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On the Humorous Lightness of the Coronavirus Pandemic. Case Analyses of Poetic and Narrative Texts by Jacques Moulin and François Varay

Abstract

The Corona pandemic has produced an enormous wealth of publications in the field of fiction. In terms of French literary production, the vast majority are more or less autobiographical and/or quasi-therapeutic chronicles of experiencing and living through the first lockdown. Far rarer is the humorous approach to dealing with the crisis. With the analysis of Jacques Moulin's long poem "Corona" and François Varay's short novel *Le moins mauvais des mondes* (The Least Bad World), the article presents two outstanding French examples of the humorous treatment of the Corona pandemic.

Le grec nous fait drôlement souffrir quand on y pense
 Toutes les maladies sont grecques
 Toutes les maladies viennent de Grèce
 Démocratie est grec qu'est-ce que je souffre !
 Monarchie est grec le comble de la souffrance !
 Aristocratie est grec la souffrance chic !
 Heureusement nous sommes tous vaccinés
 Hormis quelques cas ça ou là
 On n'en meurt pas on n'en meurt plus
 D'ailleurs vaccin n'est pas grec
 Vaccin vient du bas-latin populaire vacca la vache
 Vacca nous protège
 La vache du peuple nous immunise contre les maladies
 grecques
 Nous devrions chacun avoir notre propre vache
 Chacun sa vacca
 [...]
 Jacques Darras, "Prosopagnosie" (unpublished)

Introductory remarks on French Corona literature

A look at the new publications for 2021 on the French book market shows it clearly: "Coronavirus is slowly but surely taking hold in the French literary landscape."¹ (Plouviez 2021)² Among the books published in 2020 and 2021 that focus on Corona or a pandemic are *Ces casseroles qui applaudissent aux fenêtres* (POL, 2020) by Iégor Gran, *Feu* (Fayard, 2021) by Maria Pourchet, *Les Affluents* (Plon, 2021) by Julien Bertrand, *La Maison des solitudes* (Stock, 2021) by Constance Rivière, *Paternoster* (Au Diable Vauvert, 2021) by Adrien Girard, *Basculer* (Belfond, 2021) by Florian Forestier, and *Ouvre ton aile au vent* (Phébus, 2021) by Éloi Audoin-Rouzeau. Several BDs also focus on the Corona pandemic, including *Au cœur de la vague* (Les Arènes, 2020) by Patrick Chappatte, *La médecin: Une infectiologue au temps du Corona* (Stock, 2020) by Karine Lacombe and Fiamma Luzzati, *Postillons* by Felix (Éditions Rouquemoute, 2021), and *La Fabrique des Pandémies* (La Découverte, 2021) by Marie-Monique Robin.

¹ Translation MOH.

² In fact, however, it is apparent that "epidemic fictions" are only hesitantly accepted by the readership and that Corona fictions sell rather poorly than well; cf. Snaije, Olivia (2021).

In fact, in France like anywhere else,³ this great number of "Corona fictions" is the result of a hitherto unprecedented writing frenzy triggered by the pandemic: "During the first confinement, one in ten French people started writing a book, according to a survey published in early May. While some of these manuscripts never left their authors' drawers, many have since found their way to the doors of publishing houses."⁴ (Guyenne 2021) In fact, from summer 2020 onwards, the number of manuscripts submitted to established publishers as well as self-publishers was unprecedentedly high. At the same time, the number of authors who sought publicity with their works for the first time is remarkable. These new authors have very different profiles and very often come from diverse cultural backgrounds: actors, scriptwriters, singers, etc. In such cases, when one cannot carry on one's main activity, writing becomes a way of expressing one's creativity different than one usually does. But how can literature respond to the pandemic? How can personal insecurity, fear and depression, but also socio-political powerlessness and anger find an outlet in literature? In other words, "how can literature translate the collective torments of men, between immediacy and reflective, even poetic, distance?"⁵ (Audrerie 2021)

On the one hand, there is, one might say, "classic" evasion literature, i.e. popular literary feel-good stories, shallow love stories, and action-packed crime novels. On the other hand, however, there are numerous more or less essayistic reflections on the crisis, not at least promoted by Gallimard's "Tracts de la crise". During the period of sanitary lockdown, from March to May 2020, Gallimard's "Tracts" collection published, in digital form, 69 short and unpublished texts by authors on the crisis. These texts were offered free of charge to readers for downloading and were included in a collection published in June 2020, in print and digital form under the title *Tracts of crisis. A virus and people. 18 March-11 May 2020*.⁶ Finally, the hard lockdown in France gave rise to the subgenre of *mémoires / journaux de confinement* ("lockdown memories / diaries"), which oscillate between very personal diary-like testimonials and socio-critical essays and represent a kind of chronicle of the pandemic. In a certain way, these slice-of-life texts, which incidentally are very similar to each other, function not only as a means of personal relief for authors to free themselves through writing, but also as valves to articulate opinion, whether through consternation or through speaking up (*prise de parole*).

Due to their tendency to have a strongly emotive and referential function, coronavirus-response texts run the risk of losing their literary relevance after a short period of time, just like daily journalistic texts, even if their documentary value as testimonies remains intact. In fact, this short-lived nature characterizes a large part of fast-reacting or quick-response literature, i.e. literary works that arise on the spot out of an emergency situation, and is, among other reasons, due to the lack of temporal distance to the pandemic, which even today is anything but over. Therefore, quick-response literature hardly shows neither deeper critical reflections nor a particularly high degree of abstraction. Indeed, these are reasons why occasional or circumstantial literature has also been and very often still continues to be regarded as aesthetically less valuable.

³ Just as Covid-19 is a global pandemic, so is the phenomenon Coronavirus-response writing. As very early reactions, we would like to mention at least two transatlantic online writing projects: *Récits infectés*, edited by Léonore Brassard (<https://recitsinfectes.com/>, 01/12/2021) and *The New York Times' short-fiction compilation The Decameron Project* (<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/07/magazine/decameron-project-short-story-collection.html?action=click&module=Top%20Stories&pgtype=Homepage>, 01/12/2021). Cf. Meyer (2020).

⁴ Translation MOH.

⁵ Translation MOH.

⁶ Cf. <https://tracts.gallimard.fr/fr/pages/tracts-de-crise> (01/12/2021).

It is, however, necessary to note that there have always been such critics who have strengthened the importance of literature's living connection with the real world and its occurrences:⁷ One of the first to advocate for the rehabilitation of *Gelegenheitsdichtung* was Goethe, who wrote to Eckermann on 17 September 1823:⁸ "The world is so large and rich and life so varied that there will never be a lack of occasions for poems. But they must all be occasional poems, that is, reality must provide the occasion and the material for them All my poems are occasional poems, they are inspired by reality and have a basis in it." (Eckermann 1, 38)

Thus, what I consider in the following article are texts that may be forgotten as quickly as they were written – or perhaps not; we cannot predict this. Anyway, let's use the moment of their current relevance to examine them a little more closely. To be more precisely, I would like to look at the immediate literary reaction to the pandemic of two French authors – Jacques Moulin and François Varay – who do not inscribe themselves directly in any of these directions, but rather, as will be shown, choose the mode of humorous refraction.

Jacques Moulin was born in 1949 and, until his retirement, worked as a lecturer for French literature.⁹ Since 2011 he has been leading contemporary French poetry meetings at the Open University of Franche-Comté. His career as a poet began in 1996 with the publication of his first collection of poetry, *Matière à fraise* (Éditions de L'Envol). Since then, he has published more than 20 volumes of poetry. Jacques Moulin writes about his passions, his familiar surroundings, and the immediately visible like nature or man-made environments. At the same time, however, he always seeks the unknown and the new, even the disturbing. His poetic writing is characterised by the permanent renewal of the poetic approach, which is reflected both in the multiplicity of forms used (free or canonical forms) and in the diversity of objects. It is therefore not surprising that Corona immediately became a poetic subject for him. The poem "Corona" analyzed here was written in March 2020.

François Varay, who is in his sixties, studied law and worked in communications before he found his way to writing late in life. He has published numerous short stories and received the Prix Amok in 2017 for his debut novel *Laura*. Varay's short stories are dense psychological studies that explore everyday crises. His short novel *Le moins mauvais des mondes* (The Least Bad World), published on 21 April 2020 as an e-book by self-publisher Librinova, is the first Corona novel to appear in France. In fact, François Varay openly accepts being called an author of occasional or opportunistic literature, as he states:

Oui, l'écrivain a l'obligation de saisir des opportunités pour décrire le moment présent.

Oui, c'est son rôle de traiter l'actualité et quand il a l'opportunité de proposer une lecture moins maussade que les flots d'information continus, il doit le faire.

Oui, quand l'auteur a l'opportunité de faire sourire son lecteur, il doit se montrer opportuniste et écrire dans cette direction.

Je ne renie en rien ce terme, mais je le prends simplement dans sa plus belle acception ! (Varey 2020b)¹⁰

⁷ Cf. Zwerling Sugano (1992).

⁸ For further readings on Goethe's ideas on occasional poetry, see e.g. Oppenheimer (1974).

⁹ For more information on the author and his work, see Sénécal (2011).

¹⁰ "Yes, the writer has an obligation to seize opportunities to describe the present moment. / Yes, it is the writer's role to deal with current events, and when he has the opportunity to offer a less dreary read than the continuous stream of information, he must do so. / Yes, when the author has the

Despite their obvious formal and stylistic differences, the texts considered in this article have two characteristics in common: Firstly, they were written immediately at the beginning of the pandemic during the first severe lockdown and were published in summer 2020. In this respect, they are paradigmatic examples of Coronavirus-response writing. Secondly, they use various modes of humor to creatively break the paralyzing effect of the pandemic and the lockdown.

Humor as a technique of literature of urgency or the literary path to resilience

When talking of Coronavirus-response writing as a recent phenomenon of world literature, we have to bear in mind that anchoring literary works in the immediate present is not a new phenomenon. Through various forms of occasional literature, ranging from antiquity through the centuries of national literatures, from Rafael Alberti's *teatro de urgencia* (urgent theatre), to Max Aub's *teatro de circunstancias* (circumstantial theatre), or to Ahmed Hanifi's *littérature de l'urgence* (urgent literature), authors have always had the more or less urgent need to write in order to help sort out the complexities of their times, to express the immediacy of crises, and/or to chronicle the various tragedies of suffering and deprivation. In fact, literature of urgency is a literature that can only be produced from a specific context and circumstance.

As remarked above, Coronavirus-response writing serves above all to process one's own feeling of powerlessness, to release tension, and to vent frustration, distress, and depression in the very concrete context of the strict French lockdown, which gave people the feeling of being innocently confined.

"A happy heart is good medicine and a joyful mind causes healing"¹¹, we read in Proverbs 17:22 in the Amplified Bible and, in fact, humor is a crucial human mechanism to cope with fear and stress. The relief function of humor manifests itself both on the producer side (in the sense of writing as a displacement activity or self-therapy) and on the recipient side (in the sense of reading as a psychological remedy): "Wit, clowning or caricaturization repress or hide the emotional impact, banishing the feeling of impotence, to be replaced by a feeling of encouragement and resistance." (Ostrower 2014: 76) Therefore, humor is an important mechanism to foster psychological resilience, that is, to strengthen the ability to mentally or emotionally cope with a crisis or/and to return to the psychological pre-crisis status quickly.¹²

Without going into further detail here, it should be emphasised that humor in itself is a broad field – not only in psychological-cognitive terms, but also in literary terms, ranging from language games to parodic allusions and grotesque distortions.

Jacques Moulin's Poem "Corona"

The poem, written in free verse and without punctuation, consists of 21 stanzas of varying lengths, ranging from one verse to eighteen. In a way, the poem is similar to the narrative sub-genre of the *mémoire de confinement* ("lockdown memoirs"): The poet describes how life of the French society of which he is a part (the poet includes himself in the collective through the use of the plural first-person pronoun "nous") has changed with Covid. Thereby, rules to contain the pandemic are voiced

opportunity to make his reader smile, he should be opportunistic and write in that direction. / I am not denying the term, but I am simply taking it at its best! " (Varey 2020b; translation MOH).

¹¹ Proverbs 17:22, Amplified Bible.

¹² For a psychological resiliency perspective on humour see e.g. Kuiper (2012).

as a direct appeal by the first-person speaker to an implicit second-person-singular reader-you:

Faut se dénouer se défaire se distancer s'écarter s'éviter
In fine se confiner pour en finir
Les confins nous touchent
Voisins à portée de mains
Jeux de mains jeux vilains
Contagieux et malsains
Lave-toi les mains gèle tes phalanges
Cure tes ongles
N'avoisine pas
Affection infection
Reste chez toi
Carte sans contact
(Moulin 2020)¹³

Furthermore, the state guidelines are interwoven as in a collage with the enumeration of the consequences for daily life in the confinement:

On fait *inhibition et défense* à tous les habitants
De se mouvoir hors de chez soi
Drones et formulaires de déplacement
Pas laisser passer
Pas de rassemblement
Gardez vos distances
Pas de côté
Pas bouger
Sport en chambre
Commerces cadenassés
Métiers de bouche entr'ouverts
Livres en péril
Routiers esseulés
Caissières exposées
Vieux emportés
(Moulin 2020)¹⁴

Incomparably more poetic are those verses in which the speaker describes how the initially vague danger of the virus loses its mythical-abstract character in the middle of spring, the time when flora and fauna awaken to new life, and literally invades people's lives:

Nature en printemps
Mars en mai
Coronille en corolles
Corneille en campagne
Mésange en courses folles
Abeille au pollen

¹³ We must unravel, undo, distance ourselves, move aside, avoid each other / *In fine* confine ourselves to end it all / The confines touch us / Neighbours within reach / Games of hands, naughty games/ Contagious and unhealthy / Wash your hands, freeze your fingers / Clean your nails / Don't be around / Affection infection / Stay at home / Contactless card (Moulin 2020; translation MOH).

¹⁴ All inhabitants are inhibited and forbidden / To move outside their homes / Drones and travel forms / No trespassing / No gathering / Keep your distance / No sideways / No moving / Bedroom sports / Locked shops / Food shops ajar / Deliverymen in peril / Lonely truckers / Cashiers exposed / Old people swept away (Moulin 2020; translation MOH).

Mais corona

Corona qui vient là

[...]

Covid dévide un fil cosmique
Lâche son Minotaure
Se détache de ses constellations
Entre en nous
(Moulin 2020)¹⁵

Verses 16-21 are reminiscent of Moulin's nature poems, which not infrequently, as here, name individual observations of nature in an impressionistic, glimpse-like manner and leave the interpretation to the recipient. The idyll of spring awakening is interrupted by the "mais". The enjambment repeats "corona", formally emphasizing the all-dominant force as the power of action.

Apart from verse one, where the emotive function dominates in the melancholy exclamation "Ô", the referential function clearly dominates in the rest of the poem. On the one hand, the naming of the pandemic is explained:

Corona virus *disease*
Acronyme Covid
(Moulin 2020)

On the other hand, the hypotheses about the origin of the pandemic that have spread virally through the media come up.

What is interesting here, however, is that the poet deals solely with the geographical origin and the ways of spreading and counters all conspiracy-theory speculations with the great uncertainty of absolute ignorance. The poem accomplishes this with the three consecutive "sais pas" and the repetition of the line in verse 91:

Corona quoi virulent et pourquoi
Sais pas sais pas sais pas
Le virus a surgi à Wuhan
République Populaire de Chine
Corona encorna au marché couvert
De Huanan un vendeur de poissons
Le virus diffusa son poison
On cherche le chaînon
L'animal intermédiaire
Pangolin ou serpent coronelle
Chauve-souris ou coronule
Sais pas sais pas sais pas
Virus bat la campagne
Prend ses aises
Se répand — conteneur et avion
Avoisine en voisin
Chaque humain

¹⁵ Nature in spring / March in May / Coronille in corollas / Crow in the field / Chickadee on the run / Bee with pollen / But corona / Corona who comes here / [...] / Covid unwinds a cosmic thread / Releases its Minotaur / Detaches itself from its constellations/ Enters us (Moulin 2020; translation MOH).

Étouffe le prochain
(Moulin 2020)¹⁶

This example also illustrates Moulin's predilection for humorous wordplays in a particularly impressive way. Let us look again at the verses "Corona encorna au marché couvert / De Huanan un vendeur de poissons / Le virus diffusa son poison". The verb *encorner* means to make someone into a cuckold or to bore something (with horns). Thus, the Chinese market trader is ultimately cheated by the virus. Quite obviously, the verb *encorner* is used here because of its similar sounding to "Corona". Moulin's delight in paranomasia continues in the fact that it is a fishmonger (*vendeur de poissons*) whose goods the animalised virus poisons. What's more, even when speculating about the carriers, Moulin chooses (unlikely) animals whose names contain the sem "coron".

Despite – or because of – all the tragedy of the situation (the three times repeated, chorus-like integrated intertext from a historical chronicle of French epidemics explicitly addresses the mass extinction that is spreading: "Très grande contagion de peste / Verrons-nous bientôt gens mourir en grande multitude" // "Very great contagion of pestilence / Will we soon see people dying in great multitude"), the poem's content evokes humorous effects in that the verses, on the one hand, contain satirical swipes at government deficits in dealing with the pandemic (e.g. faulty masks and a completely overloaded Health system) and, on the other hand, the litany-like enumeration of supposed saviors of the desacralised French Republic inevitably evokes a laugh:

Par crainte de *la grant* mortalité
Jadis on priait les saints pesteux
Saint Sébastien & Saint-Roch
Aujourd'hui on implore
Sainte Providence d'État
Saint Macron
Saint Patron
Saints Y'a qu'à Faut qu'on
Saint Yaplusqua
Saint Complot
Sainte Clôture
Saint Repli
Sainte Réserve
(Moulin 2020)¹⁷

Ultimately, the poem ends cautiously optimistic:

Fut une peste sy grant
Qu'on n'ouys de loing temps parler d'une pareille

La planète arraisonne

¹⁶ Corona what virulent and why / Don't know don't know / The virus emerged in Wuhan / People's Republic of China / Corona broke out in the covered market / In Huanan a fish seller / The virus spread its poison / We are looking for the link / The intermediate animal / Pangolin or coronella snake / Bat or coronule / Don't know don't know / Virus beats the countryside / Takes its ease / Spreads – Container and plane / Neighbourly neighbours / Every human / Chokes the next (Moulin 2020; translation MOH).

¹⁷ For fear of the great mortality / In the past, people prayed to the plague saints / Saint Sebastian & Saint Roch / Today we implore / Holy Providence of State / Saint Macron / Saint Patron / Saint Y'a qu'à Faut qu'on / Saint Yaplusqua / Saint Complot / Saint Clôture / Saint Withdrawal / Saint Reserve (Moulin 2020; translation MOH).

Notre monde appareille
 S'ouvre au doute
 Mourir pour mûrir
 L'ouest désorienté
 Cherche l'autre l'autrement
 Fuit l'autruche
 Songe à l'égard ajusté
 À quelque chose de nouveau
 Sous le soleil
 (Moulin 2020)¹⁸

The Corona pandemic, as the intertext of a historical chronicle about the plague insinuates, is an event of the century that will be inscribed in the collective memory beyond communicative memory. This will occur because – at least that is the poet's hopeful wish – the pandemic crisis is shaking the Western world's security so fundamentally that it becomes clear that the ostrich tactic of sticking one's head in the sand no longer works. This ends the descriptive poem of an oppressive situation with a resilience-strengthening *volta*: the crisis as a path to the long overdue maturation process, which can lead to a fundamental reconfiguring of a globally responsible and ecologically sustainable way of thinking and acting. The connection of meaning between the Corona crisis and the climate crisis is at the center of Varey's short novel, which we present in the following section.

François Varay's Novel *Le Moins Mauvais des Mondes*

The title – *Le Moins Mauvais des Mondes* – already makes clear the parodic character of the novel by referring to Schopenhauer's central thesis and, at the same time, establishes the relationship between global warming and epidemic. Let us recall Schopenhauer's argumentation in the chapter "On The Vanity And Suffering Of Life" of his major work *The World As Will And Idea* (1918), there we read:

Now this world is so arranged as to be able to maintain itself with great difficulty; but if it were a little worse, it could no longer maintain itself. Consequently, a worse world, since it could not continue to exist, is absolutely impossible: thus, this world itself is the worst of all possible worlds. [...] A small alteration of the atmosphere, which cannot even be chemically proved, causes cholera, yellow fever, blackdeath, &c., which carry off millions of men; a somewhat greater alteration would extinguish all life. A very moderate increase of heat would dry up all the rivers and springs. (Schopenhauer 1909: 384-385)

With his modification, Varey counters Schopenhauer's pessimism with a relativization to cautious optimism. In fact, the playful lightness dominates the entire novel. This does not mean, of course, that Varey does not take the fundamental crises of our time seriously, but rather that he is concerned not to lose optimism, because only with resilience can the individual avoid depression and resist conspiracy theories. Only in this way can humanity ultimately face the unprecedented challenges of the future energetically.

But how does Varey turn his parodistic inversion of conspiracy-theory narratives into a light and humorous farce? The fact that Varey's novel is an amusingly

¹⁸ *Was a pestilence so great / That we have not heard of such a one in a long time / [...] The planet is on the move / Our world begins to sail / Opens to doubt / To die to mature / The disoriented West / Seeks the other the other way / Fleeing the ostrich / Thinks of the adjusted regard / To something new / Under the sun*

entertaining mixture of the facts of global politics and their sometimes burlesque-grotesque distorted fictionalization is already evident in the basic structure of the plot.

In an intertextual reference game, the frame story of Boccaccio's *Decamerone*, which achieved new fame in Corona times, serves as a template. Varey transposes the gathering of 10 distinguished men and women who, fleeing the plague, go into seclusion in a remote place to debate ethical and moral questions of human coexistence into an entirely fictional setting. He accomplishes this by, on the one hand, having eight international representatives debate peace in a secret mission in Quneitra (southwestern Syria on the Golan Heights) and, on the other hand, also uniting eight international representatives in an unlikely meeting in Kiruna.¹⁹ The latter is obviously an alienated form of the United Nations Climate Change Conferences and which was initiated by the youth climate change activist Greta Thunberg.

The liaison between these two meetings is Thomas Las Cases, who works as a simple UN protocol officer for both conferences. Ironically, this opinionless and unambitious anti-hero is "le descendant en ligne directe du dernier Chambellan de Napoléon, celui-là-même qui écrivit, sous la dictée de l'Empereur, le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène." (Varay 2020a)²⁰

Greta Thunberg, however, initially appears only under the nickname Mademoiselle Julie, in reference to August Strindberg's play of the same name. In fact, the assignment of literary nicknames is one of the rules of the curiously surreal gathering of state leaders: Angela Merkel appears as Antonie Buddenbrook, Boris Johnson as Dorian Grey, Vladimir Putin as Iouri Jivago, Shinzo Abe as Shinishi Kido, a manga hero, Justin Trudeau as Jack Lafleur, a dog out of a picture book, Donald Trump as George Milton, Emmanuel Macron as Maurice Genevoix's Raboliot and Xi Jinping as Sun Wukong, the King of the Apes.

It is interesting that none of the characters is exempt from the ironic criticism of the heterodiegetic narrator, so that no one becomes a very sympathetic character. The portrayal oscillates between caricature and satire, for example when Julie's eco-consciousness is reported:

Elle commanda un tea-tree cocktail, après s'être assuré que tous les ingrédients étaient éco responsables et provenaient de petites exploitations équitables. Heureusement, la plupart des bars new-yorkais s'étaient mis à indiquer, après la liste des allergènes, toutes ces informations vitales pour des gens qui, comme Mademoiselle Julie, privilégiait le *behaviorisme écologique* au goût. Les cartes de cocktails faisaient maintenant six pages. (Varay 2020a)²¹

Or when Theresa May's successor is described:

La précédente titulaire du poste avait été remplacée en pleines négociations sur le Brexit. Femme grise, sans charisme, elle laissait la place à un clown aux cheveux

¹⁹ Kiruna is not only very remote, but it is also home to the world's largest iron ore mine. As a result of its exploitation, the town must be successively relocated. In fact, mining also has an impact on nature, as Sweden's strongest earthquake to date, which shook Kiruna in 2020, is linked to ore mining.

²⁰ "[...] the direct descendant of Napoleon's last Chamberlain, who wrote the St. Helena Memorial under the Emperor's dictation." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH) The EBook does not have page numbers.

²¹ "She ordered a tea-tree cocktail, after making sure that all the ingredients were ecologically responsible and sourced from small, fair trade farms. Fortunately, most New York bars had begun to list all this vital information after the allergen list for people who, like Mademoiselle Julie, valued ecological behaviourism over taste. Cocktail cards were now six pages long." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

blondasses, que tout le monde prenait pour un bouffon mais qui était en fait un redoutable joueur de poker politique. Il avait coup sur coup réussi le Brexit et gagné les élections. (Varay 2020a)²²

Miss Julie first brings this illustrious group together in 2017 in a sauna in the northernmost town in Sweden to seriously discuss global climate policy. Of course, the humorous implication of holding a climate conference in a sauna in a permafrost region, of all places, needs no further comment.

At the second, so-called Planet Sauna Club 2019, George Milton aka Donald Trump brings up a strategy where the climate could be saved without curbing economic production:

— Il n'y en a pas, asséna George Milton, on ne peut pas arrêter de produire, on ne peut pas tout fermer. Ce serait fermer le monde.

Tous le regardèrent en écarquillant les yeux. Fermer le monde. Comment pouvait-on fermer le monde? Ce type était incroyable! Il ne voulait pas que ses usines polluent moins, mais il évoquait de tout arrêter ensemble! Fermer le monde ! N'importe quoi ! Ce type était fou. (Varay 2020a)²³

After a short discussion, the idea of a global lockdown no longer seems so far-fetched to the discussants, and Schopenhauer's thesis that global warming brings epidemics and plagues comes to the fore:

— Oui. Une maladie qui obligerait toute la population ou presque à s'enfermer chez elle pendant plusieurs mois, le temps d'imaginer une vie différente.

— ... Moins de pollution. Moins de gaz à effet de serre. Moins de transport. Une prise de conscience. Histoire de montrer que chacun est responsable de la planète. Que ce n'est pas aux dirigeants, mais aux hommes d'agir.

[...]

— Bien sûr, il y a un coût très important en nombre de victimes. Car l'idée, c'est un virus qui se propage à toute vitesse dans le monde.

— Mais vous nous avez convaincus que ce nombre de morts serait mille fois moins important que celui des victimes du réchauffement climatique.

— Alors, voilà, on voulait vous dire qu'on est prêts à le faire. À essayer. Et à ne plus vivre comme avant. Il y a l'un d'entre nous qui a le virus dans ses laboratoires. Il pourrait le transférer dans le pays qui est volontaire pour commencer l'expérimentation. On a tiré au sort.

— Au début, on inoculerait un animal, un...qui serait mangé par l'homme. Le virus muterait et se propagerait. (Varay 2020a)²⁴

²² "The previous head of the post was replaced in the midst of negotiations on Brexit. A grey, un-charismatic woman, she was replaced by a blonde-haired clown who everyone thought was a buffoon but who was actually a formidable political poker player. He had pulled off Brexit and won the election one after the other." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

²³ "- There is no such thing," George Milton said, "you can't stop producing, you can't shut down everything. That would be closing down the world." // They all looked at him with wide eyes. Shutting down the world. How could you close the world? This guy was incredible! He didn't want his factories to pollute less, but he talked about shutting down everything together! Shutting down the world! That's crazy! This guy was crazy." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH)

²⁴ - Yes. A disease that would force almost the entire population to lock themselves up at home for several months, while they imagined a different life.

When the chapter finally ends with Thomas asking about a term he doesn't know that is supposed to have come up at the strategy session, a certain incongruity emerges. The paratext, i.e. here specifically the title of the chapter "Évocation d'un pangolin", names the pangolin that Thomas asks about, but there is no mention of it in the discussion that is reproduced; here, there is only a basic mention of a potentially edible animal as a carrier of the virus. The narrator also appears to be unreliable when the German representative is introduced as Antonie Buddenbrook, but is then frequently referred to as Eugenie Buddenbrook.²⁵

But the narrator likes to play with the reader anyway, very much in the way of the traditional omniscient narrator, who godlike directs and guides all the destinies of his imagined world and its inhabitants.

Thus, he addresses the implicit reader:

On choisit un jeune Français, qui aimait cette activité. Bourlingueur libre, penseur discret, sans lien personnel strict, il était, vous l'aurez deviné, le descendant de l'homme qui écrivit sur une île coupée du monde Le Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène. (Varay 2020a)²⁶

At times, his sometimes arrogant pose as a school teaching demiurge comes clearly to the fore, for example when he explains a pun by Macron, a graduate of the *École nationale d'administration*, to the reader, while at the same time expressing his criticism of the entanglement of French politics and elite universities:

Il n'y a qu'une seule zone épargnée actuellement, c'est l'archipel de Saint-pierre et Miquelon, à l'est de la presqu'île du Labrador, chère à notre ami Jack Lafleur. (*Jeu de mots extrêmement subtil propre aux énarques : Jack Lafleur est un personnage littéraire symbolisé par un chien, la presqu'île du Labrador qu'il administre en tant que dirigeant a un nom de chien, et une forme de museau de chien. Cela aurait dû être drôle, mais comme toutes les blagues des énarques, celle-ci tomba à l'eau, parce que personne ne la comprit, et qu'on était quand même en train de parler de millions de victimes*). (Varay 2020a)²⁷

-
- ... Less pollution. Less greenhouse gases. Less transport. An awareness. To show that everyone is responsible for the planet. That it is not up to the leaders, but to the people to act. [...]
 - Of course, there is a very high cost in terms of the number of victims. Because the idea is a virus that is spreading rapidly around the world.
 - But you have convinced us that the number of deaths would be a thousand times less than the number of victims of global warming.
 - So, here we are, we wanted to tell you that we are ready to do it. To try. And not to live like we used to. One of us has the virus in his laboratories. He could transfer it to the country that is willing to start the experiment. We drew lots.
 - At the beginning, we would inoculate an animal, a... which would be eaten by humans. The virus would mutate and spread. (Varay 2020a; translation MOH)-

²⁵ This mistake, like the statement that Merkel and Trump will not resign from office until the end of 2023, as well as the orthographic errors (lower case spelling of proper names, e.g. Thurnberg instead of Thunberg) may, however, also be due to the lack of editing in the hastily rushed publication.

²⁶ "We chose a young Frenchman who loved this activity. A free-spirited traveller, a discreet thinker, with no strict personal ties, he was, as you may have guessed, the descendant of the man who wrote The St Helena Memorial on an island cut off from the world." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

²⁷ "There is only one area currently spared, and that is the archipelago of Saint Pierre and Miquelon, east of the Labrador peninsula, dear to our friend Jack Lafleur. (*An extremely subtle play on words specific to École nationale d'administration graduates: Jack Lafleur is a literary character symbolised by a dog, and the Labrador peninsula that he administers as leader has a dog's name and a dog's snout shape. It should have been funny, but like all the jokes of the École nationale d'administration graduates, this one fell flat, because nobody understood it, and we were still talking about millions of victims*)." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

Furthermore, the narrator uses metalepses to emphasise the purely fictional character of what is being told:

Sans entrer dans le détail des travaux, ce qui n'est pas l'objet de ce récit, évoquons seulement la richesse des réflexions des huit sur l'inutilité de la guerre. (Varay 2020a)²⁸

And speculates about possible alternative courses of action for his protagonists:

Qu'aurait écrit Thomas, s'il avait parlé le suédois, au sujet de Mademoiselle Julie. Peut-être aurait-il simplement puisé dans le texte de Strindberg ? (Varay 2020a)²⁹

The paratextual structure of the novel is similarly playful, initially reminiscent of a *journal de confinement* by specifying time and place, but is in fact a fictional-surreal chronicle of the pandemic. Part one is set mostly in 2019 and presents the prehistory of the pandemic. Part two, like so many Corona reports, describes the situation in France in spring 2020. Varey's imagery is thoroughly humorous. By using the vocabulary of war, he makes an implicit reference to Macron's speech to the nation, in which Macron proclaimed that "we are at war".³⁰

The necessities that the Parisians take with them on their "flight"—game consoles for the children and bags of cocaine for the adults—can, of course, only be understood ironically. In the end, he compares the colour choice of the number of cases of infected people on the map of incidences with lethal and less serious diseases:

Dix-sept pour cent des habitants du Grand Paris choisissait, à la veille du confinement, l'exode, brusquement, en une matinée, juste le temps d'embarquer quelques consoles de jeux pour les enfants, quelques sachets de cocaïne pour les adultes, avant de fuir vers l'île de Ré, La Baule ou les îles de Vendée. Une nouvelle ligne de démarcation, un méridien Nord-Sud qui ressemblait à celui de Greenwich, reliait Lille à Toulouse. À l'Est, sur les cartes que le Ministère des Solidarités et de la Santé présentait quotidiennement, de grosses taches noires comme la Peste, montraient l'engorgement des hôpitaux, les milliers de patients en réanimation, et les morts. Les morts, anonymes, sans importance, insignifiants tant qu'on ne les connaissait pas comme voisin, amis, parents ou célébrités. À l'Ouest, de petites taches rouges, bénignes comme un début de rougeole, montrait que la contamination était encore faible. Mais pour combien de temps ? (Varay 2020a)³¹

²⁸ "Without going into the details of the work, which is not the purpose of this account, let us just mention the richness of the reflections of the eight on the uselessness of war." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

²⁹ "What would Thomas have written, if he had spoken Swedish, about Mademoiselle Julie? Perhaps he would have simply drawn from Strindberg's text?" (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

³⁰ Cf.: "Nous sommes en guerre, en guerre sanitaire, certes : nous ne luttons ni contre une armée, ni contre une autre Nation. Mais l'ennemi est là, invisible, insaisissable, qui progresse. Et cela requiert notre mobilisation générale. / Nous sommes en guerre. Toute l'action du Gouvernement et du Parlement doit être désormais tournée vers le combat contre l'épidémie." (Macron 2020).

³¹ "Seventeen percent of the inhabitants of Greater Paris chose, on the eve of confinement, to leave, suddenly, in one morning, just long enough to take a few game consoles for the children, a few bags of cocaine for the adults, before fleeing to the island of Ré, La Baule or the islands of Vendée. A new demarcation line, a North-South meridian that resembled Greenwich, linked Lille to Toulouse. In the East, on the maps that the Ministry of Solidarity and Health presented daily, large black spots like the Plague showed the overcrowding of the hospitals, the thousands of patients in intensive care, and the dead. The dead, anonymous, unimportant, insignificant until they were known as neighbours, friends, relatives or celebrities. In the West, small red spots, benign like the beginnings of measles, showed that the contamination was still low. But for how long?" (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

The plot takes another absurd turn when Al Gore, as "le Pape de l'écologie" (the Pope of Ecology), enters the story and parodically lends the plot the characteristics of a spy thriller. Al Gore, as the reader learns, already had the idea in 2015 to bring humanity to an ecological turnaround through a virus. Laurence Tubiana, France's Climate Change Ambassador and Special Representative for the 2015 COP21 Climate Change Conference in Paris, now also comes into play of supposed conspiracy.

Indeed, the narrator tells us, the virus has spread in unforeseen ways. The realisation that the (rampant) spread of the virus is most evident in regions with high levels of air pollution supports the Planet Sauna Club participants in their desire to create a new better, if not best, world:

Un monde qui luttera autant contre la pandémie que contre le réchauffement climatique, tout en diminuant la grande pauvreté. Un monde meilleur, à défaut d'être le meilleur des mondes. (Varay 2020a)³²

The third part is set in the near future, as seen from the time of the text's composition, and imagines the further course of "Operation Covid" or "Operation Pangolin" launched by the Planet Sauna Club to save the planet. In fact, there is much cynicism here, for example when the fictional Al Gore states:

— Oui, la pandémie que vous avez déclenchée a un coût exorbitant en nombre de victimes. Oui, c'est triste. Tragique même. Mais pendant ce temps, nous sauvons des vies avec le confinement général, et nous en sauvons dix fois plus dès aujourd'hui ou cent fois plus demain! (Varay 2020a)³³

Likewise, when Thomas' advocacy of speaking of Coronavirus rather than pangolin virus is explained as being of geopolitical consequence, the issue of Islamist terrorism enters into the conspiracy plot:

— Eh bien... le mot coronavirus est répété des millions de fois par jour sur toute la planète.
— Et...
— Et les gens entendent *Coran à Virus*. Dans leur esprit, cela donne une image négative à l'islam, comme étant chargé d'une maladie. (Varay 2020a)³⁴

The goal of the Planet Sauna Club is therefore a global transformation of the world for the better, encompassing all areas of life, as stated at one point: "Bien sûr nous n'avons pas de baguette magique. Nous ne sommes pas en train de vous vendre le *Meilleur des Mondes*, de Huxley. Nous sommes seulement en train de créer les bases du moins mauvais des mondes." (Varay 2020a)³⁵ The intertextual reference to Aldous Huxley's dystopia *Brave New World* – in the French translation "Best of all worlds" – which refers to the title of the novel, is to be understood as an ambiguous play on words. On the one hand, the Planet Sauna Club is concerned with the undoubtedly positive salvation of the planet and insofar with the creation of a better world. On the other hand, this salvation is to be accomplished in a totalitarian way,

³² "A world that will fight the pandemic as well as global warming, while reducing extreme poverty. A better world, if not the best of all worlds." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

³³ "- Yes, the pandemic you have unleashed has an exorbitant cost in casualties. Yes, it is sad. Tragic even. But in the meantime, we are saving lives with general lockdown, and we are saving ten times more today or a hundred times more tomorrow!" (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

³⁴ "- Well... the word Coronavirus is repeated millions of times a day all over the world.
- And...

- And people hear Quran as Virus. In their minds, it gives a negative image to Islam, as being loaded with a disease." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH)

³⁵ "Of course, we don't have a magic stick. We are not selling you Huxley's *Brave New World*. We are only creating the basis for the least bad world." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

in the sense of various literary dystopias, through surveillance and the spreading of new waves of pandemics.

The actual (dys- or utopian) glimpse into the (near) future finally takes place in the fourth part, which describes another meeting of the Planet Sauna Club in 2023 in Nuuk, the world's northernmost capital, which was formerly named Godthaab ("Good Hope"). This scene ironically breaks the fictional hypothesis about the emergence and spread of the corona pandemic several times.

Firstly, that irony occurs when Varey refers to the fictional character of all hypotheses, namely Dean Koontz in his seemingly prophetic *The Eyes of Darkness*:

Avait-on fabriqué le virus à Wuhan, dans le laboratoire P4 ? C'était effectivement rapporté noir sur blanc. Non dans les notes que Thomas avait brûlées afin qu'aucune trace des discussions du sauna Planet Club ne subsiste, non plus dans le rapport de la CIA de 2015, mais dans un ouvrage très facile à se procurer en librairie. Quarante ans avant la crise, le romancier Dean Koontz dans *The Eyes of Darkness* racontait comment un virus allait déclencher une pandémie mondiale. Beaucoup d'autres l'avaient fait, bien sûr. Mais un grand nombre d'analystes notèrent que, dans une seconde édition parue en 2000, le nom du virus fut changé.

Il s'appelait désormais Wuhan 400. L'épidémie qu'il décrivait se situerait en 2020. C'était écrit vingt ans avant la grande crise du Covid-19.

Finalement, les auteurs de fiction ne sont-ils pas tous des prophètes, se demanda Thomas, en repensant à 1984, de George Orwell, dans lequel chaque déplacement est scruté, filmé, des caméras volantes munis de hauts parleurs donnant des ordres à la population. (Varay 2020a)³⁶

Secondly, the conspiracy theory stating that the virus was actively brought into the world by climate activists is linked to the equally widespread conspiracy theory concerning Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg and Tim Cook, as when Greta confesses:

Maintenant, c'est vrai, je vais vous le dire, il y a des gens qui m'ont influencée. Ce sont trois hommes, l'un qui m'a fait comprendre que les autoroutes de l'information étaient de meilleures voies que le transport. (Varay 2020a)³⁷

Finally, the novel concludes with the reply of the fictional Bill Gates:

- Dieu nous a donné une force incroyable, qui nous permet de réussir tout ce que nous entreprenons. Cette force est bien plus puissante que notre sens du combat,

³⁶ "Was the virus manufactured in Wuhan, in the P4 laboratory? This was indeed reported in black and white. Not in the notes that Thomas had burned so that no trace of the discussions at the Sauna Planet Club would remain, nor in the CIA report of 2015, but in a book that is very easy to obtain in bookshops. Forty years before the crisis, the novelist Dean Koontz in *The Eyes of Darkness* told how a virus would trigger a global pandemic. Many others had done so, of course. But many analysts noted that in a second edition published in 2000, the name of the virus was changed. It was now called Wuhan 400. The epidemic it described would be in 2020. This was written twenty years before the great Covid-19 crisis.

After all, aren't all fiction writers prophets, Thomas wondered, thinking back to George Orwell's *1984*, in which every move is scrutinised, filmed, with flying cameras with loudspeakers giving orders to the population." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

³⁷ "Now, it's true, I'll tell you, there are people who have influenced me. They are three men, one who made me understand that the information superhighway was a better way than transport." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

que nos armes, que nos ruses. Cette force, c'est celle de pouvoir reconnaître nos erreurs. (Varay 2020a)³⁸

By relying on the purifying power of the insight of error, the end of the novel ultimately invalidates all the hypotheses presented in the preceding scenes. Resilience, so the quintessence, thus grows out of the admission of being wrong and questioning oneself, and, one might add, out of laughter and humorous lightness.

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³⁸ "- God has given us incredible strength, which enables us to succeed in everything we do. This strength is far more powerful than our fighting skills, our weapons, our wiles. This strength is the strength to admit our mistakes." (Varay 2020a; translation MOH).

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