz, a deposition taken down in the Castle of Good Hope by the Political Secretariat in November 1760 and containing an account of the journey the elephant hunter Jacobus Coetse made into the land of the
Great Amacquas that year. The illiterate Coetse told his story to the secretary, who then wrote the account up in Dutch, using the third person “den Relatant,” the narrator, to refer to Coetse. No contemporary copy of the Relaas has survived; a transcription was first published in the Netherlands in Zuid Afrika in de Holandse Tijd (The Hauge, 1916). The South African Van Riebeeck Society later published the Relaas in Dutch with an English translation by E.E. Mossop in The Journal of Wikar, Coetsé and Van Reenen (1935). These publication details listed out by Susan Van Zanten Gallagher (1991: 74) suggest the numerous filters through which the account passed even before it reached Coetzee.

The deposition appearing at the end of The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee is based upon the Relaas. Coetzee has provided his own English translation of the deposition, and has both added to and taken away from the original account. The fictional deposition appears to be a straightforward information account describing some of the people, animals, and vegetation encountered during a long journey into a new territory. It contains no mention of the protagonist’s illness, “captivity,” or expulsion; these details appear only in the extended fictional narrative. Yet the many changes that Coetzee has made from the original deposition hint at supporting the dark narrative of the other tale.

A few facts have been changed to correspond with the fictional narrative. Instead of the two wagons and twelve Hottentots the historical Coetse travelled with, the fictional deposition has one wagon and six Hottentots. The conclusion of the
fictional deposition briefly notes that the narrator was deserted by his servants on his return journey, while in fact all twelve servants returned with Coetse. Several omissions efface the friendly interactions that took place between Coetse and the Nama. Coetzee’s version omits an exchange of gifts and the fact that one of the Great Amacqua who wanted to travel returned to the Cape with Coetse.

One significant addition that Coetzee made clearly points to the story contained in the fictional narrative. A second troop of Nama tell the narrator about the eloquent Damroquas, who has yellow skin and long hair, and wears linen clothes.

The flesh-and-blood Coetse returned to Namaqualand in 1761-62. Intrigued by his story of the fair people clad in linen, the Cape administration sent out an expedition led by Captian Hendrik Hop and guided by Coetse to search for this nation. The section of Jacobus’s *Narrative* describing his return to the Nama purports to be the “expedition of Captain Hendrik Hop” (100). But again Coetzee has constructed a fiction around a historical event, since we have an account of this expedition in the journal of Carel Frederik Brink, who was the group’s official cartographer and scribe. The account of Brink’s journal given in the Van Riebeeck edition may have also suggested to Coetzee how official accounts may have effaced incidents of colonial brutality and murder.

Coetzee’s exposure of the politics of history-making is not merely confined to eighteenth-century narratives. His most scathing attack on twentieth-century mythmaking occurs in the afterword to *The Narrative*, supposedly written by “my
father, the late Dr. S.J. Coetzee, for the Van Plettenberg Society” (55). The afterword is “drawn from a course of lectures on the early explorers of South Africa given annually by my father at the University of Stellenbosch between 1934 and 1948” (55). Coetzee’s father, Zacharias, actually was an attorney, and Dick Penner in *J.M. Coetzee: Countries of the Mind* mentions Coetzee stating in an interview:

..the false historical link that has been inserted…simply has to do with my conception of the way in which the founding fathers of the South African state have run the history of the country since the seventeenth century. (47-48)

Jacobus Coetzee and S.J. Coetzee together represent an all-too-common “white writing” of South Africa. The use of the persona of S.J. Coetzee thus expands Coetzee’s exposure of mythmaking to encompass the traditional academic and politically sanctioned histories of South Africa.

S.J. decries the scientific emphasis of the official account; his history claims to describe a deeper reality:

Mere circumstances, notably the truncated account of Coetzee’s explorations hitherto current, have conspired to maintain the stereotype and hide from us the true stature of the man. (108)

The deposition was written focusing on mineral ore deposits and about the potential of the tribes of the interior as sources of supply. Discounting such commercial and materialistic foci, S.J. is more interested in the heroic stature of the Afrikaner farmer:

The present work ventures to present a more complete and therefore more just view of Jacobus Coetzee. It is a work of piety but also a
work of history: a work of piety toward an ancestor and one of the founders of our people, a work which offers the evidence of history to correct certain of the anti-heroic distortions that have been creeping into our conception of the great age of exploration when the White man first made contact with the native peoples of our interior. (108)

Jacobus is heroic, according to S.J., because he typifies the perseverance and courage of the frontier farmer who explores and takes possession of the new land. S.J.’s account is decidedly anti-British and anti-Cape. The British missionaries also come under attack for “collusion in the imperial mission,” S.J. concludes,

We hunt in vain for a British exporter of the virtues of humility, respect, and diligence. In the things of this life, said Zwingli, it is the labourer who stands nearest to God. (111) The Cape administration is interested only in easy profit and does not provide the frontier farmers with protection from marauding Bushmen.

S.J.’s chauvinism emerges also in his comments on the indigenous people. That the tribes of the interior sold their cattle to the Company for trinkets is a necessary loss of innocence, as he patronizingly explains:

The herder who, waking from drunken stupor to the wailing of hungry children, beheld his pastures forever vacant, had learned the lesson of the Fall: one cannot live forever in Eden. The Company’s men were only playing the role of the angel with the flaming sword in this drama of God’s creation. (110)

This theological explanation in some odd way absolves the white of all responsibility. The atrocious treatment of the Bushmen by frontier farmers is similarly justified. Because the Bushmen attacked their cattle and because they lacked the
resources adequately to police the zone between the farms and Bushmen territory, “the instrument they reluctantly adopted to keep it free was terror” (114).

The afterword is erratic in nature, radically shifting topics and tone, and without clear organization. S.J. claims that Jacobus’s own son was murdered by his slaves and cites Lichtenstein’s *Travels in Southern Africa* as his source. Lichtenstein does tell of the death of a Coetzee. The afterword thus both subtly and not so subtly debunks the nationalistic historicism of South Africa and its romantic glorification of the past.

*Dusklands* ultimately is about the dangers of discourse. Coetzee’s comments on the displaced aggression and sadism facilitated by televised depictions of events in Vietnam suggest some of the dangers. Dawn’s sadistic, phallic attitudes toward his wife and the North Vietnamese are but a part of his larger revulsion for humanity. To portray this revulsion, Coetzee uses descriptions of symbolic photographs as he later uses symbolic dreams in *In the Heart of the Country* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In his briefcase Dawn carries with him twenty-four well-guarded photographs depicting atrocities from the Vietnamese war. His wife correctly intuits that her husband has a “secret, a cancer of shameful knowledge” (10), though she never sees the pictures.

Description is given about three photographs, one photograph of sexual abuse, a central depiction of murder, and a third panel of imprisonment and torture. The first picture is of a former line-backer, tall and tough, from the football team of the
University of Houston, copulating with a thin, fragile Vietnamese woman whom he has lifted aloft on his erect penis. Coetzee emphasizes the horror of the central panel, which portrays two U.S. Special Forces sergeants, whose nametags read Berry and Wilson, who hold before them the severed heads of three Vietnamese men. The third print differs from the first two in that it is a still photograph taken from a propaganda motion picture film depicting North Vietnamese soldiers imprisoned in tiger cages on Hon Tre Island. Speaking of Dawn’s responses to his Vietnam photographs, Peter Knox Shaw in “Dusklands: A Metaphysics of Violence” states, “the idea that distanced documentary particularly that of the camera can corrupt response is convincingly projected” (32)

The media coverage of Vietnam, the histories written “from above,” and the themes and techniques of Dusklands all demonstrate the colonizing effects of discourse. Coetzee is seen experimenting in how to escape the colonizing effects of discourse. The ultimate paradox of Dusklands is that in exposing the ways in which discourse is used to empower and enable oppression, in revealing some of the master-myths of history, Coetzee necessarily employs his own discourse and constructs his own myth. But throughout the text, he attempts to expose himself, to call attention to the fictionality of his fiction, to disclaim the authority that is traditionally awarded the author. The self-conscious narrative of Eugene Dawn – “A convention allows me to record these details” (42) – and the elaborate layers of narrators and narratives found in the second half of Dusklands make us aware of the fictional structure. Coetzee
never pretends to offer an unbiased, objective, natural view of the facts of the past. In effect, he is practicing a kind of New Historicism in his self-conscious construction of the story.

(ii)

*In the Heart of the Country* (1977) was published both in English and Afrikaans. The novel appeared in Afrikaans in 1978 under the Ravan imprint. The English edition was brought out by Secker and Warburg. The novel received South Africa’s most prestigious literary award, the CAN Prize. Stephen Watson in his “Colonialism in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee” contends that

…all of Europe and North America has gone into the making of Coetzee – or at least into the making of his books. He has produced by far the most intellectual and indeed intellectualizing fiction of any South African or African writer. (380)

The novel reflects a later stage of South African history in its account of a crazed woman, Magda, who lives on an isolated sheep farm in the Cape desert at the beginning of the twentieth century. This novel is made up of 266 numbered sections, written in the present tense, narrated by Magda. They are referred to as diary entries, since they proceed in chronological order and loosely follow the events of Magda’s life. Magda calls herself “a spinster with a locked diary,” (3) * and near the end of

---

her account she laments that she did not have the foresight to keep “journal like a good castaway” (1977: 123). In her narrative, Magda does not comment on the fact that she is writing, in the way that Eugene Dawn did, but she does comment on the fact that she is thinking. Consequently, it seems more accurate to speak of the numbered sections as segments of her thoughts, or meditations.

*In the Heart of the Country* is like the two *nouvelles* of *Dusklands*, an extended interior monologue. The narrator is Magda, a repressed, introverted, spinster of indeterminate age. She lives in virtual seclusion on a remote sheep farm with her widowed father, whom she regards as a domineering martinet, the archetypal Afrikaner *Voortrekker* (pioneer). The indeterminate, self-reflexive, contradictory narrative that Coetzee used occasionally with Jacobus predominates here.

Because meditations are concerned with the activities of the mind rather than the historical events of a story, we find it difficult to trace exactly what takes place during the period of Magda’s life covered in the narrative. Her meditations begin with an account of her father’s return with a new bride, Magda’s jealousy, and her hatchet-murder of the father and his bride in their bed. However, these incidents have only been imagined by Magda and they exist only in her meditation. Magda’s next plot concerns her father’s growing interest in and eventual seduction of Klein-Anna, the newly-wed black wife of their servant, Hendrik.

What seems to happen is that Magda, out of resentment and jealously over a liaison she believes her father has established with their brown-skinned servant, Klein-
Anna, murders her father twice – once in her imagination, the other time perhaps actually. Firing a shotgun into her father’s bedroom window in protest, Magda mortally wounds her father. She then invites Anna and Hendrik to live with her in the house. Magda then tries to establish a position of mastery over Klein-Anna and her husband Hendrik, and fails. She next tries to develop a relationship of equality with Hendrik and Klein-Anna, and fails again. Hendrik physically abuses her and rapes her. When the neighbours begin inquiring about her father, Hendrik and Anna flee, leaving Magda on the decaying farm talking with the corpse of her dead father and trying to make sense of her experience by communing with “sky-gods,” whom she believes fly overhead and send her messages in a strange language.

Magda’s story is set during a crucial period of South African history: the decades of change at the conclusion of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Transportation is by horse, donkey, bicycle, and train. The house has no electricity or running water. Magda herself is not always sure about the accuracy of these details, and the many uncertainties of her narrative include uncertainty over its historical setting and facts. As she imagines exploring a trunk in the loft, she thinks of finding

\[…\text{ornamental fans, lockets and cameos, dancing slippers, favours and souvenirs, a baptismal frock, and photographs, if there were photographs in those days, (38)}\]

By the end of the novel, twentieth century is upon Magda: she receives a letter printed in two languages “requesting the payment of taxes for road maintenance,
vermin eradication, and other marvels I had never heard of,” (124-125) and she receives messages from voices “out of machines that fly in the sky” (126). The novel thus spans the period, approximately, from 1870 to 1960.

The Afrikaners at the turn of the century began to construct the myths of their national identity. The conscious development of the Afrikaner myth of history and the consequent sense of national identity were first articulated by S.J. du Toit and the other intellectuals associated with the Society of True Afrikaners and the First Language Movement in the seventies and eighties. The events of the Anglo-Boer War (1889-1902) served as the final catalyst to transform this cultural myth into a viable political entity, with the foundation of the National Party after the war.

*In the Heart of the Country* mirrors this epoch’s preoccupation with identity in Magda’s “fight against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history” (3). Magda, bearing the name of the long-suffering and heroic wife of the Great Trek leader Piet Retief, is one of the “mothers” of South Africa. Just as the Afrikaners struggled to find a national consciousness at the turn of the century, so Magda struggles to discover her identity.

By centering his novel in Magda, Coetzee reinscribes the figure of the woman that is commonly employed to validate the Afrikaner myth. Envisioning herself as one of the “daughters of the colonies…lost to history,” Magda attempts to articulate the silenced voice (3). Her narrative presents an alternative version of South African
national consciousness as she struggles to find her identity in relationship to the land, her father, and the Africans of colour with whom they share the land.

Magda’s mind becomes a labyrinth in which she mentions *Minotaur*, the “beast” which Magda believes “stalks” her. The identity of this beast is not immediately clear. Perhaps it is the stern father, “stiff as a ramrod” (31), and his voluptuous young non-existent bride, who licks “sweet mutton fat from her lips” (1) and displaces Magda. It may also be the brown-skinned servant couple who work on the farm, Klein-Anna with her “sly doe eyes, her narrow hips” (26), who becomes the master’s mistress and also displaces Magda; or Hendrik, Klein-Anna’s husband, “a fine chest, strong lungs, a man” (104) or perhaps the beast is Magda herself, “the grim widow-daughter of the dark father” (3). Magda ponders the identity of the Minotaur:

Somewhere on the farm my father roams, burning with shame… Is my father the beast? Elsewhere on the farm loom Hendrik and Anna…Is Hendrik the beast, the insulted husband, the serf trodden under his master’s boot, rising to roar for vengeance? Anna, with her sharp little teeth, her hot armpits – is she the beast, the woman subtle, lascivious, insatiable?

Who is the beast among us?...Is it my own snarl I hear in the undergrowth? Am I the one to fear, ravening, immoderate, because here in the heart of the country where space radiates out from me to all the four corners of the earth there is nothing that can stop me? As I sit quietly gazing at my roses waiting for the afternoon to end I find that hard to accept. (49-50)

Magda’s thoughts lead to three aspects of the labyrinth: the father as “beast”; the master/slave relationships of the father, Magda, Hendrik, and Anna; and finally, the key role that language plays in these relationships. Magda’s feelings toward her
father are a composite of contradictions: fear, resentment, desire, admiration, murderous rage, and following his death, affectionate companionship. One of her most vivid descriptions conveys her perception of her father’s frightening, domineering nature:

The boots, the thud of the boots, the black brow, the black eyeholes, the black hole of the mouth from which roars the great NO, iron cold, thunderous, that blasts me and buries me and locks me up…I squirm, again the boot is raised over me, (51)

Early in the novel Magda states that there are many “melancholy spinsters” like herself, victims of the “childhood rape”:

Wooed when we were little by our masterful fathers, we are bitter vestals, spoiled for life.” (3)

From the context of the novel it seems clear that the “rape” refers to the dominance/submission roles played out by father and daughter, respectively. Throughout the novel, Magda is seen drawing her father’s bath, preparing his meals, cutting his hair, taking off his boots as a “drudgemaiden” (32), as she refers to herself. She has incestuous desires for her father, given their isolated existence “in a district outside the law, where the bar against incest is often down” (138). She has a nightmare fantasy in which she gives birth to the “son of the father, Antichrist of the desert…an epileptic Fuhrer” (10) who leads a band of Hottentots to their slaughter and mass burial. Magda reflects,

Labouring under my father’s weight I struggle to give life to a world but seem to engender only death” (10)
She has thoughts about his penis; in her fantasied murder of her father and her imaginary step-mother, Magda perceives her father’s

…tired blind fish, cause of all my woe, lolling in his groin (would that it had been dragged out long ago with all its roots and bulbs!) (11)

Following what appears to be the actual shooting of her father, she sees him naked and has some whimsical thoughts:

The sex is smaller than I thought it would be...a pale boy, a midget, a dwarf, an idiot son” (69)

Whatever incestuous eroticism is contained in the above lines is entangled with violent hatred and childlike curiosity.

Magda’s admiration and sympathy for her father can be compared to Coetzee’s description of Jacobus when he reaches the Namaqualand. Magda describes his daily return:

..he comes home nevertheless in pride and glory, a fine figure of a man...riding in every evening against a flaming sky as though he had spent the whole day waiting for this moment, his horse tethered in a thorn-tree’s shade just over the rise” (31)

In a rare moment of compassion, Magda attempts to excuse her father’s darker side:

He hates only because he dare not love. He hates in order to hold himself together. He is not a bad man, despite all. He is not unjust. (52)
Angered that her father is in bed with the servant Klein-Anna, Magda fires one rifle shot through his bedroom window; with her eyes closed, she fires another round just as her father grabs the barrel of the gun, and he is shot. Slumped against the footboard of the bed, a hole in his belly the size of her thumb and a gaping hole in his back, surrounded by blood and flies, he hardly sounds like a tyrant.

A key to the relationship between this enigmatic father and his paradoxical daughter may be contained in two rather cryptic passages. One is a dream Magda has about a bush that glows with an unearthly light and sheds its radiance on her:

There is a scheme of interpretation, I am sure, according to which my dream about the bush is a dream about my father. But who is to say what a dream about my father is? (73)

The second passage depicts an odd union between father and daughter, the entwinement of Magda’s and her father’s feces after she and her father have taken their turns on the bucket-latrine outside the house and Hendrik empties their common bucket, Magda’s desire to merge with her father is expressed:

…there is a pit where, looped in each other’s coils, the father’s red snake and the daughter’s black embrace and sleep and dissolve. (32).

Despite the images of the burning bush and entwined excrement, Magda is left torn between feelings of hatred and love for her father and for the society which he represents.
The characters and events are seen as an allegory of modern South Africa in the novel. This is doubtless a consequence of Coetzee’s combining thought that is clearly contemporary with a turn of the century South African setting. Sheila Roberts in “Character and Meaning in Four Contemporary South African Novels,” interprets the stone farm as “South Africa itself, the father as the Afrikaner baas, and Magda as the ineffectual, dreaming liberal” (30).

The essence of apartheid society is the continuance of strictly defined roles of dominance and submission. In the novel, the master/slave relations are multiple and protean. Magda plays the role of servant/daughter to her father until she rebels and kills him. Hendrik is the archetypal servant to the father and Magda until the murder destroys the social order and Hendirk rebels and apparently rapes Magda, who then becomes subservient to him. Klein-Anna, a woman and a brown person, remains submissive to the other three principals throughout. One of Magda’s earliest self-descriptions underscores the lack of any egalitarian relationships in this society:

I, who living among the downcast have never held another in the equal regard of another’s eye, have never held another in the equal regard of mine. (8)

She recalls how Hendrik arrived at the farm at the age of sixteen, having from the village of Armoede (Afrikaans, poverty), seeking work, his hat held humbly in his hand, his speech to the father punctuated by the refrain, “Yes, my baas.” By the end of the novel, Magda is aware of the insidious nature of such subservience:
…the pitiful warrior in the hills was never as formidable as the enemy who walked in our shadow and said Yes baas. To the slave who would only say Yes my father could only say No, and I after him, and that was the start of all my woe. (129)

Shortly before her father dies, she envisions another scene:

…brother and sister, wife and daughter and concubine prowl and snarl around the bedside listening for the death rattle, or stalk each other through the dim passages of the ancestral home. (70)

These images suggest that the “beast” is multifaceted, a composite of all of the characters caught in their particular place and time in a labyrinth of master/slave relationships and language.

The continuation of the system is dependent upon the willingness of all participants to play their roles consistently and to adhere strictly to the rules. Coetzee remarks in “Tales of Afrikaners” that he was

…born in the twilight of a centuries – old feudal order in which the rights and duties of masters and servants seemed to be a matter of unspoken convention…a mixture characteristic of societies with a slaveholding past. (75)

There is no suggestion that Magda’s father gives over his sense of White superiority. He beguiles Klein-Anna with trinkets, candy, and money and she acquiesces to his sexual requests. Hendrik douses his impotent rage with brandy supplied by “the bees” then later vents his fury on his wife through physical and sexual violence.
Plaasroman or farm novel is one of the most important genres of Afrikaner literature dominating the development of Afrikaner literature between 1920 and 1940. Plaasromane were written by authors such as D.F. Malherbe, Jochem van Bruggen, Johannes van Melle, and Abraham Jonker. Although the plaasroman sometimes is seen as part of the pastoral tradition of farm novels written in English by South African writers such as Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith, in *White Writing* Coetzee argues that the English farm novels drew upon the British aristocratic novel of rural life while the plaasroman had more in common with the German Bauernroman in romanticism and anti-capitalism. Written during a period when years of poor rainfall and economic depression pushed more and more Afrikaners off the land and into the city, the plaasroman “celebrated the memory of the old rural values” (83) and emphasized the romantic, natural bond between humans and the land.

As Coetzee notes in *White Writing*, the romantic bond between Afrikaner and land is depicted in the plaasroman as more than an individual feeling; it also arose from and was dependent on the handing down of the farm from father to son, on a “lineal consciousness” rather than an “individual consciousness” (109). The plaasroman “buttress Afrikaner patriarchalism in order that a heightened significance should be attached to the acts of the founding fathers, to maintaining the legacy and perpetuating their value.” (83)

The patriarchalism of the plaasroman also encompasses black-white relationships. The dream of a rural South African made up of family farms on which
Afrikaner farmers and African labourers live together in paternalistic harmony continues to haunt the South African consciousness. Afrikaner cultural discourse upholds a patriarchal world of paternalistic land owner, supportive wife and mother, and obedient and grateful Africans – all mystically united by a dark love for the earth.

The discourse of patriarchy in South Africa has many texts and many facets as inscribed in literature and legend, history and fable, social practice and community norms. The Afrikaner patriarchal system marginalizes the weak and employs the feminine – the woman and the land – to further masculine power and authority. The novel thus challenges that oppressive identity by changing the very language of identity by allowing the feminine to speak.

Viewed against the ideal Afrikaner woman extolled in national mythology, Magda clearly is a parody, an anti-heroine. Her physical and emotional characteristics are antithetical to the Afrikaner ideal. The images with which Magda characterizes herself are negative and perverted. Her rhetoric frequently runs counter to the traditional discourse of Afrikaner womanhood. “I am not a happy peasant,” she says, “I am a miserable black virgin” (5). The bride she imagines her father bringing home is a “glutted woman” with “full lips.” The rigid strength and perseverance of the Afrikaner woman as captured in the massive sculpture of the Vrouemonument and Voortrekker Monument are in stark contrast to Magda’s discourse of feminine emptiness:

I move through the world not as a knifeblade cutting the wind, or as a tower with eyes, like my father, but as a hole, a hole with a body
draped around it…I am a hole crying to be whole…I think of myself as a straw woman, a scarecrow, not too tightly stuffed,…not unaware that there is a hole between my legs that has never been filled, leading to another hole never filled either. If I am an O, I am sometimes persuaded, it must be because I am a woman. (41)

Corrupted and ruined by the dominating myths of her father, Magda sets out to inscribe her own story and write a new history of Afrikaner consciousness. She refuses to be the pure woman who sustains the patriarchal hierarchy as wife and mother, and instead becomes the woman who seeks to undermine that hierarchy in both her actions and narrations.

Longing to free herself from the shadow of her father, Magda nonetheless is tempted to blame her lot in life on her history. In her endeavour to construct a history of her own, she not only composes the meditations and creates the story of her father’s murder, but also makes feeble attempts to recover an alternative past. Magda in these attempts shrinks from the history bequeathed to her by her father and attempts to find an alternative. She quests for a past of connections: she imagines what her mother must have been like; she creates a large happy family of brothers and sisters, including a golden boy named Arthur; she conjectures about her father’s courtship of her mother. The past that she creates reflects her longing for human interconnectedness as well as her essential isolation:

If I have brothers and sisters they cannot be in the city, they must all have been swept away by the great meningitis epidemic: for I cannot believe that fraternal intercourse would not have left its mark upon me, and it has all too plainly not left its mark upon me, the mark that has
been left upon me instead is the mark of intercourse with the wilds, with solitude and vacancy. (47)

The solitary wasteland of her desert environment appears to reflect her own hollowness, but Magda’s frequent meditations on the natural world invariably conclude that the romantic identification and bond between human and the land extolled in the Afrikaner *plaasroman* are impossible. The natural world exists only as being; she exists as consciousness. Although the unreflective existence of insects, flowers, and stones appeals to her, Magda cannot escape her human attributes of voice and choice, language, and morality.

Free to create her own history and identity through her articulations and choices, Magda nonetheless is trapped by the social structures of parent and child, master and servant, in which she exists. Magda primarily attempts to define herself, then through human relationships. However, the patriarchal oppositions of Afrikaner society and its tradition of the humiliation of the weak by the strong impair the formation of true community. As the submissive daughter of a domineering father, as the weak woman raped by an abusive man, as the white mistress of two black servants – Magda finds herself in a complex web of oppressive relationships. In her attempts to escape the master/slave dichotomy that characterizes all of these relationships. Magda tries to learn to live in reciprocity, in equality in true freedom.

The first master/slave dichotomy on which Magda meditates is her warped relationship with her father. Magda’s desperate search for some kind of intimacy with
her father results both in oedipal longings and in imagined acts of violence. In her story of her father bringing home a new bride, Magda depicts this woman as fertile and sensual, able to arouse and satisfy all of her father’s baulked desire, quite unlike herself. In fantasizing about murdering her naked father in the forbidden bed, Magda empowers herself with masculine tools. She bludgeons his body with an axe and in a later scene she either literally or imaginatively blows out his guts with a shotgun. From a position of helplessness and oppression, Magda reverses the dichotomy to become the masculine force that imposes its will on others, humiliating the weak to become the strong.

Her father’s affair with Anna presents even more of a threat of marginalization. Anna appears to achieve a degree of intimacy with her father for which Magda longs in vain. As they sit in the kitchen eating peaches and bread, Magda listens at the door:

> It is a love-feast they are having; but here is one feast which is nobler than the love-feast, and that is family meal. I should have been invited too. (52)

Beyond these laments of the loveless child lurks a greater fear, for in his relationship with Anna, Magda’s father has subverted the white/black hierarchy. If Anna can become his mistress, perhaps Magda will become the servant. “I should be seated at that table,” she continues about the love-feast,

> ….at the foot properly, since I am mistress of the household; and she, not I, should have to fetch and carry. Then we might break bread in peace, and be loving to one another in our different ways, even I. (52)
The death of her father and of the past he embodies frees Magda, she thinks, to go beyond the patriarchal system to establish new relationships with Hendrik and Anna. Dressing Anna in the “sad noble clothes of bygone times” (85) that she finds in a wardrobe, Magda watches her promenade, dreaming that Anna will become the sister she never had:

I would like to hear from her, in a quiet corner, the great secrets of life, how to be beautiful, how to win a husband, how to please a man. I would like to be her little sister, I have had a late start in life, the years behind me are as if passed in slumber, I am still only an ignorant child. I would like to share a bed with her. (87)

Magda’s casting of Anna as the elder sister suggests Magda’s sense that Anna has a superior wisdom concerning the great secrets of life. Magda is able to envision this relationship only within the stereotypical norms of Afrikaner farm life complete with country beaux, feminine wiles, and bedroom confidences. Magda’s fantasy remains firmly within the patriarchal order. Her inability to recognize Anna in her own right is suggested when she asks Anna and Hendrik to spend the night in the house with her, on a mat on the kitchen floor. Magda relegates them to an inferior position.

The patriarchal system is also perpetuated by Hendrik, who demands to be paid for his labour on the farm. Magda idealistically wants the three of them to live in a pre-capitalistic Eden, but Hendrik insists, “We did our work, miss…Now we must get our money” (94). Hendrik’s reliance on hierarchical relationships is epitomized when he dresses himself in her father’s clothes and begins to preen on the loft platform. Magda orders him to take the clothes off, and he threatens to expose himself:
Hey, look! Look! our miss, look!...Come on, don’t be scared our miss, it’s only a man! (98)

When Magda’s attempt to withdraw money from her father’s account fails, Hendrik demands that she can pay instead of money. His brutal possession of Magda’s body perpetuates the master/slave relationship by merely reversing the terms. During his nightly visits he refuses to talk to her and continually humiliates her physically. Magda pleads,

Must I weep? Must I kneel? Are you waiting for the white woman to kneel to you? Are you waiting for me to become your white slave? Tell me! Speak!” (118)

Clothed in the outward garb of master, wielding the weapon of the male organ, Hendrik has become the new father who rules the farm.

Magda acquiesces to his new role, longing to believe that it is the path to the intimacy for which she has been searching. She thinks,

In the heart of nowhere, in this dead place, I am making a start; or, if not that, making a gesture. (110)

Magda invites Anna and Hendrik to move into the guestroom, and she asks Hendrik if she is doing it right during his nocturnal visits. “All I want is a little peace between us,” (112) she says to Hendrik. Magda believes that an individual act of the will is sufficient to escape the history that confines them all:
You are so bitter that you are completely blinded. I am not simply one of the whites, I am I! I am I, not a people. Why have I to pay for other people’s sins? (118)

However, Magda cannot escape her existence as a social being; she remains a part of a people, trapped by that social role. The equality that she can offer is not sufficient, as events soon demonstrate. When the neighbours begin to inquire about Magda’s father, Hendrik knows that he will bear the guilt: “one of these days they will be back, sooner than you think,” he tells Magda. He tells

Then they will see that you are living with the servants in the big house. Then we will be the ones to suffer – not you – she and I!.. when they say I shot him, who will believe me, who will believe a brown man? (117)

Both psychologically and socially Hendrik cannot escape the master/slave dichotomy.

With Anna, Magda achieves a little success. She both vocalizes and physically enacts her desire for intimacy. She asks Anna to call her “Magda,” but Anna continues to address her as “Miss” (102). Their physical intimacy is awkward and forced:

I find her head and press my lips against her forehead. For a moment she struggles, then stiffens and endures me. We lie together, at odds, I waiting for her to fall asleep, she waiting for me to go. (103)

In Magda’s insistent pursuit of equality, Magda ironically distances Anna even further, as she finally realizes,
Anna is oppressed by my watching eyes. She is oppressed by my invitations to relax, to sit by my side on the old bench in the shade of the sering-tree. She is oppressed particularly by my talk. (113)

Magda longs for true communion to take place between her and Hendrik and Anna. She has no idea how to achieve this communion; neither her acquiescence to Hendrik’s rape nor her perseverance in talking to Anna brings her the intimacy for which she longs. In one of her final meditations she describes her attempt at reconciliation:

The medium, the median – that is what I wanted to be! Neither master nor slave, neither parent nor child, but the bridge between, so that in me the contraries should be reconciled. (133)

As in Dusklands, In the Heart of the Country suggests that behind the impossibility of relationship lies the lack of transcendence. Magda reflects,

God has forgotten us and we have forgotten God. There is no love form us toward God nor any wish that God should turn his mind to us. The flow has ceased. We are the castaways of God as we are the castaways of history. (135)

The “gods” of the flying machines do not provide a satisfactory substitute with their obscure philosophical statements. Magda claims,

I am not a philosopher. Women are not philosophers, and I am a woman. A woman cannot make something out of nothing. (119)

Magda translates into English the messages she receives from the gods, but her words to them are in “Spanish,” which Coetzee describes in his own form of
Esperanto, which Magda says she “had to invent from the first principle, by introspecting” (131). Failing to attract the attention of the gods by shouting, she collects two hundred pumpkin-sized stones with a wheelbarrow and forms her words in letters twelve feet high. Deprived of human contact, Magda’s messages become desperate pleas for recognition and communion. Magda presents her supplications to the gods:

ESMI, VENE! ISOLADO! ES MI! VIDI! (131)
It is I, come! I am isolated! It is I! Look!

CINDRLA ES MI; VENE AL TERRA; QUIERO UN AUTR; SON ISOLADO (132)
I am Cinderella; Come to earth; I want an other; Isolated Sound (or Sun, Afrikaans)

POEMAS CREPUSCLRS/CREPUSCULARIAS
Twilight poems

SOMNOS DE LIBERTAD
Dreams of liberty

MA SEMPRE HA DESIDER – LA MEDIA ENTRE (133)
But I have always desire – the medium between

To all of Magda’s pleas, the voices are silent. Magda does not repudiate her fate. She says she never wished to join the sky-gods but, rather, hoped that they would join her “here in paradise,” for she is “corrupted to the bone with the beauty of this forsaken world” (139).

Dick Penner in *J.M. Coetzee: Countries of the Mind* sees Magda’s compassionate care for her father as a change. He concludes,
There should be a term adequate to describe the tone of the ending of In the Heart of the Country: inertia, stalemate, deadlock, cul-de-sac, stasis, entropy – conditions common to modern and postmodern literature characteristic of most Absurdist fiction and drama. (1989: 72)

The novel subverts Afrikaner patriarchal discourse in a number of ways, both on a representational level and on a generic level. The character of Magda is a subversion of traditional Afrikaner ideas about women. Similarly, the setting of the novel and its chorus of life on the farm parody the traditional *plaasroman* and so reveal the inadequacies of the pastoral vision in the face of South African realities. Paul Rich in “Tradition and Revolt in South African Fiction: The Novels of Andre Brink, Nadine Gordimer and J.M.Coetzee,” terms the novel “a landmark” in the South African search for a genre to break with the pastoral colonial tradition beginning in eighteenth century British literature.” (1982: 70)

Another generic subversion occurs in Magda’s rejection of philosophy for poetry. Although lyrical landscape poetry is perhaps the oldest genre of South African literature, playing an important role in both the English and Afrikaans traditions, Magda refuses to speak in this voice also. Instead, Magda says,

I have uttered my life in my own voice throughout…I have chosen at every moment my own destiny, which is to die here in the petrified garden, behind locked gates, near my father’s bones, in a space echoing with hymns I could have written but did not because (I thought) it was too easy. (139)

The traditional elegies to the landscape written by Eugene N. Marais, Thomas Pringle, and Guy Butler are rejected for Magda’s own voice. In subverting and
refusing the traditions of the *plaasroman* and landscape poetry, Coetzee also employs his novel as a critical tool aimed at the Afrikaner identity created in and sustained by the cultural texts of these traditional genres.

Coetzee claims in *White Writing* that artists in South Africa have been on a quest for an authentic language, a quest impeded by the various social practices and physical realities of life in South Africa.

> It is no oversimplification to say that landscape art and landscape writing in South Africa from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth revolve around the question of finding a language to fit Africa. (1988: 7)

In Magda’s voice, Coetzee experiments with a new language, a new mode of discourse. Magda’s narration subverts patriarchal discourse, traditional Afrikaner language in its anti-rational construction. In Magda’s final meditation, she admits that she has not yielded to “the spectre of reason” (138) and explained all of the details of her story – why she did not flee the farm and return to civilization, what exactly has happened during the course of her history. For many feminist thinkers, feminine discourse is a language of the mind and the body conveying both ideas and the reality of the body itself.

Magda’s account employs the repetitive structure, double voices, abrupt shifts, and open endings and her lyricism and imagery further exemplify her feminine discourse. In her language she attempts to write the body even as she attempted to communicate to Hendrik and Anna through the body. Two striking passages explore
the possibility of reaching the other by means of a bodily identification, as Magda attempts in her poetry what she has found impossible in her history. Confined by language, she attempts to go beyond language to capture the instinctive pre-verbal realm of the semiotic within the symbolic. The first passage occurs as her father lies dying:

Oh father, father, if I could only learn your secrets, creep through the honeycomb of your bones, listen to the turmoil of your marrow, the singing of your nerves, float on the tide of your blood, and come at last to the quiet sea where my countless brothers and sisters swim, flicking their tails, smiling, whispering to me of a life to come! (71)

The second passage follows her rape when she longs for a resolution to her struggle in a remarkable lyrical stream-of-consciousness passage:

I want a home somewhere else, if it has to be in this body then on different terms in this body, if there is no other body, though there is one I would far prefer, I cannot stop these words unless I cut my throat, I would like to climb into Klein-Anna’s body, I would like to climb down her throat while she sleeps and spread myself gently inside her, my hands in her hands, my feet in her feet, my skull in the benign quiet of her skill where images of soap and flour and milk revolve, the holes of my body sliding into place over the holes of hers, there to wait mindlessly for whatever enters them, the song of birds, the smell of dung, the parts of a man, not angry now but gentle, rocking in my bloodwarmth, leaving me with soapy seed, sleeping in my cave. (108-9)

Both passages express Magda’s longing to go beyond the realm of words and language to a different kind of communication, a physical union in which the master/slave dichotomy is overcome.
Another feminine metaphor Magda ironically invokes is that of childbirth. Although on the representational level Magda epitomizes the sterile spinster, on the linguistic level she gives birth to the text. On yet another level, her murder of her father and disposal of his body are described with images of maternity and birth. She tries to carve out a hole large enough for his body and emerges as a maternal figure placing him into the womb of the earth.

_In the Heart of the Country_ never reaches any kind of closure. Its indeterminate ending refuses the authority of patriarchy, but is also indicative of the distortions of South African culture.

(iii)

The process of self-confrontation which has been at the centre in the first two novels arrives at a decisive point in _Waiting for the Barbarians_ (1980). This idea is informed through the process of personal-awakening, a quality that Magda is unaware of in _In the Heart of the Country_ but which becomes a determining structural feature in this novel. The novel is indirectly about the political and social struggles of South Africa. As Gordimer in her “Idea of Gardening: _Life and Times of Michael K_,” says, it projects the particular “horrors” of our contemporary world “into another time and plane” (Sue 139). The story which it tells takes place in some indeterminate geographical location and historical era, in an outpost of an unnamed Empire at a time when sun-glasses were a new invention and horses the primary means of transportation, when muskets confront bows and arrows and spears, and yet tea and
lemonade, tobacco pipes and any number of other “modern” objects are familiar. The setting is both familiar and unfamiliar while it cannot be located definitively in either time or space. The fact that Coetzee ensures that the Empire remains unnamed, the time unspecific and the geography indeterminate, indicates that the setting of the novel is something of a key to the working of the narrative. Although geographically this remote outpost does not correspond to any actual setting in South Africa, it clearly represents a particular phase of South African colonial history: the phase of bureaucratized control which succeeds the phases of exploration and agrarian settlement represented in Dusklands and In the Heart of the Country and which, in the South African context heralds the phase of militarized totalitarian control represented in Life & Times of Michael K. There are sharp stylistic and narratological differences employed in the novel when compared with the previous novels. The shift cannot be called a return to realism. But, it represents the achievement of a certain kind of self-assurance by Coetzee, who seems to have invoked the tenets of realism.

Waiting for the Barbarians and Gordimer’s July’s People, share a common project. As Stephen Clingman puts it, the “semiotic” project of “seeing the present through the eyes of the future,” in other words, of “decoding the signs and codes of the ‘present’ through the perspectives made possible by imagining the future” (Clingman Essential 202). While Gordimer, through future projection, challenges apartheid’s system of meanings within the scope provided largely by language and characterization in realist discourse, Coetzee directs his critique in terms of the basic
elements of narrative construction through displacing the milieu and withholding the resolutions, both thematic and narratological.

Ever since the National Party gained control in 1948, there have been accusations of state-sponsored torture in South Africa. But the public outcry and debate over the issue of torture in South Africa filled public discourse of all kinds – from government reports to protest poems, from United Nations declarations to novels. Coetzee in “Into the Dark Chamber,” says “Torture has exerted a dark fascination on many South African writers” (13)

The spark that ignited the rhetoric of torture was the death of Stephen Biko. Following the Soweto uprising in June 1976, unrest spread throughout South African townships. Horrified by police shootings of unarmed schoolchildren and unable to tolerate the oppression of apartheid any longer, urban blacks boycotted schools, vandalized official buildings, marched in streets, and organized stay-at-home strikes. The mass arrests included not only participants in the protests but also many leaders of the Black Consciousness Movement, including the charismatic young leader of the Black People’s Convention, Stephen Biko. After almost a month in detention, Biko died under mysterious circumstances on September 12, 1977. The government announced that Biko had died of a hunger strike, but their account was called into question by Donald Woods, a close friend of Biko and the outspoken white editor of the English-language Daily Dispatch. The South African government responded to the outcry over Biko’s death with an iron fist. But the continued public campaign to
uncover the facts of Biko’s death finally resulted in an inquest held over thirteen days in November 1977. Coetzee in this novel both laments and speaks prophetically of the practices of his country. However, his work is remarkably different from the other novels produced during this time in its non-specific historical setting and allegorical style. These unique qualities emerge from Coetzee’s postmodern concern with the implications of torture for the writer.

The title of Coetzee’s novel comes from Constantin Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians,” which depicts a decadent Roman Empire awaiting a barbarian conquest which never happens. The border guards report

Because it is night and the barbarians have not come
And some men have arrived from the frontiers
And they say that barbarians don’t exist any longer.
And now what will become of us without barbarians?
They were a kind of solution. (15)

In Coetzee’s Waiting for the Barbarians, as in Cavafy’s, no barbarians ever appear, only fishers and nomads, and the nomads appear only briefly. To the barbarous proponents of Empire, however, they are very necessary, regularly invoked in scare stories, in a procedure reminiscent of the well-known South African tactic of “swartgevaar” (black danger). Nadine Gordimer’s novella, Something Out There, also focuses on this use of “bogeyman” as a means to hold together a fractured polity by an invented external threat. The allusion to Cavafy’s poem of the same title, in which the imminent arrival of the Barbarians is some sort of a solution indicates that what is
at stake, once again, is the issue of identity: the identity of a group which defines itself in contra-distinction to another group: which, indeed, finds its *raison d’être* in the threat, real or imagined, posed by this other group.

The narrative begins with the arrival of Colonel Joll and his men from Empire’s Third Bureau at the settlement to begin operations to deal with the perceived barbarian threat. The frontier marks the point beyond which the Empire’s domain gives way to a territory inhabited by the nomadic barbarians. Joll and his men are torturers and interrogators, driven by the directive to discover the ‘truth’ and ‘truth’ predetermined by Empire’s Manichean ethos, and its own schema for self-assertion. Joll and his men round up prisoners and interrogate them. One of the tortured victims, a young barbarian girl, has been nearly blinded, and has deformed ankles, which were broken by their captors. The narrator of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a Magistrate approaching old age; he is the chief official of a remote border post of this unnamed Empire. Desiring nothing more than to see out his life in the peace of the frontier settlement, he is rendered impotent by a new phase of aggressive imperialism. The Magistrate takes in the barbarian girl, a victim of the most recent round of brutal interrogations, and imposes his fetishistic attentions upon her, before undertaking a long and dangerous journey to return her to her people. Here an encounter sets in between the colonizer and colonized. On his return, he is branded a collaborator with the barbarian ‘enemy,’ tortured and reviled. The novel ends with the abandonment of the settlement by the Third Bureau garrison as they were stormed by the marauding
elusive nomadic tribes whom the Third Bureau look down upon as ‘barbarians’. The novel closes as the supposed protectors flee and abandon the settlement and the people remaining wait for the barbarians.

The sentiments the Magistrate expresses and the attitudes he manifests in his behavior replicate those of the liberal protagonists in novels by writers such as William Plomer, Alan Paton, Dan Jacobson, Laurens van der Post in a novel like *In a Province*, and clearly Gordimer in *Occasion for Loving*, written in 1963. These sentiments and attitudes may be summarized as: belief in the power and efficacy of the judiciary system; belief in ‘civilization’ and the continual progress of human kind; an abhorrence of violence, accompanied by an attitude of tolerance and rationality; a capacity for fairly ruthless self-scrutiny and a sense of guilt which can be incapacitating; and, more significant than all of these, a belief in individual autonomy and in the freedom of choice.

Coetzee conjoins method and technique to implicate the dirty story of Empire, and informs the major concerns of the novel: the frontier, the “Other,” pollution, torture, purificatory rituals, social systems, punishment and dreams. From its opening chapter, *Waiting for the Barbarians* emphasizes the opposition between the rigidity of form and the powers and dangers of formlessness. The magistrate, a representative Liberal, is concerned only with maintaining the *status quo*, keeping his own hands clean by due observance. Confronted with two extremely smelly prisoners, the one bearing a suppurating sore, his reaction is sending the men to clean themselves
after which he abandons them to the sinister ministrations of Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau. Joll and his soldiers torture an old man and his young nephew who say they were coming to the village to seek medical attention for the boy. The boy has come to the fort to have the sore treated, to be restored to wholeness, ironically, by crossing the line between the desert and the fort he has placed himself automatically in the role of the polluter. After Colonel Joll’s “interrogation” and the death of the older man the magistrate is horrified to discover a corpse and boy in the same cell. Again he appears to be more outraged by the lack of respect of due forms of the bodies. The torturers threaten to sew the boy into his uncle’s shroud and the survivor continues to be exposed to torture. The Magistrate is moved to observe the transgression of the boundaries between the living and the dead as the torturers display ultimate cruelty towards the captives. Lamenting the cruelty, the magistrate comments that the gaol has become

“…holy or unholy ground, if there is any difference, preserve of the mysteries of the state” (6)

At this point, the first of the magistrate’s many dreams provides a different perspective. In the dream clean snow obliterates boundaries, the sun has dissolved into mist, the square blurs at its edges into the sky: “Walls, trees, houses have dwindled, lost their solidity, retired over the rim of the world.” (9) Children building a

snow-castle are similarly muffled and faceless, melting away as he approaches. In the dream the clean and the formless go together. The text moves to the tortured body of the boy, and to the magistrate’s dawning awareness that uncleanness resides with the Empire:

...is it only in the provinces that headsman and torturers are still thought of as unclean?...I find myself wondering too whether he [Joll] has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men...or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean? (12)

The subsequent dream presents an indeterminately sexed body, its pubic apertures swarming with bees, an image of the uncleanness resulting from the simultaneous blurring of bodily, sexual and species boundaries. Clearly, while in his conscious behaviour the magistrate equates the Imperial mission with due form and ritual, his unconscious reverses the terms to reveal the Imperial state as unclean, the formless expanse as pure. When Joll sends back more prisoners (fisher people) the magistrate finds them just as filthy as the townspeople do, repelled by their public defecation. “...all together we lose sympathy with them. The filth, the smell”. (1980: 19) Rumours fly that they are diseased, both their food and a dead cat is flung indiscriminately amongst them, a woman suffers a rape attempt. The definition of dirt is clearly a relative one. The removal and burial of a dead child, secreted under its mother’s clothes, renders her unclean to her people who shun her. The magistrate wonders: “Have we violated some custom of theirs....by taking the child and burying it?” (20)
Yet the moment when Joll departs, he reverts almost comically to type:

I want everything cleaned up! Soap and water! I want everything as it was before (24)

In his desire to erase the dirty story of what has been happening, he is even tempted to resort to “ethnic cleansing” – to make a fresh start by marching the prisoners out to the desert and burying them there. The temptation is resisted:

….that will not be my way. The new men of Empire are the ones who believe in fresh starts, new chapters, clean pages; I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble. (25)

The reader recognizes an allusion, feels complicity with the author and with the fellow members of an interpretive community. The text exposes the pollution anxiety which threatens the magistrate who is embarrassed by the drive of Imperialism and involves himself in condemning the rigidity of cultural definitions.

In the magistrate’s relationship with the abandoned “barbarian” girl he finds himself attracted by her awkward creeping movement and her misshapen feet. The connection to the unclean is heightened by her other mutilations. Because she has been half-blind she bears a scar by her eye “as though a caterpillar lay there with its head under her eyelid, grazing” (1). A ritual is speedily established in which the magistrate washes and massages the girl’s feet, frequently interrupted by waves of sleep, “like death to me, or enchantment, blank, outside time” (31). Ritual offers both a fantasy of atonement and a means of symbolically negating or reformulating the
past. The magistrate attempts to define her as marginal. He argues that sex with her would be out of place:

Lodging my dry old man’s member in that blood-hot sheath makes me think of acid in milk, ashes in honey, chalk in bread. (34)

Mentally characterizing her as damaged, unclean, he compares her to an animal, the untrained silver fox cub which he keeps inappropriately as a house pet. Yet he finds that she refuses to conform to the definition. With another woman, sexual desire has meant “to pierce her surface and stir the quiet of her interior into an ecstatic storm” (43). With the girl, however,

…it is as if there is no interior, only a surface across which I hunt back and forth seeking entry. (43)

The parallelism between the woman’s body and the colonized land is also a parallel between body and story. While the girl remains mute, the narrator hunts for the truth of her story, examining the signs of torture on her body and repeatedly questioning her. For a brief period the girl’s lack of verbal or sexual responsiveness drives him to a young prostitute in whose arms he finds it a pleasure “to be lied to so flatteringly” (42). But sex with the play-acting prostitute is only an attempt “to obliterate the girl” (47), to wipe clean the slate. Pleasant fictions of erotic desire cannot rival the girl’s untold story. By holding back its details, she refuses to initiate him fully, leaving him in an interstitial position, aware of his complicity with the torturers, and yet unable to move on, to turn the page. Now he finds himself recalling unsettling occasions when
in the middle of the sexual act he found himself “losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story” (45). When he tries to write a history of his thirty years on the frontier he finds himself similarly stalled:

It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write. (58)

It is the magistrate’s fear of being rewritten or even ignored by future history which is at the root of his sexual and writerly ineptitude. When two deserters are found frozen to death in the desert he insists that they are brought back to have the appropriate rites, to demonstrate that “we survive as filiations in the memory of those we knew” (54), aware that he is comforting himself against the vision of a future “barbarian” triumph which would mark the end of his history. Again and again he dreams of the girl, now with clearly defined features, building a snow fort “empty of life” (53). The dreams express his anxiety that there will come a time when his story will be the missing one, the blank and absence, when his people will be gone and the girl vividly present. Ironically, to the half-blind girl he has always been “a blur, a blank” (31) lacking distinct outlines.

To enter the girl the magistrate must enter the interstitial formlessness of the desert, crossing the line to return her to her own people. The journey, beset by danger, is described as a venture into formlessness, outside categories.

Dust rather than air becomes the medium in which we live. We swim through dust like fish through water. (60)
Even the ground beneath their feet turns out to be a frozen lake. In this new medium sexual possession suddenly becomes possible, and the appearance of the “barbarians” swiftly follows. Both magistrate and girl are, for once, in the same category. When the girl menstruates she is rendered unclean in the eyes of the men.

It is the old story: a woman’s flux is bad luck, bad for the crops, bad for the hunt, bad for the horses. (69)

In response the magistrate invents a ceremony of purification for them both “…for I have made myself unclean by sleeping in her bed” (70). With a stick he draws a line in the sand, leads her across, washes her hands, and then leads her back across the line into the camp. Almost immediately, the nomads appear from behind the rocks and the magistrate realizes that “We have crossed the limits of the Empire” (70). The sequence of events reveals just how far the magistrate has come. He is now prepared to “contaminate” himself with the girl, to cross the frontier, and to recognize the illusory nature of social boundaries, mere lines drawn in the sand, the product of cultural projections. After the sexual act with the girl the magistrate contemplates two alternative realizations:

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. (63)

Where the prostitute’s fictions were well-articulated, the girl’s untold story of marginalization, torture and resistance, remains unarticulated, and it is the magistrate’s fate to live it through. On his return to the fort, the magistrate finds himself seen as
the polluter. By entering the desert he has made himself unclean, and society promptly mobilizes to cast him in the appropriate symbolic role which dramatizes its own values. To Colonel Joll he is now “the enemy” (77) and is swiftly reduced to an unwashed, sick and smelly prisoner. For a moment the magistrate reverts to type, wondering

Have I truly enjoyed the unbounded freedom of this past in which more than ever before my life has been mine to make up as I go along? (78)

In his dreams the girl appears once more as an image of monstrosity, her feet “disembodied, monstrous,” (87) her figure evolving into massive shapes of horror. The magistrate in the first part of the novel expresses his resistance subconsciously; his venture beyond the frontier proves to be a source of power which empowers him to show his protest in an active manner.

Three key incidents make Coetzee’s point clear. When Colonel Joll displays prisoners, to prove that the “barbarians” are real, the men are linked into a line by a loop of wire running through their hands and cheeks, so that, to minimize pain, they are forced to move as one cohesive body. In addition to this overt image of the enforced oneness of the body politic, the word “ENEMY” is written in charcoal on each naked, dusty back. The ensuing purificatory ritual will involve beating them “till their backs are washed clean” (105), by blood and sweat. The magistrate objects, insisting upon the wholeness and the holiness of the human being: “We are the great miracle of creation” (107).
As a result, torture is meted out to the magistrate and it is not directed at eliciting confession but rather at “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” (115). In the successive acts of public torture to which he is subjected, the magistrate undergoes a series of inversions – from adult authority that of a to childish clown, forced to jump to and fro over a line of rope, from male to female, dressed in a woman’s smock, and from human being to bird or insect, hoisted into the air and forced to “fly” upside down. When the Magistrate is subjected to a mock hanging and then suspended by his wrists from a tree, his torturer offers him the choice between wearing a woman’s smock or nothing. He can be symbolically “reduced” either to a woman or an animal. The Magistrate accepts the smock but the pain inside of his body, overshadows the intended patriarchal shame of the feminine clothing covering the body. The Magistrate subsequently describes himself as a “beast,” rather than as a woman. He understands the pain inscribed onto his body by the regime as much more significant than the clothes it forces him to wear, and only then can he read his own bruises and scars as signs of his position within the Empire.

Through the degrading tortures inflicted on him in the name of Truth by Joll’s men, the Magistrate recognizes his abject position and is reduced to a poor physical presence, past shame, past meaning, past human languages, and there is no way of dying allowed to him, except like a dog in a corner. The Magistrate’s incoherent
howls recall an etymological origin: “He is calling his barbarian friends,” as someone observes: “That is barbarian language’ ” (121)

The opening lines of the novel and the magistrate’s initial reaction to Joll introduces the theme of sight and blindness:

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them (1)

Joll is ethically blind, as is the empire that he represents; in the capital, he tells the magistrate, everyone wears such glasses, he can see a shadowy reflection of himself; thus, he is initially reluctant to censor Joll:

Who am I to assert my distance from him?....The Empire does not require that its servants love each other, merely that they perform their duty (5-6).

It occurs to him that he could avoid the problem altogether if he simply went on a hunting trip and left the village to Joll’s will; he could then return and put his seal on Joll’s report after simply skimming it with an incurious eye. His ethical vision is not sufficiently impaired, to allow him this dereliction.

The theme of blindness and sight is further developed after Joll returns to the capital to make his report. As the second section of the novel begins, the magistrate observes a “barbarian” girl begging on the streets. Being one of Joll’s captives, she has been questioned, tortured, and left behind to survive or die. The magistrate sees
that her ankles have mended crookedly after having been broken and that she has a

strange way of regarding him. As he approaches her, she stares straight ahead, her

line of vision at right angles to his approach; as he comes nearer, she gradually turns

her head away from him. He makes inquiries and is told that their torturers have

blinded her. Under his insistent questioning, the girl reluctantly explains that the

soldiers destroyed her frontal vision by holding hot metal prongs close to her lenses.

However, she can still see peripherally; thus, she turns her gaze away from the

magistrate in order to see him more clearly.

Joll darkens his vision to conceal himself from the world and, perhaps, to
distance himself from his victims. Although the magistrate later struggles to perceive
Joll as a sentient being, his first impression of the essence of the colonel’s beliefs
remain consistent with Joll’s actions: “Pain is truth” (5)

The essence of the girl is more obscure. Partially blinded, she makes the best
use of the sight that remains to her. Crippled and impoverished in a strange frontier
village, she has no means of support but begging and prostitution. She practices both
until the magistrate forbids her to beg and offers her a position as a domestic in his
home. His first perception of her is as a combination of domestic servant and
concubine. She is productive as a domestic- “She washes dishes, peels vegetables,
helps to bake bread” (32), and later encourages the reluctant magistrate to make love
to her.
Most of the magistrate’s early thoughts about the girl are attempts to untangle his ambivalent feelings about her and the barbarian culture she represents, since the two are able to converse only through what she knows of his language. He later laments his shortsightedness in not learning her language. She is an enigma to him. He describes her as “a stocky girl with a broad mouth and hair cut in a fringe across her forehead” (73). She has two sisters in her homeland whom she would like to see again. Her father was killed by Joll or his men. Her manner of “seeing” makes her a foil to the magistrate. Whereas he feels compelled to probe the dark labyrinth of the torturer’s mind – he wonders if Joll has a “private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors….?” (12) The girl resists his inquiries about the details of her torture in the magistrate’s first interrogation by saying: “Beans make you fart” (29). When he finally exacts the details of the blinding from her and then asks, “How do you feel toward the men who did this?” (41) She refuses to respond. For days they are unable to have sexual intercourse together as the magistrate probes her with questions as her torturers had probed her with their implements: “Are you here in bed with me because it is what you want?.....Come, tell me why you are here” (40). She replies candidly, “You want to talk all the time.....You should not go hunting if you do not enjoy it” (41).

Although the girl has virtually no choice but to serve this essentially benevolent master, she is not subservient in spirit. Once he reveals his limited perception of her by making a joke comparing her to a fox cub that he has found:
“People will say I keep two wild animals in my room, a fox and a girl” (34). She indicates by her rigid gaze that she does not approve of the comparison, and he apologizes. While the magistrate is torn by conflicting emotions and self-doubt, the girl is stoical. Asked how she survived before he took her in, she readily acknowledges that there were other men, “I did not have a choice. That was how it had to be” (54). When he temporarily stops their sleeping together she accepts this without a word. When he tells her he is going to take her back to her people, she agrees but shows no sign of rejoicing. On the excruciating journey across the desert she does not complain. When the accompanying soldiers ostracize her during her menstrual period, she does not question her exclusion. Most importantly, during his last hours with her, the magistrate sees how clouded his own vision had been in regard to her. Sitting in the tent, he observes her joking with two soldiers by the campfire:

The banter goes on in the pidgin of the frontier, and she is at no loss for words. I am surprised by her fluency, her quickness, her self-possession. I even catch myself in a flush of pride: she is not just the old man’s slut, she is a witty, attractive young woman (63)

Thus, in the last moments of their relationship, the magistrate transcends his myopic view of her as servant, concubine, and wild animal. Through the interstices of the magistrate’s doubting eyes, the barbarian girl with her partial physical blindness retains her manner of seeing: she is direct, uncomplaining, and independent even in servitude. She is productive, stoical, convivial and above all, accepting things as they are, with a composed attitude towards torturers and lovers, pain and pleasure, without passing any judgments.
Prior to the arrival of Joll and the girl, the magistrate’s life had apparently been one of serenity and easy sensuality: administering the law, visiting prostitutes, observing the slow cycle of the seasons, and anticipating a peaceful retirement. Suddenly, a great chasm appears before him, somewhat like the abyss with the arrival of the men from the Third Bureau. As an official, the magistrate is inevitably linked to Joll. As a humane and just man, he knows Joll has passed into the realm of the forbidden and unclean, into the realm of horror.

The internal conflict in the magistrate manifests itself in his relationship with the girl. When he takes her into his home he knows immediately that this is at once an act of compassion and coercion: “The distance between myself and her torturers, I realize, is negligible: I shudder” (27). His first act with her is in its outward form sacramental: he bathes, massages, and oils her feet and broken ankles. The magistrate, however, doubts his motives in performing this ritual. The first time that he does it he is aware that while it is a gesture of kindness to the girl, it is also a means of escape for him:

I lose myself in the rhythm of what I am doing. I lose awareness of the girl herself (28)

At other times he resents his “bondage to the ritual of the oiling and rubbing, the drowsiness, the slump into oblivion” (41). He even wishes to “obliterate” the girl, whom he considers ugly and sees himself as no better than torturers.
The Magistrate feels guilty in his ministration to the girl. He attempts to decipher her scars in order to understand their meaning.

Is it then the case that it is the whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself….Is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? (64)

Stephen Watson in “Colonialism in the Novels of J.M. Coetzee” suggests that Coetzee sees a solution to the cycle of double-thought in the Magistrate,

…self consciousness can be transcended and the endless regression of self-doubt can be overtaken by an overriding will to the truth. (382)

It is such a will to the truth that saves the magistrate from an endless cycle of double-thought and self-recrimination.

Throughout the novel the Magistrate dreams emphasize the opposition between the rigidity of form and the powers and dangers of formlessness. The magistrate is certain that he must have seen the girl among the other prisoners before she was disfigured and crippled. The girl, however, tells him that she and the other prisoners all saw him. In attempting to recall the girl before she was maimed, the magistrate seems to be trying to envision an Edenic time where torturers have no place. Through the medium of six dreams, he finally achieves his desired vision of the girl before she was tortured.

In all his dreams the Magistrate dreams of children building a “snow castle.” The Magistrate’s first dream shows the clean snow obliterating boundaries, the sun
dissolving into mist, the square blurs at its edges into the sky. The Magistrate in his dreams is both drawn to and repelled by a winter scene of children building a snow castle. The children melt away at the approach of the Magistrate, all except for one girl/woman who continues her work and does not even turn to face him. He tries to imagine “the face between the petals of her peaked hood, but cannot” (10).

The subsequent dream presents an indeterminately sexed body, its pubic apertures swarming with bees, an image of the uncleanness resulting from the simultaneous blurring of bodily, sexual and species boundaries. Clearly, while in his conscious behavior the Magistrate equates the imperial mission with due form and ritual, his unconscious reverses the terms to reveal the imperial state as unclean, the formless expanse as pure. On the next occasion, the Magistrate circles the child, determined to learn her face, but the hood reveals no human features. It is not a face at all but another part of the human body that bulges under the skin “it is white, it is the snow itself” (37). The scene is replete not only with the latent dread of a monstrous unknown, but also with a fearful recognition of an uncanny projection. The dream, furthermore, gives evidence of historical man’s potentially violent search for truth in the Magistrate’s compulsion to know the girl working in the snow. He needs to see the girl’s face as a way of gaining access to whatever significance she or her task may hold. Once seen, the girl undergoes a rapid transformation in the dream: human but embryonic, human but monstrous, inhuman, inorganic – “the snow itself.” Repellent and unapproachable, the snow woman/child condenses the unease felt by the
Magistrate after the arrival of the soldiers. No longer is he in charge, no longer is he in sole possession of knowledge, truth and power; instead, he is forced first in dreams, then in dreams, then in his confrontation with the blinded barbarian woman, to confront that rejected other within himself, the alien presence that permeates the air of the town like an evil miasma and that shades off into the mirage – like reflections of the desert. The dream in its atemporality, the recurrent dream becomes a model for the novel as a whole.

The magistrate has his third dream about the girl. In this dream the snow is much deeper than in the others, the air so cold that his features are frozen so that he cannot smile or speak. The girl is again building a snow fort. He tries to tell her that she should put people in the empty square, but he is mute, his tongue frozen like a fish. As she turns toward him, he expects to see again some faceless creature,

    But no, she is herself, herself as I have never seen her, a smiling child, the light sparkling on her teeth and glancing from her jet-black eyes. ‘So this is what it is to see!’ I say to myself. (53)

Soon after this dream, he returns her to her people and homeland and he and the girl make love naturally and happily just before they are separated.

His last three dreams of the girl occur after the magistrate has returned to the frontier village and has determined to openly oppose Joll. In the first of these, there is no longer snow, only dust and cold, an appropriate atmosphere for the harsh reality of this dream-nightmare. The Edenic child is gone and the beggar girl is before him,
huddled against a wall. He attempts to comfort her and unwraps her bandaged feet, only to discover that they have become nightmarish symbols of the torturer’s trade.

The feet lie before me in the dust, disembodied, monstrous, two stranded fish, two huge potatoes (87).

He huddles the detached feet against his body to warm them, and then awakens momentarily before re-entering the dream. In this brief segment, Coetzee gracefully captures the essence of the novel:

I enter the barracks gateway and face a yard as endless as the desert. There is no hope of reaching the other side, but I plod on, carrying the girl, the only key I have to the labyrinth, her head nodding against my shoulder, her dead feet dropping on the other side. (87)

When his fifth dream of the girl occurs, the magistrate has already become the complete rebel/victim, speaking out against Joll’s barbarities, refusing to yield to the impulse of hatred, and suffering the tortures that are the consequence of his rebellion. His nose is broken and his skin welted and bleeding from the blows of a stick as he dreams of the girl. This time she is neither the idealized Edenic girl nor the broken-footed beggar, but simply a lovely girl who lives in a world where no torturers are present. At first he thinks she is again making a “snow-castle or sandcastle,” but then he sees that it is a clay oven she has built.

…..mistaken, it is not a castle she has built but a clay oven…..now he can see that what she is holding out to me is “a loaf of bread still hot,” (109)
She holds out her hands to offer him something. At first he sees it as a “shapeless lump” recalling his early vision of her face, but then he sees that she is offering him a loaf of steaming fresh-baked bread, a gesture as suggestive of a sacrament as his washing and oiling of her feet. This is a marked progression from his initial ambivalence about the barbarian girl, whom he finally sees clearly.

Between this and his last dream about the girl, the magistrate subtly and dangerously mocks Joll’s interrogation. He is excrutiatingly tortured and then is dressed in women’s clothes and derisively hanged from a tree in a mock crucifixion. He is turned loose to beggar himself in the streets as a mockery to the people to whom he once was the sole administrator of the law.

He had his last dream about the girl. The scene is once again the snow-covered square. He begins to walk, but as in the dream-literalism of a Kafka story, the wind-driven snow wafts him aloft. The theme of a vision returns as he sees the solitary girl below his swooping figure:

“She will not see me in time!” he thinks, but she does turn and see him: “For an instant I have a vision of her face, the face of a child, flowing, healthy, smiling on me without alarm, before we collide” (136)

This is a hopeful dream. He awakes, his mouth covered in kisses, not from the girl, but from a stray dog wagging its tail. This delightful yet serious moment is but the stuff of dreams, a momentary respite from the harsh reality to follow.
When the Magistrate returns from this very dangerous winter journey, he is imprisoned by the Third Bureau for “Treasonously consorting” with the enemy. As a prisoner he soon becomes the body in pain. But before he suffers any physical abuse, he first feels elation because his alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over. He responds to the Warrants Officer’s accusation by declaring

We are at peace here…..we have no enemies…..unless I make a mistake…..unless we are the enemy. (77)

Indeed, he understands how the new, Third Bureau barbarians have inverted, unmade civilization. He understands the fragility of justice and of domestic life and the vulnerability of both to interpretation by “civilization” and inversion by torturers. The irony of the magistrate’s retort is no longer the irony of his position as magistrate. His statement sums up and dismantles the contradiction of Empire and why it must construct itself in terms of its enemies, because it is its enemies. In this way, revealing and entering the fracture in the logic of Empire, he frees himself: “I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man.” (78) An ambiguous freedom, perhaps, for he undergoes a physical and mental torture from this point. But it is a moral freedom, a “truthfulness,” which will unravel the Empire’s control of history like a ball of string. For the outpost, and by extension the Empire, falls prey to its own xenophobia, life becomes apathetic, paranoid, until
with the decimation of the expeditionary force in the desert, simply from its failure to contact the barbarians, the outpost virtually disintegrates.

For the outpost, and by extension the Empire falls prey to its own xenophobia, life becomes apathetic, paranoid, until with the decimation of the expeditionary force in the desert, simply from its failure to contact the barbarians, the outpost virtually disintegrates. Without irony or equivocation the Magistrate shouts at the Colonel

.....you are the enemy, you have made the war..... – starting not now but a year ago when you committed your first filthy barbarities here. (114)

The significant issue in this act of separation is the subject position of the Magistrate. For he is not colonized in the way the barbarians may be. Except his position in the ruling class, the ethnicity or background of him is not revealed. However, he is a subject of colonial discourse, as well as becoming subjected to it as consummately as the barbarians. But it is a subject position from which rebellion, the simple act of saying “No!” is indeed possible. The far-reaching revelation of his action is that resistance can emanate from just such a subject position. His resistance leads to his separation from power and makes him subjected to torture and abjection which brings with it a capacity to expose the contradictions within the system.

After his own experience of torture, the Magistrate finds himself in a position similar to that he had imposed on the barbarian girl. A blow on his face leaves a caterpillar like scar under the Magistrate’s eye. The scar is not only identical to those on the girl’s damaged eyes, but the Magistrate also discovers that people are
surreptiously fascinated by the marks on his body. Just as the girl had found shelter and sustenance in the company of several men before the Magistrate took her in, the broken Magistrate sings for his keep when he learns that “he is not without friends, particularly among women”, who can barely conceal “their eagerness to hear his side of the story.” (126, 127)

The clearest example of Coetzee’s allegory is that which appears to be formed by the remnant poplar slips that the Magistrate has recovered from his archeological site. Lance Oslen refers to the wood slips as a sort of ancient hieroglyphics unearthed by the Magistrate whose avocation is archeology. When Colonel Joll interrogates the Magistrate as to the meaning of the poplar slips, the Magistrate can offer no historical explanation. Instead he offers a story. In his capacity as reader, he chooses not to construe them as mere blanks, nor does he offer a reading of them which would generate an entirely new story. Instead he operates intertextually, retelling the events of ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ in coded, reshaped and oppositional form. One slip, interpreted as a father’s greeting to his daughter expresses the loving care and protection which the girl’s tortured father was prevented from providing. A second and third supposedly recount the abduction, beating and death of a brother, recalling the events of the opening of the novel. An invented detail, a stitch through the dead man’s eyelid, underlines the extent to which Empire cultivates and enforces blindness to alternative truths. Colonel Joll’s military exploits are also a target. The last slip, a single character, is decoded as
…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. (112)

The inversion suggests that members of a society may share a common linguistic system but their interpretations differ according to their social and economic positions. The Magistrate has come to recognize that he has been complicit in the work of Empire, that his hands are not clean. The slips reveal that although he and Colonel Joll may share membership of a common category, the Empire, categories can be not merely inverted but reinvented and imaginatively reshaped.

In the sixth and last section of the book, the colonel and the magistrate, the man of war and the man of law, have a final, climatic encounter. On an unfamiliar terrain, Joll’s troops have been routed and slaughtered by the barbarians. Significantly, the hill nomads defeat Joll’s army through their knowledge of the terrain and weather conditions of their land. Unlike Joll, they are body and soul of this place and know its features. With the help of their knowledge and of nature, their victory is won by passive resistance. First Mandel and the soldiers desert the fort; then Joll retreats back to the fort with his defeated army. Returned to authority by default, the Magistrate angrily and impatiently confronts Joll. Joll sobs,

We froze in the mountains! We starved in the desert! Why did no one tell us it would be like that? We were not beaten – they led us out into the desert and then they vanished!....They are barbarians! They lured us on and on…..they would not stand up to us. (147)
The Magistrate did not tell Joll about the dangers of the season, but Joll chose to regard this fact as opinion. The notion that Colonel Joll, too, is only a body can only appear at this moment with the Colonel’s defeat by the elements. Joll also learns the lesson which the barbarians, or the barbarian in themselves, have taught to masterful men, the lesson of collapse into a naked and loathsome physical essence. His eyes, at last, are opened, his dark glasses, smashed or lost from which came “no reciprocal gaze but only my doubled image cast at me” (144). And Joll seems “washed clean” – like the Magistrate, perhaps purified by his experiences, or like Pontius Pilate, denying his guilt. It is then the Magistrate, desolately in full knowledge of his own physicality, becomes the torturer, mentally he envisages and then suppresses the urge to blind the Colonel with splinters of glass broken from the coach window. He has a lesson for Joll that he has long meditated.

I mouth the words and watch him read them on my lips: “The crime that is latent in us we must inflict on ourselves,” I say. I nod and nod, driving the message home. “not on others,” I say: I repeat the words, pointing at my chest, pointing at his. He watches my lips, his thin lips move in imitation, or perhaps in derision, I do not know. (146-7)

The Magistrate cannot know whether his lesson is received with derision or gratitude. But his struggle has not been only to teach Colonel Joll a lesson. When the army has left the town in shambles, the place becomes half deserted with its economic structure virtually destroyed. The Magistrate knows a better way to pass these last days of waiting. Instead of dreaming of a saviour, the Magistrate reassumes his civil administration after the departure of Colonel Joll, the saviour with a sword, and
undertakes a saviour’s role himself. At this moment the Magistrate tries to write his journal. This is the point at which Coetzee rehearses that central question of all resistance literature. It is when the Magistrate sits down to write “a record of settlement to be left for posterity” (154) that he finds what he begins to write is not some clear autonomous history, not the annals of an imperial outpost “or their souls as they waited for the barbarians” (154), but a description that is in large part determined by the genre in which he is writing:

I think: I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to love outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame? (154)

The Magistrate acknowledges his inability to write a history of his outpost that can account both for his aversion to and his complicity with empire. The history remains unwritten except in the Magistrate’s private monologue that is Waiting for the Barbarians. But though the Magistrate has wanted to live outside history, he cannot, he is “the same man” he “always was” but time has broken, “something has fallen in upon” him “from the sky” (143). The Magistrate knows there has been “an irruption of history into the static time of oasis” (143). A man who once hoped to be memorialized by “three lines of print in the Imperial gazette” (8) has learned not to be entirely satisfied either with imposing “history” or with a narrative that merely ignores history. If history is not truth, neither is an absence of history.
The novel ends on a note of indeterminacy. The magistrate is still unable to set down any organized record of his times and feels that “There has been something starving me in face and I still do not see it” (155). And the Magistrate’s actual narrative concludes not with a dream of children but with real children. In the final dream the Magistrate, merged with snow and wind, flies once more, swooping down on the girl. No damage is done by their collision which, however, has become a meeting of like with like. He is left with a vivid impression of her smiling, healthy face, and a feeling of relief. The dream becomes a kind of reality in the novel’s final pages. Once more the Magistrate watches children at play in the snow, but this time far from constructing a defensive fort, they are building a snow man in the middle of the outpost’s central square, symbolically filling their nearly-abandoned town with new life, suggesting that the town may be find-suggesting a hope that South Africa may find – despite the “waiting for the barbarians,” a real “second chance to build an earthly paradise” (143).

Coetzee’s fiction, in terms of desire to prevent the appropriation of history to the discourse of the novel, represents an engagement with history on his own terms, terms that can blur the distinctions between self and other, between oppressor and the oppressed. The language of Coetzee’s novels reveals both the liberation and oppression latent in theoretical discourse and reminds that like the Magistrate and Coetzee himself, the people of the world possess “language in a world of pain”.

****