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BARBARISM IN ENGLISH TEXTS

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Annotation: *A barbarism is a nonstandard word, expression or pronunciation in a language, particularly one regarded as an error in morphology, while a solecism is an error in syntax. This article is devoted to the expression of barbarism in English texts.*

Keywords: *Barbarism, text, language, expression, politics, word, translating.*

INTRODUCTION

The recent reanimation of the rhetoric on barbarians and civilization has coincided with a shift in the criteria according to which global divisions and conflicts are perceived. It is often argued that after the fall of communism global dividing lines are not so much determined by the market or by political ideology—capitalism versus communism or democracy versus totalitarianism—but by culture. In the words of Samuel Huntington, “the velvet curtain of culture” has taken the place of the Cold War’s “iron curtain of ideology”. Culture is at the epicenter of the political dividing line between good and evil, peace and violence, or progress and reaction. The rhetoric on barbarism and civilization comes to complement what Bernard Lewis and Huntington famously describe as “the clash of civilizations.” This development, which Mahmood Mamdani calls the “culturalization” of political conflict, goes hand-in-hand with a moralization of global conflicts¹⁶. As Chantal Mouffe argues, “nowadays the political is played out in the *moral register*”. This means that the we/they opposition, “instead of being defined with political categories, is now established in moral terms”. Therefore, instead of “a struggle between ‘right and left’ we are faced with a struggle between ‘right and wrong’”; the “we/they” distinction is “visualized as a moral one between good and evil”. The moralization and culturalization of global conflicts may account for the increased popularity of the vocabulary of barbarism and barbarians. The figure of the “barbarian” encapsulates both the *moral* inferiority and irreconcilable *cultural* difference of the other. Hence, constructing the other as barbarian enables his or her perception as an enemy needing destruction rather than a worthy adversary.

¹⁶ The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2013).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

If we look up “barbarism” in major English dictionaries, among the definitions we find are the following:

- uncivilized nature or condition; uncultured ignorance; absence of culture; barbaric style (in art etc.), unrestrainedness
- the absence of culture and civilized standards
- ignorance of arts, learning, and literature; barbarousness
- a thing characteristic of such an uncivilized and unenlightened state
- One cannot help noticing that barbarism is mainly defined through negative categories and through a grammar that signifies lack or absence. The same experiment with the term “barbarian” yields similar results. A barbarian is¹⁷:
 - a foreigner; a person with a different language or different customs; spec. a non-Hellene, a non-Roman; also, a pagan, non-Christian
 - savage, wild, or uncivilized person
 - an uncultured person; a person without sympathy for literary or artistic culture

These definitions set the barbarian against a positive standard of civilization, whether this standard is defined by one’s language and customs, ethnicity or culture (Hellene, Roman), religion (Christianity) or behavior (good manners and sophistication). In all definitions, the barbarian is situated outside the borders of civilization, as a being who does not speak the language or share the culture of the civilized, and thus, by extension, as incomprehensible, unfamiliar, uncanny, improper.

Both “barbarism” and the “barbarian” are thus accompanied by a seemingly inescapable negativity. This negativity partly resides in the terms’ semantic content: their standardized connotations of violence, evil, savageness, brutality, exploitation, and destruction. However, it is particularly their opposition to the positive notions of civilization, culture, or humanism that grants them their negative status. Barbarism operates as the negative standard, against which civilization measures its virtue, humanity or level of sophistication. From this high standing, civilization constructs its objects—those barbarian others who function as its “constitutive outside.” Within this oppositional framework, the barbarian and the civilized are interdependent concepts. The “civilized we” can be sophisticated, mature, superior, and humane, because the barbarians are simple, infantile, inferior, and savage¹⁸.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The term “barbarism” is associated with unintelligibility, lack of understanding, and mis- or non-communication. These associations can be found in the etymology of the “barbarian”: in ancient Greek, the word $\beta\rho\beta\rho$ imitates the incomprehensible

¹⁷ Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles (2012).

¹⁸ Encarta Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language (2014).

sounds of the language of foreign peoples, sounding like “bar bar.” The foreign sound of the other is dismissed as noise (“bar bar”), and therefore as not worth engaging. Consequently, the barbarization of others disempowers them. Those labeled as “barbarians” cannot speak back and question their “barbarian” status, because their language is not even understood or deemed worthy of understanding. In certain ways, the “barbarian” is a non-concept, because it tries to signify and capture the un-signifiable, the unintelligible, the unknowable. But the fact that by definition a “barbarian” cannot be “known” or “understood” enables its frequent function in language as a generic term. Naming someone “barbarian” denies this person an actual face, subjectivity, and singularity. This (non)appellation constructs the other as a hollow vessel, filled accordingly by the discourse of civilization in ways that sustain the civilized identity.

The aforementioned definitions of barbarism do not cover the entire scope of its meanings as registered in dictionaries. Barbarism is also used in another sense, which is primarily linguistic, but also extendable beyond language. Thus, barbarism can also be a countable noun defined as: “A word or expression which is badly formed according to traditional philological rules, e.g. a word formed from elements of different languages”; “an offensive word or action, especially a mistake in the use of language”; “[t]he use of words and idioms not in accordance with the (supposed) normal standard language, esp. of those of foreign origin”; “absence of cultivation in language”; and by extension, “something that breaks rules of convention or good taste.” A more inclusive version of these definitions captures barbarism as:

The intermixture of foreign terms in writing or speaking a standard, orig. a classical, language; a foreignism so used; also, the use of any of various types of expression not accepted as part of the current standard, such as neologisms, hybrid derivatives, obsolete or provincial expressions, and technical terms, or any such expression used in discourse.

While this second meaning is again mainly expressed through negative formulations, it simultaneously invests “barbarism” with a quality I am tempted to call *insurgent*. “Barbarism” is an element that deviates from (linguistic or other) norms and conventions; it is something that “breaks rules” and undermines traditional patterns or frameworks; it is an insertion of “foreign terms” and elements that do not fit or are “not accepted as part of the current standard”; it can be an element that strikes a discordant note in conventions of “good taste.” Based on the above dictionary definitions, “barbarisms” signal encounters between heterogeneous spatial or temporal frames, linguistic registers, and discursive orders. They bring the familiar in contact with the foreign by introducing “foreignisms” in classical idioms. They confront the new with the old and the past with the present through “neologisms” but also “obsolete” archaic expressions. They disrupt an elevated language with “provincial expressions.” They bring heterogeneous elements together in “hybrid derivatives.”

It follows from these definitions that foreign or erratic elements, inconsistencies,

disruptions, and unlikely encounters or comparisons are also included in barbarism's range of connotations. If we push these definitions a bit further, barbarism could denote an invasion by foreign, disruptive elements into dominant, normative discourses and modes of reading, writing, viewing, knowing or understanding. Barbarisms could be elements that break with traditional rules, cross cultural or disciplinary boundaries, and delve into new, unexpected combinations; elements that cause confusion and misunderstandings, and invite new, counterintuitive modes of reading. Barbarisms appear in a zone of error ("badly formed," "a mistake"), as well as hybridization and syncretism ("formed from elements of different languages"). They thus take effect at moments of encounter between two (or more) discourses, systems or subjectivities. By staging encounters between diverse objects in this study, I show how the concept of barbarism can trigger alternative ways of knowing and theorizing that accommodate strangeness, reversals, bewilderment, and other such phenomena that arise at border spaces between "languages" in the broadest sense of the word.

Thus, instead of dismissing barbarism as a noise (the "bar bar" of the other) not worth engaging, I argue that this noise has the potential to unsettle the supposedly harmonious, elevated speech of the "civilized self" by confronting it with its own cacophonies and foreign elements—its own internal barbarisms. The mumbling of the barbarian—the confused speech, the stuttering, the noise—can turn into a force that interrupts the workings of our language and leads to a rethinking of the frameworks on which the discourse of the self is premised.

Why insist on the old name "barbarism" and not come up with another term for the operations this study unravels? Or, to paraphrase a question posed by Jacques Derrida, why should "barbarism" still designate that which already breaks away from barbarism—away from what has always been conceived and signified under that name—or that which, not merely escaping barbarism, implacably destroys it?¹⁶ Derrida questions the premises of this question: "[C]an 'what has always been conceived and signified under that name' be considered fundamentally homogeneous, univocal, or non-conflictual?". The heterogeneity, ambivalence, and conflicting aspects within an old name such as "barbarism" are constitutive of this concept. Derrida elaborates this through the notion of the "double mark." Every name or concept is involved in the "structure of the double mark." Although it is caught in "the closed agonistic, hierarchical field of philosophical oppositions," a concept also retains "its old name" in order to "destroy the opposition," to which it "has never quite yielded". Thus, a part of the old name remains unmasterable by the logic of binaries. Every concept receives "one mark inside and the other outside" the system of binaries, and can thus generate a "double reading": it sustains an opposition but can also critique, wrench apart, disorganize the traditional opposition to which it belongs. In this study, barbarism is subjected to such a double reading. By probing its "outside mark," I try to show how barbarism can disrupt its own binary, but also how it can go further in order to perform creative operations.

According to Derrida, putting the “old names to work” in this way always involves the risk of “regressing into the system that has been, or is in the process of being, deconstructed”. But to do away with old names and thus “cross over,” as Derrida calls it, “into the outside of the classical oppositions,” is missing the opportunity to intervene in the system—here, the binary system that produces the barbarian and the civilized. In the process of using old names for new purposes, we should not forget that the system to which they belong is not a given, “a sort of ahistorical thoroughly homogeneous stable,” but instead a “hierarchically ordered space” that cannot achieve closure, because it is always being traversed by the forces it represses and expels. In other words, the opposition between barbarism and civilization, rigid as it may be, is constantly challenged by the otherness and exteriority of the same “barbarism” it tries to repress and subdue.

Thus, barbarism oscillates between two main functions. On the one hand, it reinforces the discourse of civilization that needs it as its antipode. On the other hand, barbarism also nurtures a disruptive potential, through which it can interrupt the workings of the very same discourse that constructs the category of the barbarian for the sake of civilization’s self-definition. Thus, according to Brett Neilson, barbarism oscillates “between two poles”¹⁹:

The first represents the persistence of binary thought (master/slave, white/black, male/female, voice/writing, etc.) and of the material processes of domination that support this dichotomous logic. The second stands for the ambivalent processes of discursive slippage, the repetitions and doublings, that the articulation of binaries can never completely close up.

While the pervasive use of barbarism in Western discourses testifies to the “overwhelming power of the binary,” the notion also registers “the openings, ambivalences and dislocations that problematize this inexorable logic of overcoding”. This double potential of barbarism makes its workings in language far from stable and predictable. But the term’s instability and transformability is not only a result of the tensions within its formal meanings. Although I started this introduction with dictionary entries, I do not see barbarism as a “formal unit” of language but rather as an “unmasterable event” (Bal 2002: 280). As an event, barbarism is co-shaped by a constellation of factors that constitute its performativity every time it is employed: the term’s formal meanings; the tension between its accumulated historical meanings and its signifying force in the present; the intentions of the speaker (or author) that uses the term; the way the listeners or readers perceive it; the specific contexts in which it appears; and the infinite contexts it evokes. The performativity of barbarism—the way the word functions in the here-and-now of its every use—is not a by-product of the formal unit called “barbarism,” but is just as constituent of barbarism as its formal

¹⁹ The New Oxford English Dictionary (2018).

dictionary meanings²⁰.

As Derrida argues in *Limited Inc*, the iterability of every utterance—the fact that it performs differently in its every use—“leaves us no choice but to mean (to say) something that is (already, always, also) other than what we mean (to say)”. In other words, intentions and meanings do not always coincide. According to Derrida, the gap between intention and meaning guarantees the fundamental undecidability of all utterances—literal, serious, fictional, literary, and so on. The use of “barbarism,” then, could yield meanings that do not coincide with the speaker’s intentions and may even run contrary to these intentions. Precisely in the disjunction between the term’s meanings and intentions I see possibilities for recasting barbarism. Barbarism does not always fulfill the “intention” implicit in its conventional, long-standing meanings—i.e., it does not always end up *meaning* what *it means to*. This breach between meaning and intention safeguards its open temporality—the fact that the term remains vulnerable to change and thus its future is not determined.

The disjunction of meaning from intention also has consequences for what “barbarism” and the “barbarian” end up doing: their effects in “reality.” As Shoshana Felman argues, language is not “a *statement* of the real” or a “reflection of the referent” but “the referent is itself produced by language as its own *effect*.” In other words, “language makes itself part of what it refers to”. Felman elaborates:

Referential knowledge of language is not knowledge *about* reality (about a separate and distinct entity), but knowledge that *has to do with reality*, that acts within reality, since it is itself—at least in part—what this reality is made of. The referent is no longer simply a preexisting *substance*, but an *act*, that is, a dynamic movement of modification of reality.

Barbarians, then, do not exist independently of discourse, but are produced in the act of an utterance. Naming someone barbarian creates him or her as a threatening, foreign, savage being. But what an utterance says (what it wants to say) is not always what it ends up doing. An utterance, Felman argues, is always “*in excess* over its statement” and thus its effects cannot be reduced to its constative aspect (its meaning). The force of an utterance—its performativity—can be seen as “a sort of energizing ‘residue’,” the residue of meaning. Thus, the act of naming someone “barbarian” is “a dynamic movement of modification of reality” because it can turn a person into an enemy. But, as the word “dynamic” suggests, the forms this modification may take, that is, the material effects of an utterance, cannot be taken for granted. Between the formal meaning of the barbarian and the production of barbarians as effects of the act of naming, there is excess, a residue of meaning, which leaves an opening for different effects than the ones intended. In the space shaped by this excess, “barbarism” and the “barbarian” can break with their conventional meanings and perform operations with

²⁰ Webster’s New International Dictionary (2013).

unexpected effects. These operations may result in creative “modifications of reality,” but also in a resignification of the terms themselves.

CONCLUSION

Although barbarism is an overdetermined and historically charged term, this project claims that we should not give up on its critical thrust—its “edge”—in cultural theory. If we do not take the concept of barbarism for granted, relying on its conventional meanings and functions in discourse, we are more alert to the shifts and openings it may create in the categories of this discourse. Through these openings, new grammars, new relations, and new modes of speaking and knowing could emerge.

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