Cindy Harris

possible only with lots of help from the weather and from energy suppliers. Without that good fortune, the system is powerless to handle what the next twenty years are likely to bring.

As a matter of fact, I rather imagine they are right about this, but my critical faculties argue that the system has proved resilient in the past, surviving, as it has, wars, depressions, secession, and Richard Nixon. Could America recharge itself yet again? Will it slide into one of the dismal futures that the authors—and indeed many of us—fear? Or will we opt for making one of the new, brave, happier, and more convivial worlds they hope for and believe in?

WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS
by J. M. Coetzee
(Penguin Press; 156 pp.; $3.95 [paper])

John Tessitore

American awareness of South African literature, to speak in admittedly general terms, began more than thirty years ago with the publication of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country.* Whatever the literary merits of that much-discussed novel, few doubt the landmark significance of its publication. And yet, for several reasons—not the least of which is official censorship—South African literature did not regain popular attention in the United States until the publication of Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* five years ago. Since that time we have heard a great deal from that country: two more volumes from Miss Gordimer, both well received here, and works of fiction by some half-dozen other South Africans, black and white. None has failed to receive attention in this country's principal review forums, and some have been noticed by the more popular media.

I do not think it a coincidence that South African fiction has received such intensified attention at a time when the government of South Africa—most particularly, its policy of apartheid—has itself become the focus of intense international interest. It is *not*, as South African novelist André Brink says elsewhere in these pages, that South Africans have only suddenly begun to write; rather, it is only now that large numbers of Americans (and others) have begun to read them. Here, then, is compelling evidence that literature does indeed reflect life; and in the instance of Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* it does so brilliantly.

The plot is a simple one: An elderly magistrate stationed at the extreme frontier of the "Empire" has his comfortable existence destroyed suddenly and explosively by the government's decision to teach the "barbarians"—the black nomadic peoples living on the Empire's fringe—a military lesson. The unnamed magistrate, who tells his own story in a continuous, first-person, present-tense narrative, explains that some government stores have been stolen and that, in reprisal, a Colonel Joll has been sent from the capital to discover and punish the perpetrators.

The methods of investigation are the simple methods of stupid men: brutality and humiliation. When the magistrate asks Colonel Joll how he can be sure that the one he tortures does indeed harbor useful information, the latter replies:

"...I am probing for the truth, in which I have to exert pressure. First I get lies, you see—this is what happens—first lies, then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth."

That Coetzee is describing the methods of his own government in the present day we cannot doubt. But it is just as apparent that he has purposely created an undefined geography set in an unspecified time. Irving Howe, in his *New York Times* review, took issue with the vagueness of time and place, impatient that the author and reader alike acknowledge the world of this novel as the world of contemporary South Africa. But can we not do so and then acknowledge something more? Is South Africa in the 1980s, after all, our only example of authoritarian tyranny, of ethnic and racial oppression, of conspicuous inhumanity?

This conscious effort to expand the terrain of *Barbarians* suggests a kinship with *King Lear*, a kinship further supported by a comparison of the central figures. Both Lear and the magistrate are aged men who, long accustomed to comfort and authority, are suddenly brought low, made the object of scorn and ruin. The magistrate, unable to re-

main aloof from the brutal interrogation of prisoners, takes it upon himself to return a young black woman—blinded and maimed by her captors—to her people, now wintering many days' journey from the outpost. After a torturous trek the magistrate returns to imprisonment, physical abuse, and—what is clearly the most pernicious punishment of all—social ostracism and public humiliation. Yet, like the "mad" Lear reviling the storm, the magistrate's soul will not allow him to surrender. Himself a prisoner, he witnesses a group of captives displayed publicly in painful bondage. They are about to be beaten.

"For me, at this moment, striding away from the crowd, what has become important above all is that I should neither be contaminated by the atrocity that is about to be committed nor poison myself with impotent hatred of its perpetrators. I cannot save the prisoners, therefore let me save myself. Let it at the very least be said, if it ever comes to be said, if there is ever anyone in some remote future interested to know the way we lived, that in this farthest outpost of the Empire of light there existed one man who in his heart was not a barbarian."

The "political novel" is a delicate hybrid, susceptible to the fatal strains of didacticism, ponderous prose, structural transparency, to name only a few. What ultimately makes *Barbarians* such excellent fiction, then, is not its thematic *intention* but its artistic *execution*. Coetzee is simply superb, producing here the kind of probing, intense monologue reminiscent of Stendhal's. That the author can relate a tale of horror in prose so exquisite testifies both to his inordinate literary skill and, as a South African, to the indomitable spirit of the human heart. [WV]

OURS ONCE MORE: FOLKLORE, IDEOLOGY, AND THE MAKING OF MODERN GREECE
by Michael Herzfeld
(University of Texas Press; 197 pp.; $17.50)

Stephen Rousseas

The title of Herzfeld's book is taken from the "Song of Hagia Sophia" about the sack of Constantinople by the Turks in 1453: The emperor and the patriarch are in the process of celebrating a solemn mass, with the sixty-two bells of Hagia Sophia pealing thunderously, when the voice of an archangel bids them cease the mass, gather the icons, and snuff out the light, "for it is the will of God that the city should turn Turk." At that moment, according to the song,

> "The Holy Virgin was seized with trembling, and the icons wept tears.
> 'Be silent, Lady and Mistress, do not weep so much.
> Again in years and times to come, all will be yours again'"

It is not clear who is speaking, the emperor or the archangel, nor is it of critical importance. What is important is the subsequent change in the last line from "yours again" to "*ours once more*." Greece is no longer the Virgin's. It is the emperor who speaks. The "Song of Hagia Sophia" thus became the rallying cry of an irredentist Greece, whose aspirations to reclaim ancient territories—the *Meghali Idhea* (Great Idea)—culminated in disaster and defeat by Turkey in 1922. One is tempted to extend the rampant emotions of the song to the idea of *Enosis* (Unification) that echoed through Greece in the 1960s and to the partitioning of Cyprus by the Turkish invasion of 1974. But that is not part of Herzfeld's story. His is about the unbridled superpatriotism of the Greeks and their vision of their homeland and its mission—a superpatriotism that has tainted most of the historical writing of contemporary Greeks and made their folklore a call to action.

Modern Greeks (or, as they prefer, *Hellenes*) have long had an identity crisis. From 1453 to the revolution of 1821 and establishment of the modern Greek state in 1833, the Greeks lived under the harness of the Turks. Throughout its long history, Greece has been repeatedly invaded by Dorians, Romans, Slavs, Franks, and others; but each time the captors became the captives. The Turks did not; and for four hundred years the Greeks struggled to maintain their national identity. The role of the Greek Orthodox Church in keeping the language and culture alive in clandestine schools and underground churches largely accounts for the fact that, unlike in the English, French, Italian, and Russian revolutions and wars of unification and independence, only in Greece has the Church emerged with its vast land holdings and political influence intact. But Greece as we know it today is a creation of no more than sixty years. In 1833, Greece was restricted to the Peloponnese and Attica. It was not until the Balkan wars of 1912-13 and a series of treaties that followed that Greece was given Macedonia, Epirus, Western Thrace, and the island of Crete, as well as some of the eastern Aegean islands.

Herzfeld's concern is with the development of folklore studies in Greece and the key role they played in the *political* development of Greece. Unlike folklore studies in France, Germany, and other countries, *laographia* (from *laos* [the people] and *graphia* [writing]) was riddled with ideology from its inception and almost totally lacking in scholarly tradition. But as Herzfeld emphasizes, "in a real sense laography helped *define* the national culture [and therefore] no student of Greek society can afford not to take some account of it." Indeed, "Greek folklore studies were an organic part of the making of modern Greece."

Herzfeld is an anthropologist who has lived in Greece for several years and is fluent in the language. His fluency in modern Greek and his non-Greek professional training have allowed him to undertake what most native Greeks could not: an objective and relatively dispassionate history of the development of Greek folklore studies over the last hundred years, all of it in its political context. As Herzfeld points out, laography begins with the emergence of the modern Greek state from the revolution of 1821 and the need of its people to establish a cultural continuity with the Greeks of antiquity and of medieval Byzantium. Greek folklorists sought traces of antiquity in the customs, lore, and folksongs of the people.

This same effort led also to the attempt, which still plagues modern Greece, to purify the Greek language (*Katharevousa*), and set up the Hellenist and Romeic ideological confrontation. Modern Greek still suffers from this division between classical purists and a more introspective identification with Byzantium and its glories. There is not one language in Greece; there are five. There is *archaezousa*, an almost classical Greek used only by a few extremists; *katharevousa*, a language cleansed of