

PEACE: section 5, the decline and fall

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Michael Andre-Driussi — 01 Nov 2002, 18:55

It seems to me that there is a historic sweep to PEACE that reaches its climax in "The President." In ways it reminds me of Coetzee's WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS [1980] in incorporating the interplay between urban civilization and pastoral nomads.

In section 1, Weer talks to Hannah as practically the last person around to have seen an American Indian, probably an Iroquois (c. 1853). She prefaces the tale by saying "You make it sound like a show. It wasn't no show" (hc, 30). This reminds us that yes, there really were "Wild West" circus shows, featuring American Indians. It makes the clear linkage between displaced aboriginal people and the nomadic, mysterious entertainers of the carny world.

In section 3 we learn that Tilly made a pact with the nomadic carnies (before 1923). He had something they wanted, the ability to create freaks from normal people. He helped them, they helped him, trade flourished.

The Iroquois/American treaty (once real, then forged) is revealed in section 4 to be contingent upon Blaine having a son. Blaine has no son in his old age (1953).

We come to section 5, with its surface focus on the Tang factory (1974): automation, industrial decline, unions. But the low level workers are American Indians from Central America. More crucially, the "contract" between carnies and the chemistry empire has come up for renewal: Charlie Turner seems to want the same deal with Weer that he had with Smart, and Tilly before Smart, but Weer is an engineer, not a chemist. There is no longer any basis for a relationship, so the carny nomads leave the alliance, which in my mind seems like the Germanic tribes who had been welcomed into the Roman Empire as frontier guards and then later reverted to their barbarian ways to aid in the dismembering of the state when Rome failed to keep up the relationship/bargain.

The Indians are in the factory; the roving carnies will not accept tribute any longer; the Americans are sterile, dying of their own poisons.

The Doris letter is about the savage future ahead: one can join a nomadic group, but there will be no mercy for the weak. Doris represents the last of the dying civilization, crumbling in the face of barbarian onslaught.

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