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Pandemic(s), Crisis, and Bibliotherapy

Abstract

The COVID-19 crisis has led to a re-definition of our lives and a significant de-stabilization of our mental condition. Research shows that we tend to conceive of challenging realities in terms of war and battle: thus, we have struggled with depression, low spirits, and a lack of human interaction. If so, how can we counteract such depressive tendencies? Although today it seems that both writing and reading are efficient in mitigating feelings of loneliness, historical records of the reactions to the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 reveal that silence and evasion are also possible. Using the method of wide reading, I first examine the divergent responses to the crisis. Through close reading, I then explore the manner in which literature may be therapeutic for both writers and readers. Finally, I argue that the literary choices of the reading public, recently re-directed towards (auto)biographical fiction, may soon impact the canon within education. This, in turn, prompts a final hypothesis concerning a generic re-shaping of a future literary canon.

Keywords: crisis, pandemic, bibliotherapy, literary canon, autobiography

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 may be conceptualized as an unexpected, disruptive event which has rocked the foundations of established daily routines in virtually every sector of everyday life worldwide. Evidence for this has been found in research conducted synchronously in various European countries, most notably in Italy, the second most affected country in the world by COVID-19 (Gennaro et al., 2020).¹ In a report on the current situation in Italy, Gennaro et al. (2020) find it almost impossible to predict the repercussions of the pandemic, and they list the possible outcomes. In consequence, a distinct divide has been created between recollections of the pre-pandemic world and projections for a future reality. Such rhetoric bespeaks the conceptual categorization of the ongoing pandemic in terms of a crisis, with a critical division into a pre-COVID-19/post-COVID-19 dichotomy.

Conceptualization of *crisis*

A simple search on the Internet is proof enough that the phrase “COVID-19 crisis” has established itself permanently in our vocabularies; the state of emergency has now lasted long enough to create the necessary distance between the categories of pre- and post-pandemic. The issue of temporality seems particularly relevant since an event or a situation can only be labelled critical with hindsight, asserts Ansgar Nünning (2012, p. 2). Moreover, Elena Semino (2021, p. 50) argues that the current pandemic has been repeatedly imagined as the front line in a battle: In her research on the current political discourse in Great Britain, the scholar furnishes numerous examples of militaristic rhetoric,² which she dismisses

¹ For more information about Italy’s situation in Europe during COVID-19, see Ortenzi et al. (2020).

² The scholar quotes from a statement on COVID-19 on 17 March 2020 by Boris Johnson, who labels the virus a deadly enemy, or an alien (Semino, 2021, p. 50f). As in Great Britain, in Poland too we have been exposed to such rhetoric: see an article

as both inappropriate and counter-productive.³ Although questioned by scholars, the militaristic metaphors applied in COVID-related utterances are, in fact, used on an everyday basis by both politicians and the general population worldwide; this, warns Semino, can provoke, or even strengthen the feelings of anxiety, fear, and dread.

Investigating the etymology of *crisis* lends a certain legitimacy to the militaristic conception of the recent pandemic. Even though Semino (2021) deplors the war imagery metaphorically applied in the current, political discourse worldwide, the original uses of the term legitimize and justify the military context. A derivative of the Greek verb *κρίνω* – which can mean to distinguish, to decide, or even to win (a battle)⁴ – namely, the noun *crisis* (*ἡ κρίσις, -εως*), is on rare occasions used to denote a decisive moment in a battle.⁵ However, this meaning is not the major application of *crisis* in classical Greek literature, in which the semantics of the battlefield more often refers to the power of judgement, usually during a trial or at court. Thus, the original saliency of the term is not exclusively tied to war; there is also a further context, namely, a medical context that is also a legitimate use of the noun *crisis*.⁶ Interestingly, when used in both of these less frequent contexts – the military and medical – a certain passivity is implied in the use of the lexeme; in contrast to the courtroom,

in *Rzeczpospolita* available at <https://www.rp.pl/Koronawirus-SARS-CoV-2/210409464-Koronawirus-Reuters-o-sytuacji-epidemicznej-w-Polsce-To-jest-wojna.html>

³ Instead of war metaphors, Semino (2021) proposes fire metaphors as being better suited for the COVID-19 context.

⁴ If not indicated otherwise, all references to the Greek lexemes follow information found in *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, available at <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>. For the military context, see meanings II, 2 b and c under *κρίνω*.

⁵ See the idiom “*κρίσιν σχεῖν*” – of a war, to be decided – discussed under *κρίσις*, meaning III. Interestingly, it implies a certain passivity as well as contingency in a war *crisis*. By contrast, active espousing is implied in the context of a trial or judgement, as evident in *Crisis*, the original title of an ancient drama which dealt with the judgement of Paris. For more information see <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>.

⁶ In the medical context, *crisis* used to imply a sudden change for better or worse; when applied to human anatomy, it denoted the middle of the spinal column; see <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>, under III, 2 and IV, respectively.

a *crisis* in a disease or a battle may occur as a result of a series of events unforeseen by a participant – the narrating focalizer – and thus be conceived of as contingent and accidental, without the agency of an external power or action. Thus, the militaristic conceptualization of the current battle against the COVID-19 pandemic is likely informed, although unconsciously, by the etymological legacy of *crisis*.

Pandemic(s): The Spanish Influenza and COVID-19

If the etymology provides a linguistic foundation for the militaristic conceptualization of the COVID-19 pandemic, European history shows that the metaphorical correspondence between the source domain of war and the target domain of disease, though quite common (Semino, 2021), is not a hard and fast rule. Another pandemic and another war fought in Europe a century ago should be considered, namely, the outbreak of Spanish influenza in 1918 (an H1N1 virus),⁷ which coincided with the end of WWI. If juxtaposed, the prescribed codes of conduct and recorded scenarios appear quite similar during both pandemics as quarantine, isolation, and containment measures were strongly advised both then and now. It seems people suffered from the social restrictions and isolation a century ago as in the present circumstances. However, despite the advice, the pandemic in post-WWI Europe was apparently disregarded by the war-worn population: as Mark Honigsbaum (2014) observes, a century ago, people failed “to register the enormity of the death toll from the Spanish flu” (p. 207). Furthermore, the scholar quotes a famous modernist writer, Virginia Woolf, whose fleeting reference to the ongoing Spanish pandemic reads, “we are, by the way, in the midst of a plague” (Woolf, as cited in Honigsbaum, 2014, p. 225).⁸

⁷ According to official data, the virus had spread worldwide by 1919 and resulted in at least 50 million deaths – see the data given at <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/1918-pandemic-h1n1.html>.

⁸ Interestingly, Woolf also links war and ill health in the quotation, ironically stating, “we are, by the way, in the midst of a plague unmatched since the Black Death,

Today, in the midst of the pandemic frenzy encouraged by the media,⁹ the quotation sounds surprising; nevertheless, its wording suggests that the immediacy of war and its overwhelming presence in the minds of post-WWI Europeans prevented a comparison of battlefield atrocities with a life-threatening flu.¹⁰ Thus, although researchers today propound that the abstract nature of illnesses, both physical and mental, welcomes “the potential therapeutic utility of metaphors, which may be used to conceptualize [them]” (Tay, as cited in Demjén & Semino, 2017, p. 371) – and, as shown above, COVID-19 is particularly conceptualized through war metaphors (Semino, 2021, p. 51) – the 1918 pandemic was marginalized as a result of the temporal juxtaposition of war and illness (Honigsbaum, 2014, pp. 207–227). The scale of suffering exceeded anything we might imagine today; in fact, it left people speechless and disinclined to invest it with any further metaphorical meaning.

Resilience to Crisis: Bibliotherapy

As regards resilience to crisis, there are numerous possible scenarios. However, two major tendencies in dealing with a crisis emerge: either the victims eschew any reference by not directly addressing the issue in question, or else they are completely preoccupied with the problem in an attempt to translate the critical event into familiar terms, and thus reduce it to manageable dimensions. Both the 1918 and 2019 pandemics provoked these divergent reactions, although in the case of the former

according to the *Times*, who seem to tremble lest it may seize upon Lord Northcliff, & thus precipitate us into peace” (Woolf, as cited in Honigsbaum, 2014, p. 18). Honigsbaum’s study of Woolf’s health problems is an interesting contribution to the studies of medical treatment in the early 20th century.

⁹ The present article was written in the late 2021, with COVID-19 as a top priority in the public discussion; since then the threat of the war in Ukraine has overshadowed that of the pandemic.

¹⁰ Honigsbaum (2014, pp. 207–227) examines the “forgotten pandemic” in terms of a trauma.

a failure to openly confront the issue prevailed.¹¹ As Honigsbaum (2014) suggests, the horrors of WWI being followed by the despair at hundreds of thousands pandemic casualties in Spain, and indeed throughout Europe, prompted attitudes different from those seen today in the face of COVID-19. In his study, Honigsbaum (2014, p. 207) argues that ironic detachment from the crushing death toll recorded around 1920 was a natural reaction to an emergency of an unprecedented scale. Certainly, excessive stress fosters repression, and in 1920 this can be observed in statements from the time: "So vast was the catastrophe and so ubiquitous its prevalence that our minds, surfeited with the horrors of war, refused to realize it" (Honigsbaum, 2014, p. 207). Interestingly, the silence surrounding the 1918 pandemic also extends to later accounts of both the Great War and the Spanish influenza pandemic: in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell (1975/2013) only once mentions Spanish flu in the context of demobilization.¹² A similar tendency is discernible in several autobiographical narratives from the period in which the pandemic is mentioned, yet marginalized.¹³ Thus, Honigsbaum (2014) appears to be correct in his conclusion about the possible reactions to crisis by stating that "the enormity of the event renders individual experience irrelevant. To recover the individual story it is necessary to invest it with meaning and significance" (p. 226), which, in the case of WWI and Spanish influenza, has been only attempted from the 1970s onwards.

¹¹ As regards the 1918 pandemic, a deeper reason for such repression might be either political (i.e., maintaining stability on the home front during the war) or psychological (i.e., repressing trauma); more in Honigsbaum (2014, Chapters 6 and 7).

¹² It is a fleeting remark regarding Robert Graves's illness, to which he had almost succumbed (Honigsbaum, 2014, p. 237). See also the aside by Virginia Woolf quoted in Note 7.

¹³ The 1918 pandemic is mentioned in Vera Brittain's *Testament of Youth: An Autobiographical Study of the Years 1900–1925* and in Robert Graves's *Goodbye To All That*. For a discussion of Graves's work in view of WWI and the pandemic, see Fussell (2013, pp. 236–238). A well-known war poet, Siegfried Sassoon, was also affected by Spanish flu, which he mentions in *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston*. For more on the waves of Spanish flu and WWI, see <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4181817>.

By contrast, today the COVID-19 pandemic seems ubiquitous, visible not only in official statements broadcast in the media – which, as shown above, apply militaristic metaphors in the discourse on crisis – but also in private conversations and contemporary literature. It seems that today the second approach to a critical event has become pervasive, namely, a direct treatment of the catastrophe. This may be due to the relative political stability in Europe, on the one hand, and an arguably deeper understanding of the psychological processes – compared to the scientific knowledge available in 1920 – on the other hand. Thus, individual narratives tend to thematize the COVID-19 pandemic. That this may prove to be therapeutic is argued by the principal investigators of the project “Poetry and COVID”; the British scholars involved nominate poetry as a mode of response to COVID-19, which is in line with research on the therapeutic value of literature.¹⁴

The beneficial effects of a direct treatment of any crisis may be explained by the processes of cognition. As the scholars argue, the metaphorical phrases employed in contemporary COVID accounts help their authors and readers approach the current crisis, since “source domains tend to correspond to relatively simpler, more image-rich, and intersubjectively accessible experiences (such as motion, combat, people, and animals)” (Semino, 2020, p. 51). Thus, the relatively complex and abstract target domains are simplified (Demjén & Semino, 2017, pp. 385–399; Tay, 2017, pp. 371–384). Indeed, as Semino (2020) observes, metaphors

greatly expand our conceptual and communicative abilities, as we can draw from the knowledge and language associated with a rich source domain to reason and communicate about a target

¹⁴ The project is funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, the University of Plymouth, and Nottingham Trent University. Any individual may forward their poems about COVID-19 to their website. Some of the poems submitted are selected and published online on a daily basis. Additionally, it is hoped that there will be a future anthology. For more information, see <https://poetryandcovid.com/about/>. Interestingly, war metaphors are also included in the “About” section of the site.

domain for which we may otherwise have little vocabulary and conceptual structure. (p. 52)

In other words, as a rule, metaphors translate the incomprehensible into more intelligible terms, which, in consequence, offers considerable comfort.

Replete with metaphors, the language of literature is as equally responsive to angst and anxiety as common speech: poetic language is capable of transmitting and mitigating feelings of frustration,¹⁵ while at the same time offering the potential for solace and consolation to both writers and readers. The latter point in particular raises the issue of bibliotherapy, a term which, according to Liz Brewster (2018, p. 3), was coined in 1916:¹⁶ bibliotherapy was then used in the treatment of those wounded in WWI (Brewster, 2018, pp. 4–6). Over the next 100 years, bibliotherapy as a field was investigated by psychologists and psychotherapists, who examined both reading responses and creativity. Both these literary interactions have assumed a greater importance in the recent practices of social distancing and remote working; literature initiates a dialogue,¹⁷ if not with another, then with oneself. Due to its particular role in an exploration of emotions and the nature of interpersonal relations (Szurman et al., 2015, pp. 151–161, 190–205; Brewster, 2018), literature has become ever more important as a component of therapy (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 1).

As suggested above, the outbreak of COVID-19 provoked a range of reactions, among which poetic creativity is certainly not the least significant. The outcome of the university project “Poetry and COVID” has

¹⁵ For more details, consult Hedges (2005), particularly Chapter 9, “Running Creative Writing Groups,” by Miriam Halahmy.

¹⁶ Bibliotherapy as a term was first used in *Atlantic Monthly* in the article “A Literary Clinic,” by Samuel McCord Crothers; it was applied in a medical context. Based on the medical usage, in 1919 the term was metaphorically applied in a novella by Christopher Morley, *A Haunted Bookshop*. For more information, see Brewster (2018, pp. 3–4).

¹⁷ For more on dialogue form and function, consult Kinzel and Mildorf (2011). For an interesting discussion of the diverse, philosophical notions of the dialogic form, see Guilherme and Morgan (2018).

shown that both academics and ordinary individuals have been involved in translating their experiences of social distancing and isolation into poetry. An excellent example of such poetizing is a 2021 publication, *Corona Sucks*, by Professor Till Kinzel.¹⁸ While the poem certainly deserves a more detailed discussion, in my analysis I wish to explore its explanatory function. In accordance with Gertrude Stein's observation about the explanatory function of poetry,¹⁹ the nouns by far outnumber the verbs in the poem.²⁰ The opening, tell-tale word, "Corona" – which is part of both the title and the first line of the poem – not only highlights the immediate COVID-19 context, but also predetermines the pandemic frame of reference against which all the nouns are used. Thus, the fairly familiar phrase, "waves / of melancholy / and depression" (vv. 2–4) is immediately imbued with an additional meaning – the waves of casualties during a pandemic. The tidal movement, which has shaped our reality into phases of so-called high and low tides of the disease, is also reflected by the regularity of the tertasyllabic lines, which several cases of *enjambement* breach – similarly to the unpredictable number of new cases of coronavirus. Analyzed from the perspective of an individual living under COVID-19 restrictions, the series of irregular run-on lines – with the help of which the poem is actually framed as one sentence – may connote the sudden lifting or tightening of the rules imposed by governments. The pandemic seems both never-ending, like a long, one-sentence poem, and yet divided into definite phases in which "I have gone / half mad with fear / locked-down in mind / and soul" (vv. 12–15). Furthermore, the abruptness of the lines

¹⁸ I am greatly indebted to Professor Kinzel for having shared the poem with me. It is published online at <https://poetryandcovid.com/2021/01/15/corona-sucks>.

¹⁹ In her lectures on poetry and narration, Gertrude Stein observes that poetry is mainly connected to the function of naming, whereas prose narration performs the function of registering movement. This, according to Stein, is due to the divergent word categories involved in the composition of the forms: while the former is dependent upon nouns, the latter is based upon sentences and paragraphs (Stein, as cited in Ashton, 1997, p. 318).

²⁰ Some verbs – "to speak, / to laugh, to jest, / to ponder and digest" (vv. 17–19) – are aligned in an enumeration, which appears to render them nominalized even though, formally, they are infinitives.

seems to rhythmically emphasize the literal meaning of the metaphor in which the lyrical I admits to having become used to “ra- / ther cough[ing] up thoughts” (vv. 9–10). This uncommon metaphor links the act of coughing, a major symptom of COVID-19, with a basic human activity – the thinking process – with the implication that COVID-19 has permeated into every sphere of our lives, even into our most private thoughts. The degree adverb “rather” is split into two syllables – graphically represented by a hyphen and the ensuing *enjambement* – and, thus, its forced and unusual division adds to the conceptualization of the metaphor as a literal, poetic representation of a cough: the lyrical I seems to literally “cough up” the line. Apparently, COVID-19 has utterly permeated the lives of those who either cough because they are unwell or in anticipation of falling ill. By virtue of the mundane vocabulary, basic grammar, and a certain laconicism of statement, the reader is able to reconstruct and identify with the final act, metaphorically described by the lyrical I as the act of “put[tin]g my heart / in quarantine” (vv. 22–23). To my mind, herein lies the particular strength of the lines: although apparently a monologue, the poem prompts, and indeed invites, a direct response from the readers, who may identify with the feelings of frustration at the unexpected restrictions. Consequently, the poem is received as a convincing translation of the pre-COVID-19 world into a less-than-normal COVID reality, a reality defined by the first and last words of the poem as “Corona ... quarantine.” The experience thus becomes both communicable and comprehensible through the recognition of a shared human experience. Theoretical research offers support of such an explanatory reading of the poem, because it has been established that “reading poetry can trigger greater levels of emotional focus, attentiveness and imagination” (Green, 2020, p. 125). In the poem quoted above, the attentiveness to a range of aspects related to COVID-19 may foster resilience in the readers by creating a sense of community and emotional connection. After all, one major force of imaginative literature is to mitigate the feeling of loneliness (Brewster, 2018, p. 43). This, in turn, agrees with Rita Felski’s (2015) recent claims about the uses of literature in everyday life: The scholar argues that, instead of a condescending attitude towards non-academic

responses to literature, academics “would do well to reflect on” them as, even if unprofessional, they show that literature matters to its readership (p. 191). I would add that it does so particularly during a pandemic.

As the foregoing discussion implies, greater resilience to a crisis can be also be achieved through the act of reading: in such cases the explanatory function of literature is linked with the instrumental function, as the world being depicted is conceived in terms of an analogy to reality. According to Jaén and Simon (2012), a major therapeutic role can be assigned to reading, as “stories may be viewed as a human adaptive strategy to maximize our chances for survival by allowing us to watch safely the experiences of others and extract valuable lessons” (p. 2). The strategies of survival – in other words, the means of resistance to critical events – have increasingly gained the attention of scholars of both literature and the medical humanities (Brewster, 2018; Mildorf, 2020; Hustvedt, 2010).²¹ Among the diverse approaches adopted, which include prescribed reading²² as well as the process of creative writing,²³ several therapeutic models have been developed in order to foster patients’ resilience to critical events.²⁴ Numerous examples could be adduced to support the hypothesis; yet it is sufficient to mention Virginia Woolf’s fierce contradiction to the suggestion of one of her doctors, who surmised – early in the 20th century – that during an illness any creative effort or emotional involvement

²¹ I am indebted to professor Jarmila Mildorf for directing my attention to Hustvedt’s most recent book as well as to the findings of the medical humanities. For further references, consult the forthcoming issue of *Narratives & Mental Health* (Brill), which is entitled *Narratives and Mental Health: Bridging the Cultural and the Individual* edited by Jarmila Mildorf, Elisabeth Punzi, and Christoph Singer.

²² Clinical literature has introduced the notion of Books on Prescription, where literature is literally prescribed to patients, i.e., bibliotherapy. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommended in its guidelines such treatment for depression, anxiety, and bulimia nervosa (Brewster, 2018, p. 12). See also the description of university experiments in Green (2020, pp. 102–125).

²³ At the beginning of the 20th century, the terms “pathography” and “autopathography” were applied in the medical context; for more information, see Mildorf (2020, p. 111).

²⁴ For the diversity of approaches, see Brewster (2018, Chapter 2).

in the world of fiction caused too much exertion and was quite detrimental to her physical and mental well-being (Honigsbaum, 2014, pp. 4–5). This was challenged by Woolf, who stated that if she were “divorced from [her] pen ... a whole current of life [would be] cut off” (Woolf, as cited in Honigsbaum, 2014, p. 10). Contrary to the doctor’s advice, Woolf has in fact been proven correct, as today the therapeutic effects of reading and writing have become an established field of investigation.²⁵

Generic considerations

Since I am a literary scholar, a special point of interest is the question of whether any genre might be particularly helpful for therapeutic purposes. As regards prose narration, autobiographical writing – or rather *life writing*²⁶ – appears to support patients afflicted with physical illnesses, since – according to Brewster (2018) – they “may find meaning and understanding in reading autobiographical accounts of others who have undergone and articulated similar experience to them” (p. 41). A case in point is Siri Hustvedt’s (2010) *A Shaking Woman, or a History of My Nerves*, in which the author endeavors to explain to both herself and her readers the mysterious disease whose symptoms she traces in the autobiographical narrative; as in *Corona Sucks*, the explanatory function of literature also becomes discernible.

Apparently, exposure to a global pandemic has increased the demand for autobiographical storytelling with which the readers may, to some extent, identify. Thus, if what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010, p. 127) claim holds true, namely, that the pre-pandemic decades were

²⁵ For example, the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society at the University of Liverpool – the outcomes of the studies are discussed in Green (2020, pp. 99ff).

²⁶ Since my paper is focused on bibliotherapy, I eschew a discussion about the form, i.e., autobiography as a distinct genre, mode, or a kind of discourse. A compelling discussion can be found in Buchholtz (2011, pp. 19–45). As Mirosława Buchholtz asserts, literary scholars today tend to apply the broader notion of *life writing*.

governed by autobiographical discourse,²⁷ then its representation within literature during the COVID-19 pandemic seems to have increased considerably. As Jarmila Mildorf (2020, p. 107) observes, one attraction of autobiographical accounts within a medical context might be their narrative potential, which involves, and indeed promotes, the creation of a “story logic” behind an obscure illness. To my mind, the logic ascribed to the unknown and unexpected is an integral part of the survival strategy in general, and thus also during the COVID-19 pandemic, since a storyline unfolds in time while logically heading towards its conclusion, with the expectation of a(n) (happy) ending. An apparent desire for predictability has become clear, even in imaginative literature; as argued, autobiographical storytelling may re-introduce a certain order into a chaotic reality, which is particularly the case with autobiographical narration.

Therefore, bibliotherapy has acquired a special importance in the recent crisis, as (self-)isolation has become a major medical recommendation in times of emergency, despite being questioned by some politicians and sociologists: it is necessary to stay safe, even if lonely, at home. This loneliness is likely to provoke both creative writing responses and a marked increase in the sales of books.²⁸ The consequences of this peculiar situation may be deeper than expected: I contend that, under critical conditions, individual reading preferences may change somewhat, leading to a shift in the categories or genres in demand, and possibly to a re-shaping of the literary canon. Insofar as reading preferences are concerned, as shown above, (auto)biographical narration may be favored over prose fiction with a greater interest in historical or social novels;²⁹ quite naturally, the focus is now on the individual. This might involve

²⁷ For a comprehensive discussion of the various forms of autobiography, see Smith and Watson (2010, p. 127ff). I endorse the authors’ claims about the multifariousness of the *life* narrative.

²⁸ A report by Business Research Company (2020) estimates that the 2021 global book market increased by 5.4% over 2020. The report includes e-books alongside published volumes and predicts a rapid growth in digital book versions.

²⁹ In his *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Harold Bloom observed a shift away from historical novels as early as the 1990s (Bloom, 1994/2019, pp. 31f).

substantial changes in the school canon. Indeed, reading lists are being revised during the COVID-19 pandemic, at least in Poland: here the educational institutions have approached the canon from the stance of ethics and have argued for the promotion of virtues in compulsory reading lists, which have been supplemented by autobiographical narration.³⁰

Conclusion

As argued above, in times of self-imposed isolation certain forms such as (auto)biographies, memoirs, or letters³¹ become particularly attractive since they invite, and indeed encourage, the processes of self-identification while also offering consolation to the reader. Whereas consolation may be a debatable issue, the preference of a given genre over another is measurable: Research proves a direct interdependence between social changes, literary taste, and the literary canon.³² As Alastair Fowler (1982, pp. 214–215) asserts, although the official canon seems more stable than the tastes of the readers, it is also liable to transform, particularly in the case of formal school curricula. The critic asserts that the official school canon leaves some space for individual choices and these, I argue, may become more focused on *life writing* and its sub-genres. Readers may prefer well-known characters and the (auto)biographical renditions of their struggles, which compensates for the lack of stability in times of crisis. In the long run, this may lead to a reevaluation of the genres represented in the current canon, both critical and institutional, since “the complete

³⁰ See the statement by the Minister for Education, Przemysław Czarnek, published on November 20, 2020, which propounded the indispensability of the philosophical legacy of John Paul II in Polish schools (Michalak. 2020). As a literary scholar, I can merely comment on literature. To my mind, the recent changes in the canon in Poland have been encouraged by two separate phenomena: While the focus on the individual is motivated by the COVID-19 crisis, the promotion of exemplary deeds and lives may be rooted in the present policy of the government.

³¹ All of which are sub-genres of autobiographical narration; see Smith and Watson (2010).

³² More in Fowler (1982, pp. 213f).

range of genres is never equally, let alone fully, available in any one period” (Fowler, 1982, p. 227) and every epoch makes deletions and additions to the repertoire of active genres (Fowler, 1982, p. 227). The increased pre-pandemic interest in the (auto)biographical generic formula noted by scholars (Smith & Watson, 2010) may be consolidated since individual preferences – induced and strengthened by the recent crisis – will be linked with the more usual processes of canon modification (Fowler, 1982, pp. 230–232).

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