

Waiting for the Terrorists

(after Cavafy)

Why are we waiting, desperate for information?
Because the terrorists will strike today.

Why has Congress adjourned and gone into hiding
and set up a secret shadow government?

Because the terrorists are on their way,
muffled, dressed like cut-rate dervishes,
and they'll abolish speeches and elections.

Why did our president evaporate
on a jet, spirited to a distant site,
enthroned in a lead vault deep under ground?

Because the terrorists will strike today
and the President and his advisers must
survive to issue proclamations and appeals
for public calm and broadcast patriotic hymns
surrounded by bright panoplies of banners.

Why are so many generals on television
parading their medals, beating the drum
for prophylactic war with loud boasts about
our unprecedented military might?
Why is the press in bed with mad Procrustes?
Why is criticism greeted with derision?

Because the terrorists will strike today
and one person's patriotism is another's prison.

Why have our moral leaders disappeared?
Why have our laws and civil rights been trashed?

Because the terrorists are on the way
and death's their only concept of due process.

Why do we see nightmare in every face
we encounter? Why can't we sleep? Why are our cities
impoverished for the sake of imperial projects?
Why do we hide in our homes afraid to speak?

Night falls and the terrorists are still not here.
Rumors abound that they have been destroyed
by a virus they were carrying to envenom us.

Now what will become of us without the terrorists?
Those people were some sort of a solution.

—Richard O'Connell

PARALLEL TEXTS:

My "Waiting for the Terrorists" and Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians"

The poetry of C.P. Cavafy has exerted a strong influence on my poetry for as long as I can remember. Of Cavafy's many outstanding lyrics, the 1904 poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" is probably his best-known single work. Indeed, it has long been a literary landmark and point of departure for writers in cultures well beyond its Alexandrian ambiance. Like Eliot's *Waste Land*, it is that rare thing—a poem of timeless international import that crosses all boundaries and seems to constantly renew itself in terms of its rich ambiguity and political relevance.

My "Waiting for the Terrorists," inspired by Cavafy's "Waiting for the Barbarians" and composed nearly a hundred years later (in October 2003, to be precise), was conceived as a respectful tribute to one of the sacred texts of modernism. Not a mere parody or translation, it is intended to stand as a poem in its own right. The major contrasting difference is that Cavafy's poem deals with events in an apparently fictional kingdom, whereas my variation deals with actual events following the 9/11 attack on the U.S. Although its language and referential imagery are strikingly different, "Waiting for the Terrorists" is closely modeled on the basic verbal structure of "Waiting for the Barbarians" through a series of rhetorical questions and answers. Thus, in lines 3-7 of Cavafy's poem we read:

*Why such inaction in the Senate?
Why do the Senators sit and pass no laws?*

*Because the barbarians are to arrive today.
What further laws can the Senators pass?
When the barbarians come they will make the laws. (Rae Dalvin trans.)*

Closely paralleling these lines, in "Waiting for the Terrorists" we find:

*Why has Congress adjourned and gone into hiding
and set up a secret shadow government?*

*Because the terrorists are on their way,
muffled, dressed like cut-rate dervishes,
and they'll abolish speeches and elections.*

Both poems are in essence about the nature of a nation's political response and rhetoric in the face of an imminent threat as embodied by the "barbarians" in one case and the "terrorists" in the other. Both deal with a civilization in crisis and yet raise questions about the values of each civilization. In both, evil is externalized in such a way that any potential criticism is stifled for the sake of ostentatious display in the Cavafy poem (as presented in lines 16-21) and militaristic strutting and bravado in the other:

*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.*

Despite their stridency, the parallel lines in "Waiting for the Terrorists" ring just as false and hollow:

*Why are so many generals on television
parading their medals, beating the drum
for prophylactic war with loud boasts about
our unprecedented military might?
Why is the press in bed with mad Procrustes?
Why is criticism greeted with derision?*

*Because the terrorists will strike today
and one person's patriotism is another's prison.*

It is the ironic tone of the collective "we" voice in both poems that bears the weight of the political crisis along with the implicit criticism of the civilizations under attack. Thus, in Cavafy's poem the collective voice asks:

*Why did our emperor wake up so early,
and sit at the principal gate of the city,
on the throne, in state, wearing his crown?*

*Because the barbarians are to arrive today,
and the emperor wants to receive
their chief. Indeed he has prepared
to give him a scroll. Therein he engraved
many titles and names of honor.*

In sharp contrast to this almost comic opera staging, in "Waiting for the Terrorists" we learn of the stealthy flight of our president to an undisclosed location shortly after 9/11:

*Why did our president evaporate
on a jet, spirited to a distant site,
enthroned in a lead vault deep under ground?*

*Because the terrorists will strike today
and the President and his advisers must
survive to issue proclamations and appeals
for public calm and broadcast patriotic hymns
surrounded by bright panoplies of banners.*

Though the lines in both poems run parallel, they diverge widely in terms of their immediate and ultimate political significance.

Cavafy's poem is an implicit critique of a decadent civilization's response to the "barbarians" —so much so that we come to feel that the barbarians have already arrived and are in control of the kingdom described in lines 16-21 and 24-27:

*Why don't the worthy orators come as usual
to make their speeches, to have their say?*

*Because the barbarians are to arrive today;
and they get bored with eloquence and orations.*

One is reminded of the capitulation of France in 1940 through the collaboration of the Vichy government. Similarly in "Waiting for the Terrorists" the "patriotic" zeal to punish the terrorist aggressors is shown to have led to the internal destruction of our democratic processes and institutions:

*Why have our moral leaders disappeared?
Why have our laws and civil rights been trashed?*

*Because the terrorists are on the way
and death's their only concept of due process.*

Further on, lines 26-31 in the Cavafy poem convey the sense of disorientation and fear created by the invasion of the "barbarians":

Why this sudden restlessness, this confusion?

(How serious people's faces have become.)

*Why are the streets and squares clearing quickly,
and all return to their homes, so deep in thought?*

Likewise, the turning point in "Waiting for the Terrorists" pivots on the parallel lines where the full existential and political consequences of the 9/11 attack are presented:

*Why do we see nightmare in every face
we encounter? Why can't we sleep? Why are our cities
impoverished for the sake of imperial projects?
Why do we hide in our homes afraid to speak?*

Thus, ironically, the terrorists are shown to have conquered in a sense by imposing a reign of terror through a reactionary policy of fear and intimidation.

Despite the obvious paralleling of texts, the two poems are not identical by any means. The differences sharply contrast the passivity of the Cavafy poem with the militant tone of the other. It is important to remember that both *are poems*, not political tracts; both deal with complex imagined events in which the psychological dimension is at least as important as the political. Yet both seem to arrive at the same complicitous, somewhat cynical conclusion:

*And now what shall become of us without any barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.*

*Now what will become of us without the terrorists?
Those people were some sort of a solution.*

RICHARD O'CONNELL lives in Hillsboro Beach, Florida. Collections of his poetry include *RetroWorlds*, *Simulations*, *Voyages*, and *The Bright Tower*, all published by the University of Salzburg Press (now Poetry Salzburg). His poems have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Margie*, *National Review*, *The Texas Review*, *Acumen*, *The Formalist*, *Light*, etc. His most recent collections are *Dawn Crossing* and *Waiting for the Terrorists*.