

Awaiting the Barbarians by C. P. Cavafy

*Imitated from the Greek by [Peter Dreyer](#) (September
2022)*



XXII
XXV

Garrett Lockney '66

Awaiting the Barbarians (Περιμένοντας τούς Βαρβάρους)

What are we all waiting for here in the marketplace?

It's the barbarians who are coming today.

Why is there such a lull in the senate house?

Why aren't the senators in session legislating?

Because the barbarians are coming today.

Why should the senators make laws anymore?

The barbarians will legislate when they get here.

Why is our emperor up so early, sitting

by the city's greatest gate in state on

the throne, officially, wearing the crown?

Because the barbarians are coming today,

and the emperor is waiting to receive

their leader. He's to be presented

with a scroll. On it he's been written

up with lots of titles and honors.

Why have our two consuls and the praetors gone out

today in their red, their embroidered togas;

why are they wearing armlets heavy with amethysts,

and rings shining with bright emeralds;

why, today, are they carrying precious maces of office

with the intaglios specially silvered and gilded?

Because the barbarians are coming today,

and such stuff impresses barbarians.

Why don't the celebrated rhetors come as usual

to make their speeches, to say what they have to say?

Because the barbarians are coming today,
and bombast and fine phrases bore them.

Why should there suddenly be such uneasiness
and confusion. (How serious faces have grown!)
Why do the streets and squares so quickly empty,
with everyone going home in such perplexity?

Because it has grown dark, and the barbarians haven't
come.

And some folk have arrived from the frontier
who say that barbarians no longer exist.

*And now what shall we do without barbarians?
Those people were a solution of sorts.*

Note: There are many translations of this, Cavafy's most famous poem, first published in 1904. For Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard's canonical rendering, on which J. M. Coetzee based his 1980 novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*, see <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51294/waiting-for-the-barbarians>. My imitation of Cavafy's poem, reformulating its English title, stresses the *passivity* of the citizens in confronting an ominous future. Passivity and helplessness are also conveyed in a short poem Cavafy published in 1897 and subsequently chose to place in his collected poems immediately before Περιμένοντας τοὺς Βαρβάρους.[*] Many translations exist, including one by the poet's brother Iannis. Mine is offered as a simple imitation rather than a translation. Cavafy's poem is titled TEIXH ("Walls"); mine is called

Towers

Uncircumspect, without regret, indecently,
Cyclopean towers were built around me;

hope abandoned, I lurk down here distraught,
unhappy fate my last remaining thought.

I had so far to grow in each direction,
I failed, it seems, to notice their erection,

oblivious of the builders' stir and sound,
excluded bit by bit from my own ground.

In Cavafy's lifetime, there were as many as 150,000 Greeks, over a third of the population, in Alexandria, founded by the Macedonian Greek Alexander the Great in 331 BC. Today, fewer than 1,000 remain.

[*] See Anthony Hirst, "Note on the Greek Text," in *C. P. Cavafy: The Collected Poems*, translated by Evangelos Sachperoglou, with an Introduction by Peter Mackridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xxxv.

[Table of Contents](#)

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and Human Destiny (New York: Simon & Schuster; London: Secker & Warburg), and most recently the novel *Isacq* (Charlottesville, VA: Hardware River Press, 2017).

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