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## **From Collective to Individual Trauma Nina Yargekov and the Elaboration of the Pandemic Crisis**

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**Abstract** • The writing of the self is a field of election in the trauma's processing. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a global situation of collective trauma being processed in personal and community forms. The «Revista de la Universidad de México» promoted a *Diario de la pandemia* with articles published regularly to keep the feeling of daily pages testifying the pandemic waves. French-Hungarian writer Nina Yargekov took part with her article *Sondage: un lapin sort grand gagnant*. The personal story of pandemic trauma is declined through the use of playful way, humour, pastiche and parody, giving rise to an original mixture of reality and fiction. Yargekov, through autofictional writing, attempts to reconstruct what she calls *psychisme fracturé*. Her testimony, balanced between socio-political analysis and intimate reflection, shows the therapeutic aspect of writing: resilience.

**Keywords** • Nina Yargekov; Autofiction; Trauma; COVID-19; Pandemic; Diary.

**Ledizioni** 

# From Collective to Individual Trauma

## Nina Yargekov and the Elaboration of the Pandemic Crisis

Julia Kritsikokas

### I. Trauma Studies, Trauma Fiction and the Autofictional Narrative

Trauma is a paradigm that pervades our contemporaneity and its notion enjoys unprecedented fortune in our days. As Roger Luckhurst states in his study *The Trauma Question*: «trauma is a concept that can only emerge within modernity, [...] as an effect of the rise, in the nineteenth century, of the technological and statistical, society that can generate, multiply and quantify the ‘shocks’ of modern life». <sup>1</sup> Trauma, however, finds its epistemological roots in a time and culture far removed from today’s: that of industrialised Europe and the nascent School of Psychodynamic Medicine, and it is no coincidence that the founding texts of Trauma Studies are the inheritance left by the fathers of psychology. The genesis of the concept of trauma can be traced back to the era of industrial society in the intersection of three different fields: law, psychiatry and the war industry. Thus, it is characterised by an original interdisciplinary nature.

The strong social issues that arose from the expansive power of industrialisation and, specifically, the problem of accidents at work gave rise to the notion of trauma in a social-political dimension. When the work accident assumes a political and social importance such as to reorganise society in the form of the modern welfare state, the concept of trauma, understood in a more physical than psychological sense, becomes a fundamental aspect for modern man. <sup>2</sup> However, it was only with the First and Second World Wars that the notion of trauma acquired the characteristics it still has today, assimilating the initial political-collective dimension with the psychological-private one. The Holocaust is unanimously recognised as the first truly mass trauma of the West, and the aesthetic debate that arises around the historical events of the Second World War and their incommunicability, has a privileged role in Trauma Studies. Language, the only instrument capable of giving voice to the victims, seemed to cancel itself out in the face of the extremity of such events, as noted by Theodor W. Adorno: «To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric». <sup>3</sup>

The relationship between trauma and literature was strengthened in the 1980s when Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder was recognised by the American Psychiatric Association and included in the third edition of the Diagnostic Manual. In these years many intellectuals began to take an interest in the problem of the unspeakable nature of the traumatic experience, recuperating the studies of Freud and Janet. Also in these years, a progressive approach of the human sciences to ethical issues took place. An important figure in this sense was Emmanuel Lévinas and, according to whose thought, ethics enables man to leave behind the Western mentality that had always tried to understand the Other by assimilating it to the Self, expropriating it of its diversity, in order to favour the encounter with the Other

<sup>1</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, London, Routledge, 2008, p.19.

<sup>2</sup> Rachele Branchini, *Trauma Studies: prospettive e problemi*, «LEA», 2, 2013, pp. 389-402.

<sup>3</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel Weber, 9<sup>a</sup> ed., Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1997, p. 34.

that is marked by moral responsibility towards it.<sup>4</sup> This ethical turning point in poetry concerned a re-evaluation of the artwork-reader relationship: the task of the reader was to use the opportunity provided by the text to face otherness.

The normalisation of psychiatric trauma and man/woman's need to perceive the traumatic experience and communicate it to the world, made it possible for the relationship between trauma and literature to be fully defined in the 1990s, with the publication in 1991 of a special number of the psychiatric journal «American Imago» entitled *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Trauma*. In this special number, contributions appeared from main figures in the critical panorama, who distinguished themselves for the affirmation and recognition of Trauma Studies. Among the main exponents, the figure of Cathy Caruth is fundamental: she edited the volume that in 1995 brought together all the essays published in the 1991 journal, entitled *Trauma, Exploration in Memory*, which is still the main text in cultural studies regarding trauma.

According to Caruth, trauma is a paradoxical experience that shocks the individual's psychic defences and the processes of recording mnemonic traces. The experience of trauma is defined as *paradoxical* because there is an unbalanced relationship between cause and effect: very violent traumatic experiences are not fully assimilated and processed by the consciousness at the moment of impact and the psychic defences act in a delayed and repetitive manner, through hallucinations, dreams, flashbacks. Like Caruth explains:

The survivors uncertainty is not a simple amnesia; for the event returns, as Freud points out, insistently and against their will. Nor is it a matter of indirect access to an event, since the hallucinations are generally of events all too accessible in their horrible truth. It is not, that is, having too little or indirect access to an experience that places its truth in question, in this case, but paradoxically enough, its very overwhelming immediacy, that produces its belated uncertainty.<sup>5</sup>

Transforming traumatic memories into narrative memories can only be possible without the use of traditional narrative techniques, preferring to use voids and silences, the only forms of expression capable of evoking the incommunicability of trauma. In *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative and History*, Caruth further investigates the theme of the relationship between trauma, art and literary production by drawing on the third chapter of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and the related episode from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*: in this episode, the hero Tancredi kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel without knowing it was her, since her disguise was hidden under the armour of an enemy knight. After his beloved is buried, Tancredi steps into a sinister magical forest and strikes a tree with his sword, but blood flows from the tree and Clorinda's voice blames Tancredi for having again inflicted violence on his beloved woman.<sup>6</sup>

For Freud, this literary example helped to represent how the traumatic event inexorably reappears in the victim's consciousness, for Caruth, on the other hand, another aspect must also be highlighted: the peculiarity of the voice that seems to be released from a wound. Tancredi's story in this way represents the traumatic experience not only as the enigma of the repeated and unconscious acts of a human agent, but also as the enigma of the otherness

<sup>4</sup> Silvano Petrosino, *La fenomenologia dell'unico. Le tesi di Lévinas*, introduzione a Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalità e infinito. Saggio sull'esteriorità*, trad. by Adriano Dell'Asta, Milan, Jaca Book, 1987, pp. XIII-LXXV.

<sup>5</sup> Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Branchini, *op. cit.*

of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that is testimony of a truth that Tancredi himself cannot fully know. Not just a purely individual traumatic situation but a general condition, where the voice coming from the wound not only communicates the traumatic past of the individual:

But we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound. I would suggest that such a listening to the voice and to the speech delivered by the other's wound is what takes place, indeed, in Freud's own text, whose theory of trauma is written not only about but in the midst of trauma.<sup>7</sup>

One's own trauma is linked to the trauma of another and this can lead, therefore, to an encounter with the other, through the possibility and the surprise of listening to the wound of another. The figure of Tancredi is not only a parable of trauma and its disturbing repetition but, more generally, a parable of psychoanalytic theory itself: the psychoanalyst listens to a voice that he/she cannot fully know but to which he/she is nonetheless a testimony. If Freud turns to literature to describe the traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing. Literary language proves to be the only one capable of communicating the ambivalent and paradoxical character of the voice coming from a traumatic past, never fully assimilated and owned. The trauma of the individual is never isolated, but tells the story of a set of interlinked traumas, all of which demand testimony. It is the humankind in its totality that has to deal with the events that shock the world, and trauma is no other than a symptom of History: «If history is to be understood as the history of a trauma, it is a history that is experienced as the endless attempt to assume one's survival as one's own».<sup>8</sup>

Caruth's interpretation of Freud's example has been much debated in Trauma Studies and in particular many have questioned the validity of her thesis that assigns to art and literature the role of privileged place for the representation of trauma. In a position of conflict/encounter stands Dominick LaCapra with his study titled *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, regarding the adaptation of psychoanalytic concepts to historical analysis. For LaCapra, trauma is:

[...] a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence; it has belated effects that are controlled only with difficulty and perhaps never fully mastered. The study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing both for research and for any dialogic exchange with the past which acknowledges the claims it makes on people and relates it to the present and future.<sup>9</sup>

Dominick LaCapra introduces the concepts of acting out (the individual is continually thrown back in time to re-live the traumatic experience) and working through (the practice of overcoming trauma by processing traumatic events). These are two distinct but closely related processes: it is a repetition that involves the effort to face the ghosts of the past in order to process and understand them. For LaCapra, literature must necessarily take these

<sup>7</sup> Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience. Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001, p. 41.

two concepts into account in order to narrate trauma and, specifically, he refers to an *experimental narrative* capable of using the tools of culture. Since the early years of the 21st century, novelists have begun to engage with the main aspects of trauma studies in order to represent trauma and its processes in their works. In general, novelists started from the symptoms of the psychic disorder and tried to translate them into their works through techniques such as the disruption of the regular temporal order or the presence of constant repetitions.

The concept of trauma fiction was first introduced by Anne Whitehead in 2004 in her book *Trauma Fiction*:

The rise of trauma theory has provided novelists with new ways of conceptualising trauma and has shifted attention away from the question of what is remembered of the past to how and why it is remembered. This raises, in turn, the related issues of politics, ethics and aesthetics. The desire among various cultural groups to represent or make visible specific historical instances of trauma has given rise to numerous important works of contemporary fiction.<sup>10</sup>

According to Whitehead, Trauma fiction has developed as a consequence of three cultural currents or cultural realities: postmodernism, postcolonialism and the post-war heritage. In other words, trauma fiction shares with postmodernism the tendency to push conventional narrative techniques beyond their limits, with postcolonialism the recovery of ignored stories to give voice to a forgotten memory, and finally, war that is the real protagonist of contemporary literary productions. Whitehead distinguishes three specific characteristics in the trauma fiction: the disturbing presence of ghosts that provoke a temporal disjunction, the existence of a fragile link between the book and the reader, who becomes the first testimony of the trauma and becomes the one responsible for its transmission, and finally, the importance of the sites of memory, that are places invested with commemorative value that in novels become places where the protagonists face and interiorize the trauma.

Trauma fiction also goes to the extremes of traditional stylistic norms because some events cannot be expressed in a conventional way; in fact, fantastical elements are very often introduced into the realistic surface. Whitehead identifies three recurring literary strategies of trauma fiction: intertextuality (the presence in trauma fictions of a wide range of intertexts such as simple allusion, quotation, parody proper), repetition (the disruption of chronological order that can lead to catharsis as well as paralysis) and the presence of a fragmented narrative voice (multiple points of view and ways of telling a truth).

The stories of trauma as narrated in trauma fictions can be distinguished, in a very simplistic way, into two categories:

- a) traumatic experiences that have an individual nature such as abuse, violence, illness and mourning;
- b) traumatic experiences that have a collective nature such as natural catastrophes, epidemics, social traumas in general, that have repercussions felt by the individual as part of a community

The main trend when writing about trauma is to rely on the genre of autofiction. This is a genre characterised by the use of non-fictional elements mixed with autobiographical ones.<sup>11</sup> Non-fiction, as defined by Lorenzo Marchese in *Storiografie parallele. Cos'è la non-fiction?*, is: «a type of narrative discourse that undertakes to tell stories that really

<sup>10</sup> Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Chiara Conterno et al., *Il trauma nella letteratura contemporanea. Percorsi possibili*, «LEA», 2, 2013, pp. 219-230.

happened and can be documented [...] using the formal tools and rhetorical strategies of the literature of invention».<sup>12</sup> Autofiction is the elective field of trauma because it is only thanks to invention, to the fictional, that it is possible to overcome the narcissistic confinement of the ego and, at the same time, to give new strength and voice to the self that can hardly be said, because it is too intimate or too shameful or too traumatic. The autofictional device is part of the contemporaneity and it's always open to ever more original and innovative experimentations. Autofiction modifies the established practice of autobiography and the first-person novel to combine it with other practices, such as essay practice, diarist practice, reportage practice, etc.

In this regard, Daniele Giglioli talks about *writing about the extreme* in his book entitled *Senza trauma. Scrittura dell'estremo e narrativa del nuovo millennio*. Giglioli observes how trauma, if in the past was everything that could not be communicated: «[...] today it is everything that is talked about. From excess that could not reach the language to privileged access for the naming of the world. From a place of sinking to instances of emersion, of certification, of authentication of the meaning».<sup>13</sup> The *writing about the extreme* is characterised by an overwhelming self-referentiality, by the blurring of the line between reality and fiction, and by the overpowering of the mass media. In the case of autofiction, all works that belong to this genre rotate around trauma, around the link-non link between the authentic and the non-authentic, between the being and the not being.

## 2. The pandemic of COVID-19: individual and collective trauma in *Diario de la pandemia*

The spread of the Coronavirus was a sudden and shocking event that challenged the existence of individuals. Several studies have highlighted the potential psychological distress produced in citizens by this rude disruption of their habits and routines. In fact, during the COVID-19 pandemic social contacts, established habits and daily routines were disrupted as never before. The COVID-19 pandemic is both an individual and a collective trauma, and as such leads to changes in the entire texture of a community: it has had a significant impact on relationships, it has altered government policies and processes, it has modified the functioning of society, and it has even affected social norms. Well, as Hirschberger makes clear in *Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning*:

The term collective trauma refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society; it does not merely reflect an historical fact, the recollection of a terrible event that happened to a group of people. It suggests that the tragedy is represented in the collective memory of the group, and like all forms of memory it comprises not only a reproduction of the events, but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it. Collective memory of trauma is different from individual memory because collective memory persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events, and is remembered by group members that may be far removed from the traumatic events in time and space.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Lorenzo Marchese, *Storiografie parallele. Cos'è la non-fiction?*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2019, p. 42, trad. by me.

<sup>13</sup> Daniele Giglioli, *Senza trauma. Scrittura dell'estremo e narrativa del nuovo millennio*, Macerata, Quodlibet, 2011, p. 8, trad. by me.

<sup>14</sup> Gilad Hirschberger, *Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning*, «Frontiers in Psychology», 10 August 2018, web, last access: 1 August 2022, <<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441/full>>.

According to Hirschberger, despite the inevitable destructuring nature of the collective trauma, a process of overcoming the crisis of meaning triggered by the trauma is activated by the community. There take place processes of reconstruction of social identity, with new purposes and new reference values, and of construction of a common narrative, where the traumatic event has become the new epicentre of the identity, leading to new readings of reality.<sup>15</sup> The COVID-19 narratives are mostly media and mediated narratives, in which the space for narration and listening is modern digital media and thus a modern public space, that of the internet, which allows traumatic loss to be communicated and felt. Trauma is understood by locating its meaning in the new space of the internet, which redefines the meaning of traumatic memory and its impact on identity.

This is the position of Paul Arthur in *Memory and Commemoration in the Digital Present*, a study in which he considers contemporary representations of trauma that move from the physical places, where emotional suffering is expressed, to the public places provided by the internet, which become the new safe haven where trauma can be expressed, as in private, yet within the supportive framework of a community of other victims of the same trauma. Consequently, the penetration of digital technologies into the reign of trauma, of remembrance and of mourning has facilitated new levels of realism and interactivity:

In purely practical terms, there are obvious benefits in online memorialization in its many forms. The Internet allows access to the memorial regardless of physical location, and it allows users to visit at any time, and more regularly. [...] Furthermore, as we live increasingly in and develop greater reliance on and trust in digital environments, the relationship between notions of permanency as relating to the physical, and impermanence as relating to the virtual and intangible online is being disturbed and even inverted. Online memorial sites are now commonly assumed to last “forever”.<sup>16</sup>

The chosen case study fits perfectly into the category of individual and collective trauma, where the new digital media provide interesting ways for narrating the pandemic trauma. The *Diario de la pandemia* is an editorial project of the «Revista de la Universidad de México»,<sup>17</sup> which originally presented just the digital form and only later, after the closure of the project, became a collection book with all the essays of the different and numerous authors who participated in it. When the Covid-19 pandemic was announced, Guadalupe Nettel<sup>18</sup> and Jorge Volpi<sup>19</sup> started looking for testimonies who, from different parts of the

<sup>15</sup> Barbara De Rosa and Giorgio Maria Regnoli, *La pandemia da Covid-19, un potenziale trauma collettivo*, «TOPIC. Temi di Psicologia dell’Ordine degli Psicologi della Campania», 1, 2, 2022, pp. 56-68.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Arthur, *Memory and Commemoration in the Digital Present*, in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by Michelle Balaev, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 164-165.

<sup>17</sup> Available online at <<https://www.revistadelauniversidad.mx/releases/b5012a11-e10c-49bb-8207-dabf9b9ba223/especial-diario-de-la-pandemia>> (last access: 1 August 2022).

<sup>18</sup> She is graduated in Spanish Language and Literature from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and in Language Sciences from the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris. She is a translator, teacher and author of several novels, short story collections and essays including *El matrimonio de los peces rojos* (2013) and *Después del invierno* (2014), winner of the Herralde Prize. Her works have been translated into 17 languages and since April 2017 she has been editor of the «Revista de la Universidad de México».

<sup>19</sup> He is a Mexican writer, essayist and academic with a degree in Law and Literature from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) with a PhD in Spanish Philology from the

world and from different perspectives, could share a typical day they experienced during the extraordinary historical moment of the pandemic. The project takes the form of a collective diary, like a partial and uninterrupted chronicle of the time of the Coronavirus. A multitude of voices, such as Annie Ernaux, Chiara Valerio, Elisa Díaz Castelo, Eduardo Berti, George Zarkadakis; from Venice to Mexico City, from Seoul to Milan, from Luanda to Buenos Aires; try to open a window of light amidst the viral darkness. The diary covers a time frame from 28 March to 30 June 2020 and in its electronic pages has collected doubts, frustrations, anxiety, fear and pain triggered by the illness and its pandemic expansion.

The *Diario de la pandemia* can be considered part of what Stefano Calabrese in *Dopo il Covid. Racconti e immagini della pandemia* defines as digital diary studies, where the term *diary study* refers to a strong methodological tool, both for qualitative and mixed research, that connects individual and personal experience to collective experience. Calabrese explains that digital diaries:

[...] enable the participant to connect the levels of narrativity and reflexivity, giving a richer view of the first-person perspective: they can take different forms, from simply recording activities or events without any commentary by the author to more complex forms that include his/her personal ideas, reflections and exploration of emotions. In addition, diaries are also externalised tools for self-reflection, self-surveillance and self-regulation.<sup>20</sup>

In the studies of psychiatrists Louise Dalton, Elizabeth Rapa and Alan Stein in *Protecting the psychological health of children through effective communication about COVID-19*, the diary is defined as a form of self-writing where the author is at the same time the protagonist of the story told and this condition represents an advantaged position for suffering subjects, who cannot change their initial narrative.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, the autobiographical character of the diary is emphasised, although in a particular form given by the psychotherapist's viewpoint, which is present during certain aspects of its writing. So, these tools are often used in studies on stress and trauma and have now re-discovered their fortune thanks to the great popularity of technological devices and their usage platforms.<sup>22</sup> The *Diario de la pandemia* is also an important example of testimony, considered as:

[...] the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal "thou", and thus the possibility of a witness or a listener inside himself. In my experience, repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which one has to actually pass through, in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation. The event must be reclaimed because even if successfully repressed, it nevertheless invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one's life.<sup>23</sup>

Universidad de Salamanca. He has worked as a diplomat in France and collaborated in various cultural media. He was director of the Institute of Mexico in Paris, Channel 22 television and the Cervantino International Festival.

<sup>20</sup> Stefano Calabrese, *Dopo il Covid. Racconti e immagini della pandemia*, Milan, Mimesis, 2022, p. 16, trad. by me.

<sup>21</sup> Louise Dalton, Elizabeth Rapa and Alan Stein, *Protecting the Psychological Health of Children Through Effective Communication about COVID-19*, «Lancet Child Adolesc Health», 4, 2020, pp. 346-347.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Caruth, *Trauma. Explorations in Memory*, cit., p. 70.

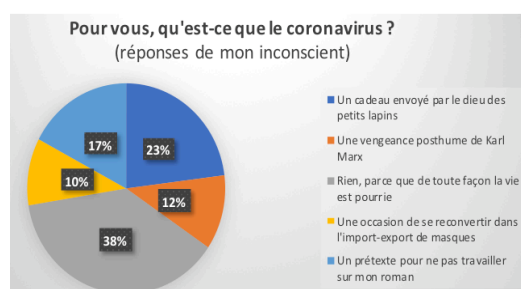


Thus, the *Diario de la pandemia*, despite the different particular stories of the pandemic experience, shows the common elements present in the different narratives and how they gave a vivid picture of the pandemic phenomenon and its repercussions on the physical and mental health.

### 3. The singular voice of Nina Yargekov in *Sondage: un lapin sort grand gagnant* and the therapeutic power of writing to achieve resilience

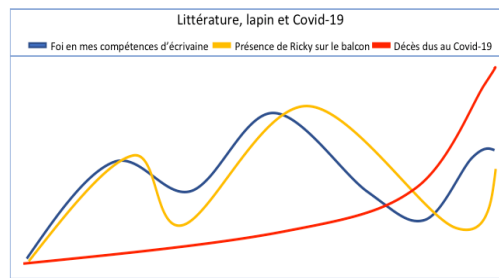
The particular case examined, as part of the collective work *Diario de la pandemia*, belongs to the genre of autofictional narratives about trauma. In *Sondage: un lapin sort grand gagnant*<sup>24</sup> (which translated into English is *Sondage: a rabbit emerges as the big winner*), the contemporary Franco-Hungarian author Nina Yargekov<sup>25</sup> offers an original electronic diary page that at once presents the parody of the article, of the statistical survey and of the astrological rubric. Yargekov's personal story of pandemic trauma is portrayed through the skilful use of playful way, humor, *pastiche*, giving light to an original mixture of reality and fiction. Indeed, in her digital diary page, Yargekov combines her personal reflections, her intimate worries and her socio-political analysis of her Country with elements that are purely fictional: bizarre statistical percents on the progression of her mood and thoughts, tables and graphs reporting the results of improbable surveys, an astrological rubric with the aim of drawing up a natal chart of the Coronavirus.

Sujets de préoccupation de mes pensées (% d'espace cérébral occupé, moyenne journalière)	
L'adorable petit lapin sur le balcon des voisins	55%
La « loi coronavirus » votée en Hongrie le 30 mars dernier	33%
Le débat utilitarisme Vs déontologie au sujet du tri des malades	9%
Au secours je n'arrive plus à écrire	3%
Je voudrais aller au resto	1%



<sup>24</sup> It is available online at <<https://www.revistadelauiversidad.mx/articles/7c09e8af-673f-480c-ac94-9bc9ad2c18ec/el-conejo-encabeza-la-encuesta>> (last access: 1 August 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Nina Yargekov is a talented and original voice on the contemporary literary scene and favours self-financing writing in her works (*Tuer Catherine* 2009, *Vous serez mes témoins* 2011, *Double Nationalité* 2016).



Figures 1, 2, 3. Tables and graphs that frame fictional elements from an authentic, autobiographical input.

As said before, Yargekov's text has an original structure, a hybrid between an article, a survey and a diary page: is a perfect example of the intertextuality typical of the trauma fiction and the autofiction. After the title, there is a summary followed by five paragraphs, each with its own title, related to each other. In the summary, Yargekov clarifies the content of her piece and highlights the main aspect of pandemic trauma by speaking about a *psychisme fracture*, a fragmented and upset psyche in crisis. This last symbolises the state not only of the personal condition but also of the world, due to the precipitous events that led to the lockdown:

Moral, worries, hopes. What does a writer confined in Eastern Europe think about? After four weeks of reclusion, I wanted to make a point by surveying a representative sample of my thoughts. Their responses reflect a dispersed mental geography, with islands of animal voyeurism and vast plains of political apathy. A fractured psyche, in short. Like, perhaps, the state of the world.<sup>26</sup>

Yargekov wrote in June 2020 so in the moment of full pandemic emergency. Her narration of the pandemic enters into what Diego Salvadori in *Narrare il contagio* defines as the *third phase*, in which there was a shift from a phase of hyper-codification of the virus, through the main themes of infection and apocalypse, to a phase in which the media hyper-production of narratives and news is followed by a confusion and fusion between public and private space.<sup>27</sup> Proceeding by order, after the summary there are the five paragraphs with their own titles: *La résilience au rendez-vous*, *Une forte baisse de l'indice de confiance en l'humanité*, *Une passion secrète pour le lapin des voisins*, *Une accoutumance aux stimuli anti-démocratiques*, *L'horoscope comme ultime recours*.<sup>28</sup>

The first paragraph entitled *La résilience au rendez-vous* (which translated in English is *Resilience is the key*) shows at once the parody of the statistical survey through a series of percents that refer to Yargekov's trend of thoughts and mood. As can be read:

Death and illness are on the horizon, yet my morale is good, with an average of 6.7 on a scale of zero to 10. This is a change from the up and down curve observed during March, a period

<sup>26</sup> Yargekov, *Sondage: un lapin sort grand gagnant*, «Revista de la Universidad de México», Giugno 2020, web, last access: 1 August 2022, <<https://www.revistadelauniversidad.mx/articles/7c09e8af-673f-480c-ac94-9bc9ad2c18ec/el-conejo-encabeza-la-encuesta>>, trad. by me.

<sup>27</sup> Diego Salvadori, *Narrare il contagio*, «Medical Humanities & Medicina Narrativa», 1, 2021, pp. 151-160.

<sup>28</sup> Yargekov, *op. cit.*, trad. by me.

marked by peaks of dramatizing euphoria linked to the idea that we are living a historic moment and by referential errors such as “Help, it’s the war”, but no, it’s not the war at all. Another nice news is that a large majority of my psyche finds the confinement not very disturbing, the explanations being that it doesn’t change anything compared to what I’m used to (72%) and that I’ve always been a bit depressed but it’s not so bad (28%). Furthermore, with a score of 62% of shower intentions in response to the question “Would you agree to wash today?” and no traces of a bite found on the camembert in my fridge, there is no reason to fear a socio-cultural breakdown of my behaviour. Finally, resilience is without doubt the key: 65% of my thoughts claim to have overcome the painful trauma of the brutal closing of the European borders, while the rate of the feeling of unreality is clearly down. For example, when I put on a FFP2 mask, the internal exclamation “This is really a sci-fi movie” only appears in 2 out of 17 cases.<sup>29</sup>

The borders between reality and fiction, as discussed before, are categorically questioned (“This is really a sci-fi movie”) and there takes place what Calabrese in *Dopo il Covid* calls the phenomenon of *derealisation* which, according to statistical data, frequently arises in individuals who have experienced trauma. Reactions to trauma are always crushing, overwhelming, so its narration is difficult both emotionally and linguistically-literally: memories in the mind are confused, fragmented, colourless. Therefore, as Calabrese shows cases:

The so-called fantasy, in a properly neurocognitive sense, represents the ‘uninhibited’ exercise of the pre-frontal cortex and the systematic application of contra-factual thinking to objects, events and patterns of action in everyday life (if the living room chest of drawers were a trap for ferocious beasts, how would it work? what shape could the drawers take? etc.). Our existences largely take place on non-existent rails, we are inhabitants of invisible cities: according to neuroscientists, this is explained by the fact that it is the contrafactuals that enable us to (elaborate the hypothesis of) changing the future, because making one hypothesis come true means making all other competing hypotheses contrafactuals.<sup>30</sup>

As the title itself suggests, Yargekov touches on the theme of resilience and of writing as a therapeutic practice. In the psychological field, the term resilience is used to express that capacity of an individual to deal with a traumatic event, acute or chronic, being able to re-establish the psycho-physical balance that preceded the trauma and, in some cases, even to make it better. As Santo Di Nuovo explains in *Trauma e resilienza. Tra neuroscienze e aspetti psico-sociali*:

The essential characteristics of resilience, on a psychological level, are competence and control during the condition of stress caused by the trauma (coping), to which, as mentioned above, is added recovery, i.e. the progressive return to the initial condition despite the severity of the trauma; and, again, the possibility of profitable learning for the future: the ability to use the same skills for further stress situations, thus strengthening the subject’s defences and abilities to deal with difficult situations.<sup>31</sup>

An important aspect in the practice of resilience is the practice of writing. According to James Pennebaker, it is not only possible but above all healthy to write about a traumatic experience that has profoundly upset us and deprived us of the ability to find meaning.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Calabrese, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10, trad. by me.

<sup>31</sup> Santo Di Nuovo, *Trauma e resilienza. Tra neuroscienze e aspetti psico-sociali*, «Journal of Applied Ceremonial and Communication in Management», 1, 2017, pp. 30-32.

Writing makes possible a re-positioning of the subject in the face of the trauma with which he/she is faced and this causes a re-organisation of the traumatic event itself, that may be easier to accept. The act of writing helps to see and understand the traumatic event with more clarity and profundity.<sup>32</sup> It is a potentially generative effort:

When a person writes about his or her traumatic experiences, he or she begins to organise and understand them. Writing about trauma-related thoughts and feelings, therefore, forces one to integrate the various aspects of extraordinarily complicated circumstances. When we manage to distil the complex experiences into more comprehensible blocks, we begin to overcome the trauma. Writing, therefore, organises trauma.<sup>33</sup>

The second paragraph entitled *Une forte baisse de l'indice de confiance en l'humanité* (which translated in English is *A strong decline in the index of trust in humanity*) deals with issues concerning the social, sanitary, psychological and economic impact of the pandemic through the percentage representation of a survey about Yargekov's thoughts. As can be read:

The above statistics should not hide the breakthrough of my existential pessimism. When asked if you would rather be reincarnated as a rose quartz crystal or as a human being in the future, 82% of my thoughts choose the mineral option, 16 points more than at the beginning of March. In the same direction, Arthur Schopenhauer makes a stunning entry in the top 3 of my most inspiring intellectuals, just ahead of Mickaël Haneke and Jean Améry. This idea that human nature is definitely rotten is justified by the racist insults towards people of Asian origin at the beginning of the epidemic (14%), the moral panic felt when sorting out the sick (31%), the disgust related to thefts and trafficking of masks (22%) and the loss of identity references due to the impossibility to go to the swimming pool (10%). For some mysterious reason, the war in Syria, the Muslim-Hindu riots in Delhi and the life of dairy cows are also cited as factors in structural despair (13%), as well as the guilt of being a privileged woman in a spacious flat, on a par with the guilt of feeling guilty, because that is another privileged luxury (5%).<sup>34</sup>

Barbara De Rosa in *La pandemia da Covid-19, un potenziale trauma collettivo* elucidates that collective traumas work as a magnifying glass of the social and political context on which they impact: so many economic, political and social problems have arisen as a result of the pandemic.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, as can be read above, Yargekov denounces the individualistic and non-communitarian aspect of the right to health (the moral panic felt when sorting out the sick 31%), the intensification of the gap between social classes (the guilt of being a privileged woman in a spacious flat 5%), the occurrence of discrimination phenomena (the racist insults towards people of Asian origin at the beginning of the epidemic 14%). The third paragraph entitled *Une passion secrète pour le lapin des voisins* (which translated in English is *A secret passion for the neighbours' rabbit*) reveals the appearance of the rabbit figure. As can be read:

The big surprise in this study was the score my neighbour's rabbit got in the social category. The adorable little mammal, who regularly wanders onto the balcony across the street, was

<sup>32</sup> Micaela Castiglioni, *Si può scrivere il trauma?*, in Id., *Narrazione e cura*, Milan, Mimesis, 2014, pp. 203-217.

<sup>33</sup> James W. Pennebaker, *Scrivi cosa ti dice il cuore. Autoriflessione e crescita personale attraverso la scrittura di sé*, Trento, Erickson, 2004, p. 133, trad. by me.

<sup>34</sup> Yargekov, *op. cit.*, trad. by me.

<sup>35</sup> De Rosa and Regnoli, *op. cit.*

the object of distracted interest until just recently. The effect of isolation has been dramatic, with 64% of my thoughts now considering it to be the most important living thing in the universe up to the stars. This proportion reaches new heights in my morning ideas, 88% of which consider that when I wake up, the imperative urgency is to hide behind the curtains in order to discreetly check that the cute leporid is well, that he is still in possession of his four legs and two ears, which then allows me to let out little giggles of joy. [...] In this context, it will come as no surprise to learn that, when asked whether, in the event of a food shortage, you would be prepared to fast in order to offer carrots to the little rabbit, 100% of my brain population answers yes, compared to only 32% when it comes to sacrificing yourself to save an exhausted nurse.<sup>36</sup>

The thought of the neighbour's rabbit sweeps away any other anxious thoughts about the pandemic, thus fully occupying the Yargekov's daily thoughts. There occurs what Calabrese in *Dopo il Covid* calls *cognitive change*: a form of emotion regulation through the change of one of the characteristics of the stimulus (positive or negative), such as meaning (reappraisal) or psychological distance (distancing). The strategy of *reappraisal*, in particular, is considered one of the most efficient and adaptive mechanisms for regulating emotional response and when used to reduce the emotion induced by a negative stimulus, there is a greater decrease in negative emotional affect for high intensity episodes, such as trauma, than for low intensity ones.<sup>37</sup>

The fourth paragraph entitled *Une accoutumance aux stimuli anti-démocratiques* (which translated in English is *Addiction to anti-democratic impulses*) shows a socio-political reflection about the problems that arose in Hungary following the pandemic events. As can be read:

On the political front, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is elected as the most anxiety-provoking personality on my mental map. Second only to my neighbour's rabbit, he alone mobilises 33% of my daily neural activity, with a peak of 72% in the days following the adoption of the 'Coronavirus law' in Hungary. [...] However, my indignation index is at an all-time low (7.6%) and it seems that I'm mainly busy shrugging my shoulders and mumbling yes, well, it was predictable anyway, so I'll eat some m&m's (19 times a day).<sup>38</sup>

Yargekov, due to the closure of the borders for the lockdown, found herself trapped by the circumstance of her double nationality, French and Hungarian. Forced to remain in Hungary, with the consequent impediment to travel, she began to feel what she calls *political apathy* in the face of the succession of government decisions. The context to which Yargekov refers is Hungary on 30 March 2020, when a law was passed to protect the country from the Coronavirus, which provided for the granting, with no time limit, of extraordinary powers to the Government, led by Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. Yargekov studied political and social sciences and has worked for years with numerous magazines, especially Hungarian ones, with political and social articles. Despite this, she is curiously apathetic about a very dramatic political situation. The explanation for Yargekov's political apathy can be found in the ideas of Gilad Hirschberger in *Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning* about extreme trauma and collective trauma: collective trauma is an event that, due to its sudden unpredictability, is capable of damaging the entire social tissue

<sup>36</sup> Yargekov, *op. cit.*, trad. by me.

<sup>37</sup> Calabrese, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Yargekov, *op. cit.*, trad. by me.

and its links and sense of community, thus revealing the inefficiency of the community, which is no longer considered by individuals as a source of support, trust and security.<sup>39</sup>

The fifth, and final, paragraph entitled *L'horoscope comme ultime recours* (which translated in English is *Horoscopes as a last remedy*) shows the phenomenon of *anthropomorphisation* of the virus, through the parody of the astrological rubric. Yargekov humanises the virus and imagines for him a natal chart, thus trying to familiarise with this unknown and unwanted host: she lets us imply that she has contracted the virus, so as to speculate on their possible future marriage by calculating the affinity of their zodiac signs. As can be read:

More alarming, a quarter of my day was spent trying to identify the date of birth of the coronavirus, then studying his astrological sign, on the pretext that horoscopes are funnier than the international press (72%), that some people believe in Jesus, so why not the planets (15%), or that if the virus asks me to marry him, it will be useful to know whether our signs are compatible or not (13%).<sup>40</sup>

Calabrese clarifies that talking about the Coronavirus as if it were a person is quite common and diffuse. This is because the tendency to project human traits into everything is from a neurocognitive point of view an innate human prerogative, which automatically perceives the specific signs of their conspecifics and this helps them understand the world. Although there is an awareness that the Coronavirus is not a person, the language and behaviour of the individuals involved suggest that the humanisation of the Coronavirus happens unconsciously. It is easy to describe the Coronavirus as human-like, because anthropomorphic narratives provide models of the virus and its behaviour that seem familiar and accessible. There is a sense of being able to hold on to this invisible thing, and this hold, whether it is illusory or not, brings a sense of security and control that is central to mental and physical wellness.<sup>41</sup>

Yargekov ends the digital page of his diary in this way: «Warning: This study should be read with caution and critical distance. In the absence of a Nina-testimony in a world without coronavirus, you can never be sure of anything. For all purposes, I would like to point out that I am a Cancer with Gemini ascendant». <sup>42</sup> Yargekov puts the theme of testimony, which can be understood thanks to the thought of Christina Demaria in her book *Il trauma, l'archivio, il testimone*: collective cultural memory is the result of the production of the interpretation of something experienced, but it is also the result of the interpretation in second instance of something seen represented and/or textualised. Testimony is conceived as a form of communication, as an instrument of knowledge and as a transformative practice.<sup>43</sup>

The relationship between reality and fiction is an apparent relationship of opposition, because it's the manner in which the images or representations of trauma are used that allows us to construct or not construct ways of truthfulness in the narratives and transform them into testimony. In the absence of a narrative of the testimony of trauma, the individual and collective memory of trauma cannot be built. Writing generates relationships and through them permits a journey of therapy and resilience.

<sup>39</sup> Hirschberger, *op. cit.*

<sup>40</sup> Yargekov, *op. cit.*, trad. by me.

<sup>41</sup> Calabrese, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-90.

<sup>42</sup> Yargekov, *op. cit.*, trad. by me.

<sup>43</sup> Cristina Demaria, *Il trauma, l'archivio, il testimone. La semiotica, il documentario e la rappresentazione del reale*, Bologna, Bononia University Press, 2012.