

**WAITING ON THE BORDER:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF
DINO BUZZATI'S *IL DESERTO DEI TARTARI*
AND J.M. COETZEE'S
*WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS***

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Il deserto dei Tartari and *Waiting for the Barbarians*¹ share some crucial elements in common and it may seem strange that two authors with such diverse backgrounds like Dino Buzzati and J. M. Coetzee chose the same setting — a walled space on the border — and the same allegory — the threat of an invasion from the northern desert. It seems a reasonable hypothesis that a similar climate of political claustrophobia and insecurity as well as a sense of looming disaster shaped their works. Coetzee, in fact, published *Waiting for the Barbarians* in 1980 during the apartheid era and at a time when other apocalyptic literature appeared in South Africa,² whereas Buzzati completed his manuscript

¹ Dino Buzzati, *Il deserto dei Tartari*, Milano: Rizzoli, 1940 and Mondadori, 1989 (English translation by Stuart C. Hood *The Tartar Steppe*, Manchester: Carcanet, 1985 repr. Penguin, 2000); J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, London: Penguin, 1980. All page references are to these editions and the translation from Italian mine. I am strongly indebted to Raymond Brown of the University of Zimbabwe who discussed the two novels with me making invaluable suggestions, *as usual*.

² See e.g. Karel Schoeman's *Na die Geliefde Land* (1972), Nadine Gordimer's *July's People* (1981), J. M. Coetzee's *Life & Times of Michael K.* (1983).

in fascist Italy in January 1939,³ on the eve of another apocalypse — one that did happen.

Neither novel can be located by any precise historical or geographical co-ordinates so as to stress their allegorical nature. Buzzati depicts a Kingdom which is ‘almost’ a mirror-image of Italy in mid-1800, as we can infer from a number of details (in the Fort a painting has an inscription in Latin, the monocle is in fashion, the army uses 32 grams lead bullets, but the telegraph is still unknown).⁴ He mentions a few real place and people names (Holland, the Tartars, the gypsies) along with some others that do not exist (the village of San Rocco, King Pietro III, Prince Sebastiano), thus playing with the reader’s ‘hesitation’, to use Todorov’s term, between familiar and unfamiliar elements.⁵ Coetzee, though, stretches this ambiguity even further by accumulating conflicting details that leave the reader completely disoriented and make it impossible to locate the Empire anywhere in the world or at any precise time in history. The main element of defamiliarisation is introduced at the very beginning of the novel when the Magistrate asserts that he has never seen a pair of sunglasses before. Sunglasses, or rather smoke-coloured quartz lenses, have been known by different cultures from time immemorial and they were definitely common at a time when glass windows, glass

³ The year of its completion is a significant one also in relation to the conclusion of the Italian campaign in Ethiopia.

⁴ The single lens, or monocle, dates to the early 1800s; the army used 32 grams lead bullets in the mid-1800s, as Prof. Johann G. Hocherl of the University of the Federal Armed Forces in Munich kindly pointed out; the telegraph was in use only in the late-1800s.

⁵ Sigmund Freud was the first to point out in his essay ‘The Uncanny’ that a writer can provoke an uncanny (‘Umheimlich’) response on the part of the reader by crossing the boundary between reality and unreality. In *The Fantastic* Tzvetan Todorov defines the fantastic as literature that generates hesitation in the reader’s mind. *Il deserto dei Tartari* and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, though, do not fulfil the other two conditions singled out by Todorov as characteristic of fantastic fiction, that is to say that the hesitation be embodied by a character and that the reader rejects “allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ explanations” (33). Unfortunately, *Il deserto dei Tartari* in particular has been presented for too long as ‘a classic of fantastic literature’ as we read on the front cover of the 1975 Italian edition published by Mondadori.

decorations, clocks, pencils, muskets and guns were in use,⁶ as it is the case with *Waiting for the Barbarians*. This detail — the only one of the kind, but nonetheless a very significant one in the text — would locate the narrative in a totally unknown time in history — perhaps an apocalyptic future.

Unlike Buzzati — also an accomplished and successful painter — who describes in detail a scenery that recalls the Alps (particularly the Dolomites), Coetzee only sketches the main features of a landscape that is less realistic and more enigmatic. Although there are suggestions of a Chinese setting, as described for instance by travellers along the Silk Road (snowy mountain ranges and long edges of deserts, oases, walled cities, buried towns in the desert where inscribed wooden slips were unearthed),⁷ the ethnic division of the Empire recalls that of South Africa. There are, in fact, a master race, the imperial rulers, the Barbarians, people who migrated from the North like the Bantu, and the fisherfolk, aboriginal people who have been totally marginalised like the San.

The subtle interplay between familiar and unfamiliar permeates the whole novel. For example, the Magistrate mentions a proverb — ‘cold heart, cold hand’ (86) — which is ‘not quite’ the one the reader is

⁶ The Magistrate reads ‘the classics’ (38) and mentions ‘military textbooks’ (100) implying that his civilisation knows printing.

⁷ In ancient China, before paper was invented, bamboo and wooden slips were used as writing materials. Large numbers of official documents written on wedge-shaped wooden tablets have been found in China. Joll might be right, though, that they are simply ‘gambling sticks’ (113), something similar to mah-jong. In the ruins the Magistrate unearths a lintel carved with a design of dolphins and waves (15), but the sea is never mentioned in the novel, though the albatross is (81). The tiger rampant in the emblem of the Empire is a common symbol in Chinese heraldry, but it also recalls the rampant lion of another Empire - the British. The ‘battalion standard’ is ‘green and gold’ (139) like the South African national colours for sports and most South African whites would identify these as ‘national colours’. Particularly during the Apartheid years, when the country was faced with boycotts of their sport team, these colours came to represent a kind of national pride and unity to the supporters of the white regime against the ‘hostile outside world’. The fact that the Magistrate leaves for the northern desert at the end of winter, in the month of March (58), points to a country in the northern hemisphere. Coetzee deliberately describes flora (e.g. ilang ilang, hibiscus, mulberry, gooseberry, walnut tree, poplar tree) and fauna (e.g. fox, waterbuck, parrot) that cannot be possibly found together in any single region in the world.

familiar with ('a cold heart and a warm hand'), or describes 256 as a 'perfect number' (16) — whereas it is, rather, a 'perfect' square.⁸ Similarly, he hints at 'the popular song of the rider and the juniper bush' (108-9) but, although the song in Grimms' tale 'The Juniper Bush'⁹ is quite well-known, there is no rider in it.

Buzzati employs similar devices to achieve a defamiliarisation effect. Even when he mentions a real nation, Holland, the reader is totally at loss having to accept that a smooth passage does exist from the fictional world of the novel into a country on the map.

It is not surprising that both Buzzati and Coetzee have been compared to Franz Kafka. More than of a direct correspondence or derivation — something that too many a critic has pointed out without ever substantiating it — it is possible to evince a similar use of elements from the fantastic, as well as a similar preoccupation with the allegorical nature of their works.¹⁰

As in Kafka's narratives, in *Il deserto dei Tartari* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* there are hardly any physical descriptions and characters are identified by their name and/or by one or more distinguishing elements associated with them, such as their occupation or place of origin. The protagonist of *Waiting for the Barbarians* is simply the Magistrate and Joll's victim, the Barbarian girl. Mai, Joll and Mandel — the only people with a name — are characterised by the

⁸ Though we are familiar with the concept of 'perfect numbers' because they have been dealt with by mathematicians since ancient times, 256 is not one of them. 256 is a square number, that is, the result of another number multiplied by itself. The Magistrate lays out the slips in 16 smaller squares (16), because 16 is the square root of 256. 16 itself is a square, hence 256 may be described as a 'perfect' square because it has the 'square of squares' property, being a square of a square (4x4x4...). The number 256 may also stand for $2+5+6 = 13$, but 13 is a numinous number and not a perfect one. 256 is a key number in computer science (the eighth power of 2), but this goes beyond the scope of the novel.

⁹ The original title 'Von dem Machandelbaum' literally means 'About the Juniper Tree'. In current German, though, the word *Machandelbaum* 'juniper tree' has been replaced by *Wacholderstrauch*, 'juniper bush'.

¹⁰ Buzzati and Coetzee share a common interest for Dostoevski more than Kafka. Buzzati and Kafka were both graduates in Law.

implications, whether ironical or not, contained in their names¹¹. Mai recalls *ma*, a linguistic near-universal for ‘mother’ found in many of the world’s languages¹² and she is, in fact, the mother-figure in the novel. Colonel Joll is not a ‘jolly’ person, neither does he ‘jolly’ people to win their co-operation. Furthermore, in Afrikaans *jol* means ‘to play around’, ‘to have fun’, which singles out the worst kind of torturer: somebody whose job is also his recreation¹³.

His dark glasses and the black carriage he travels in identify him as an infernal creature who brings about death and destruction; with his lethal touch he changes healthy people into cripples and dead bodies, and the tool-hut by the granary — a symbol of life — into a horror chamber.

The ethical vision of the ‘vain, hungry for praise’ (84) and cowardly Mandel is as distorted as Joll’s; although he does not wear dark glasses like him, the effect is quite the same since it looks as if he has had ‘crystal lenses slipped over his eyes’ (118). His name — which surprisingly recalls that of Nelson Mandela’s¹⁴ — points out how historical circumstances and personal choices may determine completely different, even diametrically opposing destinies: the victim

¹¹ The prostitute at the inn has been nicknamed ‘the Star’, but the Magistrate prefers to think of her as ‘a bird’ (46).

¹² See e.g. Indo-European *ma*, Proto-Bantu *mààmáa*. In ancient Greek Maia ‘good mother’ was a respect form of address. Maia was also the Greek goddess of spring, life and rebirth and the mother of Hermes.

¹³ Joll is presented as a sadist who enjoys killing for killing’s sake, as his initial conversation with the Magistrate about hunting clearly points out. There are also perverted feminine elements about him. He ‘walks with his hands clasped as a woman’, (4) he is proud of his wrinkleless face (1), he has ‘tapering fingernails, slender feet in soft shoes’ (5), he wears mauve handkerchiefs (5); all these elements meant to identify him as a sophisticated barbarian. The Third Bureau recalls the Third Reich and Joll seems to share some features with the stereotype of the effeminate SS torturer.

¹⁴ Mandel’s name may also echo Mengele’s, the most infamous Nazi ‘expert in torture’.

and the executioner, the hero and the villain, life and death — all avenues are open.¹⁵

Unlike the settlement where the Magistrate lives, the Fort in *Il deserto dei Tartari* is exclusively military and has no civilian population. The soldiers have Italian names (Lagorio, Simeoni), but also Spanish (Ortiz, Fernandez) and French (Morel). Some names indicate distinctive features in their characters too. The protagonist, who wastes away his life in a sort of trance, is called Drogo, a word that recalls *droga*, ‘drug’; the doctor who convinces him to stay at the Fort and destroys his life is called Rovina — literally ‘ruin’, ‘damage’;¹⁶ the name of the aristocratic and sickly Angustina — a parody of the romantic hero who suffers from consumption — reveals a word-play between two adjectives that are only one phoneme apart — *augusto*, ‘august’, ‘majestic’ and *angusto* ‘narrow’, ‘inadequate’ — but have opposite meanings mirroring what the character would like to be, but patently is not. No wonder then that his (class) antagonist is a ‘giant of a man’ (36) called Monti, literally, ‘mountains’.¹⁷

In both novels relationships between characters are influenced by class divisions. Lieutenant Angustina cannot relate to anybody but Lieutenant Lagorio, the other member of the aristocracy at the Fort. Captain Monti, a self-made man from the lower class, is envious of Angustina’s aristocratic status and at the same time despises him for that, in a way not dissimilar from that in which Warrant Officer Mandel

¹⁵ It is for this reason, in fact, that the Magistrate’s hatred for Joll seems to subside and then vanish once he sees the innocent child in him at the end of the novel (146). Earlier on in the novel the Magistrate pointed out, in fact, how violence corrupts ‘the hearts of the innocent’ (108).

¹⁶ Rovina actually ‘ruins’ Drogo twice, the first time at the beginning of the novel when he talks him into staying at the Fort against his will, and then – ironically – at the end when he forces him, instead, to leave the Fort against his will.

¹⁷ The name of the hateful Sergeant Matti — literally ‘fools’ — can be only understood in the light of the untranslatable Italian expression *castigamatti*, ‘martinet’, ‘slave-driver’, but literally ‘fool-driver’ or ‘fool-basher’. He is, in fact, the officer who writes (malicious) reports on his colleagues (102-3).

— a self-made man and a plebeian — hates the patrician Magistrate. Both Monti and Mandel attempt to humiliate their enemies by ‘stripping’ them of their authority, the former by trying to have the nobleman remove his elegant boots, the latter by forcing the Magistrate to wear a woman’s smock. But, unlike the first-person narrator in *Waiting for the Barbarians* who inevitably makes the reader feel for him, the omniscient narrator in *Il deserto dei Tartari* is quite detached from Angustina. He repeatedly seeks to direct the reader’s sympathy towards the bourgeois Drogo and is critical of the aristocracy who, literally, are not equipped for and cannot catch up with the changed times, just like the nobleman who struggles to keep up with Monti and the other soldiers who wear, instead, the ‘right’ shoes for the occasion. Angustina’s death is meaningless and unheroic as he dies on the mountains while staging a card-game with a non-existent partner for the sake of the soldiers of the Kingdom of the North who are watching him. He has deliberately not worn his cape nor taken shelter under the rocks to prove his worth to Monti and the other soldiers. But, ironically, when he is about to freeze to death in the storm he calls out: ‘overcoat, overcoat!’ (132), as *cappotto*, ‘vole’, literally means ‘overcoat’.¹⁸ Angustina’s very last words, ‘tomorrow we should...’ (137), are of the most mundane kind and do not fit, in the least, the hero he wanted to be. Only the bourgeois Drogo, in fact, will have the privilege of dying at peace with himself watching the stars.

The protagonists of the two novels are both representatives of a central, but surprisingly acephalous government. Nobody, in fact, seems to act or speak in the name of a King¹⁹ or Emperor, neither does

¹⁸ Only in a few card games (Scopa, Scopone, Tressette and their variations) is the word *cappotto* used. All of them are played with the Italian forty-card deck of cards, another indication of an Italian setting.

¹⁹ Surprisingly, it is only in Major Matti’s office that a portrait of the King is hung on the wall (21). On one occasion he reports the King’s words ‘Fort Bastiani sentry of my crown’ (27) to Drogo and it is not clear whether the King ever made such a statement since the Fort is clearly of no importance to anybody. Matti is the only character who seems to care about the central authorities in town and, in fact, he is the one who writes reports for them. The King also appears to Drogo in a dream (86).

anybody seem to have espoused a national ideal or cause. Drogo — an army officer — and the Magistrate — a civilian officer — are committed to their own beliefs and dreams (or obsessions) more than to an authority above them.

In the two novels there is no state religion either, and religion in general plays a very minor role. This is most surprising considering that Coetzee is describing the history of imperialism. Submission to a religion goes hand in hand with colonisation, but neither the fisherfolk nor the Barbarians seem to have been touched by any activity meant to convert them.²⁰ Buzzati portrays the life at a military outpost where, oddly enough, there are no religious observances whatsoever and not even a chaplain is ever mentioned.²¹

The border marks not only a relationship between states or territories, but also between the periphery and the centre within the same nation and in both novels the frontier is marginalised by the centre. There exists, in fact, a dichotomy between outpost and capital town as well as between those who live in the borderlands and the townspeople.²² Characters are thus identified also by their allegiance to the frontier (Drogo, the Magistrate, Mai) or to the capital town (a younger Drogo, Lagorio, Joll). In fact, in *Il deserto dei Tartari* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* a tension exists between the periphery and the centre of the state.

²⁰ There are no suggestions whatsoever of a Christian state. The narrator simply talks of 'rites' being performed (54); he also refers to 'temples' in the capital town (16). On one occasion, though, he mentions a 'belfry' (136) and one wonders how to make sense of this detail. The absence of any religious institution at the outpost contrasts with the author's use of Christian images throughout the novel.

²¹ There is a 'wooden crucifix' (31) in Drogo's bedroom; there are 'immense churches' in town (60) and Drogo's mother 'goes to church' (149), the nearest village to the Fort is called San Rocco (Saint Rocco) and Private Lazzari keeps 'a holy image' (107). These elements point to a Christian (Catholic) country like Italy.

²² In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the isolation of the outpost from a central government makes it possible for the Third Bureau to conduct a seemingly wholly unnecessary operation against an 'enemy' which no one at the settlement is conscious of being threatened by.

In Coetzee's novel the clash between the two, embodied in the Magistrate and Joll, is above all a conflict of interests (political and moral), whereas in Buzzati's work the Fort and the capital town represent two irreconcilable forces, two incompatible worlds: that of the soldiers and that of the civilians, the masculine and the feminine. The former is high up on the 'pointed mountains' (16) — with evident phallic symbolism — and is characterised by the bareness of the landscape, the 'geometric rules' of military life (19) and the sound of trumpets; the latter, often referred to as 'down there' in the plain (27), has splendid palaces and gardens and echoes with 'women's voices' and the music of the piano (60).

When Drogo arrives at the Fort as a young Lieutenant, he is still attached to his hometown and to the two women in his life, his mother and his fiancée. One of his first thoughts is for his mother, but he discovers — to his own bafflement — that he cannot write a sincere letter to her: his communication with the feminine world is interrupted. The young man is about to 'bury' himself forever at the Fort and, in fact, the room he is given is 'completely covered in wood' (31-2), just like a coffin.

Significantly, Drogo has to renounce the beautiful and expensive cloak he has bought in town because such an elegant piece has no place at the Fort. The tailor Prosdocimo explains to him that the collar is too low, 'not military enough' (52). What is fashionable '*down there* in the city', he adds, 'does not count for *us soldiers*' (52, my emphasis). In order to become 'a soldier' with no identity of his own²³ Drogo has no choice but to give up his cloak and sever all his other ties with the capital.

People who live in borderlands tend not to identify themselves with the centre. Therefore, in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate, who has become a man of the outpost, is outraged by the interference of

²³ In a painting by Buzzati reproduced on the cover of the 1975 edition of *Il deserto dei Tartari*, there is a uniform with nobody inside which recalls TS Eliot's 'hollow men', 'shape without form, shade without colour'.

the authorities in border matters they do not understand ('Why do you not send people with experience of the frontier to investigate frontier unrest?', 20). Later on in the novel, a woman stresses the same concept when she says: 'All these *strangers from the capital*, upsetting things!' (127, my emphasis). No wonder then that in town everybody wears dark glasses that obfuscate their view: no dialogue is possible between the borderlands and the centre, no co-operation between the Magistrate and Joll.

Ethnic divisions, though, play a more meaningful role than those determined by class and dwelling. Empires sustain themselves by maintaining such differences and, in fact, the Magistrate knows that — from the Barbarian girl's point of view — the distance between himself and her torturers is 'negligible' (27) since both he and Joll belong to the master race and are therefore in a position to make of the girl whatever they wish. That is why, in the allegory, the scars on her body are not simply the product of Joll's torture, but symbolize the damage inflicted on her people and her culture by the Empire.

Unlike his Biblical counterparts, the Magistrate has no power to heal 'the lame and the blind'.²⁴ He can only wash and anoint the damaged body of the girl to try and comprehend the history of the bloody encounter between the Empire and the Barbarians.

At first, though, his newly-gained insight does not take him very far; instead of taking action, he is overcome by drowsiness and sleep, just like those intellectuals who are aware of the injustice that surrounds them, but prefer to keep quiet. It is only when he decides to return the

²⁴ It is significant that the girl has been left 'lame and blind' by her torturers. Head and feet are the two extremities of the human body, the temple of God, the feet at the lowest level, the eyes at the highest because they are traditionally regarded as the abode of the mind. For this reason 'the lame and a blind' is a recurrent cluster in the Bible to signify people who are damaged 'head to toe'. This is exactly what the Barbarian girl tries to explain to the Magistrate who wants to employ her as a maid: 'I am...' — she holds up her forefinger, grips it, twists it' (27). Since he cannot possibly heal her body, he tries to restore it at least in his memory by making a deliberate effort to recollect her before her encounter with her torturers. Having failed even in this, he dreams of her in a series of dreams until, finally, he succeeds in 'seeing' her as the healthy girl she used to be.

girl to her people, that he no longer needs the anointing ritual that lulls him to sleep.

The Magistrate becomes 'the eyes to the blind and feet to the lame',²⁵ a sort of biblical prophet who denounces injustice: 'the One Just Man, the man who is prepared to sacrifice his freedom to his principles' (113-4), Joll mocks him and he is not wrong in his judgement of him. People, in fact, do not seem to pay any heed to what the Magistrate says and, ironically, when he feels himself invested with 'Godlike strength' (107), he receives a powerful blow on his cheek and he is silenced.²⁶ He wants 'to defend the cause of justice for the Barbarians' (108), but he knows only too well that he is too confused and powerless to become a true charismatic prophet with a message that can turn the people in a new direction. The Magistrate is no hero, rather, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot's 'Gerontion', 'virtues are forced upon him by his impudent crimes', a predicament he is aware of, as his self-critical attitude to his own protest shows.

Since the Magistrate is a reluctant and hesitant prophet, he can only go through an ordeal that is a mockery of a crucifixion. Mandel and his

²⁵ Cf. the Magistrate's predicament with Job 29:14-17: 'I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame. I was a father to the needy; I took up the case of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth'. Like a Biblical 'righteous man' the Magistrate falls several times, but 'rises again', whereas 'the wicked are brought down by calamity' (cf. Prov 24:16). The parallel between the Magistrate and a Biblical prophet has been pointed out by M. H. Maltz in 'Dual Voices and Diverse Traditions in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*'; *Unisa English Studies*, 28, 1, 1990: 30.

²⁶ This actually has a Biblical parallel in Job too: 'Men open their mouths to jeer at me; they strike my cheek in scorn and unite together against me' (Job 16:9-11). The Magistrate mentions God only on this particular occasion. The only time Drogo entreats God to give him strength to witness an eventual attack of the Kingdom of the North at the end of the novel, the door of his room 'slams to with a loud bang like a hostile answer to Drogo's prayer' (214). This is an example of irony in the novel, though critics have often maintained that the work 'lacks ironical detachment' (see e.g. Giuliano Manacorda, *Storia della letteratura italiana tra le due guerre: 1919-1943*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1980: 334). Other examples of irony have been pointed out earlier on in the present article, for instance in the choice of characters' names and in the portrayal of Angustina.

soldiers strip him, force him to wear a woman's smock and a salt²⁷ bag as a cap — in place of a scarlet robe and a crown of thorns — and hung him on a tree. He thinks of himself as a scapegoat and he does not blame the crowd that comes to watch him. When he roars in pain, a bystander jeers at him: 'He is calling his Barbarian friends' (121), re-echoing the comment 'He is calling Elijah' in the New Testament.

The Magistrate is able, if only in a dream, to have a sort of communion with the Barbarian girl who wears a blue robe — the Virgin's colour, and offers him a loaf of bread (109) with a clear reference to the Christian symbolism of bread-breaking in the Eucharist. This is his reward for his desperate one-man protest against the culture of inhuman violence that Joll is spreading among the people of the outpost.²⁸

Dreams and nightmares feature as significant elements in both *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *Il deserto dei Tartari* in that they mark the turning points in the narratives. In the former they are often visions of hope (when children appear in them), whereas in the latter they usually foretell disaster, as if Drogo — who is under the fatal spell of the Fort and the desert beyond — is haunted even in his sleep. The Magistrate's dreams, though, are not premonitions like Drogo's. They are not the product of the unconscious of a sensitive individual, but prophetic visions that are of relevance to the whole community and need to be interpreted and understood, if not by the character himself, by the reader. The Magistrate, being a sort of prophet, is 'gifted' with profound insights and exceptional powers of expression that reveal themselves in his prophetic dreams — a very significant element in the whole novel. His dreams are also salvific in so much as they reveal what might be if only the Barbarian girl and the Barbarians were

²⁷ Salt was used in different traditions, Biblical included, in sacrificial offerings.

²⁸ This is only a dream and the Magistrate reflects on the limited nature of his protest and of his power of speech, diminishes himself and says that it is 'easier to lay my head on a block than to defend the cause of justice for the Barbarians' (108). But he has stood up for them and is rewarded, in this fashion, by 'them'.

recognised for what they are.²⁹ He dreams of the girl before he meets her, though he cannot see her face and his dreams of her become clearer as time goes on until she appears as she really is, face to face, that is, not a Barbarian, but a salvation figure of great beauty. In fact, in the allegory, she has the potential of being the 'key to the labyrinth' (87), the Ariadne figure who will deliver the ethnic group to which the Magistrate belongs from the labyrinth which they themselves have created, but only if she is recognised as herself, if only he can 'see' her as she really is, if only he stops making of her 'whatever he feels like' (78).

In *Il deserto dei Tartari* and *Waiting for the Barbarians* a tension exists not only between the periphery and the centre, but also between the walled space and the 'beyond', the 'other' symbolised by the desert, an unknown land to the north of the outpost inhabited by menacing strangers, the descendants of the Tartars (Turkic-speaking peoples spread across central Asia) in the former and the so-called Barbarians in the latter. The north as a cardinal point suggests both a farthest possible limit (the 'Ultima Thule' of the ancient Greeks and Romans) and a source of danger in that in Greek and Latin classics as well as in the Bible, the north (whether northern winds or northern populations) brings about destruction.

In Buzzati's novel the desert is also symbolic of the aspirations of some characters, those who, like Drogo, are waiting for an attack from the Kingdom of the North to meet their destiny. In the symbolism of level, the capital town represents the lower level (the valley), the Fort the higher (the mountains), and the desert the highest level. In fact, it is not the vast plain that can be viewed from the Fort, but only 'a triangle' (29) because the mountains at the sides and the mist ahead partially obstruct the sight. The triangle with the apex uppermost is a symbol of the urge to escape from the base towards the apex and, therefore, of a yearning for something that transcends ordinary life - the dream of

²⁹ The dream on pages 148-9 is an exception. It is a dream that reflects the reality of imperial history, the mass grave of the past, history as the rise and fall of empires with all the slaughter that is involved in this process.

some moment of glory which will prove to them that their lives are redeemed from worthlessness. But the visible triangle of desert is actually ‘inverted’³⁰ with the Fort at the apex, indicating that the characters are mistaken in their expectations of deliverance from the desert. The inverted triangle represents, in fact, pressure on the apex from all that is contained in the triangle above — pressure instead of deliverance. In this light, the original title chosen by the author, *La Fortezza* (‘The Fort’), would have been more appropriate than the one agreed upon with the publisher that shifts the focus of the narrative from the walled space — the apex of the triangle — to the desert and the Tartars outside.³¹

Just as in *Il deserto dei Tartari* the other side of the border is only partially visible from the Fort because of the perpetual mist, so in *Waiting for the Barbarians* the desert is hidden by ‘haze’ (14) and nobody knows for sure what it may conceal.

The desert is not only a space of absence, but also a space of potential in so much as, by imagining the ‘missing’ landscape, the characters can fill it with a sense of purpose. In fact, the very first time Drogo looks at the northern desert he can only make out ‘a bare *meaningless* plain’ (85, my emphasis), but once he charges it with metaphysical significance, it becomes a bewitching scenery, the scope itself of his life. Similarly, the Magistrate — who has never been to the northern desert — gives it form and substance by drawing the first maps of the area (12).

In both novels the protagonists’ eye-sight, verbs of sight as well as metaphors of sight play a major role.³² The Magistrate’s ‘eyes are

³⁰ The position of the apex can be inferred by the description of the landscape. A triangle of desert with the apex down appears in the picture that Buzzati himself painted for the cover of a later edition of the novel (see also fn. 23).

³¹ The original title was rejected by the critic Leo Longanesi (1905-1957) who was the editorial adviser to the publisher Rizzoli for the series of world literature in which Buzzati’s novel appeared. It is worth noting that the new title seems to imply that the Tartars are a tangible presence (like the Barbarians in Coetzee’s novel), or at least a significant one, whereas most references are to the army of the Kingdom of the North, the descendants of the Tartars.

³² The importance of metaphors of sight has been assessed by numerous critics and for this

sharp' (39) and he is associated with light. He gives his own life a direction only after he goes down to the granary with a lantern, like Diogenes, in search for truth. Being his antagonist, Joll is identified with blindness (his dark glasses), blinding (his prisoners) and 'blackness' (146).

The Magistrate is obsessed with vision (he wants to interpret the wooden slips, the scars on the girl's body, the stains in the torture chamber) and lack thereof (the blind Barbarian girl) and he is also very attached to the familiar views that surround him. It is ironical that, on their first encounter, the Magistrate proudly shows his maps and 'the sights' (5) to Joll. Similarly, when he first meets Mandel, he is impressed by his (feigned?) 'interest in the new sights of the frontier region' (49).

Drogo has a similar concern for the landscape, as Major Matti ironically points out when he says: 'I didn't know you had an interest in views' (26). Not unlike the Magistrate, Drogo tries to read 'signs' too as he scans the horizon trying to 'interpret' the tiny specks on the other side of the border.

Although the frontier is regarded as 'lazy' (8) in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and as 'dead' (15) in *Il deserto dei Tartari*, in both allegories borders represent a source of potential danger. Being a dividing line established by somebody on disputed land, a border is inevitably a place where trouble manifests itself, cyclically, throughout history.

A border also possesses a metaphysical significance in that crossing borders marks a ritual passage from one social status to another.³³ The Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Private Lazzari in *Il*

reason it is not treated at length in the present study.

³³ Victor Turner in *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982) maintains that 'The passage from one social status to another is often accompanied by a parallel passage in space, a geographical movement from one place to another. This may take the form [...] of the literal crossing of a threshold which separates two distinct areas, one associated with the subject's pre-ritual or preliminal status and the other with his post-ritual or postliminal status' (25).

deserto dei Tartari cross the border and both lose their identities in the process. Once they come back they are not recognised for whom they used to be: they have become ‘enemies’, one is put in prison and the other is shot.

The Magistrate is conscious of the significance of crossing borders when he comments: ‘We have crossed the limits of the Empire, it is not a moment to take lightly’ (71). By crossing the line between the Empire and the Barbarians’ territory, he becomes a different person altogether and as such he is seen by the authorities who jail him on his return: he is no longer a respected magistrate, but ‘a fucking old lunatic’ (126).³⁴ The same happens in *Il deserto dei Tartari* to Private Lazzari, the soldier who crosses the border to catch a mysterious horse he has mistaken for his own. When he comes back, he cannot speak the language of the Fort because the password has changed while he was away: he is no longer ‘a soldier’, but ‘a stranger’ and a stranger who approaches the Fort must be shot on the spot.

When Lazzari is killed by a sentry, the narrator gives an inventory of the treasured possessions found in his drawer. They are a ‘holy image’ (107), which makes him the only character who is in touch with the spiritual world; some ‘colourful handkerchiefs’ (107), which give an unexpected glint in the monochrome domain of blue uniforms;³⁵ ‘four silver buttons for his Sunday best that [...] would never be of any use at the Fort’ (107), a clear indicator of the young man’s ‘civilian’ identity; ‘two maize cobs’ (107) that connect him with nature and fertility and a tinder-box that identifies him also as a ‘magic’ character, straight from the popular Grimms’ folktale of the same title which also features a soldier as the protagonist.³⁶ Lazzari does not reason like the other men

³⁴ Conversely, at the end of the novel when Joll returns from the border, he is the one who is described as a ‘madman’ (146).

³⁵ In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the uniforms of the army are also blue.

³⁶ Private Lazzari believes in a magical world, in a ‘secret passage’ through the mountains (94) and cannot be convinced of the contrary, not even by Sergeant-major Tronk, somebody that every soldier respects and fears at the Fort. Lazzari possesses some ‘magical qualities’ too. In

at the outpost and, in fact, 'it never occurred to him — not even for a moment — that without knowing the password he could not get in again' (96). In his innocence, he even believes that the Colonel might forgive him 'because he had brought in [...] a beautiful horse' (96-7). Being a peasant (105), Lazzari belongs neither to the Fort nor to the capital town, but to the realms of nature and popular imagination. He is a complete outsider and he cannot possibly comprehend, let alone survive, the 'inexorable rules of the Fort' (98) which everybody else seems to take so seriously.

In *Il deserto dei Tartari* Drogo and those characters who share his obsession find themselves compelled to wait for the possibility of an act of heroism that never presents itself³⁷ and end up living in a present that is a kind of negative time — not dissimilar from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* — in which movement has no significance.

Unlike the Magistrate who tries to take some form of action, however insignificant, Drogo has no will to leave the Fort, nor does he try to change his lot and keeps on waiting for an invasion until the very end.

Drogo longs for war, the Magistrate, instead, for an uneventful life. He does not want to make history, but 'to live outside history' (154). The Magistrate, who has been 'waiting to retire' (8) in the safety of his walled town, discovers at his own expenses that there are no peaceful corners on the map of empires and that history will eventually disrupt 'the static time of the oasis' (143).

History cannot be escaped and the Magistrate has visions of possible futures in which the Barbarians will (temporarily) be victorious. In an analogy with the episode in the October revolution when the

fact, the strange horse that does not belong to him, does follow him all the same and when the young man is shot by the sentry, it comes closer to him instead of running away. Lazzari's name reminds one of Lazarus, but contrary to the reader's expectations that the sentry might have missed or wounded him, Lazzari does not rise again because he is truly dead.

³⁷ As a contrast, there is no military mystique in Coetzee's novel: only cruel and inept officers and unruly and potentially dangerous soldiers. Buzzati is not uncritical of the military mystique that attracts Drogo, but it is a strong voice in the novel and one that the protagonist finally sees as his justification.

Bolsheviks dismantled the statue of Alexander III with the two-headed eagle emblem of the Tsars and stormed the Winter Palace,³⁸ he imagines how a Barbarian will ‘climb the bronze gateway to the Summer Palace and topple the globe surmounted by the tiger rampant that symbolises eternal dominion, while his comrades below cheer and fire their muskets in the air’ (133-4). Later on, he wishes for another type of revolutionary, ‘a Saviour with a Sword’ who will deliver his people from bondage and ‘scatter the enemy hosts and forgive us the errors that have been committed by others in our name and grant us a second chance to build our earthly paradise’ (143).

In the time of history empires rise and fall, as the ruins of an early civilisation near the outpost clearly point out. More disturbingly, the discovery of an old mass grave by the wall of the town shows that the past had its Jolls and Mandels too (the skeletons lay ‘on top of each other’ and the remains of an innocent child are found among them, 148)³⁹.

The levels in the landscape seem to symbolise the past (underground level, the ruins of an ancient culture),⁴⁰ the present (the outpost, the Empire) and the future (the desert, the Barbarians).⁴¹ The Magistrate is aware of the fact that the Barbarians will eventually take over, just as the desert they inhabit ‘defeats’ Joll in the end⁴² and will ultimately

³⁸ This is also a famous scene in Sergei Eisenstein’s movie *October* based on the actual events of the Russian revolution. The pulling down of the symbol of the empire, or previous regime, is actually a conventional action in all revolutions.

³⁹ At the beginning of the novel, the Magistrate explains that no human remains have been found at the ruins: ‘If there is a cemetery we have not found it’ (15). The mass grave is located ‘between the barracks and the south wall’ of the outpost (148), the ruins are located ‘two miles due south of the town’ (14).

⁴⁰ The Magistrate speculates that they may be the ruins of a culture that the Barbarians destroyed (15).

⁴¹ The Barbarians inhabit the desert, or rather the mountains beyond it, as a consequence of the expansion of the Empire.

⁴² Cf. the words of the soldier at the end of the novel: ‘We were not beaten – they led us into the desert and then they vanished’ (147).

obliterate the oasis (51). But he cannot communicate with them successfully; neither can he hear the 'spirits from the byways' at the ruins (16), nor interpret the message contained in their buried slips.⁴³ He can only 'patch maps together' (12) and 'patch up relations between the men of the future and the men of the past' (72).

In the end the Magistrate takes the lead 'in all measures for the preservation of the people at the outpost' (145). He sees Joll (temporarily?) defeated and stripped of his power — symbolised by his dark glasses — though, like a prophet, he does not rejoice. He tries, instead, to teach him a 'long meditated lesson' (146) telling him how all human beings are capable of being cruel, but they must not — as he has learnt — allow this to govern their dealings with 'others', with different ethnic groups. The Colonel's lips move, but the Magistrate does not know whether 'in imitation' or 'in derision' (147).

Joll may not be a changed man, but what is important is that his fall has shown that no man or empire is 'invulnerable'. Moreover, for the very first time, there are signs of dissent among the few die-hard people who have stayed at the oasis. Some people (children?), in fact, throw stones at his carriage as 'shouts and curses rain down' (146-7) whereas, earlier on, nobody had shown any condemnation for Joll's cruel methods, nor had anybody attempted to stop Mandel and his men when they ransacked and terrorised the settlement.

In *Il deserto dei Tartari* it is only at the very end that Drogo realises what a mistake his life has been, 'how futile it had been to wear himself out on the ramparts of the Fort, to scan the desolate northern plain' (233). He finally understands the truth: he has been expecting the impossible without seeing the irony of his confidence in his expectations. He has in effect wasted his life, has done nothing for anyone, not even for himself or his military career (he dies with the grade of major), has left no children, no friends. He has formed no strong attachments except to a heroic vision that never becomes a

⁴³ The Magistrate pretends to 'interpret' the slips for Joll, claiming they contain 'Barbarian characters' for 'vengeance' and 'justice' (112). By doing so, in the allegory, he is speaking for all those who have been oppressed by Empire throughout history and called 'barbarians'.

reality and deliberately never seems likely to. Ironically, this awareness comes to him at the very moment of his death and the 'single battle' he has been waiting for all his life (78) will be the one with 'the last enemy',⁴⁴ Death. Heroism for Drogo can only be achieved by squaring his shoulders at the end to step across 'the black threshold' (233).

By the conclusion of the novel something has changed, though; after more than thirty years, Drogo has finally understood the pointlessness of his predicament. That is why he dies neither at the Fort nor in town (both in a way or another sources of frustration), but half-way at an inn where peace and harmony can be found at last. Although two women appeared earlier on in the novel — his widowed and elderly mother and his maiden girlfriend — it is only at the inn that Drogo meets a 'fertile' woman, a mother with a child contentedly asleep in a cot, a possible image of love and hope. Significantly, Drogo — who only knew the martial music of the trumpets at the Fort and the melodies of the piano in town — hears for the first time a guitar accompanying people singing 'some sort of popular love song' (230), some 'sweet music' (231).

Similarly, at the end of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the Magistrate sleeps with Mai, the only mother-figure in the narrative.⁴⁵ She has just had a new baby and she is also the mother of the little boy who seems to like the Magistrate, perhaps the only person who shows some feelings for him throughout the novel.

Children, whether those who appear in the protagonist's dreams or those who inhabit the settlement, stand for hope in the novel. It is not by chance that they are the only people who visit the ruins — they use the area as playground and listen to the 'groans under the earth' (13) — establishing a link with a past nobody is interested in apart from the Magistrate.

⁴⁴ 'The last enemy to be destroyed is death' is a quotation from 1 Corinthians 15:26. This is seemingly the only reference to the Bible in the whole novel.

⁴⁵ An aboriginal woman holds a child in her arms at the beginning of the novel, but the child is dead.

Il deserto dei Tartari ought not to be read — as too many critics have pointed out — simply as an allegory of the human condition, but first and foremost as an allegory of the condition of the Italian bourgeoisie during fascism and before the war. Buzzati describes, in fact, the stasis, the lack of a positive focus and direction that characterised the life of many Italians during fascism, a regime that obtained and maintained consensus also by inculcating unattainable dreams of glory.⁴⁶

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* Coetzee uses allegory to describe the feelings of impotence, isolation, confusion and guilt experienced by those South African intellectuals who, like the Magistrate (a civilian officer, but also an artist, a writer), preferred to ‘sleep’ instead of taking action against injustice, or engaged themselves in an individual protest which, in isolation, cannot possibly change the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. Although it is important for the protagonist, for his own image of himself, that he should have made such protest, his story is one of missed opportunities, of underdeveloped potential, of lost direction. That is why the novel ends with the children ‘building the new man’: the future belongs to them.

Il deserto dei Tartari and *Waiting for the Barbarians* do not offer simple answers or strategies.⁴⁷ They reflect, in different ways, the malaise of those intellectuals who are unable to produce any meaningful transformation and therefore wait for a change that comes from the outside. The former is the historical product of the political climate in Italy during the period of fascism and the latter of that of South Africa during apartheid. To paraphrase Roland Barthes, Drogo in *Il deserto dei Tartari* is an exemplar of complicity, the Magistrate in

⁴⁶ See Marcello Carlino’s *Come leggere “Il deserto dei Tartari”* (Milano: Mursia, 1976: 53-75).

⁴⁷ That is why, perhaps, both novelists have been criticised for their supposed lack of a clear political message.

Waiting for the Barbarians, of impotence — both experience an inescapable feeling of alienation.⁴⁸

Buzzati and Coetzee tried to transcend the boundaries of time and space. They chose allegory to make a more general statement — though not necessarily the same — about life and commitment.

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⁴⁸ This is how Roland Barthes in *Le degree zero de l'écriture* (Paris: Seuil, 1953: 1972) describes the impotence of the intellectual (24).