Introduction

Rien de plus compliqué qu'un Barbare.
—Gustave Flaubert, "Lettre à Sainte-Beuve"

The words *barbarism*, *barbaric*, or *barbarians* figure prominently in political rhetoric at the dawn of the new millennium. While the rhetoric of "civilization versus barbarism" seemed to partly recede with decolonization, after the end of the Cold War and the fall of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern-bloc Europe, and especially after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, it has made a comeback in Western politics, the media, historiography, political and cultural theory, and everyday speech. Although different things are being written and said these days about barbarism and civilization, more often than not the meaning of these terms remains uncontested. Especially in Western political rhetoric, there appears to be a silent consensus on what "barbarism" means, what constitutes "barbaric" behavior, and who a "barbarian" is. This book contends that there is nothing natural or self-evident about these categories and their uses. Despite their standardized deployment in contemporary rhetoric, these categories are mobile, complex, and versatile. They assume a variety of meanings and operations in language and other media, which can contest their deep-rooted uses in Western discourses.

By charting diverse significations, functions, and effects of barbarism and the barbarian, this study contests the seeming historical rigidity of these categories by centering on their performativity. To this end, I

propose a shift from an essentialist to a performative approach to these categories. The central question is not "who (or where) are the barbarians?" but "what kinds of critical operations can barbarism and the barbarian be involved in"? This shift aims at dislodging the notion of the barbarian from a metaphysics of presence and exploring what it could mean to *perform* a critical and perhaps even productive kind of barbarism rather than *be* a barbarian in any absolute sense.

This book proposes barbarism as a theoretical concept in cultural critique by laying out some of the epistemological and comparative operations it can trigger from within or from the margins of dominant discourses and modes of representation. It develops an affirmative approach to this notion, not despite but *through* an engagement with its negative meanings and injurious effects in speech and in social life. Revisiting underexposed aspects of barbarism unravels its potential operations in language and other media without circumventing its violent history in Western discourses and without rendering it "harmless." In the gaps and tensions between its various meanings, between its history and present uses, and between its formal meanings in language and its effects in speech, one can trace possibilities for doing different things with this concept in the space of literature, art, and theory.[1]

This study does not wish to replace the negative associations of barbarism and the barbarian with a brand-new positive meaning. Instead, it probes the (sometimes hidden) critical potential of their existing meanings and pushes it toward small resignifications while charting new sets of relations and contexts for barbarism and the barbarian within literature, art, and theory. In a Foucauldian vein, I take barbarism and the barbarian as objects produced by discourse rather than as preexisting essences waiting to be linguistically and conceptually acknowledged and named. Small modifications in the discursive constellations that form these objects in specific ways could help us envision a different connotative space for them. To borrow Stuart Hall's words, this book aims to help "disarticulate a signifier from one, preferred or dominant meaning-system, and rearticulate it within another, different chain of connotations" (1982, 80).

Barbarism is not an inherent quality of a human subject, language, medium, or cultural object. Rather, it is here revisited *through*

and *as* a series of operations, taking effect at sites of encounter between different subjectivities, languages, discourses, or systems of reference. The term "(barbarian) operations" here refers to a form of agency, not (necessarily) person- or intention-bound, that manifests itself in critical interventions often produced in the contact zones between heterogeneous discourses, narratives, or knowledge regimes. My use of the term "operations" is based on Michel Foucault's use of the term in the context of discursive operations and operations of power/knowledge.[2] In this framework, the following questions are posed: How can the operations of barbarism in literature, art, and theory expose and unsettle the uses and violent effects of this category in current and historical Western discourses? Can the concept of barbarism perform critical interventions in our discursive frameworks and even inspire new modes of knowing, comparing, and theorizing? Can this concept help us imagine ways of relating to others that are not fully dependent on essentialist binary schemes?

Rather than support a discourse that prescribes what is good and evil, this book contends that barbarism and the barbarian also carry a performative force with a transgressive potential. This potential is already implicitly registered in the definitions of these terms. If we look up the word "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 (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 2002)

—the absence of culture and civilized standards (*Oxford American Dictionary and Thesaurus,* 2003)

—ignorance of arts, learning, and literature; barbarousness (*Webster's New International Dictionary,* 1913)

In all these definitions, barbarism is captured through negative categories and through a grammar that signifies lack or absence. The same experiment with the word "barbarian" yields similar results:

—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 (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 2002)

These definitions set the barbarian against a positive standard of civilization, whether this standard is defined by one's language or 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, by extension, as incomprehensible, unfamiliar, uncanny, improper.

Both "barbarism" and the "barbarian" are thus accompanied by a seemingly inescapable negativity. This negativity resides not only in the terms' semantic content—the connotations of violence, brutality, exploitation, and destruction—but also in their opposition to the positive notions of culture, humanism, and particularly civilization. Barbarism operates as the negative standard, against which civilization measures its virtue, humanity, or level of sophistication. From a high standing, civilization constructs its abjects—those barbarian others who function as its "constitutive outside."[3] Within this oppositional scheme, the barbarian and the civilized are interdependent notions. The "civilized we" can be sophisticated, mature, superior, and humane, because the barbarians are simple, infantile, inferior, and savage.

The term "barbarism" is associated with unintelligibility, lack of understanding, and mis- or noncommunication. These associations can also be extracted from the etymology of barbarian: in ancient Greek, the word *barbaros* imitates the incomprehensible sounds of the language of foreign peoples, sounding like "bar bar." The foreign sound of the other is dismissed as noise and therefore as not worth engaging. Consequently, the *barbarization* of others—their construction as barbarians—disempowers them. Those tagged as "barbarians" cannot speak out and question their barbarian status because their language is not even understood or deemed worthy of understanding. In certain ways, the "barbarian" is a nonconcept because it tries to signify and capture the unsignifiable, the unintelligible, the unknowable. But the fact that by definition a barbarian cannot be "known" or "understood" enables the term's function in language as a generic appellation. Naming someone "barbarian" denies this person an actual face, subjectivity, and singularity. The other is treated as a hollow

vessel, filled by the discourse of civilization in ways that reinforce the civilized identity.

The aforementioned meanings of barbarism do not cover the entire scope of its lexicographical definitions. Barbarism is also used as a countable noun in another, primarily linguistic, sense, denoting "an offensive word or action, especially a mistake in the use of language" (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 2003) or "something that breaks rules of convention or good taste" (*Encarta Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, 2004).

A more extensive definition of this second meaning 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. (*Webster's New International Dictionary*, 1913)

Although 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 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 previous definition, "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 . . . expressions." They disrupt elevated speech 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 included in barbarism's connotative range. 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, or knowing. 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 counterintuitive modes of reading. Barbarisms appear in a zone of error ("a mistake"), as well as of hybridization and syncretism ("intermixture of foreign terms"). They thus take effect at moments when two (or more) discourses, systems, or subjectivities meet. By staging encounters between diverse objects, this book shows how the concept of barbarism can trigger alternative ways of knowing, comparing, and theorizing that accommodate strangeness, reversals, bewilderment, and other such phenomena that arise at border zones between "languages" in the broadest sense of the word.

Thus, instead of dismissing barbarism as noise not worth engaging (the "bar bar" of the other), 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 internal barbarisms. The mumbling of the barbarian—the confused speech, the stuttering, the noise—can turn into a force that interrupts the workings of language and incites a rethinking of the premises of the discourse of the self.

Barbarism, then, oscillates between two main functions: it reinforces the discourse of civilization that needs it as its antipode but it 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. As Brett Neilson remarks, barbarism oscillates "between two poles":

> 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. (1999, 92)

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" (92). This double potential of barbarism makes its workings in language far from stable and predictable. Even as it is implicated in one of the most steadfast hierarchical oppositions in Western

history, a part of the name "barbarism" remains unmasterable by binary logic and can thus debunk the opposition to which it is attached. In other words, the opposition between barbarism and civilization, rigid as it may be, cannot achieve closure: its apparent fixity is constantly challenged by the otherness and exteriority of the same barbarism it tries to repress, subdue, and expel.[4]

The term's instability and transformability are not only a result of the tensions within its formal meanings. Barbarism is not (only) a formal linguistic unit but also an unpredictable event, co-shaped by a constellation of factors that constitute its performativity: the term's formal meanings; the tension between its accumulated historical meanings and its signifying force in the present; the intentions of the speaker that uses the term; the way the listeners or readers perceive it; the contexts in which it appears; and the multiple 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 dictionary meanings.

Because barbarism may function differently every time it is iterated, it does not always fulfill the intention implicit in its conventional, longstanding meanings—that is, it does not always end up *meaning* what *it means to*.[5] Consequently, its use could yield meanings or effects that do not coincide with, and may even run contrary to, the speaker's intentions. Precisely in the disjunction between the term's intentions, meanings, and effects, possibilities open up for a creative recasting of barbarism.[6]

The breach between meaning and intention also has consequences for what barbarism and the barbarian end up doing: their effects in our realities. Barbarians 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 saying. An utterance, Shoshana Felman argues, is always "*in excess* over its statement," and thus its effects cannot be reduced to its constative aspect (its meaning). The performative force of an utterance can be seen as "a sort of energizing 'residue,'" the residue of meaning (2003, 52). Thus, the act of naming someone "barbarian" constitutes a "dynamic movement of modification of reality" because it can turn a person into a less-than-human enemy (51).

But between the formal meaning of the barbarian and the production of barbarians as effects of naming, there is excess, a residue of meaning, which allows "barbarism" and the "barbarian" to perform operations with unexpected effects. These operations may result in new modifications of reality but also in a resignification of the terms themselves.

While a resignification of a violent, injurious term may try to redirect the term's negativity and violence toward affirmative and productive operations, such a move, as Judith Butler argues, runs the risk of reiterating the abusive logic of the term's past (1997a, 14). This is a risk this book also takes with "barbarism." Nevertheless, casting "barbarism" and the "barbarian" *otherwise* also creates a future context for these categories—a context that is open. Thus, while an affirmative appropriation of the term "barbarian" in new discursive constellations may end up restaging the violence of its past uses, the term does not necessarily have to perform that violence each time it is used. The space of discursive performativity, Butler contends, makes it possible for words to "become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes" (15).

Thus, this book tests barbarism and the barbarian in discursive relations and contexts that do not always bind these concepts in a hierarchical opposition to civilization, or, when they do, they leave small fissures for questioning the terms of this hierarchy. In this venture, barbarism not only is an object of study but becomes a theorizing agent: it is recast as a theoretical and methodological concept.[7] "Barbarism" and "the barbarian" are thus involved not only in *what* I explore but also in *how* I explore it. As the main objects of this study are implicated in the methodological and theoretical problematics that frame it, they become interlocutors in the close readings that unfold in the following chapters.

This book's aim is to tease out the critical thrust of barbarism in order to propose it as a useful concept in cultural critique, operating on its own right and not just as civilization's offshoot. Deep-rooted and overcharged concepts such as "barbarism" and "civilization" cannot be banned from our discourses. Notions of otherness can offer a positive contribution to the identity construction of the self. The distinction between "self and other" or "we and they" and the antagonisms it contains can be seen as constitutive of any identity, and thus essential components of social life. However, there are different ways to conceptualize this distinction.

According to Chantal Mouffe, "The constitution of a specific 'we' always depends on the type of 'they' from which it is differentiated" (2005, 19). Therefore, based on the way the other is constructed, we can "envisage the possibility of different types of we/they relation" instead of trying to overcome the "we/they" distinction altogether (19). The distinction between self and other can thus be envisioned differently—in ways that do not construct the other as threatening, inferior, or illegitimate, and thus seek its destruction, but turn the barbarian *enemy* into an *adversary*, and "the Other" into *an* other.

Exposing the Objects

The works of literature, art, and theory that take center stage in this book are not viewed as embodiments of "high culture" or as the quintessential sites of civilization but, counterintuitively perhaps, as fertile sites of barbarism—sites in which different conceptions of barbarism can be developed and barbarian operations can be performed. Most of these cultural objects are recent or contemporary. Some date from the first half of the twentieth century, but the issues they bring forth place them at the heart of the present, inviting comparisons with the contemporary works discussed in this book. Although these objects are spread across various geographical sites, they all share a critical engagement with the *Western* discourse on barbarism and barbarians, which they challenge, whether they address it from within or from its margins.

The case studies situate barbarism in a broad, comparative context: pluralizing barbarism and its operations can be best accomplished through "barbarian encounters" among diverse objects, media, contexts, and discourses. The connecting thread of the objects is neither a particular national context nor a specific genre but a concept and the questions to which it gives rise. There are several valuable historical studies of "the barbarian" in particular periods or cultures. There are, however, few comparative and interdisciplinary approaches to barbarism, and even fewer attempts to chart it as a theoretically, methodologically, and epistemologically productive concept. This book makes a contribution to such approaches.

The objects analyzed explicitly thematize barbarians and barbarism. Nevertheless, the "barbarian operations" I introduce here are not the prerogative of objects in which either the terms "barbarism" and "barbarian" or visual representations of barbarians make their appearance. Barbarian operations can take effect in various cultural objects, regardless of their thematic connection to barbarism, as well as in different kinds of discourses: artistic, literary, philosophical, scholarly, nonscholarly, and so on. This study scrutinizes barbarian operations mainly in works of literature and art, because literary works and artworks tend to be more receptive to the ambivalences and stuttering of barbarism than, for example, the standardized rhetoric of politics, which tends to neutralize signs of ambiguity and confusion. Thus, the objects that figure in this book invite readings that allow the creative potential of this concept to unfold.

Selecting objects wherein barbarians are thematically foregrounded enables me to explore issues related to barbarism and the barbarian, while probing the methodological potential of barbarism. Thus, each chapter has a thematic and a methodological or theoretical component, as it deals with (1) an issue that emerges from a different aspect of barbarism or the barbarian and (2) a different methodological or theoretical aspect of the concept, that is, a different "barbarian operation."

Chapter 1 offers a preview of the main operations of barbarism at play throughout this book through a close reading of Franz Kafka's short story "The Great Wall of China" (1931). This reading probes the critical thrust of barbarism, its relation to civilization, the intertwinement of its positive and negative aspects, and its relation to epistemological and comparative questions. Revolving around an unfinished wall, Kafka's story functions as a scale model through which the structuring principles of this book are presented.

Chapter 2 situates this study within contemporary debates. It sketches the current discursive landscape around culture, civilization, and barbarism in the turn it took after the Cold War and the collapse of communist regimes in Europe, and especially after the events of September 11, 2001. The chapter presents examples from recent Western political rhetoric, especially the rhetoric of the US administration after what became nicknamed "9/11," and scrutinizes some critical responses to this rhetoric, which depart from various theoretical premises, including conservative,

liberal, humanist, left-wing, relativist, and deconstructionist perspectives. By delineating the ways in which "barbarism" and "civilization" are deployed in them, I position my own approach through and against these perspectives.

Chapter 3 looks into the uses of the "barbarian" in Western history. Most historical studies of the barbarian focus on a specific era and culture, and a few others adopt a genealogical approach. Instead of providing a chronologically ordered historical overview of the barbarian, this chapter is structured thematically around a series of criteria that have determined what constitutes "civilization" in the West from Greek antiquity to the present. In order to map out the complex discursive space of the barbarian in the West, this chapter relates its significations and uses in different eras to normative standards that have determined what counts as "civilized."

To that end, this chapter lays out a provisional typology of what I call "civilizational standards." These include language, culture, political system, morality, religion, ethnicity, class, gender, race, progress, and the psyche. Through this structuring principle, the history of the barbarian does not emerge as a linear succession of significations but as a narrative of discontinuities, repetitions, and unexpected intersections, unraveling through a web of cultural, social, political, ideological, religious, and scientific discursive strands. Thus, Chapter 3 prepares the ground for the pluralization of barbarism and the barbarian and for the disruption of conventional uses of these concepts in the succeeding chapters.

After the diachronic travels of the barbarian as the negative pole of civilization, Chapter 4 delves into the notion of "positive barbarism" by zooming in on Walter Benjamin's essay "Experience and Poverty" (1933), in which "positive barbarism" is introduced, and juxtaposes this notion to other uses of "barbarism" in Benjamin's writings. The issue is how Benjamin's positive barbarism breaks with the genealogy of barbarism and articulates a new project without dissociating itself from the destructive, violent aspects of this concept.

This chapter has a parallel methodological objective: it experiments with a kind of reading that activates the "barbarian" qualities of Benjamin's writing—a reading that combines philosophical with literary perspectives. By means of a microscopic approach, I look for odd, deviant details as an entrance to the text and treat these details as latent "barbarisms" in

Benjamin's writing, activated by the reader. Through these linguistic barbarisms the chapter explores how Benjamin's project of positive barbarism is put to work in his own writing as a textual strategy.

Whereas Chapter 4 follows Benjamin's prefigurations of the kind of barbarians that could actualize positive barbarism, Chapter 5 foregrounds the critical potential of the barbarians' absence. Here, I center on the topos of "waiting for the barbarians" through a comparative reading of C. P. Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1904) and J. M. Coetzee's homonymous novel (1980). Thematically, this chapter probes the implications of the barbarians' nonarrival in Cavafy's and Coetzee's works. Theoretically, it addresses *repetition* as a barbarian operation. If the previous chapter examines barbarism through a microscopic lens—as an operation unleashed by textual details—this chapter uses a multiplying, kaleidoscopic lens: it highlights barbarism *in* repetition and *as* repetition and explores the ways in which the overdetermined name "barbarian" can be repeated into new senses in the space of literature.

In the previous chapters the question of barbarism is located in—and limited by—language (either that of history, literature, philosophy, or cultural critique). Chapters 6 and 7 transpose barbarism from its purported "natural habitat" into an extralinguistic, barbaric realm: the visual. Chapter 6 turns to visual stagings of the topos of "waiting for the barbarians," whereas Chapter 7 focuses on artistic embodiments of "new barbarians." These chapters show how the "barbarian theorizing" this book puts forward does not necessarily rest on linguistic practices but also takes form through the visual, as well as in the interstices of the visual and the textual.

Chapter 6 explores possible alternatives to the state of waiting for the barbarians. The artworks that take center stage here—South African artist Kendell Geers's labyrinthine installation *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2001) and Argentinian artist Graciela Sacco's billboard-type installation *Esperando a los bárbaros* (1996)—flirt with two different answers to the aporia of a civilization trapped in a passive state as it awaits the barbarians in vain. These works transpose the topos of waiting for the barbarians into a visual medium, into sites of enunciation outside or in the margins of the West, and into a contemporary context. Through these artworks, I ponder what waiting for the barbarians might mean today and how the predicament this topos captures may be overcome in art.

Chapter 7 centers on a number of photo-performances belonging to "The New Barbarians" project (2004–6) by Mexican-born performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and his troupe. While Sacco's and Geers's installations play with the theme of waiting, Gómez-Peña's constructed barbarian personas appear to materialize the promise of the barbarians' arrival. However, these materializations fall far from the expectations of the civilized imagination. The barbarians in these photo-performances overwhelm the viewer through an overload of cultural references that play with Western stereotypes of barbarian others in new, subversive constellations. Gómez-Peña's project addresses barbarism and the figure of the new barbarian by means of a *barbarian aesthetic*, taking shape through a visual grammar of "barbarisms." Through their barbarian operations, the artworks discussed in Chapters 6 and 7 intervene in contemporary discussions about barbarism, comparison, and cultural translation and perform a kind of "barbarian theorizing" from the West's periphery.