

Corona Palimpsests: Pandemic Protagonists as Readers

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Abstract

Readers and readings are omnipresent not only in the controversial genre of ‘corona diaries’, but also in corona fiction; drawing on a rich literary and cinematographic epi-/pandemic tradition, early corona literature rapidly took a striking meta-turn. Based on a large comparative corpus, this paper examines its palimpsestic dynamics through the prism of reader protagonists: the analysis of reader characters and reading contexts provides valuable insights into the ways this recent literary production revisits and adapts pre-existing aesthetic and ideological patterns in a new social and media context, integrating a multitude of intertextual and intermedial references. Staging multiple acts of reading, metaleptically blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, this corpus poses a creative challenge to us as readers – never quite – ‘outside the text’; at the same time, it offers a polyvalent model of (un-)making meaning, of possibly mending, with the aid of literature, a crisis-shaken world.

INTRO: READING AGAINST THE PLAGUE

“Lisez”, recommends Emmanuel Macron in his much-commented confinement speech on March 16, 2020, encouraging his fellow citizens to seek comfort in “a sure value: reading” (Gary 2020).¹ Indeed, at least from a socially and globally rather privileged point of view, the Covid-19 pandemic also appears as a literary

1 All terms and phrases enclosed in double quotation marks are literal quotations, translated into English where appropriate; all translations are the author’s, unless indicated otherwise.

event: during the first lockdown, the French not only read more than ever (cf. Le Breton 2020); in considerable numbers, they ventured into creative territory, one out of ten admitting to some literary endeavour in the said period (cf. Gary 2020). In France and beyond, editors and agents confirm “a big spike in submissions” triggered by the pandemic (Juliet Mushens in Vincent 2020), low-threshold digital formats favouring an explosion of “user-created media content” (Foss 2020). “Lezen tegen de pest?” (Baetens 2020): in a frenzy of both writing and “reading against the plague”, literature, thus, proves itself once more as a reservoir of effective crisis coping strategies.

In his *Bibliothèque de survie*, Frédéric Beigbeder (2021, 66) pays homage to fiction as an antidote to solitude. Defying isolation, fiction also provides a “frame of reference” (Ma 2018, 29) for dealing with an often imagined “kind of disaster” (Yu 2020) turned reality: rejected as “extremely unrealistic” in 2005, Peter May’s thriller *Lockdown* is hastily published in spring 2020 (Elassar 2020). If filmic “pandemic practice” improves crisis resilience (Scrivner et al. 2021), the same might be supposed for literature-based exercise – an insight that writers have since long been familiar with: apart from his *non-superstitiousness* and affinity to “solitary life”, the hero of George R. Stewart’s *Earth Abides* (1949) lists being “a reader” as a key survival trait in a virus-devastated world (Stewart 2015, 38f.). Some decades later, one of the protagonists in Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014) owes his “disaster preparedness” to action movies (Mandel 2015, 21).

But no less than films like Wolfgang Petersen’s *Outbreak* (1995) and Steven Soderbergh’s *Contagion* (2011) or Ndemc Creations’ video game *Plague Inc.* (2012), equally valued as a means of “engag[ing] the public on serious public health topics” (Khan 2013), literature still constitutes a precious source of pandemic knowledge; in this context too, reading allows access to a new repertoire of “qualified gestures” (Macé 2011, 57). All you need to know in times of pandemics, for François-Henri Désérable, is already “dans les livres” (TC 46-50)² – and not just in the most obvious ones: for good reason, Beigbeder’s survival canon includes, besides ‘confinement classics’ such as Xavier de Maistre’s *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (*A Journey around My Room*), Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Zapiski iz podpol’ja* (*Notes from Underground*) and Thomas Mann’s *Der Zauberberg* (*The Magic Mountain*), suggestions for antipodic, i.e. thematically opposed reading, from Colette’s *Le Pur et l’Impur* to Despentès’s *Vernon Subutex*. Jacques Drillon proposes a round of applause not only for top confinement candidate

2 TC = Coll. (2020) *Tracts de crise. Un virus et des hommes. 18 mars / 11 mai 2020*, Paris, Gallimard.

Marcel Proust, but also his other faithful companions Alexandre Dumas and Charles Baudelaire (cf. *TC* 519); amateur readers, in their turn “saved by books”, spotlight *À la recherche du temps perdu* or, for instance, the writings of Simone de Beauvoir (Kronlund 2020b).

From March 2020, a new critical subgenre flourishes: between “Your Quarantine Reader” (Khatib et al. 2020) and the finest literary selection in times of “Coronavirus: de Sophocle à Stephen King [...]” (Houot 2020), international media rival in the digitally accelerated renegotiation of an old-new epi-/pandemic canon. “Boccaccio, Defoe, García Márquez, the usual suspects” (Carlos Fonseca, *ST* 384)³ are eagerly rediscovered; Boccaccio’s “livre multimédia” (Nathalie Koble in Benetti 2020), notably, inspires a substantial corpus of print and digital neo-Decamerons or ‘Coronamerons’ (cf. Stemberger 2021, 56-61). In addition, lesser-known works from national corpora are promoted, such as Filip De Pillecyn’s 1951 plague novella *Rochus* (cf. Janssens 2020) or Curzio Malaparte’s *La pelle* (1949), initially “La peste”, renamed because of Camus (cf. Zampieri 2020). “Camus versus Garcia Marquez”: from this “match littéraire” staged by *L’Express* (Payot 2020), the former emerges victorious, too. An “instant bestseller” (Rose 2020) in its time, *La Peste* rebecomes “a global sensation” (Earle 2020), provoking some iconoclastic pushback: “Je n’aime pas Camus”, declares Emmanuel de Waresquiel (Dupont 2020), while Mario Vargas Llosa labels *La Peste* a “mediocre book” (*ST* 33).

And yet: “Il faut relire *La peste*” (Malka 2020); performatively claiming a common cultural heritage, Sugy (2020) explains “Pourquoi nous relisons *La Peste* de Camus”.⁴ Gallimard’s *Tracts de crise*, intended as another “*Décameron* pour le Coronavirus” (Régis Debray, *TC* 557), emphasize the literary community factor, combining a collective of contemporary writers with 14th century poet Guillaume de Machaut and Camus. The example of *La Peste*, presented as “the Bible of these tormented times” (Philippe 2020), paradigmatically illustrates the ambiguities between a classic’s actualization and its recuperation: without being illegitimate, readings of Camus’s novel as “a guidebook for Covid-19” (Rickard 2021) frequently seem somewhat simplistic, just as the keen association of the current pandemic’s key actors – Wuhan whistleblower Li Wenliang or U.S. Chief Medical Advisor Anthony Fauci (cf. Robert Zaretsky in Illing 2020) – with Camus’s iconic Dr. Rieux. However, between Covid-19, climate change and BLM,

3 *ST* = Stavans, Ilan (ed.) (2020) *And We Came outside and Saw the Stars Again. Writers from around the World on the COVID-19 Pandemic*, Brooklyn, NY, Restless Books. [E-Edition]

4 “We must reread *The Plague*”... “Why we reread Camus’s *The Plague*”.

Camus's novel, still a strong "texte politique" (Compagnon 2021), also incites more thorough (e.g. new gender and postcolonial) reinterpretations. Overall, corona readings of *La Peste* testify to literature's doubly cathartic function: "Sometimes we turn to novels to make sense of our world, and sometimes to escape it. Yet in hard times, we often ask them to do both at once: to make sense of our world, all the better to escape it" (Earle 2020). Despite its vivid depictions of illness, suffering and death, Camus's "'optimistic tragedy'" finally brings the reader "good news", celebrating the "triumph of solidarity" in the face of absurdity (Erofeev 2002, 291, 308).

Although a particularly striking example, *La Peste* is far from being the only literary 'survival tool' widely reactivated in the context of Covid-19. Corona literature (or, briefly, 'corona-lit') displays – and reflects on a meta-level – a rich panorama of (anti-)pandemic readings; in the following, crucial reader types and reading patterns are analyzed on the basis of a large comparative corpus of exemplary texts, starting with the controversial genre of the 'corona diary'.

GENRE, CLASS AND GENDER TROUBLE: READERS AND READINGS IN CORONA DIARISM

In times of Covid-19, literature is also addressed in terms of social privilege. In France, Leïla Slimani's and Marie Darrieussecq's *journaux de confinement* triggered a heated – and eminently gendered – controversy (cf. Stemberger 2021, 42–44); amongst a wave of parodies and pastiches, Lemaître (2020) stresses that the genre's only *raison d'être* consists in its capacity "to seize the social", a challenge taken up by Nesrine Slaoui's and Cécile Coulon's respective "anti-journal de confinement" (cf. Stemberger 2021, 44) or *France Culture*'s "Journal de non-confinement" (Kronlund 2020a), featuring the pandemic experience of exposed workers whose most pressing concern, as one easily imagines, is not exactly a new in-depth reading of Boccaccio and Camus. At the same time, the literary field's expansion accentuates the "cultural gap" (Serrell 2020) between established authors and the creative precariat, represented by "*picaro*"⁵ Diane Ducret (2020).

Even so, all around the world, authors in lockdown – literary aristocrats and picaros alike – tend, rather unsurprisingly, to write about (the difficulties of) reading and writing. "I've always coped with anxiety and the unknown by reading", admits Grace Talusan, prey to a coping mechanism spiraling out of control: "[...] I've read and read until I feel sharp stabs behind my eyes" (*ST* 395). Confined in

5 All italics in quotations are in the original.

her mother's apartment, Arshia Sattar revisits her adolescent readings of Orwell, Kafka, Huxley or Zamyatin, whose "paranoid dystopias" have now "become the gross and brutal reality of my time" (ST 371). In the twinkling of a pen, writers' block in lockdown turns into a corona topos: Arthur Dreyfus meditates on a sudden "impossibilité d'écrire" (TC 66-71), while Nancy Huston analyzes her "*paralyse scripturale*" (TC 228). "How to write is not so simple", confirms Javier Sinay, hypnotized by the "biothriller, told in fragments" by social media: "I haven't even been able to read more than four pages of a book since all of this began [...]" (ST 60). For Carlos Fonseca, reading other writers' diaries grows into an obsession; temporarily "incapable of writing", the author metamorphoses into a 'diary thief' (ST 374f.).

Most corona diaries are also reading chronicles: published first serially online, Fang Fang's inaugural *Wuhan Diary* (2020) makes not only considerable space for other, less prominent voices, involving an active readership; it offers as well a portrait of the writer as an eager and eclectic reader. Fang Fang comments on news about the epidemic, messages from net friends and fiends (cf. *ibid.*, 119f.), but also on classical Chinese poetry, Heidegger's philosophy, a Taiwanese martial arts novel or an Appalachian Trail hiking diary (cf. *ibid.*, 264-267). True to literature's cathartic potential, she announces her return to fiction and the forthcoming payment of "manuscript debts" (*ibid.*, 231); what about putting the "true whistleblower" of Wuhan in a novel (*ibid.*, 329)?

"Écrirai-je encore un roman? Rien n'est moins sûr", notes Éric Chevillard (*L'Autofictif*, 2021-06-21).⁶ With all due respect for a "contexte funeste" (Chevillard 2021, 7), his parodic confinement diary *Sine die* relies on humour as a "force de résistance" (*ibid.*, 124): dismantling the genre's pathos and paradoxical conformism, he self-ironically depicts the dilemma of an author who, in pace with an army of ambitious colleagues, sets out to write about the pandemic. In the midst of a Paris haunted by nose-blowing bats and "hordes of rabid pangolins" (*ibid.*, 11f.), the narrator squats in de Maistre's fauteuil, while "domestic spider" Lachésis (*ibid.*, 99), a suspicious insect named Gregor (cf. *ibid.*, 56) and other two- or more-legged intertextual specters make mischief: "*Ô toison, moutonnant jusque sur l'encolure!*", scoffs Baudelaire's ghost (*ibid.*, 96);⁷ in desperate need of a hairdresser's attention, his distant descendant regrets that, apart from the flesh being sad, "tous les livres" are read. Fortunately, literature does not end with Mallarmé,

6 "Will I write another novel? Nothing is less certain".

7 "O fleecy hair, falling in curls to the shoulders!" ("*La Chevelure*", trans. William Aggeler: <https://fleursdumal.org/poem/203>, 2022-08-26).

after all, “[n]ous avons maintenant Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt [...]” (ibid., 19f.).⁸ Authorial animosities aside, literature, in times of confinement and reconfinement, still holds a promise of “grands espaces” (ibid., 7), beyond the new subgenre of the *Corona-Travel-Diary* (Görk 2020).

PANDEMIC PALIMPSESTS: CONTEXTUALIZING CORONA-LIT

Playfully problematizing literature’s status between social relevance and artistic autonomy, Chevillard’s idiosyncratic meta-diary points to some key features of early corona literature: drawing on a rich literary and cinematographic tradition, the latter rapidly takes a striking meta-turn. This penchant is, of course, not radically new: since ancient Greece, epi-/pandemic writing has been unfolding in profuse palimpsestuality. Camus’s chronicler looks back on a long history of epidemics, including “la peste de Constantinople” (2020, 51) documented by Procopius of Caesarea who, as does Lucretius, recycles Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*. With his epigraph from Defoe’s preface to the third volume of *Robinson Crusoe*, Camus also hints to the author’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), whose narrator “H. F.” employs an appreciable part of a “dismal time” in “reading books” and “writing down my memorandums of what occurred to me every day [...]” (Defoe 1995, ebook). Mary Shelley has her eponymous *Last Man* (1826) read “the accounts of Boccaccio, De Foe, and Browne” (Shelley 2006, ebook); in “2100, last year of the world”, Lionel Verney departs from Rome with merely “a few books; the principal are Homer and Shakespeare”, but in a life now devoid of humans, “the libraries of the world are thrown open to me [...]” (ibid.). Shelley’s paradigm-setting dystopic novel marks epi-/pandemic literature up to our days; symbolically enough, in Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, another murderous “prophet” dies with his personal palimpsest in his pocket, a copy of the New Testament scribbled over to the point of illegibility (2015, 303).

However, against the backdrop of this rich heritage, corona-lit still stands out by its dense, complex intertextuality (often nested and squared), partly conditioned by a certain ‘discomfort in literature’: the first corona works already convey a sense of anticipatory weariness, of ‘too soon’ and ‘too much’. Somewhat

8 As an epitome of commercially successful and aesthetically somewhat disputable literary production, Schmitt, a popular Franco-Belgian writer and film director, is one of Chevillard’s notorious *bêtes noires*; he is also one of the main targets – and sources – of Chevillard’s parodic *Défense de Prosper Brouillon* (2017).

paradoxically, writers and critics castigate the excesses of a “chatty” pandemic (Le Goff 2021, 11f.), further inflating a quickly growing corpus; herself author of an early corona novel (*Iznanka* [“Inside Out”], 2020), Inga Kuznetsova is nevertheless reticent about this new “trend” (Tolstov 2020). In reaction to a pronounced “anxiety of influence” (Bloom 1973), oriented at once towards the past, contemporary competitors and a future corona canon, many writers opt for ‘going meta’ right from the start; this is where reader protagonists come into play, as diegetic ‘carriers’ of epi-/pandemic inter- and metatextuality and, as such, a crucial aesthetic device.

BLURRING BOUNDARIES: READER PROTAGONISTS AND THE CONFIGURATION OF A TRANSGENERIC GENRE

Virus infection can be considered as a process of “transcription” (Krämer 2008, 138); in some corona texts, SARS-CoV-2 is indeed represented as a scriptural agent and/or metaphorical reader, as in Kuznetsova’s *Iznanka* or Charles Yu’s story “Systems”, narrated in a collective viral voice (cf. Stemberger 2021, 97-102). But mostly, more conventionally conceived human readers appear, alongside with doctors, researchers, etc., as key protagonists; among these reader characters, the analysis of our corona-lit corpus reveals several recurrent prototypes.

Professional readers – such as writers, critics or teachers – are a rather obvious choice, plausibilizing, on a diegetic level, a wide range of references and a ludically didactic role. Academic writers preferably portray academic readers: thus, in a university-based Canadian online collection of *Récits infectés* (Brassard 2020), Artaud specialist Simon Harel (“Antonin, la Covid et moi”) exploits his expertise for parodic purposes, anchoring his reflections on “Le Théâtre et la Peste” (1933) and preparing his plot’s surrealist turn. Via another erudite reader, Thea Dorn transforms a controversial essay into “a kind of corona novel” in epistolary form (Bartels 2021), using her rebellious protagonist as a mouthpiece against German pandemic policy. For all its ambivalence, *Trost. Briefe an Max* (“Consolation. Letters to Max”, 2021) constitutes an exemplary reading exercise: corresponding with her former philosophy professor, Dorn’s heroine involves the recipient in her “adventure” of reading books that demand “to be conquered”: “Texte wie Festungen, in die kein Weg hineinzuführen scheint” (ibid., 56);⁹ carving her path across philosophy, dictionaries and fiction, Johanna comments on a multiplicity

9 “Texts like fortresses into which no path seems to lead”.

of readings, from Plato and Seneca via Gryphius, Goethe and Heine, Zola and Canetti to Beauvoir.

But naive reader characters, unbound by academic conventions, have their advantages, too. While the heroine of Frédérique Lamoureux's "Fragments de quarantaine" readily identifies with Hans Castorp as a confinement fellow (cf. Brassard 2020), Alberto Vázquez-Figueroa's protagonist does not mince his words about Mann's classics, *Der Zauberberg* ("Tanta muerte y tanto intelectual tuberculoso [...]") and *Der Tod in Venedig* (*Death in Venice*) with its "viejo pedófilo" (2020b, 26).¹⁰ *Cien años después* (*One Hundred Years Later*) and *La vacuna* ("The Vaccine") illustrate even popular corona-lit's meta-dimension: amidst a "Dantesque spectacle" (ibid., 83), reading provides a "refugio" (2020a, 14) and a means of evasion; anyway, as self-declared globetrotter Samuel finally admits, he owes most of his "historias" to his library (ibid., 85). In an autoreferential loop, Vázquez has his characters discuss "un libro sobre la epidemia" that someone must be writing (2020b, 7); meanwhile, artist Víctor tackles a *Don Quijote* corona comic (cf. ibid., 27).

By choosing, for his narrative entitled *Corona*, an unpretentious but assiduous reader, Martin Meyer (2020) avoids all ambivalence issues associated with writer and/or academic protagonists: most conveniently, his Matteo, being "no professor and no critic" (ibid., 186), but just a modest elderly bookseller, can calmly delight in "the great classics' genius" (ibid., 41). Having "read in a writer that the latter had read another writer [...]" (ibid., 25), he takes the reader on another palimpsestic, if rather conventional parcours, from the Bible via Boccaccio, Defoe, Jeremias Gotthelf and Mann to *La Peste*, one of his "favorite books" (ibid., 186); recycling his own research, Camus biographer Meyer (*Albert Camus. Die Freiheit leben*, 2013) has his hero refute the idea of an epidemic's "higher morality" and claim the necessity of defining one's "attitude" (2020, 190-194).

Instead of a single protagonist, Ivan Ivanji's novel *Corona in Buchenwald* (2021), self-ironic Decameron *en abyme*, presents a polyphony of simple and sophisticated storytellers and readers: the author's alter ego, writer Alexander Mihályi-Mihajlović alias Sascha, and a polyglot philology professor interact with non-literary narrators, including an ex-boxer and a Jehovah's Witness, naive exegete of the New Testament (cf. Stemberger 2021, 61-64).

Children, as readers (or adult readers' audience), play a non-negligible role: in Alejandro Zambra's "Screen Time", a writer couple, confronted, by the "shitty virus", with the "futility of each and every word", seeks solace in their son's

10 "So much death and so many tuberculous intellectuals [...]"... "old pedophile".

children's books (*DP* 131f.).¹¹ Chiara Gamberale's corona "quaderno" (2020, 8) reflects not only the narrator's adult readings – such as the "immortal correspondence" between Sigmund Freud and Arthur Schnitzler or the letters exchanged between Rainer Maria Rilke and Marina Tsvetaeva (*ibid.*, 19, 41) –, but also her three-year-old daughter Vita's fairy tale repertoire (*cf. ibid.*, 22f.).

By conjuring up multiple readers and reading acts, early corona literature thus integrates an eclectic variety of intertexts: our corpus's protagonists turn to ancient and modern classics of epi-/pandemic fiction, dystopian novels and travel literature, to philosophy and poetry, to others' diaries and correspondences, to dictionaries and scientific discourse – and, occasionally, an even larger panoply of concrete and metaphorical texts.

CROSSED (MIS-)READINGS: SYLVIE GERMAIN'S *BRÈVES DE SOLITUDE*

"Chaque être crie en silence pour être lu autrement. Qui peut se flatter qu'il lira juste?":¹² quoting en exergue Simone Weil, Sylvie Germain, in *Brèves de solitude* (2021), illustrates her characters' disarray in the face of the pandemic by a puzzle of crossed (mis-)readings. Just before lockdown, a group of strangers gathers in a small urban park, all of them challenged by some kind of text and entangled in a web of mutual misunderstandings: an elderly lady remembers her dead husband, named, by his immigrant father, in honour of Émile Littré, before struggling once more with her crossword magazine (*cf. ibid.*, 16-21); immersed in his paperback edition of John's Apocalypse, a would-be novelist, who has left to a former companion his incomplete set of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, treads water with his project of a Bible rewrite (*cf. ibid.*, 24-29, 133). An androgynous punk and perfumery student strives to comprehend an arduous essay, feeling like Alice falling down the rabbit-hole (*cf. ibid.*, 51); a homeless black man, the narration's marginal pivot, pretends to read, in an effort to keep up appearances, an equestrian magazine (*cf. ibid.*, 22). Another old woman, fighting dementia, feels like "un verbe en voie de désagrégation" (*ibid.*, 72);¹³ her foreign nurse, with her own dark back-story

11 *DP* = The New York Times Magazine (ed.) (2020) *The Decameron Project. 29 New Stories from the Pandemic*, New York, NY, Scribner.

12 "Every being cries out in silence to be read differently. Who can flatter themselves that they will read right?"

13 ... "a verb in the process of disaggregation".

and scar-covered body, is haunted by a frightening as well as fascinating childhood tale (cf. *ibid.*, 116-118).

Ingeniously, Germain uses very young and very old, physically and/or mentally impaired characters to convey general confusion; the difficulty of seizing the invisible danger is spun throughout the text. Co-protagonist Serge loses his mother to senility and a solitary death; at her incineration, he involuntarily channels her addled mind, “Coronavalgus! [...] Coronabrutus! Coronavénus! [...] Coronagibus! [...] Coronarébus! [...] Coronacrésus! [...] Coronacrocus! Coronanégus! [...] Coronasinus! [...] Coronaphallus! [...] Coronafocus! Coronanimbus! [...] Coronarhésus! [...] Coronafætus! Coronahumus!”, briefly, a whole “lamentable Coronaopus” wildly interfering with literary and musical reminiscences from better times (*ibid.*, 177). And yet, literature is still able to restore some coherence to a fragmented world: a former art teacher metamorphoses into “Monsieur Merlin” for his little lockdown neighbor, telling her stories, including *Nils Holgersson’s Wonderful Journey through Sweden*, whereas an anxious adolescent, on the other adjacent balcony, prefers to discuss George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (*ibid.*, 107-111).

In terms of theory, it is particularly striking to observe the emergence of corona-lit as a not only markedly inter- and metatextual, but also transversal, even transgeneric genre with strong metaleptic affinity; reader protagonists play a crucial role in blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, another key feature of recent pandemic texts.

HALLUCINATING RIEUX: ERIK EISING’S TAGEBUCH DER SANFTEN QUARANTÄNE

Thus, Erik Eising’s *Tagebuch der sanften Quarantäne* (“Diary of Gentle Quarantine”, 2021) disrupts an instantly clichéd form. While the narrator, in his report about the first weeks of the pandemic, does not forget “those who do not have the comfort of just writing behind their windowpanes” (*ibid.*, 79), his own confinement revolves around a bookcase full of classical and contemporary “dusty friends” (*ibid.*, 7). In the company of Proust, Mann, Artaud and (of course) Camus, Eising’s protagonist sets out for a literary journey; even if “reading about it” is sometimes “simply not enough” (“Nein, davon zu lesen genügt einfach nicht [...]”; *ibid.*, 61), it provides depth and distance from a crisis still “too close” (*ibid.*, 72). Tweets from “real dystopia” (*ibid.*, 78) mingle with the story of the Great Plague of Marseille (cf. *ibid.*, 36); *La Peste* helps contextualize Macron’s war rhetoric and the German government’s “first war metaphors” (*ibid.*, 13). Camus

leads once more back to Defoe's *Journal*, but also to *Robinson Crusoe* and Lutz Seiler's *Kruso* (2014).

In his pandemic mini-theatre, Eising summons familiar literary ghosts: in a strangely transformed cellar, his protagonist is awaited by none other than Seiler's "Herr Bendler" and Camus's "Herr Doktor Rieux" (*ibid.*, 35-37). Drawing the reader in a metaleptic swirl, Rieux comments on his host's "Coronologie"; Bendler would rather spend the lockdown with Boccaccio's "seven pretty Florentine ladies", but alas, "we have to take what comes" (*ibid.*, 71). The underground trio launches into a discussion about "copying and recopying", about real and imaginary epidemics present and past: Rieux recalls "a similar case in Oran", "worse actually", since "the plague and coronavirus" are after all "two completely different things" (*ibid.*, 35-38). Afflicted by a suspicious cough, Camus's plague survivor nevertheless succumbs to Covid-19: "Zum Abschied ein letztes Schulterklopfen, doch er war schon ganz kalt" (*ibid.*, 73).¹⁴

CAMUS "AT FIRST DEGREE"? ALEXANDRE NAJJAR'S *LA COURONNE DU DIABLE*

With *La Couronne du diable* (2020), dedicated to all corona victims, Alexandre Najjar claims in his turn the heritage of Camus's "obstinacy of testimony" (2021, 13) and the writer's "responsibility" (Montpetit 2020). The paratext, announcing alternatively a 'novel' and a collection of 'corona stories', testifies to a certain generic hybridity; tying in with an established "drama-inspired pandemic meta-narrative" (Research Group *Pandemic Fictions* 2020, 328) and, more specifically, the theatrical structure of *La Peste*, Najjar emphasizes the importance of giving voice to the witnesses by staging "l'acte premier de la tragédie" (2021, 152). His polyphonic narrative takes the reader on an express trip around a pandemic-stricken world, intertwining fiction and facts (e.g. the fate of Li Wenliang, quarantined cruiser *Diamond Princess*, actor Luca Franzese's Facebook video about his sister's Covid-19 death, the conflict about sanitary rules in the Maronite church).

La Couronne du diable epitomizes the strategic use of reader protagonists in early corona fiction. For his Paris chapter, Najjar chooses a literature teacher on lockdown: charged with a double intra- and extradiegetic didactic mission, the narrator proposes a "remake" of La Fontaine's plague fable and a re-reading of *La Peste* "au premier degré" (2021, 48-51); as Eising's protagonist, she analyzes

14 "As a farewell, a last pat on the back, but he was already quite cold".

Macron's speech through the prism of Camus's "pestes et guerres" (2020a, 49). An Italian film student adds a new array of references between Soderbergh, Visconti and Mann: "Je ne voudrais pas mourir comme Aschenbach" (Najjar 2021, 82).¹⁵ Beyond explicit intertextuality, Najjar rewrites crucial traits of Camus's text. While his French teacher adopts the chronicler's role, his Italian narrator, following Rambert, incarnates an exemplary evolution towards reflected solidarity; fleeing from "Milan, ville fantôme", he has already made it across the border, when a telephone call from his exhausted mother, chief nurse in a regional hospital, persuades him to return: "Ma décision est prise: je ne peux pas, je ne veux plus m'enfuir" (ibid., 85-87).¹⁶ The Lebanese episode showcases another critical reader (among other texts, of Sartre's *Le Diable et le bon Dieu*) and Camusian *revenant*: protesting against the governing "mafia-ture" and religious misinterpretations of the pandemic, Najjar's enlightened "père jésuite" appears as a contemporary anti-Paneloux (ibid., 91-95). The final U.S. chapter presents a paradigmatic bad reader, failing, as a health journalist, due to his affinity to "*conspiracy theories*" (ibid., 133); a Madrid-based "médecin par vocation et éditeur par passion", modeled after the author's real Spanish publisher, establishes the link between science and literary engagement (ibid., 119).

DOCTORS AS READERS: LAWRENCE WRIGHT, WIM DANIËLS & CO.

The medical doctor or researcher as reader is indeed a key figure in recent pandemic fiction. Written before the current crisis and published in April 2020, Lawrence Wright's *The End of October* centers around a brilliant epidemiologist who is also an enthusiastic reader: when Henry Parsons discovers, on the e-reader left behind by his predecessor aboard submarine Georgia, "a long list of classics", he gratefully dives into *War and Peace* at the point where his since deceased colleague broke off, his minuscule underwater refuge opening onto vast imaginary spaces and a vision of "Pierre on the battlefield in his swallowtail coat" (2020a, 265). The battle against a "modern plague" (ibid., 116) will be lost; for all his fidelity to genre clichés, Wright refuses a happy end. On a meta-level, the protagonist's portrait mirrors the novel's making: starting with his epigraphs from Defoe and Camus, Wright pays tribute to literary tradition, specifying, though, that his supposed "prophecy" is "the fruit of research" (2020b). With *The Plague Year*.

15 "I would not want to die like Aschenbach".

16 "My decision is made: I cannot, I do not want anymore to run away".

America in the Time of Covid (2021), he reverts to journalism; the dynamic interaction between pandemic facts and fiction is, however, evident enough.

In a post-corona world, for Haruki Murakami, literature alone will not suffice, “la science seule non plus” (Nishimura 2020); as a topos of early corona fiction, the alliance between science and literature is often illustrated by a writer/doctor-researcher couple, a pattern present in popular novels, such as Mona Ullrich’s *Liebe in Zeiten der Seuche* (“Love in Times of Plague”, 2020) or Matti Sund’s and Dorit Biel’s *Das Corona-Ende* (2020). In the same vein, Wim Daniëls’s *Quarantaine* (2020), the first Dutch “coronaroman” (Veen 2020), sets up, in an academic vacation park in rural Dordogne, a medical doctor with a philologist specialized in punctuation marks. Having his protagonists fall ill with a mild form of Covid-19, he creates the perfect setting for an intimate mini-Decameron: this intellectual couple’s quarantine essentially consists of conversations, poetry and stories; while Karel’s expertise allows for epidemiological digressions, Julia’s thesis topic invites forays into literary history. Daniëls’s crucial intertext is the oeuvre of writer-doctor Anton Chekhov, inspiring, from the outset, a playful metaleptic twist: the heroine is introduced as “[d]e dame met het hondje”, the “lady with the little dog” (Daniëls 2020, 9); the two Dutch patients enjoy an imaginary trip to Colombo, where Chekhov stops on his way back from Sakhalin (cf. *ibid.*, 88f.). But reading goes beyond escapism and pleasant distraction from “often panicky” pandemic news (*ibid.*, 51); in Daniëls’s novel, literature finally unfolds its life-changing force. For Karel, Chekhov’s Christmas story “Vosklicatel’nyj znak” (“The Exclamation Mark”) marks, in corona March 2020, a turning point; infected not only with SARS-CoV-2, but also with his companion’s “punctuation virus”, he completes, in fast motion, his *éducation sentimentale*: “[...] dan, ja dan...!!!” (*ibid.*, 119f.).

READING CHEKHOV IN CORONA TIMES: GARY SHTEYNGART’S *OUR COUNTRY FRIENDS*

“I reread all my Chekhov [...]”, reveals Gary Shteyngart in an interview (Cummins 2022) about his corona novel *Our Country Friends* (2021). Against the backdrop of “a scary time” (Shteyngart 2022, 49), he proceeds to another parodic re-staging of Boccaccio, gathering a heterogeneous assembly on an upstate New York country estate – among them several writers, a psychiatrist and a narcissistic actor, flaunting “his love of the Greek classics” (*ibid.*, 111) and his disdain for his fellow lodgers’ work: “Do you know [...] what all of your scripts lack?” (*ibid.*, 95). Savouring their suffering in comfortable conditions – “Most of literature is

about privileged people being unhappy. *Anna Karenina* much?” (ibid., 162) –, Shteyngart’s pandemic refugees, “surrounded by typewriters” (ibid., 244) or “rows of books imprisoning them” (ibid., 118), bring early corona fiction’s literary as well as sanitary anxiety to full bloom. A young writer with a working-class background resents “missing more references than usual”: “White ignorant folk like me, she thought, we’re the immigrants today” (ibid., 56); an essay about her “childhood obsession with *Gone with the Wind*” (ibid., 196) gets her into serious trouble in times of BLM. Meanwhile, the decades-old friendship between two once inseparable “city-college Scheherazades” (ibid., 137) is nearly shattered when it turns out that host Sasha Senderovsky, years ago, purposely discouraged his guest from publishing an excellent novel – whose manuscript he now tries “to entomb [...] inside a groundhog’s hole” (ibid., 127).

In a sophisticated spatio-textual construction, the “Petersburg Bungalow”, full of original and translated classics (“Is one of these books *Crime and Punishment*?”), forms, within Senderovsky’s estate, a second-degree literary microcosm, crystallizing issues of reading, writing and authority (Shteyngart 2022, 52). Subtly, the library irradiates its surroundings, the characters thinking more and more “[i]n accordance with the rules of Russian novels” (ibid., 139). Once more, meta-lectic confusion, a frequent device in corona fiction, reflects the chaos of a world resembling “Genesis in reverse” (ibid., 267): “Was all this really happening: masks and tyrants, aerosol sprays and gun-toting clowns?” (ibid., 287).

Chekhov, key intertext among an eclectic corpus ranging from Homer to Joan Didion, comes to new life when misjudged novelist Vinod, knowing “exactly where Vanya sulked amid the colorful mass of bookshelves” (Shteyngart 2022, 117), retrieves a copy in the said Russian bungalow. As Daniëls’s Karel, Shteyngart’s protagonist considers his life in Chekhovian terms: “[...] he had to think like a character in a Chekhov play [...]” (ibid., 120); but, on the other hand, “[w]hat if he were not a Chekhovian character [...]? What if he –” (ibid., 175). Seemingly “summoned by a madman out of Gogol or Cervantes” (ibid., 119), the estate easily adapts to his “*Uncle Vanya*-influenced imagination” (ibid., 121); reading Chekhov on his “Brazilian area rug”, Vinod takes off in a whirl of textiles and texts: “*A country house on a terrace. In front of it a garden. [...] It is three o’clock in the afternoon of a cloudy day.*’ It was so, precisely” (ibid., 122). As the famous actor carries in the fatal virus, the reader on his rug slides into a long agony, *A Hero of Our Time* falling “out of his grasp” (ibid., 259). Listlessly, he assists to a last *Uncle Vanya* representation, hypocritically staged in his honour; while the other characters obediently assume their Chekhovian roles, the clouds, this time, “would not cooperate” (ibid., 291-293).

Having once performed as the eponymous orchard in “a very avant-garde version [...] in Berlin” (ibid., 117), the actor anticipates another Chekhov play embedded in Shteyngart’s plot: out of money and correspondingly casted, for *Djadja Vanja*, as “impoverished landowner” Telegin (ibid., 292f.), Senderovsky, with his leitmotivic tree troubles, is on the verge of losing his beloved estate but – like the protagonists in *The Cherry Orchard* – unable-unwilling to do something about it. Steering towards an ambiguous half-happy ending, however, his ‘country friends’ manage to save the estate; at this point, Chekhov fan Vinod (whose name, coincidentally or not, starts and ends with the original *Višněvyj sad*) will already have died out of – or into – the text.

PROCOPIUS, POETRY AND POLITICS: VINCENT MESSAGE’S *LES ANNÉES SANS SOLEIL*

Published after the first wave of corona-lit, Vincent Message’s *Les Années sans soleil* (“The Sunless Years”, 2022) calls for a cautious historical approach: although the context (confinement, overburdened hospitals, etc.) is clear, the author avoids naming the disease, giving his text – an elaborate meditation on literature between business, engagement and *l’art pour l’art* – a wider scope. His narrator, an avid reader and moderately successful writer who earns his living as a bookshop assistant, concentrates multiple facets of literary life: he comments on the challenges of the book market, especially in pandemic times, on the misfortune of writers whose new works – like his own – (dis-)appear during lockdown (cf. ibid., 116), but also, more generally, on the logic of the literary field; a self-ironic representative of France’s “précarariat intellectuel” (ibid., 194), transferring, after his bookstore’s closure, to bicycle delivery service, he is perfectly aware of his own lack of auctorial posture and “capital narratif” (ibid., 117).

For obvious reasons, Message’s Elias, at the difference of Meyer’s Matteo, feels some ambivalence towards the classics and still more towards contemporary colleagues, the most successful ones being “en général” not the most deserving (ibid., 47). A permanent reminder of “the incredible multitude of existing books”, the bookshop’s heterotopia both fascinates and paralyzes him (ibid., 70f.); at home as well, negotiating space between literature and family matters, Elias fights to create some blanks among masses of books: “[...] les interstices se fermaient, tout

ce monde se serrait sur les étagères jusqu'à ne plus pouvoir bouger [...]” (ibid., 25f.).¹⁷

Much of Message’s plot consists of us readers watching the protagonist read: in the midst of “the great confinement” (ibid., 169), Elias, like Eising’s narrator, retires into his basement; as Gamberale (cf. 2020, 51f.), he secretly admits what he would not confess even “under torture”, namely, the fact that he appreciates “certain aspects of this catastrophic period” (Message 2022, 90). Paradoxically only at first glance, reading about even worse historical catastrophes allows ‘breathing better’ in corona times (cf. ibid., 129); searching online for information about the worst moments in human history, Elias comes across the Justinianic Plague. “Rien que dans la capitale, il meurt dix mille personnes par jour [...]” (ibid., 85):¹⁸ paraphrasing the same passage as Camus’s Rieux (cf. 2020a, 51), he launches into a much more detailed commentary of Procopius, explicating the novel’s title and epigraph.

Thus recontextualized, Procopius’s report about climate change in the middle of the 6th century and associated “wars, pestilences or other deadly plagues” (Message 2022, 9) reads almost like a contemporary work (cf. ibid., 173); not a particularly innovative writer, but rather a fine copyist on the tracks of Herodotus and Thucydides, the Byzantine historian also refers to the issue of originality – and the advantages of arriving “so late in the history of humanity” (ibid., 107-109): just as Elias’s crammed bookshelves, “the wall of centuries” (ibid., 241) keeps, thanks to new scientific knowledge, moving and opening up. With his predecessor’s help, the protagonist frames his observations on this or that “anomaly that Procopius would surely have noted [...]” (ibid., 207); participating in protests against police violence, he identifies with Procopius’s “chef des Goths”, battling against “l’Empire” and “cette paix romaine” that, throughout the ages, suits and supports only the status quo (ibid., 221).

Procopius’s *Histories* are not the only intertext spilling over into diegetic reality. In company with “ce vieil ami sur qui je pouvais compter, le vieux poète maboul, mon Friedrich Hölderlin” (ibid., 227),¹⁹ the narrator ruminates on the still vital question of poets’ role “in meagre times”: “*Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?*” (ibid., 140). Doubly confined, after his clash with authorities, in his Toulouse apartment, telephone and Internet temporarily cut, Elias Torres relates all the more with Hölderlin in his tower; under adverse circumstances, reading saves

17 “[...] the gaps were closing, everything was squeezed on the shelves until nothing could move any more [...]”.

18 “In the capital alone, ten thousand people die every day [...]”.

19 ... “this old friend I could count on, the crazy old poet, my Friedrich Hölderlin”.

Hölderlin's human "conversation" (ibid., 170) or Camus's "dialogue", "la communication universelle des hommes entre eux" (2017, 670). "Friedrich" cheerfully joins him in the form of a poetry-loving wagtail, triggering a new metaleptic turn: chasing the bird's feline murderer across the quarter's rooftops, Elias mimics another epidemic classic's hero; quite symbolically, Message's meta-hussar lands right in the library of his old poet friend who, after gifting him his Procopius edition (and leaving behind a transcultural reincarnation of Giono's Pauline), has just died from unnamed Covid-19 (Message 2022, 228-236).

Even if Message mentions Camus only *en passant*, camouflaging an all-too-manifest intertext, his protagonist, as a multiple reenactor, finally follows in the printsteps of *La Peste* and *L'Homme révolté*. "Je me révolte, donc nous sommes" (Camus 2020b, 38): almost accidentally, Elias becomes a politically engaged writer, switching, in a viral post, from a conflicted 'I' to a solitary "nous" (Message 2022, 218f.). Involving also the reader, the narrator metamorphoses into "une voix qui a votre voix dans votre tête. Un visage incertain qui se reflète dans le miroir" (ibid., 191);²⁰ his remarks about his manner of sneaking secretly, but "tout entier" in his work (ibid., 118) hint to a transdiegetic game of hide-and-seek: endowed with a fictive œuvre of his own, he sets about writing a novel entitled *Les Années sans soleil*. At the end of Message's self-begetting text (cf. Kellman 1980), the protagonist will have found an at least provisional answer to the problem of being a poet in new 'meagre times': abandoning his project of a historical novel, he decides, after an intertextual detour that was not one after all, to tell not only "mon histoire à moi", but also "notre histoire à nous" (Message 2022, 254).

TENTATIVE CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A POETICS OF CORONA FICTIONS

With regard to a still ongoing pandemic, any definitive conclusions about Corona Fictions as a new literary genre would inevitably be premature. Nevertheless, an approach through the prism of reader protagonists provides valuable insights into the palimpsestic dynamics of an evolving genre, into the ways in which early corona-lit, recycling a multitude of intertextual and intermedial references, revisits and adapts pre-existing aesthetic and ideological patterns in a new social and media context. As shown above, readers and readings are indeed omnipresent not only in the controversial genre of corona diaries, but also in corona fiction; in our comparative corpus, we encounter professional as well as amateur, erudite as well

20 ... "a voice that has your voice in your head. An uncertain face reflected in the mirror".

as naive, docile as well as rebellious reader characters of different backgrounds, genders and ages, all of them associated with specific reading choices, experiences and strategies. Staging multiple acts of reading, metaleptically blurring – and, thus, paradoxically, re-precising – the boundaries between reality and fiction, this corpus poses a creative challenge to us as readers – never quite – ‘outside the text’; at the same time, it offers a polyvalent model of (un-)making meaning, of possibly mending, with the aid of literature, a crisis-shaken world.

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