

PANDEMIC BIOPOLITICS IN ROMANIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT. *Pandemic Biopolitics in Romanian Literature.* The biopolitics of the COVID pandemic years has had a powerful impact on all areas of activity, including literature and the arts. Contagion and isolation quickly became the governing terms of social interaction, and writers promptly echoed their impact in works that tried to capture the spirit of the time as it was unfolding. Romanian writers were particularly prompt in responding to the challenges of this unprecedented crisis in modern decades, therefore the first pandemic writings were published in the later months of 2020. Florina Ilis' *Pandemia veselă și tristă (The Happy and Sad Pandemic)*, Polirom, 2020), Teodor Hossu-Longin's *Măștile din spatele măștii (The Masks behind the Mask)*, Hyperliteratura, 2022) and collective volumes such as *Izolare (Isolation)*, Nemira 2020) and *Jurnal din vremea pandemiei. Proză de grup (Journal from the Times of the Pandemic)*, Brumar, 2021), edited by Marius Cosmeanu, are just the most visible examples that could be explored in this context. Drawing from theories concerning posthumanism, medical humanities, ethics and contagion, this paper aims to explore the manner in which the pandemic segment of Romanian literature could be integrated into a global literary framework that highlights a diversity of genres and a plurality of voices galvanizing the relationship between the massive effects of the pandemic and narrative art. My paper aims at mapping an emerging literary dialect that gives shape, voice and coherence to a collective experience that has left an indelible imprint on the present and will significantly shape the cultural climate of the near future.

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REZUMAT. *Biopolitica pandemică în literatura română.* Biopolitica anilor pandemiei COVID a avut un impact puternic asupra tuturor domeniilor de activitate, inclusiv asupra literaturii și artelor. Contaminarea și izolarea au devenit rapid termenii esențiali ai interacțiunii sociale, iar scriitorii au reflectat imediat impactul acestora în lucrări care au încercat să surprindă spiritul vremii pe măsură ce acesta prindea contur. Scriitorii români au fost în mod special prompti în a răspunde provocărilor acestei crize fără precedent în deceniile moderne, astfel încât primele scrieri pandemice au fost publicate în ultimele luni ale anului 2020. *Pandemia veselă și tristă* a Florinei Ilis (Polirom, 2020), *Măștile din spatele măștii* de Teodor Hossu-Longin (Hyperliteratura, 2022) și volume colective precum *Izolare* (Nemira, 2020) și *Jurnal din vremea pandemiei. Proză de grup* (Brumar, 2021), editate de Marius Cosmeanu, sunt doar cele mai vizibile exemple care ar putea fi explorate în acest context. Bazându-se pe teorii despre postumanism, științe umaniste medicale, etică și contagiune, această lucrare își propune să exploreze modul în care segmentul pandemic al literaturii românești ar putea fi integrat într-un cadru literar global ce evidențiază o diversitate de genuri și o pluralitate de voci dinamizând relația dintre efectele cele mai de ecou ale pandemiei și arta narativă. Lucrarea își propune să cartografieze un dialect literar emergent care dă formă, voce și coerență unei experiențe colective ce a lăsat o amprentă de neșters asupra prezentului și va modela semnificativ climatul cultural al viitorului apropiat.

Cuvinte-cheie: *Pandemia COVID-19, izolare, traumă colectivă, postumanism, contagiune, științe umaniste medicale, literaturi periferice*

Introduction. The genre and concepts of pandemic writing

The global health crisis triggered in 2020 by the COVID pandemic left its mark on a rapidly growing literary production inspired by the unusual new realities of everyday life: lockdowns, social distancing, isolation, and a massive strain on all human relations. This has established the particular literary niche of pandemic literature, an eclectic space where professional and occasional writers expressed and published their perspectives on the experience of the pandemic. Romanian literature was prompt to reverberate the dramatic notes of the period: since the first months of the pandemic, various literary works have been published, covering a wide range of approaches and styles. I shall outline the characteristics of these Romanian literary accounts of the period, starting from an analysis of the manner in which they integrate into what

Priscilla Wald called “the outbreak narrative.” Although her 2008 approach to the issue may not have anticipated the specific details of the 2020 COVID pandemic, the framework she proposes, based on previous major outbreaks such as the 2003 SARS or HIV, functions as a general, paradigmatic one, with notions and concepts of universal applicability. While Wald uses the concept of “outbreak narratives” in a broad sense, “to designate those epidemiological stories” (Wald 2008, 3), I shall adapt the notion to the specific circumstances of the 2020 pandemic, proposing instead an analysis of the COVID stories these various writers and contributors to collective volumes published in the aftermath of the first pandemic waves.

Among other significant observations concerning the articulation and spreading of outbreak narratives, Wald notes their ability to have a significant impact on the social dynamics of the moment, as “they promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles, and they change economies” (Wald 2008, 3). Epidemics, outbreaks, and, in an extended sense, pandemics have their own story, and they articulate a narrative that helps health specialists identify patterns that, in turn, contribute to reliable methods of diagnosis and, furthermore, to establishing treatment protocols. There is, quite evidently, a privileged imaginary space where epidemics and narratives coexist, thus directly invoking the essential meaning of “contagion” (con-tangere, in Latin, means “to touch together”). They also imply the “reunion” of individuals, communities, and societies under the same auspices imposed by the equalizing effect of epidemics. This feature often appears in literary texts, as a reminder of the irrational force of disease, one that universally uncovers the precarity of the human condition. In a commentary on Geddes Smith’s story of the Black Death from his highly successful book, *Plague On Us* (1941), Wald argues that it emerges as “formulaic” and “formative,” proving a paradigmatic structure that can harbor other stories from various other historical intervals. The “narrative logic” (Wald 2008, 23) of the epidemic, one that has been sought by scientists and storytellers alike since the essential intuition concerning the relation between epidemiology and narrativity arose in scientific discourse, established an important bridge between narrative art and the often unwelcoming (for the humanities) scientific world (Wald 23). The COVID pandemic proved there is a certain level of contamination between the medical vocabulary and everyday language, with notions specific to the epidemiological context spilling into the perimeter of basic conversation. The early days of the pandemic were marked by a constant mention of viral load, quarantine, isolettes (covered stretchers for carrying the first COVID patients, considered highly contagious and dangerous to others), as the media flooded public discourse with scientific notions meant to convey the severity of the moment.

Who speaks of the pandemic, and how? To what degree does literary fiction recreate the complex atmosphere of the first months of the pandemic – the fear of illness and death, the high mortality rate, the unknown dimension of the actual threat, the disbelief at the severe public health measures imposed by governments worldwide, the grief of witnessing an overwhelming amount of private suffering and loss? How does literature fare among the competing discourses narrating simultaneously the same plot, that of the pandemic? The literary texts I intend to discuss focus on narrow, individual perspectives and outlooks that project subjectivity rather than collective emotion. Yet they can be revelatory for the wider questions they pose, as the year 2020 appears more distant in time, and some notions are easier to process and assimilate through the lens of the interval that stands between the present and that specific moment.

There is a vast literature exploring the ravages and social impact of epidemics from past ages, from Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* to Camus' *The Plague* and Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*. The 2020 pandemic generated a massive response from writers across the globe, as technology proved an important tool of instant communication. Before the first books about the pandemic were published, there were various other types of interventions on the issue, from blog posts to social media posts and interviews. As the pandemic unraveled, writers such as Sarah Moss (*The Fell*), Anne Tyler (*French Braid*), Roddy Doyle (*Life Without Children*), Isabel Allende (*Violeta*), and Carley Moore (*Panpocalypse*) filled the literary stage with fictional reflections of the new state of emergency that impacted and transformed contemporary global culture. In Romania, the first books incorporating pandemic themes started to appear in the first months of the crisis: the collective volume *Izolare (Isolation, Nemira)* was published in electronic format on April 13, 2020, barely a month after the first lockdown. In 2020, Petre Crăciun edited *coronaJURNAL. Gânduri din izolare (coronaJOURNAL. Thoughts from Isolation, Zorio publishing)*, and later, in October, Florina Ilis published a volume of short stories – *Pandemia veselă și tristă (The Happy and Sad Pandemic, Polirom)*; later, in 2021, Marius Cosmeanu edited a collective volume titled *Jurnal din vremea pandemiei. Proză de grup (Journal from the Time of the Pandemic, Brumar)*; in 2022, Teodor Hossu-Longin published *Măștile din spatele măștii (The Masks Behind the Mask, Hyperliteratura)*. I shall explore Ilis' volume as a single-author fiction about the pandemic and the collective volume *Jurnal din vremea pandemiei. Proză de grup* in order to identify the characteristics of a genre that could be integrated into the larger paradigm of pandemic literature. I shall also investigate the articulation of a biopolitics of the pandemic in these literary texts, in the proximity of a conceptual anchor defined by social distancing, isolation, sanitary regulations, and control.

Literature and the biopolitics of a global health crisis

One element that reverberates through all these narratives is the imprint of authority on social and private lives. The public health measures taken by governments to control the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and, implicitly, infection rates, were met with varying degrees of acceptance and hostility. In his approach to the matter of public health and control, Michel Foucault articulates the definition of biopolitics, correlating it with forms and structures of power and oppression. The term has been invoked in connection not only with epidemics as agents of social disruption but also with the COVID pandemic. Although Foucault's concept of biopolitics is still under debate as an articulated theory that can be invoked in major public health crises that involve state-controlled power structures, it coherently resonates with some major issues raised during the recent pandemic. Foucault defines biopolitics in the last chapter of the first volume of his *History of Sexuality – The Will to Knowledge: History of Sexuality* (1976). It is a major form of political power that administratively controls life and the biological existence of a population, and its main purpose is to “ensure, sustain and multiply life, to put this life in order” (Foucault 1976, 138). Directly connected to biopolitics is the notion of biopower, signifying the manners in which biopolitics is put into action. However, there is an intrinsic historical dimension to Foucault's notions of biopower and biopolitics, as his arguments are circumscribed to various political structures from the 17th to 19th centuries. While he connects the mechanics of biopower to the juridical privileges of sovereign power, he also notes that its system took shape in the 17th century, focusing on the essential processes governing the life of the body: “propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to vary. Their supervision was inflicted through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*” (Foucault 1976, 139). The technologies perfected to acquire better control of the body and its functions grew into a complex system that gained prevalence in the 19th century, and the biopolitical became an essential component of the historical form of individual subjectivity.

Surveillance and control are other Foucauldian notions that have been invoked in connection with the 2020 pandemic, especially since they reflect Foucault's description of the discipline measures taken in cities affected by the plague (Foucault 1977, 195-200). The strict rules of lockdowns garnered much criticism in Romania, especially since there were large intervals in which citizens had to carry documentation to justify basic outings, such as driving to work or medical visits. Florina Ilis fictionalizes such an instance, when the lives of the protagonists in her short story *Q urăsc! (I Hate Her!)* change after a brief

encounter sparked by a strict pandemic provision: all citizens had to carry a written statement in public spaces, justifying their presence outside their homes. Beyond the ironic caricature of characters and circumstance, this local element of the 2020 lockdown – imposed by the provisions of the Military Ordinances of March 2020 – alludes to the weakness of a state that generally failed to control the health crisis, as the medical system, in permanent difficulty even before the pandemic, was severely strained. Local politicians were overwhelmed by the challenges of the moment: at one point in late March/early April 2020, the Romanian government deployed armed forces on the streets in major cities, with the absurd requirement that the national anthem be played on the audio stations of police cars. Lockdowns and the subsequent isolation they involved are the background of many confessional interventions in the collective volume *Journal from the Year of the Pandemic*. The contributors to this volume are journalists, bloggers, travel writers, and professionals from various fields that, in one way or another, involve writing narratives, teaching, and communication. They are located in various places across the globe, which creates the effect of a universal community experiencing present history simultaneously, with variations induced by the specific pandemic climate of the region or country they inhabit. The volume renders imaginary maps of the pandemic, from Bucharest to New York, Helsinki or Haifa to the Canary Islands. Each place has its own version of the pandemic, its own rhythm of survival, as daily life contracted and dilated according to different local responses to the crisis. Projected as a collective enterprise possibly meant to illustrate a common assumption about the effects of the pandemic – that it equalizes differences and levels out social asperities and inequities, the volume renders a different type of response, as uniformity remains mainly biological (different access to medical resources could be an argument against this assumption, too). As Lennard J. Davis noted in his analysis of the pandemic structures of biopower, “inequality in a time of pandemic is nothing new” (Davis 2003, 17).

In a critical intervention on the issue of the biopolitics of the COVID-19 pandemic (from April 2, 2020), Daniele Lorenzini comments on the iteration of Foucault’s concept in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, while also drawing on Judith Butler’s observations regarding the inequalities deepened by the health crisis and on Bruno Latour’s hypothesis that “the health crisis prepares, induces and incites us to prepare for climate change” (Latour 2021). Lorenzini also criticizes the facile assumption (reinforced by the fictional plots of the literary texts I shall discuss) that since the biological condition has been brought to the fore as the common denominator of the fight against the coronavirus, this involves a larger spectrum on which all members of a society are equally vulnerable. Lockdowns, remote work, online learning, and Zoom meetings quickly became part of a seemingly universal language of the pandemic,

as if, indeed, all workers, families, and jobs had the chance to undergo a smooth transition that mostly affected their dynamics and routines, not their income, opportunities, or even access to education. Lorenzini argues that, in line with Foucault's link between biopower and racism, understood as a form of exposure to the risk of death, we should also consider the "differential exposure" of individuals to health risks when the same forms of biopolitical control are involved. Indeed, unlike the characters in the short stories and the collective journal entries discussed here, many social groups were affected by the pandemic in more dramatic ways than the general code imposed by social distancing. Biopolitics, Lorenzini states, "is always a politics of differential vulnerability," as it permanently reinforces hierarchies that perpetuate vulnerability as an intrinsic element of the political order. The pandemic was a catalyst for the inequalities inherent to all major crises, exposing the different ways in which it affected various categories of workers and professionals who, despite an increased personal risk, contributed to the functioning and normalization of everyday life.

Another essential concept for a coherent critical perspective on the biopolitics of the COVID pandemic is posthumanism. Its conceptual proximity to the framework of contagion and epidemics is obvious: the posthuman experience involves not only a reconsideration of the universalist notion of the human (or Man, as a central figure of humanism) but also of the ways in which human life is interconnected with coexisting non-human elements, natural or artificial, including viruses or technological creations.

The coronavirus pandemic emerged from an act of contagion between animals and humans in a context that has been considered dangerous long before the pandemic started. Abusive commercial practices, the irresponsible exploitation of the environment, and the careless mismanagement of our contact with non-human species are just a few elements that could be called to designate the posthumanist context in which the pandemic erupted. The Anthropocene, understood as a distinct era in the history of life on Earth, in which the effects of the human presence left an indelible mark on nature, has also been regarded as an interval "born of anthropocentric illusions of our ontological separation from nature" (Newman, Topuzovski, 2021).

The sudden effacement of human agency from urban landscapes during lockdowns offered a startling view of our civilization's material edifices deprived of the animation that integrated them into a vital circuit. The effects of the pandemic have been interpreted politically by invoking the harsh restrictions imposed during lockdowns but also by observing the rise of populist and extremist discourse. Conspiracy theories, rumors, and irrational fears became almost as viral as the virus itself. The pandemic called for a rethinking of the limits of human agency and the human condition (Newman, Topuzovski 2021, 14).

Although pandemics have been known to have a profound impact on the course of history, the effects of such a crisis are largely dictated by the context in which it occurs and can often be unpredictable. An optimistic outlook on the pandemic interval could discern positive aspects (digitization and remote work, among others) that materialized due to rapid societal changes in many countries (Ağın and Horzum 2023, 2).

The newly released collective novel *Fourteen Days* (Atwood, Preston, 2024) could easily become a classic of the genre. Written by thirty-six American and Canadian writers, it is based on a Decameron-like principle, with a fourteen-day gathering of tenants on the rooftop of a New York building, taking turns telling apparently unconnected stories. What reunites these divergent voices is their undertone that ties them to the continuum of the present day, the life, conflicts, backgrounds, histories, and identities that give meaning to each narrative.

Its unifying element is the intended novelistic genre to which the volume is ascribed, demanding a reading centered on the inner coherence of the plot. That unifying frame is the unraveling of the pandemic crisis and the particular ways in which characters process the anxieties and traumas triggered by it. Similar Romanian endeavors are less coherent from this perspective, and this could be due to a significantly reduced editing interval and a more eclectic group of writers reunited.

Both *Izolare* (*Isolation*, Nemira Publishing, 2020) and *Jurnal din vremea pandemiei* (*Journal from the Time of the Pandemic*, Brumar, 2021) illustrate the cohesive principle that the literary reflection of this global crisis is best captured in non-curated diversity. *Izolare* sought direct impressions from writers expressing themselves freely, in the midst of a fast-paced string of events, as the pandemic spread and unfolded unpredictably. "We are not in a Camus book, nor in a Chaucer or a Boccaccio one. We are in Romania, in our homes," one narrative voice declared. The collective pronoun reunited twenty authors who contributed with short prose and poetry that illuminate their personal experience of the first months of isolation and quarantine.

As the world closed and social experiences were restricted drastically, everyday life was suddenly reshaped by new governing laws, some of them flagrantly contradicting those that defined it in the first place. Communication and encounter were replaced by social distancing; politeness and small talk were hidden behind face masks, conviviality and goodwill were effaced by suspicion and avoidance. Screens and virtual worlds replaced, in a matter of weeks, entire structures and cultural constructs that nourished our social environments.

A significant question involving the *Journal from the Time of the Pandemic* concerns the professional domains that have relevance and visibility in these literary accounts of the pandemic period. Can we derive patterns and recurrent

themes in these stories, articulating a distinct framework of pandemic literature? Before exploring possible answers to these issues, it is also interesting to note that collective projects apparently aim to capture one of the specific dichotomies that define the pandemic crisis, that of the individual and the collective, echoing the tension between the subjective perception of trauma and what could be approximated as its objective dimension.

The *Journal* has, indeed, a diaristic component. Multiple narrative voices detail the experience of the pandemic in various places across the globe, focusing on perception and emotions. Florin Șerban plans a manifesto in his intervention: "So, my words are aimed as a small manifesto of resistance and resilience against the epidemic of uncertainty that seems to engulf us, along with the epidemic itself" (Găneț in Cosmeanu 2021, 37). The mask, as a metonymy of the pandemic, is also the common denominator of cultural difference: "Asians wearing masks are seen by Westerners like some weirdos who had run away from the office on a secret mission to spread the virus across the world. Things start to change and some European governments have recently imposed the public wearing of masks" (Șerban in Cosmeanu 2021, 197).

An interesting, contrasting intervention belongs to a political figure, Raluca Prună, an experienced member of various European institutions who, at the moment the pandemic started, was a member of the European Commission. Her contribution confirms the initial denial phase of the crisis, in which, at least for a few weeks after the pandemic erupted in China, everyday life (including business and political life) continued in a regular manner. The optimistic tone of her first intervention remains valid until today: "I'm trying to find the advantages of this dystopian pandemic – we'll advance more rapidly in our digital agenda, in our use of artificial intelligence, there will be less pollution, although not sustainably, isolation will bring us close to metaphysics, we'll ask ourselves the difficult questions we've always been afraid of" (Prună in Cosmeanu 2021, 186).

A significant aspect of the ways in which pandemic biopolitical control is imposed in the various countries mapped in these diverse accounts is the cultural reception of restrictions, integrated into local contexts of adapting to the pandemic. A distinctive feature of the global biopolitics of the pandemic emerges: governments imposed strict rules that disrupted and changed preexisting routines of social and private life, with little resistance from those affected. The narrators of these personal accounts are not a representative segment that could illustrate this aspect beyond doubt, though. On the contrary, the pandemic narratives included in this *Journal* reflect compliance with the rules and a sense of retreat from the imaginary battlefield with a seemingly ubiquitous threat. Life in big cities appeared dramatically altered by social distancing and lockdowns, while the slow life of less populated areas proved friendlier.

Cosmeanu's *Journal* also proposes a geography of the pandemic, one that integrates the human element in a context of vulnerability and individual crisis. Its articulation becomes visible once the diaristic cyclicity of the *Journal* emerges – the repeated interventions, at different points in time, of the contributors, create the effect of a rising tide, a process that visibly becomes more threatening and severe as the pandemic progresses.

A marginal benefit of rapidly coagulated editorial adventures is the fact that authors have less time to transform authentic experiences into aesthetically rearranged artistic products. The pandemic ensued abruptly, and its deadly impact reverberated globally with great intensity. Literature, as a traditionally privileged means of rendering inner intensities, was also a favored therapeutic tool involved in expressing the universal angst and disbelief at the rapid onset of large-scale illness and loss.

Moreover, collective volumes allude to other popular discourses that are part of an extended definition of today's literature – blog posts, live stories on social media, personal narratives on vlogs, to name just the most visible forms. The overt message of the collective projects mirroring the pandemic experience is that storytelling is a therapeutic form of confronting a limit of today's social architecture, meant to alleviate the brutal, irrational, unexpected forces that generated the apparently unmanageable chaos of a new virus infecting countries and continents.

As the Authors Guild Foundation, who, together with Margaret Atwood and Douglas Preston, edited the volume *Fourteen Days*, mention in a note prefacing the *Fourteen Days* novellus, as they call it by its Latin name, "we human beings have faced our gravest challenges by telling stories. When we are confronted with war, violence, terror – or a pandemic – we tell stories to sort things out and push back against a frightening and incomprehensible world" (2024, 1). The carefully curated collection of stories, authored by Atwood, Emma Donoghue, Erica Jong, Ishmael Reed, and Weike Wang, among similarly resonant other names from today's literary canon, is, from an editorial perspective, an unusual event, expected to have a less common type of impact.

Romanian Literature has often been negatively affected by its delays in relation to Western and World literature. The modernist and postmodernist literary projects of the 1930s and 1980s, respectively, were also visible efforts to align the national canon to Western and international cultural power lines. Relevance could indeed be aided by timeliness, and it appears that this could have been a reason behind the prompt publication of the individual and collective volumes exploring the effects of the pandemic.

Although it appeared later than other books published in an electronic format, Florina Ilis' short story volume *Pandemia veselă și tristă* (The Happy and Sad Pandemic) raised the most critical interest as the first single-author literary narrative about the pandemic (Cobuz, 2020; Colțan 2020). Ilis is a successful contemporary writer, with a solid critical reputation and a consistent record of literary prizes and acknowledgments. However, from the bland title (an allusion to a minor volume of verse, *Balade vesele și triste* (Happy and Sad Ballads) by George Topârceanu) to the unusual brevity of the stories (Ilis is a marathon, 500-pages type of writer), the volume is an atypical production in the genre of pandemic literature.

From the beginning, the tone is mixed: the dire circumstances of the newly-decreed state of emergency are paralleled by sheer satire. Two men trapped in unhappy marriages realize the pandemic and the new regulations concerning travel around the city, including to and from work, interfere with their daily plans of using work as an excuse to be away from home. *O urăsc!* (I Hate Her!) is just as unrealistic and satirizing as the next title, *O iubesc!* in which a young IT specialist working for a small company fantasizes about falling in love with the only single colleague at his office. Both stories are ironic anecdotes about social distancing and its destructuring effects: it dissolves family units already estranged by routine, boredom and incompatible personality traits, while also nourishing unrealistic projections, fixations, and obsessions, deepening the social chasm for those who had already failed to fit in. Ilis approximates comic undertones in her narrative, destabilizing the serious regime of the pandemic crisis but remaining faithful to the "happy and sad" framework of her literary investigation.

The new COVID biopolitics is visible here through a single, massive lens: that of the private sphere and of personal relationships. More than a collective trauma, the pandemic unfolds as a string of small personal disasters. There is no protest, no resistance, no revolt against the sudden inauguration of the rule of biopolitical power taking control over personal routines and social interaction.

Ilis defies the medical norm of the pandemic, in which the pathological spectrum is dominated by the virus and the illness that triggered it. There are, she seems to suggest, deeper pathologies lurking beneath the thin veneer of normal life, and any major crisis of global impact would have brought them to the surface. Human relationships appear just as fragile and vulnerable as the bodies avoiding infection. Ilis appears to delimit an anatomy of the pandemic in which the focus is on the larger effects of pathologies and forms of contagion. From this perspective, the otherwise ideologically thin narratives illustrate the ease and acceptance that accompany the rise to authority and power of a biopolitical spectrum merely contested through conspiracy theories.

Starting with the third story, COVID seems to become central, as the fear of contagion grows exponentially as expats and foreigners continue to travel freely across borders and continents. Appropriately titled *Corona*, the story revolves around the homecoming of a young woman who had been away in Japan. Traveling from the Far East, she unknowingly became infected and, quite predictably, unwillingly became what has been termed a “superspreader,” a patient who infected others at a fast rate. An involved narrative voice tries to describe the actual experience of illness: the high, delirious fevers, the sense of losing contact with one’s ailing body, confusion bordering on hallucination, and a distorted sense of time. The actual narration of symptoms is a strategy to render the authentic experience of the pandemic – feeling, as Virginia Woolf deplored in her famous essay, *On Being Ill*, “what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to light” (Woolf 2002, 32). The narrow space of the narrative dramatically reduces the effects of this descent into illness and the overall effect of the experience is thus minimized. However, this story touches upon one of the most sensitive political issues of the pandemic in Romania – the ambivalent popular attitude towards the return of the diaspora, of which a great part were workers who could no longer keep their jobs due to COVID-related restrictions. The protagonist of the story brings the pandemic home, and the coronavirus kills her grandmother. As it happened all across the globe, here, too, the virus mercilessly claimed the lives of elders and the chronically ill. Pandemic public health regulations favor open borders and free circulation (WHO), despite the negative effects such measures could entail.

As it was empirically observed, the young, healthier adults were less prone to develop severe forms of the disease, but their less compromised immunity could not prevent them from transmitting the disease to older, more vulnerable family members. This could be regarded as a dramatic point of crisis in the biopolitics of the pandemic, one that affected families and the social fabric on an already sensitive issue – that of healthcare for elders and their general well-being, both in emerging economies and in Western countries.

Judecata de Apoi (Judgment Day) could be read as an ironic commentary on the Christian Orthodox ritual of canonizing public saints. Doctors and nurses, sanctified by the collective imagination in the first months of the pandemic (later demonized by online conspiracy trends), become the subjects of a church painter’s convoluted, comical meditation. His intention was to paint them as saints on the walls of a countryside church:

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)².

O noapte de gardă (A Night on Call) expands the medical dimension of Ilis' volume in a direction meant to expose a wider spectrum of the fragility of life in pandemic times – the death of a COVID-infected newborn. A story with a well-developed plot, this life-and-death tale from the hospital is both dramatic and disturbing. The stories of two mothers and their babies intersect just as illness and death penetrate the porous membrane protecting them from the violent ravages of the pandemic. Despite the far-fetched plot twists, the story emerges as a powerful scenario framing the life-affirming power of medical personnel, despite some thorny ethical questions that cannot be ignored. Ultimately, Ilis suggests that there is a powerful irrational component in the crisis delimited by the pandemic, but its ultimate goal is to bring order into chaos.

The last short story of the volume, *Minunata lume virtuală (The Brave Virtual World)* is a brief, jocular narrative about the complex, rapidly proliferating discourses of the social media. A separate universe of its own, the virtual world presents itself as a simulacrum of reality that closely mimics the disintegration and confusion ingrained in the essence of a global health crisis. Again, a mother and her baby are in hospital, having been tested positive for COVID. Their families communicate via social media, in a seemingly endless verbal tide that seems to diminish the gravity of the personal crisis they were facing. Denial and the illusion of communication were the early side effects of a protean, secondary crisis that lingers, in various forms of post-traumatic stress disorder even after the main crisis ended.

Conclusions

The volumes about the pandemic published as the crisis unfolded, in a discourse that paralleled the actual experience, had the mirroring effect of art created in the immediate proximity of the reality that inspired it, to which it

² All translations from Florina Ilis, *Pandemia veselă și tristă*, Polirom, 2020, and Marius Cosmeanu (ed.), *Jurnal din vremea pandemiei*, Brumar, 2021, are mine.

responded and which it tried to process, filter, and assimilate. Their therapeutic role was more evidently urgent, and the voices they reunited could be read as a chorus capturing and rearranging the intensities of the pandemic interval. The sense of community, of participation in a massively turbulent phenomenon that needed to be made comprehensible through art, are the elements that define the literature written and published under the imperative of the moment. Synchronous with the events it transfigured, this literary regime is defined by an impossibility to approximate the meaning of the complete experience, as it was still unpredictable and ongoing. It reflects a distinctive biopolitical regime, defined by compliance with the regulations of the global health crisis and retreat into individual realms characterized by uncertainty and isolation. Conspiracy theories and occasional bypasses of rules did not amount to a consolidated form of opposition to the rather sudden policy implementation of COVID pandemic rules.

However, the pandemic has drastically diminished its presence in today's public vocabulary, as if it tried to counteract its absolute dominance in years past. There is little, if any, mention of the collective trauma of the pandemic in today's culture in Romania, and the literary narratives highlighting it (including the ones discussed here) do not seem to gather more critical attention than the thin amount they received when published in 2020 and 2021. One explanation could be that the suffocating omnipresence of pandemic-related issues at all levels in public life created a temporary effect of rejection, while the trauma of the pandemic itself is, inevitably, still being processed. In her exploration of the literature about the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic, Elizabeth Outka (2020) notices a surprising scarcity of books tackling the massive catastrophe that swept the entire Western world. A possible answer lies in Western culture's perspective on major disasters, often regarded as irrational events that escape comprehensibility and reason. One strategy to overcome them is the effort to forget them as soon as their power diminishes. The literature of the pandemic will continue to grow and be just as diverse as the voices narrating it: some of it will bear the imprint of the moment, while other levels, reflecting a finite experience, will critically filter its meaning through a more distant lens.

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