



THE DICHOTOMY OF BARBARIANS AND THE CIVILISED IN THE NOVEL WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

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Abstract: This paper examines the collapse of the binary opposition between "the civilized" and "the barbarians" in J. M. Coetzee's 1980 allegorical novel, *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Set in a nameless frontier settlement of a fictional Empire, the narrative follows a Magistrate whose comfortable existence is shattered by the arrival of State security forces led by the cruel Colonel Joll. Through a close reading of the Magistrate's shifting allegiance, this study analyzes how the Empire's paranoia constructs a mythical, external "barbarian" threat to justify its own imperial expansion and institutional violence. Ultimately, the paper argues that Coetzee deconstructs this historical dichotomy, revealing that the true locus of barbarism does not reside in the indigenous nomads at the borders, but within the torture chambers and colonial machinery of the civilized Empire itself.

Key words: Empire, Imperial Paranoia, Expansion, Settlers, The Other, State-sanctioned violence, Historical Amnesia, War on terror, nightmares and fantasies of the civilised.

Contemplating on the second half of eighteenth century, Edward Gibbon refers in his book *The History of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire* that the Barbarians of the Roman era have disappeared. But at the same time, he believes that 'republic of Europe', considered to be the domain of civilization in Enlightenment thought cannot be rest assured from the barbarian threat to civilization. Threat is always there in "scarcely visible", "obscure people." The more invisible and obscure they are, the more threatening they are. Their invisibility and obscurity tantalize the civilized imagination and helps to foster the myth around them and enhances its threatening force. (Gibbon 177)

The popular myth or story is that Barbarian enemies do not just wait to confront the troops of the civilized world on the battlefield. Their threat is that of invasion from the outside into domestic territory, which would violently disrupt a prosperous community and force civilization to return to a primitive, barbaric state. J.M.Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) named after a poem written by Greek Alexandrian Poet Constantine Cavafy of the same title, similar to the poem tries to unravel around the anticipation of such an invasion, which never actually takes place.

Civilization and barbarism are opposed yet interdependent concepts. Something which constitutively functions outside the notion of civilized is considered to be barbaric thus considered to be inferior to the concept of being civilized. In terms of its etymology, the ancient Greek word barbarian is supposed to the incomprehensible mumblings of the language of foreign people, sounding like "bar-bar" (reminiscent today's "blabla"). As such it has a double implication: on a first level, it signifies a lack of understanding on the part of the other, since the language of the other perceived as meaningless sounds. At the same time, it suggests an unwillingness to understand the other's language -cultural differences and thus to make the encounter with the other a communicative occasion. Consequently, the term barbarian entails a collective construction of the Other in a





way that helps define the civilized subject itself- by specifying its negative limits. In this construction, the other is supposedly invalidated because it can never speak back and question its construction. The barbarian thus appears an abjected outside, which, according to Judith Butler, is always inside the subject "as its own founding repudiation." (Butler 3)

This pair of civilization/barbarism has been operational from its birth in ancient Greece till today. But at the same time this pair has adapted to the changing conditions as well. Yet it is perceived to be the same concepts from the yester years because the pair of civilization/ barbarism has been naturalized by discourse of history.

The opposition becomes established in ancient Greece with the Persian Wars. The opposition between Greeks and barbarians is not only linguistic but cultural differences as well- Greek democracy, freedom, and logos as principles and ways of life as opposed to the decadent luxury, lax morality, servile manners, and despotism of the Persians. However, the connotation of savageness that we ascribe to the word today does not become standardized until the barbarian invasions of Rome (Kristeva51)

During the Enlightenment, thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Montesquieu, and others express their scepticism about the merits of civilization and invented the well-known image of the "noble savage," who is closer to nature and pure than the decadent and corrupt "civilized" man. Such an act of reversing the hierarchy so that the civilized appear more savage than the barbarians are not exclusively found in Enlightenment thought. We find it already in The Iliad, in Plato's The Republic, and in Aristotle's Politics, as well as in works by writers such as Montaigne or, later, Joseph Conrad. (Rawson 98) Similarly, the high value set on a certain kind of primitivism or barbarism can also be found in different moments in history, recorded in philosophical, historical, and literary writings.

In the nineteenth century and within the colonialism, the positive (though still Eurocentric) image of the "noble savage" gradually gives its place to a negative denotation of the barbarian as violent, dangerous, and racially and culturally inferior. (Salter 22) The civilization/barbarian dichotomy is employed at the service of the imperialist project and its "civilizing mission." The barbarian (the colonized subject) is not only represented as ignorant of civilization but as threatening and destructive toward it. (Salter 35)

After the two world wars and the Holocaust, the ideal of Western civilization was debunked since the irrational and barbaric side of the Western subject had taken central stage. In the years that followed, the gradual decolonization and the emergence of the anti-colonial movement led to a reversal of colonial practices and the bankruptcy of the European civilization. the civilized/barbarian dichotomy by exposing the barbarism:

Although the discourse on barbarism and civilization seemed to partly recede with decolonization, after the end of the cold war and especially since the events of 9/11 and the declaration of the "war on terror," this discourse has made a dynamic comeback in political rhetoric, journalism, historiography, and popular discourse in the west. Samuel Huntington's popular book *The clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (1996) is a characteristic example of the re- emergence of this oppositional thinking in terms of civilization and barbarism, or "the west" and "the rest." Huntington divides the world into eight Civilizations and detects a growing conflict between the Western civilization and Islam, which he identifies as the main threat to the west. Following this logic, the West, under the leadership of the United States, has to be ready to confront these enemies. (Huntington 209)

In the face of the persistence of the barbarian/civilization dichotomy with all its violent ramifications in history and in its recent reinvention, the study of literary works that thematize and, at the same time work against this discourse acquires an additional significance. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* plays on this opposition





and disrupts the fixity of the relation between its two constituents. In doing so, it takes a beyond the tradition of the discourse on barbarians as outlived.

In *Waiting for Barbarians*, Coetzee foregrounds the relation between history and literature. His novel manifests its opposition to the authoritative discourse of history, at the same time it has to confront the omnipresence and penetrating force of this discourse. The position of the speaking voice in this work will prove relevant to exploration of its ambivalent affiliation with the authoritative discourse of history and civilization. Coetzee seems to question the presuppositions, discourse of history and civilization written by exponents of the self-proclaimed "civilized world" (western world) and at the same time try to expose the purpose of having such categories.

Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is situated in an undefined town and period. The magistrate, who narrates the story, is peacefully doing his job in a small town at the edge of the "empire." The advent of Colonel Joll, a functionary of the "Third Bureau," disrupts the tranquillity of his life and brings him face to face with the brutal reality of the Empire. Colonel Joll arrives to collect information about "the barbarians" who are supposed to be planning attacks against the Empire and to be causing border troubles. The absurdity of the whole enterprise starts becoming obvious when large group of fishing people who have nothing to do with any barbarian attacks are captured, interrogated, tortured, and kept as prisoners. From then on the Magistrate refuses to cooperate with the Empire and its practitioners. He eventually ends up in prison and is tortured after being wrongly accused of treason. He is released again when the people of the Third Bureau leave the town. The invasion of the barbarians that the Empire so feared does not take place and the expeditionary force that had been sent to confront them is dispersed in the desert and extinguishes without ever reaching the enemies.

The progressive form of the verb in the title of the poem points to the lack of closure in the process of waiting. It is a process without a definite beginning or end, as the advent of the object of waiting is eternally deferred. By the using the title Coetzee makes the act of waiting more tantalizing and underlines the omnipresence and yet, absence of the barbarians. This kind of unsure situation leads to ambivalence in the speaking voice. Coetzee's writing is regarded by many critics as quite problematic, since it is caught up in the ambivalence that characterizes oppositional white South African Writing. While trying to interrogate the binary divisions set up by an apartheid society, white writing is inevitably entangled in them and thus finds itself in constant engagement with, and opposition to, the hegemonic oppression of Colonialism. (Kossew 7) This ambivalence characterizes the position and identity of the protagonists in Coetzee's novels, as well as the position of the author himself.

The Magistrate's position in Coetzee's novels is also ambivalent: he is an insider of the Empire, but not quite. Living as he does in a convenient state of ignorance and tranquillity, he gradually moves into a position of uncertainty and doubt. He questions the certainties and truths of colonialist discourse and takes an oppositional stance. He realizes, however, that switching sides is not merely a matter of choice. Despite his good intentions, he cannot avoid his complicity with the discourse of the Empire. Just as Butler has argued in the case of gender, the subject does not pre-exist, but emerges and operates only within the matrix of social relations. (Bensveniste 225) The authoritative discourse of the Empire, within which the Magistrate has been shaped as a subject, is not something he can discard since it is not external to his being. Caught up in a position where he can belong neither to the oppressors nor the oppressed, his identity becomes a site of conflicting claims. Consequently, his narrative becomes a battlefield of opposed discourses marked by the magistrate's attempt to make a difference, to become- as Colonel Joll ironically calls him- "The One Just Man"(124) When Colonel Joll's native prisoners are brought in, the Magistrate sympathizes with them but at the same time maintains a





condescending distance. He does not want them to stay long or come back. The sympathy soon gives way to impatience and indignation at "their animal shamelessness," "the filth, the smell, the noise"(20-21). His voice is full of contradictions. Later he views the same features that he himself attributed to these natives as a result of "the settlers' litany of prejudice: that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid" (41) What he had previously taken as a fact, he now exposes as a biased and unfair opinion based on the settlers' partial knowledge.

What is more, during a conversation with a young officer, the Magistrate imagines that the officer sees him as "a minor civilian administrator sunk, after years in this backwater, in slothful native ways" (54), thus bearing the same supposed barbarian qualities of the natives. Once doubt creeps into the Magistrate's life, however, the certainties of his former life as a blissfully ignorant colonizer are irrevocably shaken. There is a beautiful scene in chapter two in which the Magistrate goes hunting. On spotting his prey, a ram, he aims with his gun and notices that his pulse does not quicken. He then lets the ram go. In this scene a revelation takes place: The Magistrate escapes for a moment the self-centred and limited logic of the hunter, who only sees himself killing his prey, and realizes that there are more ways to view the self and others (civilized and barbarians). He thus turns his gaze to the victim, which now becomes a "proud ram" rather than a shooting target, and considers the possibility of failure in the act of hunting. For a moment he transgresses the binary colonial logic of hunters and targets. He experiences the freedom and terror of an ontological dislocation. The realization that there are other ways of viewing the world opens the way for an interrogation and revision of the fixed categories on which the Magistrate's life had been built.

But while he questions the Empire's practices, he often contradicts his own oppositional statements and actions. Even when he assumes the position of the victim and of the enemy. of the Empire by being charged with treason, doubt does not leave him. Moreover, the colonizer's instincts do not abandon him. His obsessive care for barbarian girl who was made lame and blind by Colonel Joll and left behind by her own people does not fundamentally differ from the practices of her torturer: "I behave in some ways like a lover I-I undress her, I bathe her I stroke her, I sleep beside her-but I might equally well tie her to a chair and beat her"(46). In his fondling and kissing her wounds, he recognizes the drive to engrave himself on her as deeply as her torturer did. This drive reflects the need of the Empire to inscribe itself on the bodies of its subjects. Soon enough he realizes that he and Joll are actually different sides of the same coin. It is not a coincidence, then, that the novel begins with a description of Colonel Joll's sunglasses in which the narrator can see a reflection of himself.

In the barbarian girl the Magistrate sees the possibility of making contact with the other. His approach, however, is incurably marked by the logic of understanding as penetrating and deciphering, so typical of the colonial attitude toward the colonized. Her body, however, is obstinately impenetrable. Living in the same house as they do, they actually live past each other. Despite the Magistrate's repeated attempts, the girl remains an unsolved mystery, a stranger, and his attention for her is incomprehensible. Even the reconstruction of her form as a memory becomes an unattainable task. The blindness of the girl makes it impossible for him to exist in her gaze. Instead of a reciprocal gaze, he only sees his own double image cast back at him (47). As long as he tends remains trapped in the Empire's logic of violating its subjects in order to construct them on its own terms, the Magistrate communicative attempts will not be gratified by the girl. If, as Emile Benveniste tells us, subjectivity is produced in the here and now of an utterance, and if the "I" cannot just dictate its truths, but need the "you" to sustain its authority and allow it to speak, then the girl's refusal to validate the magistrate's discourse by responding to it challenge the power of that discourse and condemns the Magistrate to crisis of self. (Bensveniste225-236)





However, despite his failure to unfold the mystery of the girl, the Magistrate does not impose his own voice on her. Without forcing her, he waits for the girl to talk about her experience in the torture chamber. The fact that she never discusses it does not lead the Magistrate to make up his own story about her-his narrative remains true to her silence. Despite his desire to make contact with her, he does not force her into it and, in so doing, he shows his willingness to live with difference, without fully understanding the other and her language.

The "waiting" of the novel's title could also then refer to the process of waiting for the other to speak without having to use words that have been chosen for her. Therefore, the girl's silence and the Magistrate's patient waiting for it to end-gives her agency. By refusing to let her tortured body be translated into language, she prevents the othering that the Empire's categorizations (Barbarians and civilized) would impose on her body and her story. (Wenzel 66) Although her refusal to speak frustrates the Magistrate, it holds within it the promise of a voice that will different from his, but will also be the first step toward a reciprocal approach on equal terms. It is only in the desert where the Magistrate takes her to her people that she willingly sleeps with him for the first and last time. The desert neutral, formless space outside the borders of the town-erases with the dust and wind the violence of limits and categories. Away from the limits of imperial discourse, - the girl comes to him on her own terms. Coetzee seems to suggest the so called 'other' or 'barbarians' can be understood only when we cross the boundaries laid down by ourselves (Empire) and interacting with them without prejudice. It all starts with the acceptance of difference.

Perhaps the closest that the Magistrate comes to her, even though she is no longer physically with him, is when he comes to occupy her place as a victim of torture. Through his imprisonment, torture, and humiliation, he experiences firsthand the way in which the Empire reads and labels bodies. From being respected official, he is suddenly labelled as an enemy of the state. From a torturer although he did not engage in practices of torture himself, he experienced his position toward the barbarian girl similar to that of her actual torturer he becomes a victim of torture and therefore, just as in the case of the girl, his voice cannot be understood anymore by the Empire. For the Empire and its practitioners, everyone who produces meaning alien to their language is reduced to a barbarian. Listening to his howls of pain, the magistrate's torturers scornfully remark, "he is calling his barbarian friends." One of them adds, "this is barbarian language you hear" (133). The scene strongly evokes the etymology of the word barbaros in ancient Greek, which stems from the perception of the language of others as meaningless sounds.

Do barbarians really exist or they just a myth? In the novel the identity of the people to which the Empire refers with the term "barbarians" stays unclear. The barbarians against which the Empire sends its expeditionary forces are supposed to be violent nomadic people, planning attacks against the Empire. However, the expeditionary forces never seem to reach these barbarians, although they constantly think that they sense their presence. The Empire's belief in the categories it has discursively constructed is so blind that it actually disregards the absence of any empirical evidence relating to the existence of such an enemy. The barbarians constantly seem to leave traces without their presence ever being manifested. Thus, when "clothing disappears from washing-lines" and "food from larders," the people of the town are convinced that the barbarians did it, even though nobody actually catches them in the act. Various speculations are made to account for the fact that the perpetrators are never seen, such as "the barbarians have dug a tunnel under the walls" or they only "come out at night" (134). The barbarians become the scapegoats of the Empire, as the people end up accusing them for every calamity or crime that takes place, like the flooding of the fields. Through the accumulation of rumors around them, the myth of the barbarians takes an extraordinary proportion and leads to their demonization. They become the personification of evil. The narrator observes



that "once in every generation, without fail, there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians"(9). The myth around them is thus a long-standing one, sustained by the discourse of history, which imposes such categories in the first place as objective and eternal. The construction of the barbarians is exposed in the novel as an absurd and well-organized fiction, and the status of historical discourse is shaken by the realization of its close affinity to mythical discourse. But the myth of the barbarians as the ultimate enemy of the Empire needs to find real bodies on which to exercise power. These are the prisoners that Colonel Joll brings with him, which, according to the narrator, are peaceful fishing people, in no way related to any attacks. The last group of prisoners that the Colonel captures is put on public display. The desperate need of the Empire to justify its discourse and prove that the real barbarians "are real" by finding-or, better said naming the enemy in material bodies, transforms the miserable prisoners into a dangerous enemy. On their naked backs Colonel Joll writes the word "ENEMY" with charcoal and orders their beating by the soldiers until the word is erased by blood. The word actually has to be written on them to make those damaged and miserable bodies plausible as enemies: "The constative claim," Butler argues, "is always to some degree performative." (Butler 11) Naming here is creating the enemy. The word "enemy" thereby becomes a performative, which manifests the Empire's inscription of its discursive categories on the suffering bodies of its subjects. In this scene, bodies emerge as mere effects of discourse, as blank surface where the performatives of the language of the Empire are inscribed. The actual referents of the Empire's signifiers-the native people are rendered irrelevant to these processes and are turned into foreign and hostile presences ("barbarians") in their own land and homes.

The barbarian other does not exist as an external enemy of the Empire. It is not situated outside the domain of the civilized subject, but within it. Through the Empire's practices of torture and humiliation, its atrocities against the bodies of its prisoners, a new referent is attached to the concept of the barbarian, which the fixed imperial discourse full of euphemisms cannot suppress. In this case, it is the overwhelming reality that leads the narrator to adopt the term of the Empire's practitioners, and not the other way around - the term creating its material referent. Although, as the narrator remarks, the torturers of the Third Bureau are probably designated as "security officers" in some pay-office in the capital (129), the Magistrate Views these people as the "new barbarians" (85) who have come to install terror in the town. He realizes that the people of the Empire are enemies to themselves and that Colonel Joll is the product of an irrational society, which becomes barbaric in its attempts to protect "civilization": "Those pitiable prisoners you brought in - are they enemy I must fear?... You are the enemy, Colonel! You are the enemy, you have made the war, and you have given them all the martyrs they need" (125). In the Magistrate's words, a new kind of inside barbarian is designated, exposing the self-destructive impulse of the Empire to give birth to its own enemies. The Empire's soldiers that have settled in town end up terrorizing the citizens, looting shops, violating laws, getting drunk, and causing trouble everywhere around them. As this behavior is constantly juxtaposed either with the pitiful state of the barbarian prisoners or with the stories about barbarian crimes that are never witnessed, it becomes impossible for the reader not to notice the paradox in the Empire's use of the word "barbarian."

The image that the Empire has created for the barbarians proves to be a reflection of itself. During the Magistrate's journey through the desert to return the girl to her people, he and his companions keep seeing specters of the barbarians in the distance, which they never reach; if they move or stop, the specters move and stop with them. "Are they reflections of us, is this a trick of the light?"(74), the Magistrate wonders. The barbarians dissolve before anyone can reach them, pointing back to the ubiquitous presence of the people of the Empire as the real barbarians. It is exactly this specter-hunting in the desert, carried out later by the expeditionary forces, that will lead to the total dissemination of the troops: they freeze, starve to death, get lost



in the desert, still convinced that they are chasing barbarians. The disintegration of the Empire comes from within, not from the pressure of outside forces.

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator uses the term "barbarian" repeatedly, in the exact same way that it is used within the discourse of the Empire: to refer to the natives (the Colonized subjects) and to its (invisible) dangerous enemies. The native fishermen, the nomads, the prisoners, and the invisible enemies are always "the barbarians" in the Magistrate's narrative. Even the native girl who lives with him is almost always referred to as "the barbarian girl," not simply as "the girl." Within the Empire's discursive regime, naming someone by the generic term "enemy" or "barbarian" is denying this person an actual face and a singularity. This (non-) appellation becomes an act of distancing oneself from the other and creating the other as a hallow vessel to be filled with the nightmares and fantasies of the civilized. The Magistrate has no choice but to employ the categories within which he himself has been constituted as a subject. These categories have acquired a naturalized effect as a result of their repetitive use in history. I believe that the obsessive repetition of the word "barbarian" by the narrator draws attention to this practice of appropriation through repetition and points to the citation of the word as the very mechanism of the consolidation of its power.

However, that same mechanism used by a discursive regime for the indoctrination of its truths can also turn into a self- destructive tool, leading to the regime's delegitimization. As Butler claims, there is a deconstituting possibility in the process of repetition because through it "gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such construction, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm." (Butler 11) As the word "barbarians" is being repeated in the novel, the fact that the material referent of the term either never appears or does not live up to its supposed "barbaric" nature (the barbarian enemies are not found in the desert and the native prisoners never display any barbaric behavior) gradually puts the term in suspicion and leads to its denaturalization. Even more, its incantatory repetition points to the excess of the Empire's discursive regime, which contaminates its truths by overstating them. At the same time, semantic confusion is caused, as a new referent emerges for the term when the narrator starts using it to designate the "new barbarians" (the colonizers). This new use is contemporaneous with the Magistrate's indignation at the Empire's practices, which eventually leads to his ostracism from the system.

This turn in the Magistrate's attitude, however, does not put an end to his use of the term to refer to the colonized subjects as well. Until the end, the conventional use of the word for the natives runs parallel to its subversive use of the colonizers. This way the word becomes performative with a double use in the narrative: while its use in relation to the natives is perceived by the readers as, in Austin's terms, an "infelicitous speech act" (the reader fails to see these people as barbarians), its use for the colonizers is more likely to secure uptake by the readers. The parallel uses of the term indicate that more than simple reversal of the opposition barbarian/civilized is at stake. The narrative does not reproduce the hierarchy by means of reversing it, but rather destabilizes the opposition by rendering it unnatural and arbitrary.

The narrator's voice is limited by the hegemonies against which it utters itself, but manages to find its way into challenging these hegemonies by undertaking a repetition with a difference. By exposing the process through which the category of the barbarians is established, Coetzee does not make this category a starting point for discussion, but rather an object of interrogation. The narrator cannot banish the barbarians as a category, but makes the workings of the system that produces them visible. Through the repetitive but confusing use of the term "barbarian," Coetzee reveals the contested terrain that it occupies and causes a crisis in the term that leads



to its resignification. The word is mobilized and becomes an event with a performative force that is historically variable.

In conclusion the novel radically questions the terms of the dichotomy and expose them as hollow, inadequate, and, at the same time, violent and absurd. Furthermore, they deal with the "existential significance of the Absolute Other's absence" (Constantino193) while struggling with the difficulty of escaping the categories that have shaped our identity. The novel also brings out the limitations of the authoritative discourse of civilization, its omnipotence is contested, and the transparency of its correspondence to the actual world becomes opaque.

Novel also highlights the self-destructive processes in a solipsistic society, which does not dare to open itself to the other, the new. Without knowing it, the citizens are themselves responsible for sabotaging their encounter with the barbarians that they so eagerly anticipate. The empire has to come to terms with its own demise, but not in the way that it has staged it: not as an honorable defeat from external enemies, but due to internal conflicts and contradictions. The narcissistic, self-indulgent mood of the decadent society in the poem is not gratified with the spectacular drama of its fall; to borrow T.S. Eliot's words, the Empire ends "not with a bang, but with a whimper"-ignored and left to die away without a real ending. Civilization is face with its anticlimax. (Poggioli 149) Coetzee establishes that the barbarians for whom the citizens of the frontier wait are only reflections of the barbaric qualities in themselves, which they project onto the other. As a result, they are forced to redirect their gaze from the outside to the inside.

Waiting for the Barbarians present the reader with unresolved questions, linguistic bewilderment, obsessive iterations, infelicitous performatives, and the desire for an alternative way of thinking and speaking. One cannot bypass the novel's striking pertinence to the contemporary world in which strict oppositional thinking in terms of "us" and "them," "civilization" and "barbarism" is staging a comeback in political rhetoric (as it was rampant in the Apartheid era) and everyday discourse. The novel explores the effects of oppositional thinking, as well as a prospect that constitutes one of the desiderata of our global community: that of a society that would not need to wait in vain for the barbarians, but would be more open to an encounter with others.

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