

## Chapter 7

# Pandemic and Literary Creativity: The Spanish Case of *Relatos de Confinamiento*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The essay proposes the analysis of some stories included in the digital collection *Relatos de Confinamiento*, published on the internet page of the Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia* between March and April 2020. The stories, of about 2-3 pages in length, composed by contributors to the newspaper, utilize the pandemic experience about COVID-2019 in a creative way and reflect on the typical circumstances of the first wave and the period of confinement. After a brief introduction to the project, the chapter offers a critical analysis of selected texts focusing on the following topics: isolation and loneliness, isolation and fear, isolation and dystopia.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is now known that the Covid-19 pandemic has had and continues to have important physical, behavioral, cognitive, psychological, as well as economic, political and social impacts on the lives of the entire world community, which is dealing with the virus, as evidenced by scientific studies to date (Schimmenti, Billieux & Starcevic, 2020; She, Jiang, Ye, Hu, Bai & Song, 2020; Casagrande, Favieri, Tambelli & Forte, 2020).

Perhaps the main feeling that characterized the months of the first “wave”, as virologists have called it, that is the months of spring 2020, was fear, with which human beings have gradually learned, and not without sacrifice, to live with, remodeling and reshaping their spaces and their time, adapting with great resilience to new, complex circumstances. In this new dynamic and evolving scenario, a central role has been covered by the figure of the artist, a category heavily threatened and questioned by the pandemic,

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which, however, has been able to react with a strong creative impulse, transforming the new reality into an artistic object, in all its declinations. In the field of art, cinema, photography, literature, theater, music, among others, in fact, it has begun a process, still ongoing, of flourishing and rich creation that revolves around the theme of Covid-19. Art thus becomes expression and image of a new context, but also reflection, reasoning, instrument of knowledge of the human soul and, last but not least, therapy and catharsis, interiorization and exorcization of evil, individual and collective. In the forced isolation to which we have all been subjected to protect ourselves, defend ourselves and “save our skins”, technology, the network and social networks have not only represented a window on the world, a useful tool for union, solidarity and human empathy, but also a space for artistic sharing of new and varied cultural products, all strictly accessible.

Within the academic field, the “COVID-19 LiTraPan” project has been conceived, where the present contribution is part of, aimed at the study and diffusion of humanistic knowledge related, in terms of themes and time of creation, to the pandemic scenario and in regard to which one may refer to Veronica Orazi’s article, published in this volume.

Circumscribing the investigation to the wide literary sphere, we can appreciate, limited to the first phase of the epidemic, which we spent locked up in our homes, creative manifestations of various kinds: diaries, poems, dramatic texts, even hyper-short ones, short stories and micro-stories. And to further narrow the field of research to short fiction, among the many praiseworthy virtual initiatives promoted in this period of time, there is the one carried out by the cultural section of the Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia*. I am referring to the project called *Relatos de confinamiento*, which collected narrative texts composed by the newspaper’s collaborators, all with previous literary experience, based on fiction and created from the specific context of the pandemic. The initiative, which ran between March and April 2020, involved the writing of 2-3 page stories, some in a double Castilian-Catalan version and, in this case, self-translated by the authors themselves. Forty-four short stories, drawing inspiration from the lockdown period and transforming it into literary material, were published on the newspaper’s website and will be the subject of this study proposal.

Therefore, the essay intends to proceed with the systematization of the published stories, which offer an interesting cross-section of reality, taking into account the different themes, narrative modes, writing techniques, literary treatment, and language adopted.

## **RELATOS DE CONFINAMIENTO: FORM AND CONTENT**

Since *Relatos de confinamiento* is a very wide collection, it is possible to identify some recurrent thematic axes, which can be traced, at least, to the following categories: stories that focus on the macro-theme of love, put to the test by forced cohabitation and the danger of disease, and developed in all its forms – sentimental love, marital crises and adulterous relations, family love, love for animals, etc. –; tales of a fantastic tone, which exploit the use of the agnition, revealed through confinement or even the motif of metamorphosis; dystopian stories, which imagine a new world populated by ghosts of men careful to survive and forced to abandon contact with each other; autobiographical reflections, where the author’s experience is reworked with irony and imagination; tales about loneliness and illness, also explored from a humorous treatment, always present when dealing with the subtopic of hypochondria; histories that arise from the memory of the past or that, on the contrary, predict a “new normal” made of restraining measures, restrictions, remodeling of habits and lifestyles and finally texts that describe the difficult

and static everyday life of the lock down, made of smart working or unemployment, online education, work-life balance, among others. In this broad spectrum, the reduced spaces and habits that marked the first wave are outlined: the hospital, the pharmacy, the supermarket, the home, the clandestine and specious outings, the innate need for contact, exchange and interaction that results in musical appointments in the balcony and in virtual meetings on instagram, facebook and social networks.

The collection brings together stories independent of each other but integral part of a unitary project, of whose each text constitutes a piece, which arises in precise circumstances, where the quarantine is both creative factor and narrative material and is developed through the use of the literary genre of the short story.

The first thread of this digital anthology, the pandemic as a common and shared experience, which the writers translate, each in a peculiar way, in a creative key, is the subject of the only non-fiction text, signed by the polygraph Andrés Trapiello, author of poems, novels, short stories, essays and critical articles. In “Todos somos Viernes”, the author recovers the defoeian character of Friday to start a reflection on the way of living and conceiving the confinement as a state, transitory, of suspension and pause from the freedom of movement, which leads the man “prisoner” (in cell, in hospital, now also at home), to give written expression to his thoughts, in diaries or other narrative forms, with the aim of seeking contact with the other (symbolically represented by the figure of Friday, Robinson Crusoe’s companion in adventures) and escape from individual isolation. Writing thus becomes, for its author, therapy but also an instrument of solidarity and a bridge with the outside world, an attempt to express a common unease in which it is not difficult, as readers, to recognize oneself. Trapiello’s reflection, which starts from the consideration that “en los confinamientos los días no pasan, se arrastran” (Trapiello, 2020), could in all respects serve as an introduction to the collection, of which it illustrates the framework and the ultimate meaning of the stories, which can be ascribed to the need, endemic to human beings, to dialogue with others by means of writing.

The second unitary element of the *Relatos de confinamiento* is, as mentioned above, the adoption of the short story as a discursive form, which presents specific characteristics that should be recalled before proceeding with the analysis of the selected texts. The short story, an autonomous literary genre consolidated to date, which is never a reduction of the novel, in terms of intentions and literary treatment, is configured by a series of rhetorical mechanisms, such as brevity, semantic density, narrativity, ellipsis, the ending - often open, but always surprising - and the active and complicit role of the reader, called upon to decode the unspoken and in some cases elevated to the role of co-creator of the text. If we dwell on the main and defining element of the story, namely conciseness, there are many theories that come to our aid, starting with Calvino’s proposals illustrated in his *Lezioni americane*, in which the Italian author introduces the concept of “rapidity”, referring to narrative economy, essential logic, agile rhythm, punctiform writing and compatible in turn with the suggestion of “lightness” or “subtraction of weight” of spaces, places, characters, structure and language (Calvino 2016, 42). Techniques, these, that allow to compress the maximum meaning in a minimum narrative space, omitting the superfluous and unnecessary, reducing or eliminating the ancillary details in a writing work based on the search for an elliptical and dry style, reminiscent of Hemingway’s iceberg theory, also known as the “principle of omission”. This theory uses the effective image of the iceberg, “of which only an eighth protrudes from the water” (Hemingway 1961, 200), to reflect the strategies of the narrator, who proceeds by synthesis and subtraction, leaving the reader with the task of interpreting the “submerged”, or the unsaid. Thus, we can understand how the apparent brevity of the story actually springs from an extreme complexity, just that of the iceberg, which the author hides with wisdom and that the reader can infer through an

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intellectual and participatory reading, filling, to quote Eco, “the white spaces of which the text is necessarily woven” (Eco, 1979, 52). The active role of the interpreter emerges in the processes of construction of meaning (Eco speaks of “lector in fabula”), which critically collects the clues disseminated by the author between the meshes of the text.

Moving to the Hispanic context, it is worth mentioning at least the theoretical reflections on the story of two great twentieth century storytellers, such as Julio Cortázar and Ana María Matute. The Argentinean meditates on the fundamental question of brevity, to reiterate that the author of short stories, who does not have time as an ally, cannot afford, like the novelist, the luxury of proceeding by accumulation, but must work in depth, ‘vertically’, purifying the text of every pleonastic element and endowing it with the strength and effectiveness necessary for a semantic opening. Cortázar proposes three key concepts that, in his opinion, make the story successful and therefore memorable: signification, referring to the wide range of connotations that the text encompasses, ranging from the particular to the general and allowing the narrated anecdote to be transcended (it returns to author-reader communication and the active role of the latter as interpreter and generator of meaning), tension or “momentary seizure of the reader”, which alludes to the ability to awaken the reader’s interest and push him to read the story in one breath and, finally, the intensity, linked not to the theme but to its literary treatment and therefore to the “writer’s craft”, which chisels and polishes the text to obtain a “penetrating and original” style (Cortázar, 1971). Ana María Matute, a master of the short story, in which she moves with virtuosity and dominance - remember the pioneering collection *Los niños tontos* (1956), which contributes to the spread of the micro-story in Spain (a genre at the time in search of its own identity and tradition) -, however, argues that the good story must possess three qualities and be “breve, redondo y jugoso como una naranja”. In a 2006 interview, Matute explains these characteristics by attributing them to the constructive power of the story, which “con pocos elementos, pero muy eficaces, muy expresivos, y muy poéticos, puede levantar un mundo, quizá tan o más importante que se pueda hacer con una novela” (Ayuso Pérez, 2007) and associates it with poetry, as Baquero Goyanes had already done in the critical field. The scholar, in fact, in his essay dedicated to the short story, traces some equivalences between the short narrative text and the poetic genre, universes only apparently distant and irreconcilable, which in his opinion conceal many similarities, on which he creates his own definition of the genre in question:

*El cuento es un preciso género literario que sirve para expresar un tipo especial de emoción, de signo muy semejante a la poética, pero que no siendo apropiada para ser expuesta poéticamente, encarna en una forma narrativa próxima a la de la novela, pero diferente de ella en técnica e intención. Se trata, pues, de un género intermedio entre poesía y novela (Baquero Goyanes, 1998, 144).*

This conception of the short story (Cortázar already spoke of the short story as el “hermano misterioso de la poesía en otra dimensión del tiempo literario”), which like poetry is incisive, mordant, and possesses an intense aesthetic force, will gain traction among other scholars and cultivators of the genre.

These theoretical considerations are also applicable to the stories of the anthology, which are characterized by their brevity (2-3 pages), ellipsis and intellectual involvement of the reader. A clarifying example of unspoken, or “silenced” material (the submerged on which rests the iceberg of hemingwayan reminiscence) concerns the setting in which the characters of the various stories move, coinciding, almost always, with the months of confinement due to the health emergency; scenario that opens in the mind of the reader in all its completeness and complexity thanks to a few, effective, textual hints.

## ISOLATION = LONELINESS

If Trapiello assimilated the experience of confinement to imprisonment in general, be it in a cell, in a hospital or inside a ship, underlining the urgency of writing as an instrument of dialogue with the other, in Blai Felipe Palau's story it takes shape through the words of an anonymous prisoner who reflects, from his claustrophobic cubicle, on the meaning of existence; of a truncated and interrupted existence, without freedom and of which the rest of the world is having a bitter taste. The text, which takes the form of a confession that resembles more a monologue out loud, is characterized by the fundamental nihilism that pervades it, supported by learned quotations - such as the reference to the existentialist philosopher Cioran and the radical pessimism of his thought -, and for the disillusioned vision of the world and of civilization, which the narrator questions through a brief but exacerbated critique of the concept of "system", whose arbitrariness is well evoked by the image of the field roll, which moves driven by the wind:

*También tendríamos que debatir qué es el sistema, palabra amorfa y elástica, kleenex que sirve para que nos entendamos, pero que no nos aclara casi nada. Es como un estepicursor, nube del desierto desnudada de hojas, pero cargada de malos pensamientos –libranos señor de todos los males–, que se arrastra y se deja llevar por el viento que más le complace y se eriza cuando oye el aullido del lobo. Sistema (Palau, 2020).*

The disenchantment with the system as a political and social apparatus is then extended to life itself, which the anonymous prisoner sees flowing in vain in the solitude of his cell, where he "dies with parsimony", in the company of an old mouse, which at the end of the text is found dead, decreeing the end of all hope. In the second part of the story, the narrator addresses himself, with a scornful tone, to an unspecified audience, assuming the general features of humanity locked up at home because of the virus and which, for the first time, experiences the anguish of solitude, that he is already 'trained' to:

*Ahora culpan al virus, pero lo que este bichito inocente, pero cabrón, ha hecho ha sido evidenciar lo que todo el mundo quería ignorar. La infección ya existía. Ahora degustan todos la miel amarga que obligan a probar a los arrinconados, a los olvidados por el sistema, y perdonadme por valerme de la muletilla. Ahora saben de qué forma la soledad araña la piel. Ahora perciben el desánimo que cuenta los segundos de los que la libertad te priva. Ahora sufren la carencia de los contactos, de los abrazos largos, de los besos huidizos, de las lágrimas mojando los hombros, de los dedos acariciando los cabellos, de la vida que huele a hierba, del viento cargado de romero, de los pies mojados por las olas. ¡Y tanto, que les duele! (Palau, 2020).*

The sense of existential emptiness, due to isolation, that grips the protagonist of "¡Y tanto!", informs numerous stories in the series, where, with different tones and nuances, the psychological repercussions of the pandemic experience are addressed, undermining the psychic balance of man, triggering now pervasive states of anxiety now discomfort. The lockdown has, as is known, caused a radical alteration of the forms of space and time, limiting in a profound way the habits and lifestyles and drastically reducing the external and sensory impulses. Around this last aspect concerns the tale, also available in Catalan, of the journalist Francesc-Marc Álvaro, entitled "Como un burro de noria". The title symbolizes with an emblematic image the state of stagnation and social paralysis of the quarantine through the story, conducted in the first person, of a lonely man, who kills time by going in circles around the terrace of

his apartment and simulating, consciously, the “static movement” and repetitive of the mill donkey - precisely the donkey of Uncle Llorenç -, whose paradoxical nature is summarized in the first line of the text, which reads: “ando mucho pero no voy a ningún lado”. The story continues with the discovery of a human figure who appears at the window of the building opposite, at first blurred and almost imperceptible, hidden behind the curtains, from where he seems to be spying on the protagonist, and who turns out to be a little girl of eleven or twelve, dressed in elegant and unfashionable clothes and with whom the narrator will slowly make friends, discovering her name (María) and enjoying the company of her and her cat Fleki. The epilogue takes place in a hypothetical post-pandemic scenario, with the return to longed-for freedom and the revelation that the apartment in which María lives has been uninhabited for some time. With the open ending, the author offers the reader at least two possible interpretations, both valid and plausible. The first, perhaps the most immediate, places the text in the realm of the fantastic, with the appearance of a supernatural figure that breaks the logical order of the real and the known, or the irruption of a ghost, which transgresses and threatens the concept of reality and that we assume is the spirit of an inhabitant of the house. This interpretation is corroborated by some details of the character: the mysterious aura that surrounds her when she is only the shadow of a head protruding from the curtains, the unusual clothing, inappropriate for the circumstance of confinement - “un vestido como de fiesta, algo pasado de moda, nada práctico” - and outdated style and, finally, the *topos* of the haunted house, ideal setting where spectral figures move. The second possible interpretation, however, suggests that the image of the little girl, first at the window and then at the balcony, is a figment of the narrator’s imagination, a sensory suggestion, a hallucination due to the progressive deterioration of the protagonist’s mental faculties, caused by the forced solitude he experiences and which does not make him faithful in the eyes of the reader: he decides to imitate his uncle’s donkey, an action that he himself calls “tarea de loco” and that ridicules him; he discovers the figure of the little girl after five days of going in circles, during which he identifies with the animal (losing reasoning?) and “precisamente durante un rato en que el aburrimiento me desfibraba”; he experiences a period of confusion and turmoil when he learns that his elderly father has contracted the virus - “La situación de mi padre me dejó fuera de juego [...] mi muelle interior saltó por los aires [...] No podía concentrarme, abandoné las rutinas y las paredes de casa me cayeron, por primera vez, encima. También dejé de hacer el burro. Me abandoné.” (Álvaro, 2020)- and as a result of which he comes into direct contact with the little girl. In short, a well-constructed and enjoyable story, which with irony and a good dose of “signification” (in the Cortazarian sense), offers various insights into the scars of the pandemic experience.

The combination loneliness-fantastic can be found in another *covidical* story, which refers already in its title to a marvelous figure: “La sirena”, by Lara Gómez Ruiz. The text, narrated in the third person with incursions into the mind of the protagonist and consequent passage to the first person, tells the story of Julia, a girl who loves the sea and finds in the water a bottle containing a magic bracelet, able to fulfill dreams. Sometime later, exhausted by the anguished loneliness of confinement and by the lack of the sea, the character decides to resort to the magic of the bracelet and to transform herself into a mermaid. At the end of the story, Julia, who in time has become a legend without knowing it - “Son muchos los vecinos de la zona que en sus efímeras salidas a la compra han visto su cola de sirena”-, reunited with the sea, finally feels happy. The protagonist’s metamorphosis is already anticipated in the incipit of the story, in which we read:

*Julia estaba sentada en la orilla de la playa. Siempre que tenía un problema o quería meditar algo se acercaba a ver el mar. El oleaje la tranquilizaba y, a la vez, la ayudaba a evadirse. Estaba convencida*

*de que en otra vida había sido algún tipo de criatura submarina, pues no podía vivir si tenía el agua lejos de ella (Gómez Ruiz, 2020).*

The author builds the story resorting to what Todorov calls the “themes of the ego”, which would refer to the principle of abolition of the boundaries between body and soul, here made possible by the metamorphic process: “metamorphoses constitute a transgression of the separation between matter and spirit”, in which “the physical world and the spiritual world interpenetrate” (Todorov, 2000, 117; 122). The transformation of the woman into a mermaid (a fabulous and marvelous creature) allows, in Campra’s words, the coexistence of two irreconcilable orders, based on the human/non-human oppositional axis, that “intersect and create an absolute transgression, the result of which is the subversion of the concept of reality” (Campra, 2000, 44). The original aspect of the text, which uses, as we have seen, the theme of metamorphosis, lies in its projection in the context of the pandemic scenario, that becomes a pretext to play with the fantastic and offer an imaginary solution to the abyss of loneliness that engulfs man during isolation.

## **ISOLATION = FEAR**

The individual and collective experience of the pandemic has placed the theme of the body at the center of attention, threatened by the aggressiveness of a dangerous and in some cases lethal virus, that has become the absolute protagonist, the pivot around which the attention and interests of all revolve: the preservation of the body as an element to be protected is the main topic under discussion in times of health emergency. The body, which we have rediscovered as fragile and in need of care, has ceased to be an object of aesthetic contemplation and, as a possible target of the virus, has shifted man’s gaze towards the problem of health, as a synonym of life, associated, in this particular viral illness, with breathing. The pandemic has brought us, in an obsessive and certainly daily way, to face the problem of death, the precariousness and the limits of the human condition and has sharpened and exacerbated some defense mechanisms and control of the body, which, in the most sensitive subjects, can lead to hypochondria. This interesting and complex phenomenon has always been taken on by literature – just think of Molière’s *The Imaginary Invalid* or Cervantes’ *Licenciado vidriera*, to cite just two exemplary texts in this sense – which translates into fiction and creatively reworks the atavistic and ancestral fear of illness and death; a fear that the pandemic has unleashed. The theme of hypochondria, a disorder that lends itself to a literary treatment that is ironic, liberating and able to exorcise the problem, is the nucleus of Sergi Pàmies’ story “El termómetro”. This text, led by an omniscient narrator who moves with ease through the maze of the protagonist’s mind, condenses in the incipit the presentation of the character and, through an opening *in medias res*, the conflict that constitutes the heart of the story, reducing in a single sequence two of the three parts of the narrative structure (beginning, middle, end):

*Para entender la inquietud de Oscar hay que tener en cuenta que vive solo, que es autónomo y que acaba de cumplir sesenta años. Eso lo hace triplemente vulnerable al confinamiento. Como buen hipocondriaco, invierte muchas horas en analizar cualquier síntoma que pueda coincidir con los que, según la OMS, provoca la epidemia. El problema es que, el primer día de confinamiento, Oscar constata que el único termómetro del que dispone no funciona (Pàmies, 2020).*

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From the very first lines, the reader knows the name of the protagonist and those characteristics that will be functional to the plot (it has been said that the story proceeds by omission and leaves out the superfluous or unnecessary), namely his age, loneliness and autonomy, factors that, the narrator explains, make him particularly vulnerable to confinement. We also discover that the character finds himself locked up in the house without a thermometer (obstacle), a trivial object that, however, like the disinfectant gel and the mask, had become unobtainable during the months of the first wave. The absence of the thermometer, initially welcomed with serenity by the character, becomes in the course of the story an obsessive and constant thought, which torments him and leads him to a fruitless search for the pharmacies of the city: “En apariencia, Oscar no presenta ningún síntoma pero, de vez en cuando, cae en abismos de inquietud que lo empujan a comprobarse el pulso y a lamentar hasta límites poco saludables no disponer de un termómetro”. We thus understand that the protagonist is suffering from hypochondriac disorder and that he tries to overcome it by believing himself to be asymptomatic and going out on the balcony for the usual eight o’clock clap to the health personnel, in the vain hope of arming himself with courage and asking the neighbors to borrow a thermometer (a hope shattered by his excessive shyness). In a ‘spyglass’ mechanism, the narrator introduces another story into the text, featuring Oscar’s maternal grandfather, who died in Belgrade and co-authored, with his daughter, a memoir that mysteriously changed the course of the entire family’s existence. Thinking of the figure of his grandfather, who taught him that “la gripe se cura con un zumo de sábanas”, Oscar searches in the recesses of the house for evidence of his missing relative and discovers a transparent envelope containing a pen, a watch and a thermometer, the finding of which is accompanied by an ironic comment of the narrator: “si se pudieran introducir efectos especiales en la vida, sonaría un piano de intriga o un coro de eunucos motivados”. Disoriented, destabilized and disturbed by this surprising discovery, the protagonist, out of decency and as a demonstration of respect for a brave man, who would have fought with the contempt of the “zumo de sábanas” the shivers that land him, finally decides not to use it.

It is interesting to note how the phenomenon of hypochondria resurfaces and reaffirms itself forcefully in the literature conceived during the first phase of the pandemic, as attested by another tale in the collection under review, namely “El ascensor” by Jordi Bastè, where the story of a man affected by Covid is related to that of a woman (his former lover) affected by AIDS or again, to get out of the *Relatos de confinamiento*, also in a text published within the Italian project *Andrà tutto bene. Gli scrittori ai tempi della quarantena (Everything will be fine. Writers at the time of the quarantine)*, published by Garzanti in April 2020 and containing twenty-six short stories, which are like twenty-six looks at the pandemic. I refer to the story by the Spaniard Clara Sánchez, reproduced in *Il Corriere della sera* of April 7, 2020 and entitled, as in the case of Pàmies, “Il termometro”. Beyond the significant coincidence of the title, which contains a series of suggestions for the reader and anticipates the central role of the object, Sánchez’s story, conducted in the first person and accompanied by precise reflections on the experience of confinement - the outings with the dogs, the search for toilet paper, the applause in the balcony, the vile destiny to which the elderly are abandoned, the disarming fragility of a corrupt and obtuse system, the comfortable solitude of the writer, etc. - develops around the spasmodic search for a thermometer. As in the text of the same name commented on above, the narrator, an obvious projection of the author who provides some autobiographical details and aware of her own hypochondria, manages to find a thermometer, but eventually puts it away:

*E, che fortuna, sono riusciti a trovarmi un termometro, di quelli di una volta, che bisogna agitare per far scendere il mercurio. Mi sento fortunata, più sicura, e torno a casa decisa a nascondere non appena sarò*



*entrata. Un termometro, per un ipocondriaco, è come una bottiglia di whisky per un alcolizzato. Entro in bagno e lo tiro fuori dalla custodia [...] Agito varie volte il termometro per far scendere il mercurio, ma non lo vedo. Sarà sceso a sufficienza? Ho sempre fatto fatica a vedere la colonnina di mercurio. È una lacuna nelle mie abilità personali: il mercurio mi resiste. Metto via il termometro disperata. Magari è difettoso. Meglio immergermi nella “Montagna incantata” fino all’ora di cena (Sánchez, 2020).*

In both texts, hypochondria is initially the driving force behind the actions of the protagonists, who adopt an identical pattern of behavior and, albeit for different reasons (the shame towards his grandfather, in the first case and the inability of the protagonist, in this one), chase it away and overcome it, at least temporarily, defeating their fear and revealing themselves to be less fragile and more rational.

## **ISOLATION = DYSTOPIA**

Dystopia, a contemporary expression of a ‘forced’ utopia, taken to extremes and where excess produces horror - “Desde cierta perspectiva, no hay diferencia entre utopías y distopías; se sabe bien que toda utopía tiene latente la posibilidad de la distopía, que los excesos de las cosas que nos parecen positivas dan lugar al horror”, assert Figueroa Díaz y Liliana López Levi (2014, 188)- is, as we know, the child of the 20th century and its horrors. A typically twentieth-century phenomenon, dystopia arises as a response to the historical traumas of the short century, such as totalitarian regimes and the abuse of science, or rather the pervasive and frenzied technical-scientific progress, seen as an agent of dehumanization, alienation and destruction of the environment and humanity; it becomes an expression, suggests Trousson, of the obsessions of an era of crisis and bewilderment (Trousson, 1995, 291), on which it critically reflects. The dystopian literature, belonging to the narrative of anticipation, which predicts a future in apocalyptic terms, is like a warning about the present, projected into another dimension but recognizable, a metaphor, in short, of the real society, which explores, through deformation, the machine of power and its convoluted mechanisms. Among the recurring themes of dystopian production are the relationship between social and scientific progress, the abuse of power, social control and the loss of individual freedom, biological and psychic manipulation, climate change and epidemics. The health emergency that began last March with the spread of Covid-19 has therefore materialized an undesirable horizon that was a scenario exploited by science fiction and that has suddenly become real for the entire global community. This epoch-making event has undoubtedly influenced the creation of dystopian works, creating a new strand, still in progress, in which the post-pandemic dystopia (already existing) takes on new connotations, connected to the theme of isolation and physical distancing and the relative dehumanization of society, to the virtual and globalized world, which pushes towards estrangement and the loss of critical thinking or, again, to the obsessive search for survival, which leads to blind sacrifice and health dictatorship. There are already the first interesting manifestations of this vein, of which we recall, in the Italian sphere, the narrative anthology of Urania published in July 2020 and eloquently titled *Distòpia*, whose unifying trait is the pandemic experience for Covid-19, which inspires the stories it contains. This tendency to rework the pandemic-dystopia binomial from a direct experience, collective and individual, is also present in *Relatos de confinamiento*, as demonstrated by the short but intense “Un mundo distante,” by Toni Muñoz. The text is set in a disturbing post-pandemic future governed by a sanitary dictatorship, which has arisen as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and is represented by the “DGCF- Dirección General Contra el Contacto Físico” and the health police, who punish violators of

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the new regime, based on isolation and home confinement, with exorbitant fines and arrest. The author describes the future society as grey and distant, denied emotions and feelings, barricaded within the walls of the home, deprived of sharing, sports and affection, and forced to interact through computers:

*Renunciamos al contacto físico. El mundo se había vuelto distante, compuesto por una amalgama de vidas alejadas que no se relacionaban entre sí. El nosotros se había difuminado en favor de un yo y luego el resto. Distanciados los unos de los otros. El nosotros quedaba reducido a un contexto íntimo. Debíamos vivir a un metro y medio de distancia. Sin excepciones. La nueva sociedad surgida tras la pandemia primaba la salud e imponía duras restricciones a la sociabilización entre humanos. El mundo se había vuelto gris aun en los sitios más soleados [...] En aquella vida las muestras de afecto estaban prohibidas. Se había levantado el confinamiento, pero la mayoría de los ciudadanos pasábamos gran parte del día en casa. El verbo vivir dejó de significar disfrutar hasta quedar reducido únicamente al tiempo que transcurre entre pandemia y pandemia [...] Un gesto, una caricia, un beso, una carantoña en público podía ser motivo de multa e incluso de detención por parte de la Policía Sanitaria. Los agentes, con placa, mascarilla y pistola, patrullaban por las calles persiguiendo el contacto [...] Los seres humanos habían convertido sus domicilios en búnkeres antipandemias [...] Había pantallas donde se conectaban los amigos. Todo era por videoconferencia. Cada uno en su casa (Muñoz, 2020).*

The pessimism that floods the text and that is a symptom of a serious concern about the future of humanity, strongly marked and torn by the pandemic, which has lost the profound meaning of existence and pursues health at all costs (exasperation of the body control, another side of the theme treated above through hypochondria), sacrificing social life in the name of biological life, fades in the final part of the story, in which the narrator, with his daughter in his arms, invokes the power of the family, the only anchor of salvation in a world that, as the title says, has become distant.

The presage of a dystopian future like the one prophesied in Muñoz's text is the basis of another story, also composed during the spring of 2020 and published on the web page of the Argentine newspaper *Página/12* by acclaimed writer Mariana Enríquez, author of novels and short stories in the horror genre. In "Edificio mayor, piso 10", we find in fact many elements present in the story examined above: setting in a post-pandemic future, physical isolation, sanitary dictatorship, incessant proliferation of viruses, social dehumanization and anonymization. In a masterful example of dystopian short literature, the Argentinean exaggerates, with horror tones, the representation of a distant world, drawing a completely alienated society, which does not know the outside world, confined in its own buildings and struggling with the dangerous Covid-42, in which a minority group of immune individuals is forced to donate their organs to save the infected and where any sign of protest is silenced not with fines and arrests but with death, spectacularly shown as a warning to the rebels by a totalitarian power, invisible but ubiquitous:

*No todos están conformes con una vida de encierro y transparencias y transplantes, me dijo. Tuvimos la suerte de ver, juntos, cómo las luces atrapaban a un cuerpo deambulante. NJC me tomó de la mano y miramos la extraña danza de la luz roja con el cuerpo. Lo encontró. Lo rodeó. El cuerpo se resistía, apenas. La luz roja lo levantó en el aire y, una vez que estuvo bien lejos de los edificios, incluso más arriba del balcón de nuestro piso 10, lo hizo estallar. Podrían matarlos de otra manera, sin esta lluvia de sangre y vísceras, me explicó NJC, pero sería menos espectacular. No sería una lección. Miramos cómo la sangre se mezclaba con la lluvia. En los edificios todas las luces estaban encendidas. Todos los ojos mirando el cuerpo, ahora apenas un resto humano, tan rojo como la luna (Enríquez, 2020).*

In this story, the dystopian scenario foreshadowed in “Un mundo distante” gives way to an apocalyptic horizon, where there is no hope whatsoever and the very concept of family has dissipated, power has become totalitarian and has exploited the fear of disease to assert itself. A bitter reflection that exudes from the exasperated deformation of the present and that contains, in the final instance, a greater degree of social and political denunciation.

## CONCLUSION

As it was said, since the beginning of the pandemic, the artists, taking their cue from the traumatic and still current pandemic experience, have given life to an incessant and prolific artistic creation, which has affected all areas of culture: theater, literature, plastic arts, music, cinema, etc.. Restricting the field of observation to the production of fiction and, in particular, to short fiction in Spain, the collection of short stories published by the Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia* from March to April 2020 is of great interest, which brought together forty-four short texts (2-3 pages) under the common sign of the pandemic, the *Relatos de confinamiento*. The stories were composed and published on the newspaper’s internet page during the months of lockdown, which radically changed our way of working, of relating to the world, of studying; in short, they profoundly altered our lifestyles and in some cases induced a reflection on the priorities of the human being and on the precariousness of life, reduced almost exclusively to the protection and preservation of the body. The changes due to the pandemic experience, which certainly varies from subject to subject and that in many cases has been painful and dramatic, are reflected in the content of these stories, which are like a mirror, certainly fictional, of the historical and epochal event that we are forced to live. Proceeding to a necessary selection of texts, for reasons of space, and however after a brief presentation of the editorial project, of which form and content have been summarized, it was decided to focus on some stories that can be classified by thematic lines and in which the wide and multifaceted theme of confinement is associated with the motif of loneliness, fear and hypochondria and, finally, the dystopian horizon. In addition to highlighting the similarities between texts, which evidently respond to a common sensibility, we have also taken into consideration other stories, not belonging to the collection in question, but written during the first wave, which give an account of the fervent literary activity that has arisen around the theme of the Covid-19 pandemic; an activity that is still in motion and that will reserve us new surprises, crystallizing the various stages of a historical event of epochal importance.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**COVID-19 Pandemic:** Pandemic of Coronavirus disease 2019, caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It was identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The WHO declared the outbreak of a public health emergency of international concern in January 2020 and a pandemic in March 2020.

**Fantastic Literature:** Subgenre of literary works characterized by the ambiguous presentation of seemingly supernatural forces, theorized by the Bulgarian-French structuralist literary critic Tzvetan, who introduced the concept, characterizing the fantastic as the hesitation of characters and readers when presented with questions about reality.

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**Hypochondria:** Excessive preoccupation or worry about having a serious illness. Also known as a health phobia or anxiety. Patients having this disorder are known as hypochondriacs. Such patients may become alarmed about even minor physical symptoms, which they interpret as representing significant health problems.

**Relatos De Confinamiento:** Collection of forty four 2-3 pages short stories, published by the Catalan newspaper *La Vanguardia* from March to April 2020, composed by the newspaper's collaborators, all with previous literary experience, based on fiction and created from the specific context of the pandemic.

**Short Story:** Autonomous literary genre configured by a series of rhetorical mechanisms, such as brevity, semantic density, narrativity, ellipsis, the ending—often open, but always surprising—and the active and complicit role of the reader.

**Utopian and Dystopian Fiction:** Genres of speculative fiction that explore social and political structures. Utopian fiction portrays a setting that agrees with the author's ethos, having various attributes of another reality intended to appeal to readers. Dystopian fiction offers the opposite: the portrayal of a setting that completely disagrees with the author's ethos.