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APOCALYPTIC PANDEMIC IN YANA VAGNER'S *TO THE LAKE*

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Abstract

The article offers an analysis of Yana Vagner's bestselling novel *To the Lake* (*Epidemiia*) focusing on the ways in which this speculative text reflects on contemporary apocalyptic anxieties and fascinations unleashed by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Following Priscilla Wald's contention that over the last hundred-plus years the knowledge about epidemics within different realms has been shaped by the "outbreak narrative" that arrives in "scientific, journalistic, and fictional incarnations," I consider how the novel spotlights the mutually reinforcing relation between a long-standing and increasingly globalised cultural imagination about contagion and the medical and political interpretations of an actual pandemic.

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Keywords: Pandemic; Yana Vagner; *To the Lake*; Contemporary Russian literature; Apocalypse; Outbreak narrative

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We sat on the floor in front of the sofa [...] the warm orange light of the fire mixed with the bluish glow of the TV screen, which was murmuring quietly and showing mostly the same footage we had seen in the morning: – presenters in front of world maps with red dots on them, empty streets of various cities, ambulances, soldiers, distribution of medicine and food (the faces of people queuing differentiated only by the colour of their masks), the closed doors of the New York Stock Exchange [...] we just sat and looked at the screen and for a moment it felt like just a regular night in, which we'd had plenty of before, as if we were just watching a boring film about the end of the world, with the beginning a bit dragged out. (Vagner, 2016, 26)¹

A viral infection with the initial symptoms of a flu is lethal for those who contract it. Doctors sound the alarm but are not being listened to. The disease which appears to be extremely contagious spreads until it is too late to contain it. National borders close, followed by stringent quarantines, healthcare systems find themselves on the brink of collapse, and conspiracist videos go viral on social media. Although familiar from the accounts of the global COVID-19 pandemic the world has been living through since early 2020, many of those things are also present in Yana Vagner's novel *To the Lake (Vongozero)*, which she wrote between 2009 and 2011. Started as a weekly blog in *LiveJournal*, it quickly acquired cult status with readers, who enthusiastically proceeded to organise role-playing games and compose fanfiction. In 2011, the entire novel was published in paperback by Eksmo along with an online version of the text. Since then, Vagner's book has been translated into eleven languages and adapted, in 2019, by Russian director Pavel Kostomarov as a nine-episode television series (*Epidemiia*). Released by Netflix in fall 2020 under the title *To the Lake*, the series was well received by transnational audiences, and this further boosted the novel's popularity all over the world.

To the Lake starts when an unprecedented epidemic paralyses Moscow. The viral threat compels a thirty-something woman called Anya (who is also the story's narrator), her son Mishka, husband Sergey, and Sergey's overbearing father Boris to flee from their comfortable suburban house, heading for the remote lake Vongozero in the northern part of Russia. Over time, the company grows to include Sergey's vindictive ex-wife Ira and their son Anton, two "new Russian" neighbours Lenny and Marina and their toddler daughter, two troublesome acquaintances Andrey and Natasha, a medical doctor Pavel and a stray dog. The road to the refuge leads past dying cities, out-of-service gas stations, and hordes of aggressive robbers. As the external hell induces ethical shifts in the characters' behaviour, the group increasingly becomes tormented by feelings of jealousy and mutual distrust.

When, with the global spread of COVID-19, real life became dystopian in the terrifying, uncertain months of extended lockdowns, many sought comfort in imaginary stories of pandemics which eerily presaged the ramifications of the ongoing situation.² The “pandemic feels” (Arthur, 2020) generated by the virus’s capacity to effortlessly elude Presidents and Governments more equipped for controlling bureaucracies and hierarchies than for offering sensible responses to emergent extreme conditions, prompted the readers to consider fiction as a form of instruction on how to face the truth, how to endure, and how to do what needed to be done. As one of such narratives, *To the Lake* was also perceived as visionary, encouraging multiple observations that the events in the book suddenly “became a reality” (Good Reads, 2020) depicting “the states of societal breakdown and disorder ... [along with] the ethical contrasts within the group on what should be done given any situation” (Good Reads, 2020). Interestingly though, while speculative fiction has always offered an opportunity to explore big ideas through an alternative reality in which a “What if?” question is introduced into the world as we know it, Vagner never expected to gauge the distance between her novel and the world suddenly dominated by the coronavirus SARS-COV-2. In an interview with the online literary journal *Literaturno* the author claimed the following:

I terribly like the stories about the end of the world [...] already for a long time people play with the idea that everything will end soon [...] in some striking and spectacular way [...] How will we behave in the face of a catastrophe? What will become of us? [...] I don’t believe in prophecies [...] *Vongozero* is speculative fiction, it could depict any type of catastrophe [...] [the epidemic] is only the backdrop providing an opportunity to talk about the people in the middle of a big tragedy and about the ways they cope.³ (Vagner cited in Bukovskaia, 2020)

Yet despite the author’s emphatic dismissal of her investment in the topic, the fact that it is a contagious disease that unleashes the apocalyptic forces is far from incidental. In her analysis of the film *Outbreak* (1995) Heather Schell contends that the present-day surge of interest in pandemics as the biggest threat to humanity reflects the popular belief “that the world could end in pestilence, almost as though viruses have now taken the place of nuclear weapons in our apocalyptic imaginations. We seem to live in a fragile world [...] where some small social change might push the button that instigates viral Armageddon” (112). And so, instead of representing, respectively, factual, populist, and speculative discussions of viruses, “virology articles, popular science bestsellers, and science fiction (SF) [...] are mutually, minutely entangled” (Schell, 1997, 98). Addressing the rhetorical features of virus discourses,

Ruth Mayer even suggests that fictional texts revolving around the trope of the virus might be more suited for reflecting on contemporary anxieties and fascinations because “they map out the world in speculative terms and thus address dimensions of the political unconscious that more solution-oriented political and journalistic approaches to the same phenomena tend to reason away or repress” (2). Against a real-life backdrop of economic crises, institutionalised corruption, military conflicts, environmental pollution, and climate change, the apocalypse might appear as a justification for reinstating the moral codes of “proper” behaviour and reasserting the existing ideas of national, racial, and sexual identities and borders.

However, the catastrophic scenario that ostensibly demonstrates uncanny parallels with the predicaments caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is exemplary of what Priscilla Wald astutely termed “outbreak narratives.” In her influential book *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), Wald points out that over the last hundred-plus years the knowledge about epidemics within different realms has been shaped by the “outbreak narrative” that arrives in “scientific, journalistic, and fictional incarnations” and “follows a formulaic plot that begins with the identification of an emerging infection, includes a discussion of the global networks through which it travels, and chronicles the epidemiological work that ends with its containment” (2).⁴ Wald’s argument resonates with Charles Rosenberg’s classic 1989 paper “What is Epidemic” in which the author argues that epidemics always have a particular “dramaturgic form”: they “start at a moment in time, proceed on a stage limited in space and duration, follow a plot line of increasing and revelatory tension, move to a crisis of individual and collective character, then drift toward closure” (Rosenberg 2).⁵ And it is exactly this dramaturgic form which informs *To the Lake* and which readers are able to (unconsciously) recognise and relate to.

Tracing how outbreak narratives shape the idea of contagion in the late nineteenth through the twentieth century, Wald also unveils the difficulties and limitations of representing communicative disease: “microbial indifference to boundaries is a refrain in both scientific and popular writing”(33).⁶ This microscopic quality of threat and the sense that the body’s boundaries have been invisibly violated produces a diffuse horror, a hard-to-capture experience of dread, which becomes amplified when the individual experience of illness becomes part of a borderless outbreak across the world. And so, rather like the epidemiological map and the electron microscope, outbreak narratives serve as “a tool for making the invisible appear” (Wald 39). Wald ponders how and to what ends these narratives are reproduced politically; she does not discuss at length the porous agency of the disease itself. In her account, it seems to emerge simultaneously on local, national, and global scales, and its contain-

ment is only partially defined by human efforts. This makes the experience of enduring the pandemic almost unreal, which in turn exacerbates the feelings of fear of the unknown threat, suffering, and death, redirecting attention to questions of survival.

The unravelling of the social fabric wrought by the uncontrollable forces of lethal contagion is undeniably at the heart of Vagner's apocalyptic story. This piece, therefore, does not aim solely to investigate how *To the Lake* depicts individual people dealing with the catastrophic outbreak. I am interested in how this cultural text problematises the established (often morally bankrupt) structures of order in the face of the pandemic's dissolution, and yet proves ultimately incapable of embracing the crisis as an invitation to develop a new societal composition that might alleviate existing problems. In what follows, I first pause to consider illness-induced suffering of an individual body and the ways this affects the experience of the self and its relations to others, before turning to the novel's registration of the repercussions of viral violence at the broader societal level.

Narrating the Disease

I needed to occupy my mind with something – anything, only not to fall through into the soporific, deadening drowsiness, which was beginning to envelop me again. [...] Don't sleep, I kept telling myself, just get scared already, come on, you're dying, you'll live for three, maybe four more days, and then you'll die, just like she said – delirium, convulsions, foam, – come on, be scared! [...] For some time, I'd probably be able to throw more kindling into the stove but then there'd definitely be a moment when I wouldn't be able to get up so I'd lie in bed, in the cooling house, and would probably freeze before this virus had a chance to kill me. This scenario seemed so unreal, so untrue, I wondered, indifferently, what would be better – to freeze in my sleep or to die in convulsions, with blooded foam coming from my throat? (Vagner, 2016, 194)

Midway through their journey, the group settle for the night in an abandoned country house. Taken over by enormous fatigue, Anya immediately succumbs to a heavy slumber populated with restless, disorientating dreams. With anguish, she sees her dead mother beckoning her, but she is unable to move: “making an effort to open my eyes I see that the walls are an inch closer and the ceiling is lower, and even though the sky and the stars are back within the window square, if I look closer I can see the window shaking, the sky pushing on the glass from outside, which swells under its weight, and it feels like it's going to break through it and swallow me” (Vagner, 2016, 187). Next morning

the heroine appears to display the standard symptoms of the viral contagion: she feels dizzy, cold, thirsty, nauseous, and aching through her whole body.

Titled “Sickening,” the chapter provides an insight into the ways in which the sick body is caught in a reality-altering delirium of sorts. In *Beyond Words* Kathlyn Conway details how, along with affecting the vital bodily functions, illness always disrupts the internal organisation of the character: the self.⁷ She writes: “[A]ll serious illness and disability share this fundamental characteristic: damage to the body constitutes damage to the self” (Conway, 2007, 42). In the space where, previously, body and self were in conversation to create a holistic version of a person, when the body is attacked by disease, the self is also exposed, resulting in fragile identities and experiences. Being preoccupied with its own mortality, the precarious self becomes the only self. The frame for what is happening becomes diluted while the sensory and emotional immediacy heightens. Anya’s disjointed thoughts revolve around the destructive power of the virus, producing nightmarish scenarios of ending, a sense of endlessness, of a deathly sleep, of drowning. Although narrated by Anya, the text also offers a glimpse of the experience of her companions—those who witness their loved one inch closer to death, her ill body gripped by terror and bleakness over what unfolds. Anya keeps the door to her isolation room locked to ensure Sergey and Mishka stay out: her longing for her husband and child is entangled with the passionate desire to protect them from the looming viral threat. Mishka braves the falling snow in his attempt to catch a glimpse of his mother’s figure through the window. Unable to utter a word, their communication proceeds through gestures and facial expressions. While the frosted thin glass changes their quotidian images (suggesting again the change of the subjective self under the extreme emotional strain), they read the signs of limitless tenderness, but most of all, concern and desperation. Sergey, in turn, refuses to succumb to protective measures and continues bringing the sick woman extra blankets and cups of steaming tea with honey and jam. He keeps watch at the shut door, making Anya fret: “and what if I’m lucky, what if I have the fever, the delirium and those wretched convulsions, then I won’t be able to stop him, he’ll definitely break in, and a mask won’t protect him, damn it, even if I’m unlucky, who can guarantee that I won’t chicken out when I feel really bad, that I won’t call him for help?” (Vagner, 2016, 198–9).

The last quote highlights one more interesting aspect of the novel’s dealing with individual illness. Elizabeth Outka explains, in *Viral Modernisms*, that historically pandemics (and illness in general) have been aligned with “seemingly less valiant, more feminine forms of death [...] [and] [t]he pandemic’s very instantiation was often one of atmosphere, of bodily sensations, and of affective shifts” (Outka, 2019, 2).⁸ Outka, who is reading modernist literature from the vantage point of the 1918 influenza pandemic instead of military con-

flict, argues that this approach alters “assumptions about death and sacrifice; shifting enemies, threats, and targets” (Outka, 2019, 2). It is remarkable that contemporary texts such as *To the Lake* partake in this long tradition of de-emphasising illness as a manifestation of an ostensibly less resilient feminine nature (as opposed to the tragic demise of male soldiers in combat). It is the female narrator who falls sick, and her descriptions meticulously register her emotional oscillations in the face of her aggravating physical symptoms. The premonition of mortality challenges her character’s stability to the extreme, as her own physical distress becomes almost secondary to her frenetic anticipation of Sergey’s attention and care. Notably, many readers commented on Anya’s continuous exaggerated need for support and reaffirmation of her relationship. Thus, one reviewer reflected as follows:

One thing stood out for me: the story of *Vongozero* [*To the Lake*] unfolds in an extremely patriarchal world. Sure, disasters (in real life and in fiction) tend to throw people back into the fold of some of their most archaic archetypes; men become hunters, women become guardians of the hearth; but in this case, Anya’s world had been extremely patriarchal before disaster struck. This is not even a thing; the women of the novel never reflect on this sudden change in their roles and functions, because no change occurred. I find this disturbing. (Good Reads, 2020)

Indeed, Anya’s sickness is exemplary of the tendency, in the novel, for women to enact stereotypical female roles while men, by contrast, excel in contests of strength, power, and ability to defend their kin.⁹ It is striking, for instance, that simultaneously with Anya’s illness, Lenny (operated on by Ira) is recovering from a knife injury sustained in a violent scuffle with two extremely aggressive men who attempted to rob the Muscovites during a brief rest stop on a deserted road. Not only do Sergey, Lenny, and Andrey repeatedly resort to arms in the face of (perceived) danger, the old-aged Boris skilfully swings his hunting rifle to scare away looters from Lenny’s house, and even the soft-tempered adolescent Mishka fires a shotgun at one of the multiple foes disrupting their journey. The geopolitical war Outka discusses in her book, here, is replaced by the apocalyptic chaos induced by the invisible enemy that a lethally dangerous virus represents. Yet, similar to the narratives in Outka’s study, the novel recreates the familiar dichotomy of gendered roles. In its attempt to propose ways of resisting the catastrophe, it seems to hold on to the previous parameters of the ordered, pre-pandemic life, of which patriarchal relations form the most essential part.¹⁰

Apart from exposing “passive” feminine forms of suffering as a kind of genre convention, the account of Anya’s sickbed reproduces a common el-

ement of many outbreak narratives as theorised by Wald – the unbearable idea of the virus’s ambiguous and random violence, as the person who looks healthy can be spreading the disease through a simple act of breathing. In order to render meaningful the terror of the pitiless, anarchic quality of the viral contamination, people resort to identifying a contagious source: a scapegoat, a (healthy) carrier. While Anya is anxious to recapitulate her movements – “What did I do wrong? When did I make a mistake – the time when I took off the mask to speak to the kind security guard or yesterday, in the woods, when I jumped right into the arms of the smiley stranger in a fox fur hat?” (Vagner, 2016, 193), the social effects of the viral attack become immediately manifest. It is Ira who hastens to read the symptoms and her facial expression transforms into “a white exclamation mark, twisted with fear” (Vagner, 2016, 190). Signs of repulsion and anguish in the attitude of the others immediately translate into Anya’s behaviour. She hastens to cover her mouth with both hands, tries to hold her breath and retreats from the common room into a confined space of isolation. And so the group’s precarious cohesion starts to unravel, exposing the tension between the imperative to stay together to offer resistance to the human and non-human perils during the flight, and the mutual suspicion caused by the essential impossibility of apprehending the invisible pathogenic agent that moves without intent, emotion, or distinction.

The Societal Collapse

[Ira] described to us how the city was dying; how the panic began straight after they announced the quarantine, and people started fighting in groceries and chemist’s shops; how the troops came in and masked soldiers were giving out food and medicines off the military trucks; how a neighbour who used to babysit Anton had fingers on both of her hands broken when somebody tried to snatch her bag, and after that they only went out in groups of eight or ten. How buses and trams had stopped running and only ambulances circled the streets, soon replaced by military trucks with red crosses – first they were red stripes clumsily stuck to their canvas tops, and then – which looked more permanent – they painted them on. They stopped picking up infected people from their homes, and the families had to walk them to the trucks, which would come twice a day to start with, and then several times a day. How those “field ambulances” stopped coming altogether [...] and people had to take their infected family members by themselves. Sometimes they had to take their dead bodies. (Vagner, 2016, 68)

To the Lake clearly illuminates what happens when a lethal disease reaches pandemic levels. In the previous section, I considered how the novel depicts the

effects of the disease and captures the transformations a sick body inflicts upon the sense of self and its relation to others. As the story unfolds, it also shows how these individual transformations play out at a larger scale, producing changes in the societal order. In turn, when a widespread breakdown of social structures occurs, it engenders chaos and human-initiated violence. Despite readers' fascination with the "prophetic" quality of the novel, it is remarkable how this contemporary text echoes classic literary accounts of pandemics and the severe disruption of social laws, norms, and communities they inevitably cause.¹¹ Considering the metaphoric significance of contagion in the modern era, René Girard maintained, in his seminal 1974 text "Plague in Literature and Myth," that the metaphor of the plague in narratives usually exposes fear of "social disorder," of anarchy and undifferentiation caused by mimetic violence (834). The book offers scenes familiar to readers from existing pandemic narratives and, unsurprisingly, from the COVID-related international broadcasts and their own experience. It starts with Ira's chilling account of the situation in the Russian capital, and continues with the apocalyptic images of overflowing hospital wards, quarantines, food and fuel shortages, police and traffic controls, concrete road barriers, "people in military uniforms and identical respirators covering their faces" (107) at checkpoints. All official measures ultimately prove ineffective as the authorities fail to protect the population from the terror of the nonsentient airborne agent, or to stop the flow of refugees swelling up as the pandemic moves relentlessly from place to place. Part of the dissolving order in Anya's descriptions appears to reside exactly in the sense of an absolute and profound feeling of defencelessness from the onslaught:

We were trying to come to terms with the fact that we were too late. Running away from the danger that was coming from the city – the city that used to be our home, the city that no longer existed – we couldn't imagine that we were driving towards the same kind of chaos we had been fleeing from – we had thought that it was enough to slip away from the wave which was about to swallow us, when it suddenly became clear that there were plenty of other "waves" like that one, moving with a speed much faster than we were capable of, they were spreading like ripples in water around every city, around every crowded area, and if we wanted to save our lives we had to think of a new way of reaching the place we had chosen as our refuge, dodging those waves, and not knowing when they would block our way again. (Vagner, 2016, 136-7)

In this, and many other fragments, the cascading viral devastation is repeatedly compared to a wave. While in the medical parlance a wave denotes each new sudden increase in the contagion rate, here it is also invoked to produce an

association with a high and powerful ridge of water in the open sea, which can easily overwhelm a vulnerable human being who happens to be in its way. The image of a wave points to the futility of man-made borders and barriers, reminding us that an airborne infection, like water, can easily move through structures imagined as impenetrable.

As the expedition moves forward, the sense of chaos and widespread social disintegration is captured in traces of material devastation: windblown, “empty streets, vandalised food stalls” (93), stores shut up, eerie “deserted villages with blind windows and sporadic lamp-posts” (122), destroyed bridges, “burned car wreckages” (148), “barricades, built by the citizens in the hope to protect themselves from their infected neighbours” (264), and endless snow-covered roads through dark impenetrable forests. *To the Lake* abounds with apocalyptic imagery. A chapter titled “A Stabbing and a Shooting” starts when the group arrive in a town, which would remain indistinguishable (in their “Muscovite” eyes) from all others they passed through earlier, if it weren’t for the enormous snowbanks blocking access to houses and footpaths, and a caravan of people walking slowly and silently in one direction, “pulling sledges with identical oblong plastic bundles on them” (144). The sight of a square and further on – a church with green and blue cupolas and a peaked belfry, reveals “a man’s figure in black, standing [...] near a make-shift [*sic*] platform, with an iron rod attached to it with a rope” (145), striking it rhythmically with a long heavy bar. Dark bundles, similar to those on the sledges, are huddled together on the snow. Realising that these are the bodies of the victims to be left behind to freeze in an improvised mass grave, Anya is struck with horror and incomprehension: “It looks like they were left without any support? No medical help, no ambulances – nothing!?” (146)

Another shocking experience of the human tragedy occurs shortly after, in a place that has been subjected to the “cleansing operation.” Andrey is the one to explain that several weeks ago “the army had made this decision – they couldn’t introduce quarantine, they just cleansed everything in the radius of thirty kilometres towards the north” (251). The travellers realise that what they witness is the result of this blood-curdling intervention: “the smoke was still hanging above this dreadful place. [...] There wasn’t a single house left intact – identical and black, with broken frames and empty windows – the glass had all exploded in the violent heat – they stood on both sides of the road, the only witnesses of the catastrophe, silent, unable to testify about it” (252). They drive through an empty village in the hope that its inhabitants were able to escape before it was torched down. Their hopes are shattered when, on the sidewalk, they discern the burned corpses of those who were still alive when the “cleansing” took place. In this account, the collapse of the social order is at its most horrifying – it effectively epitomises the authorities’ absolute fail-

ure to respond adequately and humanely to the uncontrollable proliferation of the pandemic. In a way, these descriptions reflect on two contrasting anxieties usually present in pandemic narratives (be they fictional or real). On the one hand there is a fear of abandonment, anarchy and complete chaos; on the other – the terror of the stringent governmental strategies of disease containment.

Together with the image of the amorphous grey heap of dead bodies in the church square, mourned only by a few people who might not have long to live themselves, the sight of the charred human remains signify the ultimate erosion of social structures. It also gives rise to a question of how to mourn (mass) death in a pandemic. Evoking associations with the present reality, these scenes can be related to Judith Butler's theorisation of grievability and mourning. Butler contends that the loss of those who perished in the present pandemic takes place in the private realm. Contrary to mass shootings, for instance, pandemic bodies are "deprived of the public gathering in which such losses are marked and registered and shared" (Butler and Yancy, 2020, 485). Yet private forms of mourning can never substitute for the gatherings, both private and public, in which losses are acknowledged and worked through, while "all these lost lives are grievable, which means that they are lives worthy of acknowledgement, equal in value to every other life, a value that cannot be calculated" (Butler and Yancy, 2020, 145). The rapid succession and scale of these losses raises a spectrum of political questions about the preparedness of medical infrastructure to withstand a pathogenic threat of such magnitude. Although Butler's observations concern the peak of the real COVID-19-induced situation, the book's readers obviously were able to recognise, in the fictional images of bodies piled in shapeless heaps, the incessant shocking footage of overwhelmed hospitals and mass funerals in different world locations that they were confronted with on a daily basis during the first months of the pandemic. This, and the sense of bewilderment at the "senselessness" of death, could be perceived as the main reasons of the novel's unexpected popularity.

Offering an appalling picture of the anarchy a pandemic can inflict on society, *To the Lake*, however, diverges from a conventional outbreak scenario in that it is not interested in the disease's mysterious provenance or cure.¹² Its apocalyptic tale also eschews beliefs in divine intervention or punishment. As I stated earlier, Vagner's intention is to reflect on the notions of human morality against the background of the enormous fear of the deadly virus's randomness. Yet the above scenes reveal that the intensity of harm and suffering is not equally distributed. Despite their bewilderment and terror, the group of Muscovites seem to be much better equipped for withstanding the threatened violence than the inhabitants of the places they pass on their way to the refuge. And consequently, what is perceived as moral behaviour is different for various characters and often depends on their class and social standing.

The Way to the Refuge: Social Encounters and Emotional Response

It was clear that we could vaporise and disappear at any point of this complicated route, which not many people would take a chance to go by even in the summer; we could simply get stuck in the snow – which nobody cleared anymore – and freeze to death; any negligible trouble with the car in minus thirty, without telephones or any hope of help, would paralyse us and we would be doomed; if this happened we would risk coming up against the people who lived there and they wouldn't be happy to see us even if the disease hadn't reached them yet. Only the fear of the virus we were facing was stronger, so we turned right, under the little blue road sign. (Vagner, 2016, 250)

This fragment is one of many in which fear informs the narrator's vision of places, people, and encounters. The sight of the night guards at the scarcely lit petrol station, the menacing male figures in police uniforms at an important crossroad, an abandoned car in a layby with traces of blood on the fresh snow, a stranger in city clothes suddenly appearing at the door of their temporary abode, the blinding headlights of a snow plough on a deserted track – all these impressions are coloured by the feelings of apprehension and imminent danger. Yet real events often contradict the anticipation of doom. The narrative contains only a few instances in which a situation, initially perceived as perilous, actually ends badly, the most dramatic one being when Lenny is stabbed with a knife in a scuffle with two violent men during a short break on an empty road. More often than not, however, it is the mistrustful protagonists who display questionable conduct. This begins early in the story, when at a petrol station on the outskirts of Moscow they store up as much fuel as they can carry while downplaying their panic and deliberately neglecting to inform the workers about the gravity of the pandemic situation and the enormous wave of refugees coming their way.

When midway through the journey they are forced to stay in one of the many abandoned villages for Anya and Lenny to recover, the men unscrupulously plunder the surrounding cottages and basements for food and firewood, but abandon a family who have fled from nearby Cherepovets without supplies. All that Anya is able to feel during the first encounter with an older man in a city coat, who comes to ask for help, is extreme anger and mistrust. Boris, in turn, dismisses the man with advice to forage in the neighbourhood and when the latter shows reluctance, he callously remarks: “Don't be shy [...] Trust me, if the owners haven't come back, they're most likely dead by now. In times like these doing the right thing doesn't work” (229). The next day, the Muscovites discover that the man stole a box of canned meat from their trailer and Andrey,

armed with a gun, is dispatched to reclaim it. He returns empty handed, but not because he doubted the moral rightness of his mission. Rather, shocked by the sphere of desperation and decay he retreated out of fear of contamination.

On another occasion, their Land Rover is pulled out of the deep snow by the driver of a snow plough. Anya registers how Sergey and Boris, who initially hold the stranger at gunpoint, are astounded to hear him say: “Why wouldn’t I help good people [...] Only if they really are good, those people. It’s troublesome times, we should help each other” (286). The plough driver offers the travellers shelter for the night, yet Anya, consumed by suspicion, believes his hospitality to be motivated by the wish to learn about the state of affairs in Moscow:

If our host had a reason to drive out in the middle of the night in his grader, after noticing the light from our cars on the deserted road, and then, without asking any questions, inviting eleven completely strange people to his house for the night, there could be only one reason – curiosity (292).

In disbelief, they hear that their host goes out every night to clear the same track even if there is a small probability that someone would be passing through it. At dinner Boris and Sergey conspire to make him drunk to be able to steal petrol from a tank in the back yard. When they are caught in the act the next morning, the man’s reaction is not what they expect: “Boy, what a strange lot you are,” he says without anger, only maybe a touch surprised. “You’re not like normal people, I swear. Why do it this way? I have two and a half thousand litres there. Why didn’t you ask?” (308).

I discuss these incidents because they testify to the assumed class privilege and a certain sense of entitlement the protagonists tend to display throughout their journey. Although it could be expected that the “normal” quotidian notions of ethical behaviour would be disrupted and/or redefined under duress, the pandemic actually reveals and exacerbates the already present moral deficiencies. Anya’s account shows that even against the apocalyptic backdrop the notion of human morality is (re)interpreted from the point of view of what is beneficial for the group without much regard to others who might be put at a disadvantage in the process. It is remarkable that apart from Lenny’s “new Russian” background and Boris’s past as a representative of the Soviet intelligentsia, no information is provided about the occupations of the other travellers. Although initially the group lacks cohesion, with the men competing in their vigour and prowess, and Anya endlessly criticising Lenny and Marina’s bad taste, Boris’s old Soviet habits, Ira’s hostility, and Andrey and Natasha’s selfishness, they are ultimately united in their distrustful and superior stance towards the country people they meet in the course of their journey. Anya’s

ruminations are saturated with negative feelings that effectively inform her paranoid behaviour. I suggest that the ways Anya and her companions behave towards the (socially and culturally alien) others are defined by the affective values they routinely attribute to those who live outside their big-city world.¹³ As a result, instead of unifying the community indiscriminately shattered by the ubiquitous contagious mechanism, the viral threat appears only to exacerbate the existing fissures in social structures.

Conversely, while the Muscovites consider the villagers backward, insensitive and violent, the latter regard city dwellers as carriers of infection. Susan Sontag points this phenomenon out in her seminal book *Illness as Metaphor*, where she argues that metaphors of pestilence often expand on “the theme of the rejection of the city” (74). In the popular imagination the urban environment is often seen as abnormal, unhealthy, and disease-causing, and it is juxtaposed with the wholesomeness and healing capacity of the countryside. Vagner’s book reiterates this opposition in the penultimate chapter, titled “Into The Woods,” illustrating how a group of country people who live in an isolated settlement in the so-called “frontier exclusion zone” (388) believe the epidemic originates from the “poisonous” urban environment characterised by “debaucherous” lifestyle. In the chapter, the protagonists have only a few kilometres left to cover when they are apprehended by five armed men in camouflage jackets and respirators. They have to surrender their guns and are made to walk in single file, empty handed and wearing protective masks, towards an assemblage of newly built solid wooden houses in a clearing near the lake. When Marina wonders whether the strangers are infected she gets this answer from Sergey: “I don’t think so,” Sergey said, “I think they’re worried they’ll catch it from us” (398). A little later a small crowd of ordinary-looking men and women, “probably locals who have escaped from the villages dotted along the motorway” (401), receives the newcomers with tangible hostility. The scene demonstrates confusion and mistrust experienced by both parties, ostensibly motivated by the distance between them in terms of provenance, class, and strategies for dealing with the current predicament. And when the settlers’ leader, a man called Ivan Semenovich, invites the Muscovites to stay overnight, it is not clear whether they are truly welcome or held hostage. Reflecting on their hosts’ overt animosity, they strategize:

“There’s thirty-four of them,” Sergey said simply, “And only nine of us. I mean adults. He said they use a principle of a ‘common pool’, everything is shared, fair do’s, but I don’t know how they were going to do it, what they’d brought with them, I don’t know what kind of people they are, and this isn’t the point, really,” and he carefully touched his smashed lip, “it’s just there’ll be no democracy here, you see? They’re troops. They have a different kind

of brains. No better, no worse, just different. And there's more of them. I don't think it's a bad thing that they're here, just the opposite, it's good, because... well, for many reasons. But I'll feel better if they stay here and we're there, on the island, on our own." (Vagner, 2016, 410)

Despite the shared desire to avert microbial intrusions, the social differences feed into the mutual prejudices precluding a chance of giving shape to a new community of survivors in the aftermath of societal collapse. Priscilla Wald contends that conventional "outbreak narratives [...] make the act of imagining the community a central [...] feature of its preservation," while "communicative disease transforms a social group into a mystically connected biological entity" (53–54). In Vagner's story, the imminent viral danger does not lead to the coordination of efforts across the social strata. The borders of social division remain in place, and if a resilient collective is imagined, it happens on a micro-level, that of a family, be it biological or surrogate. While the villagers are unconditionally united around the patriarchal figure of Ivan Semenovich, the protagonists prefer to form their own immunological "body" of sorts. This happens despite the feelings of jealousy, envy, and frustration that continue to circulate among them because, along the way, they learn that self-centredness and rejection of collective-minded actions only heightens individual susceptibility to lethal dangers lurking around each corner. Ironically, with their "immunity" secured through complete self-isolation, Anya still expresses her worry about how eleven different people will endure "staying together until the end of the winter in a small house like this one, without water, without electricity and toilet, without books and favourite programmes on telly but, most importantly, with no chance to be alone, just the two of us" (208). Thus, in the end, the menacing pandemic waves do not engender in the protagonists any kind of alternative posture. The novel appears to endorse suburban complacency, favouring some people and their lifestyles over others, and foregrounds seeking refuge from the contagious rest of the world as the only sensible response to the pandemic that can be imagined.

Conclusion

Resonating with present pandemic anxieties, the story of post-apocalyptic survival in Yana Vagner's *To the Lake* initially unfolds as a radical rupture of the social fabric caused by the sudden proliferation of an uncontrollable disease. The novel's perceived disconcerting parallels with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic might explain its immense popularity with contemporary readers. Yet the author's choice of a deadly contagious disease as an immediate cause

of the end of civilisation clearly resonates with Susan Sontag’s classic observation (talking about AIDS) that:

The taste for worst-case scenarios reflects the need to master fear of what is felt to be uncontrollable. It also expresses an imaginative complicity with disaster. The sense of cultural distress or failure gives rise to the desire for a clean sweep, a *tabula rasa*. No one wants a plague, of course. But, yes, it would be a chance to begin again. (Sontag, 1991, 175)

Showing the national authorities attempting (in vain) to contain the pandemic, and individual citizens’ taking their salvation into their own hands, the novel skilfully employs a set of generic outbreak fiction tropes, framing it as a story of post-apocalyptic survival revolving around the questions: “What could happen here?” and “How could the characters act?” Although popular understandings of “apocalypse” emphasise large-scale destruction and depopulation, the Greek word from which it derives, *apokalupsis*, can be translated into English as “revelation” or “unveiling”. James Berger argues that “the apocalyptic event, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end” (5). Announcing and describing the end, however, apocalyptic narratives seldom show the world irrevocably ending: “something [always] remains *after the end*” (Berger, 1999, 6, original emphasis). Living through scenes of swarming and panicked population, closed borders, blown bridges, riots, quarantine, burned and abandoned settlements, the novel’s characters survive because from the start they are able to profit from their privileged position as middle-class suburban consumers, which translates into more timely and better access to vital information, but also into the possession of a place of possible refuge, reliable means of transportation, and sufficient ammunition for the flight to succeed. Although haunted by the scenes of societal collapse and the losses it represents, the narrator’s world is remarkably self-enclosed, and driven by the desire to understand herself and her family as “selected” for survival, valuing their lives above the lives of others. It is telling, in this sense, that Anya is the only person in the narrative who actually survives the infection and she wonders: “We never found out what my illness was – was it a virus, deadly for so many people but sparing me for some reason, or was it just the result of stress, several sleepless nights and hypothermia?” (Vagner, 2016, 204). In the face of spreading precariousness, the chance to start anew is ultimately left undegraded. On the contrary, the familiar world of pre-pandemic complacency is not irretrievably lost in the novel. What remains after “the end of times” is the relationship between the survivors and their envisaged future to-

gether, which are categorically made dependent on society's most persistent and archaic mode of existence – that of the patriarchal family.

Notes

1. In this article, I use translations of the novel's fragments as well as transliterations of names and topographic locations, from the official English translation by Maria Wiltshire.
2. The corpus of recent pre-pandemic books, films, series and games about pandemics is impressive and includes, to name but a few, such cultural texts as Richard Preston's 1994 nonfiction thriller *The Hot Zone*, Greg Bear's 1999 novel *Darwin's Radio*, Steven Soderbergh's 2011 film *Contagion*, Justin Marks' 2017–2019 series *Counterpart*, Emily St John Mandel's 2014 novel *Station Eleven*, Ling Ma's 2018 novel *Severance*, Emma Donoghue's 2020 novel *The Pull of the Stars* (written 2018–2019), Maggie O'Farrell's 2020 novel *Hamnet* (published near the start of the first UK lockdown), and the video game *Plague Inc.*, first released in 2012.
3. Here and elsewhere all translations from Russian (except the primary text) are mine.
4. By pointing out the formulaic structure of epidemic-themed accounts, Wald's work resonates with writings of, among others, Lisa Lynch, Alexandra Semmler, and Heather Schell who, respectively, termed such texts as “epidemic-panic narratives” (Lynch, 2001, 73), “medical apocalypse” stories (Semmler, 1998, 154), and “emerging-virus narratives” (Schell, 1997, 93).
5. Cristobal Silva even conceives of epidemiology as a whole as a “narrative genre [...] [as it] formalizes a set of vocabularies and grammars that articulate why epidemics act as they do, and why certain people get sick while others not” (2011: 4).
6. Wald's theorisations echo the work of physician and literary scholar Rita Charon who argues that trying to understand stories of disease implies the ability to “tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty” as “pain, suffering, worry, anguish, and the sense of something not being right are conditions very difficult, if not impossible, to put into words” (2006: 4). Accordingly, in her study of the narratives of the 1918 influenza pandemic, Jane Elisabeth Fisher points out that the existing accounts of the illness emphatically engaged with “remembering those who died rather than the disease that killed them” (2012: 3).
7. Connecting disease with the transformation of subjectivity is a recurrent theme in the Western literary tradition since Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, which opens with a plague destroying the city of Thebes. Sophocles's

- drama particularly demonstrates how contagious diseases test individuals' knowledge of themselves and their capacities.
8. Outka builds on the idea that cultural imagination genders even the forms of dying. While dying on the field of battle is considered masculine (and heroic), succumbing to illness is conventionally represented as feminine.
 9. The novel's other victims of viral violence are also women: Ira's sister; Anya's mother, who dies in Moscow in the early days of the epidemic; and Ira's best friend Lisa, whom she remembers appearing one night at her door asking for help, and whom Ira does not admit into the apartment for fear of contamination. Conversely, men either sustain physical injuries in a fight (Lenny), suffer a heart attack (Boris), or are killed in a confrontation with the aggressive mob (ambulance driver Nikolay).
 10. Throughout the novel, Anya's recollections of meeting Sergey and of their unperturbed life together are infused with an excessive sense of dependency. Although she is the mother of an adolescent son, and it is implied that she has a good job, her professional occupation is never discussed and her character seems to be entirely defined in terms of Sergey's world, diminishing her separate identity.
 11. The most outstanding examples of such literature are Giovanni Bocaccio's *The Decameron* (1353) and Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), which both explore how pandemics break down the structures that tie community together.
 12. Although, at some point in their journey, the medical doctor Pavel joins the group, his story does not conform to the conventional idea of heroic combat against the virus. Instead he tells the others about his vain attempts to procure medicine for his provincial hospital only to discover that the effective vaccine does not exist and, instead of looking for a remedy, the medical authorities remain paralyzed by panic and indecision.
 13. The fragments I consider here also illuminate how emotions are always implicated within concrete embodied encounters. thus invoking Sara Ahmed's theorisation of the "cultural politics of emotions." Ahmed puts the emphasis on emotions' sociality to demonstrate how they can become "sticky," adhering to particular objects and bodies (Ahmed, 2004, 11). She further conceives of stickiness as the outcome of repeated impressions, histories of cultural and personal exchanges, and the subsequent "accumulation of affective value" (Ahmed, 2004, 92).

Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that they have no conflict of interest.

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