

T.O. McLOUGHLIN.

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FABLES FROM THE DESERT - FUNCTIONS
OF IRONY IN BECKETT AND SOME
SOUTHERN AFRICAN WRITERS.

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IN BECKETT AND SOME SOUTHERN AFRICAN WRITERS.

(Includes Mungoshi's Waiting for the Rain)

The point of this paper is to see whether there are any significant differences in texts which, despite their culturally divergent sources, tackle a very similar problem in seemingly similar ways. The texts are by the Irishman Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot, a Zimbabwean Charles Mungoshi, Waiting for the Rain, and a South African J.M. Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians.¹ Because, as the titles suggest, the characters wait for something that ironically does not come, the main critical attention will be given to irony and how it works in each of the texts.

Certain features of irony are worth mentioning at the start.

'Irony,' writes Kierkegaard, 'asserts a relation of opposition.'² In simple terms irony thrives on the interplay between what seems to be and what is, and it recognizes that 'the coexistence of incongruities is part of the structure of existence.'³ Irony, says Hayden White, is 'the linguistic strategy underlying and sanctioning skepticism.'⁴ Irony is neither neutral nor innocent. It stems from a writer's urge to reveal apparent realities as unreal. Kierkegaard explains this from the example of Socrates:

the whole substantial life of Hellenism had lost its validity for him that is to say, the established actuality had become unreal to him, not in some particular aspect but in its totality as such. In relation to this invalid actuality he allowed the established to feign existence and thereby brought on its destruction.⁵

These remarks offer a pertinent model for discussion of similarities in the three works: in summary, first, life loses its validity for the ironist; so he allows the established to but feign existence; and as a consequence the work brings about the destruction of 'invalid actuality'.

In Kierkegaard's model what is present in an ironic work has but a 'feigned' existence, and it is important to notice how this sense of 'feigned' is achieved. Most obviously by placing the story—more properly the fable—in a setting that is less real than metaphoric, more suggestive of a metaphysical state of mind than of a materialist mundane reality. The setting in each book is a desert which reflects what one critic has called a 'moribund culture.'⁶ The barren, god-forsaken backdrop in each text is one indication that 'the established reality' has become unreal.

The desert is, in Hayden White's terms, a dominant trope in all three texts.

But the desert of the fable is not the anomalously salvific setting of Patrick White's Voss, nor the desert of Christ's temptations and triumph over evil. It is a place more like Eliot's Wasteland where significance is hard to come by and fulfilment unknown. At the level of natural imagery Estragon and Vladimir wait at a barren spot on the road. There is a mound, a tree (for hanging), a ditch, and a bog. Lucifer travels home to 'a heap of dust and rubble' (52). 'No breathing space in this desert,' says Kuruku (65). The fort in Waiting for the Barbarians is an oasis (51), but the text accents extremes of heat and cold; all around lies the desert beyond which live the Barbarians.

Setting, so resistant to meaningful change becomes the metaphoric scene of waiting. Here various manifestations of an established order play out their so-called existence. In each text this order is imaged by figures of power, individuals who in different degrees and ways embody either convention or tradition. Society has to a large extent taken on its colour and direction from such people. They are figures committed to a cause, or belief, or simply to power itself. Pozzo, Matandangoma in Waiting for the Rain and Col. Joll, police officer in the Third Bureau in Coetzee's novel signify an order, a framework by which society might measure itself.

The established order in each book, although 'feigned' by the text, is presented as an object of awe and sometimes puzzlement to Estragon and Vladimir, of respect and fear to the Mandengu family, and of incomprehension and occasionally joy to the townspeople in Waiting for the Barbarians. In each text its presence, qualified by the metaphoric context, is part of the writer's awareness that 'the established actuality had become unreal to him.' The ironist drives home incongruities between this 'established actuality' and the rest of his text in order to signify its insubstantiality and his own freedom from its grasp.

It is necessary therefore to look briefly at how irony achieves this double function of destruction and liberation in each of the texts.

To return to Pozzo. At his first encounter Estragon asks him timidly, 'You're not Mr Godot, Sir?' Pozzo replies in a terrifying voice, 'I am Pozzo' (22). Typically Pozzo makes definite unambiguous statements; Estragon and Vladimir much prefer questions. Against Pozzo's authority is posited this pair of bumbling friends for whom questioning is the only thing they do with any conviction. For them nothing is certain. The ability to know

is itself in doubt. They don't follow the conventions of serious conversation. Against Pozzo's imperative and logical way of talking and handling experience in Act One the ironist places a language that is tentative and doubtful. Whereas Pozzo seems to know what he is doing, Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly dispute where they are and what to do. Their problem is what to say and how to pass the time. Because they are waiting, the present is a kind of negative time, it has no significance.

Vlad. What do we do now?

Est. Wait.

Vlad. Yes, but while waiting.

Est. What about hanging ourselves?

Vlad. Hmn. It'd give us an erection! Let's hang ourselves immediately. (17)

His connivance to outwit boredom, to counter insignificance with play illustrates a comic ingenuity, a complicity of desperation which subverts conventions of thought and serious communication. The result of Vladimir's question is an absurd joke that the two of them commit suicide in order to enjoy an erection which neither of them will be alive to experience: Coming as this conversation does before Pozzo and Lucky enter for the first time it establishes a tone of comic futility. Pozzo asserts that he owns the place (23), but such claims to authority are subverted by the text which establishes that Pozzo's values, now reduced to a master-slave relationship, stem from an order that does not exist. He recalls the kindness, help and entertainment Lucky used to give him (34). He speaks as though obedience is a necessary consequence of command, he respects and expects rationality, he is at times lyrical about the world and his memories. But when he comes back in Act Two he is blind and asks 'where are we?' Vladimir replies, 'I couldn't tell you' (86). An increasingly ambiguous figure he returns to be absorbed into a world of futility and comic irreverence where not reason but a parody of reason reigns. Vladimir's reply deflects the seriousness of Pozzo's question with a destructive irony reminiscent of Swift and Joyce. Where time and place are at least in doubt, if not unknown, language is left to pretend that meaning is possible. After Pozzo's exit Estragon and Vladimir wonder whether he was Godot (90). It's absurd, but a possibility.

Their question to Pozzo suggests, as does the title, that Godot exists. But 'Godot' with its French suffix that qualifies God as a familiar and a diminutive, 'my pal God', or, 'that fellow who is sort of God', may not 'Personally I wouldn't even know him if I

saw him' (23). The kind of epistemological question that besets Estragon and Vladimir does however make Pozzo's sureties seem banal. What the reader is left with then is a problem of knowing. Is God there? Is he a familiar? Is he worth waiting for? As Estragon and Vladimir stand at the end deciding to leave, they are caught like Joyce's Eveline in a paralysis.

Vlad. Well. Shall we go?

Est. Yes, let's go.

They do not move.

Curtain.

Both going and staying are futile. Man is victim of his own contradictions—spirit and flesh, positive and negative, command and question, word and action. Waiting for what he does not know and has no means of knowing, he pretends to know it all. Estragon and Vladimir do not take time, space, or experience seriously. Rather they help one another face the joke. Their compassion for one another, their desire to relate to one another, to play games, to fabulate are the resources of a culture that has lost not only its perception of its values but the means to think or talk about them. In this epistemological desert Pozzo's determination to push on is absurd. As in Flann O'Brien questions are more important than answers. 'There is no answer at all to a very good question,' says the Good Fairy.⁷

In Mungoshi's Waiting for the Rain the ways in which the established actuality is allowed a 'feigned' existence are more difficult to analyse, not least because the text is reluctant to isolate its principal characters. Unlike Pozzo and Col. Joll, the medicine woman Matandangoma expresses what is partially present or implicit in many of the other characters. To see how the ironist shows she has but a 'feigned' existence and is destroyed we need to start with the person most obviously antithetical to her, namely the young Lucifer, who before he leaves the village to take up his scholarship in Europe, pauses in the hut and, in contravention of Matandangoma's orders (130), smashes the medicine bottles she has prescribed for him, 'one by one into very small pieces' (172). In this symbolic rejection of tradition and belief Lucifer physically acts out the subversion of the established order which the text has been working at throughout the novel.

One of the principal incongruities which the irony points up centres on the word 'home'. The family assembles at Lucifer's home to bid him farewell. Before he arrives for the week-end the text has established that

'home' is a fractious, drought stricken place. As Lucifer approaches in the bus images of dust and death predominate. Later he puts his reactions to the place on paper; home is where 'The sharp-nosed vulture already smells carrion' (52). His brother Garabha at one point bursts out, 'I am tired, yes. I am tired of coming home every time only to feel I am not wanted here, to hear who hates our family, who has done what to us' (133). The traditional and desired sense of 'home' which Matandangoma puts forward, where past and present, the living and their ancestors are reconciled, has been subverted long before she arrives. She is allowed a position of honour at the family meeting but her decisions, her authoritative tone of voice are merely tolerated by the text.

Her vision of the processes of appeasement of the ancestors is punctuated by her crushing authority and sarcasm towards Betty, and Lucifer - 'Wipe the snot off your nose, puppy,' she says to him. 'Now, if you will leave us for a moment, we will proceed' (149). But her assurance and ruthlessness have already been subverted by the text's insistent reminders that indeed Lucifer will leave, and not just for a moment. Furthermore, the old order may well 'proceed' and with a 'heart of stone,' as Matandangoma suggests, 'but as Lucifer has long since written in his poem, on a road 'that goes nowhere' (53).

At one level the novel is not about waiting, but about leaving. The family does gather, but to see Lucifer off. In the end 'Lucifer watches his home disappear behind a cloud of dust' (180). The destruction of the myth is complete, but as in Waiting for Godot the implication is that the waiting goes on.

In Waiting for the Barbarians, with its echoes of Cavafy's poem of the same name,⁸ the ironist introduces and sustains the antithetical forces of order and subversion from the very first page: Col. Joll sits opposite the Magistrate. The Magistrate thinks to himself:

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 (1).

Joll, Colonel of police, instrument of the law, the emergency powers, of justice-in-brief, of what holds the state together-wears glasses against the glare of the desert. But as Dr Johnson said of irony, 'the meaning is contrary to the words.'⁹ The Magistrate's first person narrative shows that Joll and the established actuality he represents are blind. Against Joll's cold commitment and 'patriotic bloodlust' is set the Magistrate's

scepticism about himself-'stupid and befuddled' he calls himself (94)- and an active compassion for a barbarian girl prisoner whose feet he washes. In the best sense of irony he contradicts Joll, and the contradiction activates for the reader ironies against Joll that put him in perspective. In so doing they free the ironist and the reader from the narrow view of him which most characters in the book have.

Hence Joll's determination to capture, torture and extract information out of the barbarians, who he believes are preparing to attack the country's border posts, is never allowed to become the subject of the text. It is undermined by irony. After the Magistrate has witnessed yet more torture, this time of captives brought into the town square, he turns away from the atrocity in the realisation that the real barbarians have been present all the time in the persons of Joll and his troops. The people waiting are themselves the barbarians. Irony has finally displaced the established order with at least three possibilities, 1) that the Barbarians of the title do not exist, ii) that they might exist, but not here, iii) that they are the soldiers. As Kierkegaard argues, irony replaces the established order with its own actuality: 'its actuality is sheer possibility.'¹⁰

What the reader responds to in these examples are the strategies by which the ironist liberates himself and the reader from the limitations of convention, of perspective, and received ideas, conventions of language and communication in Beckett, conventional trust in power, authority and the law in Coetzee, and conventional attitudes to tradition, not to mention the new urban world and education, in Mungoshi. By the liberating processes of irony the reader is brought in the end to a freedom of judgement beyond the powers of anyone within the text. Unlike the closed ending of say Jane Austen's Emma, or the open ending of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, or indeed the alternative endings of a Waugh or a Fowles novel, the endings leave the reader free-not to choose between or synthesise the opposite tendencies, but to assess the significance first of the absence of various things, the absence most obviously of an ending, of Godot, of Barbarians, of rain, and secondly of waiting itself. As the titles suggest the texts have a continuing presence in which the reader is free to make of the possibilities what he will, or almost. Readings are determined by the terms of the discourse, and its modes. Freedom needs a context and they provide the context within which the readers' freedom can play. The particular mode of each text sets

up the terms for this freedom to assess and to continue with the possibilities of the text.

The question then is what are the dominant modes of discourse and comprehension in Beckett, Coetzee, and Mungoshi? Meaning in Beckett is not so much achieved as questioned, and the principal manner of doing this is to set up oppositions between questions and statements, and then to question epistemology itself. The text operates by a self-contained irony in which characters generate a language of communication that is self-defeating. The dominant mode is ironic. This exhibits itself in the tone and mood of the very title which is self-consciously ironic and admits no relations with meanings outside itself. The freedom the reader has with Waiting for Godot stems from an acceptance that irony is self-defeating and judgement itself is a sceptical business, even comic, but certainly not serious. Estragon cries out in exasperation, 'I don't know why I don't know' (67).

Coetzee's Waiting for the Barbarians is an allegory about political power in which the word 'Barbarians' moves from being a metonymy for rugged military raiders who have no clear identity, to a metaphor which establishes an equivalence between barbarism and Joll's **Third Bureau**. In that power and authority are allegorised in the seemingly blind Colonel of police meaning is achieved by leaving the reader to make the equivalence between metaphor and reality. The text pushes at meaning obliquely. We ask ourselves, what does the allegory stand for? This is not a reductive question; rather it is capable of several answers because, in its very difference from the world of experience, metaphor is free from the necessary limitations of a particular time and space. As a mode of knowing, metaphor sets up a tension between its text and possible pre-texts and contexts. Hence the reader is free to make a particular correlation of the text to reality, or not.

The text is therefore but tenuously linked with the actual world. As ironist Coetzee establishes an oblique stance with his own context, "South Africa. The ironic incongruity is that the text is, and it is not, South Africa. The freedom to judge the Magistrate or Joll, or indeed waiting, has to acknowledge that metaphor both as distorter and accenter of the commonplace transcends fixed literal equivalences. There is no simple answer to the questions, who are the Barbarians? Are they coming?

With Mungoshi's Waiting for the Rain we come much closer to the world of actuality. Rain operates as a synecdoche. Garabha, Lucifer,

the Old Man recognize that the country is waiting for rain, but as the book progresses we realize that rain is but one of many things waited for in this splintered society. Hayden White's comments on synecdoche are useful here. Synecdoche, he argues, works 'towards integration of all apparently particular phenomena into a whole, the quality of which was such as to justify belief in the possibility of understanding the particular as a microcosm of a macrocosmic totality.'¹¹ Although the earth, the bushes, Garabha, Sekuru, Tongoona and others severally are waiting for rain to invigorate the soil the apparently particular phenomenon is integrated by the text with the armed struggle which John is waiting for, Betty's expected baby, death coming to Japi, and at another level the return of Makiwa's spirit to the Mandengu family, and the return of Lucifer himself. The text works primarily by synecdoche. At the end of reading the title becomes metonymic, the reduction to a word of a whole process of change, and on reflection the metonymy becomes metaphoric.

Hence within these different modes - irony, metaphor, synecdoche - it is possible to distinguish manners of irony peculiar to each. The ironic mode of Beckett is self critical. The language constantly foregrounds the incongruities between words and meaning, the verbal and the substantive, waiting and Godot.

The irony peculiar to Coetzee's metaphoric mode is not so much self-referential as inter-textual. It plays on the incongruities between the text and what it displaces or takes the place of. Its possibilities lie in the tensions between metaphor and actuality.

The synecdochic nature of the Mungoshi text means that the reader's freedom works within a more particular framework than in either Beckett or Coetzee. The new actuality at the end of Waiting for the Rain, of possibilities, which the irony has made available, is part of that dialectic which Kierkegaard talks about in which the established order is destroyed making new actualities possible which in turn carry the seed of their own destruction. The synecdoche focused by specific details of place - the rolling ranches of Hampshire Estates, Chambara Township, Manyene Tribal Trust Land - turn this text into a microcosm of a more concretely defined macrocosm than does the metaphor in Coetzee or the irony in Beckett.

A comparison of these books shows that irony has the same destructive and liberating tendencies in each case. What the irony liberates the reader to do however is very different. Waiting for Godot leaves the

reader free to play with epistemological uncertainty. The line 'I don't know' echoes through the play and much of Beckett's fiction. As mentioned above metaphor gives a freedom of a different sort. The question at the end of Waiting for the Barbarians is not, is there significance? but, what is the significance say of the Barbarians? Mungoshi's synecdoche prescribes much more specific possibilities. Like Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent and Ngugi's Petals of Blood the possibilities and the 'feigned actuality' have a particular place, culture, and history. The context of the reader's freedom is more limited than in Coetzee or Beckett. Its potential lies within the particular cultural development of Zimbabwe and metonymically of colonial and post-colonial Africa.

This looks like an argument for synecdoche as a culturally descriptive mode. What then of metaphor or irony? Beckett's ironic mode, particularly its irreverence and playful energies, and Coetzee's use of metaphor have so cut themselves free from a specific actuality that they display a dissatisfaction with synecdoche. This is endemic of cultures that are more concerned with language as a means of seeing the world differently to what the commonplace tells us it is than with using language to capture the commonplace.

Two final points can therefore be made. First, Coetzee is part of a cultural sensibility, shared by writers like André Brink, Athol Fugard and Nadine Gordimer, which accepts that language can offer oblique visions of actuality. One of its important functions is to discriminate. Beckett is of a sensibility that questions these assumptions with ironic irreverence.

Secondly, to argue that Beckett demonstrates something fundamental to the human predicament - a Johnsonian endurance, or 'a compassion for the human condition'¹² - is to claim that readers are free to do with him what his ironic mode gives them no means of doing. Furthermore, the human condition for many non-Western readers belongs essentially to the realm of historical process. For Beckett it does not. The novels of African writers like Achebe, Ngugi, La Guma and Mungoshi are evidence of an historico - political consciousness whose first steps against despair are made in a synecdochic or metonymic discourse to describe the desert both physical and spiritual in which colonialism has placed them.

Mungoshi's synecdoche is as much a product of his culture, in which waiting is an action of belief that the present will have its particular

consequences, however ironic, as Beckett's irony demonstrates his where language is more curious about its comic helplessness than about so called actualities.

FOOTNOTES

1. Beckett, Waiting for Godot (London: Faber, 1956, 2nd edn., 1965), C. Mungoshi, Waiting for the Rain (London: Heinemann, 1975), J.M. Coetzee, Waiting for the Barbarians (London: Secker, 1980).
2. S. Kierkegaard, The Concept of Irony (London: Collins, 1966). p. 272.
3. S. Hynes, cited by D.C. Muecke in Irony, Critical Idiom series (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 22.
4. Hayden White, Tropics of Discourse (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 73-74.
5. Kierkegaard, p. 287.
6. E.B. Tenenbaum, 'Beckett's Pozzo and Lucky: The Alternative to Waiting for Godot', Studies in the Humanities, 7, No.2 (1979), 32.
7. Flann O'Brien, At Swim-Two-Birds (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 201.
8. Voices from Modern Greece, Selected Poems, trans. and ed. by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 7-8.
9. Johnson's Dictionary, 3 vols. (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown and Green, 1827), II, 'Irony'.
10. Kierkegaard, p. 296.
11. White, p. 72.
12. Unnamed Student cited by Alec Reid, All I Can Manage, More Than I Could (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968), p. 57.