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Contagious Otherness: Translating Communicable Diseases in the Modern Italian and Francophone Novel

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The words 'contagion' ('to touch together') and 'translation' ('to carry across') share a common course of action and meaning, i.e. that of breaking what 'should be joined or joining [what] should be separate' (Douglas, 1966: 113). Continuous yet imperceptible, ideas of risk, corruption and error have been attached as much to the transfer of texts, beliefs and theories as to the spread of diseases. Our immune system fights against outsiders, just like national cultures can shield themselves from the foreign. Yet, if we have come to accept that contagion can be understood as a 'foundational concept in the study of [literature], of religion and of society' (Wald, 2008: 2), translation's epidemiological dimensions have remained relatively unexplored. What do the art of translation and epidemiological science have in common, and how can they inform one another? Why is contagion culturally valuable, but physiologically destructive? How can translation theory contribute to an innovative biocultural epistemology of contagion? This essay aims to address these questions by shedding light on the implicit, yet understudied, translation-contagion link. It offers the first comparative analysis of its kind, covering three centuries (19th century–present), two languages (Italian and French), and four contagious diseases (plague, smallpox, Ebola and AIDS). It provides an interdisciplinary model that allows us to approach the study of literature and epidemiology in a synergetic, non-exclusive way, based on the double mobilisation, or 'entanglement' (Whitehead et al., 2016), of literary and medical knowledge.

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The Science-Art of Alterity

The expression ‘outbreak narratives’, coined and theorised by Priscilla Wald (2008: 2), refers to scientific, journalistic and fictional accounts of epidemics: evolving stories that follow a formulaic plot, from the early detection of the foci of infection to containment. The present study borrows Wald’s powerful coinage to explore processes of othering and belonging in Italian and Francophone outbreak narratives of the modern and contemporary period (19th century to present). It investigates five literary, non-Anglophone cases: Alessandro Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi* [*The Betrothed*] (1842); Albert Camus’ *La Peste* [*The Plague*] (1947); J-M G Le Clézio’s *La Quarantaine* [*The Quarantine*] (1995); Nicola Gardini’s *La vita non vissuta* [*The Unlived Life*] (2015); and Véronique Tadjo’s *En compagnie des hommes* [*In the Company of Men*] (2017).¹ The chosen texts exemplify the interplay between immunity and community, the personal and the collective, the self and the other, in ways that, I argue, illuminate the relational—and ultimately translational—dimension of contagion. A significant proportion of these narratives (three out of five) are postcolonially invested accounts of contagion in the Francosphere (Camus, Le Clézio and Tadjo), a perspective that will allow us to examine forms of cross-cultural contact and/or resistance vis-à-vis questions of power and race. This analysis embraces the idea that translation is an epistemic category, enabling us to investigate the paradoxical tensions upon which health and well-being depend (Engbretsen, Sandset and Ødemark, 2017; Susam-Saraeva and Spišiaková, 2021). Revealing the semantic conflation of cultural and biological communicability, these novels highlight the biological, cultural and literary parables traced by four contagious diseases in the past three hundred years—plague (Manzoni, Camus), smallpox (Le Clézio), AIDS (Gardini) and Ebola (Tadjo)—and across four geographical areas (France, Italy, the Indian Ocean and West Africa). This temporal and spatial expanse will help us to contrast and compare, both transnationally and transhistorically, and through the lens of translation theory, notions and experiences of contagion.

What do the art of translation and epidemiological science have in common, and how can they inform one another? Why is contagion culturally valuable, but physiologically destructive? By interweaving literary, immunological and philosophical approaches on the one hand and, and adopting the instruments of textual analysis and close reading on the other, this article will attempt to sketch a biocultural theory of contagion. The article will test a double, complementary hypothesis: immunology is the science of otherness and translation is the art of honouring alterity. In doing so, the

¹ Quotations from these novels will be taken from published English translations in the body of the essay, whereas original excerpts are quoted in full in the notes. Gardini’s and Le Clézio’s novels have not yet been translated into English; in these cases, the translations provided are mine.

article puts into operation the science–humanities agenda advocated by second-wave medical humanities (Whitehead et al., 2016). Whereas first-wave medical humanities placed an emphasis on the ancillary role of the humanities in the training of medics and care professionals (the three Es of this primary scene being ethics, education and experience), second-wave medical humanities is more theoretically charged and has a globally-oriented agenda, its most defining feature being the notion of disciplinary ‘entanglement’, or integration.

As Ivorian writer Véronique Tadjo reminds us, ‘knowledge knows no borders’ (2021: 103), which is to say that it is inherently translational; it is produced, circulates and infects our imagination through translational paradigms.² Far from merely a transfer of words and meanings from one language to the other, translation is a powerful, hermeneutic tool that allows us to better understand the mysterious relation between Self and Other. I hope that this essay will help to define, and contribute to, the evolution of a hermeneutic of translation which transcends linguistic, cultural and disciplinary borders.

Immunity and Community

Epidemics are fundamentally relational diseases, in that their modes of infection depend upon contact with others, be they a close family member, a stranger, an animal or a microbe. Yet, despite a wide range of disease vectors, the figure of the carrier has long been associated with that of the migrant or outsider: the paradigmatic Other, or ‘archetypal stranger’, who embodies the danger and fascination of ‘human interdependence in a shrinking [globalised] world’ (Wald, 2008: 10). It is more and more common to juxtapose a ‘global transportation network’, and its circulation of bodies and commodities, with a ‘global disease network’ where ‘the threat posed by internal exchange ... resides in the potentially undetected passage of invisible contaminants across institutionally regulated borders’ (Ostherr, 2002: 2, 12).

As Korean-born, German philosopher Byung-Chul Han puts it, ‘everything [perceived as immunologically or culturally] foreign is simply combated and warded off’ (2015: 2). Even though biological evolution and societal progression have been shaped by genetic and environmental differences (variation)—often expressed in the forms of deviation from the norm and transgression of boundaries—foreignness is unwelcome. This unresolved tension between Self and Other, immunity and community, determines the mysterious master plot of health and illness. While the Other as ‘secret’, ‘temptation’, ‘eros’, ‘desire’, ‘hell’ and ‘pain’ is rejected and disappears, the

² ‘La connaissance est sans frontières’ (Tadjo, 2017: 131).

‘proliferation of the Same constitutes the pathological changes that afflict the social [and biological] body’ (Han, 2015: 1).

Like communication, the experience of contagion relies on patterns of relationality. One of the most compelling arguments supporting the validity of this relational paradigm has been offered by Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito, who examines the transversal nature of immunity as an epistemic category. Esposito observes that phenomena such as ‘the battle against a new resurgence of an epidemic, [...] the strengthening of barriers in the fight against illegal immigration, and strategies for neutralising the latest computer virus’ may have nothing in common if they continue to be ‘interpreted within their separate domains of medicine, law, social politics, and information technology’ (2011: 7). And yet, as Esposito demonstrates, our understanding of relationality changes radically when stories of this kind—biological, juridical, technological and cultural—are read through the unique, interpretative lens of immunity, i.e. a category that is able to ‘cut across ... distinct discourses, ushering them onto the same horizon of meaning’ (2011: 7). An ontology of immunity has the advantage of congregating, rather than segregating, knowledge. By means of a unifying, hermeneutic act, it enables us to address the double mystery of contagion, which is at once cultural and biological. The aetiology, mechanism and therapeutics of infectious diseases rely on, and manifest through, the vertiginous, ‘breathtaking correspondence[s]’ that occur at the interface of different disciplines and semantics (Esposito, 2011: 197). As a result, Esposito’s ontology of immunity is, in fact, an ontology of relation. Just as the Self seeks to define and protect itself by way of distinction from the Other, there is no identity without community, the human species being social by definition.

The coexistence of seemingly opposite forces, within and outside biological and societal apparatuses, is apparent in the delicate, and often self-contradictory, equilibrium of legislation whereby violence and oppression can in turn be condemned and legitimised (for example, the existence of prisons has often been justified on the basis of this idea). The co-presence of opposites also validates the counter-intuitive principle underpinning vaccines, i.e., the assumption that the inoculation of disease vectors in the human body serves to protect this same body from disease. As noted by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1995), immunology is the science of contradictions. If biological and societal interactions can be seen as acts of communication, it follows that all communication is immunological and that immunology is inherently communicative (see Esposito, 2011: 52–53).

This complex system of exchange-refusals can have nihilistic implications not only for the individual, but also for the human species. Autoimmune diseases such as AIDS

trigger the lethal mechanism whereby a biological Other (e.g., HIV) is misrecognised as the Self. HIV is an immunodeficiency virus that, by attacking the body's immune system and by interfering with its ability to respond to other viruses and infection, can cause acquired immune deficiency syndrome, otherwise known as AIDS. Another case in point, which illustrates how protection from the non-self can generate instead of reduce risk, is vaccines and pharmaceuticals. As Michel Foucault pointed out (2004), induced defence mechanisms against bacteria and viruses, like all forms of medication, represent both protection and risk for the organism that is exposed to artificial attacks. According to Foucault, vaccines and medications induce a disturbance, even a destruction, of the human and natural ecosystems (10). By the same token, national cultures may perceive the entrance of immigrants and outsiders within their political and cultural borders as at once enriching and threatening.

Esposito comes to terms with this apparently unsolvable puzzle of logical contradictions by proposing a paradigm shift. Drawing on the works of theorists such as Donna Haraway (1998) and Alfred Tauber (1994), he replaces the vocabulary of war and defence—dominant in narratives of biological and cultural infections—with that of recognition. This is nothing less than a Copernican revolution insofar as it posits the [biological and sociological] body not only as an organism open to alterity and alteration, but one that is vitally dependent on them. This change in perspective implies that (1) the body is a fluid and derivative entity, rather than a self-contained, independent system; and (2), that immunity is the process whereby the Self and the Other are continuously and interactively produced.

The Translational Paradigm

I call the paradigmatic shift auspicated by Esposito 'translational': first, because translation deals, by its very nature, with alterity (Bassnett, 2005); and second, because translation functions through and permits the coexistence of opposites—science and culture (Engebretsen, Henrichsen and Ødemark, 2020), dominance and marginality (Venuti, 1995), uniqueness and multitude (Reynolds, 2020)—to name just a few. A recent interdisciplinary project has demonstrated that translation and contagion are linked not only semantically and historically, but also ontologically and functionally (Arnaldi, Engebretsen and Forsdick, 2022). This study has shown how both elements exist by virtue of, and rely upon, a present-centred temporality (translation and contagion happen in the now), an other-oriented agenda (they negotiate the encounter with alterity), and patterns of exponential growth (they are meant to sustain processes of proliferation and multiplication). Translation

and contagion also point to language as a fundamental tool of communicability and biocultural circulation, since both ideas and viruses replicate themselves through translation. The present section extends these theories' concern with linguistic, cultural and biological otherness. I contend that translation studies provide us with a powerful theoretical horizon in which we can inscribe, and cross-fertilise, experiences of biological and cultural alterity.

The 'hermeneutic motion', a translation model theorised by George Steiner (1998), performs the dialectics between immunity and community occurring in every act of communication, which, for Steiner, is essentially an act of translation (translation is the mode of human speech, even when it is monoglot). Yet, the fourfold movement of translation/communication—which comprises trust, aggression, embodiment and restitution—is linguistic and cultural as much as it is biological and immunological. Steiner notices that:

No language, no traditional symbolic set or cultural ensemble imports without risk of being transformed. ... After a time, the native organism will react, endeavouring to neutralise or expel the foreign body. Much of European romanticism can be seen as a riposte to this sort of infection, as an attempt to put an embargo on a plethora of foreign, mainly French eighteenth-century goods. In every pidgin we see an attempt to preserve a zone of native speech and a failure of that attempt in the face of politically and economically enforced linguistic invasion. The dialect of embodiment entails the possibility that we may be consumed (315).

Inevitably, we experience loss and breakage in every translational/relational endeavour. The 'hermeneutic motion' postulates that the 'enactment of reciprocity', or restitution, i.e., the stage that allows us to restore balance, is 'the crux of the *métier* and morals of translation' (Steiner, 1998: 316). Reciprocity reveals that translation, just like immunity, is 'an act of double entry' seeking to equalise outflows and inflows of energy in a way that reproduces the enigmatic dynamics of otherness and self-definition (Steiner, 1998: 319). In this sense, the hermeneutic motion is an ethical movement, in that it points to a way of preserving the Self without rejecting the Other.

This series of functional similarities between biological and cultural transmission do not exhaust the theoretical possibilities of translation in terms of our effort to examine biocultural contagion. In accepting Steiner's definition that translation is implicit in every act of communication, I deduce that translation can produce occasions of (1) relationality, (2) variety, (3) preservation and (4) cognition. These categories have been inspired by, and interact with, the four stages of Steiner's

hermeneutic motion, and they have been adapted here to map the complex texture of immunological and transcultural transfer.

There is a centrifugal impulse in language (Steiner, 1998: 32), or, if one prefers, a ‘language instinct’ (Pinker, 1994: 15) that: connects us with others (relationality); helps us to articulate cultural and biological responses (variety); serves the evolution of life by means of, and as transmitted by, accounts of scientific, philosophical and literary investigations (preservation); and mediates between the ‘phenomenal reality of the “empirical world” and the internalised structures of consciousness’ (cognition) (Steiner, 1998: 85). Knowledge is ‘created in and through the [translational] dynamics of statement’ (Steiner, 1998: 85).

As abstract as they may be, these elements capture the complex, biocultural mechanisms of epidemics. Outbreaks of infectious diseases pose questions of relationality (contagion comes from an external vector); variety (responses to disease vectors can be culturally and genetically diversified); preservation (the health of the individual is linked to that of the community); and cognition of physical and spiritual phenomena (epidemics are ‘metaphysical’ in that they confront us with the problem of the incomprehensibility of evil and of the unknown) (Givone, 2012).

In the following sections, I explore how these forces interact in the chosen novels. The aim is to test the suitability of translation theory—in the form of the model devised here—to analyse contagion. As the prototypical locus of alterity, translation cuts across immunological, cultural and linguistic discourses, thus offering a holistic, if not systematic, understanding of epidemics and their narratives.

The Language Plague

The translational paradigm is most apparent in the disruption of language brought about by epidemics. Since infectious diseases are spread by way of communication, language proves to be a thermometer of contagion. Examples of linguistic difficulty (inability to name and classify unknown events) and alteration (e.g., deviation from normal speech and its epistemic configurations) can affect journalistic, scientific and religious discourse as much as literature. The latter, however, provides a powerful insight into pandemic semantics because it welcomes variance of, and often a divergence from, standard and less creative ways of writing and thinking. Literary language tends to resist standard usage and, in so doing, maintains the ‘health’ of linguistic and epistemic systems which would risk deterioration if they lost their variation potential. Literature also helps us to configure alternative epistemologies when existing knowledge proves to be limited.

There is a language of plague: a set of metaphors (e.g., war) and words frequently used to compose outbreak narratives; but, when the disease affects language directly, there is also a ‘language plague’, which refers to the ways in which language itself becomes ill. This condition, which is at work in many epidemic narratives, on the one hand sheds light on the link between language and cognition and, on the other, outlines the limits of standard expression. As Italo Calvino points out, the sickening of the linguistic apparatus—conceived as a complex semiotic web made of words and images—corresponds to a pathological and anti-literary vision of the world (cognition):

It sometimes seems to me that a pestilence has struck the human race in its most distinctive faculty—that is, the use of words. It is a plague afflicting language, revealing itself as a loss of cognition and immediacy, an automatism that tends to level out all expression into the most generic, anonymous, and abstract formulas ... I don’t wish to dwell on the possible sources of this epidemic ... What interests me are the possibilities of health. Literature, and perhaps literature alone, can create the antibodies to fight this plague in language. ... This lack of substance is not to be found in images and language alone, but in the world itself. This plague strikes also at the lives of people and the history of nations (1988: 56–57).

From this perspective, epidemics implicate philological and literary discourse in that their unfolding is regulated by rhetorical as well as biochemical principles. The first problem of this kind is posed by the classification of diseases; diagnostic reticence, accompanied by the fear of calling things by their true name, seem to emulate, although in a reversed way, the writer’s efforts to capture the *mot juste*. In Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*, medical and political authorities refuse to give the disease its proper name, with the result that the reality of contagion is concealed rather than elucidated. This vagueness, however, is diametrically opposed to that offered by literary language. Whereas the former obfuscates our vision of reality, the latter provides a deeper insight into it, and/or alternative understandings:

In the beginning, then, there has been no plague, no pestilence, none at all, not on any account. The very words had been forbidden. Next came the talk of ‘pestilent fever’—the idea being admitted indirectly, in adjectival form. Then it was ‘not a real pestilence’—that is to say, it was a pestilence, but only in a certain sense; not a true pestilence, but something for which it was difficult to find another name. Last of all, it became a pestilence without any doubt or argument—but now a new idea was attached to it, the idea of poisoning and witchcraft, and this corrupted and confused

the sense conveyed by the dreaded word which could now no longer be suppressed (Manzoni, 1972: 582–83).³

A similar short circuit between naming and knowing, science and superstition, freedom of expression and political control is displayed in Camus' *The Plague*. Like Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, this is a novel on the theme of pathological, betrayed, aborted, and/or perverted communication. Despite differences in language, time, space and scope, both novels follow an ethical and political agenda: *The Betrothed* depicting the moral and political decadence of Lombardy during the Spanish occupation of the late 1620s, and *The Plague* indirectly engaging with the rise of Nazism through the narration of an infectious cataclysm sweeping the French–Algerian city of Oran in the 1940s. In both, plague is the pathological manifestation of illnesses afflicting the biological and societal body. The difficulty of naming/knowing and, as we will see, translating, lies at the centre of both stories as an incontrovertible symptom of the disease. This semantic struggle contributes to the activation of the forces of variation (in the form of freedom of speech and respect for divergent perspectives) and preservation (knowing is curing) that, ultimately, lead to cognition. Scientific and political authorities, driven by irrational and selfish impulses, resist common sense and reason with the result that they sabotage their own quest for knowledge:

The word 'plague' has just been uttered for the first time. ... A word that conjured up in the doctor's mind not only what science chose to put into it, but a whole series of fantastic possibilities utterly out of keeping with that grey-and-yellow town under his eyes. ... True, the word 'plague' has been uttered. ... It was only a matter of lucidly recognizing what had to be recognized. ... Then the plague would come to an end, because it was unthinkable, or, rather, because one thought of it on misleading lines (Camus, 2010: 35–39).⁴

³ 'In principio dunque, non peste, assolutamente no, per nessun conto: proibito anche di proferire il vocabolo. Poi, febbri pestilenziali: l'idea s'ammette per isbieco in un aggettivo. Poi, non vera peste; vale a dire peste sì, ma in un certo senso; non peste proprio, ma una cosa alla quale non si sa trovare un altro nome. Finalmente, peste senza dubbio, e senza contrasto: ma già ci s'è attaccata un'altra idea, l'idea del veleno e del maleficio, la quale altera e confonde l'idea espressa dalla parola che non si può più mandare indietro' (Manzoni, 2002: 716).

⁴ 'Le mot "peste" venait d'être prononcé pour la première fois. ... Le mot ne contenait pas seulement ce que la science voulait bien y mettre, mais une longue suite d'images extraordinaires qui ne s'accordaient pas avec cette ville jaune et grise ... Il est vrai que le mot "peste" avait été prononcé. ... Ce qu'il fallait faire, c'était reconnaître clairement ce qu'il devait être reconnu. ... Ensuite, la peste s'arrêterait parce que la peste ne s'imaginait pas ou s'imaginait fausement' (Camus, 1947: 49, 52–53).

In a similar way, Nicola Gardini's *The Unlived Life* tests the extent to which another infectious disease, AIDS, can be perceived as an 'epidemic of signification' (Treichler, 1987: 32). A love story between two men who contract HIV, the novel explores the ways in which language carries us through, and saves us from, the inexpressibility of illness (Scarry, 1985: 3):

We were still unaware, as we were ignoring to be ignorant, that the vocabulary we were used to had lost its functions; that we were unable to comprehend what we were saying, even though it seemed to us that we were understanding it, and so it should have seemed. ... When we try to describe illness, we never consider the primarily linguistic nature of suffering, the clash with the unsayable, with the insufficiency of semantics, with imprecision, with the temporariness of conclusions, as if we were in a foreign land where we could test all the languages we speak and yet none of them proved to be useful, not even silence. ... Something excessive and irreparable had occurred, and we had no words to talk about it, we had no thoughts to think it. I had finally found love, and love was inflicting on me the most frightening of illnesses (Gardini).⁵

The passage above is a distillation of the translational paradigm theorised in this essay, in that it exemplifies this paradigm's relational, preserving and cognitive dimensions. AIDS discloses the paradox of biocultural communication: being an autoimmune disease, it reminds us that our body can misrecognise itself as Other; and, being classified as a sexually transmitted disease, it shows us that interactions with the Other, even when manifested through a non-pathological experience of love, can make us ill. In this way, AIDS demonstrates that the comparison between the devastation of sense arising from a language detached from reality, and the devastation of the immune system is more than metaphorical. As Sergio Givone puts it, philology can be more useful than psychopathology in the face of contagion (2012: 128).

It is translation, and not erudition, that rescues us from the semantic void. As Nicola Gardini himself noted in an interview, 'illness is a mysterious text; illness asks us to translate this extreme experience, which most of the time we do not understand, into

⁵ 'E ancora ignoravamo, ignorando di ignorare, che il vocabolario cui eravamo abituati aveva perduto le sue funzioni; che non intendevamo quel che dicevamo, anche se ci pareva di intenderlo e così doveva parerci. ... Non si considera mai, quando si cerca di descrivere la malattia, la natura prima di tutto linguistica della sofferenza, lo scontro con l'indicibile, con l'insufficienza della semantica, con l'imprecisione, con la provvisorietà delle conclusioni, come se in una terra straniera mettessimo alla prova tutte le lingue che conosciamo e nessuna alla fine si rivelasse utile, neppure il silenzio. ... Qualcosa di enorme e irreparabile era accaduto, e noi non avevamo le parole per parlarne, non avevamo il pensiero per pensarlo. Io avevo trovato finalmente l'amore, e l'amore mi infliggeva la malattia più temuta' (Gardini, 2015: 60).

something understandable, into something sharable' (Arnaldi and Gardini, 2020). Gardini's reflection invites us to mobilise all available knowledge structures (politics, philosophy, science, religion), and perhaps even propose new ones (through literature's capacity to deviate from standard speech and create new worlds), in order to defend ourselves and others against the risk of meaninglessness, abstraction and dogmatism.

Examples of this epidemic of language and sense, and its antidotes, are numerous in the novels. In *The Betrothed*, Don Ferrante, a cultivated intellectual believing that the plague is caused by astrological forces, dies surrounded by books, an episode which reveals the limitations of human knowledge in the face of contagion. Don Ferrante's reliance on erudition does not save him from death. Camus explores religious discourse in the form of the homilies delivered by Father Paneloux, who first tries to justify the plague as divine punishment and then accepts the fact that the event is, in fact, incomprehensible. Here, Camus' attack on the 'abstractions of the plague' (Camus, 2010: 87) is at once linguistic, ethical and hermeneutic; 'to fight abstraction', the narrator claims, 'you must have something of it in your own makeup' (Camus, 2010: 86).⁶ This radical position of recognition with, and acceptance of, evil—be it a linguistic and cultural habit, a virus, or a person carrying the infection—resonates with Gardini, who takes the translational paradigm to its logical extremes. Together with Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91), who tried to find a new language to transcend the constraints of orthodox poetry and speech, we are here invited to accept that 'Je est un autre' (2009 [1871]: 343) ['I is an other'], which is a further way of suggesting the proximity between the Other and the Self:

The virus became human, it became the 'other'; an immanent, pervasive, ineradicable 'he'. And such it should have been, if I had ever wanted to resist him. I would have never been him, even though he spoke and acted through me. Even though he was 'I'. ... The sick person is like a translation: they are an eternal transitory state ... a version of consciousness that I tried very hard to transform into words (Gardini).⁷

The Exilic Prism

Illness alienates us from our own body and sense of self, with the result of turning us into 'strangers to ourselves' and one another (Kristeva, 1991). As demonstrated in

⁶ 'Les abstractions de la peste'; 'Pour lutter contre l'abstraction il faut un peu lui ressembler' (Camus, 1947: 110).

⁷ 'E il virus si umanizzò, diventò l'"altro"; un "lui", immanente, pervasivo, inestirpabile. E tale doveva essere, se volevo resistergli. Io non sarei mai stato lui, anche se lui parlava e agiva attraverso di me. Anche se lui era "io". ... Il malato è come una traduzione: è un eterno stato di passaggio ... una versione della coscienza che io tanto faticosamente ho cercato di trasformare in parole' (Gardini, 2015: 97, 203).

the previous section, by the military imagery and vocabulary used to narrativise the experience of disease, the sick individual feels attacked and estranged. Pain, perhaps the most intimate of all experiences, is also one that constantly confronts us with otherness, as well as with experiences of contamination from the outside world (Han, 2018); it elicits a sense of foreignness within ourselves. The feeling of self-alienation determined by illness can be refracted in a multitude of exilic experiences, which I explore below. I define this set of interlinked, othering inflections of the self as the ‘exilic prism’. That illness transforms our citizen status into that of an exile is memorably revealed by Susan Sontag in the opening lines of her 1978 essay *Illness as Metaphor*:

Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place (2002: 3).

In the novels to be discussed—but this is also symptomatic of non-literary narratives of contagion (e.g., journalistic)—the infectious disease is often carried by non-locals, who are rapidly accused of being superspreaders (Wald, 2008: 4). It is not surprising that, both in *The Betrothed* and *The Quarantine*, foreigners are considered responsible for the transmission of the plague and smallpox respectively, and that the accused are marginalised and persecuted. The following quotations, taken from the novels in question, prove this point:

The commission of public health had feared that the plague would come to the duchy of Milan with the German troops; and so it did, as is well known (Manzoni, 1972: 564).⁸

On the other side, there are many migrants in the same state; they disembarked from the ships coming from India presenting all the symptoms of smallpox (Le Clézio, 1995: 98).⁹

The threat represented by the Other in an epidemic emergency translates into measures of separation and confinement. National borders are closed to limit the influx of goods and people; social gatherings are prohibited; migrants cannot return home; relatives,

⁸ ‘La peste che il tribunale della sanità aveva temuto che potesse entrar con le bande alemanne nel milanese, c’era entrata davvero, come è noto’ (Manzoni, 2002: 700).

⁹ ‘Il y a beaucoup d’immigrants dans le même état de l’autre côté, qui ont été débarqués des bateaux venant de l’Inde, avec tous les symptômes de la variole’ (Le Clézio, 1995: 98).

lovers and friends may be kept apart; xenophobic acts may occur. Anyone who has experienced the COVID-19 pandemic does not need to read novels to be familiar with such occurrences.

In Camus' *The Plague*, the forced exile imposed on the lives of the characters is thought to be more detrimental than contagion itself. 'The thing he'd most detest', the narrator says with reference to the character Cottard, 'is being cut off from others; he'd rather be one of the beleaguered crowd than a prisoner alone' (Camus, 2010: 293).¹⁰ The severance of human relations goes hand-in-hand with the spread of the disease, as in the case of the journalist Raymond Rambert. When the plague strikes, he finds himself unable to join his partner in Paris, thus remaining trapped in a city with which he has no connections. Rambert's migrant condition embodies that of all human beings in the face of disease. As forced isolation becomes more and more a synonym of interrupted and/or impeded communication, the exile resorts to the language of platitude, that is, a plagued idiom:

Thus the first thing that plague brought to our town was exile. ... Still, if it was an exile, it was, for most of us, an exile in one's own home. ... In the general exile, [travellers such as the journalist Rambert] were the most exiled. ... Moreover, in this extremity of solitude none could count on any help from his neighbour; each had to bear the load of his troubles alone. ... This was true of those at least for whom silence was unbearable, and since the others could not find the truly expressive word, they resigned themselves to using the current coin of language, the commonplaces of plain narrative, of anecdote, and of their daily paper. So in these cases, too, even the sincerest grief had to make do with the set phrases of ordinary conversation (Camus, 2010: 67–72).¹¹

As shown by this passage, the translational paradigm relies upon a logic of communication whereby human interaction, linguistic expression and contagion are closely intertwined.

¹⁰ 'La seule chose qu'il ne veuille pas', the narrator says with reference to the character Cottard, 'c'est être séparé des autres. Il préfère être assiégé avec tous que prisonnier tout seul' (Camus, 1947: 226).

¹¹ 'La première chose que la peste apporta à nos concitoyens fut l'exil. ... Mais si c'était l'exil, dans la majorité des cas c'était l'exil chez soi. ... Dans l'exil général, [les voyageurs comme le journaliste Rambert] étaient les plus exilés ... Dans ces extrémités de la solitude, enfin, personne ne pouvait espérer l'aide du voisin et chacun restait seul avec sa préoccupation. ... Pour ceux à qui le silence était insupportable, et puisque les autres ne pouvaient pas trouver le vrai langage du cœur, ils se résignaient à adopter la langue des marchés, ... le mode conventionnel, ... de la chronique quotidienne ... Les douleurs les plus vraies prirent l'habitude de se traduire dans les formules banales de la conversation' (Camus, 1947: 88, 90, 93).

In Le Clézio's *The Quarantine*, which takes place on Flat Island, not far from the north coast of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, the translational discourse is punctuated with underlying postcolonial undertones. Once more, we witness the unresolved tension between Self and Other, immunity and community, concern and fascination. The novel is constructed upon a complex system of identifications that enables the projection of the protagonist/narrator Léon into a younger version of himself, as well as into the self of his own ancestors (grandfather), of literary and/or legendary figures (e.g., the poet Rimbaud), and of the Other by definition, Suryavati (the Euro-Asian woman with whom Léon falls in love). Throughout this centrifugal and other-oriented narration, readers are informed of the smallpox outbreak only through the depiction of the containment measures that result in a forced exile on the island. The quarantine zone thus becomes a translation zone (Apter, 2006). In such space, we may encounter non-native speakers mastering a foreign tongue, as the boundaries between the familiar and the foreign begin to blur. As this series of multiple examples show, epidemics are great equalisers:

—Where did you learn to speak French so fluently?

My question was idiotic and deserves an ironic answer.

—Just like you, I suppose. It's my language. (Le Clézio, 1995: 134)¹²

She is similar to me, she is from here and from nowhere, she belongs to this island that belongs to no one. She belongs to the Quarantine. (Le Clézio, 1995: 145)¹³

—*Bhiiii...* Would you like to be my brother? ... I have a strange feeling, something that has broken deep inside me, something that has been liberated. (Le Clézio, 1995: 191)¹⁴

I was not the same person any longer. I was someone else, I was her. (Le Clézio, 1995: 322)¹⁵

Le Clézio's account of the smallpox epidemic is translational, inasmuch as it emphasises the therapeutic effects of alterity. The process of recognising oneself in, and ultimately becoming, the Other is described in almost ritualistic terms: it marks the protagonist's

¹² '—Où as-tu appris à parler français aussi bien? Ma question est idiote et mérite la réponse ironique: —Comme toi, je suppose. C'est ma langue' (Le Clézio, 1995: 134).

¹³ 'Elle est semblable à moi, elle est d'ici et de nulle part, elle appartient à cette île qui n'appartient à personne. Elle est de la Quarantaine' (Le Clézio, 1995: 145).

¹⁴ —*Bhiiii...* Veux-tu être mon frère? ... J'ai un sentiment étrange, quelque chose qui s'est rompu au fond de moi, qui s'est libéré' (Le Clézio, 1995: 191).

¹⁵ 'Je n'étais plus le même. J'étais un autre, j'étais elle' (Le Clézio, 1995: 322).

incremental stages of healing through their encounter with another human being, language and culture.

Love as a healing/destructive force also animates Gardini's novel. Here the immunity-community dynamic is unmasked and scrutinised in its grammatical mechanisms. The language of the body and physical well-being has its own embryogenesis and evolution, which, intriguingly, is presented as opposing the language of the mind. Gardini movingly stages the split between mind and body from which illness emerges. Our affection for a fellow human being, which represents translation's emotional underpinnings, bridges the gap between the seemingly irreconcilable spheres of matter and spirit:

This is the immune system: the evolutionary result of the strenuous will to be one-self and not an other; it is the body that learns to say: 'I am I and you are you'; the body that commits to distinguishing the pronouns; that invents a grammar, that establishes the right to recognisability as it claims to recognise itself. Language was born out of the cells, and its act of birth is a protest of autonomy. This is what we call health. Everything that is not I is an enemy. Love represents the only condition in which the non-I does not bring about death and is welcome without apparent danger. ... The body distinguishes, whereas the mind confounds, mixes, juxtaposes. The mind has its own evolution. As it refines itself, it cultivates the desire to withdraw into the indistinct; it suffers, evidently, from nostalgia (Gardini).¹⁶

Pathological communication, disrupted relations and the disjuncture between the individual and the ecosystem are also at the core of Tadjó's novel *In the Company of Men*. Here the exilic condition imposed on people by the outbreak of Ebola in West Africa is explored through a prism of mutually estranged perspectives. The narrative voice belongs, in turn, to different characters, from a medic to a nurse, from a baobab tree to the Ebola virus, and from the bat which was considered to be the source of the epidemic, to the researcher who discovered the disease. This novel seems to suggest that, in times of emergency, a post-human renaissance is required. The Other, upon which we rely in order to construct and maintain our lives on earth, is not exclusively human; it can be a microbe, an animal, or a plant. Epidemics are contained not by way

¹⁶ 'Questo è il sistema immunitario: il risultato evolutivo di una strenua volontà di essere sé stessi e non altro; il corpo che impara a dire: "Io sono io e tu sei tu"; il corpo che si impegna a distinguere i pronomi; inventa una grammatica, sancisce il suo diritto alla riconoscibilità, pretendendo di conoscersi. La lingua nasce dalle cellule, e nasce come protesta di autonomia. Questa è la salute. Tutto ciò che non è io è nemico. L'amore rappresenta l'unica condizione in cui il non io non porti morte e sia accolto senza apparente pericolo. ... Il corpo distingue, ma la mente confonde, mischia, sovrappone. La mente ha tutta una sua evoluzione. Affinandosi, sviluppa il desiderio di ritrarsi verso l'indistinto; soffre, evidentemente, di nostalgia' (Gardini, 2015: 60-61).

of elimination of the Other, but rather by re-establishing and protecting the delicate interrelation between all parts of the ecological and societal systems. The examples below display Tadjó's anti-anthropocentric stance towards Ebola, which is understood here as an ecological emergency concerning the planet in its entirety:

For a long time, I was a tree in despair. ... I wanted to become a tree without roots so that I could leave this arid place. Gradually, I started listening again to what humans had to say (2021: 31–33).¹⁷

All right, all well and good, but it's not me humans ought to fear the most. They should rather be scared of themselves! I am virus thousands of years old. ... I understood that their true power showed itself when they presented a united front (2021: 111–119).¹⁸

As a bat, somewhere midway between a mammal and a bird, ... I harbour but one regret: having let Ebola escape from my belly. ... But look at me now, I'm the one that gets demonised. [But] I'm a creature that augurs good luck ... For I was born from love. ... Yes, I'm a hybrid and proud of it. We're all hybrids, human-like animals, or animal-like humans. All of us have a bright side as well as a dark side. Our lives are not so much a straight line ... We have to be versatile and able to adapt. ... We need to know how to deal with the unexpected. The universe—with ... the infinity of possible destinies—proves it every day (2021: 122–124).¹⁹

The obscure relation between immunity and community is a translational statement put in the mouth of the bat which carried the Ebola virus. Hybridity, multiplicity, metamorphosis and variation are the key aspects of translation displayed by this animal's human-like and human-oriented speech. By a paradoxical twist of fate, the Other, that is supposed to threaten our health and well-being, saves us from death. At the same time, it is not unity, but the multiplicity of genes, languages and visions that secures life on the planet.

¹⁷ 'Je suis resté longtemps un arbre désespéré. ... Je voulais devenir un arbre sans racines pour pouvoir quitter cet endroit aride. ... Je me suis mis de nouveau à l'écoute des hommes' (Tadjó, 2017: 35, 37).

¹⁸ 'D'accord, c'est très beau, c'est très bien. Mais ce n'est pas de moi que les hommes devraient avoir le plus peur. Ils devraient avoir peur d'eux-mêmes! Je suis un virus millénaire. ... J'ai compris que leur puissance se manifestait quand ils étaient unis' (Tadjó, 2017: 141, 150).

¹⁹ 'Chauve-souris, mi-mammifère, mi-oiseau, ... je ne regrette qu'une chose: avoir laissé Ebola s'échapper de mon ventre. ... Et voilà que maintenant je suis diabolisée. [Mais] Je suis une créature de bon augure ... Car je suis née de l'amour. ... Oui, je suis hybride, et j'en suis fière. Nous sommes tous hybrides. Animal humain, homme animal. Nous avons tous une face claire, une face sombre. Notre vie n'est pas une ligne droite. ... Il faut être multiple pour s'adapter. ... Savoir épouser l'imprévisible. L'univers le prouve chaque jour par ... l'infinie possibilité des destins' (Tadjó, 2017: 153, 155, 157).

This novel is a powerful example of the ways in which epidemics trigger a pathological cascade whereby health, societal and environmental crises intersect and enhance one another, putting at risk all routes of communication. As Karen Thornber points out,

alleviating the suffering associated with adverse health conditions involves not only developing new medical treatments ... It also requires fundamentally changing how people treat themselves, one another, and the planet (2020: 4).

Epidemics expose the interconnectedness of all species on the one hand, and the dependency of species on the ecosystem they inhabit on the other. They affect the way in which humans communicate with one another and with the environment.

On a theoretical level, epidemics show that there cannot be medical humanities—the field of research that looks at the synergies between medicine and the humanities—without ecocriticism, which is the interdisciplinary study of literature and the natural world. Though a detailed consideration of the interplay between medicine and ecology lies outside the scope of this article, the translational relation between human and environmental health is key to our discussion. Perhaps even more strikingly, epidemiological crises bring to the fore the limits not only of a sectorial approach to the humanities, but also of biomedical sciences as stand-alone disciplines. Through the death of the intellectual Don Ferrante, Manzoni dramatically stages the defeat of theories and dogmas; disillusion undermines medical, religious and societal institutions in Camus' *The Plague* and in Tadjou's novel the alleged superiority of science is challenged through the humble words of the researcher who is supposed to represent its strengths:

I'm the Congolese researcher who discovered the Ebola virus ... People call me a scholar, a man for whom science equals truth and nothing but the truth. But I've understood one thing: scientific reason can't satisfy every human need. ... Through our thoughts, our words, and our actions we have the capacity to reconstruct the world. ... The atoms making up our body come from deep inside the stars. ... We are the universe (2021: 103–08).²⁰

The words of this scientist illuminate translation's fourfold movement of relationality, variety, preservation and cognition. They highlight the ways in which linguistic and

²⁰ 'Je suis le chercheur congolais qui a découvert le virus Ebola. ... On dit que je suis un savant, un homme qui fait de la science sa vérité. Mais j'ai compris une chose: la raison scientifique ne peut répondre à tous les besoins humains. ... Nos pensées, nos paroles et nos actions ont la capacité de reconstruire le monde. ... Les atomes du corps proviennent du cœur des étoiles. ... Nous sommes l'univers' (Tadjou, 2017: 131, 134, 137–38).

cultural tools are as relevant as biochemical and pharmacological interventions when dealing with multifactorial health crises. There is knowledge that does not come from numbers, nor from ‘the dreams of the learned’ (Manzoni, 1972: 600).²¹ Rather, this knowledge comes from human sympathy (Camus, 2010), love (Gardini, 2015), in the form of reciprocal acts of recognition amongst fellow humans (Le Clézio, 1995), and between humans and the environment (Tadjo, 2017). Translation can be a type of contagion that, far from fatal, allows us to benefit from the positive effects of life-bearing relations and words.

The Colours of Belonging

The interlinked paths of translation and contagion celebrate the many colours of otherness and belonging. I borrow this expression from Priscilla Wald, who describes contagion in paradoxical, translational terms as ‘the colour of belonging, social as well as biological’ (2008: 12). We need a rich palette to be able to capture the nuances of health and illness, and the complex biocultural equilibrium that both elicit. Thus far, this article has established that the distinction between pathology and health, the familiar and the foreign, is unstable, as illustrated by the fundamentally paradoxical nature of epidemics. It has also investigated the linguistic dimensions of epidemics, hence the decision to concentrate on literary texts and their translational intra-, inter- and afterlives.

As emerges from the novels, outbreak narratives tend to be meta-literary and intertextual in that they include information about their own compositional process, language use, and sources. As counter-intuitive as it may sound, epidemic novels are typically about literature. On the one hand, Manzoni’s narration of the plague uses contemporary eyewitness accounts and official reports by Alessandro Tadino (1580–1661) and Giuseppe Ripamonti (1573–1643), the two historians who chronicled the Milanese plague of 1630; on the other hand, the novel is the retelling of a story found by the narrator in an anonymous 17th-century manuscript. From this perspective, *The Betrothed* can be read as an extension of Don Ferrante’s library, where we can explore the decisive moments in which literature can make us either healthier or ill.

In *The Plague*, Camus explores, and explodes, the boundaries of literary, scientific, religious and journalistic discourse, as he stages their inefficiency and abstraction, from the homilies of Father Paneloux to Grand’s attempts to write a novel, and from newspaper reports to Tarrou’s diary. All these languages are flat and unable to convey meaning unless they are translated into non-conventional, reimagined idioms:

²¹ ‘I sogni de’ dotti’ (Manzoni, 2002: 736).

For the first time exiles from those they loved had no reluctance to talk freely about them, using the same words as everyone else, and regarding their deprivation from the same angle as that from which they viewed the latest statistics of the epidemic (Camus, 2010: 175).²²

Meaning, for Camus, lies outside of orthodox speech and is to be found elsewhere, in the ‘land of [people’s] desire, a homeland [which] lay outside the walls of the stifled, strangled town, in the fragrant brushwood of the hills, in the waves of the sea, under free skies, and in the custody of love’ (2010: 288).²³ Camus describes not the end of our exilic status and/or the expulsion/extinction of the Other (Han, 2018); rather, a full embrace of the need to transcend ourselves through language, which, ‘qua expression, is already supplement, externality, prosthesis’ (Esposito, 2011: 165). In Le Clézio’s and Gardini’s novels, the interplay between the meta-literary and intertextual dimension becomes even more apparent. *The Quarantine* starts with the encounter between the poet Rimbaud and the narrator’s grandfather; the narration is punctuated with lines by famous poets (e.g., Longfellow and Baudelaire), whilst alternating between diaristic, botanist and multilingual writing. The boundaries between creation, imitation and translation are similarly blurred in *The Unlived Life*, where the narrator’s translations from the classics function as a medicine against AIDS. As he reads the second book of the *Aeneid*, the narrator interrogates the mystery of human resilience, resistance and healing by adopting a supra-biological angle:

What we still need to understand—and I mean it on a philosophical rather than biological level—is the reason why at a certain point we cannot resist any longer, why resisting is no longer possible or sufficient (Gardini, 2015: 156).²⁴

Similar considerations could be applied to Tadjó’s novel, in which one of the characters writes poems to communicate with the ill. Especially when we feel most lonely and exiled, literature is ‘the Promised Land in which language becomes what it really ought to be’ (Calvino, 1988: 56). The words of literary fiction provide us with an ‘other’ language with which we can heal broken and pathological relations as well as create new ones. If the lexicon of war proves to be insufficient to describe the tension

²² ‘Les séparés n’avaient pas de répugnance à parler de l’absent, à prendre le langage de tous, à examiner leur séparation sous le même angle que les statistiques de l’épidémie’ (Camus, 1947: 212).

²³ ‘... leur vrai patrie ... se trouvait au-delà des murs de cette ville étouffée ... dans ces broussailles odorantes sur les collines, dans la mer, les pays libres et le poids de l’amour’ (Camus, 1947: 344).

²⁴ ‘Resta da capire—intendo su un piano filosofico, non biologico—perché resistere, a un certo punto, non sia più possibile o sufficiente’ (Gardini, 2015: 156).

between immunity and community, literature can offer creative tools to overcome this obstacle. For instance, Tadjó goes beyond the image of illness as a battlefield to present it as a galaxy: ‘The earth is sometimes farther from Man than the moon. A doctor in a spacesuit discovers a new universe’ (2021: 35).²⁵ One may argue that new metaphors will not save the world. And yet, during the early phases of the coronavirus pandemic, a surge in fiction sales on the one hand, and the limits of evidence-based methods on the other (see the debate around vaccination and scepticism towards the use of face masks) have shown us that we cannot rely exclusively on science to find our way out of a health crisis. Novels appeal to a suffering, disoriented population who are gripped by the fear of contagion because they offer a structure—mobile yet solid—within which the different threads of the epidemic story (fictional, historical, biological, etc.) can be woven. To give but one example, the UK book publisher Penguin reported that in the last week of February 2020, sales of Camus’ *The Plague* were up by 150% on the same period in 2019 (Flood, 2020).

More often than not, these novels present an open ending that reminds us that epidemics cannot be defeated; at a certain point, they fade away, and yet they can return when we least expect them. In a sense, epidemics remain the ‘elsewhere’ we cannot, and perhaps should not, colonise. This is a lesson we learn from, and owe to, books. In Camus’ and Tadjó’s words:

None the less, [Rieux] knew that the tale he had to tell could not be one of a final victory. ... He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good (Camus, 2010: 297).²⁶

Humans need to recognise that they’re part of the world, that there’s a close bond between them and all other living creatures, great and small. ... For if they haven’t learned to live here, how they can possibly survive in the distant Beyond? (Tadjó, 2021: 125–26).²⁷

²⁵ ‘La terre est parfois plus éloignée des hommes que la lune. Le docteur en combinaison d’astronaute découvre un nouvel univers’ (Tadjó, 2017: 41).

²⁶ ‘Mais [Rieux] savait cependant que cette chronique ne pouvait pas être celle de la victoire définitive. ... Car il savait ce que cette foule en joie ignorait, et qu’on peut lire dans les livres, que le bacille de la peste ne meurt ni ne disparaît jamais’ (Camus, 1947: 355).

²⁷ ‘Les hommes devraient prendre conscience de leur appartenance au monde, de leur lien avec toutes les autres créatures, petites ou grandes. ... Car, s’ils n’ont pas appris à vivre ici, comment pourront-ils vivre dans l’Ailleurs lointain?’ (Tadjó, 2017: 159).

Conclusions

The essay has explored the suitability of translation theory for the study of contagion as a complex, biocultural phenomenon. It has endorsed the principles of second-wave medical humanities research and practice, through the cross-fertilisation of perspectives from the humanities (translation studies, philosophy, textual analysis) and medicine (immunology and epidemiology). This disciplinary crossing has created a porous interzone where different fields of knowledge are not just compared, but coexist in a dynamic of continuous exchange. Though the theoretical model devised in this essay is preparatory, I hope that these preliminary steps will help pave the way for interdisciplinary investigations at the interface of humanities and medical sciences. It is my aspiration that studies of this kind will advocate for (1) the application of humanities methods and resources to the understanding and management of diseases; (2) the inclusion of scientific approaches into the study of literature; and (3) a more translational and therefore just way of conducting epidemiological research, one that is willing to accommodate and celebrate its linguistic, cultural, and disciplinary Others.

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