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South African censorship: the production & liberation of *Waiting for the barbarians*, by J. M Coetzee

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ABSTRACT:

During Apartheid, South African censorship became the main legal instrument for the control and cultural tutelage of society. Censors decided which literary works could be read. Thousands of books were withdrawn from circulation, but the censorship did not achieve total success in curtailing the circulation of ideas. One novel, in particular, was released despite being not only very political, but also representing events that were – as J. M Coetzee puts it – in the minds and hearts of people of conscience during Apartheid: torture and fake reports issued by the South African police. Through documental and critical analysis, this article aims to answer one question: why *Waiting for the barbarians*, novel by J. M Coetzee published in 1980, was never banned? We will bring information and reflections on how the use of literary strategies, a political strategy and the exercise of censorship by a peculiar censor were crucial for the system's circumvention.

KEYWORDS: African literature, post-colonial, censorship.

RESUMO:

Durante o Apartheid, a censura sul-africana foi um dos mais importantes instrumentos de controle e tutela cultural da sociedade. Na literatura, censores decidiam quais obras poderiam ser lidas. Milhares de livros foram retirados de circulação, mas não houve sucesso absoluto em coibir a circulação de ideias. Um romance em particular foi liberado, apesar de ser não apenas muito político, mas também representar eventos que estavam – como disse J. M Coetzee – nas mentes e corações das pessoas com consciência durante o Apartheid: a tortura e os relatórios falsos emitidos pela polícia sul-africana. Por meio de análise documental e crítica, este artigo tem como objetivo responder uma única pergunta: por que *A espera dos bárbaros*, romance de J. M Coetzee publicado em 1980, nunca foi banido? Traremos informações e reflexões sobre como estratégias literárias, manobras políticas e o exercício da censura por um censor peculiar foram elementos cruciais para que o sistema fosse contornado.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: literatura africana, pós-colonial, censura.

INTRODUCTION

We heard long time ago from Professor Fernando Rosa Ribeiro, at Universidade de Campinas (São Paulo, Brazil), that South African Apartheid could not be considered a colonial (or post-colonial) regime because South Africa became independent from England in 1910, and the Apartheid era officially started only in 1948, after the Afrikaner party and the Herenigde Nasionale Party formed a coalition in order to win the elections in 1940. It may have been so to part of the population – especially the white who agreed with government actions and laws –, but it was not true for the majority of people who wanted a fairer country and certainly not for the Black population surviving under terrible conditions and under the domination of white rulers. Besides the extreme tension between black, colored and white population, another element

to be considered while thinking about South Africa's Apartheid is the conflicts between British and Dutch (Afrikaners) descendants, the two main colonizers.

The reality is that, either post-colonial or not, the Apartheid produced real situations of oppression – in which White people, living in privileged neighborhoods, pretended to have nothing to do with other South Africans' life, especially the black populations living in crowded and poor townships. For a long period of time, it was not true also for the writers and artists to kept silent by censorship when they tried to denounce Apartheid's injustices – no matter if these artists were whites or blacks.

Everyone in the country lived within rather demarked borders imposed by the state through physical separation, while the law forbade any kind of cross-cultural or interracial exchanges. The truth is that in order to maintain Apartheid, the government had to keep control of everyone and everything, including all the discourses written to inform and to influence the nation, among them the literary ones. Mainly during the 1970s and the 1980s, the political aim was to keep white people as ignorant and uninformed as possible from what was going on in the townships, in the prisons and in the torture cells.

The state also needed to keep the black population apart from discourses that could incite rebellion. Black people were set aside not only physically ('apartheid' means separation, in Afrikaans), but also intellectually. As a consequence, and in order to maintain the status quo, anything that could pose a threat to the state – pictures, reports, plays, novels, poems, paintings – or anything that contradicted the political agenda had to be banned.

It's also relevant to point out that black South African literature is a phenomenon of the 20th century, mainly because the educational system, as everything else in the country, prevented the black youth from receiving a good education. Therefore, many of them were forced to leave the country, as did Nelson Mandela, the first black president after the end of Apartheid.

White writers were the majority in South Africa. Even African literary critics recognized the incipency of South African black literature in the 19 and the 20th century. When interviewed by Coetzee, Louis Nkosi even said:

With the best will in the world it is impossible to detect in the fiction of the black South Africans any significant and complex talent which responds with both vigor of imagination and sufficient technical resources to problems posed by the conditions in South Africa (Coetzee, 1992, p. 344).

Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, B. Breytenbach, and J. M Coetzee were some of the white writers who achieved international recognition while writing under Apartheid. J. M Coetzee was born in 1940 and lived mostly in South Africa until he got an Australian citizenship and is living now in Adelaide, Australia. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2003 and he also was the first writer to be awarded the Man Booker Prize twice, first for *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1985) in 1983, and then for *Disgrace* (Coetzee, 2000) in 1999.

Despite the subject matter of his novels, in which oppression and violence are represented in all their crudeness, J. M Coetzee has been criticized by his peers for not writing openly against the conditions in South Africa during Apartheid in his first books. To reinforce his critics position, other writers such as Gordimer, Brink, and so many others had some of their books banned or suffered other kinds of restrains while Coetzee had never had a book banned by censorship.

Despite the opinions of his peers, after reading some of Coetzee's novels any reader with some knowledge of Apartheid's laws in South Africa would make relations between fiction and the reality of social segregation. Despite crafting some of his narratives in allegorical plots it's impossible not to think about South Africa when reading, for example, *In the heart of the country* (Coetzee, 1977a), *Waiting for the barbarians* (Coetzee, 1980) or *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1985), in which he approaches human, political, moral and ethical issues unquestionably related not only to under-Apartheid-South Africa but to any situation of oppression.

During Apartheid, Coetzee published *Dusklands* (Coetzee, 1996) in 1974, *In the heart of the country* (Coetzee, 1977a) in 1977, *Waiting for the barbarians* (Coetzee, 1980) in 1980, *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1985) in 1983, *Foe* (Coetzee, 2010) in 1986, and *Age of iron* (Coetzee, 1998) in 1990. He also wrote an ‘autobiographical’ novel in 1997, *Boyhood: scenes from provincial life* (Coetzee, 1998) – in which fiction and his own memories are intertwined in such a way that it is impossible to know when reality ends and fiction starts.

In his non-fictional books *Doubling the point: essays and interviews* (Coetzee, 1992) and *Giving offense: essays on censorship* (Coetzee, 1996) Coetzee – among other topics – touches the question of censorship, physical and psychological violence and torture – strongly opposing to any idea of violence of any kind. By reading his fictional and non-fictional writings we may infer that Coetzee was very much aware of the eyes of censorship watching over his (and other artists) shoulders and of the role of censorship in the lives and works of all artists in South Africa as well as its mechanisms of oppression.

In this context, the aim of this article is to scrutinize Coetzee’s aesthetical and political choices in the process of writing and publishing *Waiting for the barbarians* (Coetzee, 1980) in relation to what was going on in his country, aiming to answer a single question: why *Waiting for the barbarians* (Coetzee, 1980) was not banned by South African censorship?

Our research is based in documentation released after the end of the Apartheid regime, especially the report issued by Reginald Lighton in 1980, *Reader’s/expert’s report – serial n. P80/11/205*^[1]; the book *A South African censor’s tale* (Rooyen, 2011), by the former judge and censor Kobus van Rooyen; Professor Peter McDonald’s *The literature police: apartheid censorship and its cultural consequences* (2009); an interview with poet Charles Pierre Naudé, and documents, newspapers and personal J. M Coetzee’s files that Coetzee kindly allowed us to work with, gently sent to us by the librarian Cecilia Blight from the National English Literature Museum (NELM), in South Africa.

LITERATURE AND CENSORSHIP

During the South African’s Apartheid, a corpus of censors guided by complex laws decided what could be read and what should be banned from bookstores and even private bookshelves. Thousands of works were withdrawn from circulation and therefore did not reach their readers.

Some people may think that there is nothing surprising or new about it, and they are right. The same kind of constraint happened in Russia, Chile, Argentina and in all countries where censorship was imposed – at different times for different political reasons, but equally tough to stifle dissent. In Brazil, for example, during the military dictatorship decades, the number of books banned and censored has reached thousands.

Despite all the restrictions and censorship imposed by the authorities to prevent people from doing what they were willing to do, as well as speaking against what was going on in the country, the censorship apparatus was circumvented by writers, editors and even – and this was the most surprising information we found during our research – by the South African censors themselves.

Although courageous and efficient, we are not going to detail the editors’ underground networks built during Apartheid to spread books, poems and newspapers. Even though it is essential to know that it existed and worked well as a resistance tool against this imposed silence, our focus in this paper will be on the writer’s strategy to survive censorship and a censor’s supposedly intent to do right.

In 1980, by the time *Waiting for the barbarians* – from now on referred to as *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) – was published, Coetzee had already solved his publication problem. When publishing *In the heart of the country* (Coetzee, 1977a), his second book, he made a decision that changed his career. He accepted an offer from the British publishing house Secker & Warburg to become his publisher. The book first version was bilingual – it was written in English, but all the dialogues were in Afrikaans. This version was not good enough for Secker’s international market, so Coetzee wrote a monolingual version, only in English. In order to have his

original bilingual version published in South Africa, he tried to get an authorization from Secker to allow Ravan – his former local publisher – to sell the bilingual version of the book in the South African market. However, it was not an easy achievement as Secker did not want to give up his share of the local market but was also feared that the book could be banned.

Coetzee fought to have his book published in South Africa, the only place he believed his work would be fully meaningful. Coetzee felt trapped by Secker's position: they did not want to allow Ravan to sell the book in the country, but did not intend to take risks, either. He was very upset with the outcome, and wrote to Tom Rosenthal^[2], from Secker,

Finally, I must say I will find myself in an unacceptable position of a situation [...] in which the book is neither banned nor available in this country, while no moves are occurring in any direction, i.e. a position of stalemate. If the book is not going to be available in the only country in which it really attains its full significance, I must at least have the comfort of knowing that I am not responsible. (Coetzee, 1977b)

Finally, after many comings and goings, Ravan received an authorization to print the bilingual version, and Secker also launched the monolingual version – an imported one –, in the country's market. This entire printing saga evidences how censorship affected publishers. As the books were analyzed by a censor only after being published, many publishing houses faced financial difficulties for having invested their money to edit and print books and not being able to sell them afterwards.

We mention the editing saga because it is both interesting and important to Coetzee's work and worldwide success – besides, it partially explains why Coetzee was never banned. The publishers' strategies and negotiations for publishing and distributing books would be enough subject for paper, but due to the limited scope of this paper, we'd rather focus on Coetzee's strategies to save his third book, *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980), from banishment as well as present the report written by the book's main censor, Reginald Lighton (1980) who worked for many years as a censor, under various leaderships, one of them being Jacobus van Rooyen, a former judge and censor – who afterwards published a book titled *A South African censor's tale* (2011).

What has always puzzled us was the fact that *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) was never banned. It is a dense political novel. It deals with torture happening in an anonymous Empire village where the population waits for the attack of barbarians – something that never happens. The book was published in 1980, just after the Soweto massacre and the death in prison of the activist and leader of the Black Consciousness Movement Steve Biko. Despite all these politically heated events, the novel was never banned. The publishing saga explains the reasons why Coetzee's previous decision to publish with Secker is one of the many elements that helped the liberation of the book. Although Coetzee is South African, his books published by Secker arrived in South Africa as 'imported books'. This strategy did not save him from the censor's scrutiny but put him in the international market. With all the international pressure due to Nelson Mandela's imprisonment and Apartheid itself, a ban could no longer remain a local issue. With *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980), he achieved international fame paving the way for his first Man Booker Prize, for *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1985).

On the September 20th, 1978, two years before the publication of *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980), Coetzee wrote a letter to his friend, the writer Sheila Roberts, in which he expressed all his dismay and discontent regarding the death of Steve Biko, murdered under torture in prison. He was down hearted since he suspected that the government would cover-up Biko's death with lies, as it had happened so many times with other people's death in prisons. Coetzee wrote:

Biko's death has cast a pall over everyone. It would seem that the pathologist is going to report that he was murdered; my guess is that the government is then going to brazen it out – refuse to hold an inquiry or else hold some kind of low-level cover-up, such as an internal police inquiry – and to hell what people think. (Kannemeyer, 2012, p. 328-329)

It was not a coincidence, then, that his first manuscript of *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) coincides with the date he wrote this letter to Sheila Roberts. Another important issue connecting South Africa to *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) was the fact that Coetzee was so troubled by the knowledge of torture and death in his country that he affirmed, in *Doubling the point* (Coetzee, 1992, p. 300), that “In 1980 I published a novel [*Waiting for the barbarians*] about the impact of the torture chamber on the life of a man of conscience”.

Coetzee also wrote, in *Doubling the point* (1992) that both *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) and *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1985) were pathological responses to the prohibition of certain themes in South African arts, especially torture, imprisonment and the evil being perpetrated on a daily basis – an evil everyone was aware of. Against to all that violence, he responded in the only manner he could and knew to: by writing.

In *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980), the main protagonist is a nameless civil servant who serves as magistrate to a frontier settlement of a nameless Empire. The representatives of the Empire set themselves as civilized in opposition to the ‘barbarians’, represented by the ‘other’ inhabitants, with alien habits, culture and customs. The magistrate longs for a quiet retirement and hopes to live his last years of service in peace. He enjoys spending time in some ruins in the desert looking for inscriptions in some source of pottery he finds there. Everything changes when Colonel Joll arrives together with his army announcing that the barbarians are planning an attack to the village and the army’s duty is to protect the village and the Empire frontiers. Joll has been sent to investigate this possible array. His methods of investigation, however, are violent and brutal. Joll tortures the natives found in the surroundings of the village, disturbing the magistrate’s peaceful life and conscience.

One of Joll’s victims, a young barbarian girl, whose father died at his hands, is left blind and lame in the village. The magistrate feels sorry for her and takes her home, hiring her to take care of his house. The magistrate gets fascinated by her – there is sexual atmosphere involving them, but never accomplished while she is with him.

Eventually, he decides to take the girl back to her people and because of his action is considered an enemy of the Empire. The magistrate is taken into custody accused of being consorting with the barbarians. Mandel, another officer, takes pleasure in humiliating and hurting him.

The magistrate demands a trial that is never given, but he is severely beaten, tortured and starved for Mandel’s enjoyment. Meanwhile, the soldiers led by Joll are dying in the desert while trying to get to the barbarians. Those soldiers who remain at the village starts to take advantage from the settlement’s people, returning to the capital when they realize their mission has failed. After the army leaves, the magistrate reassumes his former position, and stability among the settlement returns.

After *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) publication, Coetzee also wrote the article ‘Into the dark chamber: the novelist in South Africa’ – first published in *The New York Times* in 1986 and afterwards republished with modifications in *Doubling the point* (Coetzee, 1992, p. 363) – in which he stated that “The dark, forbidden chamber is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se; in creating an obscenity, in enveloping it in mystery, the state creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation”. According to Coetzee, these dark chambers represented, for him and his South African fellow writers, the very ‘womb of art’ (Coetzee, 1992).

Putting together those pieces of information, the dates of the letter and the starting point of the book, there is no question that *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) is about South Africa or, at least, it unfolds themes such as torture, death in prison, fake reports, oppression, evil – all very much present in the country at that moment. Even without all the evidence already mentioned, it would have been enough to read the book to make some connections. So, why was not it banned?

Other critics, such as Peter McDonald and the poet Charl Pierre Naudé, have asked themselves the same question about the publication and release by censorship of Coetzee’s novels. According to McDonald (2009), both *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) and *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1985) were not banned due to sheer luck and a hand from destiny. When interviewed by us in 2012 (unpublished material authorized by

the author), the South African poet Charl Pierre Naudé attributed the book's liberation to luck. Actually, 'luck and the passage of time' were Naudé's explanation for the *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) liberation.

We, however, think differently, especially regarding *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980). There are enough elements to support the argument that the book was released not by a hand of destiny, but due to other factors not guided by luck, but by intentional human action, such as well-planned and elaborated writing by Coetzee, and reading strategies by the censor, Reginald Lighton, coupled with South African government political needs.

Before scrutinizing the historical facts about the writing, publishing and liberation of *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980), we need to clarify the difference between censorship and self-censorship. Although the words are self-explanatory, the consequences of both are not always that clear. Censorship is the prohibition of discourses opposing the status quo. It works by forcing people to assume as their own the discourses of the ruling people. Self-censorship consequences, however, can be even worse as the artist censors his own art fearing violence, banishment, sometimes even death. The writer, as any other artist, starts to write thinking in what is possible to be told and adapting his writings to that possibility. The danger of self-censorship is that it is a step toward the naturalization of the idea that all art must behave well, be suitable to the laws and politically correct. It takes from all arts the most important element, that is the freedom to speak, to show, to question.

We all have some internal instances responsible for self-observation and moral consciousness, acting as social restraint – this is important to make possible life in society – otherwise, there would be chaos. However, both self-observation and moral conscience – although socially desirable – may become powerful tools for controlling and coercion used by the ones in power. Self-observation is not something we are born with. It is acquired and demands that we accept as ours the rules and parameters posed by other groups. The problem begins when self-observation is imposed due to the desire to silence voices, writings, paintings, and other self-expressions because someone does not want to be questioned.

In *Doubling the point* (Coetzee, 1992), Coetzee stated that during the 1960s and the 1970s censorship was harder than before or after. In this book, Coetzee confessed that he had been little disturbed by the censors or the police, which did not prevent him from being contaminated by the mere knowledge of their existence – thus, as a writer, he is unable to assess how much he was contaminated by the knowledge of an existing censorship. As a consequence, he can not tell us, consciously, if his aesthetic options for *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) were guided and motivated by the desire to pass unnoticed by censorship.

It is not easy, though, to determine writing strategies from self-censorship, but in the case of *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) we tend to think in strategies rather than self-censorship due to its history. Besides that, in his first book, *Dusklands* (Coetzee, 1996), written during hard times of Apartheid, Coetzee denounces the colonial decimation of ethnical Black groups by the first colonizers – despite censorship's restrains.

Based on letters exchanged between Coetzee and his publishers, the writer was very much aware of the risks of banishment and took some precautions, the most important of which is related to the setting of the novel. In his first manuscripts, all actions happened in Cape Town, in South Africa. Later on, probably willing to deal with the theme of oppression and torture in a broader and more universal way, while trying to avoid being banned, he changed the setting to an unknown place – described in such a way that no place on earth would fit in, unless, of course, we think of the setting as a microcosm of South Africa.

Creating an allegorical, supposedly general village, he inscribed the narrative in the specter of an exemplary tale set nowhere, at the same time loading the description of the scenery (the surroundings of the village) with geographical elements so characteristic of South Africa – it would be hard to miss it: a salty lake, mountains, snow, desert, sand dunes, they all together portray his country – in a clever way without putting his book at risk of being censored.

Although the change of setting was very important to the novel, it is not enough to affirm that Coetzee practiced self-censorship – but it is much more likely that it was a strategy to escape from having the book unquestionably related to local issues while circumventing the system and achieving his goal: to reach his

readers. His strategy worked since the unknown setting was one of the reasons appointed by the censor to release the book. The censor wrote in his report: “The locale is as obscure place’, and any symbolism more so [...]” (Lighton, 1980 – grifo nosso).

Coetzee has always believed that the work of censoring had never attracted clever minds. His profile of a censor was of someone bureaucratic, prejudiced, and stupid (Coetzee, 1996). He was very much surprised when he knew that writers and professors – some of them his colleagues at Cape Town University – accepted the mission of banning and forbidding.

He was also surprised that Professor Reginald Lighton was the main reader for *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980), because Lighton did not fit his imagined ‘censor profile’. In addition, in a speech given in Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil), at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, on April 18th, 2013, Coetzee said he believed the book had been released because the ban would mean the recognition of all the injustice, the pain and the despair that existed in his country. Although Coetzee’s hypotheses are quite possible, the book seems to have been released partially out of guilt. South African police and laws of that time were extremely unjust for the non-Whites, allowing arbitrary killing and arresting while curtailing any possibility of good education, good jobs, free movement by the Black or Colored. It is quite possible, though, that the censor had second thoughts about Apartheid and its consequences while analyzing *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980). Besides, there is solid evidence that other factors also contributed to its liberation.

At that time, three censors used to read a book and decided whether it should be banned or released. One was the main reader, and the other two were referees. Until very recently no one knew who the censors working for the Apartheid system were. After the change of power, the new government released the official files for researchers who were studying censorship during that period. Now everyone knows who the censors working for the Apartheid system were, or are, as some of them are still alive.

According to Kobus van Rooyen, judge of the supreme court and a censor at the time, the internal and international pressures for changes were so strong that the government agreed to release some works by white Afrikaner writers in order to soothe the Afrikaner dissidence and get the intelligentsia’s sympathy (Rooyen, 2011).

Usually, those who suffer from censorship are the ones who write about it – people avid to tell their stories and to share their pain. In a way, van Rooyen’s book is rare in the sense that he is a censor willing to tell his side of a history of oppression he helped to build. *A South African censor’s tale* (Rooyen, 2011) brings us a discourse constructed to show him as a liberal while telling us his version of historical events. In his book, van Rooyen unfolds two movements helping us better understand the contradictions as well as the forces of an introjected ideology appearing now and then under and between the lines of his writings. These movements clarify his thinking and beliefs while putting another piece to the puzzle we are trying to solve.

The first movement is a personal one, and the second may be described as a social outburst of demands causing a disintegration of a social structure during his administration which ended up with a hounded president – Mr. de Klerk – who had no other option but to free Nelson Mandela and propose direct free elections. The personal movement is at the same time contradictory and revealing. Van Rooyen was a lawyer and a judge in a country where human rights and justice for all were only a dream-to-come-true, but above all his discourse presents him as a kind of hero, a defender of the freedom of speech and of equality among all people. We must say in his defense that André Brink prefaced *A South African censor’s tale*, in which he affirms that he gave no support to the judge’s work at the time of Apartheid because he – Brink – preferred frontal confrontation instead of legal strategies or the subtleties of van Rooyen’s mind. According to Brink, van Rooyen believed that the Apartheid system and apparatus could only be defeated from the inside, using the same weapons used by the system, but against it (Brink, 2011).

In many censors reports from the 1980s it is possible to detect more clearly the ideology expressed by van Rooyen (2011) in *A South African censor’s tale*. Superficial reading and interpretations by professional readers were the main and most noticeable element in these censors’ reports. Not only did *WfB* (Coetzee,

1980) received a superficial reading, but the same thing happened to other novels, including *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1985), another novel published by Coetzee.

Historically speaking, van Rooyen would be considered a liberal – or as someone trying to get rid of his moralistic genesis. It is true that his actions brought openness to censors' activities. It is also correct that he worked to release previously forbidden books and plays in South Africa. However, it is very difficult for someone who was born and raised in a racist society to become completely free from the influences of their local of birth. In many passages of *A South African censor's tale* (Rooyen, 2011) it is possible to notice some subtleties such as his use of the idea of a 'likely reader' to unban or release a work of art. This 'likely reader' would depend on the context and the target audience the book (or play, or painting, etc.) could reach. Sometimes, this 'likely reader' could be defined as White, Christian, educated while in other contexts the concept of 'likely reader' addresses to Black, poor and uneducated. However interesting his approach to the 'likely reader' is, we will not develop the idea here, but we would like to point out the existence of such concept because the presuppositions about what kind of reader a book would attract was important in its analysis by the censor. Once determined the targeted public, the book could be considered innocuous as a revolutionary tool. So, we acknowledge the existence of this "likely reader" because the use of the concept by the censors reveals their awareness of a social order based on social differences that should not be disturbed.

By reading van Rooyen's book, it is possible to realize that his liberalism is much more related to the defense of adults rights to erotic publications and to their right of reading and watching whatever suits them, then a defense of equality in the society he lives in. He defended that the White South Africans should be able to read whatever they wanted to, including anti-Apartheid novels (Rooyen, 2011). At the same time, he assumed to have banned the play *It's a boy*, by Robert Kirby for portraying interracial sexual relations between a young white lady and a black man allegedly because it was against the law (Rooyen, 2011). He also confirmed the ban on the American series *Roots*, based on the novel *Roots: the saga of an American family*, by Alex Haley (Rooyen, 2011). His argument for the ban of both – book and television series – was that a significant parcel of the probable spectators could identify themselves with the *American slaves portrayed in it* (Rooyen, 2011). The premises behind his allegation are cruel – and are the very recognition of the inequality his work helped to maintain for decades. At the same time, he released *Lady Chatterley's lover* (1928), by Lawrence; Portnoy's complaint (1969), by Roth; *Rabbit is rich* (1981), by Updike; *Lolita* (1955), by Nabokov; among others, only recommending age restrictions (Rooyen, 2011). It seems in all that cases that the restrictions were related to the age of the reader rather than the theme of the book. He also dedicated an entire chapter – "Security and the voice of the majority [...]" (Rooyen, 2011, p. 108-127) – to the ban and release of newspapers, magazines and some books by Black writers. He also justified the ban on plays and novels by Black writers during the 1980s affirming that these people, in daily contact with pressure and disputes, lose their perspective of what was convenient for them (Rooyen, 2011).

After travelling to England and the United States during the last years of the 1980s, van Rooyen was convinced that the end of Apartheid was close – and he started to intensify the liberations of books and other works considered subversive in old times, allying himself to dissident voices. Van Rooyen moves after his travels remind us of a Zulu expression loosely translated as "some men become friend of the alligator hoping to be the last one to be devoured".

Despite being very far away from being a real democratic and liberal subject, van Rooyen was threatened in many ways for the positions he assumed – especially at the end of the 1980s. Due to the liberation of 'immoral novels', he was subject to the Christians' rage who accused him of defending non-Christian values. Other people accused him of being a non-nationalist. His house was attacked, his life threatened, and he suffered many other constraints because he defended magazines that displayed naked women, and novels in which sex and violence were portrayed, as well as anti-Apartheid books by Afrikaner writers. The constraints and restrictions van Rooyen suffered for being 'liberal' say a lot about the conservatism of white South African

society of the 1980s, as well as the values that society defended. At the same time, his 'liberal' positions pro-erotic novels but against anti-Apartheid novels say a lot about the man.

WfB (Coetzee, 1980) and *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1985) were published during this time, when the 'likely reader' was valorized and when there was a non-written instruction to release white Afrikaner writers who posed no threat to the state.

According to Peter McDonald (2009), both Reginald Lighton – main censor for *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) – and Rita Scholtz – main censor for *Life and times of Michael K* (Coetzee, 1985) – are part of the Afrikaner intelligence and do not correspond to the censors' image thought by J. M. Coetzee in *Giving offense* (1996, p. vii; 10) in which he stated that censorship does not attract subtle minds, putting power in the hands of bureaucratic and prejudiced people. Although we agree with McDonald in matters of Reginald Lighton's academic achievements, we believe Coetzee was not referring solely to an academic profile, but to a certain kind of mind – and of a specific way of seeing the world. However, in relation to Lighton, all leads us to believe that he was not a simple-minded person – and that he acted intentionally for releasing the novel, as we intend to demonstrate.

It is important to keep in mind that, even though the government was willing to have the sympathy of the Afrikaner intelligence, the censors were old actors in the same play – who used to use a heavy hand to forbid and ban. McDonald says that Coetzee was fortunate because professional readers and academics read his two novels (McDonald, 2009). In fact, he was – but there is evidence that there was more than luck involved.

After Soweto, the situation was extremely tense, and the state decided that mass media vehicles such as television, cinema and radio would be their primary target. Subversive books should still be banned – especially the ones written by black writers – but it seems that this feeble breeze of freedom was enough to enable Lighton to take a position in relation to *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980).

Reginald Lighton was a professor at Cape Town University doing research in the educational fields. Lighton was also a novelist and an anthologist. He joined the Censors' Board (under Kruger) in the early 1970s and went on to serve as deputy director of the new censorship bureaucracy from the mid-1970s to the early-1980s. Besides some literary anthologies, he wrote books for children. He was far from being a naive reader, or fitting Coetzee's 'censor's profile'.

Lighton report for *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) was short – two pages, most of which official formularies. The description of the book and its plot took 26 lines handwritten, the analysis 19 lines, and there is a post-scriptum of three lines. A very short document for such a political book, especially if in comparison with others reports – for Brink's banned *Dry white season*, in 1979, for example, the report took dozens of pages.

By reading Lighton's report for *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) and comparing it to others he wrote during his work as a censor, it seems that he gave it a quick look, not a careful reading. He seems to have favored Coetzee with a superficial reading, where fundamental aspects of the work are ignored and never mentioned. These aspects include torture rooms and false reports issued by the Empire – like those issued by the South African police when some prisoner died under torture. Lighton focused his analysis of *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) on the main character, the magistrate, pointing out his good heart and the troubles he faces. He also did not mention Coronel Joll's discourses of fear about rumors of a barbarian attack – aiming to maintain village inhabitants cooperative – much similar to White government discourses about Black population. One other element he fails to see was that there were two kinds of torturers in the novel: Colonel Joll, who tortures because he believed in the Empire's discourses and officer Mandel, who gets pleasure from torturing. Many years later, the distinction made by Coetzee makes sense again – one of the chief tortures was one of the few who did not receive forgiveness during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – because all his victims who survived appointed him as a sadistic, who went much beyond his 'duties' would require. Those – and other observations – led us to believe that Lighton gave the book a superficial reading – which contradict the knowledge he demonstrated when analyzing the main character. Lighton compared the magistrate – most accurately – to Kafkian characters – probably for comparing the magistrate loss of his humanity while

being barbarized by the soldiers. Furthermore, when describing his defiance of the institutional power, Lighton described him – again mostly appropriately – as ‘quixotic’. His struggles against Joll may very well be compared to Don Quixote’s fights. It does not seem the comparison a naïve reader would make.

He also comments on the setting of the novel, describing it as an “[...] obscure place, a kind of an oasis in an arid region at the north of the equator, where the winters are icy” (Lighton, 1980). Lighton moves away from any possibility of relating it to South Africa, affirming that there is no parallel between the setting of the book and his country. He also affirms that there are no White people in the village, which seems to be a misinterpretation because the village is surrounded by walls to protect the servers of the Empire, supposedly as a reference to South African white neighborhoods, still protected and surrounded by high walls.

He states about the book:

The few across the line sex incidents are almost entirely inexplicit & in no case lust-provoking. ‘The locale is as obscure place’, and any symbolism more so – apart from the arrogant tyranny of State senior ideologists – their blinkered ideological outlook & ruthlessness. Further symbolism could with diligence be extracted. All is of world-wide significance, not particularized. Though the book has considerable literary merit, it quite lacks popular appeal. The likely readership will be limited largely to the intelligentsia, the discriminating minority. There are less than a dozen ‘offensive’ words, and all are commonplace & functionally in context. We submit there is no convincing reason for declaring the book undesirable. (Lighton, 1980 – grifo nosso)

Finishing his report, Lighton considers *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) a tragic and dark novel, despite being unrelated to South Africa’s reality. For any reader minimally aware of South African policies and police, however, it would be impossible not to make connections between the novel and South African reality. Thus, it is quite understandable why Coetzee, at the previously mentioned speech in Porto Alegre, considered Lighton’s interpretation as a diversion to avoid acknowledging *WfB*’s (Coetzee, 1980) critical and revelatory political issues. It, in fact, would be a recognition of everything that was going on in the country and he would not be able to release the novel, if he accepted possible relations between *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) and the barbaric situation of the Black population under the Apartheid regime.

We agree with Lighton on one thing: Coetzee was not – at the time of *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) – a popular writer neither nor an easy one. His books have layers of interpretation and meanings that will certainly escape an inattentive reader. However, Lighton, whose profile fits just the kind of reader that he, himself, declared the book would attract, missed several important passages that would be considered subversive if looked at carefully. The doubt that arises is why his report on the book is clearly partial as his reading is limited to the magistrate’s troubles and leaving aside other crucial elements of the novel.

Had he been a naïve and non-professional reader, such a reading could be accepted. Being who he was at the time, his reading of *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) is enough evidence that he self-censored his own report in order to release the book. It seems that he purposely scrutinized the book, but then wrote a superficial report. There are two probable causes for it. The easier one to guess is that he fell in love with the novel and decided that it should be released for South African readers. The other one, harder to prove, is that there was a change in his political positions. Some probable catalysts for going from pro-state to against it could have been the Soweto massacre, when the police killed innocent students cold-bloodedly; Biko’s death, or even a mind shift toward the awareness of the daily suffering of millions of people. There is no way of affirming it for certain as there are few things harder to prove than intention and real motivation. However, since the first reading, his report sounded suspicious to us due to its shallowness.

Moreover, there is another interesting and significant clue in his report. Besides the phrase above quoted, in which the censor wrote that he was able to extract some “[...] symbolism related to the arrogant tyranny of State senior ideologists” (Lighton, 1980), there is another much more revealing statement in his report, although very subtle, owing to its intertextuality. The reader would only recognize it if he/she knew both works, the report and the poem ‘Invictus’ by the Victorian poet William Ernest Henley (1875), written in 1875. At the very end of his report, Lighton kept describing the main character, the magistrate, and his saga.

As he wrote: “[...] ‘bloody but always unbowed’ Magistrate heading the dispirited remnants of the populace waiting for the barbarians” (Lighton, 1980 – grifo nosso). It is very unlikely that it is a coincidence that the censor mentioned – although a little modified – a verse of the famous poem ‘Invictus’. Willian Ernest Henley wrote the poem in his early age as he was recovering from a leg amputation in a hospital. In it, we can read how prevalent the theme of resilience in the face of hardship is one of its central topics:

Out of the night that covers me
 Black as the Pit from pole to pole
 I thank whatever gods may be
 for my unconquerable soul
 In the fell clutch of circumstances
 I have not winced nor cried aloud.
 Under the bludgeoning’s of chance
 my head is bloody but unbowed.
 Beyond this place of wrath and tears
 Looms but the Horror of the shade,
 and yet the menace of the years
 Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
 It matters not how strait the gate,
 How charged with punishments the scroll.
 I am the master of my fate:
 I am the master of my soul (Henley, 1875).

The reference to the poem ‘Invictus’ acts as a proof of an intentional political action on the part of the censor in his report. It was like light in darkness. Peter McDonald (2009) also noticed the use of this verse in Lighton’s report, crediting its use to Lighton’s wish to reinforce the magistrate’s survival skills as well as his moral standards. Going forward, we would like not to dismiss Peter McDonald’s interpretations, but to complete them, to step forward a little further. It became clear to us that the burden carried by everyone during Apartheid affected even the ones who were paid to protect it. We believe that in his report Lighton sent a message to posterity – as at the time his report was not open to the public – about his real feelings about South Africa and Apartheid.

In South Africa, ‘Invictus’ was more than a poem about resistance and moral standards. It was known by every dissident as Nelson Mandela’s favorite – the very poem Mandela claimed to be the one that helped him to never give up while in prison – the poem he used to read when in need of support and strength. When Mandela was feeling down – or broken down – this poem was the piece of resistance he turned to. In South Africa, ‘Invictus’ acquired new meanings: resistance, fight, hope – among others. The selection of a verse from this poem may be the key to understand Lighton’s report as a censored one, a bureaucratic paper he manipulated through censored reading and writing to release *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980).

Apparently, Lighton saw in the magistrate someone who remained strong despite being physically broken, destitute from freedom and humiliated – just like Nelson Mandela in his many years in prison. There is no way of affirming that Lighton was aware of how powerful this poem was to Nelson Mandela, but because he was part of the system, such speculation wouldn’t be unlikely.

CONCLUSION

It is well known and widely accepted that oppression raises all kinds of strategies to subvert and to disrupt power. The practice of self-censorship – like some kind of plague eating people’s soul from the inside – seems to be a common tool in the life of writers and editors living under censorship. However, we have never heard of a censor practicing self-censorship in his work. Lighton’s shallow reading of *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) coupled

with the use of the verse taken from 'Invictus' may be an unusual breakthrough leading to the possibility of proving self-censorship in the work of a censor.

So, the answer to the question we posed at the beginning of this paper – why *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980) was not banned – is not an easy one. Yet, it is certainly much more complex than sheer luck or the passage of time. Specifically, regarding *WfB* (Coetzee, 1980), there were many elements simultaneously in action. The more evident ones are the writing choices and strategies by the writer, JM Coetzee, political moves seeking some sympathy among intellectuals and artists, and, crucially, a censor who was – supposedly – having second thoughts about the system he used to protect, whose tragic acts and their consequences he – apparently – was no longer willing to support.

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NOTES

[1] Provided to us by Cecilia Bligh, librarian at the Rhodes University Library

[2] Provided to us by J. M Coetzee.