Still Waiting for Barbarians after 9/11? Cavafy’s Reluctant Irony and the Language of the Future

Maria Boletsi

Abstract

C. P. Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” (1904) has been adapted and restaged in art, music, and literature throughout the twentieth century. Since the early 1990s, and especially since the events on 11 September 2001, however, it seems to be haunting the Western imaginary. Its various allegorical uses in the press and cultural theory demonstrate the poem’s prominent figuration in debates about post-Cold War and post-9/11 realities. Cavafy’s poem is mobilized in critiques of the American Empire. It helps express the fear of others or of the unknown after the purported rupture of 9/11. But it also captures the desire for overturning saturated systems and forming new narratives and communities in the context of the financial crisis and recent protest movements. Besides functioning as an allegorical formula for capturing contemporary (global) realities, the poem also assumes a mediating function in current debates: it seeks alternative expressive modes, beyond metaphysical truths and essentialist oppositions, as well as beyond cultural relativism. This function takes effect through the poem’s evocation of two genealogies of “barbarism”: a negative and an affirmative one. The poem neither rejects nor fully affirms either of these genealogies. It thereby generates a kind of irony that can be termed “reluctant” in its questioning of and simultaneous attraction to metaphysics and presence. Through its reluctant irony, the poem seeks a viable practice of living in liminal times—a practice much needed in (our) times of crisis.

“Waiting for the Barbarians” (“Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους,” 1904) is one of C. P. Cavafy’s most widely circulated poems. It has been restaged in works of literature, art, and music in several cultural contexts throughout the twentieth century. Since the 1990s, however, and especially since the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, the poem seems to be haunting the Western cultural and political imaginary. The poem’s recurrent figuration in various genres and media during this period is an unmistakable sign of its intense “afterlife.” But
how is the poem produced by the present, and, more importantly, what kind of understanding of present (global) realities and vision of the future does Cavafy’s poem negotiate and propose?

As an allegory for the fear of others or of the unknown, a critique of a decadent order, or a call for a new start and radical change, this poem responds to specific desires and anxieties generated after the end of the Cold War and, even more, after what has been nicknamed “9/11,” up to the current financial crisis and recent protest and social movements. Focusing on the poem’s workings in the present, I chart its deployments in the press and in cultural theory in the West since the late 1990s. I then turn to the poem to unravel the genealogies of “barbarism” it evokes: a negative and an affirmative one. As I retrace both genealogies, not only in the poem but also in contemporary discourses, I argue that the poem assumes a mediating function in current debates: it seeks alternative expressive modes, beyond metaphysical truths and essentialist oppositions, and also beyond cultural relativism. Irony, I contend, works as the catalyst in this mediation. I therefore center on the kind of irony the poem (and Cavafy’s poetry in general) puts forward—an irony I term “reluctant” in its radical questioning of and simultaneous attraction to metaphysics. Significantly, through its mediating function, the poem also seeks a viable practice of living in liminal times—a practice much needed in (our) times of crisis.

This article thus probes the contemporary afterlife of a poem that has turned into a popular topos called upon to capture global realities. I use “afterlife” here in line with Walter Benjamin’s use of the term in “The Task of the Translator.” Benjamin conceptualized translation as the original’s afterlife, marking a process of transformation and renewal of the original (1999:72–73). For him, translation issues from the original’s afterlife and marks its continued life in every present, without striving for likeness to the original; it is an unpredictable “outliving” of the original (72–73). Paul de Man views the movement that the original undergoes through translation as “a wandering, an errance, a kind of permanent exile”—an exile, however, without a homeland, since the origin for de Man (and Benjamin) does not exist as such and is only evoked by the translations (2000:33). The afterlife of Cavafy’s poem, then, manifests itself in its various translations, understood in a broad sense: as processes of interpretation, reading, adaptation, recontextualization, citation, and artistic restaging.

The poem and its literary and artistic restagings

The poem is structured as a dialogue between (probably) two interlocutors. The reader is informed that the city is in commotion, as everyone is preparing to receive the barbarians:
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 did our emperor get up so early,
And why is he sitting at the city’s main gate,
on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?

    Because the barbarians are coming today
    and the emperor is waiting to receive their leader.
    He has even prepared a scroll to give him,
    replete with titles, with imposing names.

Why have our two consuls and praetors come out today
wearing their embroidered, their scarlet togas?
Why have they put on bracelets with so many amethysts,
and rings sparkling with magnificent emeralds?
Why are they carrying elegant canes
beautifully worked in silver and gold?

    Because the barbarians are coming today
    and things like that dazzle the barbarians.

Why don’t our distinguished orators come forward as usual
to make their speeches, say what they have to say?

    Because the barbarians are coming today
    and they’re bored by rhetoric and public speaking.

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 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.¹

To each question by the first speaker, the second speaker has a clear answer: “Because the barbarians are coming today.” This answer is confidently repeated several times, assuming a reassuring function that makes it sound almost like a promise to the other speaker, as well as the readers, who are also anticipating the barbarians. The non-arrival of the barbarians crushes the second speaker’s confidence and deprives civilization of the only solution it seemed to have. Instead of offering closure, the only answer the final lines give is captured in the ambiguous statement that deems the barbarians “a kind of solution” (emphasis added). The failure of the poem’s implicit promise—to present the barbarians—exposes “the barbarian” as a construct of the civilized that serves to sustain their self-definition. As the barbarians in the poem are shown not to exist outside this civilization’s discourse, the age-old oppositional thinking in terms of “barbarians” and “civilized” is debunked. The absence of the object of waiting in the poem thus harbors a critique of this binary logic. What is more, it is because the poem does not keep its implicit promise that its endless renewal is enabled: its haunting effect is enhanced by the structure of the failed promise that permeates it. Thus, the title’s promise is renewed in works that stage and refashion the topos of waiting for the barbarians.²

The theme of waiting for the other’s arrival has been taken up by several literary works, from existentialist meditations, such as Dino Buzzati’s novel *Il Deserto dei Tartari* (*The Tartar Steppe*, 1938) to Samuel Beckett’s play *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*, 1952), and from Julien Gracq’s novel *Le rivage des syrtes* (*The Opposing Shore*, 1951) to J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), which is probably the most outspoken literary recontextualization of Cavafy’s poem. In addition, numerous poems originating in more than ten countries respond directly to Cavafy’s poem or apply its dialogic structure to other contexts. Examples of such poems are “Del amor por los bárbaros” by Luis Benítez from Argentina (1996); “After Cavafy” by American poet James Merrill (1994); Alistair Te Ariki Campbell’s “Waiting for the Pakeha” (1975), a poem from New Zealand in which the natives are waiting for the European settlers; and Richard O’Connell’s “Waiting for the Terrorists” (2003), which alludes to the events following the attacks on 11 September 2001.³

The topos of waiting for the barbarians also figures in visual art. There are several paintings, sculptures, and installations that visually translate this topos, transferring it to new cultural contexts. Artworks bearing the title *Waiting for the Barbarians* (in different languages) include paintings by Rotterdam-based artist Arie van Geest (2002), British painter David Barnett (2004), London-based artist Linda Sutton, and German artist Neo Rauch (*Warten auf die Barbaren*, 2007). South African artist Kendell Geers’s labyrinthine
installation *Waiting for the Barbarians* (2001), situated permanently outside the Gravenhorst monastery in Germany, also alludes to Cavafy’s poem through Coetzee’s novel, by which the artist was primarily inspired. Argentinian artist Graciela Sacco’s *Esperando a los bárbaros* (1996), an installation comprising numerous pairs of eyes printed on paper and staring at the viewers through pieces of wood, also visually recasts Cavafy’s theme—the artist’s source of inspiration—and probes the possibility of another “kind of solution” to the state of waiting for barbarians.⁴

Cavafy’s topos also resonates in Juan Muñoz’s comic sound installation *Waiting for Jerry* (1991), exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, as well as in the sculpture exhibition “The Barbarians” (2002) by British modernist artist Anthony Caro. In the catalogue of Caro’s exhibition, Cavafy’s poem is quoted in its entirety as the artist’s main source of inspiration, together with an excerpt from W. H. Auden’s long poem “The Age of Anxiety.” In music, American composer Ned Rorem’s song “Waiting for the Barbarians” (2001) is written to the lyrics of Cavafy’s poem.⁵ Philip Glass’s opera *Waiting for the Barbarians*, based on Coetzee’s novel, premiered in Erfurt, Germany, in 2005. Recently, Greek-Australian composer Constantine Koukias also composed the opera *Barbarians*, which premiered in Hobart, Tasmania, in 2012 as part of the MONA FOMA festival. In this operatic staging of Cavafy’s barbarians, the poem was delivered in Greek as well as in English translation. Finally, a theatrical adaptation of Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, written and directed by Russian director Alexandre Marine with music by Dmitri Marine and produced by Maurice Podbrey, premiered in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2012.⁶

### Allegorizations in contemporary political contexts

Besides its figuration in aesthetic contexts, the poem is frequently cited in other contexts or genres, ranging from newspapers, magazines, and Internet blogs to cultural and political theory.⁷ As Diana Haas and George Savidis have suggested, Edward Gibbon’s *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, which Cavafy was reading when he wrote the poem, constitutes the poem’s main intertext.⁸ However, despite some allusions to the Roman Empire, the poem’s lack of explicit historical markers enables its deployment as an allegory potentially applicable to various historical situations long after its publication. The poet in “Waiting for the Barbarians,” Edmund Keeley writes, does not have “a specific historical event in mind” but wishes to “offer an insight into the larger pattern of history that raises particular places and events to the level of metaphor or myth” (1976:30). Viewed as such, Cavafy’s barbarians provide fertile material for various allegorizations. In the 1990s and even more so after 9/11, newspaper articles and opinion pieces regularly tapped into Cavafy’s poem to
illuminate issues in politics and international relations or to comment on social and cultural phenomena. It is worth taking a closer look at some of these uses.

Cavafy’s barbarians are often evoked in reflections on the “American Empire.” In an April 2008 article in *The New Yorker*, entitled “After America. Is the West Being Overtaken by the Rest?” Ian Buruma uses Cavafy’s poem to probe the thesis that “America’s time of global dominance is finished, and that new powers, such as China, India, and Russia, are poised to take over.” In this context, he writes: “All great empires set too much store by predictions of their imminent demise. Perhaps, as the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy suggested in his poem ‘Waiting for the Barbarians,’ empires need the sense of peril to give them a reason to go on. Why spend so much money and effort if not to keep the barbarians at bay?” The poem helps Buruma highlight the fear in the attitude of empires towards their barbarians, as well as the American Empire’s need for an external negative other, through which it can measure, augment, and legitimize its power and (military) practices.

Similarly, the poem offers John McDonald the insight that each civilization needs a negative other “by which it can define its own goodness.” In his piece “Enemies at the Gate” (2005), McDonald reflects on the various groups on which the tag of the barbarian is conferred today, especially after 9/11. Besides terrorists, these barbarians are “delinquents, vandals and drug dealers, greedy businessmen, certain elements among footballers, the tabloid press, avant-garde artists, and those who oppose avant-garde artists.” Emphasizing the dehumanization of the other the term effectuates, McDonald points to the ironic fact that civilization constructs its barbarians in order to license barbarous acts. Contemporary barbarians are thus not external enemies, but products of civilization: “The more superficially civilized we become—that is, the more affluent and self-assured—the more we breed barbarians” (n.p).

McDonald centers particularly on art as an arena in which barbarism (defined as rule-breaking and norm defiance) is encouraged and funded by civilization and its institutions. Rather than a threat to the structures of civilization, he views the “licensed barbarism” of “anti-social art” as “a social pressure valve,” which enhances rather than destabilizes the status quo, by offering a harmless form of protest within the system’s structures. Returning to the poem at the end of his piece, he concludes that there may “no longer” be any barbarians today—no agents “who stand outside the officially-sanctioned codes of etiquette.” Following Cavafy, he considers the barbarians a convenient construction for evading internal problems: “The barbarians are still our all-purpose solution to imponderable social ills, they still allow civilized beings to indulge in occasional uncivilized acts. As long as we have them in reserve, we need never get too close to our problems” (n.p).

In the last fifteen years, both sides of the ideological spectrum, conservatives and progressives, have appropriated Cavafy’s poem. While amply used
to criticize the American Empire and the corporate state as well as to expose the construction of external barbarians as an imperial ruse, it has also been utilized in the service of essentialist demands for clear-cut moral distinctions after 9/11.

A striking example of a reductive appropriation from a conservative perspective can be found in William Kristol’s article “Civilization and Barbarism” from April 2013, which also starts by quoting the poem’s final verses. Published in the neoconservative opinion magazine The Weekly Standard, Kristol’s article starts with a sketch of the twentieth century as an era in which civilization (identified with the U.S.) tries to ward off barbarians (first the Nazis, then the communists) that threaten to sink the world into “a new dark age.” The end of the Cold War, Kristol remarks, did not mean the end of the barbarians, a fact that was confirmed by the attacks on 9/11. Thus, “there are still, in the enlightened and progressive 21st century, barbarians at the gates—and, sadly, within the gates” (n.p.). While terrorists lurk outside the gates, Kristol also finds barbarians inside the U.S., as he links proponents of abortion, for example, to the barbarian hordes within the country’s borders. Kristol’s ultimate objective is to criticize the “lack of moral clarity” (n.p.) of the Obama administration—what he perceives as the morally reprehensible reluctance of the White House to identify the forces of barbarism and civilization in the world in a straightforward manner, so as to reinstate America as the essence of civilization and cast its enemies as incarnations of barbarian evil. Kristol’s plea for clear-cut oppositions in global politics (good versus evil, civilization versus barbarism) iterates a claim that has gained currency since 9/11. After 9/11, as Michael Rothberg notes, borders and oppositions have been “locked down” and citizenship “re-racialized” (2009:155). It is curious, however, that Kristol opts to use Cavafy’s barbarians as a starting point for developing an essentialist argument, given that the poem at the very least interrogates the transparency of any such opposition by foregrounding the barbarians’ absence.

Conservative appropriations such as Kristol’s as well as several appropriations from more progressive perspectives can be placed in the context of debates about the new position of the U.S. after the Cold War—debates which had already started in the 1990s. Figurations of the poem in this context are particularly frequent, since the poem provided a useful trope for conceptualizing post-Cold War realities. Lewis Lapham used the title of Cavafy’s poem to name his collection of essays on American society (1997). The poem guides his critical reflection on the post-Cold War period, in which most dangers to U.S. society, as he sees them, stem from internal barbarians. The real danger in post-Cold War America, Lapham contends, comes from the masters of the American Republic: America’s hypocritical political elite and corporate culture. In the final essay of the collection, Lapham addresses the uninhibited reign of global capitalism as the real barbarism in a post-political era without external barbarians (1997:219).
Lapham’s ostensive evocation of Cavafy’s poem in his title makes the poem emblematic for the post-Cold War condition, in which, it seemed, the barbarians did not exist “any longer.” Their absence generated either over-confident proclamations of the triumph of liberal democratic governance or quasi-apocalyptic scenarios about the imminent fall of the American Empire under the weight of its internal barbarism. Lapham does not resist a trend several critics followed around that time: indulging in historical analogies between the contemporary American Empire and the Roman Empire as well as the subsequent “Dark Ages.”

A master in the art of drawing such historical parallels is Morris Berman. In his piece “Waiting for the Barbarians” in The Guardian in October 2001, Berman complements observations he had already made in The Twilight of American Culture (2000b) with insights that the events of 9/11 brought forth. Berman paints a gloomy picture of a present-day America in decline due to the same internal problems that the Roman Empire was facing towards its end (e.g., growing social inequality, dropping levels of literacy, lack of critical thought, spiritual decline, apathy, political corruption). To this “internal barbarism” he adds the threat of external barbarians as it materialized after 9/11, and traces similarities between these attacks and the “barbarian invasions” of the Roman Empire. America today, then, “has barbarians at the gates, and also, it would seem, within them” (n.p.).

The rhetorical strategy of drawing historical parallels grants an air of (historical) validity to a diagnosis of the present and a prediction for the future, while this diagnosis is necessarily based on a strict selection of only those elements bound to confirm the hypothesis initially put forward. Thus, the present is illuminated through a past blueprint-narrative that offers the illusion of a historical repetition of the same. In Berman’s rhetorical scheme, Cavafy’s poem (with its abstract metaphorical structure, but also, significantly, its allusions to ancient Rome) provides a perfect allegorical vessel that can host both historical contexts as if they coincided. In Berman’s understanding of the poem, the barbarians receive a solely negative signification: they are the destroyers that a declining civilization fearfully awaits. Hence, the future prospect he concludes with comes as no surprise: “It is a chilling thought, the possibility that for the remainder of the new century, America will be waiting for the barbarians” (n.p).

In her article “Paranoid Empire,” Anne McClintock rereads Cavafy’s poem and notes that it “haunts the aftermath of 9/11 with the force of an uncanny and prescient déjà-vu” (2009:92). Her reference to the poem’s force in terms of a déjà-vu foregrounds repetition as the mode of its haunting effect. McClintock probes the paranoia that triggered U.S. imperial violence after the end of the Cold War and especially in the context of the war on terror since 9/11. “To what dilemma are the ‘barbarians’ a kind of solution?” McClintock
Still Waiting for Barbarians after 9/11? asks (92). The end of the Cold War and the fall of Eastern-bloc communism left the hegemony of neoliberalism unchallenged. As Western neoliberalism, led by the U.S., seemed to reign uninhibited, the optimism accompanying this professed post-political era led to confident diagnoses, epitomized by Francis Fukuyama’s famous proclamation of the “end of history.”10 As a result, Western politics, as Chantal Mouffe notes, celebrated the disappearance of antagonism in a “post-politics” without a “they” (2005:31): a world without barbarians. The barbarians of the American Empire—the USSR as its big enemy—were not there “any longer.”

The legitimacy of an Empire, however, is grounded in the construction of the barbarians—an external enemy that generates “nightmares of impending attack” and justifies escalations of military violence. “Cavafy’s insight,” McClintock notes, “is that an imperial state claims legitimacy only by evoking the threat of the barbarians.” When there are no barbarians any longer, she continues, “the legitimacy of Empire vanishes like a disappearing phantom” (2009:92). In the 1990s, as the great antagonism of the U.S. and the USSR receded, the lack of a visible external threat turned into a source of anxiety for U.S. power. There was no use training a massive army without a plausible external threat. As Secretary of State Colin Powell noted before 9/11, “though we can still plausibly identify specific threats [. . .] the real threat is the unknown, the uncertain” (quoted in McClintock 2009:93).

Disproving this supposed lack of external threat, the terrorists involved in the 9/11 attacks seemed to verify that the barbarians had finally arrived. These new barbarians were thus called upon to provide “a kind of solution” to the “enemy deficit” that took shape after the end of the Cold War and “the crisis of imperial legitimacy” that ensued (McClintock 2009:92). However, these new barbarians were not real enough. In the proclaimed “age of terrorism” after 9/11, the distinctive feature of this new type of barbarian is their lack of distinctive features. As Arjun Appadurai remarks, the increase in terrorist actions since 9/11 has induced uncertainty regarding the agents of such violence: “Who are they? What faces are behind the masks? What names do they use? Who arms and supports them? How many of them are there? Where are they hidden? What do they want?” (2006:88). These barbarians function like ghosts, and their shadowy presence served as a justification for the declaration of total war from the U.S. and its allies. The war on terror targeted several countries and individuals, in an attempt to hypostasize the ghosts: to make the enemy recognizable, visible, masterable.

Although the barbarians seemed to have arrived with 9/11, in fact they had not. In the years after 9/11, the world, particularly the West, was dominated by the fear of barbarians: the fear that those incalculable enemies would arrive, again and again, just like ghosts. Post-9/11 paranoia was that of a world fearfully waiting for the barbarians, not a world in which the barbarians had
already arrived. The real traumatism produced by the events on 9/11, Jacques
Derrida argued in an interview, lies not just in the destruction it caused on that
day, but in the kind of future threat it imposed upon the world: “Traumatism is
produced by the future, by the to come, by the threat of the worst to come, rather
than by an aggression that is ‘over and done with’” (2003:97). The threat these
events signaled was worse than that issuing from the Cold War, in which there
existed a “balance of terror” between two states (98). The 9/11 attacks imposed
the specter of a more terrible kind of barbarism awaiting us in the future, the
threat of which determines our lives in the present.

The link between this fear of an impending enemy attack and imperial
violence has often been explored. The fear of barbarians after 9/11, as Tzvetan
Todorov argues in his book *The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civil-
izations*, threatens to turn us into barbarians—by “us” Todorov refers to
citizens of the West. Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib exemplify the internal
barbarism generated when giving in to this kind of fear. U.S. torture practices
in this context can be viewed as attempts to produce the elusive barbarians as
identifiable bodies, which are placed under direct U.S. control and subjected
to violent acts of revenge (McClintock 2009:95). In this context, the poem also
gives impetus for critiques of the demonization of certain groups after 9/11. In
an article entitled “West Needs to Rethink Attitudes to Islamic Civilizations”
in *The Irish Times* in May 2002, Patrick Comerford reflects on the suspicion
and prejudice against Muslim populations within or outside of Europe and the
U.S. after 9/11. He reaches his conclusion through a brief discussion of Cavafy’s
poem: “An imagined external enemy provides excuses for not wrestling with
real social and political problems. On the other hand, real dialogue with the
Islamic world is the only way of removing prejudice and fears of an imaginary
threat.” His use of the poem to probe hostile attitudes against Muslims after
9/11 underscores the need of the “civilized” to construct barbarians as a way
of avoiding confrontation with internal problems.

Civilizational rhetoric today

The poem’s deployments as an allegory for contemporary political realities, as
discussed above, testify to the manifold ways in which it haunts our present.
Its pervasive presence is in my view not unrelated to the ongoing popularity
of the term “barbarian” and of the rhetoric of “civilization versus barbarism”
since the early 1990s, and especially since 9/11. The popularization of this
rhetoric coincided with a shift in the criteria according to which global divi-
sions and political conflicts are perceived. As it has often been argued, after
the Cold War and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, global dividing
lines are not determined by the market or by political ideology—capitalism
versus communism or democracy versus totalitarianism—but by culture. This
“culturalization” of political conflict, which Mahmood Mamdani has called “culture talk” (2004:17), goes hand-in-hand with a moralization of global conflicts. In this context, the we/they opposition, Mouffe argues, is defined in moral terms: instead of “a struggle between ‘right and left’ we are faced with a struggle between ‘right and wrong’” or “between good and evil” (2005:5). As the “civilization versus barbarism” rhetoric had partly receded from Western public discourse after World War II and decolonization, this recent shift could partly account for the regained currency of this rhetoric already in the 1990s, and even more after 9/11. As George W. Bush proclaimed on 15 September 2001 that “a group of barbarians have declared war” on America (quoted in Jackson 2005:38), terrorists were tagged as the new barbarians in the “crusade” against terror.

Since 9/11, the tag of the barbarian has been conferred on various groups besides terrorists. It has been applied to Islamic culture; fundamentalist societies; (Muslim) migrants within, or threatening to invade, the borders of Western European countries (tagged as “barbarians at the gates”); or the multitudes during recent uprisings in major European cities. “The Barbarians Inside Britain’s Gates,” for example, formed the headline of a Wall Street Journal article by Theodore Dalrymple on the London riots in 2011. Recent social movements such as the “Indignants” or the “Occupy” movement were also received as nonsensical, incomprehensible, irrational, and, in that sense, barbarian. The “problematic” Southern European countries since the financial crisis have also been cast as internal barbarian threats to the future of Europe.

As the fear of others became a mobilizing force in Western politics after 9/11, the term “barbarian” facilitated the construction of others as irrational, dangerous enemies rather than legitimate adversaries. The popularity of the “civilization versus barbarism” rhetoric after 9/11 can also be linked with the desire that was voiced soon after the attacks to endorse absolute, universal values and moral categories, which had been discredited in the framework of postmodern relativism. In dominant rhetoric, “9/11” was framed as a seismic rupture separating the old from a new world. In immediate responses to 9/11, this rupture was often interpreted as a farewell to the postmodern “age of irony” and relativism, which presumably made it impossible to make absolute judgments and identify “evil” because postmodernism ostensibly denied the existence of reality as such. Already on 22 September 2001, Edward Rothstein wrote an article in The New York Times entitled “Attacks on U.S. Challenge the Perspectives of Postmodern True Believers.” And on 24 September 2001, Roger Rosenblatt declared in an article in Time magazine that “The Age of Irony Comes to an End.” The indignation, lack of nuance, and absolutism that typified such reactions can partly be ascribed to the highly charged, emotional climate directly after the attacks. These positions were certainly not left unchallenged. However, reactions like these were symptomatic of a desire, generated
after the events on 9/11, to acknowledge the undisputable reality of the attacks and identify the terrorists unequivocally as evil. The “civilization versus barbarism” rhetoric after 9/11, then, served the demand to pinpoint “good” and “bad” guys as a means of maintaining one’s grasp on “reality.”

**Genealogies of barbarism in Cavafy’s poem**

The ways Cavafy’s poem haunts our present extend beyond its facile allegorical applications to post-Cold War or post-9/11 politics. Understanding a literary work as part of the present does not only mean turning it into an allegorical formula. Cavafy’s poem, I argue, does not only illuminate past or present situations by helping us fit them into its metaphorical structures. It can also intervene in dominant rhetoric by staging a complex critique thereof but also, significantly, by helping negotiate current dilemmas and shape alternative visions of the future.

My thesis is that the poem evokes two disparate, though interrelated, traditions in the history of the concept of the barbarian. In doing so, the poem assumes a mediating function in ongoing debates on our realities since 9/11: it negotiates a relation between past and present, between the old and the new, which suggests another “kind of solution,” beyond the clear-cut oppositions of dominant rhetoric, but also beyond cultural relativism. In what follows, I unravel this thesis.

It is noteworthy that in nearly all the aforementioned uses of the poem in political contexts, Cavafy’s barbarians become negative signifiers that induce fear and a sense of imminent peril. The element of desire in the anticipation of the other’s arrival, as well as the prospect of a new start through a barbarian invasion—both crucial ingredients in the poem’s equivocal performance—move to the background. Cavafy’s poem, however, certainly does not just function as a harbinger of doom.

“Waiting for the Barbarians” partakes in two traditions of use of the barbarian. In the first tradition, the barbarian is the product of civilizational discourse and is signified solely in negative terms as civilization’s abject or outside. In this tradition, the barbarian functions as the inferior part in a hierarchical opposition that helps sustain the superiority of the civilized self. This opposition can be traced back to the antithesis between Greek and barbarian in Greek antiquity, and has received several different referents since then. By showing how empires are dependent on their barbarians, the poem evokes this long history of the barbarian as the negative part in a binary scheme, even if the poem can be read as a critique of this tradition.

There is, however, a second tradition, in which the barbarian is mobilized as an affirmative concept. Historically, art, literature, and philosophy have at times employed barbarism affirmatively, notably in critiques of civilization,
rationality, and progress. In avant-garde art, for instance, barbarism often designated a force revitalizing a decadent (European) civilization. The movements of Dada and Surrealism are cases in point. Dada was a revolt against the barbarism of World War I and of new technology. Surrealism also reacted against the barbarism of “progress.” But both movements also used “barbarism” positively, as a counterforce to the rational and conventional structures of European culture. Surrealists regularly referred to themselves as “barbarians hammering at the gates of culture” or as “barbarians storming the gates” of European culture (Vaneigem 1999:20).

Positive recastings of barbarism have also been performed by philosophers. Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, mobilized the barbarian as a dynamic figure capable of revitalizing the decaying European civilization by disregarding moral inhibitions. The idea of a kind of barbarism that would revitalize Europe gained currency among European thinkers at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries—roughly the period when Cavafy wrote the poem. As Europe entered a period of crisis and cultural pessimism, Europeans started questioning rationalism, positivism, and the Enlightenment ideal of progress. This questioning generated a desire for change. In this context, the idea of a kind of primitivism or barbarism that would rejuvenate Europe became popular among many European thinkers. Later on, in 1933, Benjamin would also famously call for a new positive concept of barbarism in his essay “Experience and Poverty.” In a risky attempt to counter the rising threat of fascism in Germany, Benjamin proposed a “positive barbarism” that would engage in a destruction of the old, clearing the ground for creative barbarian spirits to make a new start (Benjamin 2005:731–735).

Cavafy’s poem evokes this tradition, too. It is noteworthy that Cavafy’s own reading of his poem also underscores the positive aspect of the barbarians’ arrival:

Besides, the poem does not work against my optimistic view [about the future]. It can be taken as an episode in the course towards the Good. Society reaches a level of luxury, civilization, and consternation, where, desperate from being in a position wherein it cannot rectify things through a compromise with its usual mode of living, it decides to bring radical change—to sacrifice, to change, to go back, to simplify. (These are the Barbarians).

Cavafy’s reading, by associating the barbarians with “radical change,” almost imbues their expected arrival with a revolutionary potential. Whether the “solution” they represent entails going back to a simpler mode of life, as Cavafy here suggests, or another practice of living, one thing is certain: the citizens’ anticipation of the barbarians and their disillusionment when they do not arrive turn the barbarians into signifiers of the hope for something new that could replace the bankrupt structures of their society. But this newness cannot
come from the old barbarians who are not there “any longer,” because these are products of the same old discourse of their civilization. The temporal indication “any longer” in the poem may allude to existing (historical) constructions of barbarians, which cannot “exist” in the poem’s present, possibly because they cannot fulfill their traditional functions in the Empire’s narrative convincingly anymore, having grown oversaturated as a civilizational category.

Newness can only come from barbarians as specters from an unknown future that is yet to come: these are the barbarians that, we might say, have not yet arrived in the poem. The advent of the barbarians as the “truly other” does not take place in the poem, because the citizens are unable to imagine this other in terms different from those they have set themselves. The citizens assume they already know what the barbarians are like, what they want, and how they will rule the city once they arrive. The consuls and praetors are wearing embroidered togas and are overloaded with jewelry, because “things like that dazzle the barbarians.” The orators are silent, because the barbarians are “bored by rhetoric and public speaking.” The poetic casting of the city evokes Orientalist stereotypes of decadence, luxury, and excess. The citizens either believe that this is what the barbarians are like, or that these are the kinds of things the barbarians like. In other words, the barbarians are either constructed according to an Orientalist blueprint, or they are imagined as crude warriors—reminiscent of the invaders of Rome—who are likely to be impressed by the Empire’s grandeur. The citizens leave no room for the arrival of something really new, because they presuppose an already known other that can be articulated in existing representational regimes. The citizens are thus unwittingly responsible for forestalling their encounter with the barbarians they anticipate.

The poem conjoins and mediates between the two aforementioned strands in the genealogy of the barbarian, which we may, for the sake of the argument, call the “negative” and the “affirmative” traditions, despite the somewhat reductive nature of such a denomination. On the one hand, it acknowledges the necessity of the old category of the barbarian for civilization’s self-definition. On the other hand, it also hints at the possibility of another “kind of solution,” which would not involve the barbarians as the citizens have constructed them (and which “do not exist any longer”) but, perhaps, the “barbarian” otherwise: as the foreign agent of radical change. The poem, however, does not announce this other “kind of solution” all too confidently; the doubt encapsulated in the phrase “a kind of” betrays a hesitation that can be viewed as a sign of negotiation between the two traditions, instead of a straightforward replacement of the one with the other. Let us keep this hesitation in mind for a while, as we turn again to the present.

Most popular uses of the barbarian in public rhetoric after 9/11 treat the negativity of the barbarian and its opposition to civilization as a given and thereby also partake in what I catachrestically termed the “negative tradition.”
Alongside public rhetoric, however, there is also an ongoing preoccupation with the barbarian as an affirmative concept. Contemporary art is a realm in which this preoccupation finds fertile ground. For example, barbarism formed the theme of the 2013 Istanbul Biennial (September-October 2013), entitled *Mom, am I barbarian?* In the text announced as the Biennial’s “conceptual framework,” artists and thinkers are invited to think, in the current context, what it means to be a barbarian.17 The authors ask:

What does the reintroduction of barbarity as a concept reveal today? Is it a response to an urge to go beyond already existing formulas, towards the unknown? It may refer to a state of fragility, with potential for radical change (and/or destruction), thus, to the responsibility to take new positions. Through the unique interventions of artists, the biennial exhibition [. . .] will ask if art can foster the construction of new subjectivities to rethink the possibility of “publicness” today.

The kind of barbarism sketched through these questions is cast as a desire for breaking existing codes, destroying traditions, and imagining radical change in order to move towards something new. The destruction that such a move requires is here linked to a sense of responsibility—the responsibility, perhaps, to ensure that the future is not predetermined, but remains open to new languages and expressive modes. This kind of barbarism can even help forge “new subjectivities” that cannot find representation in the current social order, because they do not fit its existing categories.18 This transgressive potential of barbarism, as we read in the Biennial’s conceptual framework, is pertinent to our realities:

In the face of excessive production, connectivity and complexity in the world, the simple and direct (and their opposites, the over-complicated and convoluted) are espoused as an expression of the desire to start anew. Against the alarming incompetence of cities, governances and regimes, there is an increase in retreats to the countryside to start anew, develop new communities and alternative economic systems.

According to the text of the Biennial, the concept of barbarism can help us rethink existing social contracts. It is projected as a counterforce to barbaric processes of neoliberal globalization and capitalism (excessive production, connectivity, complexity), and an expression of the desire to start anew. This desire may take different forms: retreating to the countryside; developing new, inclusive communities; and imagining alternative economic systems, as a means of overcoming the violence of capitalism, which has afflicted so many populations in the context of the ongoing financial crisis. It is the latter desire that has largely motivated several social movements in the last few years, such as the “Indignants” or the “Occupy” movements, but also, more recently, the 2013 Gezi park protests in Istanbul. These protest movements were criticized
for the nebulousness of their cause and their lack of specific objectives and political program. But a question such as the one so often addressed to the “Occupy” protesters—“But what do you want?”—makes, as Slavoj Žižek argues, the following point: “Say it in my terms or shut up!” (2012:84). A demand for radical change cannot be easily articulated in existing hegemonic discourses, because it aspires to break through, and reinvent, those discourses and the frameworks that sustain them. This demand may thus sound confusing, vague, and incomprehensible, because it anticipates a future language, which is “barbarian” in the term’s etymological sense: a language that sounds like noise (the “bar bar bar” of the foreigner’s speech), because it has not yet been formed.

Barbarism thus holds a double potential. On the one hand, it denotes the negative other of civilization in a traditional oppositional mindset. On the other hand, it can signify change or critique of an established framework and the desire for a new beginning, even when that entails the violence of destruction. The tension between these two traditions occupies our present and the challenges it faces.

Cavafy’s poem, then, conjures up both these barbarian specters: the one from the past, which stresses the pervasiveness of the old narrative of the struggle between civilization and barbarism in Western history; and the one from the future, which signifies the hope of another “kind of solution.” By staging the tension between these two specters, the poem acknowledges the persistence of old, historical discourses in the present—such as the rhetoric of “civilization versus barbarism” today—but also the possibility of recasting them in and from the present towards new narratives for a different future: a future that is “barbarian” because it is open, incalculable, and not yet articulated.

**Cavafy’s little god of irony**

This negotiation between the two genealogies of barbarism unravels in the poem with the help of an essential catalyst: irony. The irony of the two final lines is hard to miss: “And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution.” Critics have suggested that the irony here is expressed by a detached voice beyond the limited perspective of the two speakers.19 This view, according to which the final lines would be uttered by the third voice of a poet-observer, reflects the common association of irony with detachment. I argue, however, that these lines are spoken by the first speaker—the one asking the questions in the poem. The final lines constitute an attempt to salvage the old discourse on barbarians—an attempt, however, undermined by the doubt in the words “kind of.” “A kind of solution” captures the agony of the speaker, who realizes the failure of the previous order and yet desperately tries to cling to it for fear of the unknown that another solution may harbor. Refusing to crystallize into a definitive statement, these lines yield a sense of groundlessness and undecidability. The
voice in these lines knows that the “old” barbarians are not the solution, as these barbarians are produced within a discursive regime that is part of the problem. The speaker is, after all, constituted as a subject through this discourse and drawn to it, just as the citizens are drawn to the barbarians. Fully disavowing this discourse may be an impossible gesture of self-erasure. But civilization’s “truth,” which sees the barbarians as the solution, has to co-exist with the subversive addition “a kind of,” which questions this “truth,” without, however, fully dismissing or replacing it with another truth. This kind of irony functions in a metonymic rather than metaphoric fashion, as it captures the contiguity of two “truths” as well as of two barbarian specters, rather than substituting the one with the other.

Cavafy’s irony is a reluctant irony: not nihilistic, cynical, but drawn to metaphysical notions of truth just as it questions them. At times, the poetic voice seems to be drawn to metaphysics, a desire to get beyond all perspectives: I stress desire here because it is never realized. Cavafy’s poetic voice oscillates between the desire for presence, truth, and the formulation of historical laws on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the acknowledgment of the ephemeral, shifting perspectives, the force of appearances, the awareness he shares with other great ironists like Nietzsche, that “every description [. . .] is relative to the needs of some historically conditioned situation” (Rorty 1989:103). Truth in Cavafy is there, and yet it is not; it is questioned by a reluctant irony that has to dispel it and simultaneously desires it. The poet, as we read in one of his unpublished notes from 1902, recognizes the contingent nature of every “truth”: “Do Truth and Falsehood actually exist? Or is there only New and Old—and the False is simply the old age of Truth?” (Cavafy 1983:24, my translation). And yet, he does not abandon or deny the allure of this evanescent truth in his poetry.

Cavafy’s reluctant irony is not, in my view, a cowardly or easy way of avoiding choices or clear-cut positions. It involves a suffering and hesitation that, I think, are important to experience before letting any barbarians engage in the violence of destruction—even those who intend to bring positive change, for we can never know in advance whether destruction will lead to a better or worse future. The following prose poem by Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert—another master of irony—helps me visualize Cavafy as a reluctant ironist. It is called “From Mythology”:

First there was a god of night and tempest, a black idol without eyes, before whom they leaped, naked and smeared with blood. Later on, in the times of the republic, there were many gods with wives, children, creaking beds, and harmlessly exploding thunderbolts. At the end only superstitious neurotics carried in their pockets little statues of salt, representing the god of irony. There was no greater god at that time.

Then came the barbarians. They too valued highly the little god of irony. They would crush it under their heels and add it to their dishes. (2007:180)
In this idiosyncratic account of the history of religion, the decline of the anthropomorphic pantheon of the Greeks and Romans, in which gods had weaknesses and human habits, is succeeded by the inating of the god of irony, ironically represented by little statues of salt. This god’s statue is inherently ironic: a statue of salt is ephemeral, expendable, subject to consumption, going against the stability, constancy, and eternal life attached to the idea of a god. Interestingly, salt was also long regarded as possessing the “power to repel spiritual and magical evil.”

True to his ironic nature, this god of salt undermines himself: he is represented by something reified yet ready to be crushed at any moment; and his material form (salt) may have the (magical) power to invalidate and exorcise his spirit. There is of course also an intimate and fascinating link between irony and salt. Irony can be viewed as the salt that adds flavor and multi-layeredness to language. We can also recall idioms such as “to take something with a grain of salt,” which suggests that one is not taking a statement or argument literally, seriously or at-face-value, but maintains an attitude of suspicion or doubt: the kind of suspicion of “truth” that irony also demands.

In the end, however, the barbarians come, and Herbert writes that they “value highly” this god by crushing him. The destructive act of turning the god of irony into seasoning is of course still an ironic act. As a philosophical concept, irony is, at least in a certain tradition, a stance of negativity and destruction. From Kierkegaard, who, in his revisiting of Socrates’s irony, viewed irony as “infinite absolute negativity,” to Paul de Man, for whom irony involved a “radical negation” and the permanent threat of the “undoing” of any (theory of) narrative, irony seems to be invested with the destructive force of the barbarians (de Man 1996:165–166, 179). “An ironic temper can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of solvents,” de Man writes, and his choice of words somewhat emulates the dissolution of the god of irony by the barbarians in Herbert’s prose poem. Irony for de Man is something “very dangerous” and “threatening” because it is characterized by uncontrollability: it encapsulates the “impossibility of understanding,” as it performs an infinite negation of meaning and intelligibility, making it impossible to decide on the meaning of any text. Controlling and understanding irony, as many critics have tried to do, is for de Man an impossible gesture, because understanding it would necessarily mean canceling its course and undoing its main function (1996:166–167).

This kind of irony resembles the force of the barbarians: they, too, are considered a permanent threat to the controlled structures of civilization; they, too, hold the danger of total destruction; they, too, etymologically signify absolute unintelligibility (the “bar bar bar” of the foreigner). Understanding the barbarian would constitute an appropriative act that would necessarily cancel his or her “barbarian” status. Barbarians tolerate no fixity. Every stance that threatens to turn into religion, reification, metaphysical truth, goes against their version of irony as negativity and groundlessness. The god of irony—a statue of salt—is
of course inherently ephemeral, but that is not good enough for the barbarians in Herbert’s poem, who do not tolerate any form of religious ecology. A god of irony is a *contradictio in terminis* and has to be destroyed.

How is Cavafy’s irony to be understood? Is irony for him a little god of salt he likes to keep in his pocket or does his use of irony correspond to the barbarians’ destructive act? In other words, does irony for him embody a contradiction (in its questioning of, and simultaneous attraction to, metaphysical truths) or is it a stance of radical negation? In Herbert’s poem the barbarians may arrive, but in Cavafy’s they do not—at least not yet. As a result, Cavafy gets to keep this little god of irony in his poetic universe. Cavafy’s universe is full of little gods, which, as Eve Sedgwick argues in a piece on Cavafy, often mediate writing and desire: Lares, Eros, Muse, personified concepts like Memory or Poetry (2010:9). To this pantheon, we could add the little god of irony, which Cavafy honors precisely because he embodies an irresolvable contradiction.

Herbert’s god of irony captures the reluctant irony that I read in Cavafy’s poetic universe. Cavafy honors this god, but in the knowledge that his power is transient, that he can turn into seasoning at any moment. Metaphysical beliefs and irony are both there, challenging each other. Cavafy may not embrace irony as radical negativity, but he carries the god of irony in his pocket, reluctantly and with a slight embarrassment perhaps, fully aware of the irony in such a gesture. This is, perhaps, why the barbarians do not come yet in his poem: their non-arrival allows Cavafy to savor this little god in his pantheon for a bit longer.

*Living in-between “no longer” and “not yet”*

We live in a world largely dominated by the fear of barbarians but also longing for new modes of living, belonging, and relating to others. The uprisings and protest movements of the last few years have shown us, to use Žižek’s words, that “the taboo has been broken, we do not live in the best possible world; we are allowed, obliged even, to think about the alternatives” (2012:77). These movements and uprisings, even when they fail, or fail to be convincing, are valuable manifestations of a desire for change. We thus find ourselves in a position similar to that of the first speaker in Cavafy’s poem, who, facing an impasse, poses the question “and now, what?” The poem does not offer a clear-cut solution to the predicament it poses. But the kind of irony it puts forward implies a solution in the form of an alternative stance based on negotiation: desiring the new, while acknowledging the pervasiveness of the old paradigm, which cannot be easily overcome, as it still structures the speaker’s discourse.

The ceaseless iteration of Cavafy’s poem through its various restagings and deployments generates an extension of a present moment as an impasse or time of crisis. The present staged in the poem is, on the one hand, marked...
by the awareness that the existing dominant narrative is no longer viable or able to guarantee a desirable future: the “truth” of this narrative—to follow Cavafy’s note—has aged, unveiling itself as falsehood. On the other hand, this present is also occupied by the anticipation of a future that may bring radical change and with it a new narrative. Only, the narrative of this future-to-come is not there yet. Life in an extended transitional present, in which no narrative is fully convincing or all encompassing, is life at a standstill. Waiting for change to happen may last for a long time. Life, however, has to continue in liminal times. With “everyone going home lost in thought” at the end of the poem, the real challenge begins: the barbarians’ non-arrival forces the citizens to develop a practice of living in crisis, when the old barbarians are not there “any longer” and the new barbarians (the hope for a redemptive, revolutionary moment) are not yet there. Cavafy’s poem, through its reluctant irony, seeks a viable practice of living in a liminal present, while making sure that the promise of the barbarians’ arrival is kept alive: the poem’s countless deployments today guarantee the extended life of that promise, albeit in different forms.

As the end of the postmodern “age of irony” and relativism was proclaimed soon after the attacks on 9/11, the need to identify “evil” and return to a belief in universal values and rigid dichotomies was presented as a moral imperative. Irony is, of course, still alive and kicking. But if the attacks precipitated a desire in the West to return to the false security of metaphysical notions of truth—a desire that is taking dangerous and violent forms, as a regression to nationalism, racism, or ethnic violence—then Cavafy’s irony may inspire another kind of solution, another practice of living in a liminal present, without disregarding the force of this desire.

A reluctant irony, which questions metaphysical truths without denying their appeal, could respond to the contemporary desire to overcome absolute relativism without resorting to essentialist oppositions. It could offer a viable alternative to the popular either/or logic—the logic of “either you are with us or against us”—by adding some hesitation, the words “a kind of,” to any overconfident narrative of a solution to crisis. Significantly, this irony may also help foster a productive practice of living while we wait for radical change or a revolutionary moment to arrive, facing the possibility that the barbarians as bearers of the new may not come soon—perhaps not in our lifetime. This Cavafian irony, not too confident, and affectively engaged in the narratives it questions, is needed as we keep trying to envision the language of the future: a language still barbarian to us, but one, hopefully, worth waiting for.
NOTES

1. I am using the translation of Cavafy’s poem by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Cavafy 1992:18–19).


4. For a detailed analysis of these two installations, see Boletsi 2013:139–207.

5. Ned Rorem’s piece (for medium voice and piano) follows the composer’s English translation of the poem—not the original Greek text.

6. Though initially written in Russian by Alexandre Marine, the script for this theater play was eventually adapted into English by Marine’s son, Dmitri.

7. The poem was recited by Edward Said’s daughter during his funeral as one of her father’s favorite poems and gave its title to a collection of essays on Said, Waiting for the Barbarians: A Tribute to Edward W. Said, edited by Başak Ertür and Müge Gürsoy Şökmen and published after his death in 2008.


9. Although he does not quote verses of the poem in this essay, the poem’s figuration in the essay’s title is telling for the force it lends to his argument. Berman had explicitly referred to Cavafy’s poem in his book Wandering God (2000b).


11. The use of the term “barbarism” for the “others” of the European civilization was discredited due to the term’s association with Nazi violence and also due to its use by anti- and postcolonial critics (Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, et al.) to address the violence of Western colonialism. In both cases, “barbarism” was ascribed to forces within Europe itself, rather than to exterior others, emphasizing the fact that Europe was not such a civilized place as it was assumed to be.

12. In his essay “Don’t Blame Relativism,” Stanley Fish, for example, defends postmodern relativism against what he terms a “scapegoating” directed at anyone who after 9/11 still dares to claim things like “there are no universal standards of judgment” (2002:27).

13. Nietzsche rejects the Enlightenment ideals of progress and reason and sees European civilization as corrupt and declining. Nietzsche’s barbarians are individuals with the energy and will to regenerate European culture. In The Will to Power, Nietzsche describes the barbarian as belonging to “a species of conquering and ruling natures,” who obeys his natural instincts and gives vital energy back to European society (1968:479). In some of his writings, the barbarian is equated with his Übermensch: an individual who overcomes moral restrictions in order to impose his will to power, “re-investing barbaric characteristics with moral value” (Salter 2002:69).

«Εξ άλλου και εις την αισιόδοξη ιδέα μου το ποίημα δεν αντιβαίνει μπορεί να παρθή ως ένα επεισόδιον στην σταδιοδρομία προς το Αγαθόν. Η κοινωνία φθάνει σ’ έναν βαθμό πολυτελείας, πολιτισμού, και εκκεννημού, όπου, απελπισμένη από την θέση είς την οποίαν δεν βρίσκει διόρθωσι συμβιβαστική με τον συνηθισμένο της βίο, αποφασίζει να φέρη μια ριζική αλλαγή – να θυσιάση, ν’ αλλάξη, να γυρίση πίσω, ν’ απλοποιήση (αυτά είναι οι ‘Βάρβαροι.’).» The translation of Cavafy’s comments on the poem is mine. The full version of his comments on the poem was published in the Greek newspaper Ta Nea on 23 April 1983, p. 9, in the framework of an interview by G. P. Savidis entitled «Ο Καβάφης εκφράζει τον μείζονα ελληνισμό» on the fiftieth anniversary of the poet’s death. Cavafy’s unpublished commentary on the poem was at the time exclusively offered for publication in the newspaper Ta Nea by the Cavafy archive with the consent of Kyveli A. Singopoulo.

For the argument in this paragraph, see also Boletsi (2013:167, 172).

The title of the Biennial is derived from Turkish poet Lale Mülüdör’s homonymous book. The text of the Biennial’s conceptual framework can be accessed at http://13b.iksv.org/en

The connection of barbarism with new subjectivities recalls Benjamin’s notion of “positive barbarism” as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s “new barbarians,” laid out in Empire, who should not only cause destruction, but also create an alternative global vision (the “counter-Empire”) (2000:214). Hardt and Negri note that “the new barbarians destroy with an affirmative violence and trace new paths of life through their own material existence” (215). Barbaric deployments that can trace such new paths often entail new bodies and subjectivities: bodies “unprepared for normalization” transform to create “new posthuman bodies” that subvert traditional boundaries between human and animal, human and machine, male and female, and so on (215–216).

See, for example, Poggioli (1959:148).

A systematic analysis of Herbert’s poem in the context in which it was written exceeds the scope of this article.

This prose poem was originally published in Herbert’s collection Studium przedmiotu (Study of the Object) in 1961.


In making this point, de Man responds to Wayne Booth’s work A Rhetoric of Irony, and particularly his notion of “stable irony” and his project of understanding irony, which, for de Man, “is doomed from the start” (1996:167).

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