

Future Frontiers and the State of Exception

An Agambenian Reading of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*

Kaspars Reinis

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses future frontiers and their relationship to the state of exception, where the sovereign suspends the normal rule of law in the name of security, which leads to the paradox that the “the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order” (Agamben 1998, 15). By doing a comparative reading of Giorgio Agamben’s theory on the state of exception and J. M. Coetzee’s 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a parallel between the novel and the current discourse on fear and security, the refugee crisis and the global threat of terrorism is drawn. Sovereignty becomes a state of exception that emerges from within a suspended political and juridical order, and has a direct implication for the future. The author argues that the state of exception of the current political discourse is organised around the structure of “in the name of”. Today’s sovereign is waiting for the terrorists, who are a kind of solution, a way of prolonging the exceptional, exclusive nature of the western politics. In conclusion, for a future community to come, it is necessary to abolish this structure of exclusion that operates through the sovereign exception. The future frontier, if there is to be any, cannot be a state of exception. Therefore it is necessary to render the sovereign apparatus inoperative by persisting upon the notion of “not in our name”, thus not allowing the sovereign to define itself and against what lies behind its reach.

KEYWORDS

Law, Exception, Barbarians, State, Sovereign, Truth

INTRODUCTION

In his critical essay “What is the Contemporary?”, renowned Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben examines the notion of the contemporary as a relation to one’s own time, while also conceiving of the contemporary as “precisely the person who knows how to see his obscurity, who is able to write by dipping his pen in the obscurity of the present” (Agamben 2009, 44). Agamben rather poetically engages with the notions of obscurity and darkness. One’s darkness is one’s own time and its discourse. His poetical description of darkness undermines the project of Enlightenment, where the ideas of Truth, Law and above all Reason were to save humanity and



guarantee an ethically and morally feasible future. Yet this future never came.

The Agambenian notion of potentiality can be seen at work in his example in his analysis of the contemporary and its relation to darkness of his/her time. When there is light, there is a realization of potential, a suspension of all other potentialities. Art critic and curator Hans Ulrich Obrist argues that “Agamben takes us to astrophysics to explain the darkness in the sky to be the light that travels to us at full speed, but which cannot reach us, as the galaxies from which it originates recede faster than the speed of light” (Obrist 2010). This darkness for Agamben is potentialities that constantly escape the illumination by reason, thus escape any definition of the present. The contemporary moment is darkness, something that resists being understood.

From the perspective of etymology, of the word “contemporary” can be traced back to the Medieval Latin word *contemporaries*. Its constituent parts ‘*com*’ (‘with’) and ‘*temporarius*’ (‘of time’) point towards a relational meaning: with/in time, or even with-in-time. Today, to be contemporary means to be with one’s time – time that is in passing, or, to use a Derridean notion, a dead time. To resolve this paradox of being with time, which is at once in passing as a dead time, the contemporary or this ‘being with time’ means to be with the anticipated time, e.g., the future time. Although one does not have any real hold on the time to come, the imagined future could equally be the anticipated, planned time, the time that we – humans, the anticipating animals – have always already been colonizing. This future frontier of time, which always extends in front of us, also remains in passing, always, that is, as if we would be pushing it forward, moving on.

By the collision of existence and nonexistence in darkness, its potentiality is fully enmeshed in impotentiality: it becomes something that pre-figures what is to come, that is, whatever is to come. But Agamben is not the first one to use the concept of darkness. French philosopher Georges Bataille writes that man “will regain intimacy only in darkness. In so doing, it will have reached the highest degree of distinct clarity, but it will so fully realize the possibility of man, or of being, that it will rediscover the night of the animal intimate with the world – *into which it will enter*” (Bataille 1991, 100). The contemporary is then the one that exists in this exposure to one’s passing time, one who seeks out the intimacy that the richness of potentiality of being has to offer. Even if this exposure to intimacy is an exposure to one’s finitude, it can happen immanently in a momentary lapse of reason – in a poetic lapse of being in time. For Agamben the contemporary knows that anticipation is just another fiction. We are the anticipating species, the animal that is looking forward, whilst simultaneously we seem to be only ever stuck in a passing moment.

Only the illusion of a better future has been haunting people ever since the dawn of humanity. According to Agamben there is more meaning to not-knowing, not-defining, than there is to knowing. For the contemporary, darkness is something that concerns him, that never ceases to

engage him (Agamben 2009, 45). “Darkness is something that – more than any light – turns directly and singularly towards him. The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time” (Agamben 2009, 45). The phrasing of this statement reveals an intimate relationship between the contemporary and the darkness. The darkness subverts the idea of light, by striking as a beam, thus the sentence gathers its strength on the oxymoronic paradox created by this play of words.

Yet, what is this beam of darkness that Agamben is writing about? It seems that “our time, the present, is in fact not only the most distant: it cannot in any way reach us. Its backbone is broken and we find ourselves in the exact point of this fracture. This is why we are, despite everything, contemporaries” (Agamben 2009, 47). I think that this idea of a break – a caesura – allows for rethinking one’s relationship towards time, the contemporary, fashion, and life. Honestly, I am a bit reluctant to talk about popular topics, to allow Trump to enter in my bedroom, to allow the fear of global terrorism to enter my most intimate moments, yet today, I see it nearly impossible to avoid these separating agents. They are the contemporary darkness in which I can dip my pen to poetically engage with this almost banal topic, which predates me, my contemporaries, and probably will have a long reign over the contemporaries to come. Thus, the future frontier is a matter of definition, it is no more, no less important than the ever fleeting present, yet if there is a future, one must revisit the contemporary discourse, evaluate its foundations, and then see whether there can be a future built upon the same ideas.

Therefore, I cannot avoid talking about the banality of law and its foundation on the principle of exclusion; something that Giorgio Agamben has traced and examined in his *Homo Sacer*, *The State of Exception* and *The Use of Bodies*. This caesura is a separation – the broken backbone of our time. How can an animal move forward if its vertebrae are broken? An exemplary work that can be sought out for a comparative reading, by a contemporary of Agamben, by a contemporary of our times is J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. If humans – anticipating animals – live in the illusions of safety and economic growth, then it is not difficult to see Coetzee’s work as a prophecy for the present-day global treat of terrorism, the current discourse on fear and security, and the European refugee crisis. Why is it that a novel written in 1980 strikes a chord regarding these issues? I argue that Coetzee in this novel has mastered the reproduction of the structure of exclusion. Thus, in this paper I will revisit *Waiting for the Barbarians* and do a comparative reading of this novel alongside Giorgio Agamben’s philosophy. This reading will illuminate (or rather drag into darkness) how the state of exception – the state of separation – gives power to the law to be law. In other words, this reading will illuminate how the referential structure of “in the name of” is a timeless and powerful mechanism of how law, society and exclusion operate. I also want to note that there is the aspect of cruel violence at stake here: ethics, if there are to be any,

can only emerge from a nonviolent setting. If scrutinized, this referential structure of “in the name of” collapses and functions as a fiction that has nothing to do with ethics.

LANGUAGE AND LAW

Deconstruction by Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida and Emanuel Levinas has shown that the first violence, the first separation, and the first cut was the word. “In the beginning there was the word...” says the very first line of John’s Gospel. There was always already a language at display and at stake. Following the logic of deconstruction, we know that language is one of the strongest divisions that engenders many other divisions up to infinity. The word separates itself from mere sound, and the sound separates itself from other sounds and even silence. To understand the way how deconstruction works, it is important to turn to what Derrida calls the invisible interior of poetic freedom (Derrida 1978, 7).

One must be separated from oneself in order to be reunited with the blind origin of the work in its darkness. This experience of conversion, which founds the literary act (writing or reading), is such that the very words “separation” and “exile,” which always designate the interiority of a breaking-off with the world and a making of one’s way within it, cannot directly manifest the experience; they can only indicate it through a metaphor whose genealogy itself would deserve all of our efforts. For in question here is a departure from the world toward a place which is neither a *non-place* nor an *other* world, neither a utopia nor an alibi, the creation of “a universe to be added to the universe,” according to an expression of Focillon’s cited by Rousset [in *Forme et Signification*, p. 11]. (Derrida 1978, 7)

Just like literature, law is an order of language that corresponds to actions and has the potential of power invested in it. It is a breaking-off with the world, and an added universe; it is a set of rules to be obeyed, followed, and executed. In contrast to literature, law does not work through metaphor; it works through a referential structure: a sign and a signifier, an order and a command. Based on a firm belief that there is a real relationship between what law claims to be the rule of reality, this referential structure is what binds Western society together – its trust in its legal apparatus, and in its sovereign. Yet, more and more often, in light of terror attacks and recent wars, the function of law and the actions of the sovereign powers cannot achieve their goals just through the normal proceedings of the law. For example, on the 6th of June, 2017, in light of the Manchester and London bridge terror attacks, the prime minister of the United Kingdom Theresa May said that she is prepared to rip up human rights laws to impose new restrictions on terror suspects: “And if human rights laws stop us from doing it, we will change those laws so we can do it” (Mason and Dodd 2017). There is a need for exception, a state of emergency, where the sovereign can perform violent acts that would otherwise not be permitted according to the normal proceedings of the law. Agamben writes: “But the extreme aporia against which the entire theory

of the state of necessity ultimately runs aground concerns the very nature of necessity, which writers continue more or less unconsciously to think of as an objective situation” (Agamben 2005, 29-30). This is a naïve conception: the command of law as responding to a situation always entails a subjective judgment, and “obviously the only circumstances that are necessary and objective are those that are declared to be so” (Agamben 2005, 30). The importance of the word, or the name, in which law operates is a tautological mechanism that presupposes the idea of law. The law is law, because it is the law that the sovereign has decided upon. Thus, there is exclusion at play here: everything that remains outside the law, that is not deemed to be law, is left there to avoid violence and to provide wellbeing to the people, to the society, in whose name the law of the sovereign operates.

According to Agamben, the defining feature of the Western civilization is its foundation on the principle of exclusion (Agamben 2015, 199). The separation between the sign and the signifier is a structure at hand also in this argument regarding the law: “the state of exception separates the norm from its application in order to make its application possible. It introduces a zone of anomie into the law in order to make the effective regulation [*normazione*] of the real possible” (Agamben 2005, 36). Thus, the lawful future is also the law-less or the right-less future. The state of exception is always already a process of ruin and decay (Agamben 2005, 86). This implies that there is a certain essential incompleteness in sociality itself: the ‘society’ is an impossible formation, which never captures the nuanced nature of sociality. But it is exactly the sociality and its impossibility of accomplishing an authentic identity present to itself, the impossibility of grounding truth¹ to the Truth. (Haver 1997, 200). This foregrounds that the sovereign will act out “in the name of society”, whereas the society might equally be a fiction that the sovereign claims to represent and protect, in order for the sovereign to prolong its era. It can employ various tools to do so: national mourning of a death, defining a common enemy, giving a vision of future, etc. These narrative tools or survival strategies of attributed beliefs are positioned in the mind of the sovereign as perspective-taking of its subjects. The sovereign can only hope to prolong its era, if it assumes that its subjects trust the country – that people say, for example, “I know the police will keep me safe”. The state can exist on this promise of attributed belief in its power. But, paradoxically, this has nothing to do with knowledge at all. Rather, there is another layer at play; the attributed belief has a twofold trace – one only believes that one knows. As naïve as these sovereign narrative strategies might seem, they still play an unreasonably large role in the present-day political discourse. Fear of terrorism, islamophobia, and the refugee crisis, among many others, work as strategies of sovereignties to unite its subjects towards a common ‘goal’, which might have nothing to do with real knowledge or empirical proof of making people safe.

¹ By ‘truth’ (with lowercase ‘t’), I mean the all-encompassing concept that has not suspended any potentialities. By ‘Truth’ (with uppercase ‘T’), I mean the tautological truth of the law.

I think that it is fair to say that the western system of thought, discourses, and law operates through the rhetorical structure of “in the name of”. This is what Agamben calls the essentially empty space, “in which a human action with no relation to law stands before a norm with no relation to life” (Agamben 2005, 86). The sovereign power, in whose name we are governed, is essentially an empty space or a fiction. The CCTV cameras installed in the name of safety do not really make the cities safer, they provide people with an illusion of safety, a feeling that you are being looked after. CCTV cameras are in the service of the law (they are included in the apparatus of the law) and yet are in transgression of the law insofar as they intrude in the private rights of citizens. What happens to my right of not being seen or followed?

By unmasking such sovereign fictions, it becomes possible to see how law separates what it had claimed to unite. “Every fiction of a nexus between violence and law disappears here: there is nothing but a zone of anomie, in which a violence without any juridical form acts” (Agamben 2005, 59). In my opinion, the present-day politics that are organised around the concept of safety, and the structure of “in the name of”, is also waiting for the barbarians: it is waiting for a reason and a solution to execute the extrajudicial power of the state of exception and to renew the course of Western politics, a promise that is already broken at its inauguration. Now, after this theoretical meditation, I would like to return back to the ideas and thoughts expressed earlier in this paper: ethics, tautology of law, exclusion and violence. I will dip my pen into the darkness of our times, and allow the contemporary structure of “in the name of” to unwind and fall apart in Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*.

WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS

Waiting for the Barbarians is a 1980 novel by the Nobel Prize winning South African writer J. M. Coetzee. Coetzee is the author of, among others, *Disgrace*, *Elizabeth Costello*, *Dusklands*, and *Life & Times of Michael K*. Coetzee took inspiration, and the title for his book, from the Greek poet Constantine P. Cavafy’s poem:

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

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

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

[...]

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?

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

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

And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
 They were, those people, a kind of solution. (Cavafy 1992, 18)

The barbarians are a sort of solution for the Empire, which is why Coetzee has taken the central idea of Cavafy's poem to show how empty an apparatus of a sovereign power is, and how it needs the structure of "in the name of" to function. The novel takes up this notion of waiting for the barbarians, who never arrive. The book opens with Colonel Joll arriving at the frontier and assuming emergency powers, thus evoking a state of exception to face an insurrection by the barbarians. The Third Bureau of the Civil Guard arrives at the frontier, disposes the rule of the Magistrate and pursues to investigate the rumour of arming barbarian tribes. This is the way the Empire shows that it is taking precautionary measures. The Third Bureau spreads and follows the belief that there certainly will be a war against the barbarians. Coetzee thus foregrounds the state's justification for suspending the rule of law in the name of security. The Empire uses barbarians as an excuse, as a way of prolonging itself, its era (Coetzee 1980, 147) through evoking a state of exception within its frontiers. For the Empire to exist, and for the people to believe in it, the Empire must define itself against its borders, and against what lies behind the borders – the barbarians. There is a need for applying the norm, for the Empire needs to re-establish its power in the frontier and belief in its powers, thus showing that it operates in the name of safety of its citizens. Agamben writes:

This means that in order to apply a norm it is ultimately necessary to suspend its application, to produce an exception. In every case, the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference. (Agamben 2005, 40)

In Coetzee's novel the Empire's establishment of a state of exception and declaration of the necessity of interrogation and torture is shown to be a subjective decision tied to the state's true motivation, namely, power: "One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire," the Magistrate reflects, "how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era" (Coetzee 1980, 147). A solution is to suspend the law, by basing the law on the sovereign exception, which leads to the paradox that the "the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order" (Agamben, 1998, 15). The sovereign is outside law or the juridical order because the sovereign

can decide when to suspend the validity of law and when law is law. Yet, it is important to note that the “state of exception is not a dictatorship (whether constitutional or unconstitutional, commissarial or sovereign) but a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations—and above all the very distinction between public and private—are deactivated” (Agamben 2005, 50). In the end, the sovereignty becomes a state of exception that emerges from within a suspended political and juridical order.

Most of the action of *Waiting for the Barbarians* takes place in a frontier settlement, a literal manifestation of the state’s politics of inclusion and exclusion. This remote outpost signals both the beginning and the end of the Empire. It represents a “zone of indistinction” on the one hand: as the first line of defence against an attack, it is a symbol of the strength of the state to repel its enemies. On the other hand, its walls – beyond which lies the domain of the other, the unknown and unexplored territory of the barbarians – also indicate the actual border, or the limits of Empire – the limits of its reach of power. “In truth, the state of exception is neither external nor internal to the juridical order, and the problem of defining it concerns precisely a threshold, or a zone of indifference, where inside and outside do not exclude each other but rather blur with each other” (Agamben 2005, 23). But the suspension of the norm does not mean its abolition. Quite the opposite – there is a structural similarity between Coetzee’s frontier and the state of exception: “*Being-outside, and yet belonging*: this is the topological structure of the state of exception, and only because the sovereign, who decides on the exception, is, in truth, logically defined in his being by the exception, can he too be defined by the oxymoron *ecstasy-belonging*” (Agamben 2005, 35). The frontier is the outer border of the Imperial rule, yet it simultaneously belongs to the rule. An exposure of the sovereign towards what is not (yet) in its grasp, is also an exposure to the potentiality of non-existence – of becoming redundant – and of becoming like the foreign territory that touches its establishment.

Coetzee’s novel highlights the similarities between law and exception on more than one level. A reading of the novel alongside philosophy allows for a more accessible, feasible, and open reading of rather complex philosophical concepts that question the very foundations of the theory of state and sovereign rights to law and order. The recent events² in the United Kingdom, Belgium, and France show how the sovereign not only acts in the interest of protecting people that are in real danger, but also ensures that these events add to securing a position for the continuity of the sovereign.

² I deliberately use the word ‘events’ rather than singling out terrorism, police response, public discourse, or the election frenzy, as they all are intrinsically linked to one another through the structural simile of attributed belief and the referential structure of “in the name of”.

TWO SIDES OF THE TRUTH

Another level of structural similarity between law and state of exception can be seen in the comparison between the two main characters of Coetzee's novel. Colonel Joll is an active agent at the Third Bureau. He has arrived to the frontier to investigate and pursue findings of truth concerning the supposedly growing threat of a war with the barbarians. The Magistrate is a complicit subject of Empire and plays role in both maintaining and subverting the state's construction of its objective enemies.

The literary scholar Carrol Clarkson, in *Coetzee: Countervoices*, argues that Coetzee inscribes his own proper name or his initials within his works (Clarkson 2009, 82). This can be seen as a metafictional move to acknowledge that all of Coetzee's creations are not only coming (obviously) from one and the same person, but that they are initially versions of one and the same person. For that reason the Magistrate and Colonel Joll are not polar opposites – they might as well be the same person, the same expression of the state apparatus, and an expression of the same author. Already on the level of the proper name, one could argue, the characters, who have sovereign power are actually one and the same person, are mirror images that reflect the tautology of truth.

Colonel Joll's work is "to find out the truth. That is all he does. He finds out the truth" (Coetzee 1980, 3). His explanation of how torture "works" to obtain the truth leads the Magistrate to conclude, "Pain is truth; all else is subject to doubt" (Ibid. 5).

"What if your prisoner is telling the truth," I ask, "yet finds he is not believed? Is that not a terrible position? Imagine: to be prepared to yield, to yield, to have nothing more to yield, to be broken, yet to be pressed to yield more! And what a responsibility for the interrogator! How do you ever know when a man has told you the truth?"

"There is a certain tone," Joll says. "A certain tone enters the voice of a man who is telling the truth. Training and experience teach us to recognize that tone."

"The tone of truth! Can you pick up this tone in everyday speech? Can you hear whether I am telling the truth?" (Coetzee 1980, 5)

Colonel Joll is searching for a certain truth: a truth that could assure the Empire of the growing threat of the barbarians; a truth that would justify the state of exception; a truth of the threat that would allow the Empire to re-establish its own meaning again – but such a truth is never to be found. His investigations and methods of torture rather inscribe a certain truth of power onto the bodies of the fishermen and others who he brought in to torture. He searches for the truth, which cannot be anything else than a tautology; a truth that would affirm his investigations, namely, that

every suspect and every prisoner is associated with barbarians and work to undermine the power of the Empire. For him “[p]risoners are prisoners” (Coetzee 1980, 22). He is a hermeneutician: someone who reads signs, searches for truth, and establishes a hermeneutic circle. For him the recognition of a sign (the prisoner must be connected to barbarians) is also its affirmation and inscription of the sign into the text (there is a growing threat of the barbarians), thus leading to the understanding of the text (the inscribed tautology of truth). A similar threat exists in real life – islamophobia and the Othering of people can lead (and has lead in the past³) to the suspension of human rights and to persecution of the innocent.

When the Magistrate tries to plead on behalf of a boy and his uncle, asking the Colonel how “simple people like that” can be of use to him, Joll replies, “Nevertheless ... I ought to question them” (Coetzee 1980, 4). The Bureau responds dismissively to the Magistrate’s objections – “We have set procedures we go through” (Coetzee 1980, 4). This points to the cold exercise of the apparatus’s power, which aims at capturing bodies into its apparatus of truth. It is like searching for a truth which always already has been non-existent. It is the same way how apparatuses of the sovereign produce bare life or *homo sacer*. The figure *homo sacer*, which Agamben derives from Roman law, means something that cannot be sacrificed, yet can be killed with impunity (Agamben 1998, 86). This is a form of life that may be killed by anyone, and thus is an object of a violence that exceeds both the sphere of law and of sacrifice. In the eyes of the sovereign, the barbarians are something resembling Agamben’s bare life – a life that can be killed, violated, or forcefully changed without legal consequences (Agamben 1998, 83). Joll’s function at the outpost is to activate the codes of the Empire and to write the meaning of the barbarian as enemy through torture. He writes the way of law through the structure of “in the name of”, and for him the name, or the word that he searches for is ‘the truth’.

Colonel Joll reasons like a policeman and pursues unnecessary torture of people. Thus, the Magistrate begins to question the humanity of the sovereign:

I find myself wondering too whether he has a private ritual of purification, carried out behind closed doors, to enable him to return and break bread with other men. Does he wash his hands very carefully, perhaps, or change all his clothes; or has the Bureau created new men who can pass without disquiet between the unclean and the clean? (Coetzee 1980, 13)

Profaning means to return back from a state of belonging to the sacred to the free use of men (Agamben 2007, 73). Here it might be belonging to the state of the torturer, and returning back to being a regular man of the service. This highlights the ethical importance of Coetzee’s argument. It really does not take monsters to commit horrendous acts. They are simple men, just like

³ The highly controversial detention and interrogation practices at Guantanamo bay and similar facilities raise the question of what it means to live in a society that is being policed and controlled.

everybody else. The evil, if there even is such a thing, is always already banal⁴. What is even more at stake than the profanation is what Agamben understands as the definition of use: “[U]se is always a relationship with something that cannot be appropriated; it refers to things insofar as they cannot become objects of possession” (Agamben 2007, 83). Breaking bread with someone is not appropriable, it is to see the other as one's equal. Yet there is no external evidence to mark these men of the Third Bureau in *Waiting for the Barbarians* as torturers; as the Magistrate observes while regarding Mandel, “the care of souls seems to have left no more mark on him than the care of hearts leaves on the surgeon” (Coetzee 1980, 129). The Magistrate tries to understand his torturers, but all he does is seeing them as simple human beings. They do not go through any ritual of purification before they break bread with others, they just are human beings. The Magistrate seems to be developing a less categorizing attitude towards others; one might argue that he tries to allow bodies to be bodies, and to not capture them in apparatuses. “The space about us here is merely space, no meaner or grander than the space above the shacks and tenements and temples and offices of the capital. Space is space, life is life, everywhere the same” (Coetzee 1980, 17). In a way, the Magistrate's gaze is the profanation of the torturer; the humanization of what would be deemed inhuman. On the other hand, the Magistrate is in a no way different than Colonel Joll, when it comes to the rigorous search for understanding, for signs:

Except that it has not escaped me that in bed in the dark the marks her torturers have left upon her, the twisted feet, the half-blind eyes, are easily forgotten. Is it then the case that it is the whole woman I want, that my pleasure in her is spoiled until these marks on her are erased and she is restored to herself; or is it the case (I am not stupid, let me say these things) that it is the marks on her which drew me to her but which, to my disappointment, I find, do not go deep enough? Too much or too little: is it she I want or the traces of a history her body bears? (Coetzee 1980, 70)

Thus, the Magistrate is also a hermeneutician: he wants to understand the scars of the barbarian girl; he wants to understand, what his torturers feel; he wants to uncover the ruins of the Old Empire, and to understand himself. He desires “to live outside the history that Empire imposes on its subjects, even its lost subjects,” and “never wished it for the barbarians that they should have the history of Empire laid upon them” (Coetzee 1980, 169). Life becomes trapped into the biopolitical, anticipated future becomes past, and is written as history. But in acknowledging that the Empire has imposed a narrative of history onto its subjects and beyond its borders, the Magistrate forges a space for the recognition of a common humanity with the barbarians. Rather than a common humanity, he acknowledges the differences and the inevitable separation between subjects of the Empire and barbarians, and opens it up for being the space for existence. The literary scholar, art historian and queer theorist John Paul Ricco argues that

⁴ It is beyond the scope of this article to go in detail and bring into dialogue Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*.

Separation is the spacing of existence, and is, by definition, never solitary but always shared. It is what affirms that for anything to exist, there must be more than one thing, each one separated from other one, together partaking in the spacing between that is opened up by separation (Ricco 2014, 1).

Sharing separation becomes a being-together: an existence that is relational and shared, thus always a coexistence. Ricco goes on to say that the praxis of coexistence is sharing in separation. Sharing separation becomes this being-together that creates an alternative to the hermeneutical reasoning and the state apparatus that acts “in the name of”. Yet it does not exclude the fact that frontiers and the centre – the barbarians and the citizens – will never be one and the same. It is an ethical way of existing where the incommensurability of the separated bodies becomes a space for decision on how to carry on. But as regards of the form that such a decision would take, it cannot be reduced to elections or politics, it has to be altogether a different form of being together that both respects the otherness and embraces the poetic potentiality of what life has to offer.

Every Empire’s and every sovereign’s lie is its presentation of its right to power as an unassailable truth. Often it comes in a form of being re-elected, or, in cases of monarchies, a presentation of itself as having a divine right to rule. It cannot be challenged, yet, as Agamben has noted, the sovereign is the exception: “the law is outside itself” (Agamben 1998, 15). The rule is a part of the exception, just as the exception is part of the rule. Thus, no matter whether it was the rule of Colonel Joll or the Magistrate, they both belong to the sovereign; to the apparatus that creates exclusion and inclusion by suspending and permitting law. They both are sharing a separation; paradoxically, they need each other to exist. In easy times, the Empire nurtures its subjects and promises to keep them safe. In difficult times, it claims the legitimacy to exert a force against those who question its authority. Both lies preserve the state’s self-interest. This point is nicely illustrated by the following passage from *Waiting for the Barbarians*: “For I was not, as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less” (Coetzee 1980, 148). Just as the Colonel and Magistrate are one part of one and the same sovereign, so does the barbarian belong to the discourse of sovereign, even if the barbarian is just an idea. It is the production of the bare life; a form of life which serves as justification for the sovereign to exercise its power and to prolong itself just for a while longer.

The literary scholar Victor Li argues: “Just as sovereignty, according to Agamben, produces bare life or *homo sacer*, so too does civilization produce the barbarian” (Li 2014, 10). Moving from literature to real present-day politics, I will employ the rhetoric capacities of the comparative reading that I chose to do in this paper. A comparative reading is a form of reading that allows for two rather unrelated things to be brought to common grounds and compared within the reason.

Thus, I will entertain the idea that the present-day politics that are organised around the concept of safety, and the structure of “in the name of”, are also waiting for the barbarians. Or: today’s sovereign is waiting for the terrorists. I am not saying that there are no terror acts, but the very reaction of Western countries towards terrorism is dangerous. It is more following the logic of the fear than reality. Here are some statistics from globalresearch.ca, which is the home page of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), an independent research and media organization based in Montreal.

Statistics say that it is four times more likely to die by being struck by lightning than to be killed in a terrorist attack (*GlobalResearch* 2017). And as globalresearch.ca writes that the total number of Americans dying because of terrorism includes figures of deaths in all theatres of war such as Afghanistan and Iraq. Statistics published by *GlobalResearch* show the likelihood of dying from medical causes such as cancer and heart disease and contrasts them to the likelihood of dying in a terrorist attack. To make things worse, it is 9 times more likely to be killed by a law enforcement officer than a terrorist. Actually, it is 2059 times more likely that one kills oneself than that one dies as a result of a terrorist attack (*GlobalResearch* 2017). The global figures are even lower, thus there is no true reason to follow the logic of waiting for the terrorists, to take exceptional measures, and to subjugate people through the discourse of global fear. Of course, these statistics can be doubted, but as an illustrative example, they can serve a good wake-up call (which unfortunately is not really waking people up).

CONCLUSION – NOT IN OUR NAME

The structure of “in the name of” is deeply enmeshed within the fabric of how our daily lives are organized. Even an unveiling of it might not be enough to challenge it, as its application is much more complicated and takes on various forms in its expression in present-day politics. The familiar seems to be always preferred over the Other. The past will always be the proliferation of what is to come. Thus an imaginary of future has to strive for living outside history, otherwise it will be a memory of the future, which seems to be the case regarding the politics, the state of exception, and ethics.

More and more often, state of emergency or exception is evoked; for example in London, Saint Petersburg, and Paris. There are even certain places, or nonplaces (Augé 2008), which exist only in their essence on the very state of exception that grants their power; for example: airports, embassies, and even shopping malls. Sovereignty exercises its power to evoke the state of exception, becomes a state of exception that emerges from within a suspended political and juridical order, and has a direct implication for the future. “In the name of safety” is a catchphrase of the sovereign. It enables the current political discourse of state of exception. This paper is

coming less to a conclusion, and more towards a rhetoric staging of a debate. It is an opening; it is an invitation to rethink what is often taken for granted (the tautology of law = law) and to rethink how far such an attributed belief of “in the name of” can actually extend – how far can I⁵ allow the law, and the sovereign to operate in my name? This is a question that invites a response in a form of thoughtful and dense silence. However, the way how the sovereign power works is rather simple: we (the ambiguous we) the people – the citizens – through an election, grant the power of deciding in our name to the sovereign, be it a president or a government. However, this system, called democracy, has been turned into a highly opinionated, yet politically inactive crowd, which is supposed to pass a multiple choice test called an election. I do not want to go into details here, as Agamben does, and many other political philosophers have done, but the point is simple: the sovereign exists, if it acts in our name, or, as I have argued at length, presents itself as if acting in our name. All the decisions, popular or unpopular, are made in the name of people. Mystical, floating like a signifier, these people, in whose name things are done, are sort of a solution for the actions of the sovereign.

In Coetzee’s novel the barbarians never arrive. I even doubt that there were any real barbarians at all that would be a threat to the Empire. There is only the fear of their arrival which helps the Empire to manifest its power, but also leads to a collapse of its power in the frontier when the investment in the affair of fighting against the barbarians turns against itself and the army gets lost in the desert, when people leave the frontier, and when the Magistrate restores himself back to power. Coetzee shows how the state of exception, founded merely on the need for the exercise of the power in order to once more define Empire against its borders, can lead even to the collapse of the Empire. A frontier, whether in our imagination or a real political establishment, always exists in an exposure to the forces of finitude. However, the urge to become more political and the struggle against control makes literature and other practices of poiesis to leave the hermeneutical reasoning. By doing so, literature is inviting to rethink, and even to render the political apparatus of control inoperative. Apparatuses of control, first of all, function on a structural level in our thinking. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* is like an invitation to rethink the way of law and order: the division between citizens and their others, between politics, and between life and ethics. Although the novel is already 37 years old, the ideas it carries have not aged a bit. There always will be a frontier, even if it is our future, which becomes colonized, shaped, and expected to unwind in front of our eyes. Whatever tomorrow is planned to be, this belief exists in the exposure to its potential of not being – of not coming true.

Today’s sovereign is waiting for the terrorists, who are a kind of solution; they are a way of prolonging the exceptional, exclusive nature of Western politics. But does making people go

⁵ An authorial ‘I’, a first person ‘I’ that refers back to the person writing this text.

through numerous devices and safety procedures in airports make us safer? Is there a real link between being under surveillance and safety? What is happening with my rights to be seen and my right to keep my daily and nocturnal activities secret? Fear, close-mindedness, the loss of identity, nostalgia, conservatism – these are only a few of the current trends that fuel up the sovereign power to use its power of exception. The sovereign often exceeds addressing the real threat and slides into creating more regulations that take away freedoms by creating laws. Everything that is written in the law is also all that is not written in the law; law as an order of language acts more as a powerful agent of exclusion than as an agent of inclusion.

I am not in a position to provide a real conclusion, nor can I ethically be obliged to give one. This paper does not pretend to have answers or solutions; it does acknowledge the vast incommensurability of reality. The darkness of our contemporary time – its broken backbone – is a sociality of shared-separation; it is a distinctly incalculable shared sociality, which can be at times also traitorous. The both sides of this broken bone are structurally shared; they are a wound that illuminates the being stuck in present state of exception. The future frontier, if there is to be any, cannot be a state of exception. So it cannot really be a community, unless it is sociality that, to borrow from my friend and teacher John Paul Ricco, is ‘the *unbecoming community*’: a sociality that is defined by its existence as sharing the separation, and where separation becomes a space for ethics (Ricco 2014, 207). The darkness of such a community supersedes the light. Such a con-temporary community can exist in a poetic retreat. For, as Agamben has written about the contemporary, the darkness is “something that – more than any light – turns directly and singularly towards him” (Agamben 2009, 45). The eyes of the contemporary are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from our own time. If the shining light from the stars is the past, then the darkness that surrounds it is the light that never reaches us, is that, which moves away from us as the universe expands. The name for this darkness – this being with-in time – is nothing but future. For a future community to come, it is necessary to abolish this structure of exclusion that operates through the sovereign exception. I see the structure of the current discourse prone to a reversal, where the separation between citizens and their others as executed by the sovereign becomes something that unites us, and does not exclude us from one another. Let it be a refusal to follow the logic of exclusion.

Therefore it is necessary to render the sovereign apparatus inoperative by persisting upon the notion of “not in our name”, thus not allowing the sovereign to define itself and against what lies behind its reach. This can only come into being if rationalism, utilitarianism, growth economy, and many other major ways of governing are to be called into question through aesthetic practice, which could be called living. So where does a discussion of a literary text lead us? Literature might not enjoy a simple and direct relationship with reality. In case of my case study, Coetzee’s

novel highlights the painful and unethical difficulty of reality as mediated through the power of the modern state and its sovereign. Coetzee wonderfully has illustrated the problem of whether politics has actually any link to life as such, and in the end of the day, this debate could have equally been a debate regarding history:

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. (Coetzee 1980, 146)

Thus a shift from a biopolitical form of living and a historical form of living towards Agamben's much praised 'what-ever-being', an aesthetic form of living, can be seen as the way for a new future frontier to come. "Somewhere and nowhere at once: this is where we are left, this is the place that remains" (Ricco 2014, 206) – our frontier of the ever fleeting present.

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