
(Anti)Barbarous Empires: J.M. Coetzee's Iconoclasm in *Waiting for the Barbarians*

VLADIMIR BITI

Institute of Slavic Studies, University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria.
Email: Vladimir.biti@univie.ac.at

Empires usually operate on the premise that only imperial centres are carriers of the historical progress of humanity, whereas imperial peripheries are far removed from this progress's blessing. According to John Maxwell Coetzee, the Dutch Empire considered South Africa as its own land, which deprived that country's indigenous people of their citizen rights. Like the residents of European imperial peripheries who were relegated to similar zones of historical indistinction, they were doomed to the twilight of legal illegality. Unlike the regulated area of historical progress, their state of exception was ruled by the whims of imperial officials. 'The security police could come in and out and blindfold and handcuff you without explaining why, and take you away to an unspecified site and do what they wanted to you', he wrote in *Diary of a Bad Year* (1977: 171). In his novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Coetzee strategically 'unmoors' and 'deterritorializes' this peripheral state of exception, spreading its iconoclastic effects all over the 'sacrosanct' territory of history.

After the empty ominous locations of both of his early novels, *Dusklands* (1974; Coetzee 1998) and *In the Heart of the Country* (1978; Coetzee 1982a), Coetzee's third novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1981; Coetzee 1982b) introduces an unspecified frontier of an unknown empire.^a As the zones of an empire's dis/junction with foreign languages, cultures, and customs, the borderlands represent a huge challenge for all imperial administrations. They usually regard these in-between zones of mixed belonging and hybrid loyalties as a pernicious threat to their empires' welfare. If anywhere, it is precisely in these indistinct, murky, and amorphous translation zones that their identities have to be confirmed, maintained, and, if necessary, violently defended from their potential gravediggers.

During the crises of empires that accelerate the processes of their dis-identification, the violence against the borderlands' 'foreigners', 'savages' and 'degenerates'

was often publicly advocated and supported. The prejudices against them were quickly spreading. In this regard, Franz Kafka's short piece 'An Old Manuscript', written immediately after the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1919), deserves special attention. It is narrated by a humble cobbler whose report switches from first-person singular to the first-person plural perspective. As a typical representative of the mob prejudices, he presents the nomad soldiers as degenerate foreign intruders who have shamelessly taken possession of the square in front of the Emperor's palace, where his workshop is located:

This peaceful square, which was always kept so scrupulously clean, they have made literally into a stable. We do try every now and then to run out of our shops and clear away at least the worst of the filth, but this happens less and less often, for the labor is in vain and brings us besides into danger of falling under the hoofs of the wild horses or of being crippled with lashes from the whips. (Kafka 1988a: 455)

It is impossible to communicate with these barbarians who only speak their ridiculous 'jackdaw' language and 'make grimaces' all the time.^b On top of stealing whatever they please from people, they stage their horrible carnivorous dismemberment ceremonies:

Not long ago the butcher thought he might at least spare himself the trouble of slaughtering, and so one morning he brought along a live ox. But he will never dare to do that again. I lay for a whole hour flat on the floor at the back of my workshop with my head muffled in all the clothes and rugs and pillows I had simply to keep from hearing the bellowing of that ox, which the nomads were leaping on from all sides, tearing morsels out of its living flesh with their teeth. (Kafka 1988a: 456)

The Emperor and his officials do not care to stop this disgraceful torment in front of the imperial palace and instead leave their humble subjects to cope with it, 'but we are not equal to such a task; nor have we ever claimed to be capable of it. This is a misunderstanding of some kind; and it will make us perish' (Kafka 1988a: 456, trans. modified; *wir gehen daran zugrunde*).

Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* opens with a similar misunderstanding between an Empire's centre and its periphery concerning the barbarous threat to its welfare, but displaces the latter from the centre to the borderlands. This reverses the division of roles from 'An Old Manuscript': now, whereas provincials remain indifferent to the alleged peril, the government undertakes violent preventive measures against it. By doing so, it instinctively follows Hegel's famous advice to the governments to launch war to stop the disintegration of their states through the rise of their subjects' selfishness (Hegel 2011: 473). In 'An Old Manuscript', it is the Emperor's and his officials' delineated disinterest in common affairs that epitomizes this reckless striving for self-existence (*Fürsichsein*). Nothing but disintegration can take place in empires in which the barbarians push 'right into the capital, although it

is a long way from the frontier' (Kafka 1988a: 455). Hegel accordingly warned against Kant's proposed ideal of a perpetual peace:

Just as the movement of the ocean prevents the corruption which would be the result of perpetual calm, so by war people escape the corruption which would be occasioned by a continuous or eternal peace. (Hegel 1896: 331)

In Kafka's time, the corruption in question acquired the advanced form of a war by everyone against everyone, indicating that the imperial predestined 'harmony of spheres' transformed into the post-imperial tyranny of one self-enclosed sphere against the other:

I was defenceless against the figure across me, she sat quietly at the table and looked at the tabletop. I went around her in circles and felt strangled by her. A third walked around me and felt strangled by me. A fourth walked around the third and felt strangled by him. And so it continued up to the movements of the stars and beyond. Everything feels the grip on the neck. (Kafka 1953: 312, translation mine)

Disquieted by the disintegration of society into its groups' and individuals' encapsulated realities, Kafka directed his attention to its perilous fragmentation into such 'casings of the bondage to the future' (Max Weber; *Gehäuse der Hörigkeit der Zukunft*) and revealed their hidden warring against one another.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, on the contrary, Coetzee deals with the centre's encapsulation into its delusions by examining its 'hysterical' emergency measures and the ways they effectuate the frontier as their stage. Distracting attention from its own corruption, the central administration blames the 'alienated' and 'indifferent' borderlands for it, trying to reappropriate their territories which were disappropriated by barbarian influences, influxes, and intrusions. By its very nature, the borderland degenerates core imperial values but the main figure in Coetzee's novel that, according to the alerts sent to the centre, bears responsibility for their deterritorialization is the Magistrate, an imperial official who was appointed with quite the opposite task of protecting and consolidating the Empire's territory. True, this happened while he was still a young man (Coetzee 1982b: 5) and in the meantime he developed an interest in the natives, adopted some of their habits and got accustomed to the 'wilderness' of their domicile.

This deterritorialization of his civil manners by the barbarous ones has reminded some critics of the character of Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (Samolsky 2011: 66; Micali 2017: 13–16), who was likewise sent far away from the imperial centre into 'the heart of the country', presumably the Belgian Congo, to be exposed there to a similar 'barbarization'. However, the conclusion that both novels lead to the insight that the only real barbarians are the colonizers, might prove to be 'all too easy' (Micali 2017: 15) considering that Coetzee's novel refracts Conrad's central perspective through Kafka's peripheral one. Besides, even though Coetzee's novel, due to some undeniable South African references, was often read as

an allegory of the South African ‘twilight of legal illegality’ in the 1970s (Coetzee 1992: 363), its godforsaken borderland is all but predominantly African. There are no races in the novel and there was no ‘Third Bureau’ in South Africa, but instead in tsarist Russia. Further on, according to the report of a South African censor, ‘the locality is obscure; some oasis in an arid region north of the equator, where winters are icy. It is nowhere Southern African, nor is there any white populace’ (quoted in Wittenberg and Highman 2015: 110).

Indeed, whereas Coetzee set both *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* in landscapes with which he was intimately familiar, in *Barbarians* he envisioned, i.e. constructed, an unknown landscape (Coetzee 1992: 142). Being patched together from various travellers’ accounts, the novel’s ‘map’ belongs less to the physical than an imaginary geography. ‘I just put together a variety of locales and left a lot of things vague with a very definite intention that it shouldn’t be pinned down to some specific place’ (Coetzee in Penner 1986: 35). To avoid the harsh state censorship, he displaced the novel’s setting from Cape Town and Robben Island (Mandela’s prison), which were envisioned for its first version, to Lop Nor lake next to the Mongolian border in northwest China (Wittenberg and Highman 2015: 112). Certainly, Coetzee’s geopolitically abstract rendering of citizens’ confrontation with the barbarians, which ‘could as well be Russian and Kirghiz, or Han and Mongol, or Turk and Arab, or Arab and Berber’ (Coetzee in Begam 1992: 33), is not simply the outcome of his political discretion. More substantially, it is his relentless commitment to explore how the ‘real’s’ circulation empties out all historical realities.^c No single reality matches the ‘real’s’ spectrality, which therefore has to be traced down in the space in-between these realities. The more overlapping historical realities, the more deterritorialized this ‘province’ in which the ‘real’ is expected to reside becomes.

This is why, more than Conrad’s technique of deterritorialization, Coetzee’s radical dislocation associates Kafka’s, which was guided by the same iconoclastic attitude to all historical realities. Thus, in his ‘At the Construction of the Great Wall of China’ (Kafka 1988b),^d the Austro-Hungarian Empire, striving to stop its threatening fragmentation at the outset of the twentieth century, transfigures into the ancient Chinese Empire in the process of its unification out of seven warring states. Kafka undertakes another and similarly extreme dislocation in his ‘Memoirs of the Kalda railway’ (Kafka 1976: 303–313), inspired by his uncle Löwy’s memories of the Congo railway construction (Alt 2005: 28) that, interestingly enough, pops up in Conrad’s novella. Although Kafka’s adventurous uncle, often addressed in his diaries, understandably recalled tropical temperatures, the story reports a railway construction in the icy Russian steppes.

Next to such climatic and cultural turnover of its setting, *Barbarians* also associates with Kafka’s ‘At the Construction’ through the official deployment of the barbarian threat as the means for the vanishing empire’s reanimation and consolidation. Foggy and vague, the idea of the barbarians appears in both narratives ‘as a blank slip onto which the Empire engraves itself; that is, the Empire gives itself form by writing’ on them (Valdez Moses 1993: 120).

[T]he ghost of barbarian enemies is [...] the necessary fulfilment of the Empire's ghost; it is only thanks to the opposition to an external threat that the innumerable people scattered across the vast Chinese territory (in which, as we are told, even the language of neighbouring countries sounds strange and shocking) can acquire the sense of belonging to a common civilization. (Micali 2017: 12, translation mine)

The Tarim basin, in which Coetzee sets his novel's action, has long been contested by various sides. The name of the province which it belongs to, Xinjiang ('new frontier'), dates from the nineteenth century, when the area, formerly known as East Turkestan, officially became part of the Qing Empire after conquest in the mid-eighteenth century. The explorations of the Swedish geographer and ethnographer Sven Hedin in this area, as presented in his *Central Asia and Tibet: Towards the Holy City of Lassa* (1903) and later works, have been founded by Chiang Kai-shek in the 1930s with the aim of securing the area's subjugation within a larger China. They served as the novel's most important documentary sources. Hedin himself 'adhered to the idea of a Great China [...] and shared the Chinese view that Tibetans and the Mongols were uncivilized barbarians' (Johansson 2012: 68). He meticulously evokes the former empire of Loulan that disappeared through the barbarian invasion and the loss of water, and Coetzee places his novel in the frantic time just before its demise. However, the depicted hysteria of a pre-revolutionary period, strongly reminiscent of the panicking South African apartheid (Attwell 2014: 206), is far from being over in today's China. 'In the wake of 9/11, the Chinese government has sought to portray attacks in Xinjiang as part of a coordinated global al-Qaeda jihad [...] and their own repressive treatment of Uyghurs as part of "counterterrorism"' (Wittenberg and Highman 2015: 123).

To intensify the delineated deterritorialization of the novel's setting, Coetzee additionally refracts *Barbarians'* already overlapping South African, Russian, and Chinese historical realities through the fictional ones, such as that of Conrad's god-forsaken Belgian Congo, Kafka's ancient China from 'The Great Wall' or his French Caledonia from 'Penal Colony'. Through the reference to the latter that serves as the pretext for *Barbarians*, the entanglement of 'backshadowing' and 'foreshadowing' acquires an additional push. Whereas *Barbarians* deal with ancient historical developments, it was only toward the end of the nineteenth century that the New Caledonia colony became the dumping ground for the 'dregs' of the French Empire such as the Parisian Communards (1871). Foucault discusses the deportations of these outcasts toward the end of his *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1977), which also powerfully influenced Coetzee's novel, although it analyses the French Empire's historically later transformation.

Moreover, some critics were tempted to interpret *Barbarians* as an anticipation of the state of exception's world-wide expansion. Following Derrida's reading of the apartheid as a metonymic rather than exceptional historical phenomenon (Derrida 1994: xiv), Wittenberg and Highman for example argue that:

today, the novel has more bite and urgency precisely for its blurring of referentiality; through it we can recognize contemporary practices and link them, their dynamics and rhetoric, with apartheid, now roundly reviled. (Wittenberg and Highman 2015: 124)

Coetzee himself *seems* to be underpinning this interpretation when he, albeit indirectly, extends the state of exception to his new domicile, Australia, still affected by its former colonizers' (i.e. British and American) *translatio imperii*. His senior doppelganger from the *Diary of a Bad Year*, *Señor C.*, quotes his own remarks about pending security legislation in the South Africa of the 1970s that were made in 2006 during his invited reading in the National Library in Canberra:

The security police could come in and out and blindfold and handcuff you without explaining why, and take you away to an unspecified site and do what they wanted to you. [...] All of this, and much more, in apartheid South Africa, was done in the name of a struggle against terror. I used to think that the people who created these laws that effectively suspended the rule of law were moral barbarians. Now I know they were just pioneers, ahead of their time. (Coetzee 2007: 171)

To appropriately understand this statement, one ought to know that Australia, by suspending 'a range of civil liberties indefinitely into the future' (Coetzee 2007: 19), at the time unreservedly joined the American and British war on terror. As for the Americans, following the same logic of 'extraordinary times', which demand 'extraordinary measures' (Coetzee 2007: 43), George W. Bush declared himself to be above the law: 'he cannot commit a crime, since he is the one who makes the laws defining crimes' (Coetzee 2007: 49).

Nevertheless, one should be wary of interpreting *Barbarians* as an exemplary instance of 'futurity' (Eshel 2012: 4–5). Letting the past culminate in the future means making a history out of past and future and this is quite the opposite of that which Coetzee demands of the novel, i.e. to be 'a rival to history' (Coetzee 1988: 5). Like Kafka, he systematically refuses to treat such interruptions as events pre-calculated by history. For him, on the contrary, they never stop drawing the established historical order back into the prehistorical state of confusion.

So even though Coetzee's doppelganger, *Señor C.*, claims that 'his' *Barbarians*' torture chamber anticipates the horrors of Abu Ghraib (Coetzee 2007: 171), Coetzee himself interprets any novel's representation of torture as an unreflected collaboration with the torturers (Coetzee 1992: 363). In the writer's contradictory world as reigned by the unpredictable 'real', different perspectives do not 'dialogically' complete but subversively 'parenthesize' one another. Coetzee does not add different historical realities – South African, Chinese, Russian, Australian, American – to each other in order to finally derive their common truth. This would resume the imperial power's operation, which violently presses the Empire's truth into all subjects until they obey it (Samolsky 2011: 73–74). Abhorring such tyrannical levelling down of all historical realities, he instead tends to uncover the denied '*real*' of one

reality from the other's point of view. As no historical reality can take the evasive prehistorical 'real' into its full possession, the operation steadily goes on by applying one reality after another to the 'real' that blurs all realities' boundaries. As a result, like an invisible iconoclast, contingency barbarically decomposes the imperial sacrament of history.

Notes

- a. In developing my argument in this article, I will be drawing on the selected material from my recent book.
- b. From the residents' point of view, barbarians by definition speak inarticulate animal languages (*bar-bar*) but it is noteworthy that Kafka refers specifically to jackdaws (*Dohlen*) here, which translates in Czech (*kavka*) as his surname and means the same. Have the Czech natives once designated the Jewish settlers as 'jackdaws' because of their 'barbarous' language and is Kafka's surname a relic of this stigma? Whatever the case, 'barbarian' is obviously a positional rather than a natural attribute.
- c. I am using the concept of the 'real' in Jacques Lacan's sense here. In his work, *le réel* designates a dispossessed entity that 'resists symbolization' (Lacan 1987: 66) or 'subsists outside of symbolization' (Lacan 2006: 324), i.e. eludes human reality as established by symbolic distinctions. Out of this hidden non-position, it degrades this reality's appearances to the status of mere 'grimaces' (Lacan 1991: 148), i.e. deterritorializes their identity.
- d. I have modified Willa and Edwin Muir's imprecise translation of this story's title.

References

- Alt P-A (2005) *Franz Kafka: Der ewige Sohn: Eine Biographie*. Munich: C. H. Beck.
- Attwell D (2014) Writing Revolution: The Manuscript Revisions of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *Life Writing* 11(2), 201–216.
- Begam R (1992) An Interview with J. M. Coetzee. *Contemporary Literature* 33(3), 419–431.
- Coetzee JM (1982a) *In the Heart of the Country*. London: Penguin.
- Coetzee JM (1982b) *Waiting for the Barbarians*. New York: Penguin.
- Coetzee JM (1988) The novel today. *Upstream* 6(1), 2–5.
- Coetzee JM (1992) *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Ed. Attwell D. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Coetzee JM (1998) *Dusklands*. London: Vintage.
- Coetzee JM. (2007) *Diary of a Bad Year*. London: Vintage.
- Derrida J (1994) *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning & and the New International*. Kamuf P (Trans.). London and New York: Routledge.
- Eshel A (2012) *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault M (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Sheridan A (trans.). New York: Vintage.
- Hedin, S (1903) *Central Asia and Tibet: Towards the Holy City of Lassa*. London: Hurst and Blackett.
- Hegel GWF (1896) *Philosophy of Right*. Dyde SW (trans.). London: George Bell and Sons.
- Hegel, GWF (2011) *The Phenomenology of Mind*. Baillie JB (trans.). New York: Dover.
- Johansson P (2012) *Saluting the Yellow Emperor: A Case of Swedish Sinography*. Leiden: Brill.

- Kafka F** (1953) Fragmente aus Heften und losen Blättern. In Brod M (ed), *Hochzeitsvorbereitungen auf dem Lande und andere Prosa aus dem Nachlass*. New York: Schocken, 224–418.
- Kafka F** (1976) *The Diaries 1910–1923*. Brod M (ed), Kresh O and Greenberg M (trans.). New York: Schocken Books.
- Kafka F** (1988a) An Old Manuscript. In *The Complete Stories*, Muir W and Muir E (trans.). New York: Schocken Books, 455–457.
- Kafka F** (1988b) The Great Wall of China. In *The Complete Stories*, Muir W and Muir E (trans.). New York: Schocken Books, 266–279.
- Lacan J** (1987) *The Seminar. Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique, 1953–1954*. Forrester J (trans.), Miller J-A (ed). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lacan J** (1991) *Le Séminaire. Livre XVII: L'envers de la psychanalyse, 1969–70*. Miller J-A (ed). Paris: Seuil.
- Lacan J** (2006) *Écrits*. Fink B in collaboration with Fink H and Grigg R (trans). New York: Norton.
- Micali S** (2017) Aspettando i barbari. Conrad, Kafka, Coetzee. *Between* 7(14), 1–23.
- Penner D** (1986) Sight, blindness and double thought in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *World Literature Written in English* 26(1), 34–45.
- Samolsky R** (2011) *Apocalyptic Futures: Marked Bodies and the Violence of the Text in Kafka, Conrad, and Coetzee*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Valdez Moses M** (1993) The mark of empire: writing, history, and torture in Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*. *The Kenyon Review* 15(1), 115–127.
- Wittenberg H and Highman K** (2015) Sven Hedin's 'Vanished country': setting and history in J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the barbarians*. *Scrutiny* 2, 20(1), 103–127.

About the Author

Vladimir Biti is Chair Professor Emeritus at the University of Vienna. He is the author of 11 books, with *Tracing Global Democracy: Literature, Theory, and the Politics of Trauma* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2016; second, paperback edition 2017), *Attached to Dispossession: Sacrificial Narratives in Post-imperial Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018), and *Post-imperial Literature: Translatio Imperii in Kafka and Coetzee* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2021) among the most recent. He is the editor of the volumes *Reexamining the National-Philological Legacy: Quest for a New Paradigm* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014), *Claiming the Dispossession: The Politics of Hi/storytelling in Post-imperial Europe* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), and co-editor of *The Idea of Europe: The Clash of Projections* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2021). In addition, he is co-editor of *arcadia: Journal of Literary Culture*, and Honorary President of the ICLA Committee on Literary Theory. Since 2016, he has been the Chair of the Academy of Europe's Literary and Theatrical Section.