Civilization and/or Barbarism in Magnason, Atwood, and Houellebecq

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Western nations pride themselves on their advanced technology. But given our current debates about automation, robotics, genetic modification, the use and abuse of the internet, and cyber-crime, we might pose the question: does technological progress make humans more civilized or more barbaric? I propose to explore that question by analyzing three contemporary speculative fiction novels-- *LoveStar* (2002) by Andri Snær Magnason, *Oryx and Crake* (2003) by Margaret Atwood, and *The Possibility of an Island* (2005) by Michel Houellebecq—that feature more than one type of future human: some are (bio)technologically enhanced (the "cordless men", the "Crakers" and the "neohumans") while others are not ("wire-slaves," "pleeblanders," "savages," or plain, unenhanced humans). In different but related ways, the characters in these novels compel us to interrogate our notions of the relation of technology to civilization and barbarism. The authors set their novels in the future in order to raise questions that trouble us today in the context of contemporary excesses of capitalism, consumerism, and neoliberalism. But some definitions are in order before we proceed to our analysis of the texts.

Definitions

The words "civilization" and "barbarism" and their derivatives have been used so frequently in public discourse that they no longer seem to need any explanation or clarification. Maria Boletsi notices an apparent consensus on their meanings. The existence of such "rhetoric of 'civilization versus barbarism'" (Boletsi 1) implies indeed that public opinion has a precise idea of what—or rather *who*—the civilized and the barbaric are. Such intuitive attribution finds echo in most of the dictionary definitions of these terms (Boletsi 3-4) and is the rightful heir to Samuel Huntington's 1996 *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, which, as Boletsi recalls, describes political conflicts as bare conflicts of culture and "is marked by oppositional thinking in terms of 'the West' and 'the rest', or civilization and barbarism" (41). Boletsi's documented synthesis identifies a range of stereotypical binary oppositions implicit in the contrast between civilization and barbarism, such as education *vs.* ignorance,

culture *vs*. nature, sophistication *vs.* simplicity, freedom *vs.* oppression, honor *vs.* dishonor, tolerance *vs.* intolerance, equality *vs*. hierarchy, and individualism *vs.* collectivity, among others.[1]

As aforementioned, these traditional oppositions are perpetuated by most dictionaries and in many political discourses, but they have also been problematized. In the sixteenth century, Montaigne stated that "[e]veryone gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country", which has since then inspired many intellectuals to reconsider the understanding of "civilization" and "barbarism". In the twentieth century, French structural anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, throughout most of his work, and especially in the collection *We Are All Cannibals and Other Essays*, has made his contribution to this topic by questioning the legitimacy of Western customs and highlighting their resemblance to non-Western traditions (Hurel n.p.). More recently, the questioning of these concepts follows various trends. In line with Montaigne, Chantal Mouffe and Stanley Fish state that civilization and barbarism are just a matter of perspective, and can be reduced to the opposition between oneself and the Other. Scholars such as Wendy Brown, Gilbert Achcar, Slavoj Žižek, Walter Benjamin, and Tzvetan Todorov consider barbarism to be part of every civilization, thus uncovering the barbarism of the Western countries, which has two implications: on the one hand, contrary to the former, relativistic interpretation, barbarism can be "an absolute moral category" (Boletsi 49); on the other, only actions can be described as barbaric, not people (let alone peoples) (Boletsi 55). Precisely, Tzvetan Todorov contends that "[b]arbarians are those who do not acknowledge that others are human beings like themselves" (qtd. in Boletsi 52-53). Lastly, Brett Bowden recalls that some commentators have tried to pinpoint new "standards of civilization" less partially than Huntington: Gerrit Gong mentions "a standard of non-discrimination or standard of human rights" and "a standard of modernity" (qtd. in Bowden 166) and Mehdi Mozaffari sets democracy, liberalism and economic globalization as nowadays' standard. Both of them, however, highlight and criticize the West-centrism of these standards (Bowden 168).

Similarly, authors of speculative fiction often question and undermine the traditional, stereotypical understanding of these concepts by imagining the humans of the future, which inevitably invites comparison with the current state of humanity.

Cordless Men and Wire-Slaves

Andri Snær Magnason's 2002 *LoveStar* is about the changes in society—mainly Western society—resulting from the invention of groundbreaking communication technologies, all coming from the same Icelandic company, LoveStar*,* whose eponymic charismatic founder hires prominent scientists to materialize his revolutionary technological ideas. The first of these technologies to which the reader is introduced is based on bird waves, which the LoveStar company manages to use as a wireless means of communication among humans and between humans and machines. This technology allows humans not only to transmit data and communicate, but also to carry out most of everyday-life actions, from checking their bank accounts to turning on the faucet. The bird waves allegedly "eventually free mankind" (12); this is the advent of the "cordless man":

> The cordless man has little as possible to do with cords and cables—not that they were called cables anymore. They were known as chains, and gadgets were known as weights or burdens. … In the old days, people said, we were wire-slaves chained to the office chair, far from birdsong and sunshine (Magnason 17).

This early excerpt from the novel sets out the way future humans differ from their ancestors. The main advantage of the cordless technology is that it supposedly allows humans to be freer. The original version of "cordless man," "handfrjáls nútímamaður," literally translates as "hand-free modern man."[2] Humans of the past, on the contrary, were oppressed by the "weights" and "burdens" of material technology to which they were cruelly "chained," just like "slaves." Cordless technology, which has made humans free, is superior to hands-on technology. According to this quotation, technology has delivered humans from a barbaric state and is thus a vector of civilization. The beginning of the novel conveys its future society's common (mis)conception that technology is civilized and that its lack and refusal can therefore pull one back into a barbaric state. This echoes Gerrit Gong's claim that modernity is currently a standard of civilization since it is "related in terms to the 'standard of living' and 'quality of life' that can be achieved universally via the application of science and technology to issues of health, nutrition, and the

like" (Bowden 167).

After the discovery of the bird wave technology, LoveStar designs several inventions. The first one, LoveDeath, is meant to revolutionize funerary rituals by sending dead bodies to disintegrate in space rather than burying them in the ground. Some people even go to their own funerals while still alive, accompanied by their families so that the latter can properly bid farewell and witness this spectacular death. LoveStar's other project, InLove, is a matchmaking service that guarantees the union of true soulmates through an analysis of the waves that all human beings emit. Lastly, the novel ends on the promise of LoveGod, a material place where all prayers allegedly go. Although all of these technologies eventually become commodified, they originate in the mind of LoveStar, who is really more of a philanthropist than a businessman. He is obsessed with realizing his ideas—as explained in the ninth chapter "Ideas"—because he believes in their potential to make the world a better place. The matchmaking service InLove, for example, is entirely free and calculates appropriate matches for everyone on the planet. When possible soulmates are discovered, the company even offers them a trip to one of Lovestar's facilities in order to meet.

Yet various aspects of the novel demand that we ask if technology really is a vector of civilization. As mentioned above, the era of the cordless man is presented as an era of enhanced freedom. However, not everybody enjoys the benefits of this new technological era, and those who do must pay exorbitant subscription fees or else become living advertisements of the company's products. When the main character, Indriði, considers quitting the bird-wave network, he realizes that it would complicate immensely his everyday life:

> It was possible to become a wire-slave and cease to be a cordless connected subscriber, but it was only a theoretical option as most home appliances were cordless, switchless, and remote controlled via lenses. Of course, one could pick up a phone and call 234.415.333.333 in order to turn on the tap in the bath (or was it 334) and use the same number but ending in 537, to flush the toilet and it was possible to open the car door by calling 395.506.432.664 and tapping in a one-hundred-digit code for the car alarm (121).

Rejecting technology is clearly not a viable option anymore, which makes this newfound freedom quite relative. The bird-wave technology might be liberating some humans from their material bonds, but forcing them to use it actually subjects them to new, immaterial but just as tight—if not tighter—bonds. It is precisely because technology has become hegemonic that people cannot be free outside of its compass. Therefore, there is no freedom altogether in the future society of *LoveStar*: one is either a "wire-slave," or a slave to cordless technology and the company that provides it. A technological society that enslaves its members—the use of the word "slave" actually carries great weight since it refers to an institution that has long been associated with barbarism—calls into question the civilizing power of technology, especially when the latter is in the service of capitalism.

The novel indeed interrogates not only the benefits of technology itself but also the ruthless marketing strategies induced by the capitalist imperatives of profit and growth. Even though LoveStar thinks that the technology developed by his company contributes to the progress of mankind, he carries out his research away from the practicalities and leaves to others the commercialization of his discoveries, which is, to him, just another way of financing research. The description of LoveStar's chief of marketing and antagonistic character, Ragnar, and his blind pursuit of profit, reveals the dark side of the company's undertaking. In this respect, the development of LoveGod is one of the most chilling chapters. LoveStar, who seems, so far, to have been in denial about the abuse of his technology for strictly financial purposes, has discovered that the waves produced by prayers are all going to one same place on earth. When he discloses his findings to Ragnar, the latter immediately envisions the marketing potential of this discovery if they were to control it:

> "Can you imagine what an invaluable system we would have our hands on? Cordless, gadgetless, inbuilt direct access. …Imagine ... if we could send people some kind of revelation, inspiration, or sensation! If we could speak to the heart like a thunderous voice from heaven! ... Imagine what a company would pay for guilt! If you felt guilty for walking past some product!" (224-225)

Ragnar therefore imagines the first great benefit of this new technology: it would guarantee an unprecedented connection with the human mind and an even tighter grip on the users. So far, the bird-waves system had already been depriving them of their freedom of movement and speech; this new technology would also rob them of their freedom of thought. Again, technology in the hands of rapacious marketers becomes a controlling, constraining, and ubiquitous force that reduces its users' ability to live freely and independently.

Ragnar then carries on with more and more delirious ideas. He imagines that this new technology could also become the ultimate assistance service that literally answers prayers: "Of course, it won't just be business. We'll help people too. Let's say you come face to face with some thugs who are going to attack you. You send up a prayer…DEAR LOVEGOD, HELP!" (225-226) This delusional attempt to morally justify the commoditization of praying ends up in blasphemy: Ragnar sets up, as a new god, LoveStar—both the company and the man— and when LoveStar expresses reservations regarding his own deification, Ragnar answers: "it doesn't matter who it's addressed to. … Whether you say dear God or Buddha or dear Bob!" (226). In terms of the barbarism/civilization dichotomy, religion is rather ambivalent: up against science, it would be closer to the barbaric end of the spectrum; yet, it is also one of the most important products of culture, which is historically associated with civilization. Ragnar's efforts to rationalize religion—in considering that God and Buddha are interchangeable or, later on, reminding LoveStar of the Church's questionable past practice of selling absolutions—adds to the inherent ambiguity of religion concerning civilization *vs*. barbarism, hinting at the relativity of such a dichotomy.

Conveyed by the use of capitals and multiple exclamation points, Ragnar's extreme excitement, which verges on delirium, represents the danger of unleashed capitalism. Ragnar himself seems to be losing control from the very moment he learns about LoveGod: "LoveGod assailed Ragnar's waking and sleeping life. … There came a point where Ragnar could take no more" (223). When he finally gathers the courage to present his ideas to LoveStar, he gets more and more excited: he impatiently interrupts

LoveStar, speaks faster and faster, looks “on fire,” “as if he was drunk,” is “speeding on his ideas,” “blabs” (225), “[becomes] involved in his story,” miming, falling on his knees and shouting (226). In the further developments of the novel, Ragnar’s thirst for profit verges on madness when he proposes a new marketing campaign to convince more people to subscribe to LoveDeath and therefore boost sales. To show what happens to those who do not subscribe, Ragnar creates a dreadful advertisement in which trucks filled with body parts can be seen driving up a volcano and “tipping their loads into the boiling, sulfurous mud” (245). Ragnar clearly considers those who refuse to subscribe to LoveDeath as inferior and ignorant: “This is not aimed at a general audience. It is to show the illiterate, the poor and stupid target groups” (246). Ragnar therefore perpetuates the usual prejudices with the use of the words “illiterate” and “stupid,” judging that his customers, the ones who accept and pay for technology, are superior to and more civilized than those who choose to live without it. When asked about the authenticity of these corpses, he answers: “It was just rubbish that had been left lying around, just a few days’ worth of raw material. We didn’t kill anyone. It would all have rotted anyway” (247). Ragnar’s lexical choices (“rubbish”, “raw material”, “it”) dehumanize those who do not subscribe to LoveDeath, who are reduced to anonymous, lifeless body parts. Even though Ragnar believes that he and his technology-ruled culture are more civilized, his behavior, which corresponds to Todorov’s notion of barbarism, challenges this position. Moreover, the cruelty and immorality of this advertisement, which bases its efficacy on the terror it may cause to the audience, is further proof of Ragnar’s barbarism. Such ruthless commercial exploitation, here committed in the name of civilization, compels us to question not only whether a society based on technology actually becomes more civilized, but also whether such technological progress is even desirable as long as capitalism determines the direction of technology.

Crakers, Compounders and Pleeblanders

Margaret Atwood’s 2003 *Oryx and Crake* forms the first part of a trilogy set in a future time when almost all humans have been decimated by a pandemic. The protagonist of this story is Snowman, previously called Jimmy, apparently the last human living in this post-apocalyptic world inhabited mainly by genetically engineered animals and humans. The hybrid humans, called “Crakers,” were

created before the catastrophe by Crake, Jimmy's best friend, in the hope of making the world a better place. Crake bioengineers his hybrids by combining genes of humans and animals to alter "the ancient primate brain" (305). He believes his new humanoid creatures will live in greater harmony with the environment, and will be free of racism, greed, hierarchy, and sexual jealousy.

> In fact, as there would never be anything for these people to inherit, there would be no family trees, no marriages, and no divorces. They were perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons, or, for that matter, clothing. They would have no need to invent any harmful symbolisms, such as kingdoms, icons, gods, or money. Best of all, they recycled their own excrement. (305)

The Crakers' return to a more natural state constitutes a positive movement, away from the vices of the pre-apocalyptic civilization ("the world's current illnesses") portrayed in the novel. The Crakers personify stereotypical aspects of both barbarism and civilization, most of which usually have positive connotations. On the one hand (aspects of barbarism or primitivism), their alimentation is natural and unsophisticated (which echoes Levi-Strauss's 1964 *The Raw and the Cooked*); they neither use nor need any technology since they are "perfectly adjusted to their habitat," and are comfortably naked and sexual. On the other hand (aspects of civilization), they live collectively, peacefully, and free from racism, discrimination, and hierarchy. Lastly, the Crakers escape some dichotomies altogether: tolerance is not an issue because they have been made unable to register the differences among themselves; nor is honor an issue because they lack the societal structures that normally support it (family, territory, clan).

Yet, this utopia dreamed up and prepared by Crake develops in a slightly different way than he intended after the catastrophe. Despite Crake's efforts to spare the Crakers from "harmful symbolism," (which he believes will reinstate the problems of hierarchy and aggression that debased humanity) they still develop superstitious beliefs, aided by Snowman's narratives. Snowman tells them stories about Oryx and Crake, whom he has raised to the rank of creator deities. In these new myths, animals are "the Children of Oryx" (Jimmy and Crake's friend, colleague and lover) and Crakers are "the Children of

Crake." In fact, in order to promote the possibility of survival for his bioengineered constructions Crake caused the pandemic, which Snowman calls "the Great Rearrangement" and "the Great Emptiness" (103). In their mythmaking the Crakers deviate from their creator's rational ideal. Moreover, I have already alluded to the ambivalent place of religion in the civilization *vs*. barbarism debate. The Crakers therefore behave in ways that are traditionally associated with both civilization and barbarism, and thus undermine the popular definitions and assumptions of civilization and barbarism.

Having been taught to live harmoniously with nature by Oryx, and kept at bay from the corruptions of civilization, the Crakers resemble the Noble Savage stereotype, which sheds a favorable light on barbarism. Although Crake idealizes closeness to nature as the way to live a better life, quite ironically, the Crakers are far from natural: they are able to live a sweet, simple life thanks to the most sophisticated biotechnology. Being a product of science, they are as unnatural as they can be. Therefore civilization and barbarism merge, not only, in the Crakers' behavior but also in their very biology, which has been genetically modified and bioengineered. Actually, in this post-apocalyptic world, there is barely anything left that has not been corrupted by mankind: most of the remaining animals are hybrids (rakunks, wolvogs, pigoons, etc.) and the air, the water and the soil are polluted. This strongly echoes the philosophers' and scientists' current claim that we have entered the Anthropocene, "the recent geological phase during which human activities have had a global impact upon the planet" (Dukes ix), a concept that stems from "the acknowledgment that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate. … There is no place or living thing that we haven't changed" (Purdy 2-3). The post-apocalyptic world of *Oryx and Crake*—which thus seems to be where we may be heading— results from the rise and fall of civilization and therefore contains both some remains (and mostly memories) of civilization and a recrudescence of barbarism.

However, the pre-apocalyptic world, when Snowman is just Jimmy, a creative but troubled young man, is similar to our era. Jimmy's society is a dystopian future version of the twenty-first century, in which our current flaws reach their nadir. Our superficiality and obsession with beauty evolve into a society dominated by biotechnological corporations such as OrganInc Farm, HelthWyzer,

RejoovenEsence, and AnooYoo that produce cosmetics and genetically modified food and animals. Society is divided into two classes: the few who work for one of these companies and live in private, secured “Compounds” out of which they hardly ever venture, and the rest of the people who live in the “pleeblands,” areas devoid of social services and governmental agencies, nests of corruption and vices:

> There, [in the pleeblands] it was rumoured, the kids ran in packs, in hordes. They’d wait until some parent was away, then get right down to business—they’d swarm the place, waste themselves with loud music and toking and boozing, fuck everything including the family cat, trash the furniture, shoot up, overdose. (73)

The compounders and the pleeblanders diverge in more than one way. They are geographically isolated from one another and their living conditions differ. The Compounds are affluent, well-ordered, and clean. Compounders avoid the pleeblands, considered dirty and dangerous. When Jimmy goes to visit Crake at college, he rides on the sealed bullet train that speeds through the pleeblands:

> He glimpsed a couple of trailer parks, and wondered what it was like to live in one of them: just thinking about it made him slightly dizzy, as he imagined a desert might, or the sea. Everything in the pleeblands seemed so boundless, so porous, so penetrable, so wide-open. So subject to chance. … Accepted wisdom in the Compounds said that nothing of interest went on in the pleeblands, apart from buying and selling: there was no life of the mind. Buying and selling, plus a lot of criminal activity; but to Jimmy it looked mysterious and exciting, over there on the other side of the safety barriers. Also dangerous. (196)

The pleeblands are everything that the Compounds are not: disordered, crowded, messy, polluted and dirty. Yet, while the reader would expect complete revulsion on Jimmy’s part, he uses terms that are not negative but rather connote mystery, freedom and nature: “desert,” “sea,” “boundless,” “porous,” “penetrable,” and “wide-open” and “chance.” Tired of his sterilized, surveyed, secured, and superficial lifestyle, in need of adventure and unpredictability, Jimmy seems to be drawn to the pleeblands, whose

apparent barbarism almost evokes positive feelings.

When he actually gets to the pleeblands a few years later, he is finally able to accurately measure how different compounders and pleeblanders are, not only culturally, but also physically—"Asymmetries, deformities: the faces here were a far cry from the regularity of the Compounds. There were even bad teeth" (288)—or even biologically:

> Before setting out, Crake had stuck a needle in Jimmy's arm—an all-purpose, short—term vaccine he'd cooked himself. The pleeblands, he said, were a giant Petri dish: a lot of guck and contagious plasm got spread around there. If you grew up surrounded by it you were more or less immune, unless a new bioform came raging through; but if you were from the Compounds and you set foot in the pleebs, you were a feast. It was like having a big sign on your forehead that said, Eat Me. (287)

Due to their geographical separation, the pleeblanders and compounders' bodies have adapted to their environments, so that the two different social classes have almost become two different species. Again, a superficial glance at these two groups suggests that the pleeblanders are barbaric and the compounders civilized, yet again, more critical understandings of civilization and question this interpretation. The compounders treat the pleeblanders as animals—they are said to "[run] in packs, in hordes" and "swarm the place" (73)—intellectual inferiors, "mental deficients" (288) with "no life of the mind" (196) and sometimes, commodity: "All skin colours, all sizes. Not all prices though, said Crake: this was the low end. So Jimmy could window-shop, but he shouldn't purchase" (288). If "the barbarians are those who do not acknowledge that others are human beings like themselves" (Todorov, qtd. in Boletsi 52-53), the compounders clearly qualify. The pleeblanders, to a much lesser extent, also denigrate the compounders, whom they see as "privileged, weak-spined, degenerate" (242). According to Todorov's definition of barbarism, therefore, both the pleeblanders and the compounders are barbarians.

The reader indeed quickly understands that the compounders are just as full of vices as the pleebs, if not more: not only are the Compouders obsessed with youth, beauty and longevity, they are

also ruled by the mandates of capitalism just as much as in the pleeblands, where supposedly, “nothing of interest [goes on], apart from buying and selling” (196). Furthermore, compounders are irrepressibly fascinated by violence and death, for which the Internet is a powerful medium:

> They’d watch … the Noodie News…. Or they’d watch animal snuff sites, Felicia’s Frog Squash and the like …. Or they might watch hedsoff.com, which played live coverage of executions in Asia. … Shortcircuit.com, brainfrizz.com, and deathrowlive.com were the best; they showed electrocutions and lethal injections. … There was an assisted-suicide site too—nitee-nite.com, it was called (81-83).

The Internet, along with the rest of technology, is used unethically to appeal to the compounders’ lowest instincts. As in *LoveStar*, technology, which is traditionally seen as a vector of civilization, is twisted to serve financial interests and winds up as a barbarizing force. In *Oryx and Crake*, a similar phenomenon occurs to the Humanities, which are abandoned in favor of the hard sciences and become utilitarian in order to survive: they are now exclusively employed to create efficient propaganda and marketing. This stronghold of culture has thus been turned into a device of manipulation, weakening people’s critical thinking and pushing them toward choices that are both less intelligent and less free.

Neo/Humans and Savages

The Possibility of an Island, written in 2005 by Michel Houellebecq is divided into two narratives that unfold in parallel. One is the autobiography of Daniel, a successful stand-up comedian in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century who becomes involved with a cult that carries out research on human cloning. The other narrative is told centuries later by Daniel’s clones, the “neohumans” Daniel24 and then Daniel25, who do not recount their own lives but merely comment on Daniel’s autobiography, through which they try to know and understand the entire human race, most of which has been annihilated by several nuclear and natural catastrophes. The neohumans, designed by Vincent, head of the cult, have survived partly because of their biotechnological enhancements:

> Vincent’s drawings prefigured the man of the future. For a long time animal nutrition had

> seemed to him to be a primitive system, of mediocre energy efficiency, producing a clearly excessive quantity of waste …. For a long time he had been thinking of equipping the new human animal with that photosynthetic system that … was the property of vegetables. … The human being thus transformed would subsist, solar energy aside, on water and a small quantity of mineral salts (323-324).

As in *Oryx and Crake*, our sources of nutrition are identified as one of our main problems, though for different reasons: Crake develops a species that "[eats] nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two" so that "their foods [are] plentiful and always available" (305), which eradicates the possibility of a tension created by lack of food as well as guarantees a harmonious relationship with animals. Vincent, for his part, accuses our feeding mechanism of creating waste and accelerating the deterioration of our body. Because their biological features "mark a definitive break between neohumans and their ancestors," Daniel sees the neohumans as "nothing less than a new species and even, strictly speaking, a new kingdom" (324). ("Kingdom" is a taxonomical term describing a specific rank in the classification of living organisms: "one of the three primary divisions into which natural objects are commonly classified—compare animal kingdom, mineral kingdom, plant kingdom" (*Merriam-Webster*)). This classification undermines human exceptionality in that it reveals that humans are just another type of animal whereas the neohumans, for their part, are not animals, nor plants, nor mineral, but a subtle synthesis of all kingdoms, somehow confirming their superiority. Furthermore, even if this hybrid biology makes them inherently ambiguous, their advanced technological sophistication inevitably evokes civilization.

Beyond their biology, the neohumans are also represented as superior and civilized in that they seem to be the last guarantors and conveyors of *culture,* understood as both "the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations and "acquaintance with and taste in fine arts, humanities, and broad aspects of science as distinguished from vocational and technical skills" (*Merriam-Webster*). Their main

activity and purpose in life is indeed to read and comment on their ancestors' autobiography—a duty imposed on them by their creators, who had not found any other way to pass down personal experience and memory from humans to their clones and from one clone to the next—as well as the works of scientists and philosophers. Since cataclysms have almost wiped out mankind, the neohumans are responsible for saving and transmitting the last testimonies of human *culture*, which, as Boletsi explains, can also be a synonym of "civilization" in that both words "[describe] the accumulated habits, attitudes, beliefs, values, behavior, and a way of life shared by the members of a society" (72).

Neohumans share the remains of our planet with the "savages," as Daniel24 recurrently calls them, namely the few unmodified and uncloned humans who have survived the various cataclysms but have regressed to a primitive way of life. Since neohumans are not supposed to leave their homes, Daniel24 has met very few savages, except the few isolated specimens occasionally prowling around his property. But when Daniel24's successor, Daniel25, decides to leave his home permanently to see what lies beyond his fences, he discovers the savages' customs, which are unequivocally presented as backwards compared to the neohumans and twentieth-century humans:

> The savages' occupation of the building translated above all disorder, stink, and piles of dried excrement on the floor. There was no sign of mental, intellectual or artistic activity; this corresponded to the conclusions of the few researchers who had looked into the history of the savages: in the absence of any cultural transmission, the collapse had occurred with amazing speed. (395)

The description of the savages' lifestyle echoes that of the pleeblanders in *Oryx and Crake*: they are careless and filthy and show just as little "life of the mind" (Atwood 196). Cultural transmission is identified as a means to preserve civilization, which reinforces the idea that the neohumans are the civilized, since their main activity is to pass this set of human knowledge and experience on to their successors. Daniel25 also repetitively describes the savages making fires on the floor, whether they are in the woods or in the remains of a luxurious hotel that "contained a battery of vitroceramic cookers—that

they were incapable of understanding how to use" (387). Quite ironically, these future humans are helpless when facing twentieth-century technology. This study has so far only identified the misuse of technology as a creator of barbarism but in this novel, all technology has simply gone out of use, turning future humans into barbarians while simultaneously rehabilitating technology as a catalyst for civilization. Daniel25 praises technology even further, finding it to be the greatest human achievement, surpassing "literary and artistic productions, …philosophical and theological systems":

> we [neohumans] could no longer see in [those human cultural productions] anything more than the arbitrary ravings of limited and confused minds. … Man's technological predictions, on the other hand, could still inspire respect: it was in this field that man had been at its best, that he had expressed his deepest nature, *there* he had attained from the outset an operational excellence to which the neohumans had been able to add nothing of significance. (395)

As previously mentioned, *LoveStar* and *Oryx and Crake* implicitly shed a negative light on technology which paradoxically, turns out to be a vector not of progress but of barbarism. In Houellebecq's novel, however, the neohuman Daniel25 considers technology as "what was best about mankind" and the neohumans' inability to achieve further technological breakthroughs makes them less civilized than twentieth-century humans. In this excerpt, Daniel25 also undermines the importance of "literary and artistic productions" and "philosophical and theological systems" compared to technology—a rather surprising opinion considering the neohuman duty to read and comment on not only autobiographies but also philosophical and literary texts. Considering the strong connection between culture and civilization, this might confirm the civilizational superiority of twentieth-century humans in the eyes of the neohumans. Yet, the neohumans actually consider these aspects of human culture as mankind's weakness, preventing them from idealizing completely their less evolved ancestors. The tone of Daniel25's comment on the biological differences between humans and neohumans is indeed quite neutral and does not indicate with certainty whether Daniel25 envies or pities his ancestors:

> Compared with a human, I benefited from a suppleness, endurance and functional autonomy that were greatly enhanced. My psychology, of course, was also different; I did not comprehend fear, and whilst I was able to suffer, I felt none of the dimensions of what humans called regret.… Consciousness of a total determinism was without doubt what differentiated us most clearly from our human predecessors. Like them, we were only conscious machines; but, unlike them, we were aware of only being machines. (408-409)

While the previous excerpt uncovers the ambiguity regarding the civilization and barbarism of twentieth-century mankind, this one highlights both the ambiguity with which Daniel25 considers these humans as well as his own internal ambivalence, as a being both similar to and different from his ancestors. The last sentence is representative of this semi-sameness: humans and neohumans are similar in their essence—both are "conscious machines"—but differ in terms of self-awareness. Such confusion prevents the readers from identifying neohumans as more or less civilized than humans.

Lastly, the treatment of the savages by the neohumans leads to a less ambiguous conclusion. One of the neohumans' spiritual leader's sermons advocates the following: "Treat all men as animals—deserving understanding, and pity for their souls and their bodies" (33). Daniel24 follows this animalizing recommendation, yet less benevolently: "I simply consider them [humans] to be slightly more intelligent monkeys, and, for this reason, more dangerous. There are times when I unlock the fence to rescue a rabbit, or a stray dog; but never to bring help to a human" (17). For Daniel24 the savages do not even qualify for the empathy usually granted to animals. In Magnason's and Atwood's novels, the enhanced species' way of treating the un-enhanced humans might reinforce the former's own belief in their being civilized while it in fact undermines their actual degree of civilization, considering Todorov's notion of barbarism as the act of dehumanizing another human being.

Conclusion—Humans and posthumans

These three narratives—*LoveStar*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Possibility of an Island*— anticipate a future in which several kinds of humans and posthumans coexist, which may prompt comparisons and

classifications regarding who is more civilized or more barbaric. Depending on one's understanding of the concepts of "civilization" and "barbarism," such comparisons can lead to various, often-contradictory conclusions—or no conclusion at all, if these contradictions cannot be resolved. Stereotypically, technology is often associated with progress and civilization, making the more technologically adept or enhanced characters apparently more civilized. Yet, these three novels avoid all simplistic, polarized representations, forcing the reader to reconsider these shallow interpretations and prompting more critical understandings of civilization and barbarism. On the one hand, what is usually categorized as civilized and positive turns out to create barbarism: technology actually enslaves people in *LoveStar,* and annihilates humans in *Oryx and Crake.* Similarly, the systems representative of the West—capitalism and consumerism—are in fact seeds of barbarism: LoveStar's chief of marketing turns his technological breakthroughs into commodities that hold a strongly subjugating power over their users; society in *Oryx and Crake* is dominated by corporations widening the gap between the rich and the poor, eradicating critical thinking and eventually reducing everyone to bare consumers; and the twentieth-century society described by Daniel in *The Possibility of an Island* is plagued by extreme economic and sexual neoliberalism. On the other hand, embracing barbarism may have positive outcomes: refusing technology creates freedom and salvation in *LoveStar*, Atwood's Crakers echo the Noble Savage stereotype, and the neohuman Daniel25 eventually leaves his home, possibly in an attempt to reconnect with a more authentic, humane lifestyle.

The dualism "civilization *vs*. barbarism" is also challenged by the existence and juxtaposition of more than just two types of (post)humans—pleeblanders, compounders and Crakers in *Oryx and Crake,* humans, savages and neohumans in *The Possibility of an Island*—which help the reader acknowledge the relativity of such categories: these characters can only be situated on a spectrum and never truly qualify as entirely civilized or entirely barbaric. Even when the imagined society is quite binary, such as with the cordless men and the wire-slaves in *LoveStar*, the reader somehow plays the third party, inevitably considering the fictional society through the lens of his own one—which is the intended purpose of most speculative works. These three novels indeed produce criticism of not only the future possibilities laid

out by technology—what could happen—but also of our contemporary Western societies—what is actually happening. *LoveStar* criticizes the current and growing dependence on technology and consumerism; *Oryx and Crake* warns against the rising commodification of all aspects of life (youth, culture, violence and sex); and, besides technology, very few aspects of the late-twentieth-century society seem to be valuable in the eyes of the narrators of *The Possibility of an Island.*

The three novels considered here reflect our contemporary fears that technological progress may *not* contribute to a more civil society. None of them allows a definitive judgment of its characters as either barbaric or civilized, mainly because such judgment does not even depend on the characters' intrinsic qualities but instead on the way they treat each other, which resonates with Todorov's understanding of barbarism as the refusal of another person's humanity. These novels indeed seem to be affirming the importance of empathy, which is unsurprising given that reading fiction necessitates and stimulates, before anything else, our capacity to embrace the perspective of the Other.

Notes

1. In her extensive study of barbarism, Boletsi traces the origin and evolution of this concept, from its Greek onomatopoeic debuts —“bar bar” was a way to describe the unintelligible language of a non-Greek (57)— to Walter Benjamin’s “Positive Barbarism”, a destructive process “to explore new modes of being” (111) and Guillermo Gómez-Peña “New Barbarians”, prompted by “cross-cultural and hybrid identities” (209). Let us note that Boletsi recalls that the linguistic definition of barbarism implies a kind of hybridity (5).

2. In “cordless man”, “man” —which, in both English and Icelandic (“maður”), may refer to the human species as well as its male members— must be understood, in this novel, in its most encompassing meaning. The author however points out that, “of course, in a male dominant world, it is always more man than woman” (Magnason).

3. In this article, the posthuman must be understood as the result of “*human enhancement* or augmentation” whose “visions range from the posthuman as a new biological species, a cybernetic organism, or even a digital, disembodied entity” (Ranisch & Sorgner 8).

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