

Araştırma-İnceleme

**‘WAITING FOR THE BARBARIANS’: THE IMAGE OF  
THE OTHER IN DEREK MAHON’S ‘POEM BEGINNING  
WITH A LINE BY CAVAFY’**

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**Abstract:** In ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’, the Alexandrian poet Constantine Cavafy explains how the ruling class maintains its power within the context of meanings attributed to the Other, and tells how deeply the extinction of the Other shakes the current socio-political system. As an archetype for a great number of literary studies, this poem also inspires the Northern Irish poet Derek Mahon’s ‘Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy’. In this poem, Mahon examines the dilemma of the civilised-self by questioning the reigning Protestant obsession with Catholic presence. Grounded chiefly on the traces of ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ in ‘Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy’, this paper tells how the Protestants in Northern Ireland used Catholic presence politically to secure their sovereignty until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, and how they transformed this perception of historical threat into a paranoia. The barbarians in both poems are practical scapegoats for the reigning order. Yet, unlike those Cavafy describes, Mahon’s barbarians live not beyond the borders, but together with the civilised-self, aping its lifestyle. The civilised-self perceives even this desire for levelling as a threat and gradually transforms into what it is frightened of, by positioning itself negatively against the Other. If Cavafy’s barbarians are a remedy for the decaying civilisation, Mahon’s barbarians are agents of the Protestant paranoia as well as an outcome of the culturally decayed society.

**Key Words:** Derek Mahon, Constantine Cavafy, Barbarian, The Other, Ideology of Fear.

**‘BARBARLARI BEKLERKEN’: DEREK MAHON’IN ‘POEM  
BEGINNING WITH A LINE BY CAVAFY’ ADLI ŞİİRİNDE  
ÖTEKİ İMGESİ**

**Öz:** İskenderiyeli şair Konstantinos Kavafis, ‘Barbarları Beklerken’ adlı şiirinde, ötekine yüklenen anlamlar çerçevesinde yönetici erkin iktidarını

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nasıl sürdürdüğünü gözler önüne sermekte ve ötekinin yokluğunun var olan sosyo-politik düzeni nasıl derinden sarstığını anlatmaktadır. Birçok yazınsal çalışmanın ilk örneğini oluşturan bu şiir, Kuzey İrlandalı şair Derek Mahon’ın ‘Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy’ adlı şiirine de esin kaynağı olmuştur. Mahon, bu şiirinde, Katolik varlığını saplantıya dönüştüren egemen Protestan anlayışı sorgulayarak uygar bireyin açmazını irdelemektedir. Daha çok ‘Barbarları Beklerken’in ‘Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy’deki izlerini temel alan bu çalışma, 1998 yılında imzalanan Hayırlı Cuma Antlaşması’na kadar geçen zaman içinde Kuzey İrlanda’daki Protestanların egemenliklerini sağlamlaştırmak için Katolik varlığını politik araç olarak nasıl kullandıklarını ve bu tarihsel tehdit algısını bir paranoyaya nasıl dönüştürdüklerini anlatmaktadır. Barbarlar her iki şiirde de egemen düzen için kullanışlı günah keçileridir. Ancak, Kavafis’ininkilerin tersine, Mahon’ın barbarları sınırların ötesinde değil, uygar kişi ile birlikte yaşamakta ve onun yaşam tarzına öykünmektedirler. Uygar kişi ise bu benzeşme arzusunu bile tehdit olarak algılamakta ve ötekine karşı olumsuz pozisyon alışı ile giderek korktuğu şeye dönüşmektedir. Kavafis’in barbarları çöken uygarlığın çareleri ise, Mahon’ın barbarları hem Protestan paranoyanın araçları hem de kültürel yönden çöken toplumun ürünleridir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Derek Mahon, Konstantinos Kavafis, Barbar, Öteki, Korku İdeolojisi.

## Introduction

Originally denoting non-Greek speakers in antiquity, the word ‘barbarian’ has experienced a significant semantic extension and thus has a great many connotations today. That said, its acquired meanings always stay close to its core meaning. The word comes from ‘barbaros’, which was derived from the repetition of ‘bar, bar’, the sound uttered by the ancient Greeks while imitating the unintelligible language of foreigners. Regarding the origin of the word and its historical development, the *Oxford English Dictionary* online (2017) provides a series of interrelated meanings:

A. *n*

1. *etymologically*, A foreigner, one whose language and customs differ from speaker’s.

2. *Hist.*

a. A person who is not a Greek.

b. A person living outside the pale of the Roman empire and its civilization, applied especially to the northern nations that overthrew them.

c. A person who is outside the pale of Christian civilization.

d. With the Italians of the Renaissance: a member of a nation outside of Italy.

3.

a. A rude, wild, uncivilized person. (...)

4. An uncultured person, or one has no sympathy with literary culture. (...)

B. *adj.*

1. Applied by nations, generally depreciatively, to foreigners; thus at various times and with various speakers or writers: non-Hellenic, non-Roman (*most usual*), non-Christian.

2. Uncivilized, rude, savage, barbarous.

As these definitions indicate, ‘barbarian’ is a derogatory term; to avoid being labelled as such, one must be loyal to the established order, conform to the rules of the system or be a member of the supreme civilisations. Such depictions are prejudiced, depreciative and discriminating, because they are exclusivist and single-sided. The voice that defines ‘barbarian’ distances itself from all shortcomings, to such an extent, in fact, that no negative quality can penetrate its milieu. Malignity is associated with the other side of the border. A ‘barbarian’, thereby, signifies a negative outsider or an excluded Other, a person or a people who are believed to menace or threaten the conventions of the established order. The barbarian also conveniently shoulders the blame for the sins and wrongdoings of the established socio-political system, in that it functions as a scapegoat and is used as a kind of lexical and practical shield with which to protect the position of those in power. In this sense, it supports and reinforces the status of the civilised and “the discourse of civilization by functioning as its negative offshoot and antipode” (Moser & Boletsi, 2015, p.14).

The applicability of the term ‘barbarian’ to almost all areas makes it a practical figure in great demand in world literature. Portraying how a socio-political order needs an Other to maintain its authority and sinks into despair when losing it, the Alexandrian poet C. P. Cavafy (1863-1933) also joins in such discussions in his great poem ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’. Its influence on other writers has been so deep that it has become an archetype, inspiring many other literary works including J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Samuel Beckett’s great play *Waiting for Godot*. Moreover, numerous poems in different languages from various countries have followed this archetypal poem, including James Merrell’s ‘After Cavafy’, in which the Japanese are portrayed as barbarians; Mahmoud Darwish’s ‘Other Barbarians will Come’, which addresses the Israeli-Palestine conflict and the Israeli occupation in Palestine and Lebanon; and Richard O’Connell’s ‘Waiting for the Terrorists’, which ironically and jeeringly considers the utter despair and helplessness that characterised the social and political system of the USA following the attacks on September 11, 2001. The key issue questioned in such poems is the identity of barbarians and their function in a civilised world.

Scrutinising the social division and cultural dereliction in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, Derek Mahon (1941- ), born and raised in the Protestant suburbs of Belfast as the only child of a working-class Ulster Protestant family, also follows in the Greek poet's footsteps. Especially in his 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy', an adaptation of Cavafy's 'Waiting for the Barbarians', first published in 1972 under the title of 'After Cavafy, he implicitly criticises the Protestant obsession with the Catholics in his country and ironically seeks for Ulster barbarians. Yet, Mahon's barbarians do not come from the past in this poem; quite the opposite, they belong to contemporary Northern Ireland. They live inside the pale of European civilisation and speak the same language, English, as the members of civilised society. But does doing so indicate mutual understanding? Of course, it does not, because speaking the same language does not guarantee such an outcome. For this reason, the barbarians of Northern Irish society throughout the Troubles, a three-decade civil war (1969-1998) during which the terror carried out by paramilitary Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Unionist organisations was inextricably intertwined with that of the state, amounted to the corruption of the civilised-self, too. Grounded chiefly on the traces of 'Waiting for the Barbarians' in 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy', this paper aims to prove that for Mahon, while Protestant sovereignty in Northern Ireland before and during the Troubles depended on Catholic scapegoats to fulfil and maintain its authority, it produced its own barbarians by perpetuating the paranoia and fear that pervaded all aspects of the society. What the poet narrates in this poem is essentially all concerning the civilised-self. His close examination reveals that this self transformed itself into what it demonised.

### **1. Cavafy's Barbarians: Some Sort of a Solution**

Cavafy's 'Waiting for the Barbarians' describes a Roman town in the grip of corruption, and thus on the brink of collapse. Despite its historical content, Peter Mackridge (2007) classifies it as a philosophical poem, for it conveys a message of universal significance (p. xvi). Maria Boletsi (2013), by contrast, tends to see it as a historical poem, even though it lacks explicit spatial and temporal markers (p. 155). In fact, both critics are correct in their views, since Cavafy portrays a simple but multi-interpretable scene brimming with historical, social and political allusions, and opens a philosophical perspective mainly on the identity and function of barbarians.

In the poem, all the townspeople, from grandees to the ordinary citizens, are in the forum to meet their barbarians. The senators stop legislating; the emperor breaks his routine and wakes up early to await the visitors by the main gate to the town; consuls and praetors take their places in the forum in their splendid costumes; and the orators suspend their bombastic speeches. All these unusual welcoming preparations are interrogated and the mood of flurried townspeople is depicted in the poem, but the identity of the barbarians is never stated. Lexically, they are outsiders, inhabitants of a foreign territory, whose existence is always a serious threat to the people of the town. Cavafy strangely presents

them not as enemies, but rather as would-be saviours of the decayed civilisation. As things stand, this is a sort of surrender for the expectants, and convincing themselves to surrender to the barbarians is an option of last resort for them.

Boletsi (2013) interprets this poem as a stage performance, because it takes the form of a vivid dialogue performed before the reader, because of the stage setting evoked through the references to the citizens, emperor, senators, consuls, praetors and orators (p. 144). The visible stars of the poem are the two speakers: one who asks short, simple questions and another who answers them in a similar vein. The questioner is either perplexed by what he sees and genuinely oblivious to what has prompted the people to rush off, or a highly clever person who is fully aware of everything, yet pretends ignorance, thus aiming to make the respondent grasp the essence of the meeting in the forum. He is a critical thinker questioning everything he finds unreasonable. The second person is, perhaps, an ordinary citizen who contents himself with what the authorities announce, an adherent to the corrupt order and a parrot satisfied with the given.

It is understood from the answers of the second speaker that Cavafy suggests a very deep irony through the expectations of townspeople. They look forward to the arrival of their archenemies in the hope that their decaying civilisation might renew itself in their hands. However, the grandees ironically carry on with their customary practices, which precipitate the collapse of the city. The emperor is "seated at the grandest gate of [the] city,/ upon the throne, in state, wearing the crown"; the consuls and praetors wear "purple, embroidered togas", "put on bracelets studded with amethysts,/ and rings with resplendent, glittering emeralds" and carry "precious staves/ carved exquisitely in gold and silver" (Cavafy, 2007, p. 15). They do not forgo splendour, but rather insist on displaying hauteur through their actions. They imagine barbarians to be fond of glittering, ornamented and gaudy things and to hate orators and their flowery speeches. Such a depiction evokes the colonialist posture in representing the primitiveness of the colonized natives. If, as Cavafy's grandees believe, the barbarians "get bored with eloquence and orations" (Cavafy, 2007, p. 17), then they can have no understanding of literature or art, which is one of the chief measures of being civilised. Yet, in the poem, the barbarians are "the remedy to the predicament of a decaying civilisation" (Boletsi, 2013, p. 148). An irony reveals itself on this very point: The civilised people of Cavafy's poem yearn to surrender to those whom they have cast as the Other and accept the authority of their archenemies with while continuing to indulge in old habits and harbour the same prejudices.

Hania Nashef (2009) suggests that the chief action in this poem is waiting itself, a kind of ritual that disrupts daily life. It is a passivizing process that suspends everything and paralyzes people. Drawing attention to the strict passivity and involuntary captivity of those who wait in Cavafy's poem, she argues that the general mood in the forum has arisen from uncertainty:

The vague essence that defines the waiting can hold people captive. People wait, ensnared by a power they fail to understand, and their wait becomes the inactive activity that defines their lives. The artificial state that is begotten by the process of waiting not only suspends the linear passage of time but also allows certain realities to be imposed under the pretext of times of emergency. In Cavafy's poem, "Waiting for the Barbarians," the citizens are paralyzed by this uncertainty, awaiting further instructions from the authorities who inform them that when the barbarians arrive the state of suspension will be lifted (p. 7).

All preparations in the town are for the arrival of barbarians, a point that is repeated again and again throughout the poem. Here, repetition comes from the desire to believe or to commit the repeated subject to memory. The respondent is so sure about what will soon happen that he gives the same answer to every question: 'Because barbarians will arrive today'. Boletsi (2013) reads this repetition as a promise to the reader and townspeople. For her, the more the repetition is emphasised, the greater the disappointment that results when the promise is unfulfilled (p. 171). This is the reason for the pessimistic atmosphere which replaces the hope towards the end of the poem. The final stanzas depict the changed mood of the citizens and the extent of their frustration:

Why has there suddenly begun all this commotion,  
and this confusion? (How solemn people's faces have become).

Why are the streets and the squares emptying so swiftly,

and everyone is returning home in deep preoccupation?

Because night has fallen and the barbarians have not come.

And some people have arrived from the frontiers,

and said that there are no barbarians anymore.

And now, what will become of us without barbarians?

Those people were some sort of a solution (Cavafy, 2007, p. 17).

So corrupted is the town in Cavafy's poem that the townspeople look forward to the arrival of barbarians. The reception they have prepared is, at least, an appeal to their historical enemies, a kind of begging that reveals the extent of their desperation. In the face of their failure to find any cure for the decay of their civilisation, realising that the political system is bankrupt, the people grow anxious. Their solemn faces signify the loss of hope. With nothing left to wait for, they leave the forum and return home. Whether they will gather again in future is unclear. Indeed, the uncertainty which emerges at this point in the poem now hangs like a shadow over it. Setting all hopes on the anticipated arrival of the Other necessitates a waiting process and makes the people captives of this process. They are suspended in limbo, as it were. The unquestioned expectation of the respondent that the barbarians will soon arrive

becomes meaningless after the news from the frontiers, and "suddenly the mechanical repetition of his answer sounds like the stuttering utterances of a barbarian" (Boletsi, 2013, p. 148). In the process of waiting, the civilised-self transforms itself into what it hates.

## **2. Mahon's Barbarians: Protestant Paranoia and the Catholic Scapegoat**

Derek Mahon's 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy', as its title indicates, opens with a line from 'Waiting for the Barbarians': "It is night and the barbarians have not come." By transferring Cavafy's poem to an Irish setting, it can be regarded as an adaptation. Here, Cavafy's ancient city turns into Mahon's contemporary Belfast, which looked for a solution for its thirty years of political and social turmoil until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, a peace deal that brought an end to the Troubles, which was signed between the British and Irish governments and political parties of Northern Ireland. Regardless of the fact that their hope is in vain, the people in Cavafy's poem still dare to wait for their negative outsiders, but Mahon's barbarians are not foreigners. They are insiders who live in the heart of Belfast. Haughton (2007) asserts that this poem elucidates "a sense of anticipated cultural dereliction" (p. 78); if so, it can be said that these barbarians must have acquired a share of the collective decay together with their arch-rivals. They yield completely to modernity that assimilates indigenous groups and other cultures. That means the decline in Mahon's city is deeper than the one in Cavafy's.

Like Cavafy, Mahon does not offer any information about the identity of the barbarians. However, considering the lines all throughout the poem and following the key words, the reader can easily notice that both those who wait and those for whom they wait are from Northern Ireland. The question of whether they are Catholic Republicans, however, is left unanswered, yet it is possible to make a guess about it. Aside from Mahon's "a 'plague on both of your houses', attitude" (Mahon, 2000, pp. 163-164) towards the Troubles and watching the strife from a distance without taking sides, we can infer that the barbarians are Northern Irish Catholics. Because the main theme on which the poem is built is the reigning Protestant obsession with Catholic presence and the paranoiac fear of the Other.

Mahon, in the poem, illustrates a ground where the past and present, the particular and general, are represented together. There are echoes of this tendency stylistically in the body of the poem, too. While the focus in the first three stanzas is on the past, the last two describe the way things are now. This enables the poet to display a sharp contrast between yesterday and today. Basically, his is an interwoven double-layered perspective, hinting at the colonisation period on the one hand and alluding to contemporary times on the other.

The first layer is related to the historical demeanour of the coloniser towards the colonised. The indigenous Irish were perceived by the colonisers as non-civilised mobs, living on the other side of the borders, speaking a different

language, Irish, and menacing the system of plantation; in other words, they were negative outsiders against the civilised Protestant ascendancy. In accordance with the policy of plantation mainly implemented in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Protestant English colonists settled on the lands confiscated from Catholic landowners "with the aim to remove the native stock and replace the population with loyal English subjects, to be rooted firmly on the spot (State, 2009, p. 93). That means, instead of staying in its territory, the civilised-self transgressed the borders of the Other and provided a living space for itself in 'barbarous lands'. As a result, the new order turned everything upside down and the coloniser became an insider and made the colonized an outsider. Mahon hints at the bizarreness that resulted from this situation. Creating an outsider from an insider or vice versa is, of course, a striking irony and the use of irony is central to his poetry.

The other layer of Mahon's perspective reflects the social structure of contemporary Belfast. Historically, the defining voice had its hegemony over the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland after the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which concluded the Anglo-Irish War and provided for the division of Ireland. The resultant demographic structure was one of the most important reasons of the Troubles, because the Catholics who made up the majority of the population in Ireland became minority in the North after the treaty. It was an exact advantage for the power politics of the struggle for Protestant hegemony. In that new order, the historical perception of the Protestant-self remained unchanged, continuing to tag the Catholics as barbarians, at least until the Good Friday Agreement. However, unlike the colonisation period, these barbarians were now familiar insiders created in the heart of the civilised society.

Although the Others of the past disappeared and petered out, the campaign between the paramilitary organisations throughout the Troubles showed that the problems were still continuing. In such circumstances, to create Others and expel them from the society does not mean they cease to exist, because, especially in modern times, even when the Other is excluded, it does not disappear entirely but rather continues to remain a part of the community:

[T]he other who is excluded from civilized society as a barbarian is also constitutive of the entity he is expelled from. Civilized society depends on the barbarian other for its self-conception. Therefore, as a constitutive element of civilized society, the barbarian can never be totally excluded from the precincts (Moser & Boletsi, 2015, p. 15).

The borders were crucial for determining the barbarians in the colonisation period. They provided a strong indication for the Planters about who their enemies were. In this sense, borders gave certainty to the civilised judgment. By contrast, except for the Peace Wall of Belfast, which was built to divide the rival communities and prevent them from fighting, the borders in Belfast were mostly invisible or socially accepted. The resultant intertwinement paved the way for the civilised to live side by side with barbarians, whose identity is

determined by conjecture. This uncertainty makes the past, despite all its difficulties and problems, more desirable than the present for Mahon himself. This is why the poet remains nostalgic about the good old days of Ireland in 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy'.

In the first stanza, Mahon outlines the positions of the native barbarians and the civilised Planters in Ireland. The ideological fear instilled in Protestant settlers by the authorities about the threat of the indigenous Irish served to protect the plantation system. The enemy might come and destroy everything at any time. In fact, the natives did not pose any danger to ordinary people; their target was the great court, the executive officers of colonisation. Therefore, "When the great court flared/ With gallowglasses and language difficulty/ A man could be a wheelwright and die happy" (Mahon, 1979, p. 45). The resistance was engaged in a struggle to survive, a fight against the reductive views of the civilised authority. Apart from these, the picture depicted in the next two stanzas is ridden with innocence. It evokes the basic elements of Irish life and the historical landscape of the uncorrupted island:

We remember oatmeal and mutton,  
Harpsong, a fern table for  
Wiping your hands on,  
A candle of reeds and butter,  
The distaste of the rheumatic chronicler,

A barbarous tongue, and herds like cloud-shadow  
Roaming the wet hills  
When the hills were young,  
Whiskery pikemen and their spiky dogs

Preserved in woodcuts and card-catalogues (Mahon, 1979, p. 45).

As Patricia Craig (1992) suggests, this poem "bring[s] the past, with its strangeness, into the creative juxtaposition with the everyday" (p. 116). The poet does not portray a sinister view of the past; rather, he seems to draw a picture of innocence. Tagging the natives or the outsiders as barbarians is a kind of illusion riveted through the politics of the ascendancy. As in 'The Last of the Fire Kings', one of his best poems, Mahon looks at this issue from a different aspect. Here, barbarity produces itself inside the society. The Fire King, who has "reigned five years/ during which time/ he has lain awake each night/ and prowled by day/ in the sacred grove/ for fear of the usurper" (Mahon, 2011, p. 63), is sick and tired of the cycle of violence and sword-based tribal order. Therefore, he aspires to break with the murderous tradition either by committing suicide or escaping from his society. He is a lonely person, a victim and an odd man out whose view of life is far removed from that of his society. As Jonathan Hufstader states (1999) "The Fire King [...] becomes the scapegoat upon whom

the community projects its violence, lest that violence turn inward and destroy the community" (p. 119).

In a similar vein, in 'Snow Party', as he describes the still and serene atmosphere of Nagoya, where the Japanese poet Basho is invited to a snow party, Mahon (2011) suddenly shifts focus: "Elsewhere they are burning/ Witches and heretics/ In the boiling squares, // Thousands have died since down/ In the service/ Of barbarous kings" (p. 62). While those kings are leaders of the established order, the witches and heretics are the otherised and marginalised people. They are the scapegoats on whom everything can be blamed, and the safeguards of a system built on the ideology of fear. On the other hand, their extinction would be dangerous for the authorities, since they always need someone to blame for the crime and corruption in the society. In this sense, the witches and heretics are the fabricated-barbarians living in a substantially barbarous society. They might be excluded or rejected by the system, but this does not erase their existence. They are insiders, not outsiders. This point is underlined by Moser and Boletsi (2015):

[T]he concept of barbarism refers to an other who is rejected by, and excluded from, civilization. But since civilization constitutes itself by rejecting the barbarian other, the exclusion can never be complete. As a constitutive element of civilization, the excluded is also included, thus destabilizing the hierarchical opposition it is meant to reinforce. In turn, the opposition's inherent instability and the other's subliminal presence provoke repeated and anxious efforts to restabilize the antithesis, ever new attempts to redraw the line between self and other and to expel the barbarian for good. Because of its instability, the antithesis unleashes a dynamics of increasing violence against barbarians. This violence, which is meant to keep the barbarians at bay, ends up reaffirming the barbarism that is constitutive of civilization (p. 17).

Mahon highlights the historical motivation of the Protestant population in Northern Ireland once again in the final stanzas of 'Poem Beginning with a Line by Cavafy'. Those who are persistently proclaimed to come have not arrived, leaving the Protestant-self with predicaments. The only remedy, under these circumstances, might be to look inwards. In the second part of the poem, this is what Mahon does:

Now it is night and the barbarians have not come.  
Or if they have we only recognize  
Harsh as a bombed bathroom,  
The frantic anthropologisms  
And lazarous ironies behind their talk  
  
Of fitted carpets, central heating  
And automatic gear-change—

Like the bleached bones of a hare

Or a handful of spent

Cartridges on a deserted rifle range (Mahon, 1979, p. 45).

Although Mahon writes that the Ulster barbarians have not arrived, he amends his line by adopting an ironic approach. He states that they might have come, addressing some signs around. However, those signs are nothing short of an implicit repetition of the historical Protestant motivation. This hidden reiteration and adumbration evokes the attitude of the respondent in Cavafy's poem, which peremptorily represents the dominant perceptual acuity. The implication for the politics of the ruling powers in both Mahon's and Cavafy's societies can be encapsulated as 'the more repetition, the more support'. In the case of Belfast, before and during the Troubles, the rival groups were sharing a similar lifestyle and were subject to the same laws which were mostly in the Protestants' favour. Given that they constituted the majority of the population in Northern Ireland and had control of the political system, the reason for their struggle is called into question. When considered from this aspect, it can be said that such an attitude of mind is related to politics or a collective paranoia, if not both.

It is unimaginable to expect a community which for so long has been looking for enemies and finding them in the form of the Catholics to abruptly give up their historical perceptual frame. This explains the paranoia with which they look for traces of danger from Catholics in every detail of daily-life. The Catholic barbarians might ape their Protestant rivals and aspire to gain their high standards of living, but even this does not stop the civilised-self from perceiving them as a threat. Norman Vance (2004), in a similar vein, writes that the bleached bones and spent cartridges are merely metaphors for the present condition of the would-be civilised, but not evidence of an external threat from the barbarians (pp. 570-571). Seeking for the barbarian outsiders is as futile as hoping to find a live hare among its bleached and naked bones or shooting at a deserted rifle range which has lost its target as well as its intended use.

That said, 'the bleached bones of a hare' and 'a handful of spent cartridges' are at least proof of the presence of something, even if that something is no longer alive. The reflection of these ominous images is seen in an attack 'harsh as a bombed bathroom', which was probably carried out by the provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army). But to use the same paramilitary methods by means of loyalist groups such as UDA (Ulster Defence Association) and UVF (Ulster Volunteer Force) reduced the quasi-civilised self to the level of barbarians. This was one of the deepest dichotomies of the Protestant-self in Northern Ireland all through the years of the Troubles.

### **Conclusion**

The term 'barbarian', apart from its lexical meanings, also signifies those who are used by the ascendancy to cover up its corruption and sins. In this sense, the barbarian functions as a kind of scapegoat through which those in power convince their subjects of the innocence of the reigning order. In fact, the actual

threat is not the barbarians themselves, but their extinction. The image depicted towards the end of Cavafy's poem of the people who had gathered in the forum making their way home in disappointment shows this reality. The statement that 'there are no barbarians anymore' can also be taken to mean 'there is no need for barbarians anymore', because beyond its traditional fear and doubts, the civilised-self can take the opportunity to examine itself. The problem is inside, lurking in the core of the society. From this perspective, Cavafy's 'Waiting for the Barbarians' is a story of corrupted civilisation, which engages in quasi-civilised tricks, misleadings and manipulating its citizens by means of the outsiders. Now that they no longer exist or have died out, barbarians are entities created in the minds of the civilised, rather than living savages.

Following in the footsteps of Cavafy, Derek Mahon starkly exposes the historical perception of the Protestant civilised-self in relation to its Catholic barbarian rival. After interrogating the doctrine and politics of his Protestant community, he seems to conclude that all attempts to otherise and marginalise Northern Ireland's Catholics are based on both a collective paranoia sustained by traditional Protestant fear and the wish to maintain their political power and status. However, unlike Cavafy's barbarians, Mahon's are not outsiders, but rather they live in the heart of the society with the civilised-self. The former are extinct Others, whereas the latter are repeatedly created odd one out. In this sense, barbarity is contagious and the term 'barbarian' is an adjective that captures the negative attributions of a community rather than a noun denoting the savages. While it might not necessarily be inherited, it can also be acquired. Unlike Cavafy's, Mahon's barbarians are not always the cure for the decaying civilisation, rather they are mostly reason of the Protestant paranoia and outcomes of the corrupted civilisation. Transforming itself into an adjective apart from its lexical meanings, the term 'barbarian' points to an infallible reality in Mahon's poem. It is the reality of a society which has changed in one way or another so much that it is not itself anymore.

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