

Haunting Imperial Representations into Dialogue: *Os cus de Judas* by António Lobo Antunes and *Waiting for the Barbarians* by J. M. Coetzee¹

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Abstract: Bearing in mind that the colonial experience decisively influenced the Anglophone and the Lusophone worlds, it is important to consider the literary production of writers from different traditions from a comparative perspective. Their books not only problematize cultural and power structures, but also examine the implications of this process for the construction and transformation of individual and collective identities. In this paper, I propose to compare two books: *Os cus de Judas* (1979) by António Lobo Antunes and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) by J. M. Coetzee. Both novels discuss relationships of power between the metropolitan centre and the colonial periphery from the perspective of two men working for the colonial enterprise of their native countries in a war context. My aim is to examine how and to what extent the novels, taking the protagonists' traumatic memories as a starting point, converge on the reflection upon the ambiguous status of colonizers in the colonies, thus proposing conflicting representations of empire, which problematize the transforming and ideologically negotiable condition of individual and collective identities.

“[S]entado na cabina da camioneta, ao lado do condutor,
de boné nos olhos, o vibrar de um cigarro infinito na mão,
inicieei a dolorosa aprendizagem da agonia”

Antunes, *Os cus de Judas*

“And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were some kind of solution.”
(Cavafy, “Waiting for the Barbarians”)

With the growth of post-colonial studies, the myth that only colonized people were the victims of the process of colonization was debunked. Many writers started to discuss and problematize not only the experience of officers working for the colonial enterprise both in the colonies and in the metropolis, but also the semantic investments they made in the symbolic representations of the empire from their perspective.

In this paper I focus my attention on two novels: *Os cus de Judas* [*South of Nowhere*] (1979) by António Lobo Antunes, and *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) by J. M. Coetzee. My main interest is to compare how writers belonging to different literary traditions, but affected in the same way by imperialism (though within different historical and social contexts), approached the representation of the ambiguities related to the implementation of colonialist policies and their effects.

Although Antunes's volume has definite and unequivocal spatial and temporal coordinates, making reference to the Portuguese Colonial War, unlike Coetzee's book, whose allegorical traits might refer to any country submitted to colonial oppression at any time, both novels discuss violence in the colony and have narrators who are male officers of the colonial enterprise.² Both texts are confessional discourses which problematize the effects of dislocation on the protagonists' search for identity (Ashcroft; Seixo) and consider the significant epistemological and ideological implications of the characters' transit across borders. My aim in this essay is to examine how and to what extent Lobo Antunes and Coetzee use the protagonists' traumatic memories to reflect on the colonizers' ambiguous stature in the colony, thus proposing conflicting representations of empire and addressing the artificial, plural and ideologically negotiable condition of individual and collective identities.

Defining what a frontier is in a context of colonial dominance is apparently paradoxical, for the physical borders delimiting metropolitan and colonial space do not correspond to the cultural frontiers that determine social and cultural relations between colonizers and colonized. Thus, if, on the one hand, it is somewhat contradictory to distinguish the metropolis from the colony, as they are both part of the same imperialist territory, on the other hand, the distinction between metropolis and colony defines ideological borders that

clearly determine the power relations between the centre and the margins. The apparent paradox is ultimately undermined when we accept that discussing the frontier within the frame of colonial dominance implies considering an issue that rests on a rhetoric of limits, as understood in Ribeiro's "A Retórica." This discussion has important repercussions on the configuration of individual and collective identities.

I believe that the officer who works for the empire in the colony may be characterized as a frontier being, for, as I have already stated elsewhere, I understand the frontier as a multipolar axiological space.³ In other words, and according to António de Sousa Ribeiro's reading of Boaventura de Sousa Santos's theoretical assumptions, the frontier is, *par excellence*, the space of interaction and cultural construction of the Other. In this sense, it should be understood as an area of dialogue and learning that is potentially emancipating. The characterization of the frontier as a multipolar axiological space makes the opposition between colonizers and colonized considerably relative, for the experience of the frontier gives rise to the ambivalent identification which Bhabha emphasizes and which is related to the mixture of attraction and repulsion between the parts.

In the novels analyzed in this essay, the protagonists experience an identity crisis that results mainly from knowledge acquired on the frontier and from their progressive inability to accept the physical and/or imaginary limits imposed by imperial power. Within a space where, due to the colonizing process, the sense of belonging of colonizers and colonized alike becomes ambiguous and questionable, contact with the colonized in the violent atmosphere of war initiates a process of reconfiguring identity, which in turn reveals its dynamic and problematic condition (Mendes), with obvious implications in the configuration of imagined national community as conceived by Anderson. The contact and, in some cases, the interaction with the colonized stimulates the colonial officer to search for the Other, which is a quest for himself/herself at the same time. In this process, surreptitious attempts to erase or silence the Other are disclosed and confronted. If, on the one hand, the imperial ideological machine constructs the image of the colonial Other (Boehmer), adhering to the principle that the colonized is socially and culturally inferior to the colonizer, then on the other hand the experience of colonial war confronts the metropolitan officer with the Other, whose condition of vulnerability is not very different from his/hers. Consequently, not only is the alleged superiority and authority of the colonizer subverted—so too is the obscure notion that

only the colonized is a victim of the colonizing process.

It is worth returning to the protagonists' situations in the two novels in order to clarify what I mean by experience of the frontier and its influence on the revelation of the Other. The doctor in Antunes's novel and the magistrate in Coetzee's narrate the memories of their comings and goings to and from the borders of the empire. In *Os cus de Judas*, the doctor travels between Lisbon and Angola and, within the Angolan territory, between urban centres and the wilderness. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the magistrate travels to the frontier with the aim of handing the young barbarian he protects back to her people. In the South African writer's novel, the frontier marks the limit that separates the empire from the territory where the so-called "barbarians" live. They were dispossessed of their land by the colonizers, and, although they are rarely seen, the imperialist discourse transforms them into a potential threat to the balance of life in the colony. Despite the fact that the metropolis is neither a starting point nor a destination in the protagonist's trips, the walled-town where the narrator lives represents a space of imperial control, even though it is very distant from the metropolitan centre of decisions.

In the Portuguese writer's novel, the doctor's trip to Angola is not voluntary and is approached, from the very beginning, as a transition from childhood to adulthood, an assumption that confers on the trip to the *Ultramar* an important epistemological dimension on an individual level. This dimension ironically reflects the protagonist's aunts' hope that the war could transform him into a man. Moreover, its relevance extends to the collective domain when we consider that the narrator's account of his memories in the Colonial War deconstructs the imperialist propaganda system that had been justifying and sustaining not only the empire but also the necessity of the Angolan conflict. It is worth noting that, in Lobo Antunes's novel, the narrator's comings and goings to and from Lisbon and Luanda (*simulacrum* of the metropolitan capital in the colony) result in his progressive "de-identification" with the metropolis and the glorious national past that the historical discourse helped transform into a myth.

In Coetzee's novel, the journey to the frontier of the barbarians' "occupied territory" is voluntary, though no less dangerous. In fact, it represents a final attempt to read and interpret the Other, mainly in the form of those who had undergone torture inflicted by the representatives of the Third Bureau. The Other is represented by the young barbarian woman who the magistrate receives in his house and with whom he has an intimate relationship. It is

curious to observe that, from the beginning of the novel, the magistrate is characterized as a man who has a special interest in the past, as illustrated by his meticulous care in finding, preserving and interpreting objects from other civilizations that have withstood the devastating action of time. However, his attempts to read the Other, which are informed by his erotic relationship with the young barbarian and by the deciphering of inscriptions found in the archaeological remains, fail (Parry 48; Jolly 127-28; Kossew 93-94; Dovey 143). The magistrate's care with the young woman's body is symptomatically similar to the way in which he tends the remains found in the sand. (The rituals of cleaning and preserving objects with the use of oil are illustrative examples of this). His attempt to read the Other through the marks left on the woman's body and on the disinterred objects reveals his respect for memory and explains his zeal to leave everything ready and conserved, for he believes that, in the future, his civilization will also be faced as the Other when its traces are found and analyzed.

When comparing the two books, it is clear that in Coetzee's novel the epistemological search for the Other (already found in Lobo Antunes's, albeit circumscribed to the Portuguese colonial experience) becomes even more comprehensive, and curiously, in pragmatic terms, more effective, since there are no definite spatial or temporal coordinates. Leaving aside the opinion of several critics, who equate the novel's context with the apartheid rule in South Africa, I prefer to focus on the novel's lack of definition of the historical period at issue, the characters' names, and the geographical location of the metropolis and the colony. My aim is to show that, as in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the empire Coetzee's reader gets to know through the magistrate's memories is one that transcends time, conferring an important trans-temporal dimension on the novel and the problems it addresses.

In fact, the allegorical nature of Coetzee's novel translates the author's interest in highlighting how important it is to know and respect the Other in any civilization. Hence the protagonist's need to observe and decipher the mysterious marks left on the woman's tortured body, as well as on the ruins of the past. The woman, however, resists the magistrate's questions, and usually answers with silence whenever he tries to find out how the suffering has been inflicted upon her.⁴ Thus, the magistrate is unable to get to know and reveal the Other embodied in the barbarian woman (here it is worth noting that, etymologically, "barbarian" means "one who is culturally strange or different"). He will only truly understand the nature of the colonial Other's condition

when he himself is subjected to various types of violence by the Third Bureau men and, after being released, becomes a wanderer living at the margins of society, deprived of authority and, to some extent, of his identity as representative of the empire in the colony.

I now return to Homi Bhabha's notion of ambivalent identification, since both Lobo Antunes and Coetzee try, through the protagonists' behavior, to blur the hierarchical, cultural and social frontiers, which, according to the imperialistic logic, should distinguish the colonizers from the colonized. The ambiguity of identity (I maintain that it is an "anxiety" of identity) stems from the doctor's and the magistrate's confrontation with other officers serving "the imperialist cause"—confrontation that derives from the abuse of power that promotes the Other's dehumanization, transforming him/her into an animal. In Lobo Antunes's novel, the example of the sadistic and violent behavior of PIDE's agents towards prisoners or that of the Katangese soldier who shamelessly violates the doctor's privacy when he uses the latter's toothbrush are illustrative of the aforementioned ambiguity/anxiety of identity. In the South African writer's text, out of many possible examples, I would like to highlight Colonel Joll's violence, for he unflinchingly believes that "truth" can only be extracted from prisoners through the infliction of pain. Coetzee thus addresses the problem of the artificial character of a "true" testimony, since it is given under torture and thus depends on the tortured person's capacity to resist pain and suffering. Colonel Joll's belief that truth can only be achieved by means of violence ultimately deconstructs the apparent truth that justifies the empire and the colonizers' superiority over the barbarians. The individual memories that the magistrate tries to organize through writing are transformed into an exercise of reconfiguration of the public representation of memory, as well as a site of memory (Nora), which proposes an ambivalent representation of the authority of an empire undergoing a process of deconstruction.

All these examples illustrate how identity is socially fabricated and re-fabricated through social interactions, and how individuals shape their identities on the basis of conflicts between different agents and socializing places (Mendes 490). Lobo Antunes's and Coetzee's choice of protagonists is clearly not gratuitous for, despite their critical voices, they are "civilizing emissaries" who, in the colonial space, are vested with power (power to treat and save lives in the doctor's case and to restore order in the magistrate's case). First, within the specific context of colonial war, such choice undermines the colonizer's authority as regards decisions on life and death, as well as on right and wrong.

The doctor in Lobo Antunes's novel struggles with his condition as a man transformed into a cowardly animal by the imperialist army, feeling impotent before the violence of war and afraid for his own life and for that of his fellows in all the "cus de Judas" he has been to. If, on the one hand, the doctor sees the soldiers' bodies being sealed off in plumb coffins, from where the unforgettable odor of death exhales, on the other, he helps colonized women deliver their babies in silence. By being legally vested with the power to draw borders between good and evil in the colony, the magistrate experiences the power abuses ordered by another emissary of the empire when the former is considered an enemy, which is also when his "painful learning of agony" begins.⁵

It is interesting to question why both authors address the experience of two ruined empires through two male discourses that are proffered by colonizers. In the search for a possible answer, I would like to focus my attention on the relationships these two men establish with female characters in the narratives. In both novels, the protagonists' relationships with colonized women are ruled by silence. Sofia somehow represents the doctor's encounter with his human side. She represents much more than a way to satisfy his sexual needs. In her arms the doctor finds comfort amid wartime privations (here, it is important to notice that the chapter identified by "S" is one of the harshest in terms of criticism of the empire). It seems hasty to interpret the female characters' silence (also present in the doctor's relationship with the woman he meets at the bar and who listens to his accounts in a post-colonial situation) as an element that suggests lack of communication or resistance. The African woman is characterized as free by nature. Silence, by contrast, can be read as a sign of mutual understanding and comprehension, as a sign of a possible relationship between colonizers and colonized, without the specter of the imposition of one's authority over the other's submission. It is worth pointing out that Sofia's silence is totally different from that of the female prisoner who is raped by the army officer. In this case, there is no exchange, no communion, just exploitation. However, this same violence eventually reaches Sofia when she is considered a "commissary" by PIDE and faces death with her "ticket to Luanda," after having been arrested and repeatedly raped by the soldiers. The doctor is left with another kind of silence: the cowardly silence of all those who, once again, feel powerless to fight against the excesses and absurdities of the colonial enterprise—a silence that is definitively broken when he undergoes a moment of catharsis promoted by the remembering process and that is transformed

into the novel *Os cus de Judas*.

The magistrate, on the other hand, develops a bizarre kind of relationship with the young barbarian. He knows the most intimate parts of her body thanks to their erotic relationship. The odd aspect is that this eroticism does not result in sexual intercourse. Unlike the soldiers, who helped the woman but exchanged a coat or a pair of boots for sexual favors, the magistrate wants to know how torture was used against her and her father, as if this knowledge were vital not only to his understanding of the colonial enterprise and of his role in the colonial project, but also to the configuration of his individual and collective identity. On the one hand, as pointed out before, the young woman's silence may be read as a form of resistance to the Other's rule, for revealing the details of the torture she was subjected to implies the acknowledgment of the colonizers' power, and, as such, the negation of her barbarian identity.

On the other hand, however, the woman's silence reflects the contradictory difficulties of communication between colonizers and colonized. In other words, the young barbarian interprets the magistrate's refusal to have sexual intercourse with her as a way of refusing the Other (in this case, the colonial other). It is only when both share the adversities of the journey towards the territory occupied by the barbarians that she understands the magistrate's effort to return her to her people (even though he would like her to return with him to the walled-town). It is then, upon her insistence, that sexual intercourse finally takes place. As in Lobo Antunes's novel, and specifically as regards the doctor's relationship with Sofia, there is no appropriation. Communication, however, is not effective, and this becomes evident when the barbarian prefers to remain with her people and the magistrate regrets not having learned the barbarians' language.

In Coetzee's, as well as in Lobo Antunes's book, the written word represents the protagonist's effort to break the silence dominating the power relations between metropolis and the colony, between colonizers and colonized. This written word denounces the hollowness of the myth of danger represented by the barbarians, and starts to regulate the inhabitants' daily lives in the walled-town as soon as they are no longer protected by the empire. It is again the magistrate who tries to bring order to the chaos created by the abuses of history imposed by imperial power: no longer as one of its representatives, but instead as someone who has experienced the ambiguity and anxiety represented by frontier knowledge, and who is searching for his identity through the constant quest for the Other, that Other who is denied or silenced by

imperial power. In sum, Lobo Antunes's and Coetzee's novels represent an attempt by writers belonging to different literary traditions to symbolically reveal and discuss the burden of the imperialist legacy upon history through fictional discourse. And this attempt clearly implies the reassessment of the epistemological and ideological representation of history itself (Parry 62; Watson 32-33).

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Elena Z. Galvão for having revised the final version of this paper.

² On *Waiting for the Barbarians* as an allegory, see Jolly; Kossew; and Dovey.

³ See Martins in the list of Works Cited. I am grateful to Wladimir Kryszynski for having suggested the expression "multipolar axiological space."

⁴ On silence in the fictions of J. M. Coetzee and within the discussion of colonial and post-colonial discourses, see Parry and Marais.

⁵ I borrowed the expression "painful learning of agony" from Antunes's *Os cus de Judas*.

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