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The Barbarianism of the Civilized Man Literary Allegories

“The Barbarians are here.”

Jim Coetzee

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THE ANCIENT Greeks, who occupy a bright spot in the history of humanity, and to whom the Western world owes so much in various fields such as philosophy, art, literature, history, ethics, rhetoric, etc., labeled the Others as barbarians. The term barbarian, *barbaroi*, comes from Ancient Greek and it refers to those who speak unintelligible languages, a multitude of words used together without any logic and sense: *bar, bar, bar* (“blah, blah, blah”) (Moraru 2011, 28). Ancient Greeks considered themselves to be superior people and, as such, they did not deem it necessary to make “the effort to know” and better understand other “inferior” civilizations.¹ Intolerance, irrational behavior, exclusion or rejection of what is unknown, in spite of what Dominique Walton calls “l’omniprésence de l’Autre comme facteur aggravant d’incompréhension” (Walton 2003, 10; see also Moraru 2011, 22), all these traits are ever present, no matter how advanced civilization becomes and how many millennia separate us from Ancient Greece. This startling observation permeates various ways the field of art, of

literature, which focuses on the experiences of oppression, discrimination and racism that, although having a mutilating effect on the human condition, still remain a lesson to be learned.

Technical Perfection and the Annihilation of Humanism

IN HIS third sea voyage, Gulliver, Jonathan Swift's character, finds out about the existence of a flying island, Laputa, a technical miracle, carefully and scientifically described by the author, in an almost neutral tone. We are given mathematical, mechanical details—an analytical and abstract style is the most appropriate for such a subject. "The flying, or floating island, is exactly circular; its diameter seven thousand eight hundred and thirty seven yards, or about four miles and an half, and consequently contains ten thousand acres" (Swift 1970, 178), etc. It is astonishing to discover that this island is a terrible instrument used for punishment and even destruction. If the people who live below the flying island and under its rule rebel, they are deprived of sunlight and rain, by "keeping the island hovering over such a town." If the rebellions do not cease, they are "pelted with great stones" and finally, if they obstinately continue with their insurrection, "he proceeds to the last remedy, by letting the island drop directly upon their heads, which makes a universal destruction both of houses and men" (183). And, at this point, the reader comes to the realization that he was presented with an aberrant invention, similar to the thinking machine mentioned to Gulliver by a scientist during the same voyage. This ingenious creation's purpose is to standardize and serialize thought.

The author of Gulliver's adventures, who lived in the rationalistic century of Enlightenment, the era of absolute faith in the value of scientific and technical achievements and in progress, created a satire of this blind optimism. Renouncing any term that would denote emotional involvement, adopting the attitude of a cold, emotionless observer, Swift focuses only on quantitative symbols, as figures become the star of his narrative. Everything is expressed using mathematical symbols, thus creating a large discrepancy between the perfection, ingenuity and accuracy of the technical inventions and their lack of humanity. It is of no importance whether the flying island and the thinking machine were created from the very beginning as instruments of control, even for the suppression of some humans and the annihilation of the thinking process, or these properties were discovered later on. What does matter is that they do not serve humanity's wellbeing and progress, becoming grotesque, monstrous, aberrant, irrational

creations. The intellectual effort, the intelligence involved in their creation are useless as long as they suppress life, thinking, and stifle human freedom.

Scientific discoveries and technical innovations were regarded throughout history as expressions of progress, as victories for civilization and human intelligence. Nevertheless, quite a few times they served destructive intentions, which seriously raised the problem of civilization achievements used for barbarian purposes. Unfortunately, these achievements are not annihilated by the superlative thinking that created them. In these circumstances, rational thinking cohabits with or is subordinate to irrational thinking. The literary style chosen by Swift to present the invention that serves criminal purposes is the non-emotional narrative. The writer does not lament, does not deplore this state, but watches in a detached way, inhibiting any emotional expression, and using the cold, emotionless language of science. The outcome of this attitude is terrifying; humanity is diminished, suppressed to the point where the reader finds it difficult to identify the culprit, the character morally responsible for this barbarous creation packed in the technical perfection of a soulless machine.

Nevertheless, beyond this creation, we find the king, the authority who immediately seized the opportunity to exert his inhumane domination over his subjects by abusively using scientific discoveries for personal gain.

The Disappearance of Motivations and Causal Links in Kafka's Allegorical World

EVERY TIME humanity is threatened or undermined through different avenues, the first question to arise concerns why this is happening, although clarifying answers do not make the horror of the situation more bearable or diminish it. The lack of explanations and justifications makes our existence nonsensical, and this represents one of Kafka's essential themes. The writer, having noticed our need for explanations, although useless at times, which endeavor to give an apparent meaning to our lives, explores the human reaction to this very lack of motivation, logic and coherence. The uncertain and aberrant world (death being the only certain thing) created by Kafka leads to a deep anxiety, enhanced by the fact that all the "enigmas" are not solved even at the end of the stories.² Readers are not given any clues, any help to understand the mechanisms behind actions, the coding is seamless; the characters' behaviors and reactions are absolutely illogical and unexplainable. Thus we have the blueprint for a meaningless and chaotic existence, always in danger of being crushed by an incomprehensible barbaric force.

In Kafka's work, the allegory of the meaningless human existence, twisted under the scathing influence of evil without a cause, is essentialized and stylized. We are provided with an abundance of details, with careful, meticulous descriptions that do not shed much light on the story. We find thus the paradox of describing a reality whose meaning escapes us, the following aberration: we are given "everything," but we do not understand its logic! In *The Castle* for example, the character K. carefully explores a labyrinth of bureaucracy, symbolized by the allegory of the castle. We cannot know the hero's destination as he incessantly looks for something, we do not know what for and why. The story, the anecdote are sketchy, reduced, simplified in all of Kafka's works. There isn't much going on, but there are a few essential allegorical models: the search (*la quête*) in *The Castle*, the waiting in *The Trial*, the experience of the lower stages of evolution in *The Metamorphosis*. One of the motifs that attract the most attention is the rapport between the aggressor and the victim that appears to define the human condition. The castle is a faultless, inexplicable machine, just like the absurd judicial apparatus from *The Trial*. With *In the Penal Colony*, Kafka creates an infernal world of fright and horror. The numerous details and the technical, mechanical descriptions annihilate humanism, replacing it with logical connections. The torture machine is an admirable technical achievement by its ingenuity and a frightening success in suppressing the human being. "When K. looked at the castle he sometimes thought he saw someone sitting quietly there, looking into space" but, in fact, "K. had never seen the slightest sign of life there" (Kafka 2009, 88). This immense discrepancy between excelling through thought, intellect, inventiveness and the destructive purpose is an issue acutely expressed in Kafka's prose. His allegories reveal that intellectual performance is not an absolute guarantee for preserving what is good and moral. The strange created world is a world without the fundamental ideas of good and evil, amputated by the disappearance of any logical connection; that is why it appears so eerie to us. Although it apparently seems to be very far from reality, the author creates an experiment in which the absurdity of decisions that destroy countless human lives is taken from ordinary life and transformed in a literary matter. The relationship to life, to its attributed lack of meaning that lead to disasters provoked by people, is clear; fiction transfigured reality, it did not nullify or contradict it.

Two types of dehumanization are clearly exposed: firstly, that of the scientist or technician who actively takes part in the destructive process, as if entranced by the perfection of the killing machine, and secondly, the passive dehumanization of the spectator, who sees the horror and does not act or intervene to stop it, thus becoming responsible as well. The two categories cooperate for the establishment or restoration of barbarism throughout history.

The Civilized Barbarians

THE TWO types of barbarians, the active and the passive one, are very well illustrated by Coetzee's characters from the novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Colonel Joll and the Magistrate. The former is the torturer sent by the secret service called "The Third Bureau" and the latter, the central character, is the spectator to abominable acts, desiring peace and a prosperous life, but who is transformed into an accomplice by his non-reaction. Coetzee's allegory is located in an imaginary Empire, in an uncertain time and space, probably in South Africa, but the parable is outside time and space.

Colonel Joll hides his gaze behind tinted glasses, and sight becomes one of the main literary themes of this novel. The eyes are windows to the soul, thus the torturer cultivates his dehumanization by hiding his eyes; the tinted glasses keep his perverted human essence from being noticed, being lost in the grotesque zeal to find "the truth." He is a "truth fanatic," "a doctor in interrogations," delighted with his own technique: "First, I get lies, you see—this is what happens—first lies, then pressure, then more pressure, then the truth" (Coetzee 1982, 10). And the Magistrate remarks sardonically: "Pain is truth, all else is subject to doubt" (*ibid.*). But what kind of "truth" is that which is revealed under torture? How can the colonel be so proud of his methods to make a person give in and agree to say all that the aggressor wants to hear, admitting even to things he has not done, only to survive? This barbarian who appears to be civilized, who devalues the notion of truth itself, does not understand a thing, not only about the human nature towards which he does not exhibit any compassion, but also about the fact that the so-called barbarians are not a real threat. His army is practically disarmed, ravaged by the tough desert conditions, and not by a direct confrontation with the "enemy" after which one side would become the victor, superior to the other. The "enemy" is armed with bows and arrows, old weapons, and lives in tents! The colonel cowardly deserts his companions afterwards, losing his tinted glasses, showing himself not as a cold and rigid person, but as a pathetic being who only wants to save his own life.

The Magistrate is the Empire's representative who leads a quiet existence, enjoying the perks of his station in life, reading the classics, fascinated by the remains of a civilization discovered through archeological digs, even if he cannot understand it—perhaps this explains the attraction and mystery it exerts upon him—and does not hesitate to lead a promiscuous life. The relationship he develops with the barbarian girl whom he transforms into his whore has more profound explanations. The physical desire he feels for her is underpinned by pity, envy, guilt and cruelty in equal measure. The broken tortured body of the girl, her eyes, who lost their sight, have not lost completely their humanity.

What else is left of this crushed humanity is what the Magistrate intends to find out, but to no avail. This woman seems to be hollow inside, just a surface that makes knowledge impossible. The same significance is attributed to his dreams of children with white, empty, smooth, featureless faces. These beings appear grotesque, terrifying because they are impenetrable. The so-called barbarian is the Other, whom the civilized man cannot reach or understand, and then this human being is considered inhuman, an almost animalic lifeform, despised, who does not know how to behave and must be subdued, dominated by force.

The Magistrate considered himself a civilized being, and would have liked the world to regard him as civilized to the depths of his soul, but then he becomes acutely aware that he is the lie the Empire propagates during peacetime, and Colonel Joll is the truth spread during difficult times. "The two faces of Imperial domination!" It is not insignificant that the Magistrate rediscovers his humanity when he is reduced to the primitive condition of a being who only wants to survive. He refuses to remain an accomplice to an absurd crime, returns the barbarian girl to the tribe, no longer accepts the torture of innocents and is punished for it, becoming himself a victim of imperial representatives who accuse him of treason. However he is unable to keep his dignity, pleads for his life, becomes just a body hoping to appease its hunger and to perform its physiological functions. The Civilized man with refined tastes, cultured and delighted by the classics, can turn in a single moment into a brute, not just by passively watching the torture of his fellow human being, but also by being subjected to a deprived existence. The balance is very fragile and dignity is easily lost. However, many times, only one who lives through such limitations can fully and truly understand the essence of one's own humanity.

Is it Impossible to Change Human Nature?

THE ALLEGORIES created by Swift, Kafka, Coetzee and many others from different cultures and historical eras, highlight an incurable evil and a situation without remedy. The writers do not offer or suggest solutions, but are satisfied just to observe the reality or to criticize it in an indirect, artistic manner. The world does not seem to be morally different now from what it was in the past, but naming the problem, relaying its gravity, its impact over society in general, is an important step taken by art. Literature is not meant to transform evil into a show, which we all can watch and then forget immediately afterwards. Once we become conscious of what is happening, our guilt and responsibility increase when we continue to indulge into an equivocal situation.

The works of the mentioned authors question our trust in reason, offer the image of a falsely idealized civilization, undermining the myth of progress when used to serve destruction. Through their works, Swift and Kafka draw our attention to the dangers of an excessively technicized and rationalized world, of an excess in the very qualities that made our world great. The mechanisms of domination, discipline, and control are a new type of barbarianism, the irruption of savagery into modern civilization. But this problem can be regarded from another point of view. What if Habermas is right when he affirms that there is too little reason in our civilized world, rather than too much, as all the conquests of science and technology let us believe? Perhaps we ought to discuss the matter of a deficit, not of an excess of reason! The reason that is directly and inseparably linked to humanism and morality and does not equally condone immorality. Christopher Rocco, commenting on Habermas's theory stated: "the processes of rationalization have not yet been institutionalized, or have proceeded one-sidedly in favor of an instrumental reason embodied in technical-scientific enterprises" (Rocco 1994, 78).

The smooth, nightmarish, featureless faces from Coetzee's novel remind us of Kafka's world that lacks categorization (*Kategorielose*), ordered, meticulous but featureless, without substance, sense and logic, no depth, just surface. But we cannot conceive a rational society without varied intelligence levels, without a meaning that follows or leads to another meaning, without particularities, differences, multiplicity, pluralism, and even contradictions, without those fertile contradictions, not the ones that generate conflicts where a party must always lose, at times painfully. Because, in the bipolar world we live in, one person is civilized and another person is a barbarian, and implicitly only one of the two has rights and is rightful, and usually the barbarian is the loser. He/she does not "deserve" anything for he/she is not worthy, and furthermore he/she must be despised, exiled through racism and xenophobia, as he/she is at an inferior evolutionary stage. In reality he/she is not inferior to the civilized man/woman as the roles can change in a split second, as they both downgrade that which they do not understand, because of a terror of the unknown and hatred of the unknowable. In a solipsist world, only the one representing the culture used as a reference point exists, and only this culture owns the "unique truth," *solae veritates*.

We live under the impression that once we become civilized, we can no longer return to barbarianism, but the barbarian ego co-exists sleepily with the civilized ego, it has not been annihilated, and it is a part of the shadow of the civilized being that can always be activated.³ "The barbarians are here," Coetzee says (1982, 163). To respond to backwardness, cruelty, savagery with the sophisticated, cold savagery of the torture machine is nothing else than return-

ing to barbarianism, accepting dehumanization. Who is inhumane in Coetzee's novel: the barbarians, simple, nomadic human beings, living primitively, innocents corrupted by the many "benefits" of civilization, like alcohol, or the torturer who wants to snatch confessions of in-existent attack plans against the Empire from innocent people? There seems to be an ambivalent nature of the human intellect and power, a perilous balance and dialectics between authority, force, rebelliousness on the one hand, and helplessness, weakness, lack of dignity, moral misery on the other. Is this ambivalence perverted—we indulge in it, consciously admit and cultivate it—, or is it that we simply cannot ignore it, cannot give a voice to the irrational, cruel, violent part of us, as in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where "the shadow," Mr. Hyde, is controlled up to a point where he escapes the control of reason? Barbaric, irrational behaviors could be explained in such a manner; the Other is "the shadow of himself" (Stevenson 2006, 90). If human nature is fundamentally bipolar, antagonistic (civilized and savage) and condemned to abandon once in a while, according to circumstances, the voice of reason, then civilization is also a sort of *pharmakon*, both remedy and poison!

Nevertheless today we are speaking more and more, which can be an indication of a major change in attitude, mentality, and finally in the behavior or internal structures, about the importance of transcending our limitations, to build a *Bridge and Door*⁴ to the world of the Other and to renounce ignorant opacity, and to rectify our insensitivity to particularity. Identity at any level can only be defined in relation to the Other, Huntington said, and Christian Moraru speaks of the manner in which understanding the Other is attempted, is rewarded with self-knowledge and "a double opportunity to discover others, no doubt as well as ourselves. The two discoveries are inseparable" (Moraru 2011, 22). The civilized man must understand that destruction of the Other equates to self-destruction. Nowadays, more than ever, we live in a relating world, "a network society" that obliges us to care for the others. That is why, Christian Moraru says, we must establish "an ecology not an egology" of relationships with our peers and also with those different from us.

Thomas L. Friedman, in his 2005 book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, mentions a different paradigm of the assignment of value, which is valid in the field of economics and informational technology especially, but our society is collaborative in nature in all of its levels and it is impossible for these profound changes not to affect all the components of society, especially the way of being and thinking of the human individual. Thus, if in the past value was created in a predominantly vertical system, this system being labeled by Friedman as one of command and control, today the model becomes more and more horizontal, based on connection and multiple forms

of collaboration. “Everywhere you turn,” Friedman says, “hierarchies are being challenged from below or are transforming themselves from top-down structures into more horizontal and collaborative ones” (Friedman 2005, 48). If the old system very clearly defined the leaders and those they led, who was the exploiter and who the exploited, the civilized and the barbarian, in the near future even the meek will have power and will be given the opportunity to demonstrate their value, to prove that they are the keepers of an immense potential for work, creativity and culture.

Anthropologists point out that societies affected by rapid changes (such as the changes affecting today economic trade, the labor market, IT, etc.) are found to be rather unstable. A world without cultural or linguistic differences, without any conflicts fueled by ideologies, and without separations between people that often generate friction, seems to be a remote reality. It is true that the new communication technologies are the main modality that brings people together, without judgments in terms of evolutionary stages. At the same time, it is inferred that these technologies equally lead to uniformization, representing a danger for differences in identity which must be maintained. We are not only similar to each other, but also unique and different from one another. It is an axiomatic truth against which it makes no sense to fight. Thus we must clearly state the different features, those defining aspects representing particularities which must be respected, protected, and those limitations and barriers within our community and individual mentality that create injustice and a flagrant violation of the human rights and freedoms of the Other. People will always need rules, laws to uphold, and the authority principle and its application in daily life, because otherwise anarchy would ensue, but this authority ought not to turn, as it often happens, into domination, control and abuse.

Literary allegories are some of the modalities that help us become more conscious of the grave, absurd, destabilizing consequences for the human being of the refusal to understand, respect, regard with tolerance and openness towards dialogue the one who is different from you. Scientific and technical discoveries have often been used for destruction. Humanity’s progress over thousands of years is undeniable and is overwhelmingly due to scientific and technological advances. These innovations seem to cause significant mutations in the structure of a global society that is infinitely more open towards communication than it used to be. It is possible to cause good changes, mutations of the human structures, which would cease to think of differences in conflictual terms, annulling once and for all the tension between the civilized man and the barbarian and making it unacceptable for the civilized man to prove himself a barbarian.

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Notes

1. “A barbarian, Greek historians and philosophers enlighten us, is fundamentally a non-Greek, a foreigner. Vice versa, a foreigner must be barbaric, totally different” (Moraru 2011, 28). However, some Greek historians used the word “barbarian” only in the descriptive (non-normative) sense. As Patrick Thollard says, “barbare, chez Strabon, est une catégorie qui permet de classer et de décrire les peuples sans avoir à les juger” (Thollard 1987, 39).
2. Some interpreters have pointed out that Kafka’s stories “are not set in any definite time,” so the characters “tend to be interpreted by readers as actors in an always present” (Gross 2002, 247).
3. In the contractarian political theory, this issue was developed by Thomas Hobbes, whose merit consists in “knowing and seeing against what the liberal ideal of civilization has to be persistently fought for: not merely against rotten institutions, against the evil will of a ruling class, but against the natural evil of man” (Strauss 2007, 107). However, as Gabriela Ratulea pointed out, “it is not clear enough whether, in Hobbes, the moment when nature is denied is equivalent to the assertion of civilization” (Ratulea 2014, 610).
4. Georg Simmel’s metaphor for the multicultural society viewed as a bridge system between separate parts (see Simmel 1994, 5–10).

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Abstract

The Barbarianism of the Civilized Man: Literary Allegories

The binomial civilized/barbarian is as old as the history of culture and civilization. What is grave is that humanity considers civilization as something definitive, earned for good, while civility can quickly and much too easily be transformed into barbarism. It is what authors like Swift, Kafka or Coetzee demonstrate through literary allegories. Barbarism is equated with the attempt to annihilate the human being with the aid of the machine or through the military superiority of the civilized man. After all appearances this reality emerges: civilized man becoming a barbarian under certain conditions will never change, although in the era of globalism a structural change is foreseen. Communication will create the premise for knowing the Other, for showing understanding and tolerance towards him/her, so, in an optimistic scenario, the barbarianism of the "civilized" man becomes less and less possible.

Keywords

civilized, barbarian, literature, allegory, humanity, dehumanization, Swift, Kafka, Coetzee