Hinting at the mutual constitutiveness of the past and the present, Walter Benjamin wrote that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (1999, 247). This essay probes the bearing of the poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” ("Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους," 1904) by the Greek poet Constantine Cavafy on the present. It focuses on the poem’s ‘afterlife’ since the 1990s and specifically in the period after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. I use ‘afterlife’ here in line with Benjamin’s use of the term in his essay “The Task of the Translator,” in which he conceptualized translation as the original’s afterlife, marking a process of transformation and renewal of the original (72–73). For Benjamin, 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 any homeland, since the origin for de Man (and Benjamin) does not exist as such and is only evoked by the translations (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.1

C. P. Cavafy’s “Waiting for the Barbarians” has been restaged in works of literature, art, and music in several cultural contexts throughout the twentieth century. Since the early 1990s, however, and especially since the events on September 11, 2001, the poem—which can be said to have turned into a topos—seems to be haunting the Western cultural and political imaginary. The recurrent figuration of the poem
in various genres and media after what has been nicknamed ‘9/11’—newspaper articles, cultural theory, artworks, poetry, obituaries, internet blogs—marks its intense ‘afterlife.’ But how is this poem produced by the present, and perhaps more importantly, what kind of understanding of our present moment and vision of the future does Cavafy’s poem yield?

As an allegory for contemporary predicaments, a mode of critique of a decaying order, or a call for a new start and radical change, the poem responds to certain desires or anxieties generated after the Cold War and amplified since 9/11, up to the financial crisis that started in 2008 and recent protest and social movements. It captures the fear of others after the purported rupture of 9/11, but also the longing for alternative futures, particularly in the context of the ongoing financial crisis. Zooming in 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. The poem’s irony—an irony I term ‘reluctant’ in its radical questioning and simultaneous attraction to metaphysics—works as a catalyst in this mediation. Significantly, through its mediating function, the poem also seeks a viable practice of living in liminal times—a practice much needed in times of crisis.

**The Poem’s 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?