



Waiting, Time, and Law: A Reading of Selected Works by Franz Kafka and C. P. Cavafy

Shadi S. Neimneh

The Hashemite University, Jordan

shadin@hu.edu.jo

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i3.2602>

APA Citation: Neimneh, S. S. (2026). Waiting, Time, and Law: A Reading of Selected Works by Franz Kafka and C. P. Cavafy. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*. 8(3),1-12. <https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v8i3.2602>

Received:

01/03/2026

Accepted:

14/04/2026

Keywords:

Kafka, Cavafy,
Waiting, Time,
Law,
Literature/Theory,
(Political)
Philosophy

Abstract

Using Giorgio Agamben's political philosophy, Martin Heidegger's theories on temporality and human existence, and Jacques Derrida's notion on "différance," this article argues that waiting (while rooting human experiences in time) conceals the emptiness of the law and delays meaning. Modern systems of power function not through violent force but voluntary submission and the construction of fear/anticipation. Agamben's term "bare life" (as pure biological being without legal or political qualification) signifies inclusion by exclusion, which is captured in waiting as the structure of legal power and as pure validity without meaning. Waiting is made a structural effect of power and is ironically grounded in absence and anticipation. While in his enigmatic parable "Before the Law" (1915; trans. 1933) Franz Kafka makes us ponder power as brittle and yet unquestionable for the waiting subject, C. P. Cavafy in his memorable poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1908; trans. 1915) reverses Kafka's order, making the anonymous empire wait for the elusive enemy it constructed, thus weakening imperial power with relation to the so-called enemy. Waiting suspends time and holds progress while allowing fear to paralyze those in wait. Both works use waiting as a deconstructive device, making gaps and the unstated as substantial as the surface narrative.

1. Introduction

Waiting is a universal human experience and an existential condition. Humans wait on their dreams and hopes, wait for a better future, wait for dear ones to return, wait for war to end, ...etc. In literary texts, waiting can be a rich theme and a structural device. It can delay plot events and cause suspense or ambiguity. It can often represent existential anxiety and the futility of the human condition. It is directly associated with deferral of meaning, ellipsis, narrative gaps, and the absurd. It also signifies inertia and arrested fulfillment whereby anticipation is countered by disillusionment. However, waiting is not essentially meaningless or devoid of meaning as it can be the basis for premeditated action or careful plans. In literary texts, waiting builds tension, slows narrative time, and acts as a major structural device around which a plot revolves. But how can it symbolize oppression, inertia, or bureaucracy? Can waiting delay the promise of freedom and liberation from the powers of subjugation? In literary texts, what is the relationship between waiting and power or the law as authority? This article attempts to answer such questions.

Many texts in the Anglo-American and European canons and in world literature, in general, have dealt with manifestations of this theme of waiting. For instance, generations of readers who have tackled Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1952; trans. 1954) have encountered a minimal text in which nothing happens but waiting. As one character (Estragon) famously says, in a pithy statement that captures the philosophical spirit of the time: "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" (p. 27). Aimless waiting has been understood in terms of the absurd theatre and existential contexts. Godot never arrives, and the promise of waiting continues as the characters at the end of both acts say they will go but never move. While characters cling to hope, they encounter nothing but emptiness and frustrations. Hence, waiting in Beckett's absurd drama is a reflection of a general human condition, one of meaninglessness, emptiness, and existential despair. To give another example, Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* (1924) has TB (tuberculosis) patients live suspended in a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps outside normal conceptions of time and into repetitive, circular routine while Europe waits for the unknown catastrophe of World War I. The sanatorium world seems to be isolated and timeless, as illness changes normal conceptions of time, making the protagonist's three-week visit turn into a seven-year stay, which is a suggestion of spiritual and intellectual decadence and the stagnation of European civilization. In J. M. Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), which mainly rewrites Cavafy's poem with the same title, a colonial frontier settlement anxiously waits for the arrival of the supposed barbarian enemy. However, the barbarians not actually appearing or arriving enhance the mood of anxiety and paranoia among the imperial subjects fearing but not finding the real threat. Waiting here suggests a slippage into the void of nothingness as the savage barbarian is nothing but an aspect of the imperial identity itself. Since literature depicts universal human experiences, many literary works have dealt with different manifestations of waiting and employed it to serve existential, political, and philosophical ends, among others.

Against such a metaphysical and existential understanding of waiting in literary texts, this article discusses the relationship between waiting, time, and power, suggesting that power operates through deferral, opacity, and endless procedure to deflect its inherent weakness or emptiness. Waiting is the primary technique employed by power and the legal system. Authority functions as an expectation, and waiting becomes a form of disciplinary power. Imperial power, on the other hand, makes waiting for the enemy a justification of surveillance and cruelty. As a form of power, waiting produces docile subjects who hope rather than act. Modern power, being indirect, governs less by force or command than by anticipation. Commenting on a normalizing and panoptic disciplinary power, Michel Foucault (1995) contends that discipline is "the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (p. 170). Waiting can make us complicit with the very systems that oppress us. Fear and intimidation prohibit action and incur waiting. It is this relationship between waiting and power that this article seeks to unravel.

In Franz Kafka's parable "Before the Law" (1915) and Constantine P. Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1908), the unstated narrative gaps become as substantial as the surface level of language and explicit narrative. While one text exposes the arbitrary authority of the law, the other exposes it as absent/non-existent. Waiting signifies the deconstructive logic in both works, opening the floor for our hermeneutic exertions. However, waiting in both texts hinders revelation and fulfillment. It makes us question attempts at valid interpretation. In the

words of Walter Benjamin (1968) in *Illuminations*, Kafka's parables "are never exhausted by what is explainable; on the contrary, he took all conceivable precautions against the interpretation of his writings" (p. 124). This hermeneutic impasse applies to both Kafka's and Cavafy's selected texts. While in both texts the awaited event never occurs, waiting serves different ends. In each case, waiting is an effect of disciplinary power. It is a manifestation of the symbolic exercise of institutional power on individuals. Whether we are talking about a supplicant waiting before an inaccessible gate (in Kafka) or an atmosphere of anticipation deteriorating into existential futility (in Cavafy), we are discussing authority in terms of deferral and the façade of power.

In Kafka's parable, waiting is an effect of power as the man from the country internalizes the prohibition not to enter a transcendent law, thus obeying and accepting the legitimacy of this power without daring to oppose this power or enter an already open gate. In this parable, the law thus acts as an Agambenean "pure ban." In Cavafy's poem, waiting as an individual act turns into a collective theatrical one, even becoming an act of self-deception. The guilt produced by waiting in Kafka's parable becomes a form of existential emptiness in Cavafy's poem with the imperial subjects passively waiting for the assumed enemy to take over their institutions. While in one text waiting is contingent on power relations, it becomes an existential condition and an intensified experience of time in the other text. Kafka and Cavafy render waiting a universal metaphor for our endeavor to find meaning in life despite deferral and futility. In both texts, however, waiting is more than a passive killing of time; rather, it is an attempt to deal with questions of power, meaning, and fulfillment. While one text makes a poor, simple man wait at the door of authority represented by the law, the other text yet reverses the order by making the imperial center anxiously wait for the arrival of an elusive enemy it views as the "barbarians." Hence, waiting becomes an occasion for the deconstruction of normative power relations from within.

Waiting is depicted as the basis for the operation of power whereby law and empires sustain themselves through deferral. Waiting entails not only inaction but also absence and lack of agency. In Kafka and Cavafy, the man from the country and the imperial subjects are complicit in their oppression because of their prolonged or meaningless preparation for a revelation that does not arrive, or by necessary design, cannot come. In itself, waiting is not inherently meaningless. On the contrary, it can fill our being with purpose if and once used as the basis for optimism, reasoned action, and careful decisions. Rather than passive delay, waiting emerges in this article's examination of selected texts as an active, complicated, and multilayered confrontation with the meaning of life, law/power, and language.

2. Theoretical Framing

Many theorists and philosophers have dealt with the notions of time, temporality, and waiting. In *Being and Time*, for instance, Martin Heidegger (1962) makes waiting a mode of being and temporality rather than one of passive emptiness. As Heidegger asserts, "The existential-ontological constitution of Dasein's totality is grounded in temporality" (p. 488). Human beings are caught between a past they did not choose (thrownness), an unfolding present of engagement (care), and a future of possibilities. For Heidegger, "Dasein" (as human existence) is a temporal experience of being caught in time between what happened and what is to come,

between possibility and realization. Interpreting Dasein in terms of temporality, Heidegger asserts “the meaning of the Being of that entity which we call ‘Dasein’” (p. 38). Hence, for Heidegger, we have to understand and interpret Being in terms of time and Dasein in terms of temporality (p. 63). In between the extremes of past and future lies a present situated in time and existential concerns, a present in which we are suspended in anticipation. So, rather than an empty delay, Heidegger explains, waiting is a vital way of experiencing existence through time. Heidegger (1962) makes waiting an existential condition rather than an evasion from life. He contends that human existence remains structured by time (i.e. the future possibility of death shaping how we should live): “Anticipation turns out to be the possibility of understanding one’s *ownmost* and uttermost potentiality-for-Being--that is to say, the possibility of *authentic existence*” (p. 307; emphasis original). Anticipation is made a necessary step towards authentic living and making decisions. Briefly put, Heidegger makes time a condition for meaning, action and authentic existence, for understanding Being itself. He makes Being a form of existential depth, presencing, and living in time.

In his celebrated poststructuralist lecture entitled “Différance,” Jacques Derrida (1982) highlights two underlying aspects of language contingent on the alternative spelling of the term with *a* instead of *e*: deferral and difference. For Derrida, meaning is neither fixed nor final outside the confines of language. Differences among signs and deferral along endless chains of signifiers pose a challenge to logocentrism as belief in stable or self-present meaning. Significantly for us, Derrida frames meaning in terms of waiting. He speaks of différance in relation to temporization and spacing, i.e. “mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of ‘desire’ or ‘will’” (p. 8). Différance delays both time and space. A sign, he contends, “takes the place of the present” (p. 9) since to signify is to defer presence. He contends that “the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself” (p. 9). For Derrida, meaning is not immediate, as it arrives through postponement and detours in time, and language functions through suspending fulfillment or accomplishment, i.e. via waiting and postponing as temporization. Each sign carries traces of past signs and anticipates future ones. So, signs are related to each other in a temporal relation of waiting. Derrida’s claims foster a poststructuralist deconstructive understanding of the theme of waiting in literature, in general, and in the selected texts by Kafka and Cavafy to be examined in this article, in particular. Waiting can be understood in terms of deferral of presence and time.

On the other hand, the Italian political theorist Giorgio Agamben (1999) in “On Potentiality” makes us rethink notions like freedom and justice. In his reinterpretation of Aristotle, Agamben presents potentiality as the capacity not to pass into actuality, as impotentiality and the ability not to act. Real freedom, Agamben seems to contend, is our ability not to do what we are capable of doing. This ability to suspend and transcend actualization is in itself a political stance. If the traditional Aristotelian idea of potentiality “is annulled in actuality” (p. 184), here potentiality “survives actuality and, in this way, *gives itself to itself*” (p. 184; emphasis original). In the words of Agamben (1999), “the architect is potential insofar as he has the potential to not build, the poet the potential to not write poems” (p. 170). Potentiality, hence, implies both what can be (what gets actualized or realized) and what cannot be (what remains potential). In Agamben’s thought, pure actuality can be unethical or totalitarian because it kills creativity and hinders alternatives. Waiting is an embodiment of potentiality as not being and thus suspension and mastery over actuality. As a possibility without action, waiting conforms to Agamben’s understanding of true potentiality as the capacity not to act, as being able over

being. Like Derrida and Heidegger, Agamben sees waiting as suspending linear time and embracing a potentiality that refuses fulfillment. Agamben's understanding of waiting as a state of exception challenges sovereign power's demand for action and its grip over life. It makes waiting a limbo where power operates through suspension. Importantly, waiting in the logic of Agamben is a manifestation of the the lived experience of potentiality as the power not to. This is exactly what Agamben elevates and appreciates as true freedom and authority. In this sense suggested by Agamben, waiting is politically endowed.

3. Cavafy and Kafka: Decentering the Law

In differing and deferring, to draw on Derrida, signs become traces of other signs (resonating with and echoing other signs) just as waiting reminds us of what is absent as a trace, with erasure constituting the very structure of the trace. Hence, Heidegger's waiting is ontological (aiming at an authentic futurity of possibilities) while Derrida's waiting is textual and structural (exposing absence and traces) whereby meaning is endlessly postponed. As Derrida (1982) puts it:

It is because of *différance* that the movement of signification is possible only if each so-called "present" element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not: what it absolutely is not, not even a past or a future as a modified present. (p. 13)

Derrida captures what is present in terms of past traces and future anticipation. Meaning is relational and also potential (depending on what it is not). In Cavafy and Kafka, we will see, waiting is not simply a form of delay but a structural condition for the production of meaning, entailing ambiguity and openness to interpretation. The absence (delayed presence) of both the barbarians and the law makes waiting constitutive rather than incidental. In both texts, waiting embodies *différance* because meaning never fully arrives in the present. While waiting, meaning is produced in absence and traces of expectation, i.e. in what is not yet there.

3.1. "Waiting for the Barbarians" by C. P. Cavafy

In his allegorical poem entitled "Waiting for the Barbarians," Cavafy (1992) offers us a timeless universal account on anticipation and stasis. Aside from waiting, nothing actually happens in the poem. Inaction seems to rule the life of imperial subjects, unlike the Barbarians who seem to be bored by speech and favor instead action. The end of the process of waiting at the end of the poem is presented as an existential threat to the imperial subjects because the "barbarians" were a justification for their superior, privileged position. As we will see in our discussion of Kafka's parable, the law is pure potentiality structuring society from a distance. And the barbarians in Cavafy's poem are equal to Kafka's law (and its guardian the gatekeeper). Both the law and the barbarians stand for empty potential and function through absence and deferral (i.e. no actuality and non-arrival).

To draw on Heidegger (1962), care means engagement with people or possibilities, and waiting goes against the structure of human existence as care since it entails giving up being engaged. Heidegger says that the most elemental existential truth, "for which the problematic of

fundamental ontology strives in preparing for the question of Being in general, is the *disclosedness of the meaning of the Being of care*” (p. 364; emphasis original). Cavafy’s speaker is a community member and an observer of an unfolding state of waiting as the negation of care. The poem begins this way:

What are we waiting for, assembled in the forum?

The barbarians are due here today. (Lines 1-2)

This anticipated arrival makes waiting full of suspense. So, the senators are not making laws because the barbarians will make their own upon arrival. The emperor waits for such enigmatic guests, wearing his crown and waiting at the city’s main gate:

Because the barbarians are coming today

and the emperor’s waiting to receive their leader. (Lines 11-12)

Imperial subjects prepare speeches, titles, gifts, and costumes just like the man from the country in Kafka’s parable who is ready to bribe the gatekeeper and give him everything in order to access the law. In each case, meaning and social symbols and identities are constructed in the very process of waiting. Waiting for death (since our time is finite and life is limited) should open possibilities for authenticity, not social conformity. And waiting makes us more conscious of the passage of time. Hence, Heidegger discusses the structure of human existence in terms of “care” as thrownness in the past we did not determine, falling in the everyday present of social life, and projection towards a future. He discusses care in terms of human existence being concerned (involved or invested) in the world. Care means engagement with people or possibilities, and waiting goes against the structure of human existence as care since it entails giving up on being absorbed or engaged. Heidegger (1962) says: “The most primordial and basic existential truth, for which the problematic of fundamental ontology strives in preparing for the question of Being in general, is the *disclosedness of the meaning of the Being of care*” (p. 364; emphasis original). The senators not making laws (Line 4), the emperor not practicing his duties by just sitting at the gate (Lines 8-10), and the orators not making speeches (Lines 23-24) are all negations of care as engagement with life in Heidegger’s analysis.

The barbarians, by contrast, are reportedly men of action, and so they are “bored by rhetoric and public speaking” (Line 24). Hence, the imperial orators who love eloquent words and speeches are not needed at this critical stage. To draw on Martin Heidegger’s concept of “idle talk,” imperial subjects rely on rumors and empty talk in their conception of the barbarians. The result is a form of inauthentic Dasein rooted in hearsay, opinions, and ambiguous chatter. Speaking of idle talk, Heidegger (1962) explains that it “not only releases one from the task of genuinely understanding, but develops an undifferentiated kind of intelligibility” (p. 213). Imperial subjects may have formed their conception of the barbarians based on stereotypes and misleading myths. However, the process of waiting becomes a major step in deconstructing imperial constructions of the other because it ends in a void. Fear and confusion occur as people return to their homes lost in thought at the lack of revelation, and the speaker justifies it:

Because night has fallen and the barbarians haven’t come.

And some of our men just in from the border say

there are no barbarians any longer. (Lines 31-33)

The ending of the poem surprisingly reveals how societies are so dependent on those excluded elements. As deferral of presence in Derrida's terms, waiting yields traces rather than fulfillment (i.e. presence, meaning, or fullness). Absence is not the failure of meaning, as Derrida would have it, but the very condition for the circulation of meaning. Once waiting is over, a bitter truth is revealed:

Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?

Those people were a kind of solution. (Lines 34-35)

The imperial subjects, in waiting for an unknown enemy, exercise what Heidegger calls *das Man* (the they) as an impersonal existence whereby subjects conform to the norms and expectations of collective society. Waiting is a collective, evasive act in which the speaker and the community are complicit. It is even rendered a theatrical event whereby anticipation overrides any responsibility for choices or authentic living. Heidegger (1962) puts it in such effective terms:

As they-self, the particular *Dasein* has been *dispersed* into the 'they', and must first find itself. This dispersal characterizes the 'subject' of that kind of Being which we know as concerned absorption in the world we encounter as closest to us. (p. 167; emphasis original)

It is no wonder, hence, that the speaker (who is a member of the imperial community) addresses us in the first-person pronouns "we" and "us." People imitate each other in waiting, and social authority or control becomes hidden and faceless, taking the form of fear and anxiety rather than action and alternative choices. Heidegger (1962) says: "The 'nothing' with which anxiety brings us face to face, unveils the nullity by which *Dasein*, in its very *basis*, is defined; and this basis itself is as thrownness into death" (p. 356). The anxious imperial subjects encounter nothing but their fear of action in waiting. This stalemate is tantamount to death and decadence. Preparations are not for war or resistance. Instead, imperial subjects are idly waiting for existential meaning and identity through the barbarians. All ceremonies and rituals are empty and meaningless once the expected enemy fails to arrive. Waiting exposes how inner paralysis and collapse are to blame, not the external other we call the "barbarian."

The emperor, senators, consuls, and rhetoricians prepare ceremonially because they expect the barbarians to arrive. Ironically, they expect the barbarians to provide a solution to imperial political and social stagnation. In an implicit critique of political systems, leaders are shown as passive and ceremonial rather than active or decisive rulers. They have utilized the barbarian "other" as a threat to maintain an oppressive system that expects obedience from its subjects. As per Derrida's *différance*, the arrival of the barbarians remains a suspended event entangled with abortive waiting. Considering Heidegger's thought on being and time, the imperial subjects experience existential anxiety and temporal disorientation as the waiting process unfolds in a fractured present (with the past being irrelevant and the future being uncertain). And Agamben's "bare" life further underscores this paralysis of a life with no political agency with the barbarians (as the absent threat) exposing the fake structures of civilization claimed by the empire and making waiting an exercise in mere existence.

3.2. "Before the Law" by Franz Kafka

In *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin (1968) argues that Kafka's world is a bureaucratic one of "offices and registries, of musty, shabby, dark room" (p. 112) where officials, doorkeepers, and judges hold power and exercise laws neither written nor open to the public (p. 114). Benjamin asserts that Kafka's works present "a sickness of tradition" (p. 143) and embody "the purity and beauty of a failure" (p. 145). If law exists, it is inaccessible, and if there is authority, there is no real justice. Meaning, if it ever exists, is incomprehensible. This world offers no consolation, no redemption, and no triumph. Hence, waiting is but one nuance in this arrested, stunted world. Benjamin (1968) contends that "The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time" (p. 261). Linear, progressive, historical time is empty and even oppressive for Benjamin. Instead, he views history as ruptures and missed possibilities which allow history to be written from the perspective of the oppressed. When time halts and history is interrupted, revolutionary action can redeem past suffering. So, messianic time as the now-time for the present has revolutionary potential. It is the critical present in which history is redeemed rather than left to progress. Such insights are crucial for our understanding of Kafka's parable "Before the Law."

As with Cavafy's poem, inaction is also the rule in Kafka's "Before the Law." This is a parable in which nothing much happens, and both the gatekeeper and the man from the country merely sit and talk for days and years. The authoritative order of "but not now" marks the inception of waiting as the gatekeeper does not deny the man from the country entry to the law. He just says maybe later, "but not now." As per Derrida, waiting exposes the fragility of notions like authority of truth as constructs produced through differences (what is inside the law versus what is outside). By way of passing the time and diverting the attention of the man from the country and his repeated requests for entry, the gatekeeper "often interrogates him briefly, questioning him about his homeland and many other things, but they are indifferent questions" (E-Text). To draw on Heidegger (1962) again, idle talk "discourages any new inquiry and any disputation" (p. 213), holding them back and thus functioning as a negative form of human existence (Dasein). Passing the time in idle talk allows the gatekeeper to further deceive the man from the country. In a sense, the whole story is based on deception, as the gate is open as ever and the man from the country seems to have been prohibited by nothing other than his own fears and anxieties. It is the mechanism of the law that has been operating upon him and that has allowed waiting to function. The gatekeeper seems to guard nothing, and the messengers in Cavafy's poem announce no arrival of the barbarians. In each case, meaning and structure are maintained via emptiness (i.e. idle talk).

The story begins with the promise of authority: "Before the law sits a gatekeeper" (E-Text). The man's hesitation allows the story to progress: "The gate to the law stands open, as always, and the gatekeeper walks to the side, so the man bends over in order to see through the gate into the inside" (E-Text). The man's decision to wait is contingent on fear and prohibition. Yet such a prohibition is a brittle one since the man from the country never tests the gatekeeper and takes things at face value. He is told that he may gain entry but not now, making entry into the law simply a matter of time and waiting:

The man from the country has not expected such difficulties: the law should always be accessible for everyone, he thinks, but as he now looks more closely at the gatekeeper in his fur coat, at his large pointed nose and his long, thin, black Tartar's

beard, he decides that it would be better to wait until he gets permission to go inside. (E-Text)

Surprisingly, the story's end is enigmatic: "The gatekeeper sees that the man is already dying and, in order to reach his diminishing sense of hearing, he shouts at him, 'Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. I'm going now to close it'" (E-Text). In this context, waiting becomes a confrontation with anxiety, mortality and the passage of time unto death. It becomes a mode of being Heidegger (1962) called "Being-towards-death" as an existential awareness of our finitude and impermanence. Heidegger calls death "the end of Dasein" (p. 303). Yet waiting is inauthentic being, and passive waiting is a form of being-towards-death in Heidegger's logic. He argues:

*anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned **freedom towards death**--a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the 'they', and which is factual, certain to itself, and anxious. (p. 311; emphasis original)*

Agamben (1998) in *Homo Sacer* contends that Kafka's parable "Before the Law" shows "the pure form in which law affirms itself with the greatest force precisely at the point in which it no longer prescribes anything" (p. 34), thus acting as what he called "a pure ban" (p. 34). Since the door is open, law remains "potential" for Agamben (p. 34). He explains this logic of the functioning of the law in terms of exception, i.e. inclusion by exclusion (p. 34). In the case of the man from the country in Kafka's parable, Agamben explains, "law applies to him in no longer applying, and holds him in its ban in abandoning him outside itself" (p. 34). Law functions without coercion, and without targeting the body in direct punishment, yet the violence of juridical structure sustains itself through exclusion. Agamben highlights the paradox of law's presence yet inaccessibility. Hence, his discussion of waiting is tied to his theories on sovereignty and biopolitics. Waiting exemplifies Agamben's notion on "bare life" since the man from the country is included by the law through exclusion, through the "not now." Waiting before the law and not finding entry, Kafka's man from the country is a refugee of sorts, standing in a state of exception where normal law is suspended and where legal/political mechanisms function through negation. He resembles the Homo Sacer of Agamben because he is excluded from the law yet bound to it in expectation and waiting. He is waiting in that zone between what is inside and outside the legal order.

In "The Messiah and the Sovereign", and while discussing Walter Benjamin's conception of messianic law, Agamben (1999) reads Kafka's parable "Before the Law" as an allegory of the law in the messianic age. He contends: "The man from the country is consigned to the potentiality of law because law asks nothing of him, imposes on him nothing other than its ban" (p. 172). In this contrapuntal reading, Agamben adds:

If it is true that the door's very openness constituted, as we saw, the invisible power and specific "force" of the law, then it is possible to imagine that the entire behavior of the man from the country is nothing other than a complicated and patient strategy to have the door closed in order to interrupt the law's being in force" (p. 174).

Agamben exposes the illusion of law's transcendence. Since modern power is biopower in the sense that it makes us political subjects, waiting is an engagement with modern power. Sovereign power that has right over life and death becomes modern power in the sense of exclusion, abandonment, and disallowing. Hence, Agamben highlights the possible over the realized and law as an empty prohibition, as "bare" life. Waiting is the essence of the law as deferral rather than enforcement. It is what makes the law a pure virtuality and a matter of belief. Since waiting disrupts ordinary time, it suspends us between what is and what is to come.

Waiting appears to be one layer in a bureaucratic maze. Obedience and fear make waiting part of submission to power. Ironically, waiting proved the life of the man from the country to be absurd because the gate was meant only for him. Since the door was open, waiting sustained the illusion of meaning given to law. The only political escapes with relation to power, Kafka suggests, are neither unconditional obedience nor transgression (opposition) but probably making power itself inoperative, i.e. questioning its empty promise and brittle mechanism. Both parable and poem end in a state of disarray and the crisis of waiting as a state of potentiality. If waiting ends, then potentiality is lost. Hence, political and social order in both works is kept through the expected rather than the actual. The law in Kafka's parable and the barbarians in Cavafy's poem are regulative measures functioning through waiting.

The ban not to enter the gate "at the moment" constitutes the basis of waiting in the parable. Years of waiting fail to bring a permission to enter the law. The man waits obediently without challenging an apparently hierarchical authority (something he hears about from the gatekeeper yet never actually tests). The intimidation used by the gatekeeper might be a stratagem to conceal the inefficacy of the law. Kafka's parable works at this specific level of the mishaps of internalizing authority rather than questioning it. The law might be mighty and oppressive, yet what about our fear or hesitation? In this sense, we are complicit in the oppression and injustice surrounding us. While Derrida's *différance* signals the endless deferral of access to the law (i.e. perpetual delay of meaning and justice), Heidegger's theories on being and time underscore the existential stagnation of being trapped in a suspended present. Agamben's bare life further highlight how the man's exclusion from the law reduces him to mere biological living in a state of exception beyond legal/political rights. Hence, his necessary and expected death at the end of the parable is an imperative conclusion for a life reduced to a vulnerable, powerless form.

4. Conclusion

In the short texts we have discussed, Kafka and Cavafy emphasize the interplay between anticipation, meaning, and the human condition. They seem to question how waiting is a means of control and domination and yet the site where authority deconstructs itself. Waiting is employed as a structural effect of power, and authority functions through anticipation or the promise of revelation. However, this authority is not stable as it is grounded in absence, i.e. in anticipation over fulfillment. Power functions as long as the barbarians do not arrive and the man from the country does not gain access to the law. That nothing happens in both works reveals that the ultimate violence of power is its endless deferral, not direct force. Each time the expected event fails to materialize, we are confronted with the empty center of power, with power being contingent rather than transcendent.

While in each text power is reinforced in waiting, power also loses its rationale at the end of each work. The barbarians fail to arrive and the man from the country is dying with the realization that he failed to enter the gate of the law which was meant only for him. If waiting in Kafka's parable is generally metaphysical and existential, it is collective and socio-political in Cavafy's poem. Whereas Kafka's parable can be read as an allegory on the human condition (our passive acceptance of limitations), Cavafy's poem is a political allegory on state control, on how states manipulate their populace through fear of expected enemies. Both writers render waiting as a universal metaphor for our struggles to find meaning or purpose in life despite obstacles, deferral, and futility. In a sense, each text performs the openness and precariousness that define the human condition, one characterized by being in wait.

However, and as per Heidegger, waiting is more than the passive killing of time but an attempt to deal with questions of being (i.e. those of power, decisions, and fulfillment). Waiting is the site for the constitution and suspension of meaning. Heidegger frames it as an existential condition (thrownness) of being-toward a future that never fully unfolds. And through an Agambenean lens, it is a state of exception, a liminal space where law is enforced without significance. Moreover, Derrida's deconstructive logic makes the authority of the awaited event reside solely in perpetual non-arrival as deferral. In Kafka and Cavafy, waiting is made the essence for the operation of power whereby law and empires sustain themselves through deferral and enforced anticipation. Waiting entails not only inaction but also absence and lack of agency. The man from the country and the imperial subjects are complicit in their oppression and subjugation because of their prolonged or meaningless preparation for a revelation that does not arrive, or by necessary design, cannot come.

References

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (1999). *Potentialities: Collected essays in philosophy* (D. Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2005). *The time that remains: A commentary on the Letter to the*
- Beckett, S. (1954). *Waiting for Godot*. Grove Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1968). *Illuminations: Essays and reflections* (H. Zohn, Trans.). Schocken Books.
- Cavafy, C. P. (1992). Waiting for the barbarians. In *Collected poems* (E. Keeley & P. Sherrard, Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- Coetzee, J. M. (2004). *Waiting for the barbarians*. Vintage.
- Derrida, J. (1982). Différance. In *Margins of philosophy* (Alan Bass, Trans., pp. 1-27). University of Chicago Press.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Blackwell.

Kafka, F. (n. d). *Before the law* (I. Johnston, Trans.). E-Text.

Romans. Stanford University Press.

Author Bio:

Professor Shadi S. Neimneh specializes in literary and cultural studies. He has published prolifically in numerous international journals on different manifestations of modernity and theory as well as American studies. He got his Ph.D. in 2011 from The University of Oklahoma, USA. He is affiliated with the English department at The Hashemite University, Jordan. He can be reached at: shadin@hu.edu.jo.