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## 5

BARBARISM IN REPETITION:  
LITERATURE'S WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

[In literature] this experience of writing is “subject” to an imperative: to give space for singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language, or which, in changing language, change more than language. It is always more interesting than to repeat.

—Jacques Derrida, “This Strange Institution Called Literature” (55)

The reign of independent barbarism is now contracted to a narrow span; and the remnant of Calmucks or Uzbecks, whose forces may be almost numbered, cannot seriously excite the apprehensions of the great republic of Europe. Yet this apparent security should not tempt us to forget that new enemies and unknown dangers may possibly arise from some obscure people, scarcely visible in the map of the world.

—Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (vol. IV, 177)

Reflecting on the second half of the eighteenth century, English historian Edward Gibbon points out in chapter thirty-eight of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that the barbarians, as they were known in Roman times, have disappeared. Nevertheless, he does not believe that the “great republic of Europe”—the domain of civilization in Enlightenment thought—should rest assured. The barbarian threat to civilization is always there in “scarcely visible,” “obscure people.” Their invisibility continues to tantalize the civilized imagination and to foster their myth.

Barbarian enemies—so the legends tell us—do not wait to confront the troops of the civilized world on the battlefield. Barbarians are not supposed to have a fixed location, as they hardly ever lead a sedentary lifestyle. They are believed to be somewhere “out there”: nomads, roaming vast deserts and steppes; warriors, passing through untrodden mountains; people free from constraints and moral inhibitions, and enslaved to their desires, instincts, and passions; wild, violent, untamable; with monstrous features and strange, inhuman customs; dangerous, dreadful, loathsome, captivating. Their threat is

that of an invasion from the outside into domestic territory, which would violently disrupt a prosperous society and bring about civilization's regression to a primitive, barbaric state. The arrival of barbarians at the gates of civilization is often invested with apocalyptic scenarios engaging civilized humanity as a whole (White 1972: 20). "When the barbarian hordes appear," Hayden White writes, "the foundations of the world appear to be cracking, and prophets announce the death of the old and the advent of the new age."<sup>1</sup> With such imagery and mixed feelings of fear and desire, the civilized imagination has tried to capture the arrival of the barbarians. "Περιμένοντας τους Βαρβάρους" ["Waiting for the Barbarians," 1904], a poem by the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, and the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) by South African author J. M. Coetzee, both unravel around the anticipation of such an invasion, which never takes place.<sup>2</sup>

In the previous chapter, I examined barbarism as an operation triggered by details in a text. The barbarian operations that take center stage in this chapter are not triggered by details. Rather, they are enabled by the demonstrative repetition of the foundational categories of civilization.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in Chapter Four I probed the implications of Benjamin's use of another name for barbarism ("Barbarentum"), which slightly alters the commonly used German term ("Barbarei") in order to redirect its violence towards a new project. In this chapter, I show how Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel stick to the conventional categories (barbarian, barbarism) and try to resignify them by repeating them into new meanings and effects.

Through a comparative reading of Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel, I explore the theme of waiting for the barbarians and its implications. Theoretically, the key concept in this comparative reading is repetition. The study of barbarism "in repetition" is encouraged by Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel on different levels. First, repetition takes the form of intertextuality and allegorization. Second, I am concerned with how the words "barbarism" and "barbarian" can be repeated into new senses in the space of literature and redeployed in ways that create confusion in their established uses.

<sup>1</sup> Sinor presented in White 1972: 20.

<sup>2</sup> I will be using the translation of the poem by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard in their revised English edition of Cavafy's poems (1992).

<sup>3</sup> The terms "iterability" and "citationality" were introduced by Jacques Derrida in "Signature, Event, Context." Iterability (the "possibility of repeating, and therefore of identifying, marks") is for Derrida a defining condition for every mark (315). This iterability "is implied in every code, making of it a communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid that is iterable for a third party, and therefore for any possible user in general" (315). The "citationality" of the mark refers to the same structural possibility, but puts the emphasis on the context of the mark. For Derrida, no context is fully determinable or saturated, and every mark can break with its context and function differently in different contexts: "Every sign [...] can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion." This citationality or iterability of the mark "is not an accident or an anomaly" but rather a condition without which no mark can function (320).

Intertextuality is manifest in the repetition of Cavafy's title in Coetzee's title. I do not view the intertextual relation between the two works in terms of a one-way influence of the preceding poem (1904) on the novel (1980). The novel recontextualizes the poem and invites us to revisit it from different perspectives. The concept of repetition in this chapter is also linked with two other concepts, which are central in my reading of Cavafy's and Coetzee's works: *history* and *allegory*. Both works redeploy central categories in Western history—first and foremost, that of the barbarian. I explore how these works reiterate and recast history's categories in order to perform another kind of history in literature. To explore the complex interaction of both works with what we may call "the discourse of history" or "the discourse of civilization," I first probe the position of the speaking voice in the poem and the novel.<sup>4</sup> In particular, through a reading of Coetzee's novel, I look at what happens when a "civilized" subject tries to either understand the perspective of a barbarian or even "become other" by assuming a barbarian status.

My exploration of the works' engagement with history involves the allegorical readings they attract. Both Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel are overdetermined texts. Not only have they lent themselves to numerous interpretations, but their theme—*waiting for the barbarians*—has become a topos reiterated in several genres. Many critics have tried to capture the works' relation to history by allegorizing them. Some have viewed either the poem or the novel as universal allegories of the human condition. Others have undertaken a historically rooted and contextual interpretation. Although their objectives may seem incompatible, Derek Attridge argues in his study *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* that both approaches read texts as allegories: the first kind of allegorical reading seeks to extract general statements or truths about the human condition, while the second historicist allegorical reading approaches texts as keys to an external historical situation (2004a: 33). Although I briefly discuss universalist and historicist allegorizations of both works, I distance my own reading from either of these approaches. Without dismissing allegorical readings by definition, I propose a different kind of reading, which I call *barbarian allegory*. Through the concept of barbarian allegory, I propose an alternative approach to history, actualized in the space of literature.

Finally, drawing from Jacques Derrida's and Judith Butler's views on performativity and on the possibility for alteration through repetition, I probe the subversive potential of the repetitive use of the term "barbarian" in Cavafy's and Coetzee's texts. Through this repetition, the poem and the novel try to shape ground for a new relationality between self and other, beyond the oppositional thinking of "civilized versus barbarian."

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<sup>4</sup> With the term "history" or "discourse of history" I refer to dominant academic conceptions of history in the West. To be sure, the term constitutes a generalization and an artificial abstraction from a complex network of heterogeneous narratives and modes of writing about the past. Thus, it remains catachrestic. Although its use cannot easily be avoided, I try to problematize it in this chapter. The same holds for the "discourse of civilization."

The title of this chapter—“barbarism in repetition”—can be read in two ways. On the one hand, it refers to the repetition of the name “barbarian” in literature and to a potential reconceptualization of history and historical categories through literature. On the other hand, the title also denotes the constructive barbarism that potentially lies in the operation of repetition itself. In the latter sense, “barbarian operations” can take effect through the repetition of normative and familiar categories in slightly different ways, which introduce shifts in authoritative discursive patterns. Repetition is, after all, inherent in the term “barbarian,” which is etymologically grounded in the perception of the other’s language as a series of repetitive sounds (bar bar).

To set up a theoretical framework for the issue of “repetition,” I take my cue from the theory of the performative (or speech act theory). In this chapter, I use this theory in its initial conception by J. L. Austin, and particularly in the direction it takes in the poststructuralist thought of Jacques Derrida as a general theory of iterability as well as in Judith Butler’s theory of gender and subject constitution.<sup>5</sup> Austin’s theory of the performative focuses on the aspect of language that performs the act it designates instead of just representing, describing, or stating a fact. This describes the performative aspect of an utterance, as opposed to its constative aspect.<sup>6</sup> Although literary theorists extensively use his theory, Austin’s account explicitly excludes literature from consideration. Literature for him is language used “non seriously” and “in ways parasitic upon its normal use.” For Austin, performative utterances can be studied only when issued in “ordinary circumstances” and in “serious” uses (22).<sup>7</sup>

Derrida takes up Austin’s views in “Signature, Event, Context” (1972) and in *Limited Inc* (1988).<sup>8</sup> His version of the performative underscores the iterability and citationality

<sup>5</sup> Although I use the theory of the performative throughout this study, I discuss it here in more detail due to its prominent role in this chapter in relation to iterability.

<sup>6</sup> The theory of speech acts was coined by J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* as a reaction to the solid assumption of philosophy that the function of language was to “describe some state of affairs, or to state some fact, which it must do either truly or falsely” (1). The terms “performative” and “speech act” in Austin’s theory refer to an utterance that does what it designates (e.g., in the utterance “I promise to protect you” one performs the promise by saying it). Performatives are opposed to constative utterances, which describe, state or represent something else. Although he distinguishes two categories of utterances—constative and performative—Austin concludes that all utterances, even constative statements, are to some degree performative. The constative and the performative can thus be considered aspects of the same utterance.

<sup>7</sup> The complete passage wherein Austin excludes literary language from his theory reads as follows: “A performative utterance will, for example, be in a peculiar way hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or introduced in a poem, or spoken in a soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance—a sea change in special circumstances. Language in such circumstances is in special ways—intelligibly—used not seriously, but in ways parasitic upon its normal use—ways that fall under the doctrine of the etiolations of language. All this we are excluding at present from consideration. Our performative utterances, felicitous or not, are to be understood as issued in ordinary circumstances” (22).

<sup>8</sup> For a concise presentation of the travels of the notion of the performative in theory, see Jonathan Culler’s article “The Fortunes of the Performative.”

of any mark as the condition of possibility for any performative utterance. Contrary to Austin's views, Derrida argues that there is no "opposition between citational utterances, on the one hand, and singular and original utterance-events, on the other" (1982: 326). The citation and repetition of an utterance is the condition for the singular to take place. For Derrida, this general iterability is a law of language: for a sign to be a sign, it has to be able to be repeated and cited, even in what Austin calls "nonserious" circumstances, like literature (Culler 509). As a result, literature, which Austin considers non-serious and parasitic language because it is a form of citation of "normal" language, becomes an exemplary case for Derrida's theory of the general iterability of language. "Iterability" does not just signify identical repetition—"repeatability of the same"—but "alterability" of this same idealized in the singularity of the event, for instance, in this or that speech act" (Derrida 1988: 119). The force of an utterance is not predetermined on an abstract, structural level, but in the event of every use. In this sense, iterability makes sure that concepts, utterances or marks in general are never "safe" from contamination and change (119). The force of a concept is not fixed. Its repetition makes its alteration possible.

Butler extends this view beyond language to address the constitution of subjects through the citation and repetition of norms. As Butler points out, we become subjects through repeated acts, which reflect social conventions, norms, and habits. There is no subject prior to these acts. The citation of the norm is thus constitutive of subjects. As she argues in *Bodies That Matter* (1993) and in *Excitable Speech* (1997) the repetition of certain utterances in the social world enhances dominant discourses and increases the violence of certain words. However, this also means that dominant discourses depend on the repetition of utterances and are thus not self-sufficient. A norm "takes hold to the extent that it is 'cited' as such a norm, but it also derives its power through the citations that it compels" (1993: 13). If norms are fortified only insofar as they are reiterated, Butler's argument continues, then the repetition of normative categories can potentially lead to the destabilization of authoritative discourses by producing a citation that challenges or displaces the force of the norm (14-15). The possibility of resistance and change lies in the limited space between the norm and the way it is carried out, which is not always according to expectation.<sup>9</sup> As I will argue, in Cavafy's and Coetzee's works, the destabilization of the category of the barbarian does not come about through its abolition, but by its stubborn citation, which aspires to produce difference in repetition. Because the power of normative categories is grounded in their repetitive use in different

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<sup>9</sup> The performative becomes a key concept in Judith Butler's theory of gender and sexuality in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993). "Man" or "woman," as Butler argues, is not what one is, but what one does. This has nothing to do with freely choosing to perform a certain identity. As Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*, "performativity is a matter of repeating the norms by which one is constituted: it is not a radical fabrication of a gendered self. It is a compulsory repetition of prior and subjectivating norms, ones that cannot be thrown off at will but which work, animate and constrain the gendered subject, and which are also the resources from which resistance, subversion, displacement are forged" (22).

places and moments in time, they have a strong historical dimension. Their historical weight, however, is not irreversible, because their power remains subject to their repetitive uses in the present and the future. As Jonathan Culler notes, “you can’t control the terms that you choose to name yourselves. But the *historical character* of the performative process creates the possibility of a political struggle.”<sup>10</sup> In the following, I chart the forms such a struggle can take within literature.

### Repeating the Title

Cavafy’s “Waiting for the Barbarians” (1904) is staged in a decadent city, not historically defined, but with allusions to Rome.<sup>11</sup> Diana Haas and George Savidis suggest that Cavafy’s main historiographical source for this poem was Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which Cavafy was reading at the time.<sup>12</sup> The poem is structured as a dialogue—a person poses a series of questions and another one answers them. I will refer to the person who asks the questions as “the first speaker” and to the one who replies as “the second speaker.” The questions concern the commotion and preparations the city is making, the reason for which the first speaker wishes to know. The answer to all his questions is the same, repeated again and again, with slight variations and additions each time: “Because the barbarians are coming today.” The reader and the first speaker are therefore informed that everyone (the senators, the emperor, the consuls, the praetors, the orators, and the citizens) are preparing to receive the barbarians, who are coming to take over the city. Paradoxically, the preparations do not involve any military organization against the expected enemy, but reflect a passive state of waiting for the enemy to arrive:

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?  
The barbarians are due here today.

Why isn’t anything happening in the senate?  
Why do the senators sit there without legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.  
What laws can the senators make now?  
Once the barbarians are here, they’ll do the legislating.

Why did our emperor get up so early,  
And why is he sitting at the city’s main gate,  
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

<sup>10</sup> Culler’s discussion of Butler’s views (515, emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> Words like “senators,” “praetors,” and “consuls” in the poem allude to ancient Rome.

<sup>12</sup> See Haas’s study “Cavafy’s Reading Notes on Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*” (1982) and Savidis’s “Cavafy, Gibbon and Byzantium” (1985: 96-97).

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.  
He has even prepared a scroll to give him,  
replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today  
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?  
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,  
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?  
Why are they carrying elegant canes  
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don't our distinguished orators come forward as usual  
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today  
and they're bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion  
(How serious people's faces have become.)  
Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,  
everyone going home lost in thought?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.  
And some who have just returned from the border say  
There are no barbarians any longer.

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Due to its dialogic form the poem is easily imagined as a stage performance. In fact, there are two levels of staging in the poem embedded within each other. While the speakers stage a dialogue in front of the reader's audience, an elaborate stage is being set within the poem by the citizens, the emperor, the senators, consuls, praetors, and orators, anticipating the real actors (the barbarians) to rush onto the city's stage.

Like the poem, 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 tranquility of his life and brings him face-to-face with the brutal reality of the Empire. Colonel Joll arrives to collect information about "barbarians" supposedly planning attacks against the Empire and causing border troubles. The absurdity of Joll's enterprise becomes obvious when he captures, interrogates, tortures, and imprisons a



large group of native fishing people who have nothing to do with any barbarian attacks. 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 barbarian invasion the Empire so much feared does not take place and the Empire's expeditionary force sent to confront the barbarians is dispersed in the desert and extinguishes without ever reaching the enemies.

Coetzee borrows the title of Cavafy's poem and thereby acknowledges it as the novel's pre-text. Coetzee's novels have a rich intertextuality and allude to several canonical works (including *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Heart of Darkness*, and *The Tempest*), to which Coetzee "writes back" (Kossew 1998: 9).<sup>13</sup> The fact that Coetzee's works foreground their intertextuality is not just part of a postmodern playfulness, but signals a political gesture aiming at "reshaping an old story" and rethinking the categories of dominance (Kossew 1998: 10, Newman 137).

Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* recontextualizes Cavafy's poem and immerses it in (post)colonial problematics. Both works can be placed within a broader intertextual network of works that address the theme of waiting for the arrival of the other. This topos has been staged in a series of literary works, from Dino Buzzati's *Il Deserto dei Tartari* [*The Tartar Steppe*, 1938] to Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot* [*Waiting for Godot*, 1952], and Julien Gracq's *Le Rivage des Syrtes* [*The Opposing Shore*, 1951].<sup>14</sup>

To these works one can add several poems that converse with Cavafy's barbarians. Extending over more than ten different countries, these poems either respond directly to Cavafy's poem and the questions it poses, or borrow its dialogic structure and appropriate it for contemporary situations and issues.<sup>15</sup> Examples in the latter category are American poet James Merrill's "After Cavafy," where the role of the barbarians is filled by the Japanese; Richard O'Connell's "Waiting for the Terrorists," which takes over the dialogic

<sup>13</sup> The intertextuality of Coetzee's works does not always function as a "writing back" to canonical works. For example, his intertextual ties with Franz Kafka's and Cavafy's works are of a different nature.

<sup>14</sup> These three works are existentialist meditations revolving around the process of waiting, which becomes the crux of their plot. *The Tartar Steppe* tells the story of the slow and painful disillusionment of Lieutenant Giovanni Drogo, who is assigned to an old fortress on the country's frontier where the desert starts. The protagonist longs for military glory and spends year after year waiting for an attack by the Tartars that in the old days were rumored to live in the desert. Nothing ever happens at the fortress, and Drogo wastes his life waiting for the enemy, while every opportunity at life and happiness passes him by. In Beckett's absurdist play *Waiting for Godot*, two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait in vain for someone named Godot, whose arrival is (eternally) deferred. Gracq's *The Opposing Shore* stages a mysterious atmosphere of a lurking menace between two imaginary Mediterranean nations that have been in a state of dormant warfare with one another for centuries. No frontal attack from the opposing shore takes place in the course of this novel either.

<sup>15</sup> In an anthology of poems inspired by Cavafy (*Sinomilondas me ton Kavafi* ["Conversing with Cavafy"]), I counted fourteen poems that respond to, or restage, Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians." The poets of these fourteen poems originate from Egypt, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina, Bulgaria, the U.S., Great Britain, Holland, Romania, Serbia, and Canada.

structure of Cavafy's poem to address the events following the attacks on September 11;<sup>16</sup> Serbian poet Jovan Christić's "Varvari"; and Alistair Te Ariki Campbell's "Waiting for the Pakeha," a poem from New Zealand, in which the natives are waiting for the European settlers.<sup>17</sup>

Coetzee's novel is perhaps the best-known recontextualization of Cavafy's poem in literature. What is the function of the demonstrative announcement of the poem as the novel's main intertext by the adoption of the same title? In the poem's title, the progressive form of the verb points out the lack of closure in the process of waiting. It is a process without an end, as the advent of the object of waiting does not take place in the poem and is eternally deferred. The redeployment of the same title by Coetzee raises the expectation that the novel may take the scenario of the poem further and lead it to closure. Being left with the (absent) barbarians of Cavafy, who were "a kind of solution," the reader may expect the novel to present the barbarians. But the barbarians fail to appear again. The repetition of the title puts the emphasis on the waiting and on the barbarians' paradoxical omnipresence through their absence.

The novel does not just cite Cavafy's title, but also reiterates the outcome of the waiting, namely its non-gratification. In both cases, the title fails to fulfill its implicit promise, which is also the promise of proper meaning: to produce the barbarians as presences. In breaking this promise, the title becomes an *anaphora*, which, according to Shoshana Felman's definition in *The Scandal of the Speaking Body*, is an "act of beginning ceaselessly renewed through the repetition of promises not carried out, not kept" (2003: 24). It is because the title does not keep its promise that this promise can be renewed.<sup>18</sup> The anaphora of Cavafy's title keeps reproducing its promise in an array of texts and cultural objects that bear the same title (some of which will be discussed in the following chapter).

The novel's iteration of Cavafy's title steals away the poem's proper name. The poem's most singular feature turns out to be its most iterable part. The repetition of the title demonstrates that the iterability of texts—here in the form of intertextuality—does not undermine their uniqueness as events but is a condition for their singularity. Singularity for Derrida is "constituted by the possibility of its own repetition (readings, indefinite number of productions, references, be they reproductive, citational, or transformative, to the work held to be original)" (1992: 69). That a text is iterable means that it is always open to contamination through repetition, but also that its "imitability" is an indispensable part of its singularity.

<sup>16</sup> The poem, accompanied by a discussion of its parallels with Cavafy's poem by O'Connell himself, can be found at the online *Cavafy Forum* of the University of Michigan, at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/modgreek/wtgc/c.p.%20cavafyforum>

<sup>17</sup> "Pakeha" are New Zealanders of European ancestry.

<sup>18</sup> Felman relates the promise of proper meaning with the figure of the metaphor and traces the deconstruction of metaphor and its transfiguration into anaphora through a series of unkept promises in *Don Juan* (2003: 24-25).

Iterability, as Derrida argues in *Limited Inc*, does not lead to the “full presence of ideal objects” but rather “ensures that the full presence of a singularity thus repeated comports in itself the reference to something else, thus rending the full presence that it nevertheless announces” (129). Iterability suggests that the full presence of a text—as an absolute correspondence between the text and its meaning—is never attained. The intention of a text never reaches its “telos,” because the text keeps referring to something else that slips away. An intention, just like a promise, ceases to exist as soon as it is realized. The theme of “waiting for the barbarians” exemplifies this law of iterability as the promise of full presence deferred by means of repeating and renewing itself. The barbarians’ arrival stands for the promise of full presence in the poem, which is never attained and is therefore prolonged through its repetition in other forms and contexts.

The title can be read as a performative that functions differently in its various recontextualizations. As Derrida argues, to say that texts are iterable means that they are “[t]ransplantable into a different context,” in which “they continue to have meaning and effectiveness” (1992: 64). Their repetition in new contexts does not result in an identical performance, but involves some degree of alteration. The iteration of the title of Cavafy’s poem in Coetzee’s novel results in a new event. This event stands as a challenge to the poem, testing the Cavafian theme in different spatial and temporal coordinates. Therefore, the repetition of Cavafy’s title by Coetzee does not only invite us to explore the echoes of the poem in the novel, but also to reread the poem through the experience of the novel.

### The Ambivalence of the Speaking Voice

Cavafy and Coetzee are situated in very different contexts, but their position in these contexts is marked by a certain ambivalence, which infiltrates the speaking voice in the poem and the novel. Coetzee’s writing is caught up in the ambivalence that characterizes oppositional white South African writing. While trying to interrogate the binary divisions of the apartheid society, white writing is inevitably caught up in them. As a result, it is simultaneously implicated in, and opposed to, the hegemonic oppression of colonialism (Kossew, 1996: 2, 7). This ambivalence haunts the position of most protagonists in Coetzee’s novels, as well as Coetzee’s own position as an author.<sup>19</sup>

In a different but somewhat parallel way, Cavafy also occupied an ambivalent position. Originally Greek but living in Egypt, being part of the Greek community in Alexandria and having to work in the service of the British Empire in order to earn a living, Cavafy was caught amidst conflicting worlds. Due to his complex position, he remained a marginal

<sup>19</sup> In an interview for *The Cape Times* 4 September 1987, Coetzee commented on the ambivalence of his position: “I’m not sure that Michael K [in his *Life & Times of Michael K*] is black, just as I’m not sure that I am white. These are cultural identities that are imposed upon people that they may or may not freely accept.”

figure all his life—a marginality enhanced by his homosexuality. A Greek, a European, and a Levantine at the same time, he was, as Martin McKinsey has called him, “a civilized barbarian” (42).

Ambivalence and oscillation between belonging and not-belonging mark the speaking voices in the poem and the novel. The position of the first speaker in the poem is quite obscure. The use of the first-person plural in his questions about the city (“what are we waiting for...?”) situates him as a member of the community—a citizen of the city. On the other hand, his complete ignorance as to what is happening places him outside the spectrum of knowledge to which an insider would normally have access.<sup>20</sup> Further, even though he belongs with the “civilized” and inevitably employs the discourse of civilization, his last ironic statement (if we assume that it comes from him), “Now what’s going to happen to us without barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution,” undermines this discourse by exposing civilization’s dependence on the barbarians. Since the barbarians, who were “a kind of solution,” do not exist, the other part of the opposition (civilization) is in immediate danger.

The first speaker’s storm of questions can be attributed to sincere ignorance with regard to the reasons for the commotion. However, one can also read in these questions an inquisitive spirit, one that does not want to passively wait for the barbarians and uncritically assist in the preparations, but interrogates the official course of action, seeks the underlying reasons for the city’s frenzy, and questions the rationale of the enterprise of waiting to receive the barbarians. The speaker’s questions can be read as a critique towards the city’s strange resignation and inertia. In this case, with a question such as “Why isn’t anything happening in the senate?” what the speaker implies is that the senate should be more active in times like these.

The second speaker, on the other hand, plays the opposite role. If the role of the first speaker is to question, the role of the second one is to validate the Empire’s voice by repeating its official statements in a mechanical way and spreading its propaganda. He is the Empire’s parrot. Both the arrival of the barbarians and the city’s attitude to their arrival are taken for granted in his replies, which do not betray any signs of doubt.

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<sup>20</sup> Some critics argue that a “polyphonic” dialogue is at play in the poem: there are not just two, but several people who pose and answer the questions. Savidis considers the above option and rejects the idea of only two interlocutors, which, in his view, would mean that the questions should “be ascribed to a person of extremely low intelligence to which another person, endowed with infinite patience, replies” (my trans. from Savidis’s essay “*Gia mia proti anagnosi tou Kavafi se diskous*”) (1985: 64). Savidis eventually states his preference for a third line of interpretation, according to which the questions are uttered by the same person who answers them in the tone of an internal monologue. The latter view is also shared by George Seferis and Ch. Karaoglou (Seferis 394-95; Karaoglou 302). Stratis Tsirkas argues that while the whole dialogue takes place between two speakers, in the final two lines we hear the direct voice of “the poet” (326). My preference goes to the interpretive option of two speakers, which in my view embody the tension between two forces within the discourse of civilization: a force of questioning and critique (the first speaker) and a force of authority, repeating and confirming the Empire’s “truths” (the second speaker).

The repetitive structure of the dialogue, built up as a succession of “why-because” questions and answers, accelerates the rhythmical dynamics of the poem by creating a staccato. The iambic meter in the Greek text enhances this rhythmical structure.<sup>21</sup> However, while the structure of the dialogue conveys a sense of anxiety (the heat of the preparations), it simultaneously has a reassuring function, since it turns the poem into a perfectly rational composition: to every question, the voice of civilization (the second speaker) has a clear answer. This certainty is reinforced by the repetition of the line “Because the barbarians are coming today,” which appears in five out of the six replies. The almost hypnotic effect of this repetition leaves no room for doubting the logic of the answer: the barbarians are coming, and they are the remedy to the predicament of a decaying civilization. The repetition of the reply illustrates the mechanism by which the discourse of civilization sustains itself: it cultivates the illusion of rationality and normalizes its truths by overstating them through repetition.

Nevertheless, the poem’s perfectly rational and symmetrical structure collapses in the end. The non-arrival of the barbarians deprives civilization from the only answer it seemed to have, and disempowers the second speaker by shattering his confidence. In light of this non-arrival, suddenly the mechanical repetition of his answer sounds like the stuttering utterances of a barbarian, whose language is perceived as a continuous repetition of the same meaningless sound: bar bar bar. His speech loses its ground and status.

Like the first speaker in the poem, the Magistrate in Coetzee’s novel is an insider of the Empire, but not quite. Living as he does in a convenient state of ignorance and tranquility, he gradually enters a state of uncertainty and doubt. He ceases to believe in the truths of colonialist discourse and takes an oppositional stance. He realizes, however, that switching sides is not merely a matter of free will and good intentions, because he cannot avoid his complicity with the discourse of the Empire. As Butler argues in *Bodies That Matter*, subjects do not pre-exist, but are constituted through social norms and discursive practices (1993: 7). For Butler, there is no voluntarist, intentional subject who “exists quite apart from the regulatory norms which he/she opposes” (15). “The paradox of subjectivation (*assujétissement*),” Butler’s argument continues, is “precisely that the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms” (15). This captures the Magistrate’s predicament. The authoritative discourse of the Empire, within which the Magistrate has been shaped as a subject, is not something he can discard at will, as it is not external to his subjectivity. He is construed as a subject within this discourse. Caught up in a position where he can neither belong to the oppressors nor to 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).

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<sup>21</sup> For a metrical analysis of the poem, see Mackridge 2008: 287-89.

When Colonel Joll's native prisoners are brought in, the Magistrate sympathizes with them, but at the same time watches them from a condescending distance. He does not want them to stay long or return: "I do not want a race of beggars on my hands" (20). His sympathy soon gives way to impatience and indignation at "their animal shamelessness," "the filth, the smell, the noise" (20-21). His voice is replete with contradictions and immersed in the discursive violence of the Empire, even when he wishes to counter it. Later in the novel he views the same features he himself had attributed to these natives as a result of "the settlers' litany of *prejudice*: that barbarians are lazy, immoral, filthy, stupid" (41, emphasis added). What he had previously taken as a fact he now regards as a biased and unfair opinion, based on the colonizers' partial judgment.

During a conversation with a young officer, the Magistrate assumes that the officer sees him as "a minor civilian administrator sunk, after years in this backwater, in slothful native ways" (54). The Magistrate thus implicitly acknowledges that he bears the same "barbarian" qualities he ascribes to the natives. It is noteworthy that the citizens in Cavafy's poem show similar symptoms: the legislators have quit making laws, the orators have quit making speeches, the consultants and praetors are sunk in decadence, luxury, and dazzling jewelry. Elements often attributed to a barbarian lifestyle based on Orientalist representations, are more internal to the civilized than they tend to think.

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 gripping scene in the novel, in which the Magistrate goes hunting. Upon spotting his prey, a ram, he aims with his gun and notices that his pulse does not quicken: "Evidently it is not important to me that the ram die" (42). Right afterward, however, he experiences "an obscure sentiment." He senses that "this has become no longer a morning's hunting but an occasion on which either the proud ram bleeds to death on the ice or the old hunter misses his aim; that for the duration of this frozen moment the stars are locked in a configuration in which events are not themselves but stand for other things" (42-43). He then lets the ram go.

In this scene, a revelation takes place. For a moment, the Magistrate escapes the self-centered and limited logic of the hunter, who only sees himself killing his prey, and realizes that there are more ways to view the world. As a result, he 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. He thereby transgresses the colonial binary logic of hunters and targets. Experiencing the anxiety of an ontological dislocation, he confesses: "Never before have I had the feeling of not living my own life on my own terms" (43). He momentarily detaches himself from the Empire's terms. The realization that there may be an alternative mode of relating to the other opens the way for an interrogation of the categories on which the Magistrate's life had been premised.

Nevertheless, even when he questions the Empire's practices, he often contradicts his own critical statements and doubts his actions. After delivering a sermon against the

Empire's injustice towards "the barbarians" (the natives), he cannot help asking himself: "And do I really after all believe what I have been saying? Do I really look forward to the triumph of the barbarian way: intellectual torpor, slovenliness, tolerance of disease and death?" (56).

The Magistrate is not freed from the colonizer's instincts. He takes obsessive care of a barbarian girl tortured and made lame and blind by Colonel Joll, and then left behind by her own people. His care, however, does not fundamentally differ from the practices of her torturer: "I behave in some ways like a lover—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 fondling and kissing her wounds, he recognizes the drive to engrave himself on her as deeply as her torturers did. Soon enough he realizes that he and Joll are different sides of the same coin: "For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent, pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of Imperial rule, no more, no less" (148-49). It is no coincidence that the novel begins with a description of Colonel Joll's sunglasses, in which the narrator sees a reflection of himself.

In the barbarian girl the Magistrate sees the possibility of making contact with the other. Nevertheless, his approach is not free of the logic of understanding as penetrating and deciphering, typical of the colonial attitude towards the colonized: "until the marks on this girl's body are deciphered and understood I cannot let go of her" (33). Her body, however, is impenetrable, "without aperture, without entry" (45). They live in the same house, but past each other. Despite the Magistrate's attempts, the girl remains an unsolved mystery, a stranger. Even reconstructing her in his memory after she returns to her people becomes an unattainable task: "where the girl should be, there is a space, a blankness" (51).

The blindness of the girl makes it impossible for him to exist in her gaze. His gaze cannot be reciprocated, because in her eyes he only sees his own image cast back at him (47). The girl does not gratify the Magistrate's communicative attempts. As Émile Benveniste argues, subjectivity is produced in the here-and-now of an utterance. As a result, the "I" cannot just dictate its truths, but needs the "you" to sustain its authority and allow it to speak (225-36). Therefore, the girl's refusal to validate the Magistrate's speech with a response leads the Magistrate to a self-crisis. As Gayatri Spivak argues in her commentary on the novel in *Death of a Discipline*, "the meaning of his [the Magistrate's] own acts is not clear when he tries to imagine her perspective" (2003: 22). As he continues "to swoop and circle around the irreducible figure of the girl, casting one net of meaning after another over her," the meaning he is after, according to Spivak, is "the meaning of the Magistrate as subject, as perceived by the barbarian as other."<sup>22</sup> The girl refuses

<sup>22</sup> The first quote in this sentence is from Coetzee's novel, qtd in Spivak 2003: 22. The second quote is Spivak's (23).

to yield any determinable meaning, through which the Magistrate could articulate his own subjectivity through the other's perspective. Struck by the inability of his language to translate the girl, he starts doubting the signifying capacity of his own language and considers that "perhaps whatever can be articulated is falsely put" (70). Nevertheless, her untranslatability holds the promise of another language, different from the Empire's fixed set of meanings and open to more interpretive possibilities.

Although the girl is generally cooperative, she only speaks in order to give brief answers on practical matters or to communicate purely factual information. In response to the Magistrate's inquiries about her torture, she gives him only a brief and strictly factual account of what happened (44). She never gives away emotions, she offers no indication of her desires, wishes, or feelings towards the Magistrate and her torturers, she makes no speculations, she asks no questions, and she never embellishes or nuances her utterances with anything else than bare facts. The Magistrate perceives her attitude and speech as uncommunicative. There is something ironic in the way the rational speech of a "barbarian"—devoid of emotions, interpretations, and biased opinions—is incompatible with the confused, stuttering, unstable, self-cancelling speech of the Magistrate—the speech of the "civilized." Their communicational gap is experienced as such by both sides. She understands him just as little as he understands her. "'You want to talk all the time'," she complains when the Magistrate tells her about his hunting-experience; "[y]ou should not go hunting if you do not enjoy it" (43-44). Disillusioned by their miscommunication, the Magistrate shakes his head: "That is not the meaning of the story, but what's the use of arguing?" (44). In the (non-) interaction between them, the distinction between "civilized" and "barbarian" is transfigured into a difference between two foreign subjectivities, two barbarians, neither of whom makes sense to the other.

The girl functions as a catalyst, causing the Magistrate's narrative to stutter and stumble. He cannot decide how to feel about her or what to do with her (35). He fails to make any confident statement about her, as her subjectivity remains inaccessible—"what I call submission may be nothing but indifference" (60). Frustrated with her unintelligibility, he even tries to obliterate her: "so I begin to face the truth of what I am trying to do: to obliterate the girl. I realize that if I took a pencil to sketch her face I would not know where to start. Is she truly so featureless?" (50). The girl interrupts the flow of his speech and leads it to dead-ends and unresolved question marks. His language turns into the stuttering speech of the barbarian.

His linguistic failure goes hand-in-hand with the failure of the sexual act. The connection of speech acts to sexual acts—what Felman describes as "the incongruous interdependence of the failed operations of sex and language"—is often suggested in the narrative (2003: 79). "[T]here were unsettling occasions when in the middle of the sexual act I felt myself losing my way like a storyteller losing the thread of his story," the Magistrate concedes (48). Both his linguistic and sexual failure suggest his loss of



authority: "It seems appropriate that a man who does not know what to do with the woman in his bed should not know what to write" (63).

However, despite his failure to unfold the mystery of the girl, the Magistrate does not end up imposing his own voice on her in the same way that the Empire constructs its others on its own terms. As Spivak argues, through the "exemplary singularity" of the girl, the Magistrate "tries to grasp the barbarian in an embrace that is both singular and responsible" (2003: 21-22). Without forcing her, he waits for the girl to talk about her experience in the torture chamber without making up his own story about her. Despite his willingness to make contact with her, he does not force her into it. He thereby shows his willingness to live with the other, without having access to her subjectivity.

The "waiting" of the novel's title could also refer to the process of waiting for the other to speak without using words that others have chosen for her. Therefore, the girl's silence grants her a form of agency. By refusing to let her tortured body be translated into language, she prevents the othering that the Empire's categorizations would impose on her body and her story (Wenzel 66). Only in the desert, where the Magistrate takes her in order to return her to her people, she willingly sleeps with him for the first and last time.<sup>23</sup> The desert—a neutral, formless space outside the Empire's borders—erases with dust and wind the violence of imperial categories. Away from the borders of imperial discourse, the girl comes to him on her own terms.

Perhaps the closest the Magistrate comes to her, even though she is no longer physically with him, is when he becomes a victim of torture himself. From a respected official, he is suddenly labeled as an enemy of the state, and he is imprisoned, tortured, and humiliated. As soon as he enters this new state of being—from a colonizer to a tortured victim—the Empire cannot understand his voice anymore. He starts speaking a barbarian language. 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 "barbarian," based on the perception of the language of others as nonsensical sounds.

The Magistrate does not embody the position of the barbarian in the same way that the natives or the barbarian girl do—the Empire's designated "others." His "barbarization" partly answers to his own desire to redeem himself and achieve what he was not able to achieve in his relationship with the girl. Since he cannot domesticate her otherness from his "civilized" position, perhaps he tries to achieve that by becoming the Empire's other. The status of the barbarian is usually violently imposed on others, but at times it can be

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<sup>23</sup> The Magistrate also considers the desert as a space on which his encounter with the barbarians takes place on equal terms. When he meets the barbarians in the desert and hands over the girl to them, he remarks: "I have never before met northerners on their own ground on equal terms" (78).

willingly assumed or claimed somewhere between these two positions.<sup>24</sup> The tagging of the natives as “barbarians” takes place independently of the natives’ wills. As they receive this status, their subjectivity is disavowed. They become silent objects, on which the discursive violence of civilization is imposed. They are the real site of otherness in the novel—an otherness exemplified in the singularity of the barbarian girl. The Magistrate’s “barbarian status” is partly imposed externally and partly self-assumed. It is the result of a dislocation that, according to Rebecca Saunders, “allows *him* to conceive of himself as other and to become foreign to the identity mapped out for him by historical circumstances” (223, emphasis added). His attempt to make himself the Empire’s enemy, I contend, may reflect his wish to put himself on equal footing with the girl, but also to cleanse himself, as it were, from the guilt of her torturers, which is also his own.

The practice White calls “ostensive self-definition by negation,” according to which the self defines itself by pointing to what it thinks it is definitely not, becomes in the Magistrate’s case an act of self-definition by *self*-negation (1972: 4).<sup>25</sup> Instead of defining himself based on what he (thinks he) is not, he tries to (re)define himself by negating what he (thinks he) is. His (self-)barbarization is both a brave act of opposition and a selfish act of personal salvation. We could say that the Magistrate carries his own cross, and not the colonized natives’, despite his responsible attitude towards the other.

His subversive acts are performed from within the Empire’s system, or, perhaps, from standing at its borders. His barbarian status should thus be distinguished from the barbarian labeling of those others, upon which a discourse foreign and external to them is inflicted. The Magistrate is an exponent of the self-proclaimed civilized world and wishes to become barbarian in order to oppose the Empire’s practices and fend off his complicity with these practices. The girl and her people—proclaimed barbarians by the Empire—are fishing people and nomads who (possibly) just wish to be fishing people and nomads.

Both the novel and the poem end with a sense of disillusionment and uncertainty, without any revelation that restores meaning and presence. The Magistrate tries to decipher several signs throughout his narrative. However, all the signs that seem pregnant with meaning remain undeciphered—just like the girl. No apocalyptic vision in the end releases him from his tormenting doubts and endows his actions with purpose and meaning. In the final scene of the novel he sees a child playing with snow, who appears to be the child he has often been dreaming of—one of the signs he so eagerly wanted to decode. For a moment, the expectation is raised in him (and in the reader) that at least the meaning of this sign will be disclosed. The last lines of the novel, however, seal the failure of this expectation: “This is not the scene I dreamed of. Like much else nowadays

<sup>24</sup> Saunders makes the same argument with regard to the status of the foreigner (218).

<sup>25</sup> The process described by White is also discussed in Chapter Three.

I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere" (170).

Cavafy's poem does not offer closure either. The only answer is encompassed in the ambiguous statement that views the barbarians as "*a kind of solution*" (emphasis added). The lack of certainty in these words corresponds to the final words in Coetzee's novel: "a road that *may lead nowhere*" (emphasis added). Both works question a dominant discursive order, but their questioning also leads to an uncertain future and to an agonizing search for alternatives. The final lines in Cavafy are an attempt to cling to the previous order—an attempt, however, severely weakened by the doubt contained in the words "kind of." "A kind of solution" translates in fact to "no solution." At the same time, it carries a tragic undertone, because it captures the agony of the individual, who realizes the bankruptcy of the previous order and yet strives for self-preservation by clinging to it. "A kind of" is the reaffirmation of the shaky ground on which this statement is made, and it is hardly convincing. In Coetzee, the "road that *may lead nowhere*" signals the terrifying openness of the future, when the "truths" that sustain the Empire are debunked. This road may lead to a dead-end. However, the word "may" leaves open the possibility of envisaging a different path, a "solution" beyond binary oppositions and enemies constructed for the sake of self-definition.

### What Figures between Literature and History

History [...] does not include any true "knowledge": its only knowledge is the savoir-faire of its own misunderstanding of itself.

—Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* (106)

The uncertainty and resistance to closure that the poem and the novel share contrast them with what we could call "history," which is the discursive field wherein the opposition between barbarism and civilization thrives. In this section, I explore the ways in which both literary works address history, as well as the ways in which critics have interpreted their relation to history through allegorical readings. In the next section, I propose another kind of allegorical reading I believe the works invite, which offers an alternative reading of history within literature.

In order to study the relation of Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel with history, the notion of "history" itself requires some scrutiny. According to the *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, history "principally signifies a retelling of past events which is professedly true, based (reputedly) on what really happened" (Schwarz 156). There is a long-standing conceptual division between "history" and "story," in which the latter signifies fiction or a "wholly imaginative construct" while

the former makes truth claims (156).<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, histories of the oppressed emergent from the 60s and the 70s—such as women's histories, black histories, queer histories, feminist histories, and, later on, subaltern histories—broadened the range of approaches to historical knowledge and challenged conventional academic histories, which tended to focus on high politics and/or the nation. These histories, combined with the current "proliferation of knowledges about the past" under the impact of television and new media, have blurred the long-standing opposition between "history" and "story" (159). To these developments one may add the contestation of the distinction between fiction and history by postmodern literary theorists and historians such as Hayden White, as well as Michel Foucault's influential work, which has exposed history not as a representation of reality, but as one discourse among others.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, many professional historians are still, as Derrida remarks, "naïvely concerned to 'objectify' the content of a science" (1992: 55). When I refer to history in this chapter, I see it as a strictly regulated discourse, which, according to Felman, prefers clear-cut choices and binary distinctions (2003: 100). On the other hand, while history prefers strict distinctions and "provides categories that enable us to understand the social and structural positions of people," literature, as Spivak argues, "relativizes the categories history assigns, and exposes the processes that construct and position subjects" (Spivak presented in Scott 791).

In his essay "The Novel Today," Coetzee addresses the relation of the novel to history: "in times of intense ideological pressure like the present [...] the novel, it seems to me, has only two options: supplementarity or rivalry" (3). The novel that chooses rivalry

evolves its own paradigms and myths, in the process [...] perhaps going so far as to show up the mythic status of history [...] a novel that is prepared to work itself out outside the terms of class conflict, race conflict, gender conflict or any of the other oppositions out of which history and the historical disciplines erect themselves. (3)

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<sup>26</sup> I do not identify fiction with literature. As Derrida remarks, while fiction is sometimes "misused as though it were coextensive with literature," in fact "[n]ot all literature is of the genre or the type of 'fiction,' but there is fictionality in all literature" (1992: 49). At the same time, fiction is not limited to literature, but also applies to other discourses (including history).

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Marie-Laure Ryan's article "Fiction and its Other: How Trespassers Help Defend the Border" (2002); Dorrit Cohn's *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999); Roland Barthes, "The Discourse of History" (1981); Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961); Lubomír Doležel, "Fictional and Historical Narrative: Meeting the Postmodernist Challenge" (1999); Niall Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History* (1997); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1979); Malcolm Hayward, "Genre Recognition of History and Fiction" (1994); Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olson, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature* (1994); Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse* (1978). Hayden White in *Metahistory* (1973) describes historical discourse not as an accurate representation of the past, but as a series of creative texts structured by tropes, narrative strategies, and ideological underpinnings that form our historical understanding and interpretation. White elaborated and nuanced his arguments in *Metahistory* in two collections of essays, *Tropics of Discourse* (1978) and *The Content of the Form* (1987).

Coetzee's novels have often been accused of being apolitical and not explicitly addressing the historical situation in South Africa (Kossew 1996: 10). However, the kind of novel Coetzee describes here is not ahistorical. As David Atwell remarks, "to decline the politics of historical discourses does not necessarily involve ahistoricism" (588). Coetzee reacts against the "colonization of the novel by the discourse of history" rather than pleads for a disengagement of literature from history (Coetzee 1988: 3).

The real challenge, in my view, is not to show that history is just fiction or to collapse the distinction between history and literature altogether, but to articulate the difference of these discourses without conceptualizing their relation in terms of an absolute opposition. Recasting the relation between history and literature could enable their interpenetration and encourage new readings (or even modes of writing) of history within literature. This is a challenge that Cavafy's poem, and especially Coetzee's novel, undertake.

The Magistrate in Coetzee's novel is preoccupied with history and even aspires to be a historian. After his experience of torture, he has a burning desire to write the history of the events he witnessed in a way that will expose the Empire's crimes and unveil the truth. However, he acknowledges his inability to write a history that would account both for his aversion to, and complicity with, the Empire (Wenzel 9). This history would inevitably be written in the discourse that the Empire developed in order to spread its own truth. Trying to find a way out of this predicament, he starts his "historical account" in the mode of a story or fairytale: "No one who paid a visit to this oasis [...] failed to be struck by the charm of life here" (Coetzee 2000: 168-69). His account is imbued with a romantic nostalgia for a past way of life and a desire to escape from historical time. He wishes to return to a world before history, because he realizes that "Empire has created the time of history" (146). This colonization of history by the Empire makes it impossible for him to write a history that would do justice to the Empire's victims. He says,

I think: I wanted to live outside history. I wanted to live outside the history that the Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects. I never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them. How can I believe that that is cause for shame? (169)

This shame, however, haunts him throughout his narrative. He embodies the history of the Empire and "is no less infected with it than the faithful Colonel Joll" (146). For a moment, his flight to a prehistorical world seems as the easy way out of his entrapment in the imperial matrix. However, his overall position in the novel contradicts his momentary desire for a flight from history. From the beginning he states his intention to stay within history and put up his fight: "I struggle on with the old story, hoping that before it is finished it will reveal to me why it was that I thought it worth the trouble" (26).

Cavafy's poetry is immersed in history. Remarkably, Cavafy had expressed his historiographical impulse: "I am a historical poet; I could never write a novel or a play,

but I feel 125 voices in me telling me that I could write history" (Lechonitis 19-20).<sup>28</sup> This history-writing takes place within his poems. His poetry flirts with historiographical conventions and employs techniques intended to convey a truth effect and enhance the historicity of what is enacted in the poems.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the kind of history his poetry performs de-centers hegemonic historical accounts in order to illuminate alternative perspectives, marginalized and forgotten characters or events, and obscure or peripheral eras and places.<sup>30</sup>

What the Magistrate in the novel finds impossible—writing a kind of history that illuminates other aspects of the historical experience than official versions do—is a challenge that Cavafy took up in his poetry. His historical poems usually deal with the lesser-known or glorified eras and with times of decadence and decline. They focus on moments "of choice, of misfortune or disgrace" and by "situations that lead, or have led to, ruin" (Spender 90).

"Waiting for the Barbarians" is usually counted among Cavafy's "historical poems," even though it lacks explicit spatial and temporal markers. Many interpretations use it as a key alluding to specific historical events. Some critics have tried to establish connections between the poem and contemporary events in Greece or in Egypt, where Cavafy lived. Stratis Tsirkas, for example, has argued that the events in the poem resonate recent events in Egypt at the time the poem was written.<sup>31</sup> These events—if we assume they formed a source of inspiration for the poem—reveal another connection between the poem and the novel, as they place the poem in the context of colonialism. According to this interpretation, the people waiting for the barbarians are the people of Egypt, including the foreign communities in the country. These people wanted to be saved from "civilization"—the British Empire, which had been ruling Egypt since 1878. The disappearance of the barbarians in the poem alludes to the brutal crushing of the Mahdist rising in 1898—an Islamic revolt that threatened the British power—by the British army.<sup>32</sup> The barbarians in the poem supposedly refer to the Mahdists, who did not exist any longer after their defeat.

<sup>28</sup> The translation is mine. In this phrase that Lechonitis ascribes to Cavafy, the Greek formulation for what I translate as "historical poet" is "ποιητής ιστορικός," which could either be translated as "historical poet" or as "poet-historian."

<sup>29</sup> The extreme attention to detail and love for historical precision in his poems; the extensive use of primary sources; his "archeological" inspiration from inscriptions, ancient literary works and objects; the full names and genealogical information for (historical or invented) characters; precise chronological markers and indications of places: these are some of the ways in which Cavafy's historical sense manifests itself.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Mackridge's "Introduction" to the English edition of Cavafy's *Collected Poems*, translated by Sachperoglou (xxvi-xxvii). Cavafy is mainly interested in the post-Classical era (Alexander's successor states and the Byzantine era) with its decadent empires—eras underrepresented in dominant historical accounts.

<sup>31</sup> The poem was written in December 1898 but was only published and circulated by the poet in 1904.

<sup>32</sup> For this contextual interpretation of "Waiting for the Barbarians," see Tsirkas 48-54.

Cavafy's poem has thus attracted historicist approaches, which either read it in the context of colonized Egypt, or connect it to political and military events in Greece, or place it in the *fin de siècle* climate in Europe at the time of its writing.<sup>33</sup> However, even more common is the poem's treatment as a universalist allegory. In his book *Cavafy's Alexandria: Study of a Myth in Progress*, Edmund Keeley argues that in "Waiting for the Barbarians" the poet does not have "a specific historical event in mind" and leaves the historical context purposefully vague, because he intends to "offer an insight into the larger pattern of history that raises particular places and events to the level of metaphor or myth" (30). In this poem, Keeley notices a turn in Cavafy's poetry from personal dramas to the "drama of civilization in crisis, rendered through characters, images, and symbols in action at a particular, significant moment in time" (31). Viewed as symbols within a historical pattern, Cavafy's barbarians are easily applicable to historical situations before or after the poem's publication.

The poem's citation in various genres, ranging from newspapers, exhibition catalogues, and philosophical or theoretical texts to internet blogs, illustrates its multiple allegorical functions and applications.<sup>34</sup> In newspaper articles and opinion pieces I have come across, Cavafy's poem is employed as an allegorical vessel for understanding global problems and contemporary issues in politics and international relations. It is worth looking at a couple of these allegorical applications and their thematic diversity.

In an article under the title "West Needs to Rethink Attitudes to Islamic Civilizations," published in *The Irish Times* May 11, 2002, Patrick Comerford reflects on the suspicion and prejudice with which Muslim populations within or outside of Europe and the U.S. are treated after September 11. He ends his piece with a brief discussion of Cavafy's poem, which helps him reach his conclusion: "An imagined external enemy provides excuses for not wrestling with real social and political problems. On the other hand, real dialogue with the Islamic world is the only way of removing prejudice and fears of an imaginary threat."

In an article from *The New Yorker* entitled "After America; Is the West being overtaken by the Rest?" (April 21, 2008), Cavafy's poem is used by Ian Buruma to probe the thesis that "America's time of global dominance is finished, and that new powers, such as China, India, and Russia, are poised to take over." In this context, he writes:

All great empires set too much store by predictions of their imminent demise. Perhaps, as the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy suggested in his poem "Waiting for the Barbarians," empires need the sense of peril to give them a reason to go on. Why spend so much money and effort if not to keep the barbarians at bay?

<sup>33</sup> Savidis suggests a possible historical connection of the poem with the Greco-Turkish war of 1897, a thirty-day war between Greece and the Ottoman Empire over the status of Crete (still under Turkish occupation), which Greece wished to annex. But Savidis also views the poem in a broader light, as thematizing the decadence of Western civilization (1985: 227).

<sup>34</sup> For example, the poem is cited in the catalogue of Anthony Caro's sculpture exhibition "Barbarians" (2002). It was recited by Edward Said's daughter during his funeral as one of her father's favorite poems and gave its title to a collection of essays on Said, published after his death (Ertür and Sökmen).

An opinion piece by H.D.S. Greenway in *The Boston Globe* from June 2, 2009, entitled "No More Waiting for 'barbarians'," applies the poem's message to the people of Iran after Obama's election as president:

And so it is with Iranians today. For generations America, the "Great Satan," has been at the gates, overthrowing Mohammed Mossadegh in the '50s, serving the Shah through the '70s, shooting down a civilian airliner and backing Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran, President Bush's "Axis of Evil," and on and on go the grievances, convincing Iranians that their ancient civilization risks destruction at the hands of the United States. But now President Obama is saying there need not be barbarians any longer. And Iranians are asking what's going to happen to them without barbarians? The idea that the hostility of the "Great Satan" America might no longer be is of itself unsettling. For Iranians, the constant of American hostility has been "a kind of solution."

Finally, in a piece from *The Daily Telegraph* (London) from June 15, 2005, Cavafy's poem complements Andrew Marr's thoughts on the hysteria that surrounds global warming and the threat of environmental catastrophe, which succeeded the threat of a nuclear catastrophe:

Do some of us need the thought of impending disaster to keep going—as in Cavafy's poem about a Roman city waiting for barbarian attack, which doesn't come: "Now what's going to happen to us without the barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution." Or is it that journalists, with our notorious inability to contemplate boredom, simply find mild progress too dull?

These diverse citations and uses testify to the poem's appeal in the present. Nevertheless, in my view, the bearing of a literary work on the present extends beyond the drawing of parallels with contemporary situations. Understanding the work as part of the present does not just mean turning it into a formula that helps us build an external argument about real-life situations. It involves reading it through contemporary concerns, while being attentive to its singularity and to the ways in which it might resist our attempts to use it as an allegorical formula.

Just like Cavafy's poem, Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* has been read both as a universal narrative of human suffering and moral choice, and as an indictment of the violence and barbarity of the apartheid regime (Attridge 2004a: 42). Historicist readings have been particularly prioritized in South African writing, especially during the apartheid years, when every "responsible and principled South African writer" was expected to make the country's historical situation his or her "primary concern" (33). Distant or unidentified settings in literary works were thus often translated into the South Africa of the time of their writing (33).

Despite such "translations" of the works into specific historical situations, both the novel and the poem resist readings that frame them within a certain context. Their lack



of explicit historical markers could lead to the accusation that the author or poet distance their texts from their times and thus refuse to take a stance on urgent political or social issues. Such charges are familiar in the case of Coetzee and South Africa. The absence of explicit references to an external historical reality has also led to readings that seek to extract the works' universal essence, by raising the actors and events in the texts to timeless symbols. Although the two kinds of readings discussed above—universalizing or historicist—may seem incompatible, Attridge argues that they both treat the texts as allegories. He defines allegorization as “a process whereby characters and the events that befall them are taken to represent either wider (in some cases [...] universal) or more specific meanings” (39).

Critics such as Northrop Frye and Fredric Jameson have argued that every interpretation of a text can be considered allegorical, since it tries to make sense of textual images and events by attaching ideas to them.<sup>35</sup> However, the main fault Attridge finds with allegorical readings is that they often bypass the details and particularities of the text, as they turn it into a pathway that should lead to a more significant and elevated meaning (60). The formal elements of the text seem to be in the service of an external meaning or message. Once this meaning is extracted, formal elements, narrative techniques, and other details lose their relevance, like the wrapping of a present becomes useless after the present has been opened.<sup>36</sup>

In a discussion of Attridge's views in his essay “Affective Operations of Art and Literature,” Ernst van Alphen locates the problem with allegorical readings in the fact that they often only use limited and selective aspects of the text—those that are useful for its transformation into an allegory. Contingent or seemingly superfluous textual elements that are not necessary for “the signifying transaction,” van Alphen argues, or details that do not fit the economy of the allegorical reading, are ignored (2008: 27). What is more, an allegorical reading that views a literary work as either ahistorical or as a key that refers to a specific historical situation outside the text, presupposes an absolute opposition

<sup>35</sup> Attridge discusses Frye's view in *The Anatomy of Criticism* that all traditional commentary is allegorical (Frye 89; presented in Attridge 2004a: 36), as well as Jameson's claim that “[i]nterpretation is [...] an essentially allegorical act” (Jameson 1981:10; qtd in Attridge 2004a: 36). Nevertheless, he contends that a non-allegorical reading would still be possible. The example he mentions is Coetzee's reading of *Robinson Crusoe* in *Foe* (36).

<sup>36</sup> In “The Novel Today” Coetzee also reacts against such reductive readings, which fail to do justice to the literary text:

No matter what it may appear to be doing, the story may not really be playing the game you call Class Conflict or the game called Male Domination or any of the other games in the games handbook. While it may certainly be possible to read the book as playing one of those games, in reading it in that way you may have missed something. You may have missed not just something, you may have missed everything. Because (I parody the position somewhat) a story is not a message with a covering, a rhetorical or aesthetic covering. (4)

In this statement, Coetzee suggests that a text does not always do what our interpretive framework wants it to do, but can be in excess of the message or ideology we try to impose on it. Furthermore, the formal and aesthetic elements of a literary text and what we often call its “meaning” or “message” are inseparable and in constant interaction, producing a literary event not reducible to its parts.

between literature and history. If literature and history are viewed as completely distinct domains, the only way for a literary work to be historically relevant is by becoming a marker of a historical reality external to it. This overlooks the possibility that literature can offer another mode of history writing, different from academic history, without having to explicitly refer to an external historical context.

In reaction to reductive allegorical readings, Attridge proposes a *literal* mode of reading that focuses on the singularity of the text and on the reading experience. A literal reading draws attention to what the text does rather than what it means, while not rushing into saying what a text is "about" (Attridge 2004a: 36-37, 39). It is sensitive to the reading experience and to the effects of textual elements and narrative techniques on the reader.<sup>37</sup> It can be described as a performing of the text that "responds simultaneously to what it is said, the way in which it is said, and the inventiveness and singularity (if there is any) of the saying" (60).

Based on Attridge's literal reading, Cavafy's and Coetzee's texts constitute unique events anchored in the present of their literary universe. The lack of time/place indications does not prevent these works from evoking moments in history and in the present. But while they may improve our understanding of the present and relate to external situations, they resist being swallowed up by any of them. By refusing to be reduced to a spot in a chronology, the poem and the novel become even more historically active. Their iterability underscores their immersion in history. A text's iterability, Derrida claims, is "the condition of historicity," because it roots a text to a context and simultaneously "opens this non-saturable context onto a recontextualization." This, Derrida says, "is historical through and through" (1992: 63).

But can the singularity and iterability of the literary event only be captured by a "literal reading," as Attridge suggests? Attridge is perhaps a bit too quick to dismiss allegorical readings altogether. As van Alphen argues, reading for the meaning of a text, which allegorical readings do in Attridge's definition, is something we always end up doing in one way or another when we interpret a text (2008: 29). Thus, the crucial question is *how* we read for meaning: do we read to confirm what we already know or to open ourselves to unknown meanings and sensations that signs often trigger? According to van Alphen, Attridge's proposed "literal reading" (which van Alphen prefers to call "affective reading") and "reading for meaning (allegorical reading)" do not form a hierarchical opposition, but can be seen as complementary: they substantiate each other in "an interplay" between the "affective, experiential dimension of reading" and "the allegorical dimension of meaning" (30). In this interplay, the production of meaning is the result—

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<sup>37</sup> Van Alphen prefers the term "affective reading" over Attridge's "literal reading," and convincingly argues that a "literal reading" can also be invested with meanings and ideas, just like an allegorical reading (2008: 29-30). For van Alphen, an "affective reading" is attentive to textual elements and narratological techniques. However, it does not analyze these as "'objective' textual structures" (like structuralism did), but is interested in how these elements transmit affects to the reader (27).

not the “cause, end, or goal of reading” (30). As long as allegorical readings do not rush into the production of familiar or predetermined meanings, they can be a productive part of a careful interpretive process that makes space for the “not yet known,” triggered by the affective operations of the text (30).

In Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, the untranslatable symbols and signs, as well as the irreducible otherness of the girl, are elements that exceed the allegorizations we are tempted to produce. In such ways, as Attridge argues, the novel simultaneously invites and sabotages its allegorization, thereby delivering a critical commentary on the allegorizing impulse itself (2004a: 45). But there might be more at stake here than just an implicit commentary on allegory. In the following, instead of dismissing allegorical readings as reductive per definition, I argue that by problematizing allegory the works invite a new kind of allegorical reading, which suggests another approach to history in literature.

### Barbarian Allegory

How is one to receive, how is one to understand a speech, how is one to inherit it when it does not let itself be translated from itself into itself? This may appear impossible. And, we have to acknowledge, it is probably impossible. [...] permit me then to turn the objection around. Guaranteed translatability, given homogeneity, systematic coherence in their absolute forms, this is surely (certainly, a priori and not probably) what renders the injunction, the inheritance, and the future—in a word the other—impossible. There must be disjunction, interruption, the heterogeneous if at least there must be, if there must be a chance given to any “there must be” whatsoever, be it beyond duty.

—Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* (35)

Words and signs in the Magistrate’s narrative often seem to refer to something else, but they do not. Their promise of meaning invites us to view them as parts of an allegory that promises to translate signs into something different than what they are. Neither the novel nor the poem gratify the expectations their allegorical structure cultivates.

In a definition that stays close to its etymology, allegory (from the Greek *ἄλλος* [“other”] and *αγορεύειν* [“to speak”]) means to “speak other than one seems to speak” (Saunders 223). Allegorical readings usually assume that the “other” to which the allegory refers is knowable and can be discovered through interpretation. The allegory the novel sets up is different: its allegorical structures point to something unknowable, and in that sense, barbarian. This kind of allegory, which I call *barbarian allegory*, does not promise a decodable meaning, but induces an experience that can still affect our language with its foreignness and produce multiple interpretive possibilities, none of which are final or “verifiable.” This allegory invites us to read for meaning without presupposing that the meaning of a text is ever determinable. It thus perpetuates interpretation, while alerting

the reader to the "barbarian" aspects of a literary text: those elements that escape our understanding without being meaning/ess. A barbarian allegory does not abolish reference; referring to something other is part of the definition of allegory. Thus, it does not freeze the signifying transaction, but it problematizes the correspondence of a sign with its referent.

"Barbarian allegory" describes a mode of reading of a literary text, but also aspects and elements in literary text that invite and enable such a reading. It can thus be seen as a potential in some texts (not all literary texts can function as barbarian allegories) that can be activated by the reader. Thus, the performance of barbarian allegory requires both certain aspects of a literary text and a particular mode of reading. Coetzee's novel can be read as a barbarian allegory because its untranslatable signs bear the promise of an unknowable language, the meaning of which is not fully determinable.

The girl in the novel, for instance, functions as a barbarian allegory. Because the Magistrate is unable to read her, she maintains her irreducible singularity against the generalizable features of the Empire. But despite her unintelligibility, she has a deep impact on the Magistrate's language and subjectivity. He may not be able to determine the meaning of her language and acts, but through her "barbarian allegory" the meaning of his own acts changes as he tries to imagine it through her perspective. As opposed to the fixed meanings of the Empire, the girl holds the promise of multiple signifying possibilities. As Spivak notes, in speculating about the possible meanings that his subjectivity assumes in the eyes of the barbarian girl, there is "an indefinite structure of possibilities" (2003: 23).

The girl is thus a site of barbarian allegory. But the concept of barbarian allegory, I contend, is particularly developed in the following scene in the novel, wherein a barbarian language assumes an allegorical function. The scene describes the interrogation of the Magistrate by Colonel Joll. The latter is conducting an investigation concerning supposed barbarian threats to the Empire. Colonel Joll is convinced that the Magistrate has been communicating with the barbarian enemy. He therefore asks him questions in order to clarify the exact meaning of certain wooden slips with barbarian characters on them, which were found at the Magistrate's house. The Magistrate had excavated those slips at the site of an ancient barbarian civilization. Colonel Joll is not aware of that, and assumes that the slips are recent and contain secret messages between the Magistrate and the barbarian enemies: "A reasonable inference is that the wooden slips contain messages passed between yourself and other parties, we do not know when. It remains for you to explain what the messages say and the other parties were" (121).

At first, the Magistrate stands at a loss before the translating task assigned to him:

I look at the lines of characters written by a stranger long since dead. I do not even know whether to read from right to left or from left to right [...] Does each stand for a single thing, a circle for the sun, a triangle for a woman, a wave for a lake; or does a circle merely stand for "circle," a triangle for "triangle," a wave for "wave"? (121)

The Magistrate has no idea what the characters mean. Nevertheless, he offers Colonel Joll a speculative reading, which turns these characters into signifiers of linguistic uncertainty and foreignness. He first pretends to read the texts on three of the slips as parts of an epistolary exchange: a letter from a father to his daughter, written at times of peace, and two letters informing someone about the brutal death of his brother in the hands of officers. The last two letters allude to the practices of torture exercised by the Empire's practitioners against the barbarian natives. After "reading" those letters, he moves on to another slip:

'Now let us see what the next one says. See, there is only a single character. It is the barbarian character *war*, but it has other senses too. It can stand for *vengeance*, and, if you turn it upside down like this, it can be made to read *justice*. There is no knowing which sense is intended. This is part of *barbarian cunning*.' 'It is the same with the rest of these slips.' I plunge my good hand into the chest and stir. 'They form an *allegory*. They can be read in many orders. Further, each single slip can be read in many ways. Together they can be read as a domestic journal, or they can be read as a plan of war, or they can be turned on their sides and read as a history of the last years of the Empire—the old Empire I mean. There is no agreement among scholars on how to interpret these relics of the ancient barbarians [...]' 'Thank you. *I have finished translating.*' (122-23)<sup>38</sup>

In this scene, two views on translation are implied, each with different objectives and epistemological consequences. Colonel Joll wishes to have the barbarian signs translated in order to confirm his suspicion that the signs are secret messages from the enemy. The translation he wants to elicit should reaffirm the Empire's myth of a barbarian threat. This will legitimize his presence in town and his violent practices. Although he does not speak the barbarian language and therefore needs a translator—the Magistrate—Joll has in fact already decided on the meaning of this translation and will only accept the Magistrate's translation if it confirms his own preconstructed version of it: the messages as threatening for the Empire. Joll's intended translation follows the Empire's tendency to impose its own code on others, turning it into a universal all-explanatory machine. Following this logic, the Empire translates based on the law of sameness: its translations appropriate every barbarian sign to the imperial code and regulate meaning by delimiting the context in which it can take place (Saunders 228).<sup>39</sup> The Empire's relation to knowledge is not steered by expansion, but by reproduction, perpetuation, and conservation; "[t]he concern of the State is to conserve," as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari remark in "Treatise on Nomadology" (1987: 394). In fact, the Colonel's intended translation is a pseudo-

<sup>38</sup> The emphasis on "war," "vengeance," and "justice" is in the original. The remaining emphasis is added by myself.

<sup>39</sup> In her article, Saunders provides a close analysis of the concept of the foreign in Coetzee's novel.

translation, because there is no transference of meaning from one code to another. There is only one code at play, that of the Empire.

In a different way, the Magistrate's translation is also a failure. It is a misreading—and, to be sure, an intentional one. In fact, one could argue that it does not qualify as a translation at all, since the source language remains unintelligible. His attempted translation, however, sets different operations in motion than the Colonel's intended translation. Although it does not produce positive knowledge of the barbarian language, his act results in a reassessment of the Empire's categories. The Magistrate starts with the knowledge that the translation is impossible, since he cannot read the signs on the slips. However, instead of facing the unintelligibility of the barbarian language as an insurmountable impediment, he plunges into an impossible translation, which takes non-knowledge as its starting point. In the method he employs in this translating task—what he calls “barbarian cunning”—“[t]he problem is not an ‘obstacle’; it is the surpassing of the obstacle” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 399). Although the Magistrate is denied access to the other's language, he manages to articulate a translation that does not just reproduce a version of the self (the Empire's language), but imbues the Empire's discourse with traces of alterity. I identify these disruptive traces as “barbarisms.”

Contrary to Colonel Joll, who can only imagine a univocal reading, the Magistrate's translation constitutes an allegorical reading that converts the Empire's naturalized categories (war, vengeance, justice) into barbarian allegories, by “reading” them *through* the foreignness of the barbarian slips. In this way, the language of the Empire and the barbarian language of the slips, to borrow Felman's words, “meet even as they fail to meet” (2003: 63). The Magistrate's reading, as Saunders argues, subjects the Empire's terms to multiple interpretative possibilities, while making their determination impossible (226). The Empire's most popular terms become barbarian allegories, as they are disembedded from their familiar context and read through the signs of a barbarian language.

In their “Treatise on Nomadology,” Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between “royal” and “nomad” science. While the former domesticates foreign knowledge, the latter cuts the contents of royal science loose (1987: 405). Applying this distinction to the novel, we could say that the Empire (as “royal science”) appropriates barbarian knowledge, while the Magistrate's “barbarian cunning” (representing “nomad science”) unsettles the Empire's epistemological certainties. His translation rereads the Empire's language, looking for those gaps and errors that the Empire had brushed aside by regulating contexts and banishing barbarian elements. He refuses to gratify the Empire's need for stable contexts and definitions, and imbues terms like *justice*, on which civilization depends for the justification of its practices, with an ambiguous and controversial meaning. Whereas Colonel Joll needs a stable signification for the barbarian signs, the Magistrate does not seek to extract constants from variables, but sets variables “in a state of continuous variation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 407).

*Justice*, one of civilization's favorite categories, is recontextualized by being made to co-exist with *vengeance* and *war* under the umbrella of the same sign. As a result, its meaning shifts through its proximity to these two concepts. The operation of these three terms in imperial discourse is premised on their difference, which allows them to be clearly distinguished from each other. The Magistrate purposefully bypasses that difference in order to underscore their similarity, which makes them all different sides of the same coin. The noble and virtuous connotations of *justice* are contaminated by the violent connotations of *war* and *vengeance*. Whereas both *justice* and *vengeance* may function as motives for war, in the Empire's discourse the former would legitimize violent practices, while the latter would not. The Magistrate's translation, however, suggests that the two terms are interchangeable and even indistinguishable from each other in the Empire's practices: *justice* is often an excuse for *vengeance*, or *vengeance* is masked as *justice* to justify violence. The Magistrate's translation reveals the violent associations of these terms by stressing their similarity and comparability. The hierarchical interrelation of these three terms is unsettled, the values they carry become blurred, and their absolute difference fades out, as they all become readings of the same allegorical sign.

In the face of the Empire's hegemonic knowledge, the Magistrate introduces his epistemological barbarism—his "barbarian cunning"—as a practice of inserting foreign and ambiguous elements that the Empire tries to obliterate from its discourse. These elements disrupt the seemingly fixed context within which the Empire's speech acts become "felicitous."<sup>40</sup> Notably, these elements are no other than the key categories of the Empire. However, their unorthodox use reveals the contradictions inherent in the Empire's own discourse. The terms and ideological tools of imperial language turn into instruments of subversion. The Empire cannot domesticate the Magistrate's translation, which is why Colonel Joll dismisses it.

Although his translation does not really decipher the barbarian slips, it manages to convey something of the other's language, albeit only the realization that the Empire's linguistic code is just as impaired and stuttering as the mumblings we hear in a barbarian language. His encounter with the barbarian language of the slips does not generate a total lack of meaning, but a temporary suspension of understanding that reveals the limits of the Empire's knowledge system.

Thus, the Magistrate's translation releases a multiplicity of meanings triggered by the allegory that the barbarian signs form. Based on Walter Benjamin's views in "The Task of the Translator," the Magistrate's translation could be considered felicitous. For according

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<sup>40</sup> In Austin's terminology, "felicitous speech act" is a successfully executed and convincing speech act. The Magistrate's act of translation, one could argue, is his own "cunning" and conveys nothing of the barbarian language on the slips he holds in his hands. His translation is therefore not a real encounter between two systems, but a mockery of the system to which he also belongs. Nevertheless, I argue that his translation is triggered by the haunting effect of the barbarian language on the slips and by its irreducibility to his own language.

to Benjamin, translation is "only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (1999b: 75). The Magistrate's translation not only preserves—to the extreme, one could say—the foreignness of the barbarian language, but it also conveys the intrinsic foreignness in the Empire's language. The Magistrate ends his part in this scene with the words "I have finished translating." The statement "I have finished" should not be read as "finalized" and "completed my translation." His translation does not really "finish," since it does not offer semiotic closure. His allegorical reading seeks to perpetuate interpretation by bringing in ambiguity and polysemy in the fixed relation between the Empire's signs and their meanings.

The Magistrate's reading in this scene could also serve as a model for a different approach to history. The past could be seen as a barbarian allegory: an untranslatable language—just like the barbarian script on the slips—referring to something gone and impossible to grasp as a presence. It reminds us of Cavafy's absent barbarians, who, in the poet's words, are not there "any longer." The discourses of history inherit this barbarian allegory and try to turn it into coherent stories and familiar narratives. History, then, can be seen as an attempt to read the barbarian allegory of the past and assign meanings to it. The discourses of history generally treat the past as something (at least partly) known and legible. But, as the novel suggests, we could also write history differently, by reading the past in the way the Magistrate reads the barbarian slips: as something unknown and irretrievable, which nonetheless, through its foreignness, can affect our language in the present.

Acknowledging the untranslatability of the past, we invite it to haunt, occupy, and affect our present, because we can never appropriate it and leave it behind as a "finished translation." With the past seen as a barbarian allegory, history remains an open narrative. The "barbarianness" of the past does not prevent it from being meaningful to us. Due to its allegorical function, it is not a hermetic structure, but refers to things and situations other than itself even though its referents are not determinable. It can therefore have a bearing on our present, because its signifying capacity is inexhaustible. This conception of history encourages us to reiterate the past differently in every present and make history a singular event, meaningful in our here-and-now.

The conception of history that I draw from the Magistrate's allegorical reading yields different meanings in every present without ever being present. This conception is suggested in the poem too. There, the barbarians' absence challenges their status in the discourse of history. If literature is performative in that it creates the reality to which it refers, then history supposedly refers to an existing reality in the past. However, the poem questions this opposition between literature and history by showing that a fundamental category of history—the barbarian—has no actual referent in "reality."

If discourses of history tend to read the past literally, as constative and "serious" language, both works propose history as performative and figurative language. By turning history's founding terms ("barbarians," "war," "vengeance," "justice") into ambiguous



signs, the works read history as “speaking other than it seems to speak”—an “other” that never crystallizes as presence. Paradoxically, Felman argues, the things that seemingly have no history, such as allegory, tropes, and rhetorical figures, are the things that make history (2003: 106).

Although the Magistrate declares his failure to write history as an objective account of the events he witnessed, I argue that the novel itself performs another kind of history. This is also reflected in the novel’s narrative techniques. The Magistrate narrates everything in the present tense, as if things are happening at the moment he utters them. The present tense in the novel conveys the sense of an action in progress. As Dorrit Cohn argues, it is not a “historical present” meant to enhance the vividness of the events, but creates the impression of “overhearing and immediate verbalization of what is felt and thought” (103). The present-tense narrative of the Magistrate, I argue, suggests an open-ended conception of history as an event being formed in the present. The same can be argued about the poem, which unravels in dialogic form in the present tense.

On few occasions, the present tense in the novel is juxtaposed with the past tense, which is typical for historical accounts. For example, early in the narrative the narrator suddenly interrupts his present-tense recounting to give a paragraph in the past tense, in which he reproduces stories about crimes supposedly committed by the barbarians. This paragraph is surrounded by the words “stories” and “rumour” placed at its beginning and end, respectively: “But last year *stories* began to reach us ...” and “... the *rumour* went” (8-9, emphasis added). The envelopment of the paragraph by the words “stories” and “rumour” suggests that the material of history, just like literature, consists of stories. In the case of historical discourse, however, these stories become constructed as truths.

By interrogating the modes of historical discourse, both the poem and the novel open up a space within literature for performing history otherwise. The capacity of literature to question and subvert other discourses (including itself) can be correlated with its freedom to say everything—a freedom that the strictly regulated discourse of history lacks. Derrida describes literature as an

institution of fiction which gives *in principle* the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history. (1992: 37)<sup>41</sup>

For Derrida, this freedom can work both ways: it can be “a very powerful political weapon, but one which might immediately let itself be neutralized as fiction. This revolutionary power can become very conservative” (1992: 38). The fact that literature is explicitly

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<sup>41</sup> Derrida notes that this freedom of literature is related to the modern idea of democracy in the West (1992: 37).

fictional and citational language use—which is why Austin, John Searle, and other philosophers degrade it as “non-serious” language—may suggest that literary discourse is inconsequential: it can have no impact on “real” situations or “serious” discourses. However, as Derrida also suggests, its citationality and “non-seriousness” is precisely where its political potential lies.<sup>42</sup>

Partly due to its common perception as non-serious, fictional, and citational—in contrast with the supposed “seriousness” and truth effect of historical discourse—literature is allowed to say everything and is able to use this freedom to challenge “serious” discourses. Literature, Derrida argues, can disrupt other discourses “by producing events whose ‘reality’ or duration is never assured, but which by that very fact are more thought-provoking” (72). Therefore, I contend that literature’s supposed non-seriousness, to which it partly owes its institutional freedom, is paradoxically what makes it a powerful political tool, able to intervene and cause shifts in “serious” discourses and debates. The correlation of literature’s political potential with its assumed “non-seriousness” turns the negative value of this “non-seriousness” around.

As we see in the novel, literature interrogates historical categories by fictionalizing and “citing” them in slightly different ways. Whereas reductive allegorical readings either superimpose a specific version of the historical upon the literary or deny a text’s historical relevance altogether, Coetzee’s novel and Cavafy’s poem perform history through literature’s institutional freedom. In so doing, they undercut the hierarchy between the two discourses—history as “serious” language with a bearing on “reality” versus literature as “non-serious” language that only “cites” real situations—without canceling the differences between the two discursive realms. As a result, they enable a critical performance of history through its “discursive other.”

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<sup>42</sup> The distinction between “serious” and “non-serious” discourse can be traced back to Austin’s *How to Do Things with Words* and the discussions that his views triggered among philosophers. Austin makes a distinction between “serious” or “ordinary” use of language on the one hand, and “non-serious” or “parasitic” use on the other (of which typical examples are literary texts). He makes clear that his speech act theory can only be applied to the former kind of utterances (serious). Non-serious use of language (including literature, which in this theory has the status of a parasite) is excluded from his theory (22). In “Signature, Event, Context” and *Limited Inc* Derrida performs a deconstructive critique of the serious/non-serious and normal/parasitic opposition. In *Limited Inc*, in a reply to Searle’s defense of Austin’s serious/non-serious distinction, Derrida detects a hierarchy in this distinction. Non-serious language is cast as logically dependent on serious language, according to a scheme that ascribes a positive value to the latter (serious, standard, normal, literal) and a negative value to the former language. For Derrida, such a distinction is dogmatic and does not derive from “common sense,” but from “a restrictive interpretation of common sense” (1988: 91). Instead, he sees a relation of mutual dependence between the two forms of discourse, which suggests that they should be examined side-by-side: “you cannot root-out the ‘parasite’ without rooting-out the ‘standard’ [le ‘propre’] at the same time.” The one contains the other, it exists within the other or can be transformed into it, since any mark is iterable and its context is under change: “Once it is iterable, to be sure, a mark marked with a supposedly ‘positive’ value (‘serious’, ‘literal’, etc.) can be mimed, cited, transformed into an ‘exercise’ or into ‘literature,’ even into a ‘lie’—that is, it can be made to carry its other, its ‘negative’ double” (70).

## But Who Are Those Barbarians after All? Barbarians in Repetition

A given culture is only as strong as its power to convince its least dedicated member that its fictions are truths.

—Hayden White, “The Forms of Wildness” (6)

One of the most prominent ways in which the poem and the novel challenge the discourse of history is by using history’s key terms in ways that erode their stability and enable their resignification. In the following, I explore this operation by specifically following the name “barbarian” in the novel and the poem.

The first question that arises concerns the term’s referent. In the poem, since we never see any barbarians, we can only reconstruct the image that the people of the city have created about them. The consuls and praetors are dressed in embroidered togas and are overloaded with dazzling jewelry, because “things like that dazzle the barbarians.” And the orators are silent, because the barbarians are “bored by rhetoric and public speaking.” The image of the city-in-preparation fits the Orientalist stereotype of decadent people immersed in luxury and excess. The citizens either believe that this is what the barbarians are like, or that these are the kinds of things the barbarians like. In other words, the barbarians are either constructed according to an Orientalist representational regime, or they are imagined to be crude primitive warriors—reminiscent of the Teutonic nations that invaded Rome—who are likely to be impressed by the Empire’s luxury and grandeur. The absence of the material referent of the name “barbarian” makes it impossible for the reader to test this mental image on real subjects. We only receive a mediated mirror-image of the barbarians through the civilized, who go to great lengths to comply with either what they assume to be barbarian customs or what they think would impress the barbarians.

In the novel, the identity of the people the Empire names “barbarians” stays unclear. The barbarians against whom the expeditionary forces are sent are supposed to be violent nomadic people, planning attacks against the Empire. However, the expeditionary forces never reach these barbarians, although they constantly think they sense their presence. One of the leaders of these forces is convinced that barbarians trailed him at a distance. “Are you sure they were barbarians? I [the Magistrate] ask. Who else could they have been? He replies. His colleagues concur” (53). Colonel Joll is also convinced of their existence: “[W]e are dealing with a well-organized enemy” (125). The Empire’s belief in the categories it has constructed is so blind that it disregards the absence of any empirical evidence attesting to the existence of this enemy. The barbarians constantly seem to leave traces without their presence ever being witnessed. Thus, when “clothing disappears from washing-lines” and “food from larders,” the people in town are convinced that the barbarians did it, even though nobody catches them in the act. Various theories are

devised to account for the fact that the perpetrators are never seen, such as that "the barbarians have dug a tunnel under the walls" or that they only "come out at night" (134). The barbarians become the Empire's scapegoats. The people end up accusing them for every calamity and crime, like the flooding of the fields (during which, again, "[n]o one saw them," 108) or the rape of a girl (during which her friends recognize the rapist as a barbarian "by his ugliness," 134).

The accumulation of rumors around them leads to their demonization. They become the personification of evil, ready to "fry your balls and eat them" (164). They are the bogeyman that keeps the children at home.<sup>43</sup> "[O]nce in every generation, without fail," the narrator observes, "there is an episode of hysteria about the barbarians" (9). But the myth of the barbarians as the ultimate enemy of the Empire needs to find real bodies on which the Empire can exercise its power. These are the prisoners Colonel Joll brings with him, who, according to the narrator, are peaceful fishing people, in no way related to any attacks. The last group of prisoners the Colonel captures is put on public display. As the Magistrate ironically remarks, "everyone has a chance to see the twelve miserable captives, to prove to his children that the barbarians are real" (113). The Empire's need to legitimize its discourse and prove that the 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 has to be written on them to make those damaged bodies plausible as enemies, to transform a "literal body into a figurative enemy" (Saunders 230). "The constative claim," Butler tells us, "is always to some degree performative" (1993: 11). Here, naming creates the enemy. The word "enemy" becomes a speech act, which performs the Empire's inscription of its categories on the suffering bodies of its subjects.

Colonel Joll's act reflects the Empire's need to sustain what Paul de Man calls "the myth of semantic correspondence between sign and referent" by literally attaching the sign to the referent (1979: 6). The actual intentions and deeds of the natives are irrelevant in this process. As Michael Valdez Moses argues, the Empire defines itself and produces its "truths" by "literally marking off those who lie beyond its boundaries, but within its power to subjugate" (4). Only after imposing the safety of its clear-cut distinctions does the Empire read its others, or, better said, reads itself in its others. In the same way, the Empire's officials elicit "the truth" from their victims of torture: they project their own truth onto their bodies.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> "Are the children still allowed to play there, I wonder, or do their parents keep them at home with stories of barbarians lurking in the hollows?" (110).

<sup>44</sup> On the theme of torture in the novel see the studies by Moses, Susan van Zanten Gallagher, and Wenzel.

The barbarian other does not exist as an external enemy. Through the Empire's practices of torture and the atrocities towards its prisoners a new referent is attached to the "barbarian" in the novel. The overwhelming reality (in the novel) leads the narrator to adopt the term for the Empire's practitioners. In this case, an actual situation invites the use of a certain term instead of a term creating its material instantiation (as was the case with the word "ENEMY"). Although, as the narrator remarks, in the Empire's euphemistic vocabulary the torturers of the Third Bureau are probably designated as "security officers" (129), the Magistrate views them as the "new barbarians" (85) who have come to install terror in town. He realizes that the people of the Empire are enemies to themselves and that Colonel Joll is the product of an irrational society that becomes barbaric in its attempt to protect "civilization": "Those pitiable prisoners you brought in—are *they* the 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 who have settled in town, end up terrorizing the citizens, looting shops, violating laws, getting drunk, and causing trouble. Their behavior is constantly contrasted either with the pitiful state of the barbarian prisoners or with the stories about barbarian crimes that are never witnessed. Consequently, it becomes impossible for the reader to overlook the paradox in the Empire's use of the name "barbarian."

The image the Empire has created for the barbarians is a distorted reflection of itself. During the Magistrate's journey in the desert for the return of 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?" the Magistrate wonders (74). Like a *fata morgana*, the barbarians dissolve before anyone can reach them, pointing back to the ubiquitous presence of the people of the Empire as the real barbarians. This specter-hunting in the desert is later also carried out by the Empire's troops, leading to their total dissemination: they freeze, starve to death, and get lost in the desert, still convinced that they are chasing barbarians. The disintegration of the Empire comes from within.

From the beginning of his narrative, the Magistrate repeats the term "barbarian" in the exact same way it is used within the Empire's language: to refer to the natives (the colonized subjects) and to the Empire's (invisible) dangerous enemies. The native fishermen, the nomads, the prisoners, the invisible enemies are all "barbarians" in the Magistrate's narrative. Even the native girl that lives with him is referred to as "the barbarian girl," not simply as "the girl." The Magistrate has no choice but to employ the categories within which he has been constituted as a subject. These categories have acquired a naturalized effect through their repetitive use in history. I contend that the obsessive repetition of the word "barbarian" by the narrator draws attention to this practice of naturalization

through repetition. As Butler argues, the repetition of the norm—here, the citation of the name “barbarian”—is the main mechanism of the consolidation of its power (1993: 15).

However, that same mechanism used by a discursive regime for the indoctrination of its truths can also lead 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 constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm” (1993: 10). Although the word “barbarian” is repeated in the novel, 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. This puts the term under suspicion. At the same time, when the narrator starts using it for the “new barbarians” (the colonizers), confusion is produced. This new use is concomitant with the Magistrate's indignation at the Empire's practices, which leads to his imprisonment.

The Magistrate's turn against the Empire, however, does not put an end to his use of the term “barbarian” to refer to the colonized subjects as well. Until the end of his narrative, the conventional use of the word for the natives runs parallel to its subversive use for the colonizers. Thus, the word becomes a performative operating in a twofold way: while its use for the natives is perceived by the reader as an infelicitous speech act (the reader fails to see these people as barbarians), its use for the colonizers is more likely to convince the reader and secure uptake.<sup>45</sup> The parallel uses of the term indicate that more than a simple reversal of the “barbarian/civilized” opposition is at stake. The narrative does not reverse the hierarchy, but destabilizes it by rendering it unnatural and arbitrary.

One could argue that we are dealing with two different definitions of the term “barbarian.” In the first case, the narrator uses it as a (supposedly) neutral and descriptive term to refer to the native “others” and distinguish them from the civilization of which he is part. In the second case, he uses it to impose moral judgment on the Empire's practitioners. However, through the narrator's simultaneous use of both senses, the novel problematizes precisely the intertwinement of these two senses of the word, which so often takes place in Western discourses. This intertwinement results in the automatic attribution of barbarian behavior (the second sense) to subjects that simply happen not to be part of the “civilization” of the self. Therefore, the term's performance in the Magistrate's discourse points to the inconsistencies in the language by which Western history signifies the barbarian.

The narrator's voice is limited by the hegemonies against which it utters itself, but manages to challenge these hegemonies through a repetition with a difference. Although he cannot banish the barbarians as a category, he makes the workings of the system that produces them visible, and thus vulnerable. The novel thereby turns the “barbarian” into

<sup>45</sup> With “uptake” Austin refers to the audience's response to an utterance.

an object of interrogation. Through the repetitive and somewhat confusing use of the term “barbarian,” the novel reveals the contested terrain it occupies. All in all, the uses of the “barbarian” in the novel have three different functions. They perform 1) the history of the term’s use for naming civilization’s inferior others, 2) the history of the reversals of the term’s referent, to describe the barbaric behavior of “the civilized,” and 3) the open future of the term, since its subversive iteration in the novel creates a space for resignification.

The operations of the “barbarian” in the novel invite us to revisit its function in Cavafy’s poem. In the poem, the repetition of the word “barbarians” by the second speaker conveys certainty about their coming. The phrase “because the barbarians are coming” is repeated in all his five answers and thus almost sounds like a promise towards his interlocutor, the people of the city, and the readers themselves, who are also anticipating the spectacle. The more emphatically the promise is repeated, the more everyone believes in it and thus the greater the disappointment becomes when the promise is not realized. The failure of this speech act stages the failure of the discourse of civilization to bring to life what it has constructed as its outside. The barbarians remain a signifier without a material referent because they have always only existed as part of the discourse of civilization. The poem stages the infelicitous speech act of a discourse trying to play God. Its “let there be barbarians” does not work. The omnipotence of the discourse of civilization is contested and the transparency of its correspondence to the world becomes opaque.

The people of the city are clearly attracted to the barbarians. Living in a decadent world that is falling apart, the anticipation of an encounter with the other, even in the form of an invasion, becomes the driving force behind their actions. In the Western imagination, the barbarian has sparked anxiety and fear, as well as fascination and longing.<sup>46</sup> A mixture of both emotional states overtakes the people in the poem, although desire is the prevailing emotion. The poem inflates the Western topos of the desire for the other to such an extent that it takes the form of a self-destructive wish.

The eagerness of the citizens to welcome the barbarians is comparable to the Magistrate’s attraction to the barbarian girl and his desire to make contact with her. Both the Magistrate and the people in Cavafy’s city fail to make real contact with the barbarians. But the way they imagine this encounter and the reasons for its failure are somewhat different. While the Magistrate refuses to stage an encounter with the girl on his own terms and tell her story in his own language, the people in Cavafy’s poem are unable to imagine an encounter with the other in terms other than their own.

As I have argued, the people in the poem assume to know what the barbarians are like, what their habits are, how they will behave, and how they will rule the city once they arrive. The emperor has even prepared a scroll to give to their leader, “replete with titles, with imposing names.” Hidden in these titles and names is the hierarchical structure

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<sup>46</sup> White argues that the desire for the barbarian derives from the classical tradition (the Greeks and the Romans), whereas the anxiety and fear for the other is more typical for theonomic traditions (the Christian and Hebrew tradition) (1972:10).

of the old Empire, which the people intend to pass on to their prospective barbarian rulers. Instead of trying to restructure the old so as to generate something new, they are just turning the barbarians into mirror images of themselves and their society. They are eager to change rulers, convinced that this change is enough to bring their world to a new beginning. However, the script of the Empire in the hands of the emperor contains the "titles" and "names" that safeguard the categories and oppositions that brought their society to an impasse in the first place. As such, they resemble Colonel Joll's act of creating his barbarians by writing "ENEMY" on the backs of his prisoners. Therefore, the citizens leave no room for the arrival of something truly new, because they presuppose an already known other that can be articulated in their language before it has even made its appearance. In this way, the poem presents a solipsistic society that does not dare to open itself to newness and alterity. Without knowing it, the citizens themselves are responsible for sabotaging their encounter with the barbarians they so eagerly anticipate.

The mythology of the other, Dimitris Tziouvas argues in his essay on the poem, is essential for self-affirmation, whereas its absence gives birth to utter bewilderment (177). The pessimistic mood that overcomes the city when the barbarians do not come is a sign of resignation. The Empire has to come to terms with its own demise, but not in the way it has staged it: not as an honorable defeat from external enemies, but due to internal contradictions. The society in the poem is not rewarded with the spectacular drama of its fall; to borrow T.S. Eliot's words, it ends "not with a bang, but with a whimper." Civilization is faced with its own anticlimax (Poggioli 149). The citizens are struck by the realization that the barbarians they are waiting for are projections of the barbaric qualities in themselves. As a result, they redirect their gaze from the outside to the inside. The introspection that follows—and the depressive mood it generates—can be read in everybody's faces ("How serious people's faces have become"), as everyone is "going home lost in thought." Eventually, the compelling final lines are heard:

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?  
They were, those people, a kind of solution.

Who speaks these verses and from which position? The identity and status of the voice in these lines has been an object of debate among critics. The lines could either be uttered by the first or second speaker in the dialogue or by a third unidentified voice, which could be that of the poet-observer, reflecting on the situation in the poem with a deeply ironic statement.<sup>47</sup> Based on the structure of the dialogue, we can infer that these lines are uttered by the first speaker, as a reaction to the previous statement by the second speaker,

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<sup>47</sup> Renato Poggioli entertains the possibility of a third voice (that of the poet). He argues that the poet "looks at decadence not as an actor but as a spectator doubly removed, and hence able to afford both a sardonic and an urbane wit" (148). The possibility of a third voice reflecting on the preceding dialogue can be supported by the similar structure of other Cavafian poems.



wherein he announces that the barbarians will not come. On the other hand, a metrical analysis of the Greek text suggests that these two verses follow the metrical pattern of the second speaker's speech: they comprise thirteen syllables each, as opposed to the decapentasyllabic verse (fifteen syllables) that the first speaker uses in his questions. This brings the final lines closer to the second speaker's sound in the poem.<sup>48</sup>

I contend that these lines are spoken by the first speaker, whose voice is no longer the same. His voice appears altered after the "dreadful realization of the depletion of images of Otherness" (Constantinou 193). The final voice does not belong to a third person-observer who witnesses the dialogue from a distance and draws conclusions. The agony and struggle for self-preservation implicit in the phrase "a kind of" suggests that this voice belongs to the same discourse that invented the barbarians. But this voice is also changed by self-reflection, which requires a distancing from oneself, a viewing of oneself as other. To this latter dimension it owes its ironic undertone.

The final voice could also be different because it does not only address the citizens in the poem's city, but also the poem's audience: the readers. Through this apostrophe, the speaker transfers and perpetuates the search for another "solution" in the present of every reading, implicating the reader in this search.

Searching for an answer to the question "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?" may lead to a rethinking of the self and a reflection on the conditions that made the encounter with the barbarians impossible. The non-realization of this encounter does not necessarily support a pessimistic view upon civilization. Cavafy himself read his poem with optimism:

Besides, the poem does not work against my optimistic view [about the future]. It can be taken as an episode in the course towards the Good. Society reaches a level of luxury, civilization, and consternation, where, desperate from being in a position wherein it cannot rectify things through a compromise with its usual mode of living, it decides to bring radical change—to sacrifice, to change, to go back, to simplify.<sup>49</sup>

Cavafy reads his poem as a warning that society needs "radical change." Whether the "solution" lies in going back to a simpler mode of life, as Cavafy seems to suggest in his comment, or in another mode of being, one thing is certain: the failure of the poem's promise indicates the bankruptcy of existing modes of thought, and as such it can be seen as an act of criticism, initiating a search for another "solution."<sup>50</sup> Encounters with others,

<sup>48</sup> "Decapentasyllabic verse" is a common metric form in Modern Greek poetry, comprising fifteen syllables in iambic verse. It has been the primary meter of traditional and folk poetry in Greece since the Byzantine period. Based on a metrical and typographic analysis of the poem, Mackridge argues that in the two final lines the voices of the first and second speaker come together, but he chooses not to personify the voices in the dialogue as either real or fictional characters (2008: 289).

<sup>49</sup> My translation of Cavafy's own comments on the poem, published by Savidis in an interview in the Greek newspaper *Ta Nea* April 23, 1983.

<sup>50</sup> Based on the subsequent sentences in Cavafy's brief commentary on his poem, for Cavafy retrieving a simpler way of living involves having less knowledge and less needs. This allows one to have an

the poem suggests, call for a radical refashioning of the ways we understand ourselves as well as others.

Cavafy's poem and Coetzee's novel disrupt the discourse on "barbarism versus civilization" through a subversive reiteration of its categories. But in achieving that, they both stand before an even greater challenge: that of constructing a new discursive space after having deconstructed the old. Their performance of a loss of ground cannot serve as a ground itself; it can only cause the ground beneath to move and give way for something new (Felman 2003: 44). In Cavafy's poem, this challenge of the new is implied in the question: "Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?" In the poem, the possibility of a "solution," of a new space wherein the relation between self and other is refashioned, poses as a challenging question, but is left unanswered. Despite the difference of the speaker's voice in the final verses, I still hear it as a voice standing *before* a void, not yet plunging into it. In Coetzee, on the other hand, I contend that the narrator descends into that void and dares to let a negotiation take place between the old and a new kind of discourse. The narrator's language, misreading the foundational concepts of the Empire, carries signs of a transition between the old and the new, sameness and otherness. Nevertheless, this transition is not fully accomplished in the novel, which in the end leaves us on a road "that may lead nowhere."

The narrator cannot escape the limitations of his discourse. However, he experiments with its categories and turns them into instruments of subversion and linguistic contamination. The Magistrate's barbarism consists in misusing the terms of the Empire's discourse and experimenting with the shifts and errors that may come about when these terms are reiterated. The insertion of "barbarisms" in a sedimented discourse—those errant stitches that change the pattern of civilization—unsettles the standardized relations wherein this discourse operates. In a different space, within literature, barbarism emerges as an operation that causes shifts in a familiar code by repeating the signs of this code in slightly altered signifying constellations.

### A Promise on Shaky Ground

The Empire in Coetzee's novel is falling apart for the same reasons as the city in the poem: not by an external enemy, but under the pressure of its internal conflicts. Both the poem and the novel expose the barbarian as part of the civilized subject, but nonetheless constructed as an external other that sustains the identity of civilization. These works do not just reverse the opposition between civilization and barbarism, in order to demonstrate how the civilized are the real barbarians whereas the "barbarians" are the innocent victims of Western barbarism. Rather, they question the grounds of the dichotomy by exposing its terms as hollow, violent, and even arbitrary. As both works—and particularly Coetzee's

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immediacy of experience and a fresh and more enthusiastic relation to things and their mystery.

novel—suggest, it is not enough to be able to recognize the barbarism within civilization and point the finger to the perpetrators of barbaric acts from a supposedly safe distance. Recognizing barbaric behavior is commendable, but it does not resolve the predicament of our implication in the discursive categories that have co-shaped our subjectivity. As the Magistrate's position indicates, our entanglement in the discourses of civilization, Empire or history marks our complicity with the perpetrators, even if we are not the ones using the instruments of torture. This predicament is too complex to be resolved by siding with the "good guys" or against the "bad guys." Thus, instead of just shuffling the referents of these categories, Coetzee's novel reiterates the "barbarian" in ways that confound its conventional field of operation.

Faced with the impossibility of discarding the category of the barbarian, the poem and the novel nevertheless succeed in mobilizing it. Searching for the barbarians, we do not know where to look; our gaze is un-fixed. Should we try to discern them beyond the borders of the city or in the vastness of the desert, or should we look around us, in our homes, our cities, within ourselves? And what we think we see, is it the barbarians themselves or a distorted reflection of ourselves? The barbarian is omnipresent and yet elusive.

In both the poem and the novel, the "barbarian" oscillates between history and literature, challenging the institutional boundaries of these discourses. The barbarians of history are shown to be mythical constructions with no real referents, while new barbarians—the people of the Empire in the novel or the people of the city in the poem—are designated in literature. One of history's favorite dichotomies, barbarians versus civilized, faces a "barbarian invasion" from literature, which imbues the solid terms of this dichotomy with ambiguity. The poem and the novel perform another history through literature, which I described through the concept of barbarian allegory. In so doing, they invite historical discourse to engage with its discursive other (literature), thereby challenging literature's traditional subordination to "serious" language. The novel and the poem stand on the edge of historical discourse, engaging with, but also detached from, history's categories. Literature, Derrida says, "perhaps stands on the edge of everything, almost beyond everything, including itself" (1992: 47). Its exemplary iterability opens it up to other discourses, which it can repeat into new forms and constellations (62).

Cavafy's and Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* present the reader with unresolved questions, linguistic bewilderment, obsessive reiterations, infelicitous performatives, and the prospect of an alternative way of speaking and relating to others—a prospect perhaps explored in Coetzee more than in Cavafy. The promise they make—the arrival of the barbarians—is a promise they cannot keep. However, in failing their promise they succeed in envisioning another kind of history within literature. This history is able to survive the repeated broken promise of the presence of meaning by refashioning its binary structures and "truths" as barbarian allegories: configurations of inherited signs, which may be meaningful for, and hold references to, our present, but whose meaning is never

fully determinable, making their performance inexhaustible. This reflects a performative approach to history, in which the past is a living part of the present.

These works do not have any clear-cut solution to the predicament of civilization. They do, however, project the hope—the promise even—of another “kind of solution” that could guide us to “a road that may lead” *somewhere*. Some may find the terms in which this promise is made too weak or too vague to be convincing. But attempts to repeat dominant categories into new senses cannot have a secure outcome. On this shaky ground of unpredictability, between the “may” and the “kind of” of a new solution that could put us on a road to somewhere or “nowhere,” a limited but cogent notion of agency is enabled. Cavafy’s and Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* explore the effects of oppositional thinking, as well as a prospect that constitutes one of the *desiderata* of our globalized world: that of societies that would not need to wait in vain for barbarians, but would be more open to encounters with others on terms other than the ones they have internalized.

