**J.M.Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians as a Colonial Oedipus**

Veres Ottilia[[1]](#footnote-2)

**Abstract**: In Waiting for the Barbarians I am interested in instances of looking exchanged between the various characters in the novel with special emphasis on their significance in a colonial context. Arguing that shreds of the Oedipus myth can be spotted in this narrative, I attempt to read Barbarians as a special colonial version of the Oedipus story. Having in focus motifs such as self-knowledge as riddle, (self-) reflection and self-deceit, reading and misreading, the novel brings into play the major motifs of the Oedipus myth. I read Barbarians as the (tragic) (colonial) story of one’s encounter with oneself instead of one’s encounter with another. I attribute colonial significance to the disfunctionality of looking in the novel, an aspect that signs Coetzee’s story (as) a “colonial tragedy.”I want to see how the figures of Oedipus, the Sphinx and Tiresias are present dispersed in the various characters of the novel.

**Keywords**:  postcolonial, Oedipus, looking

Set in a small frontier town of a nameless Empire, *Waiting for the Barbarians* tells the story of the town’s Magistrate whose easy and peaceful life is disturbed when the Empire orders Colonel Joll of the Third Bureau to check and inspect the Magistrate’s work and the town’s life.[[2]](#footnote-3) There are rumors that the “[barbarians](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barbarian)”—supposedly living beyond the frontier land—are preparing for an attack on the Empire, therefore the Empire orders Joll to conduct an expedition to capture the intruders, who are then brought to town, tortured and some of them killed by Joll’s men. The novel starts with the Magistrate’s first encounter with Joll. Saturated with optical metaphors, *Waiting for the Barbarians* features looking and the hiding of the eyes on the thematic level of the text from the beginning. Already in its opening sentences, the text posits looking as problematic. When first meeting Joll, the Magistrate gives an account of his hidden eyes:

I have never seen anything like it: two little discs of glass suspended in front of his eyes in loops of wire. Is he blind? I could understand it if he wanted to hide blind eyes. But he is not blind. The discs are dark, they look opaque from the outside, but he can see through them. He tells me they are a new invention. ‘They protect against the glare of the sun,’ he says. ‘You would find them useful out here in the desert. They save one from squinting all the time. One has fewer headaches. Look.’ He touches the corners of his eyes lightly. ‘No wrinkles.’ He replaces the glasses. It is true. He has the skin of a younger man. ‘At home everyone wears them.’ (*Barbarians* 1)

 Defamiliarizing looking and glasses in its first sentences, the opening of the text paradoxically posits looking as blindness and sharp-sightedness as the impairment of sight. Never having seen and not knowing what sunglasses are (for), in the beginning the Magistrate (the narrator-foculizer) (mis)understands Colonel Joll’s glasses as an object the aim of which is to hide his blindness rather than aid his looking by protecting against the sun and sand. While Joll legitimizes his wearing of the glasses by saying they protect against the sun (and that they are a new invention back home), the Magistrate is reluctant to understand the reason for Joll’s using them in the present situation, indicating his suspicion concerning the justified (and declared) use of the glasses.

I am interested in instances and ways of looking in Coetzee’s novel, with special emphasis on the meanings of the gaze in a colonial context. The opening paragraph of *Barbarians* establishes looking and the inhibition of looking as the “ur-motif” of the novel standing as an allegory of the vicissitudes of the colonial relationship. Arguing that shreds of the Oedipus myth can be spotted in this narrative, I attempt to read *Barbarians* as a special colonial version of the Oedipus story. Having in focus motifs such as self-knowledge as riddle, (self-) reflection and self-deceit, reading and misreading, the novel brings into play the major motifs of the Oedipus myth. I read *Barbarians* as the (tragic) (colonial) story of one’s encounter with oneself instead of one’s encounter with another. Considering the fact of the impossibility of the encounter between colonizer (the Magistrate and Joll) and colonized (the barbarian girl), I assign/attribute colonial significance to the disfunctionality of looking in the novel, an aspect that signs Coetzee’s story (as) a “colonial tragedy.” I am interested tosee how the figures of Oedipus, the Sphinx and Tiresias are present dispersed in the various characters of the novel.

Despite his fatigueless effort to find out the “truth,” symbolically, Colonel Joll turns out to be blind in his interrogations of the barbarian prisoners and in this sense his glasses function as a *stain* that inhibit his sight, distort his view and do *not* allow him to see the “truth.” They represent “the blind eye that Joll turns to his own tortuous treatment of the barbarians” (DelConte 36): “His work is to find out the truth. That is all he does. He finds out the truth” (*Barbarians* 3), the Magistrate explains. The irony within the narrative voice gives a firm twist to the Magistrate’s words. Joll’s address to the Magistrate that “You [too] would find them [the glasses] useful out here in the desert. [. . .] At home everyone wears them” (1) can be read as a hint of his related to where the Magistrate is supposed to belong to (and that he is supposed to see the barbarians as Joll sees them). His hint, at the same time, suggests that “at home” (in the heartland of the Empire) everybody shares his (Joll’s) idea of truth, understood (by Joll) not as something that corresponds to the actual state of the world, but as something that is necessarily hidden and given up only as a result of torture. His premise is that everybody contains such a nugget of truth in themselves (if one tirelessly goes to seek it). It is as if his glasses carried this function of investing him with (lending him) the capacity of gaining and obtaining this “truth.”

The Magistrate’s initial assumption about Joll’s optical handicap will prove right considering his symbolic short-sightedness or blindness. In this sense, Joll’s opaque glasses play the (symbolic) role of the colonial (colonizer’s) strategy of misreading and they represent and embody the colonial theme of misreading and misunderstanding. Dramatized by (and materialized in) the glasses, point of view (whether the Barbarians really exist or not, whether they are seen as friend or foe, whether the Magistrate is friend or foe of the Empire, etc.) could be said to be (one of) the subject matter(s) of the novel.

The Magistrate’s relationship with the blind and lame barbarian girl can be understood and read as part of a colonial narrative of which (Fanonian) sexual fantasies towards the other and fear from the other are part. The partly “filial” relationship between the Magistrate and the barbarian girl “becomes a metaphor for the relationship between colonizers and colonized under the Empire, assuming conflictual (and sometimes sexual) connotations” [. . .] (Canepari-Labib 39). The Magistrate himself is conscious of the dubious motives of his acts of charity toward the girl, however he cannot let go of her. Unlike the symbolism of the initial act of kneeling (on the girl’s side) and of the act of offering money to the kneeling-begging girl would suggest, their relation does *not* settle as a master-slave relationship but as a more dynamic and more ambiguous relationship. The Magistrate, as it becomes clear later, would settle for any position in their private intersubjective relation (he offers himself as a slave to her by washing and massaging the girl). He seeks but fails to find a/the reassuring look (of recognition) in her eyes and this marks a crucial aspect in the narrative dynamics of the text: “When she looks at me I am a blur;” (*Barbarians* 31) “I look into the eye. Am I to believe that gazing back at me she sees nothing—my feet perhaps, parts of the room, a hazy circle of light, but at the centre, where I am, only a blur, a blank?” (*Barbarians* 33). She sees (him) a blank; he cannot see/meet her in her eyes. He is eager to learn her, to encounter the Other (her core) in her eyes, but her eyes merely reflect him back. They both see the other as the Biblical phrase suggests, “through a glass, darkly.” The nomad girl’s unreflective eyes convey no “interior” but simply reflect the gaze of the Magistrate. So, if we see/consider this aspect of her look, the Magistrate’s assumption (his reading of her gaze) according to which “it knows itself watched” proves wrong, as the blankness of her gaze would suggest precisely the opposite, namely that she does not care if she is watched, she lives in her own closed world. Her unreflective “insect eyes” betraying nothing of an internal life, at the same time, recall Joll’s dark, unreflective glasses. In this sense, she is also a repetition of Joll, as one of the Magistrate’s descriptions of her face also suggests: her “face [is] *masked* by two black glassy insect eyes” (47, emphasis added). The word “mask” appears several times in the text to describe Joll’s glasses. The girl’s “closed” eyes reflect back Joll’s “closed” eyes and face; they reflect back his fear to encounter the other. Even her gesture of turning her head away can be seen as a reflection of Joll’s gesture of refusal to look into the eyes of his adversary through the closed dark shields of his glasses.

It is for this reason—that their relationship does not set down at the beginning as a master-slave relation—that the Magistrate cannot let go of the woman. Their relation, in fact, often manifests as a master-slave relation but in the opposite way, as the Magistrate himself puts it: “the form [the girl] to which I am in a measure *enslaved*” (*Barbarians* 45, emphasis added). Already the fact that the relationship is more important for the Magistrate than for the girl confirms its inequality. The Magistrate’s “clinging” to the girl is likewise one-sided: “I see myself clutchedto this stolid girl” (*Barbarians* 35). The question arises: if their relationship is not/does not confirm to the dynamics of a “traditional” master-and-slave (colonizer-colonized) relation—as their first encounter and the townspeople’s gossip would suggest—then what (other) kind of relationship is it?

Dismissing their relationship as a love relation due to a lack of reciprocity, Jane Poyner reads their relationship as follows: “Each night, uninvited, the Magistrate ritually bathes and oils her broken feet and in the process is lulled into a trans-like sleep, ironically oblivious of the presence of the girl herself ” (Poyner 60). The girl, on her side, is continuously found (by the Magistrate) to be absent, blank, “empty” or resisting on these encounters: “I cease to comprehend what pleasure I can ever have found in her obstinate, phlegmatic body, and even discover in myself stirrings of outrage. [. . .] I cannot imagine what ever drew me to that alien body” (*Barbarians* 45). Clearly, his attraction to her goes beyond sexual fascination, which is, in fact, lacking, as he himself realizes. Both of them being present as “absent” on their encounters, the Magistrate wonders: “with surprise I see myself clutchedto this stolid girl, unable to remember what I ever desired in her, angry with myself for wanting and not wanting her” (*Barbarians* 35). Why the obsessive attachment then? What is the nature of their relationship, what is its stake and driving force?

*“‘Let me look.’” / “‘Tell me.’” Colonial Oedipus[[3]](#footnote-4)*

The question invites several answers. Partly, the Magistrate seeks to learn and know *himself* better in and through this relationship. His question “Who is she?” is, in fact, a question inquiring after *his* *own* selfhood, meaning, in fact, “Who am *I* (through her [blind eyes])?” In this sense, the girl’s function, for the Magistrate, is to mirror him back to him. As the word “clutched” suggests, she holds a prosthetic function for the Magistrate in his self-knowledge (self-[re]cognition), in the process of learning about himself. He is “clutched” to her and cannot let go of her. It seems as if he could define himself only as dependent of and depending on this girl. The irony of this bond springs from the fact that the Magistrate knows that as soon as she is deciphered—her “meaning” found and thus her figure “demystified”—she would cease to be an Object for him. His desire (for her) would cease. While the Magistrate’s (and the text’s) constant effort is to try to fill the girl and her gaze with meaning, he is aware of the fact that at the moment that this (finding her meaning) takes place their relationship will be over.

Driven by a (colonialist’s) “quest for knowledge,” an urge to learn the girl’s “secret,” he, however, cannot help demanding from the girl “‘Let me look’” and “‘Tell me’” (*Barbarians* 33, 34). The two demands of the Magistrate aim at the same goal, to penetrate the girl’s meaning and touch at her “final truth.” The crucial difference between the two claims lies in the active-passive roles of this “search for knowledge.” While the Magistrate’s “‘Let me look’” posits the Magistrate in the position of the one who knows (let me look and I will tell your truth), his “‘Tell me’” implies the opposite, namely that the girl’s truth is known by her only (tell me because only you know).[[4]](#footnote-5) The subject/object, active/passive roles are likewise inverse in the two scenarios.

The Magistrate’s “‘Tell me’” demand, at the same time, gives voice to what Derrida calls the colonialist’s “demand for narrative:” “To demand the narrative of the other, to extort it from him like a secretless secret, something that they call the truth about what has taken place, ‘Tell us exactly what happened’” (qtd in Bhabha 98). The natives’ resistance to confession, Bhabha explains, represents a frustration of the 19th-century strategy of surveillance. “‘Let me look’” and “‘Tell me’” both build up a “panoptic” system that features a surveyor (a looker-on, a listener) and a surveyed (a looked-at, a listened-to). Bhabha (with Derrida) adds that the colonialist demand for narratives “carries within it its threatening reversal,” the paranoia of power: “‘Tell us why we are here’” (Bhabha 100). Partly, the Magistrate’s “Tell me” summon undeniably gives voice to his desire to learn the girl’s secret: “What did they do to you? [. . .] Tell me. Don’t make a mystery of it” (*Barbarians* 34). The Magistrate’s summon to the girl is an almost word-for-word rephrasing of Derrida’s “Tell us exactly what happened.” A reader, a “cartographer” driven by an urge to “read out” the secret of the girl’s “monstrousness,” he has to find out the *reason* (origin) for her blindness and deformity. His obsession with the girl is driven by a/his “historian’s” appetite to learn (about) her “origins,” or more precisely, the origin/s of her signs. The desire that generates the narrative plot (Brooks) is “for the story that the other’s body seems both to mark and to conceal” (Durrant 391).

In being the girl’s compulsive reader unable to let go of her, the Magistrate can be said to suffer of “Oedipus’ sickness:” he cannot let go of her until her riddle is solved: “Until the marks on this girl’s body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her” (*Barbarians* 33). The Magistrate’s observation confirms his crucial dependence on the girl, defining himself only *in relation to* the girl. The claim also posits him (in his role) as a “reader” and the girl as his object. It is her “meaninglessness” that seduces him. Her being a riddle appeals him as reader: “of this one [the girl] there is nothing I can say with certainty” (*Barbarians* 46). In his insatiable quest to understand her and the meaning of her marks, he lines up a series of “Oedipal statements” in his demands towards the girl. His “Let me look” and “Tell me” demands reflect and reiterate Oedipus’ unquenchable fervor to go after and learn every detail of her story and put the story together to finally learn “who she really is” (*Barbarians* 79). A detective eager to find out a “whodunit,” he raises the question “What did they do to you?” (*Barbarians* 31) three times to the girl. For him, understanding her marks (her gaze) equals with learning the truth about her. The gaze as a metaphor for learning the truth appears in Cixous’s *Oedipus:* “Give me the gaze / That unveils everything” (Cixous qtd. in Miller 257). As if understanding it literally, the Magistrate parts the girl’s eyelids to catch/take/grasp her “gaze:” “Between thumb and forefinger I part her eyelids. The caterpillar comes to an end, decapitated, at the pink inner rim of the eyelid” (*Barbarians* 33).An inveterate reader, he tries going as close to the girl as possible searching her as if with a magnifying glass.

Like the Magistrate’s, Oedipus’ conduct reflects the colonialist’s demand for narrative, his search being also driven by the “colonizer’s” “let me look” and “tell me” demands. As a true “colonizer” (Oedipus is a foreigner in Thebe), he sets out to play the role of the detective in a “learning process” which is partly driven by his confidence in himself as good reader/detective (his confidence in his knowledge) (let me look and I will be able to find out the truth) and partly by his interest in others’ knowledge (tell me because you know and I will put it all together). Indeed, the irony of Oedipus’ story could well be translated into (echoes) Derrida’s claim about the colonialist demand for narrative: it“carries within it its threatening reversal,” the paranoia of power: “‘Tell us why we are here’” (Bhabha 100).

Oedipus is where he is not supposed to be, Oedipus is who he is not supposed to be. Oedipus’ story is unsayable (Hardwick 376) and in this perspective the novel’s opening sentence gains (opens up) yet another layer of meaning: “I have never seen anything like it” reads as an “Oedipal sentence,” Oedipus’ story telling the untellable, showing the unseeable (showing, exposing what can only be looked at with blind eyes). Like Joll’s, Oedipus’ work is to “find out the truth. That is all he does. He finds out the truth” (*Barbarians* 3). Though they have different purposes leaving home, the Magistrate will find that he came to the frontier to meet himself, like Oedipus who leaves home in order to avoid meeting himself (fate) and both will find/encounter a greater homelessness where they end up. Like Oedipus, the Magistrate is driven by the “humanist” urge to save the people (the barbarians) from their distress and misery by dissolving the curse.

If shreds of the Oedipus myth are present in Coetzee’s story—primarily through the several “Oedipal statements” and the Oedipal “conduct” of the Magistrate—it is in a dispersive logic that they are at work. In *Barbarians* the figure of Oedipus is present dispersed in the Magistrate, as well as Joll, as well as the barbarian girl through her Oedipal sores (the blind eyes and the swollen ankles).[[5]](#footnote-6) Though with very different goals and tools, Joll and the Magistrate—like Oedipus—come to the colonies to do some “findings,” to meet the other—and themselves—in their different ways. On the colonies (the frontiers)—a liminal place frightening in its otherness—both of them are “homeless”, like Oedipus in Thebes (Sophocles’ text equates home and homeliness with the caregiving look of parents and “homelessness” with the lack of parents’ caregiving look). The Magistrate decides to leave the home(liness) of the Empire for the promise of an easy life on the colonies but will end up willing to learn the barbarian girl’s secret, herself sharing Oedipal features with the Magistrate, bearing Oedipal marks on her body.[[6]](#footnote-7) Broken-ankled and blind, she personifies the name Oedipus. Her blind eyes and broken ankles are injuries “received” from the Empire (Joll) and in this context the primordially Oedipal sores of blinded eyes and broken ancles become (gendered) colonial sores (sores of the colonized) on the barbarian girl’s broken body (complemented by a torture into silence of the [once again, gendered] oppressed).[[7]](#footnote-8)

The Magistrate can also be seen as a Tiresias figure, personifying the name Tiresias meaning “interpreter,” “reader of signs” (Kerényi 250). But, once again in the dispersive/disseminating logic of the characters’ traits, the barbarian girl too can be looked at as a Tiresias figure, having the stick as her prop, the stick representing the blind and old oracle in the original myth. Like Tiresias who has been blinded (punished) as a child by Athene because he had seen something he was supposed not to see (unwillingly he saw her naked, while taking a bath), the barbarian girl’s blinding can be seen as a similar punishment received from the hands of the “Empire” (Joll) for having seen scenes (the torture and humiliation of the other prisoners, her father included) that she was supposed not to see, or better, that she is supposed not to tell, her blinding, in this sense, compounding with (equaling, ranging with) Friday’s mutilation in *Foe*. In blinding himself, Oedipus chooses to have the same punishment Tiresias received for having seen what he was not supposed to see. He blinds himself because he repeated Tiresias’ sin/guilt. The figure of the naked Athene and of the copulating serpents Tiresias saw as a child (yet another scene that he was not supposed to see) recall Oedipus’s transgression seeing his mother naked and having slept with her (Kerényi 251). The Magistrate’s sexual affair with the barbarian girl can be seen as a (colonial) transgression, a (colonial) crossing of borders that “he was supposed not to cross,” having seen something he was supposed not to see. On one of their nightly rendezvous the Magistrate (the text in its rhetoric) recalls the story of Eros and Psyche, yet another story of transgression. In Apuleius’ tale of Cupid (Eros) and Psyche (in *The Golden Ass,* also known as *Metamorphoses*), Psyche is supposed never to seek to see the face of her lover who visits him nightly covering his identity in the dark. However, on her sisters’ pressure, Psyche breaks her promise lighting a candle at the light of which she discovers the identity of her lover. She sees Cupid while he is sleeping, but wakes and scars him with her candle, spilling hot wax on his skin. It is the motif of spilling the wax that is present in *Barbarians*. Sleeping with the girl one night the Magistrate says: “[…] bending over her, touching my fingertips to her forehead, I am careful not to spill the wax” (47). Playing the role of Psyche from the tale (mark the gender switch), in his affair with the barbarian girl he sees and does what he is not supposed to see and do (seeing the woman naked, making love to her). By having an affair with the girl, the Magistrate can be said to commit Joll’s “sin” of “trespassing into the forbidden” (*Barbarians* 13) (the phrase is used earlier by the Magistrate to describe Joll’s transgression when he sets out on his journey to the “barbarians” for his “barbarian-hunting”). The spilling of hot wax recalls methods of torture like the burning (marking) of the victim’s skin with hot iron or hot lead, yet another element that calls forth an association between the Magistrate and Joll (and his torture). This context gives an ironic ring to the Magistrate’s final outcry at the end of the novel grieving that “I could not engrave myself on her” (*Barbarians* 148).

The image of the Magistrate deeming to meet “twin reflections” of himself staring back at him from the dead centre the girl’s eyes depicts and portrays the very figure of Oedipus presuming to find another but recognizing himself instead as the object of his search (deeming to look through a glass/window but being forced to stumble into a looking glass, the mirror reflection of his own face). Likewise, the image of the Magistrate trying to see her “through my blind fingertips” (*Barbarians* 46) recalls the figure of Oedipus, blindly palpating to find his way in the labyrinth. While also recalling the blind seer Tiresias, the trope of blind fingertips suggests the Magistrate’s attempt to adopt (assume) the girl’s (blind) perspective and try to “see” with her “eyes.”

At the same time, for the searching Magistrate-Oedipus, the girl plays the role of the Sphinx, the woman-headed lion with wings whose riddle Oedipus solves. The barbarian girl’s bodily deformities are reminiscent of the Sphinx’s weird, bizarre, uncanny body. She, at the same time, does not only comprise (the role of) the one who lays (poses) the riddle to the Magistrate-Oedipus, her figure also points toward the solution of the riddle. Her walking stick recalls the third leg of man from the riddle of the Sphinx.[[8]](#footnote-9) The “detective” Magistrate speaks as Oedipus recognizing the girl as “the only key I have to thelabyrinth” (*Barbarians* 87).[[9]](#footnote-10)

It is this aspect—the “willingness” (openness) to encounter the other, his fervor/urge to find the other *and* his failure at finding the other—that primarily makes the Magistrate an Oedipal figure. Like Oedipus (and unlike Joll), he makes endeavors to find “the one,” the unknown one, the “other one.” His continuous failure at being able to encounter the other in the barbarian girl makes him a colonial Oedipus. Although the driving force of his quest is to come to know the barbarian girl, to encounter the colonial other in her, the girl’s blind eyes continue to reflect *him* back to him, the unreflective, impenetrable eyes “speaking” the impossibility of this encounter with the other. Like Oedipus, the Magistrate encounters himself (only) (rather than the other), and it is this aspect that makes Coetzee’s novel a “colonial tragedy” that tells (about) the impossibility of the encounter between colonizer and colonized. Joll’s dark (impenetrable, impassable) glasses play the function of the par excellence Oedipal gadget representing blindness as a colonial “sickness” or a colonial “handicap” and the impossibility of the exchange of looks as a colonial disfunctionality. Representing home (“back home”), the glasses play the symbolic role of a protective shield that inhibits, impedes, bars and prevents Joll’s possibility for an encounter with the barbarian other talking of an utter fear, denial and refusal to face this encounter. His glasses become a metaphor for the “imperialism of Oedipus” (Deleuze and Guattari’s term in Hardwick 376) and for the colonial relationship in general. It is also in Joll’s glasses that the Magistrate will see himself, his own image cast back at him, the glasses reflecting his own face and eyes back from Joll’s. Thus, Joll’s blindness gets doubled in the Magistrate’s blindness, despite his efforts at understanding the barbarian girl (’s secret/core) and despite his efforts at willing to be different from Joll. In this sense, by way of his (self-imposed, symbolic) blindness Joll’s tragedy is greater than the Magistrate’s and in this aspect he again recalls Oedipus in that they cannot really feel shame; due to their blindness they become incapable to the radical somatic experiencing of shame (Bódi).[[10]](#footnote-11)

Like many of Coetzee’s novels, *Waiting for the Barbarians*—like *In the Heart of the Country* (the Magda-Hendrik couple), *Michael K* (the mother-son relation), or *Foe* (the various love relations)—formulates the failure of reciprocity of intersubjective relations. “The craving to touch and be touched by another human body sometimes comes over me with such a force that I groan” (*Barbarians* 105), cries out the Magistrate in a Molloyesque “craving for a fellow” (*Molloy* 15) in his cell, after being locked up for more than two months, denied any human contact but the one with the little boy bringing his food.[[11]](#footnote-12) “Truly, man was not made to live alone!,” (*Barbarians* 87) he cries out in his confinement, butafter all, by the end of the novel, one finds the Magistrate alone. The encounter that he craved for—that of two strangers, two others—did not come about. As a final irony to the motif of looking in the novel, the only clear sight in the novel appears to be the sight of authority, “the blue eyes of Mandel” (132) (Joll’s henchman). The supplement meaning attached to Joll’s glasses—namely that they stand there to hide “Joll’s truth,” so if they are removed, one sees his “truth,” one gets an insight into his (“real,” “true”) “core”—does not get unfold. We never see Joll remove his glasses, one never sees his eyes. However, as an ironic answer to the aspired “truth” behind Empire’s glasses one sees Mandel’s clear blue eyes.[[12]](#footnote-13) “Truth” equals Empire. The Empire prevails, while the Magistrate’s attempts at “humanism” fail. Like the barbarian girl, he ends up blinded by the authorities (by Joll, basically, on his orders). The irony of the narrative voice (the Magistrate’s) is perceptible when he talks about Mandel’s “clear eyes, windows of his soul” (137). The inconclusive ending of the novel (Poyner 68) brings the looking/gaze motif once again into the focus, giving voice to a lack of accomplishment, disillusionment, and resignation from the Magistrate’s part: “I think: ‘There has been something staring me in the face, and still I do not see it.’ [. . .] [I am] feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere” (170). One of the last sentences of the novel, the sentence—just like the first sentence of the novel—can be read as yet another Oedipal statement in the novel. The last image of the novel posits the barbarian girl as the owner of the knowing gaze—the owner of knowledge or of “truth”—and the Magistrate as the repetition of Joll, his eyes being filmed over with a thin tarnish similar to Joll’s dark shields, unable to receive the barbarian girl’s look.

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Szabó K. István, dir. Szofoklész, *Oedipus.* (Main roles: Dobos Imre, Dimény Levente, Varga Balázs; Music: Ovidiu Iloc). (Hungarian) Szigligeti Theatre, Oradea, 2012.

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2. The novel was written in 1979 and published in 1980, at a time when the situation in South Africa appeared to be degenerating towards a general “holocaust” and the level of violence in the country was unparalleled between state security forces and sections of the black townships. At the time, the novel was read as a text allegorically focusing on the South African situation (Canepari-Labib 87). Susan Gallagher, for example, reads the novel in the contemporary context of torture following the Soweto riots of 1976-7 and the death of Steve Biko (an anti-apartheid activist) in 1977. Also David Attwell argued that Coetzee’s Empire is recognizable partly as the fictionalization of the apartheid discourse of the South Africa of the 1980s (74). Dominic Head too argued that although the parallels are vague, at one level, the novel is an “allegory of imperialism” (72), saying that there are obvious ramifications of apartheid South Africa in the novel. In “A Belief in Frogs” he argues: “Torture, or the possibility of it, was a fact of daily life for many people in South Africa in 1980, and so the representation of it strikes a chilling and literal chord” (102). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. In “African Oedipus?” Nicki Hitchcott argues: “In 1966, Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues published *Oedipe africain* (African Oedipus), a collection of clinical and ethnographical observations based on a four-year psychoanalytical study of Senegalese patients in Dakar. [. . .] The concept of an “African Oedipus” led me to reconsider the suitability of Freud’s theories of sexuality—and of femininity in particular—in an African context” (59). In *Psychoanalysis and Race* Hortense J. Spillers looks further into the Ortigues’ concept of “African Oedipus” “as an instance of psychoanalytic reference to a non-European community of subjects” (714). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Another difference between the two appeals refers to the *way* truth is expected to reveal itself—through the eyes or ears: let me *look/see* the truth versus let me *hear* the truth (tell me). For a comprehensive analysis on the gaze and the voice as love objects see *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. Ed. Renata Salecl and Slavoj Žižek. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. In Coetzee’s novel, Oedipal features are dispersed in the three major characters of the novel, the Magistrate, Joll, and the barbarian girl. In a similar fashion, in the 2012 *Oedipus* performance at the Hungarian Theatre of Nagyvárad (Romania) director István Szabó K. conceived the title figure as an “Oedipus dispersed” distributing the role to three actors (within the same performance) (the young, the grown-up, and the old and blind Oedipus), thus creating a continuously dispersing, disseminating meaning to Oedipus. Though the story of *Oedipus* “is about” (it moves into the direction that) Oedipus is “one,” his tragedy is that he is, in fact, many, he is all those persons he believes to be someone else (the murderer of King Laius, the child with the broken ankle, the son of Laius and Jocasta). The distribution and breaking of the role amplifies the meaning of Oedipus as “many,” especially that the three actors often show up together on “stage.” This is complemented by the role of the Choir (whose text is completely left out) which murmurs the sounds (letters) and syllables of the name Oedipus (each letter and syllable corresponding to a separate tune). The Choir disentangles (the name) Oedipus, unfolds it, undoes it, strips it bare to its very least particles. The singing of the Choir functions in two directions: partly it represents the ironic play and curse of gods, but it also functions as a “cure” or rune, as a dissolution of the curse. Thus (in and through the play of the Choir) will the figure of Oedipus bear the meaning of dispersion and “flowing apart” and “collection” (or “gathering”) and self-creation at the same time. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. In her *The Name of Oedipus, Songs of a Forbidden Body* (a 1977 libretto-text for an opera) Hélène Cixous likewise conceives of a split or fragmented Oedipus, doubling all the principle roles into singing and talking ones (she has two Oedipuses, two Jokastas, and two Tiresias (Miller 249). Also, as I argue about the figure of Oedipus in *Barbarians*, in Cixous’s *Oedipus* characters are awash in one another, so that in his final monologue Oedipus incorporates the mother-lover by matching a singular French verb to a plural pronoun: “Nous continue” (we continue/s) (Miller 250). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. As part of the 2000 “Greeks” Project in Glasgow, Scottish playwright David Greig’s *Oedipus the Visionary* readapts the original play raising the question of English domination in Scotland, addressing the ambivalent identity of Scots as both colonizers and colonized (Hardwick 377, 384). The theatre performance in Glasgow suggested the India of the British Raj in its setting. Oedipus speaks about the afflictions of the city as wounds (of the empire): “this plague’s tearing out the heart of everything. / It’s cut open scars / And picked at scabs” (qtd. in Hardwick 383). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. The Sphinx’ riddle goes: Which creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening? Oedipus’ answer to the riddle is: Man, who crawls on all fours as a baby, then walks on two feet as an adult, and then walks with a cane in old age. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Searching his way in the labyrinth, he also recalls the figure of Theseus, while the girl can be looked at as playing the role of either the monster Minotaur whom Theseus subdues and thus he becomes the savior of his “Empire” (Athens) or that of Ariadne who helps her lover find his way out of the labyrinth (the Empire’s/Joll’s maze of lies). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. http://www.avorospostakocsi.hu/2012/09/24/oidipusz-a-latas-es-a-hibrid-test-bizarr-csodaja/ [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. I am referring to Molloy’s “craving for a fellow” from the story of A and C in Beckett’s *Molloy.*  [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. An ironic cross-comment from Coetzee’s *Dusklands,* Jacobus says: “The Hottentots knew nothing of penetration. For penetration you need blue eyes” (*Dusklands* 97). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)