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COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND INDIVIDUAL CRISIS IN PANDEMIC LITERATURE

Gabriela GLĂVAN¹

Abstract

*Although the global health crisis triggered by the Covid pandemic has ended, the effects of collective trauma can still be perceived in various forms. Today's literature reveals, in diverse manners, the ways in which isolation, fear of illness and death, pathology, suffering and healing were experienced individually and collectively. This paper will discuss *The Happy and Sad Pandemic* (2020), by Florina Ilis, published by Polirom in the summer of 2020. Drawing from theories from Medical Humanities, posthumanism and the literary reflections of trauma, the paper aims to illustrate an emerging dialect that gives shape, voice and coherence to a collective experience that left an indelible mark on the present and will probably echo significantly across the near future.*

Keywords: pandemic, trauma, medical humanities, contagion, isolation

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1. Introduction

The collective and individual experience of the pandemic started to be written rather early, in the lockdown months of 2020, as the world was ravaged by successive waves of illness and death. One can only assume that, much like in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, storytellers retreated to their inner worlds and started to turn the massive shock of the moment into narratives. Lockdowns, social isolation, a certain medical hyper-awareness, shifting family dynamics, working from home, online schooling and the challenges of cohabitation (or, on the contrary, of solitude) became the themes of the moment. The present turned into literature in a swift, decisive move that signaled many writers' desire to be synchronous with the dramatic present moment, transfer its raw tensions directly onto the written page and not miss the opportunity to be a part of the enormously complex discourse surrounding this defining interval in recent history.

Literature has long been a reflector of the rationalizing function of the narrative in times of chaos and death. Pandemics are, by definition, such times of apparently endless individual and collective trauma. Throughout history, literature had the distinctive role of mirroring the complex processes of consciousness and reason, imagination and symbolic transference, aimed at ensuring cultural legacy, community binding, mental and intellectual survival. The recent COVID pandemic has been, in many ways, similar to other pandemics of older times, yet the battle against the pathogen and its ravages was entirely modern. Literature was quick to record the dramatic pulse of the period, and even in the first months of the first wave of the pandemic, single-author books and collective volumes began to appear. One could rightfully ask if such promptness is justified or literary texts, like any form of art, need a period of time in which ideas settle, take shape and undergo a process of transformation. Rewritings

¹ West University in Timișoara, Romania, gabriela.glavan@e-uvt.ro.

and textual negotiations are also part of the process, the author in charge of his narrative being entitled to rethink, erase, reintroduce or recalibrate any elements they see fit. A prompt publication, despite the obvious drawback of skipping or rushing the stages of creative formation, has the essential quality of being timely, appearing at the right moment, befitting the spirit of the times. Western literature was, indeed prompt with the publication of various volumes (individual and collective) reflecting the collective drama triggered by the coronavirus pandemic that began on March 11, 2020 and ended in May 2023. Many of the pandemic literature books started to be published in the autumn of 2020, and others, of a certain notoriety, such as Margaret Atwood's collective volume *Fourteen Days: An Unauthorised Gathering* are expected to appear in the first part of 2024. Atwood's long-anticipated volume is expected to appear on February 6, 2024. One can only imagine that, in a few years' time, entire library shelves will display books about the major health crisis triggered by the Covid pandemic that started in early 2020. It remains to be seen how many readers are willing to embrace this literature and inherently relive that undeniably painful experience of isolation, fear, uncertainty and hopelessness.

2. Literature as a revelator of global crisis

Editors and writers acted in the spirit of 2020, in a type of response that tried to make literature and history perfectly contemporaneous. Yet a stringent question is – how is this literature read and internalized? Is it meant to work like a sort of therapy for a collective trauma? Does it try to analyze, explore critically or humorously an unpredictable global phenomenon that, at the moment, was still unfolding, its consequences being still unclear? Are writing and reading therapeutic, bridging the gap between writers and readers? Does it create a certain sense of community, while lockdowns and isolation dissolved it? However, the success of this literature, at least in Romania, was limited. The reading public, like all those affected by the predictable and unpredictable effects of the pandemic, may have found solace and a sense of community in a literary genre that seemed to capture the immediate zeitgeist. However, once the pandemic eased, transitioning to less deadly forms split into epidemic clusters, the need to read about it may have become less stringent. Reading the immediate past is a less urgent endeavor than reading a more distant past that has become part of history and memory.

From a critical perspective, the cultural context of the COVID pandemic fits adequately into the philosophical framework of posthumanism. The rapid global changes triggered by the fast-paced process of large-scale contagion lay the premises of an unprecedented state of emergency in many domains of public and private life, surpassing the limits of healthcare and medicine. Indeed, the human element found itself displaced from its central position in the global ecosystem. In a concise overview of the effects of pandemic experience, Başak Ağin and Şafak Horzum (2023) outline some of the most significant phenomena resulting from the new social dynamic imposed by the all-encompassing health crisis. The first one would be the “unpredictable challenges that such diseases pose” (Ağin, Horzum 2023, 2) and the resulting changes in all relationships, both negative and positive. They argue that “pandemics in our known medical literature, [...] often created havocs: They led to medical, social, and psychological discussions during and after their charge, yielding both negative and positive results, such as stigmatisation, ostracisation, delirium as well as fraternities and social bonding over the concerns of disease” (Ağin, Horzum 2023, 2).

Pandemic and epidemic literature has a consistent tradition in Western literature – besides the well-known *Decameron*, by Boccaccio, equally relevant are Camus' *The Plague*, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* or *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Márquez. These literary masterpieces have been read as allegories of political ideologies, as individual philosophical endeavors questioning mortality and crisis or as repositories of collective nightmares. However, few readers expect great literary works to be written on such short notice. We can, however, question the notion that this literature that aims to capture the authentic atmosphere of a global health crisis should primarily excel on an aesthetic territory. It would be excessive to expect writers to produce narratives that are both timely and artistically refined, since there is obvious value in writing from the trenches, much like a reporter documenting the present, as it unfolds.

Romania has been quite prolific in delivering pandemic literature - in autumn 2020, Florina Ilis released a volume of short stories - *Pandemia veselă și tristă* (Polirom)/ *The Happy and Sad Pandemic*; the collective volume *Izolare/Isolation* (Nemira); Marius Cosmeanu edited a collective volume titled *Jurnal din vremea pandemiei. Proză de grup / Journal from the time of the Pandemic* (Brumar, 2021); Teodor Hossu-Longin published, *Măștile din spatele măștii/ The Masks behind the Mask* (Hyperliteratura, 2022). Many other titles can be mentioned from the international stage – the novel *Violeta* by Isabel Allende, *Panpocalypse* by Carley Moore, *Life Without Children: Stories* by Roddy Doyle, *Lucy by the Sea*, by Elizabeth Strout, to mention just the most prominent and successful ones. There is also an emerging niche of foreign literature about the pandemic, published in Romania in translation - Paolo Giordano, *În vremea contaminării* would be a relevant example.

The favored themes are anchored in the radical shift the pandemic created in social and personal relationships, from workplace dynamics to marriage struggle. The effects of social distancing, lockdown, remote work and online schooling could not have been foreseen and their effects could not have been countered by measures, as the pandemic evolved rapidly and the public health measures were implemented promptly. Literature favored, possibly like an echo to the way in which the pandemic evolved, in episodes or waves, the short genre, since it could capture stills, moments in time suspended, rather than trying to master vast narratives that need construction and careful polishing. Editing quality may be at stake – a rushed book often displays the visible signs of a process that should have unfolded at a more natural pace.

I shall focus on a particularly interesting example of pandemic literature - Florina Ilis' volume of short stories, published in the summer of 2020 - *Pandemia veselă și tristă* (Polirom)/ *The Happy and Sad Pandemic*. This is a particularly unusual choice for Ilis, as she usually writes massive, 500- pages volumes. The six short stories included in the volume are representative for the author's vision of pandemic life, and her choice of characters is also revelatory. The main characters are taken from the vast gallery of pandemic heroes and anti-heroes some: road patrol officers, emigrants returning home, a priest, nurses, patients, young mothers and fathers. Characters from "the first line", if we are to use an expression that recurred obsessively during the first phases of the pandemic.

3. The essential duality of life as farce and tragedy

In the first two short stories, Ilis focuses on social and personal relationships in order to outline the massive displacement of these frameworks during the pandemic. Lockdowns put a strain on marital relationships and forced partners to rethink and renegotiate their roles and priorities. In *I hate her!*, the opening act of the volume, a middle-aged factory director is pulled over by the police at a moment during the pandemic when citizens had to present to authorities signed papers in which they declared where they were going. This man felt he could no longer bear his wife's condescending demeanor, although he had married for love, had a beautiful home in the suburbs, a teenage daughter and what looked like a fulfilled life. Unable to stand her anymore, he went to the office daily. With no valid paper to be out on the public road, the director confessed the policeman he was desperately trying to distance himself from his wife, unknowingly triggering a crisis that would lead to the officer's divorce. If one man chose to flee everyday from suffocating domesticity, the other preferred to distance himself from it for good. The story is an obviously ironical commentary on the notion of social distancing, as the consequences of a shift in social dynamics unavoidably impacts all relationships, even on a private level. Ilis' narrative is far from ample or sophisticated, it is more like a sketch that tries to capture a particular reflection of social crisis into the hidden small fractures of family life. The reverse situation can be found in the second story, *I love her!*, where a young man working in a small IT company fantasizes about falling in love with the only single colleague from work, a young, quiet and unassuming woman he started to notice once social restrictions were enforced. The scenario is cliché – the shy, socially awkward young man is a programmer, a stereotypical representation that diminishes the story's credibility and impact. The man lived alone, had a minimalistic social network, therefore felt deeply impacted by lockdowns and social distancing. Again, the narrative bears a tone of irony and farce, reflecting the protagonist's uncertainties and oscillations in a manner aimed to place him in the proximity of comedy. While detailing her character's shifting mood. Ilis conjures another thematic

cluster meant to reflect a collective state of mind – immaturity and the refusal of adulthood. Although underdeveloped, Ilis' protagonist is meant as the prototype of the eternal teenager postponing marriage, commitment and responsibility, in a visibly desperate attempt to preserve a state in which all possibilities are still open and nothing is decided and definitive. Bordering on caricature, Ilis' portrayal of the young programmer is not meant to reveal the inner depth of a complex personality, but the destabilizing effect of a crisis that suddenly changed the environment that sustained immaturity and the refusal of adulthood. Marius handled his emotional life in a precarious, risible manner that clearly indicated his inability to connect to others and develop relationships based on real exchanges, not fantasies. The young man's projections about his coworker are unrealistic and exaggerated regardless of his particular mood on a given day. At one moment he was convinced he was in love, with isolation and working from home making his infatuation seem blown out of proportion. Once he went back to the office, the fantasy was replaced by reality, in a shift that made him think he had avoided a disaster when he realized he was not, actually, in love: "It seemed to him that he had gotten rid at the last moment of a terrible virus he annihilated before it was too late, employing a program elaborated under the pressure that the entire operating system could have gone to hell had he not acted so fast" (Ilis 2020, 46). The transparent reference to the virus – implying both the pathogen that triggered the crisis and the one connotating love, connection and human closeness – is meant to shape the character in the light of pathology. Indeed, what Ilis signals here, however subtly, is the fact that the pandemic involved a larger spectrum of pathologies, not just the one involved by COVID. The significant strain of social distancing pushed the boundaries of connection and affection even further, aggravating preexisting crises and blurring the limits between reality and fantasy.

The third story, titled simply *Corona*, tries to describe the actual experience of illness from the perspective of a young woman returning from Japan. Unknowingly, she was infected with the coronavirus and, despite repeated negative tests, she infects her grandmother and the old woman dies. The writer fails to create an atmosphere and a narrative framework to support the ambitious objectives of this short story. Ilis tries to render the confusion, highly feverish and hallucinatory state the COVID illness implies, but in fact manages to deliver a fractured, underdeveloped prose that cannot fulfill its promises. The actual experience of illness is a major point in any narrative concerning the pandemic, but this story does not reflect the complexity of experience and feeling it entails. Ilis had the correct intuition that, beyond the diverse experiences the pandemic involved and facilitated, narrating the actual experience of being sick from COVID anchors the volume in a potential territory of authenticity. What Ilis manages to convey is the all-encompassing feeling of confusion that defined the period. The story alludes to one of the most controversial political moments of the pandemic – Romanians returning home from abroad, where they worked and earned money they sent back to the country, were regarded, at the beginning of the pandemic, as agents of contagion. The story, in fact, refashions the fundamental idea that the pandemic primarily affected family dynamics and, in certain cases, turned nightmare into reality as younger, more dynamic people, proved to be the ones that put their older loved ones in mortal danger. Despite its shortcomings, this short story reminds the reader that the pandemic was, beyond the complex political crises it triggered and amplified, a time of lethality and death. *Judgment Day* tackles the religious dimension of the crisis, superimposing the personal troubles a priest who failed to discipline his son's lack of traffic responsibility with the ways in which doctors and medical personnel were, in turns, glorified and vilified as the pandemic raged on. The fact that the church painter, who considered himself skilled and talented was tempted to break the canon and paint doctors and nurses in biblical scenes in order to honor their battle against COVID is yet another strategy that remains underdeveloped in the story and in the volume, too. His thought process is a comedy in its own right: „The painter started to think deeper. (...) He had sometimes thought that he should adapt somehow to the times. But how? He could paint the founders from present times wearing clothes that reflected today's rigors, much like the masters from older days had. That would be right! But what else? No! he had to stick to the canons, because religious art had its own strict rules. But perhaps things must be renewed somehow. The people of today don't know anything about the plague, but they do know of the coronavirus. Should he paint doctors taking care of the sick, dressed in white cosmonaut clothes, as they could be seen on TV? With gloves and visors! What an artistic revolution that would be! After a hundred years art critics will explain, in books, his innovation... "(Ilis 2020, 98).

A Night on Call not only refers to medicine and the medical world, but it also takes place in a hospital, in a maternity ward. Eli is a middle-aged nurse who is on call during a particularly difficult night – when the child of a woman who possibly did not want to raise him dies. Newborns getting contaminated in maternity wards was one of the most delicate situations that doctors and nurses had to solve. Again, isolation, complex, heavy equipment, fear of the unknown and a pervasive sense that it was all a losing battle, all played an important role in shaping the mindset of those battling contagion in order to protect vulnerable categories. Eli is an ambiguous angel, though. She speculates that Mădălina, a young woman who seems not to have a partner, may not want the baby, despite his healthy glow and remarkable beauty. When another woman's baby dies of COVID, Eli swapped the babies and replaced the dead one with Mădălina's child. The nurse's dramatic gesture fits into the frame of general confusion and exacerbated reactivity, but it also possibly signals Eli's need to put order into the lives of others, gravely ignoring the limits of her duty. The pandemic favored extreme, excessive behaviors and this scenario is no exception. It also highlights a certain degree of a God complex that medical personnel might have felt – in times of crisis, reason is sometimes abolished and uncontrollable forces, formerly kept in check, violently emerge and crush all in their way.

The Brave Virtual World could be seen as a literary experiment toying with the diverse, wildly proliferating discourses from social media. The story is also an exercise in distinguishing between voices, narrators, truths, misguided replies and the meaning of the over-simplified regime of emoticons. A woman is quarantined in hospital with her newborn, tested positive for COVID. Her husband and relatives post, discuss, comment and lament on social media, obscuring, with their seemingly endless chatter, the gravity of the moment. Florina Ilis' intention is to connect the pandemic with what proved to be a major instrument of disinformation and social fracture. Social media polarized and divided people with great efficiency, and the effect was detrimental to both individuals and communities.

4. Conclusion

Despite its plurality of perspectives and voices and some warm critical approaches (Colțan 2020; Cobuz 2020) Florina Ilis' volume is unlikely to stand the test of time as a work of consistent literary art. It is, more likely, part of a dynamic paradigm of circumstantial literature, written under the impulse of the moment, meant to respond to the sensibilities of a given context, but not necessarily to transcend it. However, it is a significant marker of the ways in which literature intentionally and promptly reverberates the immediate events of contemporary history. Illness and collective suffering is not necessarily well represented in Romanian culture, although the country was not spared the disasters ensued by the pandemics of the 20th century. Modernism favored individual suffering and this is visible in other cultures. In her exploration of the impact of pandemics on culture and literature, Elizabeth Outka (2020) is interested in exploring the reasons behind the scarcity of literary accounts regarding the influenza pandemic of 1918-1919, when an unprecedentedly large number of people succumbed to the disease – anywhere between 50 million and 100 million people died of influenza caused by the H1N1 virus strain of avian origin. She argues that it is difficult to explain why a phenomenon of such magnitude left such vague traces in literary history, although literary life and literature, and art were deeply impacted by the death of some prominent authors - Guillaume Apollinaire and Gustav Klimt died of influenza, D.H. Lawrence was severely ill and barely survived, T.S. Eliot feared for his sanity, as he felt his brain was affected by the severity of the disease. Virginia Woolf, despite an easygoing attitude in the first phase of the pandemic, radically changed her tone after falling ill. She basically asks the same question and expresses the same amazement: given its fundamental violence and effect on human life at all levels, "it becomes strange indeed that illness has not taken its place with love, battle, and jealousy among the prime themes of literature" (Woolf 2002, 32). The most probable answer lies in our culture's attitude towards collective death caused by illness – it is regarded as a kind of irrational fate that could not be prevented, triggered by factors outside the realm of reason or prevention, therefore less valuable from a philosophical standpoint interested primarily in human agency.

The recent COVID pandemic left significant traces across cultural dialects and practices. Although it is still too early to discern between lasting impact and temporary impression, what has become distinctly clear is the effect of social distancing and rapid digitalization on all types of relationships and in a vast

area of professional interaction. Literature is just one of the many art forms that could develop and reshape these changes. Despite its rather peripheral status in the global cultural dynamic, Romanian literature signaled its availability to echo the impact of a major collective trauma and, implicitly, it stated its availability to resonate with the challenges of present times.

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The author

Gabriela Glăvan is an Associate Professor at The West University in Timișoara, The Faculty of Letters, History and Theology where she teaches Comparative Literature. She is the author of a book on Romanian modernism (2014), of a critical essay on Franz Kafka's short stories (2017) and on Max Blecher (2020). She has published numerous academic studies on modernism, the avant-garde and post-communism and is a contributor to several cultural magazines.