The Visceral Allegory of Waiting for the Barbarians: A Postmodern Re-Reading of J. M. Coetzee’s Apartheid Novels
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THE VISCERAL ALLEGORY OF WAITING FOR
THE BARBARIANS
A Postmodern Re-reading of J. M. Coetzee’s Apartheid Novels

by Shadi Neimneh

Nowadays, in the midst of a wave of protests and uprisings in the Arab world, the body re-emerges as a historical site of oppression and resistance. The killing of protesters that took or is taking place at the hands of security forces in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria testifies to the materiality of historical oppression. Apartheid should never be considered away from other contexts of bodily violations and loss of human rights like the Nazi death camps or the current Arab uprisings or even the Israeli-Palestinian situation. The use of sniper bullets, arrests, and torture against demonstrators in the Arab world is similar, for example, to the Sharpeville shootings in 1960 in South Africa when many protesters against the pass laws were killed and injured, with many demonstrators shot in the back as they fled the police. The same applies to the Soweto uprising of 1976 which resulted in the death of hundreds of black students protesting against apartheid and teaching in Afrikaans. Even the protesters’ goal of attaining civil liberties in South Africa under apartheid is similar to the causes of the current turmoil in many Arab states. Political rights and socioeconomic reform—as the current success of revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya shows/promises—are achieved at a price of bodily sacrifice.

Traditionally, allegory rhetorically speaks other than what it says. It becomes visible “when a progression of events or images suggests a translation of them into conceptual language” (Frye et al. 12). As Brenda Machosky reminds us, allegory is “to say one thing and mean another” and it “has always demanded that we think otherwise” (7). It is a way of writing and interpreting literature highlighting a contrast between an apparent mean-
ing and an intended one that often gets privileged. J. A. Cuddon defines it as “a story in verse or prose with a double meaning; a primary or surface meaning; and a secondary or under-the-surface meaning” (22). Allegory, besides being a narrative in which something is spoken “otherwise,” is a narrative that displaces and ambiguates reference. As a symbolic means of representation that guises true meaning, it is not typically viewed as a visceral form of art.

By nature, allegory highlights the difficulties of articulating what is not, or cannot be, said. It hints at an “other” difficult to articulate and is implicated in the problematic of representation, which accounts for its relevance in a postmodern critique of Coetzee’s apartheid works.1 It is not simply, Benjamin argues, “a playful illustrative technique,” but “a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is” (162). Traditionally, the literal meaning in allegory is overshadowed by the figurative one. Because this surface meaning is doubled by the figurative one external to the text and because allegory refers us to distant origins of meaning suggested by Benjamin’s metaphor of “ruins” (178), a good deal of allegorical interpretation becomes abstractly intellectual, trying to establish links between what is stated and what is implied. In Allegories of Reading, Paul de Man highlights levels of reading ranging between the literal and the figural and treats readings as allegorical, acting according to what we bring to texts from the world: “By reading we get, as we say, inside a text that was first something alien to us and which we now make our own by an act of understanding. But this understanding becomes at once the representation of an extra-textual meaning” (12–13). De Man further argues that “Allegories are always allegories of metaphor and, as such, they are always allegories of the impossibility of reading—a sentence in which the genitive ‘of’ has itself to be ‘read’ as a metaphor” (205). And this metaphorical dimension is only one level of allegorical interpretation we can use in Coetzee. But since this traditional approach is inadequate and problematic for critics of Coetzee because allegory is deemed in this sense as the evasive representation of abstract ideas or moral principles, I articulate another level of allegorical interpretation, a “visceral” one.2

Coetzee’s apartheid novels problematize our understanding of allegory (the interpretative act) in that allegory in them functions at intellectually distant and more literal levels. In Coetzee’s revision of received notions of allegory, the narrative is as important as, if not more important than, the external sphere of conceptual meanings. This is Coetzee’s diversion from simple allegories in which the surface meaning is overwhelmed by a deeper one of commentary. In traditional allegories, characters are abstractions and the plot communicates a moral doctrine. In Coetzee, concrete and material narrative facts are not overwhelmed by abstract meanings. Coetzee defamiliarizes allegory and allegorizes, in the process, the non-allegorical, i.e. the literal. The first-order level of overt meaning foregrounds referentiality and complicates it. It is more important than the covert parallels. The literal level of meaning that is traditionally submerged under the symbolic one is foregrounded, which reverses allegory’s interest in intellectual otherness. Bodily suffering that happens at the literal level of Coetzee’s apartheid novels, in Waiting for the Barbarians as I exemplify here, cannot be eclipsed by interpretive meanings or external referents.3

While the received notion of allegory relates narrative events to conceptual or moral levels, Coetzee in “The Novel Today” resists simple allegorization when he claims that “a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering” (4). Aware of
criticisms that allegory is abstractly rational and mechanical, he seeks to revise this notion of allegory as dissociated, to dramatize allegory’s political and historical investment via a literality that overwhelsms any figurative constructions of meaning, without necessarily negating allegory’s connection to abstraction. The literal and the metaphorical interact, but the literal is not jettisoned once it is launched at meaning. If traditional allegory transforms political realities into narrative and tackles them abstractly, Coetzee makes narrative events strongly present. Revising allegory in a postmodern fashion, Coetzee deconstructs the logic through which it works. Each novel, as I explicate in my analysis of Waiting for the Barbarians, performs a visceral materiality of its own, but the general effect on us is still allegorical, which is why a visceral allegory is intertwined with allegorical viscerality since the materiality of the suffering body becomes a new order for the allegorical. In Coetzee we never get past the body but he, as a postmodernist, problematizes the representation of the material body, which is why his early work received hostile reviews within South Africa.

The Undeniable Body

Coetzee’s is a preoccupation with the undeniable authority of suffering and oppression to which the body is subjected in material history. In an interview with David Attwell in Doubling the Point when asked to comment on the importance of the body in his works, especially with relation to his novel Foe, Coetzee talks about power relations and the undeniable authority/alterity of the suffering body: “Friday is mute, but Friday does not disappear, because Friday is body” (248). Coetzee adds by way of asserting the ontological existence of the body: “Whatever else, the body is not ‘that which is not,’ and the proof that it is the pain it feels. The body with its pain becomes a counter to the endless trials of doubt” (248). The suffering body in pain is beyond doubt in that material suffering—bodily mutilation and slavery in the case of Friday—is viscerally real to the victim of oppression, happening as a consequence of the power exercised on the victim. Similarly, Elaine Scarry writes that “The physical pain is so incontestably real that it seems to confer its quality of ‘incontestable reality’ on that power that has brought it into being. It is, of course, precisely because the reality of that power is so highly contestable, the regime so unstable, that torture is being used” (27). The suffering body has an undeniable power for the writer who is implicated in historical guilt. Suffering in South Africa wields an authority on the white writer and is not to be dismissed. It even assumes its authority over the writer and overwhelms him. As Coetzee writes in Doubling the Point, “it is not that one grants the authority of the suffering body: the suffering body takes this authority: that is its power. To use other words: its power is undeniable” (248). Coetzee adds that suffering overwhelms him, that his thinking “is thrown into confusion and helplessness by the fact of suffering in the world” (248). He articulates the postmodern difficulty of representing the reality of material suffering taking place in the world. He is aware that bodily suffering happens around us and constitutes material history, but he is also aware that such events are estranged and complicated when we represent them in fiction and translate historical materiality into the discourse of the novel. He grants non- or pre-discursive reality to the suffering body and simultaneously interrogates the body’s discursive production.
The body acts discursively as a trope for oppression within a postcolonial context, in and outside South Africa. At another level, the viscerality of suffering and pain existing at a novel’s literal level negotiates the distant analogies we might make and forms another visceral level of allegorical significance. The metaphorical meanings are allegorical just as the literal is allegorical in its way. While I might have conceded to Rebecca Saunders’s claim that allegory “is a kind of language in which a text’s literal meaning is foreign to its proper meaning,” in Coetzee’s case the vividness and abundance of bodily suffering are not exactly “foreign” to the novels’ “proper” meaning (223). The visceral materiality that abounds in the novels appropriates any “proper” allegorical meanings and enacts / embodies them. It bridges the gap between different levels of meaning. And instead of simply making us intellectually ponder the figural context to which the novels allude, Coetzee’s apartheid novels evoke a crude viscerality of pain and suffering that makes them peculiar allegories of the body. To the extent that all readings are somewhat allegorical in that modern allegory generalizes and admits the play of meaning, this article allegorizes Coetzee’s novels and reads them as postmodern allegories of the body at an intellectual level and, more importantly or rather more vividly, at a visceral level.

Intellectual / Discursive Allegory and Postmodernism

A negative critique of Coetzee’s “dehistoricized” allegories of the colonial situation fails to acknowledge that he sought to find a way of addressing apartheid realities as part of a global history of colonialism and struggled against the difficulty of articulating material suffering in fiction because it is beyond representation or, when described, is subject to fictional construction. Meskell and Weiss write that what many critics “have found difficult to grasp is that, rather than mimetically reproducing the past’s historical facticity, Coetzee’s writing wrestles with the material, bodily affect of that history” (97). A postmodernist, Coetzee conveys how material suffering is mediated in language. As Richard Lehan contends, a major assumption of postmodernism “is that meaning is a human construct, the result of paradigmatic thinking, and the product of the mediated questions we choose to answer” (249). Because postmodernism questions realism, it allows us to relate to the world, not mimetically, but through discourse.

Postmodernism’s problematization of representation as discursive should take us to the confluence between postmodernism and allegory because allegory is typically viewed as a means of self-reflexive, discursive representation. Like postmodernism, allegory makes us think “otherwise” about the real. Examined as allegories about the South African situation, Coetzee’s apartheid novels represent that situation discursively and mediate it, which makes them, intellectually, postmodern allegories about the interplay between history and its reproduction. Craig Owens underscores allegory’s alliance with the postmodern project and its celebration of problematized reference. In his two essays on “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” he admits that allegory has been long viewed as an “aesthetic aberration, the antithesis of art” (67). For Owens, however, postmodernism “neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference” (“Part 2” 80). Allegory, similarly, problematizes
the relationship between the textual and the meta-textual. It celebrates the interplay of possible meanings functioning at different levels and in different contexts. Hence, what Owens calls “the allegorical impulse,” often deconstructive, is strongly related to postmodernism. Such an impulse “that characterizes postmodernism,” Owens argues, “is a direct consequence of its preoccupation with reading” (“Part 2” 64). For Owens, allegory and postmodernism are intertwined as far as representation is concerned.

I align Coetzee’s allegories functioning at the literal level, what I call visceral allegories, with the material body and align the allegories functioning at the intellectual level, what I call traditional allegories, with the discursively constructed body. The analogy Benjamin draws between allegories and ruins in my epigraph can be understood in terms of the distance from origins ruins make us aware of and thus a mediated, intellectual meaning rather than a direct one. Allegory suggests a difference between present and distant levels of meaning. The distant level of meaning works generally, and discursively, through ideas beyond the immediate context of the work. But, importantly, Benjamin’s figure emphasizes the (historical) materiality of allegory, its “visceral” subjection to ruin, pain, or destruction. Actually, Benjamin articulates the subtle viscerality of allegory rather than its historical effacement when he writes, “In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting” (177–78). Moreover, allegory, commonly thought to destroy literal meaning, functions subversively in Coetzee by recreating visceral/literal bodies.

Frye shares De Man’s premise that all commentary is allegorical in a thematic reading when he claims that formal allegories have “a strong thematic interest, though it does not follow . . . that any thematic criticism of a work of fiction will turn it into an allegory . . . . Genuine allegory is a structural element in literature: it has to be there, and cannot be added by critical interpretation alone” (Anatomy 53–54). Frye adds that commentary is “allegorical interpretation, an attaching of ideas to the structure of poetic imagery” and that it “looks at literature as, in its formal phase, a potential allegory of events and ideas” (Anatomy 89). A “naïve allegory” for Frye loses literary merit in being clear or direct; it is one that translates “ideas into images” (Anatomy 90). For Owens, as for De Man (but not explicitly for Frye), allegory “can no longer be condemned as something merely appended to the work of art, for it is revealed as a structural possibility inherent in every work” (“Part 2” 64). Coetzee’s allegories are far from being imposed or naïve as they are about mediating the body within self-conscious, multi-layered allegories. Mrs. Curren in Age of Iron lives an allegory created by her symbolic cancer in an apartheid South Africa torn by township violence, and the titular protagonist Michael K poses to the medical examiner as an allegory of a resistant materiality in a future civil war South Africa. Similarly, the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians allegorizes imperial oppression. It is in their entirety and thematically that we can see Coetzee’s apartheid novels as allegories of the body. Each time we give the literal an interpretive meaning we allegorize it and make it intellectually abstract. However, the problem with allegorizing fiction at the thematic level is that we read it figurally, which often reduces its effect in flat, conventional allegories. This is why Coetzee’s allegories of the body align themselves with an empowering postcolonial rhetoric and resist subsuming the literal under the metaphorical as traditional allegories do.
Waiting for the Barbarians has an indeterminate setting ideal for an allegory. Moreover, its generalized treatment of oppressive systems and state-sponsored torture can discursively relate to the South Africa of the writing time in the late 1970s. Fredric Jameson offers a “sweeping hypothesis” that “All third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical” and specifically “national allegories” in the confluence they stage between “the private and the public” (69). Jameson’s term “national allegories” indicates the generalizing trend we associate with allegories and our tendency to read in a particular way each time we allegorize a body of works. Jameson’s label is useful if we consider how Coetzee shares with third-world writers a preoccupation with the experience of colonialism and its manifestations. This is why saying that Coetzee’s apartheid novels are, to draw on Jameson, “national allegories” of the body can be understood at the intellectual and traditional level of ideas but within a politicized, more concrete context. In Coetzee’s revision of traditional allegories, postcolonial, postmodern elements add to the novels’ political and historical force. This means that even if we understand Coetzee’s apartheid novels in the typical sense of ideas, the novels use allegory to voice anti-imperial, and anti-allegorical, rhetoric. Allegory is employed by Coetzee to subvert established imperial structures which are, by definition, dichotomously allegorical.

Since Coetzee is contextualizing allegory and using it to different ends from those of abstract intellectual formations, we find that his apartheid novels are self-conscious allegories in a subversive sense. The novels remind us of their status as allegories of a resistant materiality difficult to grasp yet inaccessible to us without discursive mediation. Coetzee does not accidentally use the word “allegory” or its variants in his novels. He wants us to read the novels in a particular (that is, untraditional) way, and the novels reflect on their reading as such. Since allegory is “a mix of making and reading combined in one mode, its nature is to produce a ruminative self-reflexivity” (Fletcher 77). Allegories are aware of their self-reflexive nature and their methodologies of representing the world, which draws the reader’s attention to their fictional status. “Self-reflection,” Fletcher argues, “is obsessively an aspect of the allegorical method itself, that is, allegory works by defining itself in its enigmatic use” (78). Coetzee writes in an allegorical tradition and simultaneously against this tradition.

To reiterate, to read is to allegorize, and Coetzee’s allegory invites yet resists interpretation. Jeremy Tambling writes that the “desire to know, which produces allegory, also engenders allegorical interpretation (allegoresis)” (167). When asked by Joll and Mandel to interpret a set of ancient wooden slips with unknown script taken to be coded messages between the magistrate and the barbarians, the magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians memorably retorts that they, due to their polysemy, form an “allegory”: “They can be read in many orders. Further, each slip can be read in many ways” (Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians 109). Allegory, we should remember, can be thought of as a “continued metaphor” (Fletcher 94). It happens, Owens says, “whenever one text is doubled by another” (68). The magistrate reads the slips as an allegory about oppression within a novel that can be allegorically read so. If we are to understand and interpret Coetzee’s apartheid novels as doubling each other, we are essentially allegorizing the interpretive act, for “allegorical works do not exist except in a universe of continuing allegoresis, commentary,
and interpretation” (Melville 88). This doubling device serves to point out the limitations of a traditional allegorical approach in which the literal meaning is doubled by the metaphorical one. *Waiting for the Barbarians* defies the traditional allegorical approach it seems to invite and upon which it is organically founded.

By reading the letters on certain slips as potentially standing for “war,” “vengeance,” or “justice” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 109), the magistrate relies on the conventional meaning of allegory in which something stands for another through an intellectual system of equivalents or correspondences. Moreover, he is allegorizing any allegorical reading as the contrast between the signifier and the signified. As ancient imperial relics, the slips are distant from their enunciation and receptive of interpretations. The magistrate found them among the ruins of an ancient civilization in the desert surrounding the settlement. Excavated and uprooted as they are, they lack the immediate context in which they can be “properly” understood, which is why the magistrate uses them to mock the Empire’s men by giving a travesty of present rather than distant oppression. This self-conscious reference to the status of the novel and to the interpretive act as allegorical represents the intellectually, metaphorical realm we traditionally encounter in allegories. Owens argues that allegory is “consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete—an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin, which Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence” (70). Owens adds that allegory is “an emblem of mortality, of the inevitable dissolution and decay to which everything is subject” (“Part 2” 70). Allegories engage history through the metaphor of the lost past, but in Coetzee they also evoke the strong materiality and visceral presentness of this fragmented past.

Allegory is based on a principle of openness to interpretation and a tacit understanding among writer and reader about a referential world beyond the text to which allegory refers. It constructs meaning and invites us to look for it in ruptures and fragments. Treating the world as a ruin, allegory is a way of looking at it in Benjamin’s account. As Owens contends, it is the model of “all commentary, all critique, insofar as these are involved in rewriting a primary text in terms of its figural meaning” (69). But this figural meaning often takes the place of the more immediate one. Owens writes that “the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. This is why allegory is condemned, but it is also the source of its theoretical significance” (69). Allegory commonly keeps its meaning “walled off from the source or initial stage of its utterance” (Fletcher 94). The Empire’s representatives want to know what the characters on the slips stand for, and the magistrate’s reply highlights their openness to interpretation and subverts the Empire’s attempts to dominate signification. When he attempts to “read” some slips to Joll and Mandel, the magistrate ironically reads them as an allegory of imperial oppression, which, metaphorically, reflects back on the status of the novel with relation to apartheid politics at the traditionally intellectual level. Just as we know that the magistrate cannot read barbarian script, granting that the relics carry language, we should know that a traditional allegorical reading is distant from the original meaning the text seeks to communicate/present (and even make us feel as I argue in the next section).

At the peak of his frustration with the silent barbarian girl, the magistrate—an allegorist looking for signs and hidden meanings in torture rooms, tortured bodies, burial places, the cycle of the seasons, and the sounds of the night—vents his frustration in trying to
distance himself from the girl’s torturers and questions the “allegorical” constructedness of meaning:

It is I who am seducing myself, out of vanity, into these meanings and correspondences. What depravity is it that is creeping upon me? I search for secrets and answers, no matter how bizarre, like an old woman reading tea-leaves. There is nothing to link me with torturers, people who sit waiting like beetles in dark cellars. How can I believe that a bed is anything but a bed, a woman’s body anything but a site of joy? (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 43–44)

As an amateur archeologist, cartographer, and historian, the magistrate is a seeker of meanings and signs. No wonder, he directs his interpretive will to the barbarian girl to fathom her story of torture. However, this self-conscious allegorization employed in the novel is used to reflect on histories of imperial oppression or complicity in such oppression and significantly to problematize allegory as an intellectual system of equivalents/symbols.

The magistrate not only reiterates the distinction between literal and allegorical readings, but he also resists allegorically reading himself as a figure for the torturer. An allegorical reading in the traditionally abstract sense that Coetzee subverts, and that the magistrate questions, looks for “meanings and correspondences.” Thus, one critic argues that *Waiting for the Barbarians* “allegorizes the ambivalence of white resistance in South Africa” or “the dilemma of any dissenter in oppressive regime” (Ashcroft 103–4), which means that the novel is an allegory in the general sense of the contradictions involved in the position of the liberal humanist. Allegorical writing is doubled by its interpretive counterpart. We can allegorically read the magistrate as a figure for the complicit oppressor and the girl as the oppressed other. However, the text, as evidenced by the magistrate’s doubts about allegorical correspondences, questions received notions of allegory. It negotiates this traditional and intellectual allegorizing with a more visceral one. There is a certain way of non-allegorically, but again allegorically, reading the novels as literal allegories. Coetzee might be reacting to an assertion made by Jameson that third world literature can be always intellectually read as an “allegory of the embattled situation” of that culture/society (69). If Coetzee is resisting the reduction of his novels to the label of “national allegory,” then can he be writing an alternative form of allegory, visceral allegories rather than—or complementing—intellectually abstract ones? As a postmodernist concerned with the art of storytelling and representation, Coetzee seeks not to make overt political statements about apartheid realities but to make the novel transform the way we think about history; he seeks not to allow it to be “colonized” by the discourse of history, but to make us understand history as a visceral story. Although language is a medium of representation, and we cannot think of a bodily materiality that exists outside discourse, the body is subject to the way we make it signify. Coetzee might be exploiting the metaphorical dimension of allegory to highlight another visceral dimension of reading. The apartheid novels are not simply allegories of the body at the intellectual level of ideas but rather visceral allegories of the body at a present and felt level.
Within an allegory in which the setting is a remote fort along the frontier of an unknown Empire, the first-person, present-tense narrative intensifies the experience of pain caused by torture. Allegory as symbolic, figurative representation is problematized by the literality of bodily events that happen at the surface level of meaning. Bodily suffering, it should be remembered, is at the heart of what is encountered in oppressive regimes like apartheid in South Africa of that time. The narrator, a magistrate, gets to know that for Colonel Joll, a visitor from the capital on a mission to interrogate the barbarian prisoners, “Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt” (Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians 5). The old man who dies during torture following a stock-raid does not only stand for those who died in detention in the apartheid state. Allegory is made visceral by the vivid physical descriptions. For example, upon opening the shroud, the magistrate sees that “The grey beard is caked with blood. The lips are crushed and drawn back, the teeth are broken. One eye is rolled back, the other eye-socket is a bloody hole” (7). The effect of this grim sight on the magistrate and, in turn, on the reader is one of assault. The boy who came with the old man was also tortured. He is still alive, and the magistrate sees the workings of a knife on the boy’s body: “His belly and both groins are pocked with little scabs and bruises and cuts, some marked by trickles of blood” (10). His hands, which were tightly tied, are “puffy and purple” (7). The magistrate, who when Joll interrogates some prisoners spends an evening trying not to hear “sounds of violence,” is confronted with bodily pain inflicted on the prisoners by the Empire’s torturers, by its “doctors of interrogation” (21, 8). He finds the visibly ruined bodies which were once tortured by Joll, and his senses revolt at their “sickly smell of sweat and ordure” (23). After several days of interrogation and torture, the prisoners emerge from the barracks hall “blinking, shielding their eyes. One of the women has to be helped. She shakes all the time like an old person, though she is young. There are some too sick to stand up” (23). The closeness of these bodies to him and the immediacy with which the narrating magistrate describes them support a visceral reading rather than a figural one. If Coetzee is implying a critique of apartheid realities like torture, as one would conventionally think, he shortens the distance between what is inside the text and what is outside it. Apartheid was essentially abusing and manipulating the body, which is what we abundantly find in Waiting for the Barbarians. The language employed through the magistrate not only shows us what it means to live in a body under oppressive regimes but also how it feels to live so.

When Joll leaves, the barbarian girl left behind with broken ankles and partially-blind eyes becomes the main source of the visceral reality of pain for the magistrate. Her feet when he first sees them are “swaddled, shapeless,” and when the dirty bandages are unwrapped they are “broad, the toes stubby, the nails crusted with dirt” (27, 28). He did not attend her torture, but the effects of this distant bodily event are manifested in this ruined body he finds. Massaging and washing her body, he notices in the corner of her eye “a greyish puckering,” the result of the hot iron fork that touched her (30). The barbarian girl’s body, with its broken ankles and half-blinded eyes, is ruined and fragmented like an allegory. It is like the ruins—“a cluster of dunes” standing out “from the flat sandy landscape” (14)—that the magistrate finds outside the settlement in the desert. But bodily ruins are visceral once they are seen and attended to. Contemplating the existence of a
previous culture physically eradicated, the magistrate thinks: “Perhaps ten feet below the floor lie the ruins of another fort, razed by the barbarians, peopled with the bones of folk who thought they would find safety behind high walls” (Coatzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 15). The sand-filled ruins are an excavation area for an old post. The bones they harbor, like torture, are a prime example of a distant yet re-surfacing viscerality beyond annihilation or effacement.

The magistrate allegorically treats the girl’s body just as he treats the wooden slips with secret characters, as an object to be “deciphered and understood” (31). During the journey to send her back, he thinks of her as a puzzle: “is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears?” (63). Her torture is distanced as a past event, but the ruined body is present for the magistrate. It is a source of fascination for him, which accounts for his interest in her story and his ritualistic expiation of his guilt by oiling and rubbing her body. When she tells him about the hot fork she was touched with on her eyes, her presence recreates such a visceral experience for this ethically tortured man (40–41). Her “alien” body remains an “obstinate, phlegmatic body,” and he has to interrogate her presence in his life and his relation to the system he serves (41). It is in his frustration at his inability to move her that he articulates the viscerality/literality of allegory despite the meanings it seems to invite. He admits the seductive nature of “meanings and correspondences” and interrogates the relationship between the signifier and the signified (43–44). The girl is not only a figure for political oppression; she is a visceral embodiment of that oppression. He reflects, “While I have not ceased to see her as a body maimed, scarred, harmed, she has perhaps by now grown into and become that new deficient body” (55). The ruined state of her body with “the twisted feet, the half-blind eyes” is viscerally visible to him and a motive for speculation that moves him back to the body (Coatzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 63). His temporal and spatial distance from her torturers makes the viscerality of her body for him no less visible.

The magistrate’s own pain, loneliness, and confinement highlight for him the immediacy of viscerality and foreground, in turn, the viscerality of the girl’s torture. He partakes in the victim status of the girl at the hands of a ruthless regime. He is not allowed by the Empire’s men to wash or shave, and hunger becomes his dominant bodily mode. However, the monotony of food he is exposed to makes a mere bowel movement “an agony” with “stabs of pain” and “tearing of tissues” (83). When he escapes his cell for a while and feels the urge to relieve himself, the visceral language narrated evokes many senses and possibly invites a certain facial expression in the reader, one of disgust: “Groaning I inch my way out and squat over the chamberpot. Again the pain, the tearing. I dab myself with a filched white handkerchief, which comes anyway bloody. The room stinks: even I, who have been living for weeks with a slop pail in the corner, am disgusted. I open the door and hobble down the passageway” (91). Once he catches a cold, his “whole being is preoccupied in sniffing and sneezing, in the misery of being simply a body that feels itself sick and wants to be well” (86). A life of degradation in confinement—where bodily functions are performed in the same cell and where cockroaches come out to explore his body at night—makes him view his body as a “mountain of flesh giving off its multifarious odours of life and decay” (78). His smelly clothes, unkempt appearance, and the moldy underwear he is not able to frequently change call up a singular, disturbing viscerality. Before we see the magistrate as a figure for the complicit oppressor, as we would do in a
traditional allegorical reading, we get to heed such strong visceral language. As a result, the magistrate makes us view him just as he views himself, as “no more than a pile of blood, bone and meat that is unhappy” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 84).

The magistrate is sickened by the sight of the barbarian prisoners just as he was sickened by the tortured girl: “A simple loop of wire runs through the flesh of each man’s hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks” (101). His heart “grows sick” at the spectacle of punishment he closely observes, and the unfolding violence supplements traditional allegorizing (101). When the “black charcoal and ochre dust begin to run with sweat and blood,” the magistrate understands that the game is to beat the dusty, exhausted prisoners until “their backs are washed clean” (103). When he objects to Joll’s depraving the prisoners by a hammer, a blow catches him: “I sprawl in the dust, gasp, feel the sear of old pain in my back. A stick thuds down on me. Reaching out to ward it off, I take a withering blow on my hand” (104). He sustains a broken hand and blows on the face, head, and shoulders. A blow on the face blinds him, and he swallows blood: “something blooms across my face, starting as a rosy warmth, turning to fiery agony. I hide my face in my hands and stamp around in a circle trying not to shout, trying not to fall” (105). His nose and cheekbone are broken, and one eye is shut (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 106). This viscerality that the magistrate recounts complicates any figural meanings we might give to the text; or rather, the allegorical text communicates its own allegorical viscerality.

Subjected to the needs of his body and the pain, the magistrate reflects that his torturers wanted him to viscerally experience his embodiment; they “were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body” (113). He is subjected to “the most rudimentary needs” of his body: “to drink, to relieve itself, to find the posture in which it is least sore” (112). Aside from his public humiliation by Mandel and the tricks he is made to perform, the Empire’s men perform on him a mock execution on a tree with his hands tied behind him. When he is pulled up by his arms, his shoulders tear: “I bel-low again and again, there is nothing I can do to stop it, the noise comes out of a body that knows itself damaged perhaps beyond repair and roars its fright” (Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* 119). The impossible present-tense narrative stance of narrating one’s execution as it unfolds paradoxically highlights the intensity of the experience described. While traditional allegory mediates the real, the magistrate’s narrative is an attempt at the unmediated within the larger scheme of Coetzee’s novel.

Asked by Joll and a warrant officer to interpret a set of wooden slips found in his premises and taken as coded messages between him and the barbarians, the magistrate, who does not know how to interpret the script characters on them, intentionally reads them as an allegory of imperial oppression based on torturing and killing and involving daughters and fathers (an experience he was familiar with through the girl and her father and Joll is supposed to understand). The magistrate retorts: “I have no idea what they stand for. Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman, a wave for a lake; or does a circle merely stand for ‘circle’, a triangle for ‘triangle’, a wave for ‘wave’?” (108). He reads one character as standing for “war,” or “vengeance,” or even “justice” (109). The climax of his reading comes when he ironically claims: “They form an allegory. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last years of
the Empire—the old Empire, I mean” (109–10). This allegorical set found in the desert ruins is used to evoke a present reality of pain and suffering the magistrate is part of as an imperial subject. We know that the intellectual meaning, the generalized commentary on imperial oppression, is not the primary meaning here. The text actually insists on a literal level of allegorical reading by ironically mocking the Empire’s interest in coded barbarian messages and its negligence of the present reality of its interrogation and torture of its enemies. The shrouded body with stitches through the eyelids, with bruises and swollen and broken feet he alludes to in his reading of one slip is but an evocation of the viscerality the magistrate witnessed and tried to come to terms with (Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians 109). He does not mean the old Empire; we know that he ironically means the present one. The same applies to other instances of visceral language whereby the immediacy of language complicates allegorical abstraction.

The significance of Coetzee’s apartheid works is that the presence of the material body makes up for the specific apartheid contexts his novels allegorize. As opposed to the intellectual tradition in which allegory is typically situated, we find in Coetzee a raw bodily presence that supplements easy allegorization. Coetzee’s dramatization of the body’s resistance to traditional allegorizing, as in the case of the barbarian girl, is a refusal to let the intellectual/figural overcome the literal, although the literal becomes allegorical in its own way. That is, visceral allegory, as the resistance to conventional allegorizing, becomes another level of allegory that questions and yet points to the shortcomings of allegorization by means of the physical reality of the body. It is a particular kind of allegory that presents us with the visceral and yet whose general effect is “allegorical viscerality.” In other apartheid novels by Coetzee, the material body rejects the allegorical significance codes imposed on it. Each work is an intense allegory in itself in that it reshapes our understanding of allegory as intellectually abstract and forces us to view it as a visceral one, despite the seeming distance between discourse and experience. If we simply see the suffering bodies in the apartheid novels as standing in an allegorical relation to materially suffering bodies within a South African apartheid context, then we are following the traditional allegorical approach criticized for its intellectualism. The allegorical reading we can give to each novel, however, is equally a literally visceral one. The body can exist at the level of ideas, as in traditional allegories, but Coetzee makes it real and specific. The visceral body is, paradoxically, the literal figuration and presentation of pain and suffering. It appropriates any allegorical meanings and embodies them. Coetzee’s apartheid writings convey an impressive sense of reality, which makes the represented body so tangible and close to us that it cannot be doubted. The tortured magistrate in Waiting for the Barbarians does not doubt the body in pain. We as readers, also due to the reality-effect that Coetzee’s language conveys, never doubt the experience of pain. The magistrate’s marginalized position of bodily suffering relates him to the tortured barbarian girl.

Coetzee, in representing a raw physicality—the “reality-effect” I am describing—as asks us not to erase the materiality of the body by abstractly and allegorically constructing it as that of the other. There is something elemental about the broken bodies of the barbarian girl and the magistrate that invites yet resists allegorization. Although the resistance of such bodies to codification and framing can still be read allegorically, the literal suffering and deformity of each body needs attention on its own, and its context is as important as any figural associations we can make about South Africa. Joll’s dictum in Waiting for the
Barbarians that pain is the truth while “all else is subject to doubt” hints at the literality and nearness of suffering the barbarian prisoners are subjected to within the magistrate’s narrative (5). Coetzee’s apartheid novels perform bodily suffering as literal events happening to the characters—or those around them—who often record their experiences via the immediacy effect of the narratives.

Coda: Allegory and Coetzee Critics

Coetzee’s apartheid novels were characteristically criticized for being allegorical and universalized. The novels’ representation of the historical real was viewed as too allegorically intellectual or self-absorbed for the prevalent occasion of apartheid. For many critics, allegories are abstractly distant, detached from the real and dealing only in signs and concepts. They, a common criticism goes, dislocate the truth. As Bainard Cowan puts it, “Transforming things into signs is both what allegory does—its technique—and what it is about—its content” (110). Allegory can be viewed as a “convention, inauthentic, not grounded in experience, cut off from being and concerned only with manipulating its repertoire of signs” (Cowan 111). Cowan argues that “By resorting to a fictional mode literally of ‘other-discourse’ (allegoria), a mode that conceals its relation to its true objects, allegory shows a conviction that the truth resides elsewhere and is not detachable in relations between sign and signified” (113). Tambling explicates this position and argues that “allegorical representations themselves lack reality, because they exist only at the level of the signifier” (129). Such criticism captures the view that allegories are mechanical and consciously discursive. It captures the gist of the hostile reception of Coetzee’s apartheid novels for not being grounded in South African realities and remaining intellectually distant. The literally visceral level of meaning I have argued counters the conception of allegory as intellectually distant in its representation of its subject matter.

Derek Attridge, a critic who argues “against allegory” in Coetzee, objects to allegorical readings as undermining the event of reading the text at the literal level, which reduces its impact as an encounter with or staging of otherness. Attridge consistently highlights the singularity of literature and its ethical force, its need of a responsive reading. “What I am calling a literal reading,” he argues, “is one that is grounded the experience of reading as an event” (sic) (39). He, nonetheless, fails to acknowledge that his reading, which is supposed to counter the intellectualizing trend of allegory, is itself an allegorical reading of Coetzee’s novels as literal (and visceral) events. For Attridge, an allegorical reading turns otherness into sameness or reduces the text to the familiar; it is “a reminder of what we already know only too well,” which is why some qualities, descriptions, and details get lost when a text is read allegorically and the focus becomes extra-literal (43). Even if Coetzee takes us to distant settings and allegorically uses temporal difference, there is a strong presence for pain and suffering, and the material body is a strong presence in his allegories. Estranged in discourse, self-consciously represented, or trapped in language, the body is still there, giving Coetzee’s apartheid novels political and historical relevance. But this literal level of suffering, which Attridge emphasizes to the exclusion of cognitive comprehension (and which I also described under the category of “reality-effect”), can still
be understood allegorically in a thematically coherent body of works. It is the use of such a “literal” level of suffering to provoke an ethical response that gives Coetzee’s novels their value as visceral allegories. Moreover, any reading of Coetzee that resists what Owens calls “the allegorical impulse” and systematically examines the novels in terms of their staging of the event of reading and how the otherness staged in them demands an ethical response is to some extent inevitably allegorical when it tries to argue an alternative to the allegorical way of reading.

Attridge, discussing the importance of Coetzee’s texts and their “singularity,” argues that their value is not in their “critique of colonialism and its various avatars” since we need no Coetzee to remind us that a colonial history “has been brutal and dehumanizing” for both victims and perpetrators (30). However, we do need a Coetzee to remind us that such a history of oppression cannot be narrated unproblematically and that the viscerality of the literal forms a specific brand of a postmodern allegory. Attridge criticizes an allegorical reading of Coetzee that ignores what happens at the text’s literal level. He discusses Waiting for the Barbarians and Life and Times of Michael K “non-allegorically.” His problem with allegorical readings is that they “encourage the reader to look for meanings beyond the literal, in a realm of significance which the novel may be said to imply without ever directly naming” (32). Indeed, the novels themselves cast doubt on the efficacy of generalized allegorical readings, but they negotiate another form of allegory. For example, the magistrate’s abortive attempts to codify alterity, as embodied in the barbarian girl’s body, suggest a privileging of a visceral level of allegorization over a traditionally received one.

Attridge’s approach of highlighting what happens at the literal level of Coetzee’s novels is what I call a visceral level of allegorizing. If each Coetzee apartheid novel dramatizes—that is, figures and presents—the pain and suffering that happen at the literal level, then we can claim that the novels can be read as allegories of the material body that rejects mere traditional allegorizing. It is this ambivalent aspect of the allegory that shows the interplay between the literal level in which the material body is allegorically beyond allegorizing and the body as a constructed trope that needs to be highlighted, an interplay between visceral and intellectual allegorization. There is a difference between saying that the apartheid novels allegorically represent their South African context and saying that they embody and perform abundant material suffering. The latter function is what makes them visceral allegories rather than traditional ones. However, even when Coetzee seems to be pointing to a bodily reality beyond discourse, this reality is still being discursively constructed.

A useful model comes from Sam Durrant who argues that Coetzee’s apartheid novels like Life and Times of Michael K and Waiting for the Barbarians are not “an allegory of the historical events themselves but of our relation to these events” as apartheid history itself resists an easy relation (25). Durrant adds that Coetzee’s protagonists are “unhomely figures of and for alterity, they embody precisely that material history of suffering that the narrative is unable to represent. Their bodily presence indicates an unmournable, unverbalizable history, a material history that refuses to be translated into words or conjured away by language” (26). For Durrant, the novels become allegories of trying to represent the unpresentable. What Durrant does not say—although he comes close when he uses the verb “embody”—is that the adamant, literal materiality of suffering, which problematizes easy relation, is itself allegorical beyond conventional allegorization. The
physicality embodied in the works and the focus on physical realities of pain, torture, and deformity—in short, their reality-effects—show that the distance from a South African context effected by the allegorical approach in terms of place or time is bridged or made shorter due to the viscerality of suffering. Allegory here gets less intellectual and calls for a visceral reading that makes us empathize with suffering. The body “bodies forth” its oppression and makes us feel it. Coetzee’s novels are traditional allegories of brutal regimes, and they evoke dislocated realities of South Africa and show the struggles of the writer to speak of them, yet this level of reading is allegorically intellectual compared with the viscerality of suffering the novels negotiate. Historical oppression does not go unnoticed or unfelt in Coetzee.

Theorists of allegory realize the paradoxical level of literal figuration allegories can engage. For example, Slemon articulates a distinction between the literal figuration and metaphorical figuration in allegories and writes that “In its simplest form, allegory . . . is a trope that in saying one thing also says some ‘other’ thing; it is the doubling of some previous or anterior code by a sign, or by a semiotic system, that also signifies a more immediate or ‘literal’ meaning” (4). In allegories, the literal can signify metaphorically or, importantly, “otherwise.” The torture pain of the barbarian girl and the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is an attempt on Coetzee’s part to literally figure material suffering and make us experience it closely, to make the body signify before and beyond the metaphorical. The direct representation of suffering never allows distant analogies to take precedence over what we find and ponder at the literal level of meaning. In trying to develop the literal over the metaphorical, Coetzee revises allegory and makes the literal signify in its own way.

Representing—or even “presenting”—the suffering body cannot evade textualization because the real is intertwined with discursive representation. The body has a power that cannot be doubted and is implicated in histories of oppression and colonization, yet all acts of rendering this suffering are mediated in language. The oppressed body is violated and tortured, and it has an ontology of its own. However, the visceral sense of suffering communicated in Coetzee is problematized within self-reflexive accounts that evoke yet cast doubt on the real as a construct. John Moore rightly argues that “No matter how exigent the demands of the spirit—and they are exigent—Coetzee never lets us forget either the appetites or the fragility of the body” (154). As opposed to the abstract intellectualism of traditional allegories, Coetzee’s allegories explore bodily suffering effected by unjust power structures. Bodily events like torture and confinement are viscerally material and real, and Coetzee’s visceral allegories functioning at a literal level of meaning and conveying an experience of embodiment are also postmodern allegories of the mediated body. If the material body is vividly present, then this singular presence becomes again allegorical when conceived as a thematic link among the novels. Coetzee once said in an interview that censorship on certain topics leads to “an unnatural concentration upon them” and added that his preoccupation with themes of imprisonment and torture is but “a pathological response—to the ban on representing what went on in police cells” in South Africa (qtd. in McDonald 308). Coetzee traumatically grapples with raw, material suffering in his apartheid fictions. Although his political discontent can be for some critics allegorically globalized, the viscerality of suffering is indicative, which leaves the postmodern body with a political task inherent in it and beyond its discursive enactment.
NOTES

1. Allegory, Deborah Madsen reminds us, “assumes that it is dealing with the kinds of issues which resist expression in other forms and which resist simple statement or definition” (123). Allegory explores the difficulties we ascribe to language as an expressive medium.

2. The most famous critique of Coetzee’s allegorical novels as evasive attempts shying away from naming apartheid realities and offering passive heroes is probably Nadine Gordimer’s review of his novel Life and Times of Michael K in which she accused him of projecting the horrors of apartheid “into another time and plane,” and thus a dehistoricized universalism. In this review entitled “The Idea of Gardening,” Gordimer argues that Coetzee’s heroes like Michael K that Coetzee “chose allegory for his first few novels” and that the allegorical nature of his work thus makes implicit political statements because allegory is used by Coetzee as a distancing device. Gordimer extends her criticism of Life and Times of Michael K to Waiting for the Barbarians by claiming that he “chose allegory for his first few novels” and that he did this “out of a kind of opposing desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences in which, like everyone else living in South Africa, he is up to the neck, and about which he had an inner compulsion to write.” Gordimer concludes that Coetzee has a “‘postcolonial’ approach by focusing on the material body as a site for political statements.

3. Due to space limitations, I cannot include in this article an elaborate discussion of other Coetzee apartheid novels. However, most of the claims I make about Waiting for the Barbarians apply to other novels. For example, in Age of Iron Coetzee intentionally makes Mrs. Curren, the novel’s ailing and white protagonist, establish a relationship between her terminal bone cancer and the corrupt politics of her country. Mrs. Curren constructs the metaphorical relationship between complicity in oppression and shame for this complicity on the one hand and her cancer on the other hand when she tells a black youth: “I have cancer. I have cancer from the accumulation of shame I have endured in my life. That is how cancer comes about: from self-loathing the body turns malignant and begins to eat away at itself” (145). Although the novel apparently invites a metaphorical understanding of the relationship between the body and the body politic, the bodily pain Mrs. Curren feels is beyond the metaphorical as when she claims: “There is no truth but the shock of pain that goes through me. . . . Death is the only truth left” (26). When she is in the grip of pain, her attention is turned to her body rather than to what goes on around her in the burning townships. She says, “The country smolders, yet with the best will in the world I can only half-attend. My true attention is all inward, upon the thing, the word, the word for the thing inching through my body” (Age of Iron 39). In this novel, Coetzee similarly dramatizes a distinction between the allegorical mode of the novel and the novel’s insistence on the literality of the body in pain. The conceptual analogy we make between cancer and the political corruption that is apartheid is not to be privileged over the narrated suffering.

4. A noticeable trend in the early criticism Coetzee’s novels received is a neo-Marxist one that addresses Coetzee’s failure to tackle class relationships and social factors. In a sense, critics deemed Coetzee’s postmodern innovation in form and technique an inadequate medium for the pressing social and political issues in South Africa. In the words of Paul Rich, postmodern writing “is probably destined to remain the vehicle for expressing the cultural and political dilemmas of a privileged class of white artists and intellectuals and at best it is likely to lead to a more general loosening of contemporary South African writing away from a slavish imitation of the English liberal novel-writing tradition” (73). This article responds to such accusations that seem valid yet do an injustice to Coetzee.

5. In Coetzee’s Foe, Susan Barton and Foe both fail to make Friday’s silence speak. Friday’s symbolic mutilation is the loss of a tongue that has been cut out somehow, which immediately signifies his marginalized, oppressed status in a traditional allegorical reading. The characters’ abortive attempts to teach Friday language and the meaninglessness of the stories they, like Cruso who once owned Friday, weave around him without his own authentication of such stories due to his silence are all indicative of the limitations of traditional allegorization. Coetzee wants Friday to signify prior to and beyond allegorical parallels, which is why the narrative dwells on his utter silence and foreignness to those around him at a significant moment at the end of the novel, we get to know that Friday’s home is “not a place of words” but rather “a place where bodies are their own signs” (Foe 157). It is as if the body is the literal resisting the allegorical domestication of figurative meaning.

6. In Waiting for the Barbarians as a postcolonial text, allegory exposes the construction of the Other as a justification for oppression. Allegory “is employed counter-discursively in order to expose the investment of allegory in the colonising project and thus to identify allegorical modes of cognition as the enemy of cultural decolonisation” (Slemon 12). Teresa Dovey repeatedly argues that Coetzee’s
novels are “double-sided allegories: on the one hand, they constitute allegories of prior modes of discourse, wittingly inhabiting them in order to deconstruct them and divest them of their authority” (140). Dovey’s reading of *Waiting for the Barbarians* attempts to show that allegory functions at the thematic and structural levels (140) and works to subvert “liberal humanist novelistic discourse” (141), a discourse that the novel critiques just as it is implicated in. Dovey and Slemen point out Coetzee’s deconstructive and postcolonial revision of allegory, and I extend this revision of allegory to the representation of the body.

7. Acritvic like Lois Parkinson Zamora discusses Coetzee’s early novels as political “allegories of power,” as allegories resisting injustice and the abuses of political systems through their exposure of the dynamics of Hegelian power relations of masters and servants (3). Such a typical reading, however and despite its rich insights, dismisses the peculiarities of Coetzee’s employment of allegory.

8. In fact, torture is common in times of political pressure just as it was in South Africa during the apartheid years. The experiences of the tortured Iraqi prisoners in Abu-Ghraib and those of the interrogated suspected terrorists in Guantanamo Bay testify to the prevalence of this form of bodily-inflicted punishment in the wake of 9/11.

9. One specific context in this case would be the torture and death in detention of the black-consciousness leader Steve Biko.

10. Scarry established the singular and embodied nature of extreme pain in her famous study *The Body in Pain,* and in a more recent discussion of pain that engages her work Ronald Schleifer’s *Intangible Materialism* also highlights the objectless, iconic nature of pain as a pure experience of embodiment (133). Despite the complexity of both arguments, they begin with the simple premise of the corporeality of pain.

11. In a recent study of “mirror neurons”—that is, neuronal cells in the brain (up to twenty percent) which discharge not only when a person performs a particular act (say hand movements), but also discharge when that person sees someone else moving their hands—Marco Iacoboni argues that these cells actually allow people to “literally experience the same feelings” as others (4). Thus he argues that mirror neurons “fire both when we grasp and when we see someone else grasping, as if we were inside that person” (109). Moreover, he cites a study that demonstrates that mirror neurons “for hand movements and for mouth movements . . . were also selectively activated while subjects were reading sentences describing hand actions and mouth actions” (94). Such an argument on the physiological basis of empathy is relevant here because torture and pain of the sort described in *Waiting for the Barbarians* are viscerally communicated to the reader and our brains re-create for us what we encounter on the page before us. Pain and suffering, simply put, are literally, or viscerally, felt by the reader or viewer who shrinks or winces at the pain of the other and thus emotionally reacts through empathy. Iacoboni argues, commenting on an experimental study, that “It is as if mirror neurons help us understand what we read by internal simulating the action we just read in the sentence” (94). Interestingly, a female professor who first introduced *Waiting for the Barbarians* to me years ago in Jordan said that she could not finish it because of its depiction of torture and gave it to me to read it instead. Being moved by what we read is a proof of the process of mirroring or simulation in our minds of the felt experiences of others. Instead of making us ponder apartheid realities in his fiction, Coetzee, it can be concluded, makes us feel and experience such realities upfront. I am grateful to Dr. Schleifer for pointing out this study on neuroscience to me when he read an earlier draft of this article.

12. As Gordimer argues, evoking the abstraction and dislocation commonly attributed to allegory, “The harried homelessness of Michael K and his mother is the experience, in 1984, of hundreds of thousands of black people in South African squatter towns and ‘resettlement’ camps.”

13. Allegory is often thought of as an inferior “mode of representation—indeed, as re-presentation” and “had been unfavorably contrasted with the symbol’s ability to present” (Day 105). My argument opposes such a rigid distinction and supports a new conception of allegory as both “immediate” and effective, and thus more politicized than traditionally assumed.

Interestingly, J.F. Lyotard asserts the status of postmodern texts as events that cannot be judged by “preestablished rules” or familiar norms. In this sense, postmodern texts call attention to themselves and to what happens at the literal level. As events, the texts are preoccupied with their own “rules and categories” rather than with predetermined rules (81). This supports the idea that bodily events in Coetzee’s apartheid novels are not to be supplemented by allegorical theorizing.

14. The logic that Durrant echoes here and that I hint at in my interpretation of his assertion is Lyotard’s article in *The Postmodern Condition* “Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?” which highlights “the unpresentable” or the impossibility of presentation within the postmodern project. Lyotard famously defines the postmodern as “that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself” and as “that which searches for new presentations, not in order to
enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable” (81). This definition is in line with my claim that Coetzee problematizes the way his apartheid novels stand with relation to the historical real, that referentiality and the problematic of representation are a strong postmodern theme in Coetzee’s apartheid fictions.

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