
Rhetorics of Anxiety and Compassion

Buds of 2021: theatre, cinema, essay, narrative, poetry

Esteve MIRALLES

esteve.mt@gmail.com

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Advanced Studies Diploma in Communication and Humanities from the Universitat Ramon Llull (2010). Bachelor's degree in Catalan Philology from the Universitat de Barcelona (1987). Writer. He is the author of *Narcís Comadira. Les ipseïtats poètiques de Narcís Comadira* (2021) and «Paradojas del deseo: apuntes sobre la dramaturgia catalana del siglo XXI» (2017).

English translation, Neil CHARLTON

Abstract

The article identifies recent trends in artistic texts from 2021 and articulates them using a transversal hermeneutic hypothesis: the centrality of a – prevailing – Rhetoric of anxiety, counterbalanced by a – dialectical – Rhetoric of anxiety and compassion, which places these two pre-linguistic attitudes in discursive tension. Moreover, it sets out the hypothesis in five possible sub-rhetorics: Irrelevance, Lack of power, Existential intensity, Impossibility of knowing, and Affective detachment.

Keywords: anxiety, compassion, contemporary literature, contemporary theatre

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This article brings together the ideas introduced in the closing presentation of the International Symposium of the journal *Estudis Escènics* “Imagining the Future? Catalan Dramatic Literature in Times of Crisis: 2008-2021”, delivered on 15 October 2021 at the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona. It responded to the task of identifying recent trends, among a selection of works — theatrical, literary, audiovisual — from 2021 as prospective symptoms of the beginning of the new decade and, perhaps, also as traces of the crises built up over recent years. The aim of the presentation was to complement this exercise of academic impressionism with a reasoned vision of these traces and trends.

This reasoned — transversal — view proposes, as a central interpretive key and as a framework trend, the prevalent character of a certain Rhetoric of anxiety, more or less counterbalanced by — and often mixed with — a Rhetoric of anxiety and compassion: a dialectical rhetoric, of creative tension between these two moral attitudes, both with regard to writing and human relationships as a whole.

This rhetorical framework, as a hypothesis, is finally developed into five more specific sub-rhetorics, which can be traced in the texts examined: a sub-rhetoric of Irrelevance (and False irrelevance); a sub-rhetoric of Lack of power (and False lack of power); a sub-rhetoric of Existential intensity (and False existential intensity); a sub-rhetoric of the Impossibility of knowing (and the False impossibility of knowing) and; finally, a sub-rhetoric of Affective detachment (and False affective detachment).

A contextualisation

The year 2021 marks the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century. And, at the same time, ends twelve or thirteen years of crises developing one on top of the other. It was a year marked by the Covid-19 pandemic: but from an artistic or moral point of view, probably, rather than taking on new dynamics, it accelerated the naturalisation — and the perception of inevitability — of certain unquestioned or poorly questioned ideological dynamics, present at

least since the end of the 20th century. One of these transparent dynamics, for example, would be the imposition of an ahistorical vision of the last forty years, as if it were a continuous present: as if it were a permanently resolved, not discursively conflicting, time. (Time and again, any discussion of historical memory does not venture beyond 1936 or, at most, 1975.)¹ Out of fear, cowardice or intellectual laziness — or in search of a false innocence, especially by poor leaders —, it seems accepted that, from the last forty years there is nothing to discuss critically (or from the last year, when 25,000 people died in Catalonia, preventable deaths, a high percentage). In short, “imagining the future” without having fully understood the immediate past ends up collectively drawing a future that is barely visible, and barely comprehensible.

A few years ago, I tried to sketch out the dramaturgical panorama of this early 21st century around the formulation of three paradoxes of desire: “The first: the desire to fit in and be part of a world, against the desire not to dissolve in it. The second: the desire to be able to be authentic (inconsistent and exceptional), against the desire not to be exposed to helplessness in a compassionless environment. And the third: the desire to understand oneself well and be able to be well understood, against the desire not to be irrelevant” (Miralles, 2017: 22). Here, now, based on around thirty selected pieces, I will try to move forward, as I said, in a new panoramic vision, made urgently but reasoned and related.

Intellectually speaking, and more from a literary bias, the most relevant theoretical contribution, of absolute reference, is contained in *Pel camí de Carner*, published in 2021, in Catalan, by Dolors Oller, which includes the essay entitled “L’ansietat i la pietat: dues tessitures estilístiques”. Oller organises and enriches ideas that she had previously presented: but she gives them transversal consistency. She writes (Oller, 2020: 103): “Anxiety and compassion are two virtues, two pre-linguistic attitudes, two virtues that, through words — but beyond their purely linguistic meanings —, manage to colour textual actions with an intentionality and a moral sense.”

For Oller, anxiety and compassion are, therefore, “two rhetorical operations [...] that give rise to distinctions in style and meaning.” And they are pre-linguistic virtues, she says, because “they inform us of the texture and attitudes that have driven our acts of speech” (Oller, 2020: 103).²

Dolors Oller’s formulation provides a conceptual basis for the discursive analysis that I propose in this article, ratified — as a contemporary key for contextualisation and as an interpretive key for the immediate future — for three reasons, at least: the first, because the malaises of the 21st century have called for attempts to redefine the two terms; the second, because the

1. In this respect, I find the institutional approach of an organisation like Memorial Democràtic emblematic <<http://memoria.gencat.cat/ca/institucio/>>.

2. Oller traces the sources of this duality in Aristotle (when he talks about tragedy), and Hölderlin, Rilke, and Jung, or W. H. Auden, author of a long poem entitled, *The Age of Anxiety. A Baroque Eclogue* (1948). And she later applies the intelligence of this idea to the profound reading of the moral — and artistic — meaning of Josep Carner’s poetry. But as a contemporary reference, which can be generalised. On the other hand, regarding the understanding of the notion of *pre-linguistic* attitude, I understand that it must be placed in the framework of pragmatics and the analysis of the illocutionary force, which incorporates non-linguistic elements (feelings, thoughts, beliefs) of any reference, either as an explanation or as a presupposition of relevance. (See, for example, M. BASSOLS. *Les claus de la pragmàtica*. Vic: Eumo, 2001, 255 p.)

essayistic debates about artistic contemporaneity dwell intensely upon anxiety and its effects, and occasionally also on the effects of the social eradication of compassion, and finally, the third, because current diagnostic trends detect an increase in the social prevalence of anxiety symptoms or associated symptoms, and an exacerbation of the use of anxiety patterns as identity traits (of a cool trend) or as arguments for political reaction, almost on the border of the normative formulation of a right to anxiety.

Prevalence of anxiety

“There has been an increase of almost 20 % in anxiety and depression disorders,” declared Dr. Diego Palao, Director of Mental Health at Parc Taulí in Sabadell, in an interview, with data relating to adults and linked to the psychiatric impact of the pandemic (Mouzo, 2021). And a Canadian study, also within the pandemic framework, crossed checked with numerous data from different countries, from 2020, and found that anxiety had a prevalence among 15 % of the population, which is four times more than would be usual (Porrás Ferreyra, 2020). Among teenagers, an international study, prior to the pandemic (2007-2017), states that, in people aged between 13 and 24, the suicide rate rose by 56 %. And another study sees that, between 2013 and 2017, the suicide rate doubled for girls. Other indirect indicators of anxiety, such as eating disorders or self-harm, also increased. And, in general, in the last seventy years, all the psychiatric indicators have remained stable, except those of Anxiety and Depression, and especially for women, which have grown (Smith, 2021: min. 46).

In parallel, and without being publicly expressed, support for a kind of right to anxiety has taken root, politically and in the media, as a transversal idea. Let’s make a clear distinction: one thing, as we said, is the increase in the prevalence of malaise linked to anxiety, predictably caused by a greater naturalisation of hostile social conditions; another thing is the discursive recovery from this malaise, which has transformed a health reality into a kind of social construct (halfway between complaining and accommodating), and finally, a third thing is the political exploitation of this discursive anxiety, as an ideology.

This ideology, very roughly summarised, would postulate that suffering legitimises lynching. And, specifically, suffering caused by anxiety: that is, suffering not linked to a direct cause, or with a disproportionate – and unreasonable – link to this cause. The implicit, rather than explicit, idea would be that individual anxiety generates a right that must be socially respected. And, secondarily, a political struggle about who – which individuals from which groups – has the right to anxiety as political energy, and who does not. And, therefore, which policies will become unquestionable based on the anxiety they generate in privileged groups, and which will become laws.³

3. I do not know if the right to compassion will ever be formulated politically; or the duty of compassion. The debate will require some contradictions: because compassion is an exercise of freedom. But when, in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (currently applicable in Spain), the Right to human dignity is defended, and declared “inviolable” (European Union, 2000), it is easy to ruminate on the difficulty of considering the effectiveness of such a right without a conception of human relations based on compassion.

One of the recent emblems of this political legitimisation of an anxiety can be found in the letter that the writer J. K. Rowling made public on 10 June 2020 about the changes in the legal recognition of gender – intended for trans people – and its link with biological sex. I will not go into depth, now. Rowling explains her stance based on “five reasons”. The fifth reason – which affects her “deeply” – constructs a false textbook argument. (In summary: she has been the victim of sexual abuse; this has generated a phobia for her in closed spaces; the recognition of trans women – even those without surgery or hormones – as women will enable them to use women’s changing rooms and toilets; these spaces will no longer be safe for her, by virtue of her phobic anxiety: therefore, she is, politically, against their legal recognition as women.) However, what seems relevant to me, in this case, is the political use of anxiety. And the defence of the right to anxiety. In this case, moreover, and very paradoxically, apparently from a fundamentally liberating ideological framework such as feminism (Rowling, 2020).

Essayistic presence

The essay *Humà, més humà: una antropologia de la ferida infinita*, by the philosopher Josep Maria Esquirol, appeared in 2021 – making a series from previous texts by the author. His look at this “infinite wound” confirms how human life is inseparable from the pain of living. Esquirol – in my opinion – questions the contemporary delusion of the possibility of a world without suffering: which would mean, in short, I think, the delusion of a world in which compassion would be dispensable. And he raises it – specifically – in terms of relationality; he says: contact with the other “hurts”, but at the same time it offers “the good of the company” which “drowns out everything else” (Esquirol, 2021: 151).

Esquirol’s rereading of Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* is interesting, with special attention to two acts of freedom and power – horizontal acts, between peers – which are clearly linkable to the idea of human compassion that we use here: they are *forgiveness* and *promise*. *Forgiveness*, oriented towards the past, ensures that “what has already happened does not completely paralyse.” And the promise, says Esquirol with Arendt, “is how to be able to deal with insecurity about myself in the future” (Esquirol, 2021: 50). Without doubt, they are two resources to compensate, with compassion, for anxiety. And, at the same time, when resources are denied or restricted, they become two possible sources of anxiety, without a doubt: the inability to forgive – to “start” something new – and the inability to trust in the future, in the promise.

And if Esquirol epitomises the compassionate essay, I will entrust the review of anxiety – from artistic reflection – to *Las aventuras de Genitalia y Normativa*, by professor Eloy Fernández Porta, an outstanding academic who also sets out his ideas in the format of performance. In the book, Fernández Porta explores a “problematic” vision of the artists and their mission to “produce freedom”. A mission that collides and coexists with the “modern feeling par excellence, the one that grips us all: anguish. Anguish over identity, nationality, work, subjectivity” (Fernández, 2021: 90, 32).

Fernández Porta shows us how this anguish — this excessive centrality of anguish — generates artistic responses, or “ways of constituting the subject”, which lead to a “strategic simplification”. In other words, the “creator” who aspires to become differentiated is defined in opposition to the “power” that limits him and wants him to be “normal”. And he undertakes this in an environment, he says, of “affective capitalism”, in which “the public display of ties shapes identity” and in which a “relationalist doctrine” prevails: a society based on ties and, paradoxically, on the strict regulation of ties. So, on the way to differentiation, and to escape the anxiety of having to be “normal”, we respond with greater “normativity”, he says: “the more peculiar a group is, the more of an outsider, the more manifest and necessary is a regulation that differentiates it” (Fernández, 2021: 32, 37-38, 50). It is a powerful paradox: to escape from normativity — that of vertical power —, more normativity is generated: self-inflicted or contested and horizontal.

The world is divided, then, once again in terms of “religious sectarianism”: between the “us” (“soul mates”) and the “them”, that is, the “sworn enemies”. Fernández Porta warns: “Building communities based on formalised and exposed links is the horizon of existence. A step beyond *homo sapiens*, *homo associative*.” And the artist — the subject — who wanted to free himself submits to this “imperative to experiment with [...] that hyperbolic experience of duty.” Of course: “with more intensity and anguish” (Fernández, 2021: 33, 37, 89-90). In short: less freedom, more anxiety.⁴

Conceptual redefinition

I have already outlined some keys to the contemporary redefinition of anxiety. The psychiatric origin of the term is clear when consulted in the dictionary: “Psychic disturbance characterised by a state of extreme insecurity and restlessness” (DIEC2). And, as a disorder, we know that the specialised catalogues link it to intense, excessive and persistent fears in the face of everyday situations: which are fears disproportionate to the real danger. And we know, too, that the activating dynamics of anxiety are complementary to the activating dynamics of absorbing entertainment consumption, especially the dynamics linked to the level of arousal and gratifications — and the sense of wellbeing — associated with it.⁵ The documentary film *I Am Gen Z*, directed by Liz Smith, tackles the issue of teenagers and social media with great complexity. Social media is the most defining cultural experience of Generation Z and, according to experts in the film, they create a cultural audience made from fear of the future, fear of failure, perfectionist, isolated, without privacy, in constant evasion, exhausted from always being activated and exposed, with critical inability, inability to make difficult decisions, used to

4. On Twitter, a group of playwrights were debating plays with a “theme”: I would add, at a distance, now, that a play with a “theme” very often implies a previous “community” of defenders of the theme. And that the plays with a “theme” perhaps only seek to generate the “normativity” of this “community”. Strengthening normativity; not criticism. Fernández Porta seems to say — says — that the artist can stop “producing freedom” to become a “tweeter”. Let’s think about it.

5. Frances Haugen’s speech — October 2021 — on the algorithms of Facebook and Instagram, before a US Senate Committee <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOnpVQnv5Cw>> alerted the public to these activating mechanisms, with regard to childhood and adolescence.

being divided and confronted with other groups, used to being entertained by things that make them angry... (Smith, 2021). Undoubtedly, it needs reflection: it is a new “public” on the way, who can reassess — who will reassess — the entire cultural sector; all cultural relations.

The anthropologist Andrea Boscoboinik points out the importance of Culture — that is, “the collective social knowledge” — when it comes to living with fear and uncertainty. And she picks up on Edgar Morin’s notion: the so-called *anti-fear mechanisms*. And she links to these mechanisms the existence of a *security market* in which, in addition to arms or alarms, the consumption of leisure and entertainment — as *anti-fear* consumption — plays its part: in the consumption of technology (and, I point out, in the illusion of contactless social relations); in the consumption of marked journeys (in search of a return to the origins, to nature, for example), or in the mere consumption of entertainment, or cultural consumption in general, perhaps to cling on to identity, or to tradition, or to a self-image... (Boscoboinik, 2017). This has been identified, in *Barcelona, cultura sense capital. De l’ebullició col·lectiva al talentisme creatiu*, by another anthropologist, Marc Roig i Badia, who points out how, in the midst of this devastating crisis of crises, subscriptions to platforms, and the purchase of books and tickets, are maintained as a way of avoiding loss of social status. He says: “People on poverty incomes are desperately clinging to the lifestyle of the middle classes, which has gone global” (Roig, 2021: 217).

As for compassion, which is a word that generates absurd suspicions (among those who link it exclusively to religious devotion), it is true that it has created a banal conceptual redefinition, disguised under the insubstantial layer of empathy. Nothing to do with it, of course. Empathy is a movement that places someone in someone else’s perspective (you can empathise with someone’s cruelty, for example), but compassion is a feeling, and it involves a pain that sympathises with the pain of others.

The anthropologist Lluís Duch, taking a contemporary approach (in the context of technological society, he says, which generates a hyper-affiliation with the Self and a disaffiliation with Society), managed to rethink compassion conceptually: from the reformulation of a “relationality” based on human compassion. For Duch, compassion is an “exercise of freedom” and, as such, entails a critique of fixed ideas, of everything that appears unquestioned. And it focuses, especially, on questioning how contemporary common sense usually approaches two central factors in the dramaturgical debate: Time and Space. In summary: with the desire to build a “human” Space that allows for identification, that avoids a “symbolic de-structuring” and eschews the pathologisation of existence, making both interiority and exteriority possible. And — also briefly summarising — the achievement of a “human” Time, which does not abandon itself to the *over-acceleration* of the market and money (immediacy, instantaneity, ubiquity) and which allows for a relationality of Quality: that is to say, a *relationality* in which the weight of the past can be present (Duch, 2002).

In 2021, two plays were premiered that, in my opinion, conjure this up. They are *El jardí*, by Lluïsa Cunillé, and *L’habitació blanca*, by Josep Maria

Miró. In one case, in the discomfort of a house problematised as a home — as a garden — and as a conflict, marked precisely by the difficulties of accessing the past and integrating this past into a possible present (Cunillé, 2021); in the other, with scenes like the one in the impersonal lobby of a block of flats where an architect and his former primary school teacher meet, with the urgency of deciding whether or not to give time to the past, or whether it is better to play at deliberate oblivion. To delete links. “We don’t have a relationship,” the former student will implore (Miró, 2021).

Poetry has also produced two remarkable books along these lines. On the one hand, *L’anell*, by Jordi Llavina, which — as I was able to explore on another occasion (Miralles, 2021) — centralises the reflection on the humanisation of time, through a literary vindication of the right to make a detour, to favour digression, to detach from the pressure of productive time in favour of an erratic time, sacrificed for understanding (Llavina, 2021). And, on the other, the poetry of *L’infern*, by Roger Vilà Padró, stands out, echoing this radical — identitarian — need for a slowed-down time (Vilà, 2021: 39):

*Puja al turó, i baixa’n lentament [...]
Dona temps als líquens, mentre te’ls mires,
perquè mudin de color, dona temps
a l’aranya perquè enllesteixi l’art [...]
Baixa amb la lentitud amb què es desplacen
els continents, tu mateix convertit
en placa tectònica, en sediment
sobre el qual reposen records, idees,
designis, intencions, fins i tot versos
que has llegit o escrit o deixat d’escriure*

Go up the hill, and come down slowly [...]
Allow the lichens time, as you look at them,
To change colour, allow the spider
Time to complete the art [...]
Descend with the slow movement of
The continents, you yourself converted
Into tectonic plate, into sediment
On which memories, ideas,
Designs, intentions, even verses rest
That you have read or written or ceased to write

Artistic honesties and impostures

Let’s go back to the start: “Anxiety and compassion are two virtues, two pre-linguistic attitudes, two virtues that [...] manage to colour textual actions with an intentionality and a moral sense” (Oller, 2021: 103). In order to contextualise this duality in the literary and artistic sphere, based on the condition of this “moral sense”, I understand that it is necessary to connect it with a contemporary debate about artistic *honesty* and *imposture*. Not

surprisingly, a notable part of culturalist reflections on anxiety link it to the effects of the so-called *impostor phenomenon*; especially in the field of intelligent women, which is where the phenomenon was originally studied and described (Clance and Imes, 1978). And, among the essayistic buds of 2021, in this respect, the book *Frágiles: Cartas sobre la ansiedad y la esperanza en la nueva cultura*, by Remedios Zafra, can be symptomatic.

Between privilege and precariousness — or self-exploitation — as a culture worker — if I may use the expression — and faced with the lack of opportunity, she says, to “do things with meaning,” Zafra points out how “the question of meaning returns as a slap between our forms of life, between excess production and imposture when anxiety becomes naturalised as an opaque lens before the consciousness of a seeing that hurts.” And she adds that: “It is no wonder then that those lives-work sustained in over-exploitation explode in a normalised anxiety” (Zafra, 2021: 46, 12, 22). The essayist combines documentary precision with a certain tendency to self-victimisation — and I’m not always sure if she sees anxiety as a problem or as militancy — but she always picks the right targets. Her “question about meaning” resonates with the “moral sense” that Oller identifies as fundamental, and more so in a dissolving environment of “normalised anxiety”.

Let’s clarify what I think: in a debate of ideas, or in an artistic debate, having problems — and problems you deserve not to have — is not synonymous with being right. It has no argumentative value. This is not the case with Zafra, but a certain intellectual crudeness has appeared, which assumes that the intensity of the suffering that anxiety causes in an essayist directly underpins the accuracy of her postulates. This tendency, especially when the argumentative anxiety is manifestly pathological, can be made understandable in terms of a literature of the self: but it becomes unfeasible to defend — I think — from essayistic solidity. For me, it would be the case of a hybrid book — despite the subtitle — like *Exposure*, by Olivia Sudjic, who writes a book about anxiety — exposure anxiety — which causes her to have to write the very book that she writes (that we read). From a narcissistic appropriation of anxiety, Sudjic politicises this anxious narcissism, for example, as a form of “active resistance to patriarchal oppression”. And she seems to argue, in creative terms, for the “recognition of the contradiction”, or perhaps the paradox, in which anxiety, on the one hand, leads her to “dissolution” and “depersonalisation” and, at the same time, she says, it propels her “outside of myself, not into the void but into the world it would create”. The world she creates, finally, is a mixed and indivisible autobiographical essay, linked to the narration of some anxious moments in which “the self becomes the only reality”, and in which to explain it “made it all worthwhile” (Sudjic, 2018). In short: the development of a disorder as poetics, which proposes partial remedies to the anxiety of writing, such as “you yourself have to write the compassionless criticism” (Sudjic, 2018), in a realisation of the complementary link between compassion and anxiety, and how the basis of the social centrality of anxiety is none other than the assumption of the inevitability — assumed, ascertained or self-inflicted — of a world without compassion.

In contemporary terms, the culturalist debate about honesty is a dialectical controversy between a culture-conflict and a culture-refuge (or healing, as some politicians have recently claimed),⁶ or between the critical questioning of power and the mere attenuation of the effects of its abuses, or between the creation of transformative understandings of the world view and the mere supply of products for the cultural consumption market. But, also, between anxiety and compassion.

Artistically, pre-linguistically, as a rhetorical intention, anxiety aspires to show — and therefore to make expressible, and to construct as real — the effects of the pain of living. This attitude contains honesty, I think, if it faces these effects courageously, and if it summons the naked complicity of the reader-spectator, appealed to from the awareness of one's own vulnerability, or one's own capacity to hurt. But this same anxiety can nurture the imposture of an exhibitionist approach — of merely collecting anxious experiences —, or of an identitarian construction, as a discourse of a victim who exploits pain as a mechanism for attracting attention and discursive privileges.

Complementarily, a writing moved by the rhetoric of compassion will basically aspire to make this pain of living bearable, understandable. To create works that help. This attitude contains the honesty of a discursive effort to give meaning to the pain, to the horror, to the absurd: because it is this meaning — artistically created — that will make it bearable, and that will offer a hope that can be shared and defended — not necessarily or purposely healing — from radicality, without self-deception. But it is clear that a conventional, paternalistic compassion, which starts from the differentiation between those who know and those who do not, or which is limited to a proselytism of fixed values, or of conceptual refuges, will be no more — artistically — than an imposture.

The question I pose, then, is how a controversy about artistic honesty — or about artistic imposture — can be approached, apart from the discussion about compassion and anxiety: yes, posed as “intentionality” and “moral sense”, to return, once again, to the wise words of Dolors Oller. And there are two strange novels that would back up this discussion, I think. On the one hand, *Els llocs on ha dormit Jonàs*, by Adrià Pujol Cruells, which is the story of a disruptive video game programmer who continues — as if nothing has happened — his daily life, although he is unable to remember whether or not he had killed a woman in a park the night before (Pujol, 2021). The story opens up, out of honesty, the need for a prior debate, which is the debate about consciousness — not only moral consciousness, but (first and foremost) cognitive consciousness — in a world equipped with very effective sophistications of self-deception, which cause honesty and imposture to finally become invaluable qualities. Without access to consciousness — of acts and consequences — these are two values that cannot be evaluated. Also artistically. And, on the other hand, and perhaps a step further, honesty implies the awareness of what we should know, but also the awareness of what

6. The Catalan Minister of Culture says: “The consolidation and expansion of actions related to culture, health and wellbeing is one of the priority lines of action of this legislature” <<https://govern.cat/salaprensa/notes-premsa/417721/garriga-impulsarem-illei-drets-cultural-cultura-arribi-tota-ciudadania-exclusions>> [25/1/2022].

we inevitably do not know: or what is fragmentary and cannot be completed, from the limits of personal construction, or the completeness of the self. *Aliment*, by Martí Sales, which is and is not a novel, contains the poem “Y d’Y” (Sales, 2021: 241-246), which, halfway between the versified declaration of love and a kind of declaration of intimate heritage, conjures up the centrality of facing — “mystery,” “work of compassion” — inconsistent, inevitable, constitutive enigmas and prophecies. It reads:

*i vas aparèixer tu
i a mi em va costar seguir sense esperar res
al cap d’una estona ja parlàvem d’això
del puto destí
i de les putes expectatives
de la fi del món [...]
però de moment res de res
encara res [...]
mantenint l’esperança a ratlla
el siniestro experimento de la esperanza
que diu la Liddell
ocupats desballestant expectatives [...]
l’obra a punt de començar i nosaltres que no sabem
si serà una tragèdia o un misteri
una obra de pietat o una gigantomàquia [...]
no esperàvem res ni sabíem res
només xerràvem
un nucli dur i espontani
d’ignorància esca i possibilitat
un començament
un començament qualsevol
qualsevol lloc serveix per començar [...]
començant de nou sense res a perdre encara*

and then you appeared
and it was hard for me to continue without expecting anything
after a while we were talking about this
about fucking fate
and fucking expectations
about the end of the world [...]
but nothing at the moment
still nothing [...]
keeping hope at bay
the sinister experience of hope
what Liddell says
busy dismantling expectations [...]
the show about to begin and we who don’t know
whether it will be a tragedy or a mystery
a work of compassion or a gigantomachy [...]
we didn’t expect anything and we didn’t know anything
we were just chatting

a hard and spontaneous core
of ignorance and possibility
a beginning
any beginning
any place is good to start [...]
starting over with nothing yet to lose

Rhetorics of Anxiety and Compassion

Honesty and impostures, awareness and self-delusions, expectations and hopes, personal construction and human relationships... The debate of conclusions is broad and becomes broader at every turn; I won't enter into it here. But instead, to complete this thought, as I have set out, I will propose some rhetorics — five sub-rhetorics, to try to be clearer — of this Rhetorics of anxiety and compassion. They are tentative hypotheses: they are five ideas of creative action, perhaps five pre-expressive but implicitly expressed beliefs, which, hermeneutically, seemed to me identifiable (ascertainable and articulating) in some other buds, in some other works, of 2021.

Irrelevance (and False irrelevance)

There is an entropic tendency to Irrelevance, and there is a world — a social construct of market capitalism, anti-intellectual, presentist, scared of its fears, self-punitive — that favours and ratifies this tendency. And it is often accompanied, also, by an individual action of False irrelevance, or self-inflicted irrelevance, which emanates from a colonial view of the self, which is subordinated and adheres to the codes and attractions of realities — metropolises, people, media figures, points of sale — understood as centres of the world. In this hypothesis, this colonial mechanism would be exercised from an understanding of language as a form of domination, connected to processes of *hyper-judgment* and *hyper-devaluation*: of the others, of the world (or parts of the world), of the self. Knowing that you are hyper-judged or hyper-devalued — and knowing it, more or less consciously, because we also recognise the hyper-judgmental and hyper-devaluative drive in ourselves — creates anxiety, and the experience of lack of compassion.

The ambitious novel *Els angles morts*, by Borja Bagunyà, would exemplify this sub-rhetoric, through the overflowing force of a narrator who leaves no movement (nor any mental association, nor any thematic derivation) unjudged: of none of his characters, permanently deconstructed without mercy. Everything is judged there, and severely, implacably: every shred of dignity — of refuge of personal dignity — is deactivated and betrayed as fragile, removable, reducible to mirage (Bagunyà, 2021). The extreme severity, at the same time, also betrays a — narrative, existential — fear of losing control of the discourse; a fear, probably, of having to negotiate, to dialogue, to agree, and that this commitment opens the door to a dissolution of the narrator's self, which is the voice of the book, the created work. Maybe fear of getting dirty, or of being fragile, and separable. Maximum lack of compassion of

the subject to (aspire to) not be an object of compassion. As a hypothesis, in outline, it does not seem to me to be a sub-rhetoric at all alien to the forceful, nuanced *ad hominem* dynamics, of the Twitter haters. For example. Hyper-judgment reduces everything to partial information, and the reduction confirms – and perhaps causes – the impossibility of giving constitutive solidity to anything. To any self.

With more discursive compassion, other creative operations assume one's own irrelevance; observed, confessed, taken as a starting point. In terms of personal growth, or letting go of a non-self-aware self, or in favour of a new adult self, which will build maturity – honesty as a voice – over irrelevance. Two recent songs would reflect that, I think. The first is the “Musica leggerissima” by the duo Colapesce/DiMartino, that through a fresh and musically light pop confront anxiety, existential anguish, “*per non cadere dentro al buco nero / che stà ad un passo da noi*” (to avoid falling into the black hole / which is one step away from us.) With the *musica leggera*, that they seek as noise, consciously, to avoid or attenuate the pain of living, induced by the nihilistic breath of the will: “*ho voglia di niente*” (I feel like doing nothing), they sing (Colapesce and DiMartino, 2021). And they propose:

*Ripensi alla tua vita
Alle cose che hai lasciato
Cadere nello spazio
della tua indifferenza animale*

Rethink your life
The things you have
Fall into the space
Of your animal indifference

It is irrelevance made conscious, as a mechanism that nature (animality) has enabled, but also as personal responsibility. As an action of self-devaluation. Compensable with an anti-entropic action within reach: rethink oneself, they say. And, in the other song I recall, on the other hand, in another facet of this “indifferenza animale”, and with a certain inconsistency, indeed, the author opts more for the freedom of unthinking, or of not thinking: “*Que si yo ahora fuera perra / juguetona y muy amable / no tendría estos problemas de ansiedad*” (If I were a dog / playful and very kind / I wouldn't have these anxiety problems), because “*todos estos miedos se disiparían / y viviría en armonía y libertad*” (all these fears would vanish / and I'd live in harmony and freedom) (Bandini, 2021). The inconsistencies come, of course, from wanting to animalise while maintaining the – human – freedom of having one's own voice (and not being irrelevant), and of continuing to sing freely; but the lyrics of “Perra”, by Rigoberta Bandini, rightly show a recurring framework of anti-anxiety refuges, which – given that we are unable to call for a compassionate treatment – favours rhetorical self-devaluation.

Lack of power (and False lack of power)

The world — society — disempowers; it either limits power, or circumscribes it to environments that dissolve it. And, at the same time, individuals generate dynamics — often exculpatory — of self-disempowerment. Lluís Duch, as we have already noted, spoke of the hyper-affiliation to the Self and the disaffiliation of Society: be that as it may, by combining one thing and the other, I understand that what becomes detectable artistically is an inclination to provoke or ascertain *hyper-isolation*. Which, of course, disempowers; weakens, leaves helpless, generates vulnerability, fear, anxiety.

The play *De què parlem mentre no parlem de tota aquesta merda*, by Joan Yago and La Calòrica employs a certain empathic compassion, of constant confirmation of the mutual incongruence of all the characters on stage (Yago, 2021). Obviously, the process is generous and, at the same time, limited — not very brave —, because it tends to put at the same level those who have power and those who do not, and to a certain stereotyping of the human condition. But it shows very well how — in the face of an inescapable conflict — confrontation has become a taboo, and how cowardice generates all kinds of self-justifying rhetoric: not to assume that politics — the management and definition of the common good — is also victim of the taboo of deactivating a dialectical vision of human society. In this context, confrontation produces anxiety, avoidance. Language, which here attacks weakly and defends itself strongly, and all at the same time, is lost in its own labyrinth; it becomes a labyrinth. And it articulates inaction. And it de-enlightens itself; it de-modernises itself. It proves to be inoperative, insufficient.

The taboo of asking for help is woven into this taboo of confrontation. Of turning to others. (More isolation.) In metaphorical terms of social anxiety, if you will, yes; but also in terms of the bare realisation of disempowerment in the face of radical identity fears, such as being able, or not, to protect the people you love. The anxiety of realizing the impossibility of being a protection — a shield — for the people who trust you (including yourself) is, I think, one of the most devastating side effects of neoliberal economics.⁷ The over-acceleration of time, mutual mistrust, the inability or prevention of collective intervention contribute, even more, to a disempowered reality. In *Old*, the filmmaker M. Night Shyamalan fictionalises these sources of anxiety in a fantastic fable, which — with moments of greater or lesser narrative success — triggers questions about the meaning of continuing to fight (to escape), about the existential strength of knowing how to become old and be loved (Roman *pietas* is, in origin, intergenerational: towards parents) or — more sociologically, or politically, or philosophically — about the compassion contained in the faith in tying one's own life to time — to future lives —, those who will survive us (Shyamalan, 2021).

7. In episode 5 of season 4 (2020) of the series *The Crown*, the drama tells the story of the intruder who gained access to the queen's rooms. The conversation between the unemployed man and the monarch is the emblem of this neoliberal devastation. On Thatcher, founding mother of the dehumanisation of the current economic system, the intruder says: "She's destroying the country. [...] I thought that I'd bounce back. And then I didn't. [...] And then you begin to wonder, you know, where's it gone? Not just your confidence or your happiness, but your... [...] She's dismantled it, along with the other things we thought we could depend on growing up. A sense of community, a sense of, you know, obligation to one another. A sense of kindness. It's all disappearing [...] the right to be frail, be human."

Existential intensity (and False existential intensity)

Living intensely — as a construct and as an associated practice — generates a powerful activation of the rewarded self and, at the same time, creates greater friction with others: more wounds, as Esquirol says. Maybe wounds to others, but almost certainly more wounds to oneself, too. And, in a self-legend of hyper-activation — of voraciousness, acceleration, accumulation of experiences — wounds can come to seem like the guarantee of the achievement of living plenitude. Being hurt, suffering continuously, bulimically, cumulatively — remember the “affective capitalism” that Fernández Porta pointed out to us — can contribute to the difficulty of “doing with meaning” (Zafra). Not stopping doing things, as an anxious compulsion, will rather make things equalise, in the name of intensity, yes, but they will become less and less meaningful. If you are what you do, and what you do loses meaning, it must be more difficult to know who you are, and what you really want, etc. The compulsion, then, does not satiate anxiety — it does not calm it — but it feeds it again. It renews it.

As an outline, as a hypothesis, we could trace this sub-rhetoric in various films. The Swedish *Julia & I*, by Nina Hobert, in the style of an autobiographical documentary, explains it with force and excess, and does so through the cycles of combined anxiety that arise between the two protagonists of the film: one addicted to voracious compulsions (sex, drugs, food, risk), the other gripped by a deep anxiety of exposure; one hungry to access the completeness of a decontaminated “normal” life, the other terrified by the vulnerability she feels at having to assume herself as a stranger. “I’m a fake”, she says, with echoes of the impostor phenomenon we’ve already mentioned. And the realisation: “I don’t know how to live with all this anxiety. [...] The shame of what you have been. The shame of what you are. The shame of feeling ashamed. [...] The only thing that matters: make friends with your obscurity” (Hobert, 2021).

Along with this film, without a doubt, another director, the young Israeli Hadas Ben Aroya, has found, in my opinion, the most disturbing pulse possible to express the relational desert that, on the same path of the eradication of compassion, causes the equalisation of experiences and the affective — sentimental — deactivation of all life lived, especially in the young generation, in *All Eyes Off Me*. Disturbing and precise, in the end — without ceasing to unsettle us as viewers —, the protagonist lets herself be carried away, but by her own decision, towards the need to stop, to do nothing, to feel (sensations, feelings), to appropriate time and silence, to want them, despite the difficulty of this learning for someone who has lived as if slowed down time were the opposite of living⁸ (Ben Aroya, 2021).

8. I could have considered two more films. One, which would show this endemic prejudice that conceives life as a string of stimulations and narcissistic lack of compassion: *Ovella* (2021), directed by ESCAC students. And the other, Argentinean, which exacerbates the victimistic narcissism of repeated suffering, an identity fact, amorally self-inflicted but perceived as relevant, despite being banal: *La calor* (2021), by Martín Liji, script by Liji and Rosario Cervio.

Impossibility of knowing (and False impossibility of knowing)

The world, despite the ubiquity of mass information, is becoming more and more complex and harder to understand. Also knowledge, both historical (which is constantly put under suspicion) and scientific, seems increasingly more unattainable, and uncontrollable, less reliable as personal baggage. But, at the same time, accommodatingly, not knowing – giving up understanding – frees up energy and allows us to guarantee a kind of permanent, unquestionable innocence, shielded by this (false) impossibility of knowing. And this determinism of ignorance, of course, carries with it – often under a pseudo-progressive doxa of denial of personal guilt – a frank escape route from the purgatory of maturity: which, in reality, is only possible on consciousness and the assumption of responsibilities.

It is possible that one of the fictions that makes the anxious structure of its story, and of its main character – almost more like a diagnosis than a psychology – most evident is *Sola*, by Carlota Gurt. Anticipatory anxiety moves the plot of the novel between the apprehensions, suspicions and paranoia of the protagonist. And the others – her *others* – function as the great source of anxiety: the fact of knowing (well) the others, specifically. Which means, for her: to have them controlled, adjusted to her own subjectivity. The protagonist maintains a sick relationship with her mother, but at one point she seems to identify a bit of relaxation, because she finds that the mother “perhaps with age [...] has magically become the person I need her to be.” Here is the outline of this sub-rhetoric: knowing – it turns out – is adapting the world to personal needs. This – when it happens – perhaps temporarily calms anxiety, but in the long run it also feeds it, because each self knows – cannot help but know – that he too is (part of) the world, and that with success and extension of this epistemology, she, for the others, will also become merely an object for the needs the others may have. Mei, the protagonist and narrator, complains: “It’s very difficult to find someone who understands you and, even so, they never fully understand you or it’s you who don’t understand them” (Gurt, 2021: 235-6, 159).

Hence the activating mechanism of this sub-rhetoric is, mainly, that of the *hyper-verification of personal relationships*. Out of suspicion, of course. Out of permanent dissatisfaction, in front of each new learning that will immediately become suspicious: especially if it does not meet, without negotiation or request (*not asking first* or *thanking later* are basic narcissistic constituents), the needs we expect it to satisfy. A compassionate counter-dynamic of disarmament to this anxious dynamic of hyper-verification is accurately described by Carles Sanjosé in the song *Punxes*: “*Gastes l’energia en va, lluitant sempre contra vent/ Ja t’entenc però ara descansa/ Mira’m bé, de debò veus l’enemic aquí?*” (You spend your energy in vain, always struggling against the wind/ I understand you but now rest/ Look at me carefully, do you really see the enemy here?) (Sanjosex, 2020).

And, in this logic of the (false) impossibility of knowing and the blocking of interpersonal relationships, without a doubt, we could also use the plays *L’habitació blanca*, by Miró, and *El jardí*, by Cunillé, which we have already

discussed above: especially with regard to the great difficulties with which human relationships seem to be unable to move forward (not being able to overcome the anamnesis phase), towards new stages of greater trust and, also, of course, of greater lack of protection of the self, facing the fear of being disappointed, or attacked, betrayed. Or, merely, misunderstood. Or maybe, in the end: too well understood.

Removing the past, and its weight, from human relationships, as we said, seems to be the game of anxious individualism, because outside of the very few and hyper-verified “soul mates” (the current myth of the bestie, and the bff, links fully with this), all the rest are “sworn enemies”, recalling here Fernández Porta’s idea.⁹

Affective detachment (and False affective detachment)

And I’m coming to an end: as a sub-rhetoric, affective detachment has, as I just now pointed out, a protective effect, a search for protection, at least. But it also seems linked to a narrative of emancipation. In this view, which obviously owes to an attitude of adolescent individuation, affection is — it seems — a brake on individuation.¹⁰ However: if affections dissolve the self — or wound it, returning to Esquirol’s term —, it is no less true that the lack of affections dissolves even more, even if the only thing that it detaches from is the ratification — explicit, verifiable — of affective bonds.

Hence the rhetorics of false affective detachment, which seek to radically stage a detachment that, they trust, will not be irreversible: in *Chavalas*, the film directed by Carol Rodríguez Colás and written by Marina Rodríguez Colás, the contradictions of this mechanism of anempathic overacting, in the reversed emancipation story of a protagonist forced to return to her working-class neighbourhood after reinventing herself as a cool artist in cosmopolitan settings. Fittings and mismatches, authenticities and falsifications, identity narcissism does not manage without support systems (family, friendships, neighbourhood network); it simply hides its use. Or anxiously struggles to make the traces of the bond invisible¹¹ (Rodríguez, 2021).

With greater radicalism, in the (unresolved) tension between anxiety and compassion, there are two novels that have explored the existential depths of affectivity with brilliant success. In a universe of precarious adults and deficient local customs — actually, in a masked fable — in *L’agua que vols*, Víctor Garcia Tur plays with the plots of a conventional comedy, apparently

9. A fierce taboo in the narcissistic rhetorics of anxiety, I believe, is the idea that a human relationship can be initiated apart from the decision to initiate it. In human communication, and we have known this at least since Watzlawick (1967), intentionality is irrelevant when it comes to interacting and starting an interpersonal relationship — of finding that it has started. And when you have already interacted, you already have a past — pattern — in common. The will has no capacity to intervene: and this lack of power is undoubtedly a possible source of anxiety for those who want to be able to decide everything in all their relationships.

10. The television series *Sex Education* (2019-2021) must be one of the best examples of the updated representation of this in current drama.

11. From the perspective of self-parody, the medium-length film *Stop* (2021), by the Barcelona group Doble Pletina, is interesting. Like in a mod musical out of time, the film parodies the victimhood of the whinger: “Just another time / who will sympathise with me?” And the whole story, between infantilism and B movie, passes through an empathetic, indifferent, cool indifference. The metaphor of the extraterrestrial, and of the absurd, also connects with the “animal indifference” that we have seen before: here, linked to a deconflicted, or trivialised, world as a refuge, or alibi, or pastime.

innocuous, but which progresses without pause towards the evidence of not being, of not finding ourselves, as it seemed, in a safe place. The reader tends to take reality and realism for granted, but nostalgia and sadness, stagnant hopes and self-imposed failures, disappointments and the pain of living (yes, deaths, illnesses) are the true story. I have avoided giving plot details for the fictions I have mentioned, and I won't — with good reason — for *L'aigua que vols*: but if there is a brilliant way to explain that neither anxiety nor compassion are avoidable, nor dispensable, nor easily divided, you must go to the end of this book. And to its ability to show the value, very great value, precious, of how we start to live. To know what — that is, who — we are.

Indeed: what we are. This is also the latent question of the second novel I want to mention in this section, which is *Klara and the Sun*, by Kazuo Ishiguro. In a hostile world, which sows and re-sows the seeds of fascism until it (seems) reasonable, the question of differentiation — what makes us unique as individuals — does not disappear. And, of course, it is death, and the anxieties that death makes present, that keep the question alive. Our own death, and the death of others. A robot — I must apologise here if I explain perhaps too much — disagrees with the opinions of the scientist who wants to prepare it to replace a human. According to the scientist, there is nothing “special” that cannot be identified and isolated in that human, and nothing “couldn't be continued”: he says that the researcher had “searched and searched and found nothing like that.” But the intelligent robot — the novel is also a fable — disagrees and believes that the ultra-transhumanist scientist, in reality, “was searching in the wrong place.” And he concludes: “There was something very special, but it wasn't inside” of that person they aspired to replace. He says: “It was inside those who loved her” (Ishiguro, 2021). Finally: what we are, who (else) we are.

Thus far, the summary of these five tentative sub-rhetorics. And thus far this article on the Rhetoric of anxiety and compassion. There are many open questions, of course. With new guidelines of relationality, how will theatre or literature in general be altered? How will the characters relate? How will the relational pact between the works and the readers-viewers be built? And what artistic landscape — what society — will emerge from this new relationality? Without mutual — relational — compassion between readers and books, will literature, theatre, art make sense?

Over the years, I suppose, we will gain perspective on this historical moment and on the value of its representations. Finally, however, we will have to return to the questions — and the answers — about human relationality, and we will have to return to the measure of the “exercises of freedom” that will have been made possible, either very often or very marginally. And to the anxiety management efforts they have motivated, and to the discursive — creative — efforts of renewed compassion that have been useful. I do not know if there is room for future art without compassion; I do know, however, that so far I have not found good reasons to help make it possible.

Rather, I feel called to a future of respect for human dignity, under parameters such as those proposed by Jordi Palet in *La moxilla de l'Ada*, a

family play, written for the company Teatre al Detall (Palet, 2021). The play tells the story of a boy called Adam who wanted to be a girl; because he was. Her parents – characters in the play – explain themselves and try to make themselves understood, to overcome their anxiety, and that of their daughter. The environment – the world – can be hostile, and not make it easy. And understanding – and the necessary time to understand – is also, to a large extent, inescapably, an act of will. A free act. As it is compassion. And Palet's play, and the Teatre al Detall's show, explains this very well. When taking their leave of the audience, the parents say to the audience:

FATHER: This is what we've tried to explain to you.

MOTHER: Maybe it's complicated.

FATHER: It's as simple as that: it's complicated.

MOTHER: We don't ask you to understand it, just to accept it.

FATHER: We just ask you to respect it.

MOTHER: That is simple.



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