

Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz (Bochum)

Disease as a Chance for New Consciousness in the English Novel

Abstract

The article diachronically explores the connection between suffering from an illness or under a pandemic and the wide range of cognitive response it engenders in works of narrative fiction. British and Irish writers from Daniel Defoe to Emma Donoghue and Ali Smith show with a pressing topicality that the crisis caused by a disease can inspire change and innovative ideas, in contrast to a stagnation which locks individuals and societies in customary patterns. Characters respond in unexpected intellectual and emotional ways to a trial such as the singular or collective experience of a disease. Parallel to socio-political or cultural reflections, the literary narratives exhibit the ordeal as a chance for reasoning and reorientation, following the profound uncertainty produced by an individual illness or the witnessing of an epidemic. The novels display how (re)cognition facilitates a shift of standards and social awareness. Empowered by the distress of a disease and ensuing isolation, a character's perception can be liberated and his/her vision opened onto a changed reality.

1 Introduction

Illness and pandemic infections as an individual or collective ordeal have formerly given rise to expressions of religious edification and eschatological meditations, yet also to the development of ideas, based on observation as well as speculation. Regarding fiction, Virginia Woolf criticised in February 1926 that disease, like several of our frequent experiences, represented one of the thematic blanks in literature, "[c]onsidering how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change that it brings, how astonishing, when the lights of health go down" (Woolf 1952: 14). One hundred years later, disability studies with an emphasis on corporality have ardently explored the thematization of private illness in fiction and discovered that this 'unexploited mine' substantially features in Woolf's own novels too.¹ "People write always of the doings of the mind; the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans" (Woolf 1952: 15), neglecting the condition of the body, Woolf had regretfully qualified. The representation of the heterogeneous trains of thought, "the doings of the mind" (Woolf 1952: 15) engendered in or by fictionalised illness, can also stimulate research. The mind that faces the crisis of an individual or global disease delves into diverse themes, and I wish to argue that fictional narratives addressing the predicament can also show the "tremendous [...] spiritual change that it brings" (Woolf 1952: 14). Woolf states that she is aware of the *lacuna* the influenza pandemic of 1918/19 presents in literary writing,² yet contends that in each individual experience

¹ In April 1926, the essay "On Illness" was again published with revisions in *Forum* under the title "Illness: An Unexploited Mine". Bolaki (2017) and Lemberth-Heidenreich/Mildorf (2013) are pertinent to the context of the essay regarding Woolf's fiction.

² Recently, Catherine Belling (2009) has inspected American fiction which thematises the 1918/19 influenza pandemic, with Virginia Woolf as the only British writer mentioned. Historically, Belling's contribution to the journal *Literature and Medicine* was initiated by the attention bird flu and SARS got in the USA in the first decade of this century and the response by American novelists (Belling 2009: 59, 70–71). Jane Fisher's monograph (2012) contains analyses of US American literature as well as Canadian and African fictions about the 'Spanish' Influenza, yet equally restricts English examples to *Mrs. Dalloway*. Reina James's debut novel *This Time of Dying*, published in 2007, counts among the rare literary narratives about the pandemic this side of the Atlantic; the British tv-drama *Spanish Flu: The Forgotten Fallen* was first broadcast by BBC in 2009, *Downton Abbey*, the tv-series which also mentions the 1918 epidemic, in 2010.

an unknown world is enclosed. As critic Hermione Lee noted about Woolf, "in her writing about illness [...] there is also a repeated emphasis on its creative and liberating effects" (qtd. in Fisher 2012: 78). My enquiry into narrative representations will attend to this link between observed or suffered illness and creative thinking; it will underscore the change brought about by the ordeal.

The thematic orientation of this article focuses on the spectrum of the fictional characters' cogitations, precipitated by disease as an existential situation disrupting the accustomed life for individuals and/or societies. Works of imaginative prose literature portray this liminal condition leading to reflections on fundamental issues, be they abstract, scientific, or artistic, in a character who is affected him/herself or confronted with the extremity of illness as an eyewitness. Like other forms of isolation, the crisis of a quarantine or long confinement to bed can have a stimulating effect on human resources and resilience. Even though such a predicament could lead to stagnation and dulled brooding, it conversely offers the chance for unconventional thinking on social, scientific, or artistic matters.

My argument starts from the hypothesis that even though literature shows that, for the individual as for the community, an (epidemic) disease exposes vulnerability and the buried memories of past sufferings,³ fiction also reveals illness as a turning point. It stirs the capacity for a progressive restructuring in characters who approach vital boundaries. Whereas a critic has coolly commented on the literary association between emotionality and infirmity "[d]isability is melodramatic machinery, a simple tool for cranking open feelings" (Holmes 2004: 3) the characters' cognitive re-orientation remains unexplored. If Holmes in *Fictions of Affliction* regards the representation of distress merely as a narrative device for staging melodrama, the present essay examines the question of where and how in narratives illness opens a window to the recognition of novelties in a changing world. The definition of "Illness as a Call for Stories" (Frank 1995: 53) would therefore be broadened into 'narrated illness as a summons for unfamiliar thoughts and ideas.' My article claims that this is a connection identifiable throughout the development of the English novel.

A pandemic, described and feared since antiquity as a nonhuman agency like earthquakes, tsunamis, or volcano eruptions, occupies a firm place in Science Fiction and narratives of the posthuman,⁴ with Mary Shelley's 1826 novel *The Last Man* as an earlier and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* (2003) as a recent example. On the other hand, the notion of 'plague' serves as a figure of speech which points at miserable social conditions or the contagiousness of rumours, conspiratorial networking, and the spreading of fake news.⁵ While Pat Rogers revealed that the plague of 1665 and the financial crisis of the *Bubble* were already both described with disease vocabulary (see Hoydis 2019: 106), other literary critics have considered

³ Colm Tóibín's novel *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), published after the climax of the AIDS pandemic, epitomises the literary connection between sickness and earlier traumata or unresolved conflicts. The experience as well as the witnessing of a relative's fatal disease works as "a crisis, a catalyst" for the family (Tóibín 1999: 106). Emotional bruises can be healed in the face of terminal illness.

⁴ In 2019, Julia Hoydis remarks: "generally Defoe's reflections and the characters' reactions in the *Journal* do not differ much from fictional works about super viruses or nuclear accidents, the ultimate risk scenarios of today" (99). To prove or disprove this statement by a comparison with literary subgenres would exceed the limits of this article.

⁵ For a list of works and authors conveying the metaphorical function of "epidemic" in literature see Leo Robson (2020). The symbolic use of contagious disease in Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* is addressed by Dachez (2016: 133–35) and traced by Hoydis (2019: 107) with reference to earlier criticism. See also Kimpel (2013) for the cultural context of Defoe's *Journal*.

Dickensian portrayals of London as depicting "the disease of modern life" (Barret 1970) or diagnosed "infectious fictions" in Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) (Myers 2011). In May 2020, Leo Robson summarily emphasised that the mental infection of the social body – or plague as allegory – is always a concomitant phenomenon of the medical condition during an epidemic disease, and he quotes examples reaching from Defoe through Dickens and Camus to Philip Roth's *Nemesis* (2010). Gossip and recent technological connectivity enable an exponential growth in the number of psychologically infected individuals with or without the outbreak of a pandemic. A calamitous situation can thus be produced by diverse "Infectious Fictions" (Myers 2011), which is exacerbated by the threat of an inexplicable and unstoppable virus.⁶

This article does not consider novelistic representations of disease primarily as 'illness narratives', nor does it centre on plague as imagery. It gives priority to the question of if and how the literary portrayal of an individual illness or a pandemic disease inspires the author/narrator/focaliser to expose a change by depicting *recognition*, usually by way of introducing discursive elements into the imaginative narrative. The style of a novel will change with the cognitive intimations excited by a dangerous illness or epidemic.⁷ I propose to inspect a sample of British and Irish novels, asking how the experienced condition or its perception by an eyewitness is portrayed as the stimulus of a character's reflection – as an instant of liberating creativity. Illness, usually regarded as a deficiency, could thus intermittently turn out as enhancing the individual's cognitive faculty to focus on fundamental issues in an existential situation such as isolation or immobilisation. On the opening page of her corona-inspired essays Zadie Smith (2020) quotes from Marc Aurel's *Meditations*: "No role is so well suited to philosophy as the one you happen to be in right now" (Z. Smith 2020: n.p.). Contemplation is for the Stoic the way to recognition.

As Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) argues in "Discourse in the Novel", both the artistic and the abstract or scientific thinking are creative actions. That they can be linked to a condition of corporeal infirmity has been demonstrated by historiography and may be exposed in literature as well. In modernist fiction, the figure of the artist is frequently characterised as physically weak and prone to illness or disablement. In the history of philosophy, it is known that Blaise Pascal developed his thoughts while lacking solid health; Isaac Newton's course of life was affected by the bubonic plague because it meant that the University of Cambridge closed in 1665/66, and instead of attending Trinity College Newton had to return to his home in rural parts. He used the time in undisturbed isolation to develop calculus and the theory of gravity (see A. Smith 2020: 49). Regarding contemporary science, the name of Stephen Hawking evokes the picture of the physically disabled genius of physics and astrophysics. Extraordinary new insights may be achieved not only as a *revolt against* impaired physical conditions and isolation, but *because of* the subject's singularly restricted situation by a plight which intensifies focused cogitation. While in real life this might be a rare exception, I wish to explore how fictional narratives also disclose an affinity between the characters' direct or studied experience of disease and the figural pondering about essential matters. To define stylistic

⁶ The "Postscript" in Zadie Smith's *Intimations* (2020), incited by the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, puts infectious disease to another metaphorical use. She addresses "Contempt as a Virus" when speaking about racism (Z. Smith 2020: 63).

⁷ Zadie Smith (2020) claims that lifestyles get lost due to a pandemic and quotes Susan Sontag: "A style is a means of insisting on something" (qtd. in Z. Smith 2020: 48). Smith underlines that style is not restricted to literary aesthetics.

peculiarities of the depicted reasoning in such a crisis, characterised by the oppositional connection between the disabled body/ies and the able mind, can contribute to illuminating the conceptualisation of discourse in the contemporary novel. The examination of earlier narratives that imagine the strain of a disease prepares a close look at recent fictions composed in or about a similar situation of crisis.

2 Daniel Defoe

Since *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), which I refer to as the foundation of 'pandemic novels' in English, has also recently produced universal and thorough research discussing earlier criticism, my comment on the narrator's disease-initiated reflections is circumscribed. The *Journal*, imbued with the principal thoughts of the Enlightenment regardless of its graphic descriptions, impressively demonstrates that the medium 'fictional narrative' was then *not* overwhelmed by the epidemic (see Belling 2009), which Defoe's first-person narrator witnesses without becoming a victim.

The purpose of spiritual edification, which in the early 18th century still presented itself as a justification for the novel genre, can be traced in the *Journal* without receiving priority. While Locke and Hume have been lighted up as the roots of Defoe's emphasis on the significance of the individual and "the empirical self" (Myers 2011),⁸ my observations focus on the question of how the narration discloses the narrator's reliance on philosophical or scientific thinking about medical and social aspects of the disease, including problems of public health. The first-person narrator HF rejects magic or superstitiousness as explanations for the catastrophic event, blaming individuals who may be well-meaning and serious but "whose discourses were full of terror, who spoke nothing but dismal things" (Defoe 1969: 25). His declared intention is a didactic ambition: to enlighten "those who come after me, if they come to be brought to the same distress" (Defoe 1969: 8), while he deplores that many of his contemporaries refuse to be better instructed (23). His rationality implies the professed honouring of empirical proof, while his effort at reason's prerogative does not hinder him from affirming his religious submissiveness to God's judgements (Defoe 1969: 11–13). The contradictoriness of his argumentation has been pointed out as often as "[h]is acuteness as a social observer" (Slack 1985: 335). These characteristics of the novel can partly be explained by the method of "link[ing] two time frames" (Hoydis 2019: 98) – that of the event in 1665 and the *Journal's* publication in 1722 – marked by a gap of almost 60 years in which a cultural threshold was crossed.

Julia Hoydis (2019) analyses the novel in detail as "a critical engagement with risk management in the plague year of 1665" (Hoydis 2019: 99) and also displays as one of the *Journal's* strengths its predilection for democratic views. Her statement that "From today's scientific-medical perspective, Defoe's account of the plague is, of course, entirely fictional and incorrect" (Hoydis 2019: 99) seems debatable, however. The narrator is indeed ignorant of the plague's original transmission by fleas and rats, but he is convinced that there *must* be a rationally explicable source as well as palpable means that work in favour of communicating the infection which without doubt has for him a natural cause (Defoe 1969: 193–97). He also rejects "a

⁸ Myers' study links Defoe's *Journal* to the cultural emergence of the individual. The attention paid to individualism when HF observes the outbreak of the pandemic in London is noteworthy, whereas its victims succumb to a disease that disregards individualism: "Plague signifies the very opposite – that is, the erasure of the individual" (Dachez 2016: 129). HF's depiction stresses this contrast, on which Dachez elaborates.

Discourse full of learned Simplicity" (Defoe 1969: 75) about living creatures in the air.⁹ HF only makes direct or materially transmitted human contact with the infected responsible for contagion and is even able to pinpoint the origin of the disease in London: it was brought with a bale of silk cloth on board a ship from Holland (Defoe 1969: 204).

In sum, the worries and hardships described in 1722 by Defoe about the plague epidemic of 1665 – such as the necessity of disinfection, social distancing and quarantine, discreet disposal of the bodies, a severe restriction of business and trade, increasing poverty following unemployment and an empty city – are those of a modern society facing a pandemic disease. The insufficiency of the news media that the author complains about on the first page characterised the 17th century and, according to him, had improved with fascinating progress by 1722. Travelling is practically cancelled during the plague but nevertheless undertaken, mainly by the inhabitants fleeing from London.

At every stage of his account his reasoning includes political issues and criticism of the official measures taken. Defoe's enlightened narrator clearly takes sides with the parliamentary municipal government.¹⁰ That the role of the Divine hand in matters of epidemics and their much-debated control by medical interference was still highly controversial "in one of the Politest Nations in the World" (qtd. in Ingram 2016: 158, cp. fn. 14 and 18), is proved by letters and sermons published in 1722. In the year of the publication, cultural faultlines had strongly affected politics, religion, the economy, and society. HF's reflections set in 1665, I wish to contend, are based on the *anticipation* of a modern *Weltanschauung* following a political change after 1689 and advanced opinions dispersing around the turn of the century, when "[m]edical science was becoming more excited about prevention and treatment than sin and punishment" (Ingram 2016: 157). The described official measures during the Great Plague taken by royal authority, however, such as the indiscriminate locking of houses, distribution of alms, or a decree of fasting days, are unchanged compared to the early years of the 17th century under the rule of James I (Defoe 1969: 38). The widespread superstitiousness and bigotry, which HF vividly describes, also strike as late-medieval thinking, whereas London's Lord Mayor and the magistrate try to cope with the 1665 plague with more rational means.

Regarding the literary style of the *Journal*, HF's depiction of immediate experience and reflection exhibits a fluent shift between the descriptive, emotive or chatting mode and the analytical approach. A methodically inconsistent narrative is the result. Yet nowhere does this 18th-century novel embody the horror it portrays; the

⁹ The plague can in fact be transmitted by droplet infection. It is a surprising historical detail that in the 1670ies (according to different sources in 1665!) the Dutch Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, a scientific amateur, built a high-resolution microscope and discovered bacteria in human saliva, for which he was after much initial ridiculing admitted as a member to The Royal Society (for Improving Natural Knowledge) in 1680. Since he had no command of Latin, he was unable to publish his findings but kept the details of construction for his microscope a secret. He also objected to the current theory of spontaneous generation of living creatures (from dead matter). Among his visitors in Delft were Queen Anne and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (Britannica n.d.).

¹⁰ Apart from his preferences for the magistrate and empirical knowledge the narrator freely communicates the popular verdict of King and Court concerning "their crying Vices" (Defoe 1969: 16) as the cause of the plague. As Ingram (2016) shows in his chapter on the cultural imagination of the (small)pox in the 18th century, a "punitive interpretation" of cumulative smallpox deaths in the Stuart dynasty was widespread, blaming "the general decadence of the House" (Ingram 2016: 152) for the frequent visitation by the disease.

text always remains comprehensible, lucid, and coherent.¹¹ What Mikhail Bakhtin calls the "heteroglossia" of the novel genre (1981: 417–18) is epitomised in the hybrid narrative of the *Journal*. Imaginative and scientific discourse genres are mixed, with an emphasis on the importance of the empirical. The novel's hybridity produces chilling as well as elucidating but also tedious, long-drawn passages of didactic instruction.

3 Samuel Pepys

Defoe's immersion in the tenets of the Enlightenment reveals the hiatus between the narrated time and the time of the *Journal's* narration.¹² That HF's scientific and societal reflections are often innovative (not to say avant-garde) can also be revealed by a juxtaposition with a nonfictional journal, the *Diary* of Samuel Pepys (1972), written day-by-day by a witness of the Great Plague.¹³ Pepys's mind is apparently occupied by other, 'grander' issues, the plague being usually considered a recurring event and a visitation of the poor. The context discloses that for Pepys the disease opens no window to a modernising reality; the plague hardly changes his awareness. Pepys is a busy man, member of an elevated social class, and his position as Chief Secretary to the Admiralty as well as his private inclinations prevent him from getting involved in medical discourses about the epidemic; above all, "Pepys clearly had every reason to support government policies" (Slack 1985: 253). Accordingly, mentioned preparations for a second war with Holland and the King's opinion show the diarist's priorities, and the battle at sea in May 1665 with a British victory dominates the corresponding entries. On 7 June Pepys notices in passing two or three houses in Drury Lane with a red cross on their doors and "Lord Have Mercy upon us" written on them, "which was a sad sight to me, being the first of that kind that to my remembrance I ever saw" (Pepys 1972: 120).¹⁴

Pepys also documents the soaring numbers of Londoners dying each week. Yet, unlike HF, he neither observes social distancing within the upper classes nor does he take other effective measures to prevent contagion; munching tobacco seems to him a physical remedy against the infection (07 June), setting up his will a legal provision for the worst of cases (03 July) and praying for resignation and humility a spiritual one (26 July). The continuation of the war stays the momentous issue in his talks with the King and the Duke [of York] at Hampton Court and Greenwich, whereto the Naval Office has moved (31 August). Despite the distressing situation in London, Pepys's diary also remains replete with entertaining details of private affairs.

His observations become increasingly melancholic during August, though not primarily due to the plague. The entry of the 31st documents Pepys's worries about a

¹¹ Conversely, H el ene Dachez makes a point in accentuating that the *Journal* "is fashioned by its very subject", which "bears the acknowledged characteristics and symptoms of plague", and she quotes a critic calling it "a diseased narrative" (Dachez 2016: 138). Her argument takes as a basis the analogy between the body of afflicted persons, the sick body of the capital, and the body of the text, which are all troubled by the destructiveness of the plague with its many contradictions and its elusive or random manifestations (Dachez 2016: 137–41). My reading of the *Journal* does not affirm her argument which postulates that for HF the plague completely resists cognitive understanding.

¹² Dachez (2016: 130–31) scrutinises the contemporaneous medical discourses on the plague.

¹³ Diaries are also the first narrative response published in the first year of the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic.

¹⁴ My reading relies on the *Extracts from the Diary* edited by Robert Latham (1978), on the *Diary's* German edition, selected and translated by Helmut Winter (1980), and on vol. 6 of the complete edition of the *Diary*, edited by Latham and Matthews (1972), wherefrom the dates of the entries in the following paragraphs are taken.

situation aggravated by the recent futile expedition of the fleet and the continuing public expenses – firstly for warfare and secondly for the epidemic spreading in the whole kingdom. With the expression of his chagrin Pepys implicitly affirms "the correlation between the spread of disease and the health of the nation" (Ingram and Dickson 2016: 6), which Defoe's *Journal* notes almost 60 years later. Considering his allegiance, Pepys's résumé of a conversation on 03 September is devastating:

Talking of the ill-government of our Kingdom, nobody setting to heart the business of the Kingdom, but everybody minding their particular profit or pleasures, the King himself minding nothing but his ease – and so we let things go to wrack (Pepys 1972: 210).

Despite his apocalyptic vision of a sick country, whose endangered situation is in part caused by the epidemic disease which also symbolises her condition, the interlocutors only decide to initiate actions against the large crowds assembling at funerals. They mention the negligent Court's total indifference regarding the poor, among whom the plague was raging most violently. Pepys's outburst that "the pestilence has made us crueller against each other than dogs" (22 August.; see 04 August) recalls an aphorism in Thomas Hobbes' state philosophy of Enlightened Absolutism. On 09 September Samuel Pepys prophesies the fall of the empire on account of the foreseen impossibility for Parliament to grant more money for the war: "So that as things look at present, the whole state must come to Ruine" (Pepys 1972: 218).¹⁵ With the gradual decline of the numbers of the dead in late September Pepys's attention is again deviated from the epidemic. Although aware of its consequences for urban life he believes in the inescapable fatefulness of the tribulation. At the end of December 1665, he thanks God for sparing him and his family and praises the past year for his exponentially growing wealth.

The *Diary* manifests the concerns of a young man rising to a high administrative office through noble patronage. Without doubt, as an intimate narrative it also testifies to the author's consciousness of individuality. Yet, if we bear in mind Pepys's rank as an influential civil servant, his membership in the Royal Society and later in the House of Commons,¹⁶ his interpretation of the common weal, which lacks solidarity, contrasts with the citizen HF's idea of the social body. Pepys's royalist loyalty and his engagement in the public affairs considered of supreme importance oppose the progressive, democratic and humanist spirit pervading the imaginative narrative by HF, which projects modernist stances onto an eyewitness of Anno 1665. In Defoe's *Journal* the narrator's sympathies favoured the Lord Mayor, the court of aldermen, his sensible and sober fellow-citizens – viz. parliamentarism and the enlightened middle class, to which the *Journal's* writer belonged. Through the awareness of their respective author, we perceive the plague year either from a viewpoint shaped by political conservatism and allegiance, or informed by the science-conscious, empirically oriented knowledge of the early 18th century.

4 Samuel Richardson

¹⁵ To capture projections of a fear of collapse, whether in matters of the state, humanity, or of finances, emerges as one of the main functions ascribed to literature about illness, as Hoydis states (2019: 107), quoting Susan Gilman.

¹⁶ Pepys became a member of the Royal Society on 15 March 1665, as the chronicler Thomas Sprat confirms in 1667 (Sprat 1702, 432), and its President about twenty years later. Under his presidency, Isaac Newton's *Principia Mathematica* was published in 1687. Pepys continued moving in the upper classes until he fell into disgrace and retired from public offices in the 1690ies (see timetable Pepys 1980, 472–74).

After my reading of witnesses' narratives about the disaster of an epidemic disease the following investigations focus on the relation between the sickness of an individual personally afflicted and his/her reflections caused by it, which introduce a change in character and plot and possibly in narration. While *Clarissa* (1748) epitomises the "fashionable" literariness of consumption as a disease "endowed with high social value, associated with a leisured and privileged class" (Dachez 2016: 127), Richardson's earlier novel depicts illness as a turning point.

Pamela, first published in 1740, later offers extensive literary engagement with disease in its sequel of 1742, which sets in after the heroine's wedding to B.¹⁷ For this article, however, the link between reflective, meditative thinking and illness is examined in the male protagonist's transformation, which precedes his marriage. In 18th-century novels, 'Reformation' is a key concept connected with the cathartic effect of sickness. Among "the most important and entertaining subjects, in Genteel Life", which the 1801 title page of *Pamela* promises (Richardson 1985), disease would not naturally be counted. Yet the author's assurance that the young woman's journal and letters are "published in order to cultivate the principles of virtue and religion in the minds of the youth of both sexes," as the subtitle announces, links the narrative's purpose to 'reformation' on the metanarrative level. The unforeseen change of mind in Mr B., which leads to his gradual adoption of the bourgeois value system, is inducted by a change in his physical condition. I wish to argue that this affliction of the male character produces or asks for altered means of narration as well. It is B.'s illness which causes the *peripetie* in the plot line and unveils Pamela's awareness as well as admittance of her true feelings for her master.

The opening of volume II of the novel's first edition continues with Pamela's journal. She has finally been dismissed or – in her own view – left Mr B.'s house in Lincolnshire to evade "his designing arts" (Richardson 1985: 284) and go back to her parents when she receives his letters which deeply affect her. Instead of having happily escaped she is grieved and feels imprisoned by her emotional bond with B. Her conflict between 'the passions' and moral prerogatives cannot be solved. B.'s first letter ("Sunday Night, Ten o'Clock") as well as Pamela's response, laid down in the diary stage fantasies of melodrama instead of showing rational cogitation in either party. In his writing, B. even wants to oblige her to mourn his ashes as his true widow (Richardson 1985: 283), to which she warmly consents (Richardson 1985: 284). And yet, the turn in B.'s mindscape has already occurred through an ailment when, as he confesses in hindsight, "I began to regret parting with you" (Richardson 1985: 285). Consequentially, and complaining of a disorder, he implores her to come back to him, "for I find I cannot live without you" (Richardson 1985: 285). Unable to travel he orders his servant to come upon her on her way home, because he perceives himself as "really indisposed; I believe, with vexation" (Richardson 1985: 286). Pain and trouble felt at her departure make him ill.

Pamela's deliberations after reading what he wrote to her and to the servants appear more considerate. She gains the insight that she is not the victim for which she had long pitied herself to be, but an agent in the entanglements between emotions, morality and the standards of polite society and family demands.

He is not now, in my eye, the dreaded master, but the condescending one. [...] That he is indisposed: his illness is owing to his vexation for parting with me. If he should die! (which God forbid.) And could I think that I was the occasion – I will not tell you how this sad thought affected me.

¹⁷ Allan Ingram (2016: 144–48; 156–57) analyses the narrative representation of Pamela's and her baby's illness and recovery from smallpox in the cultural context of the Stuart reign.

Recovering myself, Away with these fears, thought I, and with all my apprehensions!
I will return. I will obey him. The humble Pamela will not lose this *opportunity of laying an obligation* on her great master. Who knows, but he may owe his life to my return? (Richardson 1985: 288, emphasis added)

Even though B.'s secret perusal of Pamela's private entries in her papers has convinced him of her honesty, the present reader of the above cannot but remember the controversial response to Pamela's unconcealed moral calculation, which for instance manifested itself in *Shamela* by Richardson's rival. Her firm resolution "I will return" (Richardson 1985: 288–89, emphasis in original) also drives away the "lowering reflections" (288) to which she falls prey while recalling her dilemma and B.'s snares. When she resolves on an action which in the literal and figurative sense reverses her former steps, the decision is calmly taken and expressed in well-chosen phrases. Upon her return to B.'s house she finds him ill and in need of rest, but the next day he is "much amended in his health, as well as, I bless God for it, in his heart. *How kind a dispensation is sickness sometimes!*" (Richardson 1985: 292, emphasis added). Illness is pointed out by Pamela as a relief or release of a bewildered and disconcerted mind in a complicated situation. For her, B.'s epistolary communication of his affliction equally served to clarify her inclination and her own attitude towards her master. Although his health is not quite restored, he promises "if he were better in the morning, would take an airing in the chariot" (Richardson 1985: 293), which will reveal itself as one of the occasions for Pamela to open her heart to him.¹⁸

In Richardson's novel the mutual influence between the male character's humbling physical condition and his altered mind is represented in a short yet elucidating episode; it produces an affective change in the female protagonist as well. After his recovery, and boosted by the ensuing marriage, his newly gained insight eventually causes B. to reform; socially, spiritually, and morally he is improving from the viewpoint of the governing consciousness. B.'s correction opens for him a progressive outlook on a changed world with the bourgeois class and its value system in the ascendant. Pamela reappraises the past months and B.'s deportment with composure; now she is able to express her thoughts in a comparatively reasonable tone following her former nervous action and emotional outbreaks. Despite her constantly professed humbleness, she can after the turn consider herself almost at eye-level with her master. Pamela is convinced that sickness has had a liberating effect.

5 Mary Shelley

The superhuman enterprise undertaken by the eponymous hero of *Frankenstein* (1818) and similarly by the narrator of the frame story, Captain Walton, leads to an approaching of human boundaries, so that Julia Hoydis (2019) addresses the text as a novel of risk. Illness, which counteracts in Victor Frankenstein the rational-scientific route he has chosen, also signifies the transgressive character of his doing. His sickness, thematised early in the novel, is addressed towards its end by Captain Walton in his letters to his sister Margaret. In the *mise-en-abyme* construction of the book, Walton's account encloses the first-person narrative of Frankenstein, which in turn comprises diverse stories and epistolary narratives related by other characters. Thereby a network of different stories by and about a series of characters evolves. For Frankenstein's illness the reader has to mainly rely on the testimony of narrators other than the afflicted person. This is not atypical for the portrayal of

¹⁸ For the effect of outdoor nature on the heroine see Puschmann-Nalenz (2019), "'The place where my present hopes began to dawn'" (Richardson qtd. in Puschmann-Nalenz 2019, 161–62).

such a condition, which can either be narrated in hindsight by an altered (recovered) first-person narrator or by another character: "Dangerous illness poses a particular challenge to recounting, since it forms significant plot events in the patient's life, but often, in its threatening bodily manifestations, it also diminishes the patient's ability to narrate those events" (Belling 2009: 58).

Frankenstein also recalls his illness in first-person narrative with reference to several witnesses. He had started his scientific career as a very sound young man; eager to acquire knowledge in the modern disciplines, he is instructed by a professor of natural philosophy upon his arrival at the university of Ingolstadt that "in this enlightened and scientific age" (Shelley 1987: 90) the aspirant would have to engage himself in the study of modern chemistry, which could impart "almost unlimited power" (Shelley 1987: 91) to those deeply involved in it. In hindsight, Victor regards this hour when he was truly "infected by ideas" (Robson 2020) as fatal for his own self as well as for others. Retrospectively it seems only logical that sickness accompanies the final stages of his scientific and intellectual exploit that signified a questioning of ethical borders: "Every night I was oppressed by a slow fever, and I became nervous to the most painful degree [...]. Sometimes I grew alarmed at the wreck I perceived that I had become", but nevertheless he believes that a successful completion of his enterprise will "drive away incipient disease" (Shelley 1987: 100). Following his triumph of creating an artificial man he becomes physically ill as well as mentally disturbed (Shelley 1987: 104–106). Frankenstein's retrospective self-diagnosis states a long-lasting nervous fever which brought him near death after the monster's escape, and from which he only recovered with the care and help of his friend Clerval.

Succeeding the diverse embedded tales, the narrative relates the continuation of the frame story. Captain Walton resumes his letter-writing after he has listened to the complete tale of the often-delirious Frankenstein, of whose verity Walton is certain because he himself saw the demon passing by their ship before Frankenstein appeared half-dead from exhaustion (Shelley 1987: 248). Despite their conversations and Walton's deeply felt sympathy for his guest, he cannot offer him hope or consolation in his misery: "The only joy that he can now know will be when he composes his shattered spirit to peace and death" (Shelley 1987: 249), he imparts to his sister in England. A fatal illness ultimately destroys the hero's physical and mental health. Walton considers this damage the result of Frankenstein's self-destructive try at materialising the unethical and believed-impossible. Despondency and the rapid decline of health became his response to the outrageous act itself as well as to its murderous consequences.

In the final stage of the cycle of destruction, Walton loses in Frankenstein a reflecting mirror when his friend dies (Shelley 1987: 256). Warned by Victor's illness and death to pursue a similarly daring and irresponsible way on his discovery route to the North Pole, he remains healthy and ultimately able to return alive. In Walton's case prudence, circumspection, and responsible action are the answer to the mortal illness of an individual who was pushing the boundaries of human nature (or Divine law). The subtitle of Mary Shelley's novel points at hubris as the cause for the violation which produced disaster. On account of his modern education, Frankenstein had in his conceptualisation of the world and man neglected restrictive supernatural commandments. Having been 'infected by ideas,' above all the idea of unlimited power gained by science, they became his destiny – an intimation which may suggest that ideas themselves can contain a core that is morbid or diseased.

Modernist ideas in the era of Shelley's creation of *Frankenstein* are manifest in the amazing discoveries by Isaac Newton, William Harvey, and Benjamin Franklin (see Shelley 1987: 92). Around 1818, they had become common knowledge of the educated class. "Natural philosophy" (Shelley 1987: 93, 91), as *Frankenstein's* subject is called in the university curriculum of the fictionalised late 18th century, already comprises the sciences, mathematics, physiology, and anatomy. The enthusiasm with which the German professors praise the sea change brought about by scientific knowledge, described by them in "the words of the fate – enounced to destroy me" (Shelley 1987: 92), immediately disperses Victor's former fascination with medieval philosophers and alchemists. While Mary Shelley's novel is generally informed by the contemporaneous social philosophy of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (e. g. the creature's tale) her protagonist sees himself confronted with essential dilemmas of the (early) modern age. *Frankenstein's* positioning at a point where fascinating new scientific ideas provide more questions than answers is marked by a delimitation which for Victor causes illness and self-destruction, but which cautions his fellow men to carefully deliberate transgressions of boundaries. The window opening onto the changed reality also presents a challenge of the mind to cope with fundamental ethical questions considering relatedness and responsibility for humanity.

6 Charlotte Brontë

The early chapters of *Jane Eyre* (1847) address the themes of illness, poverty, hunger, and exclusion as part of destitute children's social circumstances in the mid-nineteenth century. Especially little Helen Burns's death from consumption causes grief and pain in the first-person narrator, who shares the fate of other girls in Lowood Institution, where infectious diseases claim many victims. The witnessing of sickness arouses serious reflection even in the cheerful ten-year-old:

"How sad to be lying now on a sick-bed, and to be in danger of dying! This world is pleasant – it would be dreary to be called from it, and to have to go, who knows where?"

And then my mind made its first earnest effort to comprehend what had been infused into it concerning heaven and hell: and for the first time it recoiled baffled; and for the first time glancing behind, on each side, and before it, it saw all round an unfathomed gulf; [...] pondering this new idea (Brontë 1994: 80–81).

Character narration exhibits the gentleness and composure of Jane's dying friend (Brontë 1994: 82); she tells Jane that her illness is not painful, but a gradual wasting away (Brontë 1994: 83) and therefore hardly frightening. If compared with the "feverish" and "delirious" states caused by the typhus epidemic as later recalled by Jane, death from consumption comes quietly for Helen and inadvertently for Jane, who at night falls asleep embracing her friend (Brontë 1994: 84). Helen, a pious Christian, has a softening influence on Jane, who even as a small child used to be "[b]itter and truculent when excited" (Brontë 1994: 60). With the progress of the novel one can perceive Jane as an example of "The Orphan as Pathetic Figure" (Gymnich 2018, 25) transformed into "The Orphan as a Figure of Hope" (Gymnich 2018: 48). Able to take the initiative at decisive moments she partly shapes her own destiny. Her insubmissive defiance – a double-edged characteristic – assists her later in life.

About eight to ten years after Helen's death Jane herself experiences serious illness and is confronted with afflictions whose impact she curtly summarises in the surprise opening of the final chapter, where she addresses the recipient with the famous words: "Reader, I married him" (Brontë 1994: 444). My focus here is on the

condition of the first-person narrator and her perception of the mutilating accident that almost cost the male protagonist Edward Rochester his life and sanity. The story of Jane's love for him seemed to have ended in church with the dramatic climax of the shocking disclosure of his earlier marriage and the fact that his distraught wife was still alive (Brontë 1994: 287–92), following which Jane's life and disposition were once more completely changed. The reversal is briefly reported in third-person narrative as if from a distant viewpoint: "Jane Eyre [...] was a cold, solitary girl again: her life was pale; her prospects were desolate" (Brontë 1994: 293). Jane's resolution to leave Thornfield and her little pupil *because* she is in love with Rochester, of whom she believes to have been intentionally deceived, causes him to be frantic; *reason*, as he interprets it, would be honoured if she stayed with him despite the impediment to their marriage.

Jane's awful disappointment at the revelation causes a personal crisis of grief, disgust, and insecurity in her, and she thereupon chooses "a road I had never travelled" (Brontë 1994: 317). However, she feels morally validated by a supernatural apparition of her mother's ghost, though Jane remains unhappy about hurting Rochester by her clandestine departure and her "long[ing] to be his" (Brontë 1994: 318). The conflict, which severely affects her health, also produces a long reasoning about the reversed direction of her life and 'the road not taken'. When Jane collapses after a disoriented literal wandering (Brontë 1994: 319–27) – nearly dying from hunger, cold, and prostration – at the doorstep of the clergyman Mr St John Rivers and his friendly sisters she is taken into his house. Recovered from total exhaustion, she accepts the offer to open a little village school nearby. "[D]ismayed at the ignorance, the poverty, the coarseness of all I heard and saw round me" (Brontë 1994: 355) she resumes her cogitation which shows, above all, uncertainty. If morally blameless, she has lost Rochester's affection as well as his care and the assets of his status when she fled from his offer to live as his mistress. Jane is troubled by ethical problems robbing her of calmness:

Whether it is better, I ask, to be a slave in fool's paradise at Marseilles – fevered in delusive bliss one hour – suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next – or to be a village school mistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England? (Brontë 1994: 356)

The rhetorical question already implies a judgment by the opposition of "fevered" and "healthy", a bias of which she also tries to convince her narratee.¹⁹ With a preference for autonomy, she achieves a consideration of herself as an individual independent from other individuals such as the inhabitants of Moor House, whom she has decided to leave behind. "You *are* original [...] and not timid" (Brontë 1994: 370, emphasis in original) states the Revd St John, whose unfeeling rationality she criticises, eventually also to reject his marriage proposal. Structurally, St John Rivers is positioned as Rochester's opponent and equally contrasts with Jane: coldness and rigidity vs. passion and self-confidence.

Following another crisis of doubt, she emerges "unscared, enlightened" and newly resolute (Brontë 1994: 415) after she heard Edward Rochester's voice calling out for her in pain and dismay. As criticism has not hesitated to affirm, Jane's return to her master could only be accomplished by an intervention that cannot be rationally explained (Drabble 2000: 528): in this case an incident of telepathy (Brontë 1994: 441–42). Jane ascribes the evocation to nature and affection, whereas Rochester's

¹⁹ That Jane Eyre's moral decision is not dissimilar to Pamela Anderson's described one hundred years earlier outlines more distinctly the differences of the heroines' character development.

change is depicted as a re-orientation. Illness, debility, and the disastrous accident which left him blind, one-armed, homeless, and a widower – in sum, a weakened situation prone to precarity – initiate in him reflections leading to a reformation. Reflectiveness following disablement works in both protagonists as the means with which a new prospect can be reached. Criticism points out that *Jane Eyre* constructs a third, contrasting, character, whose rectification fails. Mrs Reed, Jane's heartless aunt, succumbs unreformed to a fatal illness. The narrative presents individuals who possess "more or less capacity to approach boundaries, experience generosity, and receive expressions of care. The crucial difference [between the three] is one of recognition rather than relative health" (Mintz 2012: 138). A character's disabled condition has to meet with a kind disposition to bring forth pondering and insight. As Jane maintains, reflection bred in illness followed by perspicacity comes as "the work of nature" (Brontë 1994: 415). With its themes and figural cognizance, the novel represents a crisis of narrativity and (disguised) authorship.

7 Charles Dickens

Bleak House (1852/53), known for its satirical ambition, has been criticised for the first-person narrator Esther Summerson – Dickens' only female one. Even though physical illness does not emerge as a major interest of the novel, it takes a marked influence on plot and character development; moreover, the ramifications of the legal business of the Court of Chancery, "which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse and its dead in every churchyard, which [...] overthrows the brain and breaks the heart" (Dickens 1997: 3), spread like an infectious disease and only end with the death of one of the characters. My reading, however, aims at illuminating illness' salubrious significance for the narrator.

When her maid catches smallpox Esther nurses the girl and stays in quarantine with her. The epidemic scares Esther due to her care for Ada, whom she loves and is obligated to guard. Her awareness is alerted at the evidence of the first symptoms she perceives on her own body, so "that I began to think the contagion of her [the maid's] illness was upon me" (Dickens 1997: 317). Esther soon experiences the most grievous sign – blindness – at the onset of the disease; through her illness, however, which also numbs her consciousness, she gets in touch with the physician Allan Woodcourt. This provides a noticeable detail for the narrative's structure since later it becomes obvious that they have fallen in love.

The connection between illness, seeing, (in)sight, and character development, which could be observed in *Jane Eyre*, emerges in *Bleak House* as central too. 'Reflection' in its visual and abstract meaning proves essential for the relationship Esther establishes to the people who surround her. When after her recovery she literally unveils her defaced likeness in the mirror, she feels and looks calm, though "I was very much changed – oh, very, very much. At first my face was so strange to me that I think I should have put my hands before it and started back but [...]. Very soon it became more familiar [...]. It was not like what I had expected" (Dickens 1997: 362). What she had liked about her appearance is lost through her illness, which has disfigured her so that even her maid hardly recognises her. "It was all gone now" (Dickens 1997: 362), Esther admits, yet she worries only briefly about her altered looks and counts her blessings. "I had kept Mr. Woodcourt's flowers" (Dickens 1997: 362), she intimates to the reader – had preserved them together with the happy memory of his care. The first-person narrator gains new self-knowledge through her recovery from a life-threatening illness and tranquilly appraises this as a gain: "I knew the worst now and was composed to it" (Dickens 1997: 362). Glad

to have conquered the extremity caused by the disease and coped with its visible effects, she can from now on defeat gloomy hours with a "happier frame of mind" (Dickens 1997: 362). Spiritually, this gives her a feeling of permanence and elevation due to an intensified awareness of the continuation of her existence despite the outwardly apparent degrading aspect. By her immediate environment Esther is acknowledged as "always the same dear girl!" (Dickens 1997: 373).²⁰ Contentment, humbleness, and resignation seemingly ensure her a fulfilled life.

It is her guardian John Jarndyce who has experienced a deep alteration of his own self ever since Esther arrived at Bleak House, accompanied by Richard and Ada. After her convalescence from smallpox he tells Esther: "You have wrought changes in me, little woman, since the winter day in the stage-coach. First and last you have done me a world of good since that time" (Dickens 1997: 438). In addition, a letter from John prompts her to start another re-examination of the miserable and the good in her life story. "I lived my happy life there [at Bleak House] over again, I went through my illness and recovery, I thought of myself so altered and of those around me so unchanged" (Dickens 1997: 439), she summarises before opening the letter which contains John's confession of love and his marriage proposal. The curious reversal of change and un-change in Esther's meditation, compared with the previous dialogues, reveals that her subjective perspective diverges from that of the other characters as well as from an omniscient third-person narrator's distant point-of-view. In John's letter she can see the continuity of his devotion, regardless of her lost beauty or compromised heredity:

But he did not hint to me that when I had been better looking he had had this same proceeding in his thoughts and had refrained from it. That when my old face was gone from me, and I had no attractions, he could love me just as well as in my fairer days. That the discovery of my birth gave him no shock. That his generosity rose above my disfigurement and my inheritance of shame (Dickens 1997: 440).

After another look in the mirror, she imagines her future life for her altered self as "useful, amiable, serviceable, in all honest, unpretending ways", more than ever (Dickens 1997: 440). In short, she still embodies the perfect orphan figure of a Victorian novel. Esther's pondering that she must give up her cherished memory connected with the dried flowers causes her pain when she is asked to become mistress of Bleak House at John's side. A change in the sense of a return to his former role of fatherly benefactor, however, once more occurs in John Jarndyce when he discovers her fondness for Woodcourt, who upon his return to England proves also immovably devoted to Esther, so that they can get married.

As a striking stylistic feature, considering the novel's extent as well as the protagonist's interest in storytelling, emerges the characters' terseness in recapitulating her/his past. In a condensed, abstracting manner Esther imparts that her illness and recovery gave rise to her newly gained insight into perseverance and fidelity. For other characters – Richard, Esther's mother Lady Dedlock, or John's lawyer Mr Tulkinghorn – such confidence proves unattainable. Their distress ends in death.

8 Virginia Woolf

²⁰ "It seems provocative that illness is represented as negligible in its impact on a woman's attractiveness" (Mintz 2012: 143, on Jane Eyre). While Dickens' Esther is positively confirmed as unchanged, Brontë's novel has St. John coolly remark about Jane that "Ill or well, she would always be plain" (Brontë 1994, 336). Inner values are obviously rated more highly by the characters in each of the narratives.

Woolf's first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915), which has attained much critical attention also by studies developing the poetics of corporality, precedes her essay on illness with its seminal disclosures, and reveals itself as a case in point. This fiction provides an example of the narrative productivity of a fatal illness, represented with shifting perspectivalisation 'from without' and, stunningly from a narratorial aspect, also perceived 'from within' the afflicted character as focaliser. In chapter 25, the move between third-person narrative and free indirect discourse with the suffering 24-year-old Rachel Vinrace as reflector figure presents her illness while she experiences it, "isolated alone with her body" (Woolf 1965: 403). From Rachel's first mentioning her headache till "it troubled her when people tried to disturb her loneliness; she wished to be alone" (Woolf 1965: 424), this illness narrative innovatively expresses unknown sensations through strange images and portrayals of an unusually distorted perception.²¹ The presentation of the bizarre creativeness of the sick person's (un)consciousness alternates with commonplace utterances, desperate thoughts, or the strained bearing of those attending to her. When Rachel recognises Terence at her deathbed, "The curtain which had been drawn between them for so long vanished immediately" (Woolf 1965: 430). At the end, the diverse perspectives converge for the young woman and her fiancé Terence in the feeling of oneness in death as "perfect happiness" (Woolf 1965: 431). The experienced certainty of "the union which had been impossible while they lived" (431) unfolds in a world the lovers inhabit alone. Only when Terence has to leave this cosmos of "perfect certainty and peace" (Woolf 1965: 431) and is forced to re-enter the ordinary environment of his fellow humans "it suddenly came over him that here was a world in which he would never see Rachel again" (432). Realising that they are separate again he succumbs to his desperate grief. The 'normal' sphere where "the army of the upright [who] march to battle" of every day and its ordinary occupations (Woolf 1952: 18) appears as the domain of the unexceptional, even trite. The lovers' distinct individuality was formerly experienced by them as a difficult and at times painful alterity. At the end of the suffering through illness they participate in a symbiosis which they had not achieved before.²² Illness, which Rachel and Terence had faced separately, eventually opens a window to an unknown union; as the author expounded in her nonfiction of 1926, it also unlocks new ground in literature. In the depiction of the consciousness of the afflicted subjects, perception, thought, and feeling become indiscernible; cognition is not separated from emotion or even delirium. In their experience an unknown world is enclosed (Woolf 1952: 14), which the narrative discloses.

9 John Banville

The Infinities (2009) offers an ironic glimpse into an altered concept of reality through the mind of Adam Godley Sr., a famous mathematician and philosopher of the sciences, who is about to die from the consequences of a severe stroke. The family gathers around him in their Irish home and believes him unconscious, whereas he recalls the past in the Sky Room – his former study – and reconsiders

²¹ A close reading of this chapter, which explains how the representation of sickness and death anticipates postmodernist involvement with language and absent relationality, can be found in Heine's (2008) article.

²² See Theresa Crater (2002) and her comparative reading of George Eliot, Doris Lessing, and Virginia Woolf: "'In Their Death They Were Not Divided': Literary Death as Liberation".

his performance in the theory of sciences, which required repeated revisions of our accustomed world view.²³

Although he is tired and fears that his mind might be going, Adam still feels able to think back to his brilliant cognition: "How I loved the ordering of thought, the iron way of computation, the fixing of one term after another in the linked chain of reasoning. No such joy to be had elsewhere, or elsewhen, the quiet joy of a man alone, doing brain-work" (Banville 2009: 233).²⁴ Awaiting his death, he confesses that in matters of the heart, of others' hearts in particular, "I am an amateur in this arena" (Banville 2009: 239), whereas the memories of cognitive intuition have lost none of their fascination in his boundary condition, which is physically a humiliating one. The re-emergence of "the early days of the great instauration, after we had exposed the relativity hoax and showed up Planck's constant for what it really is" (Banville 2009: 164) elates Adam's mind. He is enraptured by the memory of how he mocked the "relativists and old-style quantum mechanics" (Banville 2009: 164) with a parodic new theory of physics, which turned the concept of human perception of the world upside down. His discovery of the infinity of the universe, of the non-linearity of time, and the non-existence of identity had meant taking the illusion of reality centre stage – a bewildering and, to others, a fearful recognition. When during the mental exploration boundaries were reached, they dissolved.

To Adam, his terminal illness offers only a limited timeframe for cerebral recapitulation, but at the same time it offers a surprising private experience, which adds to this protagonist's astonishment regarding his expectations of dying.²⁵ Before weakness overcomes him, he is spiritually transported by his enjoyment of brainwork and the satisfaction about his intellectual triumph. Yet through imagination he finally also achieves a transcendence of his solipsistic self-centredness and can feel empathy for those around him.²⁶ The importance of relationships as part of human nature is likewise assessed by the other characters when they take Adam Godley from the Sky Room down into the centre of his family at the very last moment of his life.

10 Pat Barker, Emma Donoghue, Ali Smith

Contemporary novels occasionally thematise disease followed by multiple deaths in connection with the wars of the 20th century as a personal and societal threshold. The influenza pandemic of 1918/19 historically suggests this thematic entanglement. A synergy between the languages of war and sickness in recent – comparatively peaceful – times in Western countries can also be perceived in the frequent exchange between images or terms of war and of disease in nonfictional as well as fictional narratives.²⁷

²³ For an interpretation of the comedy in Banville's novel and a discussion of its criticism see my 2016 contribution to *Anglistik*. The present article points at the innovative cognition reinspected by the fatally ill physicist, which mingles with his drifting into dreams and meditations on emotional matters.

²⁴ Rebecca Downes (2017) elucidates in her article Banville's preference for first-person narrative and the writer's doubt regarding third-person narration.

²⁵ Terence in Woolf's 1915 novel experiences a similar amazement when he witnesses the dissolution of boundaries with Rachel's death.

²⁶ O'Connell (2011) analyses this final step in connection with the third-person narration performed from the Divine viewpoint of Hermes (O'Connell 2011: 17–18).

²⁷ The article was concluded in December 2021. See the discursive use of the 'war analogy' in definitions of the recent Sars-CoV-2 pandemic listed in a novelist's essay (Z. Smith 2020: 14–16). Not only U.S. President Donald Trump with his "wartime wish" (Z. Smith 2020: 11) but also French President Macron used war terminology when addressing the nation in spring 2020.

One example of war novels is named for this article: Pat Barker's *Life Class* (2007), the work which introduces her eponymous trilogy on the two World Wars. The protagonists discuss fundamental questions about the place and meaning of art – particularly the visual arts – in a war with its innumerable victims. The young people who met in the life class at the Slade School of Fine Art in London before WWI experience or witness death, mutilation and injury on the battle fields, while they try to keep their devotion to the arts unblemished, or to position themselves anew with their ardour for painting under changed conditions. In the final chapter of Barker's novel, Paul Tarrant, the most questioning and philosophical of three central characters, reflects about the function of art in times of war when he is in London on convalescence leave. Noticing a poster with horrifying war propaganda he concludes:

Not a bad painting, though. In fact, all the posters he'd seen were good. Elinor might complain that painting was being dismissed as irrelevant, but it seemed to him that the exact opposite was true. Painting, or at least its near relation – print-making – *had been recruited* (Barker 238, emphasis added).

Art has been instrumentalised in a way which the focaliser judges untrue, compared to what he himself had watched. Paul's own latest drawing of a crippled soldier, which he shows to his Slade tutor (who is also a plastic surgeon), hoping for support of his endeavour to open an exhibition of his works, extorts from the professor the response "I don't see how you could ever show that anywhere" (Barker 2007: 238). Paul cogitates about the ethical and moral challenge of visual arts in war times – whether artistically representing the harm done amounts to aestheticising it, and what to think about artistic misrepresentations of war. He remains without an answer or solution. His only consequence is his wish to leave Bloomsbury and fashionable painters soon again and go back to the front as a medical orderly to give humane care to the wounded and disabled.

"I was having trouble foreseeing any future. How would we ever get *back to normal* after the pandemic?" (Donoghue 2021: 204, emphasis added). This desperate exclamation by the first-person narrator refers to the situation of a society arrested in dearth and turmoil. *The Pull of the Stars* (2020), a novel set in the 1918 influenza epidemic in Ireland, might here be called up as a second counterexample (after Pepys' *Diary*) to the texts exposing psychological or intellectual progress in an illness crisis: Donoghue's narrative depicts a reality in which fatalism and un-change seem to rule; the first-person narrator perceives the world as "a machine grinding to a halt",²⁸ regardless of the turbulent emergency surrounding her. The 30-year-old nurse Julia Power, charged with responsibility for birth and death, works in a ward for pregnant women affected by the disease. "I scrub my hands, and gargle with brandy, and leave the rest to Providence" (Donoghue 2021: 144), even a doctor proclaims. The experience of the – already recovered and immune – toiling narrator exhibits a collapsed system, including inadequate health care. In the aftermath of a World War reaching its end, overburdened, ignorant and undernourished women, suffering from poverty and living conditions which seem not to have changed for many decades, give birth in a Dublin hospital. The protagonist, sister of a shell-shocked demobilised younger brother who awaits her at home, tries to avert multiple deaths, but can only cling to rare signs of survival in total misery. "Normal" (Donoghue 2021: 204) is to her a society locked in a condition without hope for

²⁸ Donoghue 2021: 12. On 18 April 2020 the weekly *DER SPIEGEL* published an article by Ullrich Fichtner in German, whose English translation (N. pag.) literally uses the expression I quote from the novel.

improvement. The envisagement of a future for Ireland through a radical change is assigned to a minor female character, whose revolutionary endeavours have already failed: the physician Dr Lynn, who took part in the Easter Rising and has recently been released from imprisonment in England. An orderly refers to her with the words, "The hospital's hired a criminal?" (Donoghue 2021: 61) Mainstream opinion labels her as "a socialist, suffragette, anarchist firebrand" (Donoghue 2021: 60) and as one of the Sinn Féiners whom "nothing would content [...] but a breakaway republic" (Donoghue 2021: 60). Progress of a society caught in a deadlock is conceived by Dr Lynn as feasible only by a political disruption; however, authoritarianism, oppression – not least by the Church –, fear and reluctance to think about change effect a standstill reaching beyond the end-of-war chaos and the crisis of a pandemic. A new definition of "normal" (Donoghue 2021: 204) appears unimaginable to the narrator in a diseased situation portrayed from a postcolonial position. "*I wish they'd stop using war language, war imagery. This isn't a war. The opposite of a war is happening. The pandemic is making walls and borders and passports as meaningless as nature knows they are*" (A. Smith 2020: 345, italics in original) exclaims Iris, a leftist "online activist" (337) in her eighties and great-aunt to the youngest narrators. Iris has friends in Italy, who have informed her about the speed of the catastrophe (A. Smith 2020: 336). The virus knows neither national borders nor seasons of the year. In Ali Smith's recent novel *Summer*, which processes the first year of the Sars-CoV-2 pandemic among other current issues of 2020 – Brexit, migration, the American President, or the British PM – one of the protagonists makes the overwhelming impact of Nature visible and pointedly distinguishes it from man-made disasters. *Summer* completes the author's always up-to-date 'Seasonal Quartet'. Not only does the precocious child-narrator Robert Greenlaw – to himself a young genius – recur to the emigration story of Albert Einstein who, similarly to Isaac Newton during the Great Plague (A. Smith 2020: 49), lived isolated in a hut on the heath in Northern England for months and spent the time working on mathematical theories (A. Smith 2020: 369–70; cp. Robinson 2019). According to young Robert's wisdom Einstein believed that imposed solitude could stimulate creativity within any individual, especially the young – the predicament thus offering the frames for greatness and extraordinary achievements (A. Smith 2020: 352–53).

Interspersed in the novel's funny opening chapter, which presents the scenic picture of topical conditions in a one-parent family, are remarks by the protagonists about lockdown, facial masks, and Asian viruses. It is, however, in the second chapter, which contains a novelistic representation of historic confinement in internment camps during WWII with the portrayals of survivors, that the 16-year-old narrator Sacha communicates her sadness about the dead of the year 2020 and the chaos caused by the infectious disease (A. Smith 2020: 245–46). Sacha Greenlaw, Robert's teenage sister, also muses about the difference made by the pandemic in lifestyles and awareness:

But I believe one good thing that will come out of this is that my already trampled on generation will be evermore resilient. We will be aware of how lucky we are to spend time with our friends because we will know what it's like to live without them. And by God we will treasure our freedoms and we will fight for them in the name of all that is good (A. Smith 2020: 246–47).

If Sacha – in a Greta-Thunberg aggrieved fashion – first expresses sorrow about her already disadvantaged generation due to the present world-changing coronavirus crisis she reaches an appreciative revaluation of our accustomed regular life, which

must be treasured instead of being taken for granted. Accordingly, she reminds herself of the second plight which is threatening the world with a catastrophe and upsets her generation: "I am holding out for the geniuses who invent the vaccine to also be climate change geniuses. Then we might have a future" (A. Smith 2020: 247). Yet this extremity may turn into a chance for future life only under the condition that humanist stances and extraordinary inventiveness can now gain the upper hand, because "maybe we will realize that we have to stop being poisonous to each other and the world" (A. Smith 2020: 247). For the young girl's oppositional mind, the current situation effectuates a re-thinking of her own lifestyle as well as of the living conditions of the homeless and people in care homes; for other censors like the blogger Iris it is the moment they think most suitable for a devastating accusation of the state and a failing national government (A. Smith 2020: 335–37). However, apart from presenting a public challenge, the lockdown also works on a personal level as a prompter for decision-making, exemplified in a couple who separate for good in the third chapter. In *Charlotte and Art(hur)*, the parents of Sacha and Robert Greenlaw, the Corona pandemic provokes a philosophically musing argument about randomness, contingency, inertia, meaning, and ethos (A. Smith 2020: 323–31). They agree that the "lockdown world" (327) asks for a new definition of meaningfulness. But "in this world where everything is so surreal and seems to be coming apart at the seams for so many people, especially people who are stuck at home" (A. Smith 2020: 327) the crucial question arises whether it is useful to perpetually engage in a "lockdown argument" (A. Smith 2020: 330) instead of experiencing communality and love of one's neighbour.

11 Conclusion

Literary narratives unlock the chance for a new orientation in individuals through the crisis of a (pandemic) disease. To think in alternatives and variants, breaking the cycle of the customary trains of thought and crossing boundaries by recognition reveals a prospect for the future. Thereby illness can "open a window on to a rapidly changing world" (Robson 2020), as fiction variously shows. A change of the 'normal' world, which with its old standards appears no longer as coercive or desirable as previous to radical uncertainty, suffering, social distancing, and isolation, surfaces not as utopian fantasy but as a crucial test. An imagination aroused by such an ordeal individually allows for the realisation of the unfamiliar; for society, imagined in fiction, a pandemic could indeed accelerate a "paradigm shift" (Fichtner 2020).

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