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Leiden  
The Netherlands

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Boletsi, M.

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# 1

## A PIECEMEAL PROJECT

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

—Robert Frost, from “Mending Wall” (1)

A cage went in search of a bird.

—Franz Kafka, *The Zürau Aphorisms* (275)

By way of introducing this study, I turn to a literary work, which tells the story of an unfinished wall: Franz Kafka’s “The Great Wall of China” (“Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer,” 1931).<sup>1</sup> Through Kafka’s story, I offer a “sneak preview” of the barbarian operations that will be laid out in the course of this study and elucidate some of this study’s main issues: the relation between civilization and barbarism; the features and functions of what I call “barbarisms”; the relation of the concept of barbarism to questions of knowing; its involvement in comparative acts; and the ways in which we can imagine a positive recasting of this concept. The wall and its construction system in Kafka’s story function as a scale model through which I map out the structuring principles and objectives of this study as a whole.

In this chapter—and throughout this study—I propose barbarism as a conceptual tool involved in acts of comparing and knowing. Thus, in my reading of “The Great Wall of China,” barbarism unravels as a force that ruptures the epistemological premises of established discourses and imbues them with foreign and erratic elements. This does not only capture a disruptive process, but also a positive intervention that may lead to new ways of knowing. I will argue that barbarism overthrows the epistemological priority of civilization and promises other ways of knowing, which spring out of a constant tension with negation, ambivalence, contradictions, and possible impossibilities.

The concept of barbarism also has a significant comparative aspect. The “barbarian” is by definition a figure of comparison, because it is the product of a comparative act:

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<sup>1</sup> A more literal translation of the title would be: “At/During the Building of the Chinese Wall.” The story was probably written in 1917 and published in 1931. The English translation I am using is by Willa and Edwin Muir.

someone receives the label “barbarian” after having been compared to, and found the opposite of, the civilized subject. The figure of the barbarian is the measure against which civilization acquires its self-validation. The comparative gesture embedded in the barbarian is part of a hierarchical comparative framework, which establishes “civilization” as the referent of supremacy and the measure of excellence. It is therefore a comparative “act” as in make-believe, and therefore describes a fake comparison played out between two constructions devised by the (civilized) subject: the “civilized” and the “barbarian.”<sup>2</sup> The outcome of this comparative “act” is always the same: the comparison with the barbarian makes the civilized look good. Self-proclaimed civilized subjects need to compare themselves against barbarians, and they always win this competition, since both parts of the comparison are products of their own representational system.

The figure of the barbarian, however, does not always fall prey to quasi-comparative acts to the benefit of civilizational discourse. Precisely due to its comparative nature, the barbarian can operate between worlds. Acting in the interstices of languages (in the broadest sense of the word), the barbarian can create fissures to the languages and objects involved in comparative encounters. In this chapter, I show how barbarism can be involved in a mode of comparing that demands a radical change of perspective as well as a shifting of the grounds of the comparison. This mode of comparing capitalizes on the disparities, inconsistencies, and gaps among the languages or objects involved.

By introducing a different perspective on barbarism through Kafka’s story, this chapter sets the terms and prepares the ground for the barbarian operations to unfold in the following chapters.

### Barbarism and Civilization: An Unfinished Business

The narrator of Franz Kafka’s story “The Great Wall of China” is one of the Chinese builders of the Wall. He aspires to put together a historical inquiry by combining the fragmented, inconclusive, and contradictory narratives and theories that surround the construction of the Great Wall of China. As Christopher Kelen remarks, the project of the wall was meant to sustain China’s ideal of purity and its “isolationist fantasy” of “protecting herself from the hostile outside of the civilized world which she represented for herself.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as we learn from Kafka’s narrator, the project ended up defeating its purpose due to gaps rumored to exist between several blocks of the wall. The incompleteness of the Wall—the fact that pieces are missing along the perimeter it covers—is the result of the so-called system of “piecemeal construction” (“System des Teilbaues”), which takes center stage in the narrator’s exposition. “Piecemeal

<sup>2</sup> “Civilization” in this chapter is used as the self-assumed label of a dominant group that perceives itself as holding the standard of civilization. In Kafka’s story, “civilization” is identified with China.

<sup>3</sup> Kelen’s article “*The Great Wall of China* and Kafka’s *Limitless Tropology*” is published in the e-journal *Queen* without page numbers and year of publication.

construction" denotes the practice of building different blocks of the wall in different places at the same time, which would be joined together at a later stage. According to the narrator, some of these blocks were possibly never joined, leaving openings and fissures in the construction.<sup>4</sup> In the story, we read that the piecemeal construction "is one of the crucial problems in the whole building of the wall" (238). Thus, his narrative sets out to shed light on the piecemeal construction system.

His first question mark concerns the incongruity between the wall's purpose and effect. If the purpose of the wall was to offer "a protection against the peoples of the north," the narrator therefore wonders "how can a wall protect if it is not a continuous structure? Not only can such a wall not protect, but what there is of it is in perpetual danger," as the nomads could easily destroy the blocks of wall standing in deserted areas (235). The wall is porous, vulnerable to its outside. And yet, the construction "probably could not have been carried out in any other way" (236). His first explanation is based on psychological and practical reasons. The function of the piecemeal system was to ensure variation and change of scenery for the supervisors of the construction, so that they would move around regularly, building different blocks of the wall in different areas, without losing their morale or getting frustrated with their task. By moving around in order to build different parts of the wall, the supervisors could see finished sections on their way, renew their belief in their work, and feel they contributed to a great project unifying the nation.<sup>5</sup> "Thus," the narrator concludes, "the system of piecemeal construction becomes comprehensible" (238).

But not quite. In the narrative there are only provisional conclusions, constantly overthrown by new ones. Thus, the psychological explanation makes room for a theological or transcendental force behind the wall's construction. The narrator brings in the "high command" ("die Führerschaft") as the highest authority behind the decision for the piecemeal construction—an invisible authority whose decrees are not to be questioned. "And for that reason," the narrator remarks, "the incorruptible observer must hold that the command, if it had seriously desired it, could also have overcome those difficulties that prevented a system of continuous construction" (240). And yet, the narrator immediately notices a paradox that makes him doubt this reasoning: "But the piecemeal construction was only a makeshift and therefore inexpedient. Remains

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<sup>4</sup> This is how the principle of piecemeal construction is described in the story: "gangs of some twenty workers were formed who had to accomplish a length, say, of five hundred yards of wall, while a similar gang built another stretch of the same length to meet the first. But after the junction had been made the construction of the wall was not carried on from the point, let us say, where this thousand yards ended; instead the two groups of workers were transferred to begin building again in quite different neighborhoods. Naturally in this way many great gaps were left, which were only filled in gradually and bit by bit, some, indeed, not till after the official announcement that the wall was finished. In fact it is said that there are gaps which have never been filled in at all" (235).

<sup>5</sup> "Every fellow countryman was a brother for whom one was building a wall of protection, and who would return life-long thanks for it with all he had and did. Unity! Unity!" (238).

the conclusion that the command willed something inexpedient. Strange conclusion!" (240). By suggesting that the decision of the high command was improper and ineffective ("inexpedient" translates "unzweckmässig"), the narrator corrupts his own statement of belief in the unlimited powers of the command. He thereby imbues his own previous statement with a "barbarism," a trace of self-canceling doubt, which leads his reasoning to an impasse ("Strange conclusion!"). The fact that he corrupts his own statement makes his address to an "incorruptible observer" ironic and, indeed, "inexpedient." While the narrator constructs an ideal "incorruptible observer" who *must* accept the infallibility of the high command, his narrative is replete with logical errors and paradoxes, which are bound to corrupt any "incorruptible observer." The "incorruptible observer" can hardly be sustained amidst the barbarisms of the narrative.

The question of why the high command opted for the piecemeal construction still remains open. In an attempt to conceal the paradox of this "inexpedient" decision, the narrator interrupts his historical inquiry with an old parable. A river, according to the parable, needs to rise and grow mightier, but only up to a certain point, so that it does not overflow and cause destruction. The parable is supposed to demonstrate the necessity of imposing limits on one's inquiries in the pursuit of knowledge. As such, it supports the following maxim: "Try with all your might to comprehend the decrees of the high command; but only up to a certain point; then avoid further meditation" (240). The parable can be read as a self-reflection on the narrator's own venture, implicitly instructing him not to push his questioning too far. Yet, right afterward he negates and overthrows this instruction. While this parable might have been relevant during the building of the wall, the narrator contends that it is not applicable to the genre of his current narrative: "My inquiry is purely historical [...] so I may venture to seek for an explanation of the system of piecemeal construction which goes farther than the one that contented people then" (240-41). Disregarding the parable's instruction, he is willing to push the limits of knowledge in order to come to the truth. As a result, the loose end he clumsily tried to cover up with this parable—the question of why the high command would order something inexpedient—remains wide open, since its cover-up is dismissed again as unconvincing.

Hence, he continues his line of questioning: "Against whom was the Great Wall to serve as a protection? Against the people of the north." His reply is again instantly questioned and negated: "Now, I come from the southeast of China. No northern people can menace us there" (241). Not only have they never seen those barbarian nomads, but even if they existed, the land is so vast that they would never reach their villages. Once more, the narrator employs a strategy that Bianca Theisen calls "self-referential negation," whereby "a statement invites and seems to entail the following one, only to then be negated and cancelled by it" (3).<sup>6</sup> If the barbarians posed no threat, then the

<sup>6</sup> Theisen reads Kafka's prose as producing the effects of cinematic language and especially the shock-effect on the audience. Elements that show Kafka's affinity to cinematic language are the

question that logically follows is, again, *why* the wall needed to be built: “Why, then, since that is so, did we leave our homes [...] our mothers and fathers, our weeping wives, our children [...] Why?” (241).

For an answer he resorts again to the high command, which he now believes “has existed from all eternity, and the decision to build the wall likewise” (242). “Unwitting peoples of the north, who imagined they were the cause of it! Honest, unwitting Emperor, who imagined he decreed it! We builders of the wall know that it was not so and hold our tongues” (242). According to this new explanation, the construction of the wall had neither to do with a barbarian threat nor with the Emperor’s decision. It has no origin or cause whatsoever, since it has always existed.

For the narrator-historian, whose primary interest is to solve the riddle of the piecemeal construction, this sudden cancellation of all causality behind the wall’s building makes the question of “why” utterly impertinent—“inexpedient.” The recourse to the high command as an all-explanatory mechanism is not compatible with the rational criteria supposedly guiding his inquiry. This new paradox undermines the purpose of his narrative. If the decision has always existed, then why explore its causes in the first place?

However, what seems to make the whole inquiry pointless may also be read as an exposure of the arbitrary structures according to which causes and effects are constructed as such. If the decision for the wall always existed, then the perceived *causes* for the wall’s construction—protecting the country from barbarians, safeguarding the purity of the nation, strengthening its unity and identity—come after the decision for the wall and are produced as the wall’s effects. The decision for the wall is inextricable from the exclusionary structures of civilization, which are grounded in a strict division between inside and outside. The wall has always been part of these discursive structures, regardless of the existence of external enemies. The outside barbarians are not the cause for the building of the wall. Their construction as enemies is an effect of these discursive structures. The idea of the wall—a system of exclusion that bans foreignness—is imbued in the imaginary of the people of China, guiding their thoughts and actions. The Emperor’s decree for the wall’s construction, the life-long devotion of the Chinese people to its building, and the construction of outside others as threatening barbarians, are all effects—*not causes*—of the wall. By suggesting that national identity and the categories of “civilized” and “barbarians” are effects of discourse, the narrative de-essentializes them. This de-essentialization also highlights one of the main premises of this study: barbarians do not exist as such, but are constructions of a discursive structure that produces others as threatening and inferior.

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“paradoxical shifts from an assertion to its negation and its effect of uncertainty,” as well as the “bewildering array of details, figures, and perspectives, the perplexing unrelatedness of one event to the next,” and “the quandary of realism and the fantastic” (2). These are all elements we come across in this story too.

The preexisting decision for the wall's construction brings an identity into being, which is based on a dichotomization between inside/outside and an ideal of purity from foreign elements. This decision has no origin, but merely effects expected to be enhanced with the actual construction of the wall. However, a glitch appears in this project as soon as the theoretical decision for the wall turns into an actual construct. The actualization of the wall endangers the ideological structures that demanded its construction, because the system of piecemeal construction creates openings and fissures in the Empire's borders. These openings make the borders vulnerable to invasions from foreign, outside "barbarisms." If a wall is by definition impermeable, since its *raison d'être* is to seal borders, then this wall is strategically useless. The greatest monument of China's civilization is also the greatest proof of its inability to exclude foreignness from its vast territory. The Wall becomes an ambivalent symbol of greatness as well as vulnerability.

Presented as "inexpedient," the system of piecemeal construction itself can be seen as a barbarism—a foreign, inexplicable element—at the heart of China's ambitious project. While the narrator fails to adequately account for the wall's construction system, it is noteworthy that those who have a better grasp of the project are no others than the barbarian nomads. It is probable, the narrator informs us, that the nomad tribes against which the wall was built "kept changing their encampments with incredible rapidity, like locusts, and so perhaps had a better general view of the progress of the wall than we, the builders" (235-36). As Stanley Corngold observes, the design of the Wall is incomprehensible, "except, perhaps, to the nomads whom it exists to ostracize." This, Corngold argues, opens up the great paradox "that the builders are dependent on the beings from whom it is their entire purpose to obtain independence" (105).

This paradoxical dependence of civilization on its barbarians is a central issue in this study. Civilization aspires to establish a proper *locus* from which to speak, exert power, and identify others as barbarians: a demarcated center. In practice, however, this *locus* is precarious and unstable: the "civilized" center (in Kafka's story, the empire of China) is never identical to itself, as it can only exist in relation to a "barbarian" exteriority. This reflects the paradox of a "civilized" society priding on its self-sufficiency, yet needing inferior or subjugated others in order to reaffirm this self-sufficiency. Thus, although civilization holds the strong part of the opposition with the barbarians, its dependence on them, as I argue in this study, also suggests the vulnerability of civilization.

The fact that the outside "barbarians" capture the wall's design better, supports the viewing of the piecemeal construction as a barbarism—a foreign element—in the construct of civilization. If the wall's design remains almost unintelligible to the narrator, this suggests that it belongs to a barbarian code—a code the self cannot understand and decipher. Hence, the wall's design can unsettle the structures of civilization by literally producing the "openings, ambivalences and dislocations" that barbarism, in Brett Neilson's words, can cause to binary structures (92).

The “barbarism” that the system of piecemeal construction constitutes, however, does not come from the outside, but is internally generated by civilization: it is the decision of the high command. This fact, as we have seen, puzzles the narrator. Why would civilization (wittingly or not) produce the “barbarisms” that undermine the completion and safeguarding of its own project? This question gives rise to opposing assumptions. Does the piecemeal construction indicate civilization’s self-destructive drive, which makes it plant the seeds of its own potential demise in the form of gaps in the wall? Or does this “barbarism” in fact protect the Empire from turning into an isolated, self-regulating system without any connection with its outside? The latter assumption would mean that the real threat to civilization does not come from the nomads, but from the desire for national purity and the exclusion of foreignness. The piecemeal construction is responsible for the blurring of the borders between inside/outside, civilization and barbarism, enabling their interpenetration. Therefore, by leaving openings for foreign elements to enter, this design may fail to protect civilization from its outside, but it safeguards its potential for change and renewal.

The system of piecemeal construction in Kafka’s story can function as a model to rethink binary distinctions. The incomplete wall that results from this system underscores the unfinished, unsettled relation between civilization and barbarism. This marks my approach to the relation between barbarism and civilization in this study. By not taking their hierarchical opposition for granted, I focus on their relation as an unfinished business, with different, unpredictable effects each time it is iterated. As I argue in this study, the openings in the “wall” of civilizational discourse can make the performance of its key categories open to change. Through these openings, barbarism enters as a force that foils the completion of civilization’s “wall” and enables newness and alterity to affect its structures.

### Possible Impossibilities and Three Incomplete Walls

Thus, barbarisms do not only come from the outside, but also from within civilization, exposing its internal inconsistencies. The system of piecemeal construction—an inside decision—is a case in point. In the second part of “The Great Wall of China,” the narrator leaves the piecemeal construction temporarily aside and focuses on the relations between center and periphery *within* the wall of China. This part is an inquiry into Chinese political institutions which are “unique in their obscurity”—particularly the institution of the Empire (242). This inquiry, however, does not signal a complete change of subject: the narrator believes that the imperial institution is “essentially involved” with the building of the wall (242). He thus sketches the strange relation between imperial center and periphery within China. While in the story the opposition between the *intra* and *extra muros* is not very convincing (the barbarian nomads have not even been seen), inside the wall incongruities and improbabilities thrive. The rigid distinction



between inside and outside yields to tensions within the Chinese universe, wherein the people and the Empire are “barbarian” to each other, as they live in different worlds. In the narrator’s description of the empire’s *modus operandi*, and especially of the way common people relate to it, a universe replete with “barbarisms” comes alive. These barbarisms—in the form of paradoxes, hyperboles, irregularities, incompatibilities, and strange mixtures of heterogeneous orders—pertain both to notions of time and space, as well as to the relation between fiction, myth, and reality.

The relation between the Empire in Peking and the “common people” is marked either by miscommunication or by total lack of communication. Regarding time, the people in China live in a mythical past, which they perceive as the Empire’s present. Information about dead emperors and their dynasties travels so slowly that old stories reach people as “news” thousands of years after occurrence. “Battles that are old history are new to us,” writes the narrator (245). While nothing is known about the present Emperor, “[l]ong-dead emperors are set on the throne in our villages” (245). The living emperor, on the other hand, “they confuse among the dead” (245). In the rare occasion that an imperial official visits their village, the people let him make his announcements, and then secretly laugh at him, convinced that he is “speaking of a dead man as if he were alive” (245). The past is kept alive as present.

At first sight, this unorthodox temporality indicates that people live out of sync with the present, trapped in a mythical past and in a regressive mode of being. However, their time-conception could also be viewed in terms of a perpetual performance of the past in the present. In this “present,” “[t]he wives of the emperors, [...] vehement in their greed, incontrollable in their lust, practice their abominations *ever anew*” (245, emphasis added). This repetitive performance of the past as present ensures that the past does not remain fixed, but is constantly transformed through these performances.

The flow of information in the country is reminiscent of the way we view stars from the earth: most of the visible stars been destroyed for millions of years. In Kafka’s story, however, not only is history performed as present, but the inverse is true as well: for the people, the present of the Empire is already history. Current wars or revolutions happening elsewhere in the Empire are perceived as ancient history. Recounting an incident from his youth, the narrator recalls that when a beggar passed by their village to read a revolutionary leaflet by the rebels of the neighboring village, everyone burst in laughter and sent him away without believing a word he said. Although the written word of the leaflet gives vivid descriptions of “the gruesomeness of the living present,” the dialect in which it is written sounds archaic to them. Hence, the content of the leaflet is perceived as ancient history. “So eager are our people to obliterate the present,” writes the narrator (246). The gruesome present of the neighbors is a barbarism in their own present—a foreign sound dismissed as obsolete, unworthy of attention (246).

China emerges as a world of multiple parallel temporalities. These temporalities usually do not interfere with each other. But whenever they become aware of each other

in brief encounters—as in the last example—they imbue each other with barbarisms, which unsettle people’s time-conception and the truths by which they live. By juxtaposing these temporalities in the story, the narrator brings out their mutual contradictions. He thereby unleashes barbarisms that turn the familiar into something foreign and erratic and challenge the secure contexts of people’s lives. These barbarisms perform their disruptive operations whenever different temporalities in the story intersect. In line with this idea, the elements I call “barbarisms” in this study have a relational meaning: their identification as “barbarisms” is dependent on the context in which they appear. When there is no contact between different temporal frameworks in the story, the same elements I here call “barbarisms” may very well reinforce rather than undermine the security of each temporal framework.

The reality of Peking and the existing Emperor are inaccessible to common people. “Peking itself is far stranger to the people in our village than the next world,” the narrator concedes (246). The Empire is just as foreign and unknowable to them—and in that sense, barbarian—as the northern barbarians they have never seen. Yet, this does not diminish their need to keep the myth of the Empire alive. The sacred dragon—symbol of Peking—is always honored in their village, because, the narrator says, no people are “more faithful to the Emperor than ours” (246). The symbol of the emperor and the Empire as myth are far more indispensable to them than “reality.” Even if they long to clasp the Empire “in all its palpable living reality,” in the end they are not willing to exchange the safety of their mythical present for a chunk of the “real” (247). This would subject their age-old beliefs to the risk of falsification from another reality. Reality is therefore rendered irrelevant. What is more, the reality of Peking is to them a barbarism they try to exclude from their discourse.

By juxtaposing reality and fiction, history and myth, past and present, the narrative does not project these categories as irreconcilable hierarchical oppositions. Nor does it merge them by eradicating their differences. These discursive orders and temporalities are still distinguished from each other in the narrative: their differences are responsible for the tensions in the story. However, because they operate on an equal level in the story’s universe, they are able to interpenetrate and affect each other: fiction is no less “real” than reality, for history is shown to be replete with mythical constructions, and the past can be just as “present” as the present, if not more. The discursive priority of positive categories over their inferior opposites—the real over the fictional, history over myth, the present over the past—is overthrown in the story, without the conflicts between them reduced. The borders that forestall the intertwining of these orders become boundary spaces, through which these orders coexist in tension.<sup>7</sup>

Kafka’s story brings together heterogeneous genres, registers, and orders of signs: an objective and “serious” historical treatise accommodates rational inquiry, parables,

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<sup>7</sup> For an extensive theorization of the notion of “boundary space” see Inge Boer’s *Uncertain Territories*.

digressions, (pseudo-)scientific theories, myths, and autobiographical elements. All these genres and discursive orders meet each other in the narrative space we understand as “literature.” The conflicts in this space cannot be reconciled rationally, which is why the narrator’s venture fails as a rational historical inquiry. It nevertheless succeeds in articulating an alternative type of relation, which is neither based on an eradication of conflictual, irrational elements nor on their peaceful coexistence based on rational consensus. The story houses paradoxical combinations of elements in agonistic relation to each other, but not subjected to an authoritarian order. The way elements in the story relate helps us envisage a model of relation between self and other, whereby conflicts and tensions cannot be rationally resolved, but the different parties have a legitimate position in the common symbolic space of literature.<sup>8</sup>

The heterogeneous orders and elements in the story are brought together according to a logic of contiguity. They are placed next to each other in metonymical rather than metaphorical relations. This contiguity makes it possible to accommodate contradictory, unfitting elements—barbarisms—in the story without having them cancel each other out.<sup>9</sup> The paradoxes caused by the heterogeneous orders in the story seem to lead to consecutive aporias. However, these “aporias” appear as such only because of our indoctrination in a logic of irreconcilable oppositions (fiction versus reality, present versus past, inside versus outside, history versus literature, civilized versus barbarian). According to Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka’s work is a writing machine “made of assemblages of nouns and effects, of heterogeneous orders of signs that cannot be reduced to a binary structure.”<sup>10</sup> The story does not resolve the relation between the above binary pairs. It

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<sup>8</sup> This model of relations in the story is in many ways comparable to the model that Mouffe proposes with regard to democratic politics. Instead of overcoming the we/they distinction through universal consensus, Mouffe pleads for other understandings of this distinction, which would be compatible with democratic pluralism (14-16). She proposes a “third type of relation,” which she calls “agonism,” whereby the conflicting parties acknowledge that their conflicts have no rational solution, but recognize the legitimacy of their opponent. In this type of relation, the different sides are “adversaries” instead of enemies, and share “a common symbolic space within which the conflict takes place” (20). That space here is literature.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari argue that in Kafka there is no “infinite hierarchy belonging to a negative theology” but a “contiguity of desire that causes whatever happens to happen always in the office next door” (1986: 50). In this story, I trace this contiguity of desire in the narrator’s desire for answers to his inquiries about the wall’s construction. All his answers slip away and are succeeded by new questions. This produces a mercury-like effect: whenever the reader thinks the narrator has provided the answer to a question, the answer slips out of the reader’s hands, disappearing through the gaps in the story’s wall.

<sup>10</sup> Deleuze and Guattari’s views presented by Bensaïa in the “Forward” to their book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (xi). In their reading, Deleuze and Guattari distance themselves from symbolic, allegorical, or mythical interpretations of Kafka’s work, and try to formulate a politics of Kafka, by taking his writing literally. As a result, they are less interested in interpretation—digging beyond the surface of the word—but read his work as “an experimental machine” for effects (xi). In my view, reading Kafka literally does not rule out the reader’s desire for allegorization, to which the stories appeal. In Kafka’s story on the wall of China, we find the literal and allegorical, just like the mythical and the real, on the same discursive level, without one having priority over the other.

invites us to shift our preconceptions so that we can see them not as a deadlock of irreconcilable contradictions, but as a space of *possible impossibilities*, where elements can coexist and compete with their opposites.<sup>11</sup>

These possible impossibilities bring us back to the question of the piecemeal construction, but this time from another perspective. While the narrator cannot find conclusive answers to the enigma of the piecemeal construction, I argue that his narrative *performs* the design the narrator is unable to explain through reason. The narrative itself is built by the system of piecemeal construction. The story erects several blocks—mini narratives comprising parables, digressions, autobiographical incidents, scientific theories—of what promises to be a whole: a historical inquiry. But after erecting each block, it moves on to the next, without resolving the relation between these contiguous pieces. An argument or line of thinking is pushed to an impasse, and then another one starts, so that the reader almost forgets the previous “block” was left open and incomplete. The result of this construction system is a narrative of loose ends and coexisting contradictions, which the reader is encouraged to accept as such.

In their study on Kafka, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the role of discontinuous blocks as a design in Kafka’s stories, reflected in his “broken form of writing” and his “mode of expression through fragments” (1986: 72). This discontinuity corresponds to the image of the fragmentary wall in “The Great Wall of China.” The discontinuity of the blocks, Deleuze and Guattari argue, does not prevent them from being contiguous and thus in contact with each other. Indeed, as we see in “The Great Wall of China,” the mini narratives and diverse orders in the story are not entirely disconnected, but “touch” each other and expose each other’s inconsistencies.<sup>12</sup>

The openings in the story’s “wall” enable disobedient elements to dismantle the normative ground from which positive categories draw their power.<sup>13</sup> In the story, “reality” and “history” are not the normative standards against which “myth” and “fiction” are measured, but simply other modes of speaking, knowing, and understanding the world. The story’s incongruous juxtapositions confound our understanding of these categories

<sup>11</sup> In his essay “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death,” Benjamin also notices the disruption of oppositions in Kafka’s writing. In Kafka, he argues, each experience “gives way and mingles with its opposite.” “The very possibility of the third alternative puts the other two, which at first seemed harmless, in a different light” (1999b: 126).

<sup>12</sup> This discontinuity, Deleuze and Guattari argue, appears in Kafka especially when power manifests itself as a “transcendental authority, as a paranoid law” imposing “a discontinuous distribution of individual periods, with breaks between each one, a discontinuous repartition of blocks, with spaces between each one” (1986: 72). Moreover, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the blocks in Kafka’s writing do not distribute themselves around a circle with discontinuous arches, but “align themselves on a hallway or a corridor” along an unlimited straight line (73). On this line, each block has doors far from the doors of other blocks, but it also has connecting back doors, through which the blocks become contiguous. “This is the most striking topography in Kafka’s work, and it isn’t only a ‘mental’ topography: two diametrically opposed points bizarrely reveal themselves to be in contact” (73).

<sup>13</sup> Kelen also locates the “Kafkaesque” in the “disobediences of languages” and the “continual refusal of language to merely be the ground beneath our feet.”

and turn it into a “creative misunderstanding” as “a means by which to get a different hold on things” (Levine 1041).<sup>14</sup> The story creates small ruptures in the way we understand reality, history, myth, the present, and the past.

The cohabitation of possible impossibilities in the story does not transfer the reader to a literary universe that escapes our own world. As Deleuze and Guattari argue, although Kafka draws “lines of escape” he does not “flee the world”; rather, “it was the world and its representation that he *made take flight* and that he made follow these lines” (1986: 46-47).<sup>15</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka’s art does not “express,” “represent” or “imitate,” but produces “the most diverse contents on the basis of (nonsignifying) ruptures and intertwinings of the most heterogeneous orders of signs and powers.”<sup>16</sup> The result of these intertwinings is a displacement of our own reality in a way that makes us experience it with foreign eyes, through the “barbarisms” of literature. In the words of Slavoj Žižek, Kafka shows us not a “fantasy image of social reality” but “the *mise en scene* of the fantasy which is at work in the midst of social reality itself” (1989: 36).<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the incomplete Wall of China in the story, and the story itself as an unfinished wall, there is yet a third project that draws from the design of piecemeal construction. The question of barbarism, its past and present uses, its violent history, its open future, and its creative operations constitute a long wall, from which a few pieces are erected in this study, while openings are deliberately (and inevitably) left between them. Viewing this study through the principles of piecemeal construction helps me bring its pieces together, while highlighting the openings between its constituent parts. These openings can function as gateways for new perspectives, changes, questions, criticisms, distortions, constructions, and deconstructions, some of which may materialize in future projects. The different “blocks” in this project comprise a constellation of disparate objects. Its chapters touch on politics, history, literature, visual art, film, philosophy, and theory, and bring together objects from diverse national contexts. The constituent parts of this study do not form a closed circle, but try to create lines of connection with various contexts and objects.

Barbarism itself in this study is treated as an “unfinished” concept, with fissures in its discursive performances. Although barbarism is a notoriously saturated concept, and in that sense might pose as an impermeable wall blocking any attempt at resignification, in this study I approach it through Kafka’s suggested design. I thus try not to focus on the imposing wall erected by the history of “barbarism” in the West, but on the possible openings in this wall, through which a creative recasting may take place.

<sup>14</sup> Levine makes this observation about Kafka’s stories in general.

<sup>15</sup> Kafka himself writes in the *Züräu Aphorisms*: “How is it possible to rejoice in the world except by fleeing to it?” (2006: 25).

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze and Guattari presented in Bensmaïa in the “Foreword” to their study on Kafka (1986: xvii).

<sup>17</sup> See also Žižek qtd in Rutherford 305.

The coexisting impossibilities in Kafka's story capture the objective of this study with regard to barbarism. The plural concept of barbarism I propose allows contradictory—positive as well as negative—meanings to coexist in the concept. Therefore, this study does not present the reader with an either/or choice between a positive and a negative barbarism. The concept's deep-rooted negative meanings cannot be erased at will in favor of a "good barbarism." The positive refashioning of barbarism in the pages of this study emerges through a constant tension between the conventional, negative aspects of this concept and its subversive, critical, and constructive potential.

Finally, just as the main theme in Kafka's story (the wall's construction system) is performatively inscribed in the story's own construction, the object of this study is also involved in my methodological considerations. The notion of barbarism becomes a methodological tool, which can inform and affect our ways of knowing, comparing, and theorizing. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explore the modes of knowing and comparing that Kafka's story puts forward, and the ways these modes relate to the kind of barbarism that takes center stage in this study.

## Barbarism and Knowledge

It is not necessary to accept everything as true,  
one must only accept it as necessary.

—Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (1999a:124)

The motivating force of the narrator's inquiry is his desire for knowledge. He wishes to untangle the truth and gain insight into the wall's construction, as well as into the institution of the Empire, which is "unique" in its "obscurity" (242). The knowledge surrounding the Empire is non-transparent, immersed "in a fog of confusion" (242). Any news or information, says the narrator, "even if they did reach us, would arrive far too late, would have become obsolete long before they reached us" (243). Although the Empire in Peking is the center of power and thus also the supposed source of knowledge dissemination, the knowledge transmitted by the center is endlessly delayed, leading to miscommunication with the people of China and forcing them to live by ancient knowledge and laws. "In part because of the distances," Michael Wood writes, "Kafka's China is a place of misinformation and wild legend, also of claims to arcane knowledge" (331). Information is scattered in the vastness of the land.

The Emperor and his subjects live in a different here-and-now. The Chinese "think only about the Emperor," but "not about the present one," because they do not know anything about him (243). The people "know" a different emperor than the one in Peking. The Emperor they know is an almighty, immortal symbol, not threatened by external circumstances. The Emperor in Peking, on the other hand, is a vulnerable human

being with weaknesses. “The Empire is immortal, but the Emperor totters and falls from his throne,” his malicious courtiers “perpetually labor to unseat the ruler from his place,” and dynasties regularly “sink” and disappear; however, “of these struggles and sufferings the people will never know” (243). It is, in fact, their ignorance that allows them to construct the Empire as an unchanging, eternal mechanism, unaware as they are of its precariousness and instability. In the narrative, this instability is suggested through verbs that show change of position, and particularly removal from a stable *locus*, such as “totters,” “falls,” “unseat,” and “sink.” The people’s ignorance buys them a stable epistemological framework on which to build their lives. They are suspicious to new knowledge about Peking and distrustful toward imperial officials when they visit them, because they are unwilling to give up their own construction of the Empire as a stable and invincible institution. If present emperors are dethroned and assassinated, the people do not hear about it—nor do they wish to hear about it.

The same kind of knowledge that determines their relation to Peking also typifies their relation to their purported external enemies, the northern nomads. Although the narrator and his people think they know them through old books and artistic representations, this mediated knowledge has never been verified by empirical facts:

We read of them in the books of the ancients; the cruelties they commit in accordance with their nature make us sigh in our peaceful arbors. The faithful representations of the artist show us these faces of the damned, their gaping mouths, their jaws furnished with great pointed teeth their half-shut eyes that already seem to be seeking out the victim which their jaws will rend and devour. When our children are unruly we show them these pictures, and at once they fly weeping into our arms.  
(241)

Despite the vividness of these descriptions, they have never seen those barbarians. The word “faithful,” with which the narrator refers to the artist’s representations, can be read as a barbarism undermining the subsequent description of the barbarians. This adjective does not only add an ironic undertone to the hyperbolic tone of the description, but it underscores the extent to which the people’s mediated, mythical knowledge of the other is constructed as an unbiased fact. This “knowledge” of the barbarian enemies is necessary to support the binary structures from which the nation draws its self-definition.

What is even more inaccessible than knowledge about the enemies is the knowledge disseminated by the Empire to its people. In order to illustrate the inaccessibility of this knowledge the narrator recounts the parable of the Emperor and his messenger. From his deathbed, the Emperor “has sent a message to you alone” and has instructed his messenger to deliver it. But the messenger can never reach his destination, as he has to pass through endless obstacles. He has to go through the “chambers of the innermost palace”; the stairs; the courts; the “second outer palace”; then more courts; more palaces, and “so on for thousands of years.” Even if he were to reach the outermost

gate (“but never, never can that happen”) he would never fight his way through the imperial capital, “the center of the world,” “*crammed to bursting with its own sediment*” (244, emphasis added). The choice of words in the latter phrase suggests the kind of sedimented knowledge that resides in the imperial center. This knowledge is so deeply immersed in processes of control and mediation, that its dissemination becomes a process of eternal deferral. No information can travel from the palace to the common people, as the Empire is a closed, protected system. Kafka’s China, as Kelen observes, “is a set of concentric circles with no communication between them.” The messenger, who tries to channel knowledge to the outside, stands no chance against the imperial labyrinth and its closed epistemological framework.<sup>18</sup>

So far, the kind of epistemology nurtured by the Empire and its people gathers the following features. The Empire produces multiply mediated knowledge, which is almost impossible to pervade and threaten. Knowledge *about* the Empire is constructed by the people as certain and stable, although in the narrative it is exposed as unstable and precarious. It has a symbolic center, Peking, although its production is not based on actual communication between center and periphery, but on mythical narratives and misinformation. Neither knowledge from the Empire nor about the Empire can tolerate openings to the outside, and hence both need to be protected against questioning. We could call this a “civilized epistemology.”

The parable with the king and the messenger indicates the limits of civilized power and knowledge, presented as a solipsistic system of self-entrapment. Kafka’s story, however, also offers traces of another kind of epistemology. If the Empire’s concentric walls prevent knowledge from moving towards the outside, the openings in the Great Wall may signal the hope of an escape towards another epistemology—a barbarian way of knowing.

Who is “in the know” in the story? The Emperor issues decrees and controls imperial knowledge. In the people’s perception, he is deified and omniscient. Nonetheless, on other occasions the builders seem to know more than the ignorant Emperor and the nomads of the north: “Unwitting peoples of the north, who imagined they were the cause of it [the wall]! Honest, unwitting Emperor, who imagined he decreed it! We builders of the wall *know* that it was not so and hold our tongues” (242). The narrator and the builders know more about the wall’s construction, because they know the decision for it, just as the high command, has always existed. But then again, we also read that the builders know less about the wall’s construction than the nomads. The “unwitting people of the north” kept moving around the wall and thus, as mentioned previously, “had a better general view of the progress of the wall than we, the builders” (236).

As a result of this constant transference of the locus of knowledge, there is no stable position of knowing in the narrative. All agents in the story—including the reader—know

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<sup>18</sup> This delay, Kelen argues, can be seen “as a metaphor for the delay caused by interpretation: the endless delay entailed in the fact that text is never exhaustively understood.”



and do not know, think they know but do not know (“unwitting people...”), and think they do not know but know more than they think. The source of knowledge is constantly displaced. Before knowledge manages to settle in the narrative, it is on its way to another position. This is also evident in the narrator’s process of questioning: every conclusion drawn in the course of his inquiry is immediately overthrown by a new question or a new contradictory element. The epistemology the narrative performs challenges the inflexible structures of China’s “civilized knowledge” through a constant falsification and questioning of existing knowledge.

I see the above features as aspects of a “barbarian mode of knowing,” or a “barbarian epistemology.” In this mode, knowledge is not a positivity emanating from a fixed point. It is provisional and transitional, and does not get the chance to transform to hegemonic power. A barbarian mode of knowing acknowledges the contingent character of discursive categories, and thus the possibility of their disarticulation and transformation, through which new categories may be created or existing ones may be redefined.

Oscillating between knowledge and non-knowledge, a barbarian epistemology could be conceptualized as a mode of “(not) knowing.” This “(not) knowing” is not a passive ignorant state, but rather the result of a radical self-questioning that ensures the renewal of knowledge. In the story, (not) knowing—as opposed to ignorance—seems to be the result of an active educational process: “The farther one descends among the lower schools the more, naturally enough, does one find teachers’ and pupils’ doubts of their own knowledge vanishing, and superficial culture mounting sky-high around a few precepts that have been drilled into people’s minds for centuries” (242). From the narrator’s observation, we can infer that moving higher in the educational ladder does not bring people closer to positive knowledge. On the contrary, it increases doubt and questioning. In yet another counterintuitive observation, the narrative suggests that the ultimate goal of education is the intensification of doubt—learning to “unknow” what one knows.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the manifestations of a barbarian mode of knowing in the narrative, the narrator’s historical inquiry ends in a surprising, if not disappointing manner for the reader. The narrator decides to put an abrupt end to his inquiry and not push his thinking further. This decision is related to an observation made just before, namely that the lack of communication between the people and the Empire does not only lie with the governmental organization, but also with the people themselves:

there is also involved a certain feebleness of faith and imaginative power on the part of the people, that prevents them from raising the empire out of its stagnation in

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<sup>19</sup> For the idea of teaching and pedagogy as an “undoing” of what has been established by education, see Shoshana Felman’s chapter “Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable” in *Jacques Lacan and The Adventure of Insight*.

Peking and clasping it in all its palpable living reality to their own breasts, which yet desire nothing better than but once to feel that touch and then to die. (247)

Although the people long for a touch of “the real,” the myth they have constructed around the Empire is more powerful than any reality. They are not willing to exchange their own “reality” for another one, because they lack “imaginative power.” It takes creative imagination—the ability to step out of your own familiar framework—to taste another kind of knowledge of reality. Myth is for them the safe place to be, while “the real” is the other: a barbarian knowledge, which threatens their ground.

Remarkably, the narrator finds that “this very weakness should seem to be one of the greatest unifying influences among our people; indeed, if one may dare to use the expression, the very ground on which we live” (247). Therefore, he eventually backs down before the danger involved in his inquiry: “To set about establishing a fundamental defect here would mean undermining not only our consciences, but, what is far worse, our feet. And for that reason I shall not proceed any further at this stage with my inquiry into these questions” (247-48).

His narrative halts at the realization that the filter of myth, which protects people from the precariousness of the present, is indispensable for the Empire’s power and the nation’s identity. Myth safeguards civilized knowledge from barbarisms. Therefore, he decides that his narrative cannot accommodate any more questioning. “Civilized knowledge” does not jeopardize itself by opening up to foreign knowledge or self-interrogation. The narrator’s desire not to disrupt this established mode of knowing appears to overpower his initial desire to know more, know differently, and let the “river” of knowledge in his parable overflow by pushing the limits of knowledge. Is this a triumph of “civilized knowledge” over the narrative’s traces of another way of knowing? I do not think so. There is a discrepancy between what the narrator says he is doing in the end, and what his narrative does: falsifying knowledge, displacing its source, inserting barbarisms to familiar frameworks. The performative aspects of his speech are in excess of the meaning of his final statement.

Yet, although the narrator’s historical inquiry hits a wall, the end of his inquiry need not be seen as the end of the story. There is another short piece by Kafka, which could be read as a postscript to “The Great Wall of China,” entitled “The News of the Building of the Wall: A Fragment” (“Die Nachricht vom Mauerbau: Ein Fragment”).<sup>20</sup> This fragment recounts an incident from the narrator’s childhood and contains the first news about the

<sup>20</sup> In the English edition of Kafka’s stories I am using (Vintage, 1999), this fragment is added at the end of the narrative of “The Great Wall of China” and is thereby perceived by the reader as a postscript—an adjunct to the main story about the wall. The fragment is translated by Tania and James Stern. However, this fragment is not formally part of “The Great Wall of China.” This is why in other editions of Kafka’s stories that include “The Great Wall of China,” such as the German edition edited by Paul Raabe (Fischer, 1970), this fragment is left out.

building of the wall, as a boatman passing by their village brought it to the narrator's father. It is probable that the same narrative "I" as in "The Great Wall of China" writes this piece, although the identity of its narrator is not verified. It appears as an autobiographical narration, containing elaborate descriptions of the scenery and the child's responses to the incidents described. The literariness of this text stands in stark contrast to the pseudo-scientific style of "The Great Wall of China."

As the designation "fragment" suggests, it is an open piece, and its beginning and end are missing—or not (yet) written. A fragment is something broken off from a whole, and as such it alludes to the image of the Great Wall and its openings. Therefore, this fragment may be another opening in the "wall" of the main narrative. It suggests a way of exceeding the limitations of the narrator's historical inquiry and even overcoming the impasse with which this inquiry ends. In the English edition of Kafka's short stories (Vintage, 1999), this fragment is placed after "The Great Wall," thereby inciting the reader to disregard our narrator's final statement (i.e., that he will not "proceed any further") and to seek further, read on.

The fragment contains the narrator's father's account of a boatman's account of the news that the building of the wall has started. This account is filtered through the imagination of a child, who later writes down this text based on his remote childhood memories. Although he has no recollection of his father's exact words to him, the narrator tries to reproduce his father's reproduction of the boatman's words ("I venture nevertheless to give some version of what my father said," 249). This is what he comes up with in the final sentence of the fragment:

An unknown boatman [...] has just told me that a great wall is going to be built to protect the Emperor. For it seems that infidel tribes, among them demons, often assemble before the imperial palace, and shoot their black arrows at the Emperor.  
(249)

In this short narrative, the "truth" about the wall's construction is again filtered by no less than four levels of mediation: the boatman, the father, the child, and the adult-narrator.

The emphasis on mediated knowledge in this fragment takes on a different significance than the mediated-knowledge-as-myth in the main story. Contrary to what the reader might initially think, "The Great Wall of China" does not privilege an immediacy of knowledge as opposed to a mediated knowledge that imprisons "the real." As this fragment suggests, the "real" does not exist as such, since our knowledge of the world is always inevitably mediated. But the operations and effects of mediated knowledge are not always the same. Perhaps because this fragment formally belongs to a different genre—an autobiographical, personal, literary account—this mediation is not a problem that needs to be overcome in order to retrieve the "historical truth." Rather, it is a challenge. In the main story's China, the endless reiteration of certain "facts" in the popular imagination reinforces the power of mythical knowledge. However, these repetitions, reproductions, and mediations are

inevitably also subject to alterations. The four levels of mediation in this fragment suggest that there is not only an eternal perpetuation of the same (myth), but also the possibility of a repetition with a difference that could challenge mythical structures.

The final sentence of the fragment throws the overblown myth around the wall's construction at the reader's face. This myth involves "infidel tribes," "demons," "black arrows" and so on. But if the Chinese in "The Great Wall of China" are trapped within the wall that their mythical present imposes on them, for the reader a small fissure in this wall is presented through this fragment. Since this is a fragment, and thus unfinished, the reader is invited to write her own, different ending to this myth. The fragment also suggests that the age-old myths of civilization might be repeated differently within the space of literature. In line with this, in this study I also seek ways to tell the story of barbarians and barbarism differently, and look for spaces where barbarism does other things than what it *means*—taken in its double sense, as "signify" and "intend."

In a conversation with Max Brod, Kafka is reported to have said: "our world is only a bad mood of God, a bad day of his." "Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know," Brod replied. To that Kafka added: "Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us."<sup>21</sup> If there is no hope for the narrator, who halts before the danger of shaking the ground under his feet, there is perhaps hope for the reader, who is pushed through another small opening in the story's wall. The fragment may be the opening to another narrative or an index that promises another kind of knowledge. As Benjamin remarks in his essay "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death," the doctrine Kafka's parables interpret does not exist; "all we can say is that here and there we have an allusion to it. Kafka might have said that these are relics transmitting the doctrine, although we could regard them just as well as precursors preparing the doctrine" (1999b: 119). The doctrine of Kafka's stories is irretrievable; not because the reader does not dig well enough behind the story, but because it does not exist yet. It therefore requires the reader's "imaginative power," which can overcome the "feebleness of faith" the narrator ascribes to the Chinese. This is, I contend, a barbarian doctrine: it is unintelligible and foreign to the reader, but it promises a new grammar and way of knowing, which we are enticed to discover.

This doctrine could be described in terms of the (not) knowing of barbarism, as previously delineated. The bracketed "not" foregrounds barbarism as a negative concept pregnant with positivity. As a mode of (not) knowing, barbarism is imbued with positivity as a potential; a promise, rather than a given, self-evident quality. "(Not) knowing" thus refers to a kind of knowledge that does not exist yet—just like the doctrine of Kafka's stories, according to Benjamin.

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<sup>21</sup> This conversation with Max Brod is quoted by Benjamin in "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death" (1999b: 113).

### Barbarism and Comparison: The Tower and the Wall

In the final block of my analysis of Kafka's story, I focus on a comparison between the Great Wall and the Tower of Babel, to which the narrator's inquiries lead him. This brings the issue of comparison to the foreground. In the story, the comparison between the wall and the tower is presented as the theory of an unidentified scholar, who not only compared the two projects, but also asserted "the Great Wall alone would provide for the first time in the history of mankind a secure foundation for a new Tower of Babel. First the wall, therefore, and then the tower" (239). According to this scholar's theory, the ancient tower of Babel failed because its foundations were too weak. The Wall of China was thus supposed to provide the solid foundation for the new Tower of Babel. The narrator questions the rational grounds of this theory: "How could the wall, which did not form even a circle, but only a sort of quarter- or half-circle, provide the foundation for a tower?" And if the scholar's comparison was only meant in a spiritual, abstract sense, then, the narrator wonders, "why build the actual wall, which after all was something concrete" (239)? The narrator finds it curious that the scholar's book even contained architectural plans and detailed proposals for the tower that would be built based on the wall.

What I find most remarkable about this comparison is its grounds. There are several reasons—some of which pointed out by the narrator himself—why this comparison would be impertinent and illegitimate. The narrator notices the mixing of heterogeneous orders in the scholar's comparison, and therefore puts question marks to it. Discursive frames, genres, and even temporal frames are mixed without further justification: an ancient Biblical myth belonging to the Judaic and Christian traditions is compared with an actual historical (though mythically invested) project from the Chinese tradition, within a fictional narrative, in which the narrator declares to be offering a historical account of the wall. The temporal order is also reversed: "First the wall, therefore, and then the tower," the narrator notes (239). The real wall is supposed to help reconstruct a better version of the mythical tower. The concrete and literal are confused with mythical, spiritual, and metaphorical orders of signs, as the comparison presents us with the possible impossibility of a wall providing the foundations for a (formerly mythical) tower.

In the face of the reader's temptation to read the conjoining of the two projects as an allegory, the story makes sure to underscore the materiality of the project, by testing its architectural feasibility. As Michael Wood notes, one cannot forget that most importantly "we are talking about a material Wall and a material Tower, whatever their spiritual meanings or grounding might be" (334). The unproblematic coexistence of the figurative and the literal in this comparison, but also throughout Kafka's story, calls for a simultaneously literal and allegorical reading. In this reading, "literal" and "allegorical" are not opposed discursive orders, but part of the same pluralized order.

Despite the narrator's question marks about the viability of the comparison, in the scholar's theory, as presented in the story, this interpenetration of orders of signs does

not pose a problem. In fact, it forms the very ground on which this comparative act unfolds. The grounds of this comparison would not pass the test of conventional theories of comparison that require a common basis for the compared objects. Nevertheless, as Natalie Melas proposes in her book on comparison, there can be “a minimal form of incommensurability, which produces a generative dislocation without silencing discourse or marking the limit of knowledge.” “This minimal incommensurability,” Melas argues, “opens up the possibility of an intelligible relation at the limits of comparison” (31). By operating at the limits of comparison, the encounter between the two projects in the story creates its own comparative grounds instead of yielding to predetermined frameworks.

Comparisons need both similarity and difference between compared objects. Since both parts in this comparison stand on an unstable ground, the challenging question is what the two projects have in common. On a first level, both the Wall of China and the Tower of Babel seem to express a desire for unification and for the exclusion of alterity. The Wall embodies a desire for a unified nation of China, purified from the barbarians and barbarisms of the outside world. The Tower of Babel was the project of a united humanity of the generations following the Great Flood, which all spoke a single language. The tower can thus be seen as a celebration of the power of a unified humanity, devoid of foreign elements: barbarisms and barbarians. As Derrida writes in “Des Tours de Babel,” just before the tower’s deconstruction, the Semitic family “was establishing its empire, which it wanted universal, and its tongue, which it also attempts to impose on the universe” (1985: 167). This ambition for universalization, accompanied by the fear of translation and dispersion, creates the momentum for the construction of the tower.<sup>22</sup> The project was to build a tower that would reach heaven. This ambition captures the telos of the desire for absolute unification: unity with God through the crossing of the borders between heaven and earth. The hubris of their ambition—which was not to glorify and praise the name of God, but rather to make a name for themselves—brought on God’s punishment in the form of linguistic confusion and the scattering of this unified people throughout the earth.

Both projects are incomplete. The Wall, built with the method of piecemeal construction, is porous and does not offer protection from outside barbarism. Likewise, the project of Babel is not only left unfinished, but has the exact opposite outcome from its initial aspirations. In building the tower, the Semites wished to “*make a name for themselves*” and gather themselves in a unified place, and thus to “assure themselves, by themselves, a unique and universal genealogy” (Derrida 1985: 169). Instead, the project ends in linguistic confusion: the builders end up speaking different languages and thus become barbarians to each other. After Babel, language becomes a never-ending process

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<sup>22</sup> A translation of the biblical passage from 1910 reads: “Come! Let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose summit touches the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, so that we not be scattered over the face of all the earth” (Louis Segond’s translation, translated in English and quoted in Derrida 1985: 168).

of translation (Rickels 111). As Derrida argues, the goal of the tower's builders—to found a universal language and a unique genealogy—brings in a colonial violence or linguistic imperialism, and “a peaceful transparency of the human community,” both of which are interrupted by God’s punishment (1985: 174). When God imposes his name (“Babel”), he limits the universality of the universal reason he imposes by subjecting humans to the law of translation: transparency and univocity become impossible (174).<sup>23</sup>

Both projects fail to fulfill their purported goal—the desire for linguistic or national homogenization and the eradication of barbarism(s). “The ‘tower of Babel’,” Derrida writes, “does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system, and architectonics” (1985: 165). The incompleteness of these projects suggests the failure of any project striving for total unification, homogeneity, and elimination of difference. Moreover, it figures the impossibility of excluding barbarism from the field of the same. Every ideology of national purity in the case of the wall, or linguistic imperialism in the case of the tower, will always run against “barbarisms”: gaps in the wall through which foreign elements may flow in and out, or confounded tongues subject to translation and comparison, and thus never self-identical.

The commonality of the two projects could thus be summed up as follows: instead of universalizing or reinforcing the system of the self and invalidating the domain of barbarism, both constructions end up in a proliferation of barbarism(s). The narrator has doubts about the scholar’s “illegitimate” comparison of the wall with the tower.<sup>24</sup> However, the paradoxes, surprising reversals, and “inexpedient” juxtapositions throughout his narrative incite the reader to approach this comparison through a radical change of perspective. I would thus propose the following: What if we assumed that both projects did not fail, but rather succeeded in their objective? What if the builders of the Tower of Babel, condemned to the nightmare of a single tongue, secretly wished for the barbarism of translation, and gladly gave up the tower’s construction as soon as they got that gift disguised as God’s punishment? What if the Wall of China was never meant to protect from barbarians, but to enable the flow of barbarisms—in other words, what if the goal was not the wall, but the building of the gaps between its blocks?

If we viewed the tower and the wall as successful constructions instead of failed ones, then the motivating force that runs through them would not be national purity or

<sup>23</sup> “Babel” is the name of God the father. It is thus a proper name, and as such it remains untranslatable. But it is simultaneously a common noun, signifying “confusion.” As God delivers his punishment, Derrida argues, the proper name of God is divided in people’s tongues, spreading and signifying “confusion.” Therefore, according to Derrida, translation becomes necessary (due to linguistic confusion), but also impossible, since a proper name is untranslatable (1985: 173, 177-78). For another detailed analysis of the myth of Babel in relation to language and translation, including an analysis of Derrida’s “Des Tours de Babel,” see Hent de Vries’s chapter “Anti-Babel” in his study *Religion and Violence* (211-92).

<sup>24</sup> He is even condescending towards the whole theory, underscoring its irrationality: “There were many wild ideas in people’s heads at that time—this scholar’s book is only one example” (239).

(linguistic) imperialism, but rather *the desire for barbarism*. This desire is not the orientalist eroticized desire for the other or the colonialist attraction to barbarians and the drive to decipher their mysteries. Nor is this the self-destructive desire of a decaying civilization that hopes for the arrival of barbarism. What runs through both unfinished constructions, I contend, is the desire for a kind of barbarism that deterritorializes and ruptures the unifying, centripetal structures of civilization. This barbarism emerges both through the wall's gaps and through the confounded languages of the tower's builders, which de-center them and introduce them to foreignness and incomprehensibility.<sup>25</sup>

The desire for barbarism that permeates the tower and the wall is what keeps civilization from turning into an isolated, solipsistic construct. This kind of barbarism is not civilization's destruction, but what could protect it from self-destruction. It unsettles civilization's discourse and practices, but simultaneously contains the hope for newness and transformation. This barbarism can come either from outside or from inside civilization's wall. Thus, it is neither the prerogative of civilization's "others" nor of civilization itself. Either way, it takes effect at points of intersection between the inside and the outside, when the borders between them become less absolute—like in the gaps of the wall. The failure of the tower and the wall may then be redefined as the promise for another solution to the fear of the outside and the nightmare of a universalized tongue. This solution involves barbarism, but otherwise.

The desire for barbarism I see in these two projects does not have a stable origin in the consciousness of the builders, the emperor or the architects of either the wall or the tower. It can be seen in Deleuzian terms, not as something an intentional subject produces, but as a process without an origin or destination. For Deleuze and Guattari, desire does not point to a lack, but is positive in creating connections and assemblages.<sup>26</sup> This kind of desire invites us to see the wall's gaps or the unfinished part of the tower as productive elements. Thus, the desire for barbarism questions the narratives that describe both constructions in terms of lack and incompleteness. Where these narratives see unfinished parts, we could see a positive desire that connects people by reordering them in different constellations: the people of China are connected to their "barbarians" through the wall's gaps, while the builders of the tower of Babel develop different ties, based not on uniformity, but on difference and diasporic relations.

Desire is an immanent force that creates contiguous connections rather than oppositions.<sup>27</sup> "Desire could never be on a stage where it would sometimes appear like a

<sup>25</sup> In his reading of Derrida's essay on Babel, Stathis Gourgouris also considers the myth and deconstruction of Babel in terms of a desire, but a desire of diaspora. The "Babelian performance" (the myth and deconstruction of Babel), Gourgouris argues, is "the origin of a desire that has scattered its traces all over history, a diasporic desire that has plunged history into confusion—after all, Babel is also the mythical *archē*, the governing principle, of diaspora" (303).

<sup>26</sup> Deleuze and Guattari presented in Colebrook (92).

<sup>27</sup> For Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desire, see *Anti-Oedipus*, particularly the chapter "The Desiring Machines;" on desire in relation to Kafka's work, see their chapter "Immanence and Desire" in *Kafka*:



party opposed to another party,” Deleuze and Guattari write about desire within Kafka’s work (1986: 50). In Kafka’s story, viewing the tower and the wall in terms of a desire for barbarism entails setting aside the oppositional parties that govern their respective narratives—humans versus God’s power; the Chinese nation versus barbarians—and which supposedly motivated these constructions. Desire does not reside in oppositions. The desire for barbarism displaces these oppositions and deterritorializes our viewing of these architectural constructions.

In order to conceptualize barbarism as a desire animating the two constructions, we have to momentarily detach ourselves from the traditional Biblical narrative of Babel or the narratives around the wall of China. The shift of perspective that is necessary in order to see the constructions in terms of desire is a demand Kafka’s narrative makes on me. Something in the narrative’s unfinished wall and tower resists the kind of knowledge we inherit from these stories without questioning. It demands that we suspend pre-established knowledge, in order to view these constructions and the narratives that surround them differently. In this study, I seek such a change of perspective regarding the concept of barbarism, despite, but also through, its pre-established significations and uses. It suggests a process of un-knowing barbarism, provisionally, in order to cast it otherwise.

The shift of perspective in the comparison between the Tower of Babel and the Wall of China channels the negative evaluation of these projects (unfinished, inexpedient, incomplete) into a more positive direction. Instead of failed projects of civilization or humanity we can view them as achievements of another kind of barbarism. This would be in line with Deleuze and Guattari’s approach to Kafka’s work as “characterized by the total absence of negation” and “a rejection of every problematic of failure.” For them, it is not Kafka’s work that fails, but the attempt to reduce it to something else and make it fit external categories that leads to failure. The work itself is the bearer of “an affirmation without reserve.”<sup>28</sup>

This invites an approach to barbarism as a potentially positive notion, and not as the failure of civilization’s project. Such small shifts in the way we redeploy barbarism are the crux of this study as a whole. This recasting of barbarism is more than a play with words. Claiming that the wall in the story remains incomplete indexes a hidden unity behind the interrupted blocks—the image of a wall without gaps awaiting its completion. This unity poses as a positive ideal to which the incomplete wall is destined to refer and on which it conceptually depends. Reversing this logic by making the interrupted wall—and not its lost unity—the primary focus, transforms its gaps and fissures into positivities instead of absences indexing something else. This captures one of this study’s main objectives. If barbarism can function as a positive concept, we could explore its relation to its antipode (civilization) on a different ground, without having to take civilization as a necessary and primary reference point. Asserting barbarism as a positive concept entails a (temporary)

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*Toward a Minor Literature* (143-52).

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari presented by Bensmaïa in the “Forward” to their study on Kafka (xiii-xiv).

overcoming of its ideological dependence on civilization, without making its relation to civilization impertinent.

It takes a daring act of comparison—that of the anonymous scholar in Kafka’s story—for the reader to see the desire for barbarism as the connecting thread between two otherwise incommensurable projects. In order to grasp their commonality, one has to break out of the regular contexts of these projects and stand on a “barbarian” comparative ground, on which the vertical and the horizontal of a tower and a wall, the mythical and the historical, the literal and the allegorical, illuminate each other in unexpected ways.<sup>29</sup>

Kafka’s story, with the improbable encounters it stages, becomes a testing ground for comparison. This is how I imagine the comparative potential of the concept of barbarism in this study. Operating in-between objects and languages, barbarism does not only invite comparisons on smooth grounds. It uses the moments when comparing seems obstructed or when objects seem incommensurable as occasions that may lead to surprising insights about the objects involved and may cause shifts in our perspectives. By bringing together objects from different media, genres, and languages in this study, I use the question of barbarism as a connecting thread in order to construct my own comparative grounds. In doing so, I try to fashion a mobile context for these objects, formed by their unique constellation in these pages.

According to the narrator in Kafka’s story, a wall that is not a continuous structure is not only incapable of providing protection, but “what there is of it is in perpetual danger” (235). Likewise, by endorsing the principle of piecemeal construction, this project does not set out to offer definitive answers and closure, let alone insulate itself from criticism. By engaging objects from various contexts, and with its temporal coordinates extending over the twentieth and twenty-first century, this study inevitably contains gaps, openings, and loose ends. These openings underscore its connectedness with different disciplines, objects, media, and discursive frameworks. And some of these openings may serve as incentives for new projects, implicating the issues of this study in new constellations.

### Barbarism as a Paradox-Object

In “The Great Wall of China,” the coming-together of contradictory narratives, self-cancelling syllogisms, clashing temporal orders, and improper comparisons, results in a

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<sup>29</sup> Perhaps the anonymous scholar’s proposal for the convergence of the two projects is implicitly reformulated by Kafka himself elsewhere, in one of *The Zürau Aphorisms*: “If it had been possible to build the Tower of Babel without having to climb it, that would have been sanctioned” (18). This other tower, which one would not have to climb, could take the form of the wall. In Kafka, the Tower of Babel is not only transfigured into a horizontal construction (a wall), but also takes an earthbound direction. In the spirit of reversal, while everyone’s eyes are turned towards the sky, where the Tower of Babel should be, one of Kafka’s very short stories introduces the pit of Babel (“The Pit of Babel”—“Der Schacht von Babel”): “What are you building? –I want to dig a subterranean passage. Some progress must be made. My station up there is much too high. We are digging the pit of Babel” (1961: 34-35).

world of possible impossibilities. In this world, paradoxes are not only allowed to exist, but they perform critical operations, which bring about small shifts in our perspectives, the ways we know and envision our past, present, and future, or the ways we read established narratives, such as those of the Tower of Babel and the Wall of China.

In sync with Kafka's story, I approach barbarism as a "paradox-object."<sup>30</sup> As such, barbarism simultaneously contains a destructive and creative potential: the potential to subjugate and oppress others but also to debunk authoritative discourses, to do violence and to question violence, to carry a long negative history and to point to new ways of knowing and speaking, or to reinforce oppositional thinking and to promise the overcoming of binaries.

The negative, as Shoshana Felman remarks, "has always been understood as what is reducible, what is to be eliminated, that is, as what by definition is opposed, is referred, is *subordinated* to the 'normal' or to the 'positive'" (2003: 101). In the face of this discursive tendency, I argue that the indisputable negativity in barbarism does not necessarily reduce the concept to the absolute opposite of the "positive"—that is, to a concept only definable through the positive and by an appeal to a normative system that determines what the "positive" and "negative" consist in. In recasting barbarism as a paradox-object, I suggest that the contradiction between the positive and the negative in barbarism is not something that needs remedy, but a constellation of forces that can challenge conventional notions of the positive and the negative through what Felman calls "the scandal of their nonopposition" (104). Barbarism is both positive and negative, and neither positive nor negative.<sup>31</sup>

It is not easy to distinguish or predict if a certain use of "barbarism" will yield creative and, in that sense, positive effects. The antagonism between the negative and positive tendencies in the concept cannot be resolved. But the alternative of a clear-cut distinction between a "good" and a "bad" barbarism is, in my view, less appealing. Such a distinction would simply mean exchanging one binary (civilization versus barbarism) for another.

Because it is never fully independent from categories of the negative, the epistemological and methodological potential of barbarism is never fully "positive" in the sense of present, realized or complete. It points to something not-yet-realized, a not-yet-

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<sup>30</sup> The term "paradox-object" has been used by art theorist Boris Groys to refer to objects of contemporary art. Seen as a paradox object, barbarism is in tune with Groys's vision of contemporary art. For Groys, the field of contemporary art can be viewed as "an embodiment of paradox." As he argues, "[a]lready in the framework of classical modernity, but especially in the context of contemporary art, individual artworks began to be paradox-objects that embody simultaneously thesis and antithesis" (3). Particularly since World War II, we find, for example, paintings that can be seen as abstract and realistic, documentary and fictional, or objects that can be described as both "traditional sculptures" and as "readymades" (3). Groys argues that our difficulty in making sense of, and dealing with, modern art "consists in our unwillingness to accept paradoxical, self-contradictory interpretations as adequate and true" (4).

<sup>31</sup> In my thoughts on the relation between the positive and the negative in this paragraph, and especially the idea of a new negativity that transcends the positive/negative opposition, I take my cue from Felman's exposition of "radical negativity" (2003: 101-5).

existing mode of knowing, comparing, or speaking. This does not mean that the outcome of barbarian operations cannot be envisioned beforehand and thus remains completely open and unconditioned. A barbarian operation can be initiated through a particular strategy, which prefigures a certain outcome, and thereby partly structures the future. This structuring, however, has no guarantees: it can be launched towards a certain direction, but the precise coordinates of its destination are unknown—we cannot know where it will land.

The (not) knowing of barbarism functions as an invitation to let the barbarisms of foreign languages, objects, or people transfigure our language and invade our familiar spaces. These “invasions” are enabled by a piecemeal construction such as Kafka’s Wall of China: its fissures make the critical workings of barbarism possible. But who performs barbarian operations? Is it in Kafka’s text or in the reader’s act? Is it in the “noise” of the other’s language, or in the self that is alert to this noise and allows herself to be changed by it? I suggest that barbarian operations may unravel at the moment when both these forces intersect. The noise of barbarism is prompted both by the other’s language and by the self that is receptive to it. When two foreign objects, discourses, or subjects listen to each other’s barbarian noise, they may allow a different kind of barbarism to take effect—if only for a moment.

As a paradox-object, barbarism challenges us to consider possibilities our rational faculties or normative frameworks dismiss. It invites us to open ourselves to “barbarian” encounters, improper comparisons, and different ways of knowing. With such operations in mind, this study sets out to “relaunch” barbarism in the cultural field: not as the “new evil” in our world, the negative offshoot of civilization, or the opposite of humanist values, but as a force that challenges the logic of opposites and the discourses that capitalize on this logic, and nurtures the potential for other modes of understanding our global and local realities.

