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What hides under the bed?

Poems do not exist without an interpretation. And an interpretation of a poem can be a communal effort that unfolds between different texts and readers. This is the case with the way that I came to admire "Waiting for the Barbarians." Reading it at school, I was exposed at the "usual" interpretation, according to which the barbarian is the *external* other that challenges the empire. He is the foreigner that tells us who we are. Even as a school boy, I was struck by the banality of such an interpretation. At the same time I had the feeling that the poem had not paid its dividend yet, that there was more to it that the interpretation put forward by my teacher.

I only discovered a different approach to Cavafy's power when I read J. M. Coetzee's novella bearing the same title, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980). Coetzee story is set in a frontier town of the empire, which is gripped by the fear of the barbarians. If the law-abiding, god-fearing good people of the town suddenly wake up in the middle of the night they jump up with fright at the thought of the barbarian – for instance, the good women of the town will awake screaming because they think that a barbarian's hand is coming from under the bed to grab them. Such is their terror that in the figure of the barbarian reality and nightmare merge. The exception is the magistrate who does not perceive the barbarians as external others to be feared but rather as fellow human being deserving of respect.

Later, when the magistrate's fortune takes a turn for the worse, he is persecuted by the army of the empire. He finds himself sneaking into a house and – yes, you guessed it – hiding under a bed. The representative of the law is now transformed in the figure of the townsfolk's nightmare: the barbarian rapist lurking under the bed. It was only when I read this second passage that I realized why Coetzee gave his novella the same title as Cavafy's poem. It is not that the barbarian is something external that determines our identity. Rather, the barbarian is an internal element of our psyche. It is the element that at once remains repressed, shoved under the bed, forgotten, and at the same time in a strategic position to witness our dreams, nightmares and procreations. Thus, the barbarian is not an other that helps construct our identity. Rather, the barbarian is the internal element which prevents us from ever being able to say that we have a stable identity that can be measure with certainty and clearly positioned in time and space. Differently put, the barbarian demonstrates to us the illusion of subjective autonomy, since we are always with others – there is always a part of us hiding under somebody else's bed.

Dimitris Vardoulakis (University of Western Sydney) is the author of *The Doppelgänger: Literature's Philosophy* (Fordham UP, 2010), and *Sovereignty and its Other: Toward the Dejustification of Violence* (Fordham UP, 2013), as well as the editor of *Spinoza Now* (U of Minnesota P., 2011).