Living between the “back then” and the “not yet”: barbarians, crisis, and temporality in Margaret Atwood’s story “The Bad News”

Boletsi, M.; Berner, H.; Reidy, J.; Rohner, M.; Wagner, M.

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Hannah Berner, Julian Reidy, Melanie Rohner
und Moritz Wagner (Hgg.)

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Maria Boletsi (Leiden)

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1. Introduction

> These are the tenses that define us now: past tense, *back then*; future tense, *not yet*; We live in the small window between them, the space we've only recently come to think of as *still*, and really it's no smaller than anyone else's window.[1]

These words by the female protagonist and internal narrator in Margaret Atwood's short story „The Bad News“ offer a glimpse into the story's complex temporality. Past, present, and future, as well as what we may call private and historical time, touch and permeate each other in a story that stages the ‚now' as a time of chronic crisis and imminent disaster or apocalypse, whether this is understood as a „private apocalypse“, as a reviewer called it[2], or a collective disaster that ends a society's way of life.

„The Bad News“ is included in *Moral Disorder* (2006), a collection of eleven short stories that – one may assume – have the same central female character, although the identity of that character constantly shifts as we are offered glimpses into different stages of her life from childhood to old age. „Bad News“, the collection's opening story, starts with the protagonist and her husband having reached old age, with death drawing near but not quite there yet. For a big part, the story is an account of the protagonist's experience of growing older with all the fears that accompany this stage of one's life. An important aspect of this experience involves the old couple's relationship with the outside world of „bad news“: they seem to live in a time of dark sociopolitical developments and violent events that never become too concrete in the narrative and that enter the old couple's home mainly through newspapers. The bad news, which ‚invades' their home on a daily

1 Margaret Atwood, „The Bad News“, in: *Moral Disorder and Other Stories*, London 2006, S. 1-10, hier S. 4.

2 Alice Truax, *A Private Apocalypse*, *The New York Times*, 5.10.2006. At https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/15/books/review/Truax.t.html.

basis, is received by the protagonist and her husband with a strange mixture of apprehension and weariness.

The only intrusion of fantasy in the story's otherwise realist setting takes place in the final part, in which the old (probably Canadian) couple in the here-and-now morphs into a couple in the Gallic town of Glanum in Roman times, just before Glanum was invaded by ‚barbarians'. This fictional-historical excursion feels like a sudden lapse from realism into fantasy, although it can be perceived in the narrative as a reverie by the protagonist, Nell, who had visited the ruins of this town with her husband in the past and now imagines how it would have been to find herself there centuries ago. In this imagined historical setting, the „bad news" in the form of rumors of invading barbarians crossing the Rhine create a sense of foreboding and imminent disaster, even though the protagonist believes that the barbarians will not arrive for a long time and that „Glanum is in no danger, not yet".[3]

This quasi-historical narrative, which brings the protagonists' present in conversation with an imagined moment in the past, takes center stage in this essay, which sets out to unravel the story's intersecting temporalities and the sense of crisis they produce by zooming in on the figure of the barbarian and its functions in the narrative. Historically, the concept of the barbarian has been involved in different conceptions of historical time as a time in/of crisis in modernity.[4] As a concept of historical time, crisis has been understood as a transitional situation or a turning point that leads to radical change in history, but also as „a permanent or conditional category pointing to a critical situation which may constantly recur"[5], that is, as a periodic event or even a chronic state. Accordingly, the barbarian has often been associated with the threat of a

3 Atwood, „The Bad News" (wie Anm. 1), S. 9.

4 According to Reinhart Koselleck, since 1770 „the concept of crisis has become the fundamental mode of interpreting historical time"; See Koselleck, *Crisis*, übers. von Michaela W. Richter, in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67.2 (2006), S. 357-400, hier S. 371. For a brief exploration of the relation of the figure of the barbarian with the concept of crisis, see Maria Boletsi's chapter *On the Threshold of the Twentieth Century: History, Crisis, and Intersecting Figures of Barbarians in C. P. Cavafy's „Waiting for the Barbarian" („Περιμένοντας τους βαρβάρους", 1898/1904*), in: Markus Winkler in collaboration with Maria Boletsi, Jens Herlth, Christian Moser und Melanie Rohner, *Barbarian. Explorations of a Western Concept in Theory, Literature, and the Arts,* Bd. 1: *From the Enlightenment to the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, Stuttgart 2018 (= *Schriften zur Weltliteratur* 7); S. 285-343, especially S. 328-334.

5 Koselleck, *Crisis* (wie Anm. 4), S. 371.

historical rupture – a tear in the fabric of history as we know it – but also with periodic invasions as recurring episodes in the „natural life-cycle" of civilizations according to decadent cyclical approaches to history.[6] Indeed, as a „basic or founding concept" – a „*Grundbegriff*" – „of European and [...] Western identity"[7], as Markus Winkler argues, the barbarian has been instrumental in modern conceptions of history that ensure the *continuation* of what we may call ‚Western history', by either supporting progressive narratives in the spirit of Enlightenment or periodic narratives of civilizational decline, death, and rebirth, which became particularly popular in the decadent literature of the second half of the nineteenth century in Europe.[8] Atwood's story seems to respond to the latter types of narratives particularly, which are defined by a sense of crisis and imminent disaster but depend on a predictable scheme marked by the repetition of the same historical scenario.

Such narratives of crisis in a present perceived to be threatened by new barbarian invasions have regained popularity in the West in the last two decades and mark the moment in which Atwood's collection was published: in 2006, a few years after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and with the ensuing global ‚war on terror' declared by the US having established a discursive frame in the twenty-first century defined by a sense of perpetual crisis and the constant „fear of barbarians".[9] As the term *barbarian* has made a striking come-back in Western discourses since ‚9/11', the figure of the *barbarian invasions* has been very prominent in political rhetoric and the media and has become instrumental in fostering analogies between a perceived present of a civilization in ‚crisis' and the history of the Roman Empire that presumably ended with the ‚barbarian invasions'. Such analogies that forge a precarious present under the specter of an imminent apocalypse have been thriving against the backdrop of recent terrorist attacks in the US

6 Neville Morley, *Decadence as a Theory of History*, in: *New Literary History* 35.4 (2004), S. 573-585, hier S. 580.

7 Markus Winkler, *Theoretical and Methodological Introduction*, in: Markus Winkler et al., *Barbarian* (wie Anm. 4), S. 1.

8 For the involvement of the barbarian in 18th-century narratives of progress, see Christian Moser's chapter *The Concept of Barbarism in Eighteenth-Century Theories of Culture and Sociogenesis* in: Winkler et al., *Barbarian* (wie Anm. 4), S. 45-144, and Boletsi, *On the Threshold of the Twentieth Century*, in: Winkler et al., *Barbarian* (wie Anm. 4), especially S. 296-310. For the barbarian's role in narratives of decadence, see Morley, *Decadence as a Theory of History*, S. 573-585.

9 I refer here to the title of Tzvetan Todorov's book *The Fear of Barbarians: Beyond the Clash of Civilizations*, übers. von Andrew Brown, Chicago 2010.

and Europe, and have received new impetus in Europe with the so-called ‚refugee crisis' since 2015.[10]

Although Atwood does not explicitly thematize this historico-political context, the story of a couple struggling with old age in a world of „bad news" invites readers to trace an analogy on two levels: first, between an invented past (the couple's imagined life in Glanum in Roman times) and the present of the protagonists, and, second, between the personal experience of growing old under the specter of the „not yet" of death and a collective contemporary experience of the present as one of civilizational decline, crisis, threatening barbarians, and declared states of emergency, in which the space of the future is severely contracted. While the story encourages such analogies, as I will argue, it also reads as a subtle critique of such emplotments of history and the present, in which subjects are condemned to a present of sameness, waiting for an apocalyptic end in the form of an inevitable arrival of barbarians. The story's critique of such narratives also becomes a forceful exploration of the role literature can play in developing alternative visions of futurity from a present of chronic crisis.

2. Digesting the Bad News in a Present of Normalized Crisis

Atwood's story begins with a new day in the life of the narrator, Nell, and her husband, Tig, which is accompanied by the daily arrival of the „bad news" through the newspaper: „It's morning. For now, night is over. It's time for the bad news".[11] The narrator visualizes the bad news through the grotesque image of a „huge bird": a bird „with the wings of a crow and the face of my Grade Four schoolteacher [...] sailing around the world under cover of darkness, pleased to be the bearer of ill tidings".[12] The bleak and grandiose – albeit slightly comical – tone of this metaphor soon gives way to a more mundane comparison of the bad news to a „hot potato" that Tig tries to get „off his

10 For the workings of the figure *of barbarian invasions* in contemporary Western public and political rhetoric, see Maria Boletsi, *Crisis, Terrorism, and Post-Truth: Processes of Othering and Self-Definition in the Culturalization of Politics*, in: *Subjects Barbarian, Monstrous, and Wild: Encounters in the Arts and Contemporary Politics*, hg. von Maria Boletsi und Tyler Sage, Leiden und Boston 2018, S. 17-50, hier S. 18.

11 Atwood, *The Bad News* (wie Anm. 1), S. 1.

12 Ibid.

hands" „as soon as possible", unable as he is „to absorb, to cushion, to turn the calories of bad news [...] into the substance of his own body".[13] While Tig longs to „spew out catastrophe so he himself will be rid of it", Nell resists it by forbidding him to unload the bad news on her as soon as she wakes up: „Not before breakfast", she tells him.[14] The bad news and their affective, physical impact on the protagonists are cast through a language that shifts from the grandiose to the banal: the bad news are not exceptional but part of their daily routine and something they try to process as they go about their daily activities in a pace that – as the narrator concedes – is slower than it used to be. Thus, later that morning, as she reflects on the piece of bad news Tig dropped on her – „They just killed the leader of the interim governing council" – Nell thinks:

> The leader, I think. The interim governing council. Killed by *them*. A year from now I won't remember which leader, which interim governing council, which them. But such items multiply. Everything is interim, no one can govern any more, and there are lots of them, of thems. They always want to kill the leaders.[15]

This is the sole concrete example of bad news given in the story, but even this example offers no insight into the historical context in which this event takes place. Not only is it left unspecified – which leader, which „them"? – but in Nell's thoughts it soon turns into a generic event that she processes with the same automatism with which she performs her daily routines: an iterable incident that is part of a well-known historical scheme, as it keeps repeating itself in different guises, with different historical actors occupying the role of the leaders and the „thems". The sense of crisis that the „bad news" forge in the story is not defined by exceptional events or decisive moments that rupture normality but by a chronic fatigue and saturation, akin to the sluggishness of old age the couple experiences.

This collapsing of the exceptional into the mundane that swallows up any sense of ‚eventness' in the story's present is supported by the narrative style: although the story unravels in just one day in this couple's life, the iterative presentation[16] of the couple's daily activities and of their responses to the bad

13 Ibid., S. 2.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., S. 3.

16 I here follow Mieke Bal's understanding of the iterative frequency in a narrative, which takes place when „a whole series of identical events is presented at once"

news creates a mode of narration in which the singular and the exceptional are projected as generic and mundane. In the story, the slow rhythm of old age, marked by routines and the fading of the specific into generic formulas, seems to also mirror a generalized experience of the contemporary moment as a present of normalized crisis in which people, bombarded by the most gripping or shocking events through the media, respond to these events with a fleeting fascination or anxiety that very soon reverts to apathy.

The narrator's sense of fatigue and saturation that strips every event of its ‚eventness', making it part of a repetition of the same, is paired with her fear of the gradual loss of her memory, which equals the loss of her identity. She characteristically recalls their „now-dead cat, Drumlin"[17], who became senile at the age of seventeen and started eating vegetables and fruits because „she'd forgotten she was a carnivore" and did not know any more „what she was supposed to eat".[18] But even this memory of her cat is interrupted by questions indicating that memory is already starting to fail her („Drumlin – why did we call her that?").[19] The fear of losing her past (the failure of memory) is topped by the fear of living with the specter of the imminent end of their life as they grow older: this is the experience of living in the time of the „not yet" that, the narrator says, „is aspirated, like the *h* in *honour*".[20]

The bad news works, perhaps, as a temporary distraction from this fear. Despite everything, the narrator thinks, „there is no reason not to feel pretty good".[21] The bad news, she remarks, „comes from so far away, most of the time – the explosions, the oil spills, the genocides, the famines, all of that".[22] The plural tense in this sentence underscores the repetitive nature of these (non-)events, deprived of any historical specificity in the protagonist's experience. Since „all of that" seems to happen to others, in a distant reality away from the microcosm of their home, the protagonists can absorb it with slight apprehension and fascination, like the momentary fix of a drug („We don't like bad news, but we need it").[23] But the ‚drug' soon wears out, as it gets metabolized or expelled from their body: all news gets sucked into the vortex

(Mieke Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto, Buffalo und London [4]2017, S. 101).

17 Atwood, *The Bad News* (wie Anm. 1), S. 4.
18 Ibid., S. 5.
19 Ibid., S. 4.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., S. 5.

of their ‚crisis ordinariness', leaving them with the certainty of the occurrence of other similar (non-)events in the future: „There will be other news, later. There always is."[24]

The couple's processing of the bad news as well as their experience of the present can be read as symptomatic of a generalized experience of the present that marks the era of postmodernity and neoliberal capitalism. Since the universalization of neoliberal capitalism, many have detected an exhaustion of the category of time and an absorption of „previous notions of future change or the future as different" into a flat, singular „global time": a „timeless ‚now'", in which the possibility of radical change in global affairs or of „real social transformation" is denied.[25] In this context, Franco Berardi detects a „slow cancellation of the future" – a condition that can already be traced in the late 1970s and 1980s but became especially palpable after the fall of Eastern-bloc communism, which established neoliberal capitalism as the new global order.[26] This capitalist totality gave shape to the anti-utopian outlook Mark Fisher famously called „capitalist realism": a global present marked by the sense that „it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to [capitalism]".[27] In this context, the cultivation of a perpetual sense of crisis enhances the contracting of the future and of alternative worldviews. Thus, crisis, as Stijn De Cauwer remarks, becomes an instrument „into the hands of those who want to claim that ‚we have no other choice'".[28] In recent years, crisis has turned into the ‚new normal' and is experienced, as Giorgio Agamben notes, as „an enduring state", „extended into the future, indefinitely".[29]

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24 Ibid., S. 4.

25 Sarah Bruillette, Mathias Nilges und Emilio Sauri, *Introduction*, in: *Literature and the Global Contemporary,* hg. von Sarah Bruillette, Mathias Nilges und Emilio Sauri, Cham 2017, S. xv-xxxviii, hier S. xv-xvi.

26 Franco Berardi (‚Bifo'), *After the Future*, übers. von Arianna Bove et al., Edinburgh, Oakland und Baltimore, 2011, S. 18.

27 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester und Washington, 2009, S. 2.

28 Stijn De Cauwer, *Introduction: Resistance in Times of Crisis*, in: *Critical Theory at a Crossroads: Conversations on Resistance in Times of Crisis*, hg. von Stijn De Cauwer, New York 2018, S. xxiii.

29 Giorgio Agamben, *The Endless Crisis As an Instrument of Power: In Conversation with Giorgio Agamben*, *Verso Blog*, 04.06.2013, at: http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1318-the-endless-crisis-as-an-instrument-of-power-in-conversation-with-giorgio-agamben

Against the backdrop of a normalized crisis, people often turn to the past as a means of making sense of the present. Contemporary frameworks of crises, Amin Samman argues, often „take shape through returns to the historical record and in particular, to its inventory of other, apparently similar or affiliated crisis episodes", through which people emplot present crises.[30] One of these strategies of emplotment is „analogical reasoning", which traces „similarities or differences between crisis episodes".[31] This process sometimes results in a cancellation of temporal distance, creating a sense of continuity or even an „identity of events" that, as Daniel Knight and Charles Stewart argue, brings „contemporaneity to non-contemporaneous episodes as people identify and assemble moments with similar characteristics to explain their present circumstances".[32] The way Nell and Tig process the bad news in the story can be related not only to their old age but also to this tendency to forge a sense of continuity or identity between past and present. This continuity shapes a collective „we" through the construction of transhistorical analogies. As the narrator reflects on this pattern, however, she starts questioning its premises, casting it not as a historical truth but as a narrative structure through which people try to imbue a present in crisis with meaning:

> But there's been bad news before, and we got through it. That's what people say, about things that happened before they were born, or while they were still thumb-sucking. I love this formulation: *We got through it.* It means dick shit when it's about any event you personally weren't there for, as if you'd joined some *We* club, pinned on some tacky plastic *We* badge, to qualify. Still, *We got through it* – that's bracing. It conjures up a march or a procession, horses prancing, costumes tattered and muddied because of the siege or battle or enemy occupation or butchering of dragons or forty-year trek through the wilderness.[33]

30 Amin Samman, *Crisis Theory and the Historical Imagination*, in: *Review of International Political Economy* 22.5 (2015), S. 966-995, hier S. 979.

31 Ibid., S. 981.

32 Knight, Daniel und Charles Stewart, *Ethnographies of Austerity: Temporality, Crisis and Affect in Southern Europe*, in: *History and Anthropology* 27.1 (2016), S. 1-18, hier S. 5. Knight and Stewart present here an argument made in V. Das, *Critical Events. An Anthropological Perspective on Contemporary India*, Delhi, 1995, S. 121-129.

33 Atwood, *The Bad News* (wie Anm. 1), S. 3.

In this passage, collective memory is projected as a process of constituting a (national, civilizational or religious) „we", premised on a fallacious sense of continuity between past and present that enables a group of people – the „we" – to show resilience in times of crisis and to draw strength and pride from a shared past. That the constitution of this „we" is grounded in acts of violence and exclusion of different „thems" – barbarians who are perceived as a threat to the „we" – is suggested through the narrator's evocation of marches, horses, sieges, battles, occupations, butchered dragons, and the „forty-year trek through the wilderness": a striking assemblage that purposefully muddles history, fiction, myth, fantasy (dragons) and religious narratives (the story of the Exodus as the founding myth of the Israelites). All these are projected here as versions of a historically constant narrative structure: that of „asymmetrical counterconcepts", to which the pair civilization-barbarism also belongs.[34]

The narrator's reflection on this process of identity formation prepares the ground for her own act of transhistorical analogy in the story's final – and most striking – part, where she and Tig travel back in time, as it were, as a couple living in Glanum at the time of the Roman Empire.

3. Between Past and Present Crises: Historical Analogies and Their Discontents

The story's last part starts with the narrator recalling a visit she and Tig paid to the ruins of the old town of Glanum, France, during a vacation. As soon as she starts narrating the visit, the past tense of this recollection is replaced by the present tense: the pastness of the event turns to a coevalness of past and present with Nell imagining herself and Tig in Glanum just before it was destroyed by ‚barbarians': „I find myself there now, back then, in Glanum, before it was destroyed in the third century, before it was only a few ruins you pay to get into".[35]

The narrator sets the stage of this historical fantasy through descriptions of buildings and public places in Glanum, even though these descriptions carry unmistakably generic overtones („the kinds of buildings the Romans

34 The category of „asymmetrical counter-concepts" was coined by Reinhart Koselleck. See *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, übers. von Keith Tribe, New York 2004, S. 156.

35 Atwood, *The Bad News* (wie Anm. 1), S. 7.

put up wherever they went so they could feel civilized and at home").[36] The subsequent account of their habits, daily activities and routines in Glanum conveys a sense of familiarity: the routines sound similar to their routines in the present, despite the different setting („I'm having my breakfast, in the morning room with the mural of Pomona and the Zephyrs").[37] The past is cast not as a foreign territory, but a variation of their present lives: sameness trumps foreignness and distance. We are not dealing with a melting of two distinct historical horizons through a hermeneutical act meant to understand the past in its foreignness, but a reconstruction of that past as a mirror image of the present with different actors, costumes and decor.

The theme of the asymmetrical relation between a ‚we' and a ‚them' returns in this part, as the figure of the barbarian takes center stage. Two kinds of barbarians are sketched here. The first kind are the Celts: they are presented as ‚domesticated' barbarians who also live in Glanum and have „renounced their headhunting ways" and heavy drinking habits as they adopted Roman (civilized) habits and manners, even through their „politeness" is still described as „eerie".[38] The second kind of barbarians are the undomesticated, threatening ones beyond Roman borders: rumors of them crossing the Rhine and invading the Empire's territories are thickening. Those „northern barbarians"[39] – who remain spectral presences in the story, as the people of Glanum never get to see them in Nell's narrative – are the protagonists of the „bad news" that Tig keeps bringing into their household:

> „Bad news?" I ask.
> „The barbarians are invading", he says. „They've crossed the Rhine."[40]

The distinction in Nell's narrative between domesticated and wild barbarians, and the demonization of the latter, corresponds to the division in Roman times between conquered barbarians within Roman borders, who could potentially share the benefits of *Romanitas*, and an external „*barbaricum*" of savagery and lack of organization, which, as Walter Goffart argues, facilitated the self-perception of the Roman Empire as the order that warded

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid, S. 9.
40 Ibid., S. 8.

off chaos from the civilized world.[41] The way Nell casts the figure of the barbarian is strongly reminiscent of popularized versions of barbarians, which find their ‚blueprint' in Edward Gibbon's magnum opus *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (in 6 vols., 1776-89).[42]

If this fictional reconstruction of the past forms the counterpart of Nell and Tig's present life, the unspecificity of the „them" that marked the bad news in their present finds a parallel in the generic figures of the (absent) barbarians in Glanum. The barbarian is of course a generic figure par excellence. Taking into account the „onomatopoetic provenance of the lexeme barbar-"[43] – the word *barbaros* (*βάρβαρος*) in ancient Greek was supposed to mimic the unintelligible sounds of the languages of non-Greeks – the term *barbarian* tries to capture the unknowable, the incomprehensible. But precisely this unknowability of the barbarian facilitates the term's generic function: to call someone ‚barbarian', as I have argued elsewhere, „denies this person an actual face, subjectivity, and singularity. The other is treated as a hollow vessel, filled by the discourse of civilization in ways that reinforce the civilized identity".[44] Therefore, the evocation of the barbarian in this part of the story, instead of functioning as a vehicle that takes us back to a foreign place and time, ends up confirming the disappearance of the past in a flattened present. Nell's version of Glanum and its barbarian enemies reads like a repetition of the protagonists' present with its „bad news". The formulaic figuration of the barbarians signals a ‚past' absorbed by an eternal present and „effaced altogether", in line with Fredric Jameson's well-known account of postmodernism as „the cultural logic of late capitalism", in which the past survives only as a repository of empty formulas, styles, genres and commodified codes.[45] Such formulaic representations – of which the barbarian is an example – forestall an actual encounter with the past in its otherness and (partial) unknowability.

41 Walter Goffart, *Rome, Constantinople and the Barbarians*, in: *American Historical Review* 86 (1981), S. 275-306, hier S. 280. See also Boletsi, *Barbarism and Its Discontents*, Stanford 2013, S. 254.

42 See also Boletsi, *On the Threshold of the Twentieth Century*, in Markus Winkler et al., *Barbarian* (wie Anm. 4), S. 285.

43 Winkler, *Theoretical and Methodological Introduction*, in: Winkler et al., *Barbarian* (wie Anm. 4), S. 7.

44 Boletsi, *Barbarism and Its Discontents* (wie Anm. 41), S. 4-5.

45 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of late Capitalism*, Durham 1991, S. 18.

The prominence of the barbarian in the story's last part projects once more the exclusionary violence that, as Winkler argues, is „inherent in the very word barbarian" and „stems from the lexeme's onomatopoetic beginnings and pervades its mythopoetic as well as its conceptual use."[46] If the analogy the story builds between the present and an imagined past underscores the continuity or even identity of the ‚now' and the ‚then', the ‚barbarian' guarantees the stability of this transhistorical structure. As Winkler argues, even though „the opposition [between civilization and barbarism] undergoes a series of revisions and criticisms", its exclusionary function is never overcome.[47] The barbarian may thus adapt „to changing historical circumstances", Winkler continues, but „its exclusionary function, remains strikingly identical".[48] The story thereby assumes the critical task of exposing and „de-legitimizing this (often repressed) continuity" of the violence that accompanies the concept's travels in history.[49] The narrator's insistence on the repetitiveness and predictability in the way the barbarian has functioned in history underscores this continuity, thereby making it suspect: responding to Tig's „bad news" that the barbarians are about to invade, Nell points out (again) that she does not wish to receive such news before breakfast, and adds: „They're always crossing the Rhine. You'd think they'd get tired of it. Our legions will defeat them. They always have before".[50]

The barbarians – just as all the other examples of „bad news" in the narrative – remain at a safe distance and never materialize in Nell's narrative. The prospect of an actual invasion into the protagonists' own space is unthinkable for her. The barbarians cannot really be invading, it must be „Gossip and rumour".[51] Nell can only imagine the barbarians through the clichés that accompany these demonized others in the civilized imagination – as creatures that „fill wicker cages with victims and set them on fire as a sacrifice to their gods".[52] Her graphic description confirms „the powerful affects conveyed by [this] onomatopoetic and mythopoeic word", which, Winkler writes,

46 Winkler, *Theoretical and Methodological Introduction*, in: Winkler et al., *Barbarian* (wie Anm. 4), S. 8.

47 Winkler, *Von Iphigenie zu Medea: Semantik und Dramaturgie des Barbarischen bei Goethe und Grillparzer*, Tübingen 2009, S. 39-40.

48 Winkler, *Theoretical and Methodological Introduction*, in: Winkler et al., *Barbarian* (wie Anm. 4), S. 20-21.

49 Ibid., S. 8.

50 Atwood, *The Bad News* (wie Anm. 1), S. 8.

51 Ibid., S. 9.

52 Ibid.

works „not unlike a magical formula" that „evokes offensive and revolting, but sometimes also fascinating otherness that crystallizes into quasi mythical figures or personae".[53] That the barbarians belong more to the sphere of myth rather than history is suggested in Nell's fantasy by the fact that they are kept at a distance, „not yet" there, never arriving. It is in fact with the rejection of the possibility of their arrival that her fantasy, as well as the story itself, end:

> Even if they manage to cross the Rhine, even if they aren't slain in thousands, even if the river fails to run red with their blood, they won't get here for a long time. Not in our lifetime, perhaps. Glanum is in no danger, *not yet*. (emphasis added)[54]

In the story's first part, the „not yet" defined Nell's experience of living in the present with the end of life drawing near but not quite there. This temporality of the „not yet" is here transposed from the personal to the collective and the historical, suggesting an analogy between the narrator's personal experience of time and a specific type of historical consciousness. The narrator's prayer in Glanum – „Oh, make things stay the way they are" – betrays her reluctance to disengage from a *frozen* present. Nell's stance in both parts suggests a denial of the possibility of a future different from the present, *because that future can only be imagined as an end* – be it the end of her life or the end of a society or empire. Cancelling the future and staying in the present is the price for keeping death or the barbarians at bay for a little longer. Nell's account of her life in the present and in Glanum conveys a sense of entrapment in time: even her flight to an imagined past ends up enhancing the sense that there is no alternative experience of time to the ‚crisis ordinary' of a present that yields no promise of change for the better.

How are we to read the fantasy of the last part, then? Are we to perceive Nell's stance as symptomatic of the stance of a civilization that has grown so old and weary that even the prospect of a barbarian invasion is unable to ‚shake' a present that has come to a standstill? The story's above-quoted final sentences, in which the narrator tries to exorcise the specter of the barbarians, evoke two intertexts that may help us unravel the way the story engages with history and the present in this final part. The first intertext is Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Compare, for example,

53 Winkler, *Theoretical and Methodological Introduction*, in: Winkler et al., *Barbarian* (wie Anm. 4), S. 21.

54 Atwood, *The Bad News* (wie Anm. 1), S. 9.

the following lines from Gibbon's „General Observations on the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West" in chapter 38 of his magnum opus with the above-quoted final lines from Atwood's story:

> If a savage conqueror should issue from the deserts of Tartary, he must repeatedly vanquish the robust peasants of Russia, the numerous armies of Germany, the gallant nobles of France, and the intrepid freemen of Britain; who, perhaps, might confederate for their common defence. Should the victorious Barbarians carry slavery and desolation as far as the Atlantic Ocean, ten thousand vessels would transport beyond their pursuit the remains of civilized society; and Europe would revive and flourish in the American world which is already filled with her colonies and institutions.[55]

The passage radiates the optimism with which Gibbon hailed the triumph of European civilization in the late eighteenth century and believed that the barbarians cannot pose a serious threat anymore as Europe marches forward in its progressive course. Rhetorically, the above passage and the story's final lines have a comparable structure: they both project a series of barriers that will make sure that any barbarian invasion will be stalled and that civilization will remain safe for a long time. The crucial difference in the story, however, is that the deferral of the barbarians' arrival sounds more like Nell's attempt to deny an inevitable end, in line with her wish to stall death by living in the space of the „not yet" in the first part. This is not an evolved civilization that has overcome the barbarian threat – as in Gibbon's narrative – but a civilization at a standstill, in which the future has been cancelled and people have to live with the fear of an imminent barbarian invasion: an apocalypse that will come, but „not yet". In that sense, the novel evokes but also distances itself from its second intertext: the well-known poem „Waiting for the barbarians" (1898/1904) by the Greek poet C. P. Cavafy, in which the citizens of an undefined city, reminiscent of Rome, are anticipating a barbarian invasion that never takes place. While everyone is making preparations to receive the barbarians who are coming to conquer the city, the twist in Cavafy's poem comes when the barbarians fail to arrive. Even more, the possibility of them ever arriving is denied, as „some who have just returned from the border say / there are no barbarians any longer".[56] The poem's final lines expose civilization's

55 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* Bd. 6, hg. von J. B. Bury, New York 1907, S. 294-295.

56 Constantine Cavafy, *Collected Poems (Revised Edition*), hg. von George Savidis, übers. von Edmund Keeley und Philip Sherrard, Princeton 1992, S. 19.

dependence on the barbarians on which it has built its legitimacy and the narrative of its identity:

> And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
> They were, those people, a kind of solution.[57]

Just as Cavafy's poem, the narrator's historical fantasy in Glanum also stages a society facing the apocalyptic expectation of a barbarian invasion: many of the people in Glanum, including Nell's husband Tig, anticipate this invasion as a real prospect, even if Nell herself denies the proximity of the threat. The barbarians' non-arrival in Atwood's story may seem, then, to reiterate Cavafy's scenario; but it does not – not quite. In Cavafy's poem, the barbarians' non-arrival can be seen as an *event*: an event that confronts the citizens with the prospect of a different future, one without the narrative of civilization versus barbarians, in which this ‚we' will have to radically rethink their identity without this particular ‚them'. This prospect is terrifying – the barbarians, as the speaker of the final line states, were, after all, „a kind of solution". But their absence inaugurates a *different* present, disengaged from the chains of a saturated past narrative, and thus a ‚now' that holds the possibility of a different future.[58] Both Cavafy's poem and Atwood's story ask what kind of future the present allows us to imagine. But does the end of Nell's fantasy of Glanum allow this *possibility* of a different future?

4. On (Not) Ending: Literature and Futurity

As long as the story's final „not yet" sounds like a postponement of an inevitable end, the answer to this last question would have to be ‚no'. In that sense, Nell's denial of the inevitable, that is, her attempt to defer the Empire's fall or her own extinction, carries a tragic undertone. In the historical fantasy she constructs, she is allowed to pretend that the barbarians are still far away even though she knows – just as the reader does – that they will eventually come, that the Roman Empire will fall, and that Glanum will end up in ruins. We may thus be inclined to read her narrative in Glanum by adopting Tig's attitude, who, according to the narrator's testimony, is „a fatalist".[59]

57 Ibid.

58 For a detailed analysis of this poem, see Boletsi, *On the Threshold of the Twentieth Century*, in: Winkler et al., *Barbarian* (wie Anm. 4), S. 296-334.

59 Atwood, *The Bad News* (wie Anm. 1), S. 6.

Nevertheless, precisely by sliding into a fantasy, Nell can reject this predetermined future by escaping from the relentless certainty of extinction – both of Glanum and her own. She creates a fictional space for herself in which *she is, in fact, free to imagine that the barbarians are „not yet" there,* and thus to indefinitely postpone the imminent ‚apocalypse' through fiction. In this space, she can indefinitely keep the barbarians away, preserving perhaps the possibility and hope of a different, more open future, and a present that is neither defined by eternal sameness nor by the absolute certainty of an imminent – private or collective – apocalypse. Fantasy, and literature in general, have the freedom to forestall or change endings, to „say everything" („tout dire") „in *every way*", to use Jacques Derrida's phrasing[60], and to defy or lift the laws of reality through the willing suspension of disbelief. Isn't literature, after all, a space of potential ‚suspension' of endings, thwarting of certainties, bending of inevitable historical or natural laws, and escaping the „undifferentiated and perpetual contemporaneity"[61] of our present? Even though this story veers away from the worlds of fantasy that Atwood has given us in a big part of her work, her other, alternative worlds haunt this story too, holding the promise of the alternative futures that literature can offer when life or history fail to.

On the one hand, then, the protagonist's historical fantasy may be read through an attitude of historical determinism as a confirmation that history repeats itself, that Empires rise and fall and that the ‚barbarians' always eventually come. Indeed, the story *mimics* such narratives: Nell's historical fantasy, set up as a repetition of her life in the present, emulates the strategy of „analogical reasoning" that here forges an identity of past and present crises.[62] The pitfalls of this strategy become manifest in many contemporary attempts to frame present crises as identical repetitions of the past and thus to warn, for example, against new ‚barbarian invasions' and to legitimize the securitization of borders and the exclusion of different „thems".

But the story can also be read – closer, perhaps, to the spirit of Cavafy's poem – as an attempted escape from the logic of such strategies of historical emplotment. Nell declares, after all, that she „disagree[s]" with Tig's fatalism

60 Derrida saw literature as a „*fictive institution* which in principle allows one to say everything"; *This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida*, in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, hg. von Derek Attridge, London 1992, S. 33-75, hier S. 36.

61 Bruillette, Nilges und Sauri, *Introduction* (wie Anm. 25), S. xvi.

62 Samman, *Crisis Theory and the Historical Imagination* (wie Anm. 30), S. 981.

and believes that one could prevent bad things from happening.[63] The protagonist's flight in Glanum may thus signal her attempt to find a small space of possibility or hope in a present that is in thrall to a fixed „*back then*" and a „*not yet*" defined by repetitive cycles of „bad news".[64] „Even as Atwood reminds us that her bad news is also our own", Alice Truax writes, her fiction „allows us to believe that anything is possible. She may be keeping one eye on the horizon and warning us, ‚Not yet', but her art, rising up behind her, catches the light and declares, ‚Still'".[65] As a result, the temporality of „still" can be read in two ways: as marking a frozen, contemporaneous present but also as putting forward a slight objection to this experience of the present – the meaning of „still" as „nevertheless" – and pleading for the imagination of alternatives. Ending without the barbarians' arrival or the protagonists' death, the story invites us to experience the „not yet" that haunts the protagonist's present not necessarily as the prospect of an inevitable fall but as a fictional space of not-yet-knowing what the future will bring. The space of the „*still*" that lies between the „*back then*" and the „*not yet*" is, after all, visualized by the narrator as the „small window" between them, „no smaller than anyone else's window".[66] Through the small opening of this „still", another future might materialize, in which the barbarians may not arrive and the ‚we' might escape the repetition of the same by redefining itself without this counter-concept.

63 Atwood, *The Bad News* (wie Anm. 1), S. 6.

64 Ibid., S. 4.

65 Truax, *A Private Apocalypse* (wie Anm. 2) at: https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/15/books/review/Truax.t.html

66 Atwood, *The Bad News* (wie Anm. 1), S. 4.

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