WHEN PAIN FITS INTO ONE COLOUR: "THE WHITE BOOK" BY HAN KANG AS AN INDUCTIVE TEXT FOR A NARRATIVE MEDICINE WORKSHOP

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Abstract: Han Kang is the laureate of the Nobel Prize for Literature this year, 2024. The author was first translated into Romanian in 2019, by Art Publishing House, with the volume " The White Book", but the discovery of the beauty and elegance of her simple technique, which touches the soul directly, like the snow of lambs in April, truly occurred when, first reading out of curiosity, the work of an author from Seoul who becomes universal through the excellence with which she knows how to map the finest and most unexpected sources of pain.
Our work analyses the spaces of pain, as they are inserted in the book: the pain of her sister's birth and death, an event drawn in just two hours of life, with the smell of blood and tight and frozen fears, which became snowflakes, fog, pebbles, grains of sand or white nights, bones and memories.
To the direct question asked by a doctor at the beginning of the anamnesis: "what hurts?", using Han Kang's novel as a base text for a narrative medicine workshop, we discovered, together with the workshop group, medical students and young doctors, the fragility and beauty of all life encapsulated in the colour white, the symbolic colour of the medical profession.

Keywords: pain, white, literature, medicine, narrative medicine

Background

Since 2016, we have been organizing narrative medicine[1] workshops at VB University of Medicine and Pharmacy Timisoara. At first, these were more of an extension of the course on cultural anthropology of the human body or the concept of health. At that time, the main sources of methodological inspiration came from Laplantine (1), the pioneer, Charon (2), the conceptualist, and, of course, Mehl-Madrona (3), the anthropologist neuropsychologist.

[1] **2023, The Story as Sapiens' Vertical Spine – Narrative Medicine Seminars III,** Autumn workshops: *The physician with the soul on the tip of the pen*
Co-organiser Göksel Altınışık Ergur, physician and writer at Pamukkale Medical University
https://www.umft.ro/event/the-story-as-sapiens-vertical-spine-narrative-medicine-iii-third-edition-autumn-workshops/
2022, The Story as Sapiens Vertical Spine – Narrative Medicine II, *My hand in your hand*, https://www.umft.ro/event/the-story-as-sapiens-vertical-spine-narrative-medicine-ii-the-second-edition-of-the-summer-school-7th-8th-july-7th-8th-october-2022-my-hand-in-your-hand/
2021, The Story as Sapiens Vertical Spine – Narrative Medicine I / The first edition of the international summer school, co-organizer, Slobodan Dan Paich, Artship Foundation San Francisco
https://www.umft.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Summer-School_Narratif_Program.pdf,
2021, Twelfth International Symposium of CORPUS, *Humankind and Fat. Attraction, Repulsion, Health and Politics*, https://www.umft.ro/event/humankind-and-fat-attraction-repulsion-health-and-politics /
2018, *Reading the Signs*: *The Emotions and Body Shape Expressed in the Colours and Sounds of the Disease, International workshop* organized by "Victor Babes" University of Medicine and Pharmacy Timisoara and Artship Foundation San Francisco, http://www.umft.ro/data_files/documente-atasate-evenimente/4562/workshop_20novembr-_202018__20program.pdf
2016, Intangibles Bodies within the Body: *Memories, Feelings, Forecasts, International Seminar of Corpus*

We were used to listening to people, asking them for their story, a place, a custom. It didn't seem much different to what we usually did in an anthropology seminar. We knew the intricacies of narrative and we tried to integrate the story or technique into the appropriate narrative framework. The meetings proved exciting and interesting. Each time we discovered new things and had transdisciplinary discussions. The lists of bibliographical references were becoming more and more complex and diverse, but we had not yet left the field of cultural anthropology, and we could not leave the school space to enter that of the hospital and actively listen to what was happening there too through literary devices. The corridor of a hospital is the space between two borders, that no man's land in which pains are restrained because they do not yet know in which territories they will be absorbed. The French school of narrative medicine at Cergy[2] and the collaboration with the doctor and writer Göksel Altınışık[3] showed us one of the ways in which we could cross these borders.

Narrative medicine still poses institutional problems. In the reality of the Romanian hospital, the framework to host it is lacking or, if it exists, it is timid and viewed with distrust. It is rather viewed as a drop torn from an extremely precious time and given to complete the multi-coloured palette of activities in the field of medical humanities. Type: Checkmark.

Without truly understanding it, great, niche writers often criticize the resulting texts as not being of remarkable literary quality. However, the purpose of NM is not to transform doctors and patients into writers but to facilitate communication between the two and a deeper knowledge of the disease through writing, be it creative.

Taking on the challenge of writing in the clinical space with more courage, we used Han Kang's wonderful "White Book".

Attention, representation, affiliation[4]

The preparation and training itself for close reading is the first and most solid step in opening any NM workshop. The choice of literary text for this moment, in corresponding metaphorical terms, could have the weight of medical education for prevention. Only paying close attention to the proposed text could lead to representation through a creative writing piece and the desire to share it, to affiliate with the working group, to feel a part of it.

Attention

This is about an introductory workshop in narrative medicine. The goal was only to familiarize yourself with the concept. We limited registrations to groups of a maximum of six participants. Due to high interest, we preferred to divide those interested into four groups with different dates, locations and themes.

The focus of the first group and the subject of this article was pain.

We were a group of seven, six workshop participants, interested in the experiment, but quite sceptical and us, the animator, in a university laboratory. We were laying down the groundwork before approaching the clinical space. A good understanding of intention is constantly needed. Attention begins with stimulating curiosity. Their presence in the workshop was a confirmation that at least the latter was awake.

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[2] CU-IMN, Cergy Université, 2023-2024, sous la direction de Anne-Marie Petitjean

[3] Altınışık, Göksel *Amprente pe spațiul gol*, EVB, 2023, ISBN 978-606-786-355-0, translation into Romanian by Gabriela-Mariana Luca, https://www.umft.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Amprente-pe-spatiul-gol_Goksel-Altinisik.pdf

[4] Rita Charon's pedagogical triad

The invitation had aroused their enthusiasm, but they did not really realize what was going to happen. Could it have been about a creative writing workshop? Something like meetings in literary circles? A reading group or the flirtation with literary writing? Could it have been one of those therapeutic writing techniques used by psychologists?

These concerns are also observed and analysed in Christian Delorenzo's doctoral thesis[5], from which we quote:

" Of course, narrative medicine does not represent the only application of narration in medicine. The universe of "narrative practices in health," as Roberto Poma[6] defines them in a very recent essay, is increasingly vast. However, we must not forget that narrative medicine embodies a very specific and practice, with its principles and its theory. Certainly, the free and open use of "narrative medicine" testifies to the strength and success of such a definition."

Leaving aside all the anxieties that were floating at the start of the meeting, we preferred to start by introducing a few ideas regarding the newly Nobel Prize-winning writer. She belongs to a culture we all knew very little about, but were aware that, although very different from ours, she masterfully brought to the entire world the emotions of the universal human being. Our challenge was to draw and educate the attention of those present to the significant detail, using fragments of her writing.

We just asked them to follow our voice as we read, considering that we were the patient who had just entered our doctor's office. Without any further request.

We start reading the very first words from the opening of the book:

" In the spring, when I decided to write about white things, the first thing I did was to make a list.

Swaddling bands
Newborn gown
Salt
Snow
Ice
Moon
Rice
Waves
Yulan
White bird
'Laughing whitely'
Blank paper
White dog
White hair
Shroud

With each item I wrote down, a ripple of agitation ran through me. I felt that yes, I needed to write this book, and that the processes of writing it would be transformative, would itself transform,

[5] Christian Delorenzo, „Pour un hôpital narratif. Un modèle de formation à la médecine narrative en milieu hospitalier", thèse de doctorat d'Université Paris-Est Philosophie, humanités médicales et santé, 2022. Christian has a special experience in practicing narrative medicine. As a literary attaché at a Parisian university hospital, he has led several hundred workshops in narrative medicine.

[6] POMA (Roberto), « La médecine narrative », dans Collège des humanités médicales, Médecine, santé et sciences humaines, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2021, p. 185., apud Delorenzo

into something like white ointment applied to swelling, like gauze laid over wound. Something I needed." (p.1)[7]

After the first reading of these lines, we asked what they remembered and considered relevant related to the title of the volume[8].

We reproduce here the first dialogues:

A1[9]: —All those words have the colour white as a common denominator[10].

A3: — Yes, that's right. All[11].

A6: — I think there was something else in the word list, but I can't remember it now[12].

A0: — What words from Han's list do you remember?

A4: — *Swaddling bands, salt, snow, ice, rice, white dog, white hair, white bird, shroud* … these would be about it[13].

A5: — I think there was also *paper* and *flour*.

A2: — I'm not sure, but I think there was some *white flower* too[14].

A3: — I don't know if there was anything left, maybe *milk* and *sugar*. However, I think there was something that wasn't white.

A6: — Of course it was, but I can't say. I don't remember hearing the word *flour*. I remember she started writing about spring. Spring is not necessarily white, but it is a beginning. The beginning of life. There doesn't seem to be anything that announces pain in this book. Everything announces hope.

Missing from their words were: *newborn gown, moon, waves, Yulan, laughing whitely*. They had added *flour* (already controversial) and *milk*, *sugar* and *white flower* (with no additional comment). We already had three words outside the mutually accepted list. These will be found in the pages of the book, it is true, they had been anticipated, but they had not been spoken in the initial reading.

It is worth noting that the group had begun to close, the atmosphere was becoming more relaxed and the attention, once stimulated, increased as the participants involved themselves into the game. We did not comment / correct their answers.

We then suggested that they write a short paragraph inspired by the colour white, in a continuous writing exercise, for 15 minutes.

Representation and the path to affiliation

We quote excerpts from the texts obtained and shared in the group:

A1:" The white coat is the symbol of the profession I have chosen. It will probably remain just a historical metaphor. Today, hospital clothing is very colourful, less austere, more communicative. You can see the blood clearly on white, and that's scary."

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[7] Han Kang, *The White Book*, eBook, published: 02 November 2017 / Our workshops were held in Romanian, and we used excerpts from the translation by I. Prodan Iolanda, Art Publishing House, Bucharest, 2019

[8] Our observation: as we were reading, four were taking notes, two were just listening.

[9] we denote with A1, A2, A3, A4, A5, A6 as codes to identify the responses of the 6 participants and with A0 the workshop facilitator

[10] He hadn't written anything down; he had just listened.

[11] She had written something down while reading.

[12] She had also noted.

[13] A4 was among those who had noted down during the reading. She had 9 terms out of 15, all related to the concept of white. Let a percentage of 60%.

[14] She hadn't written anything down.

A2:" It depends on the context. I associate white with hospitals and hotel towels. With the unknown, especially. White surprises me, but I also like it. It's clean."

A3:" I don't know what to say. White pills are almost all bitter. I remember my mother grinding them up and giving them to me mixed with sugar when I was little. I think white can be both bitter and sweet."

A4:" White terrifies me. I will never be able to forget the night I stood by the doctor on duty at the hospital, and a patient was declared dead and then quickly wrapped in a white sheet and put in a plastic bag."

A5:" I really like white. I associate it with milk, the Milky Way, snow, brides and white flowers. Sometimes it's sharp, but if you laugh, it breaks."

A6:" Yes, it's strange. I associate white with mourning and casts. I can't explain why elegant evening wear is black, most wedding dresses are white, and why I associate white with sadness. There are, of course, cultural explanations for all of this, but I feel a lot of pain associated with white."

The texts were read in their entirety. It was interesting to position ourselves on a common denominator: the profession with the whole series of metaphors and euphemisms derived from it. They were together, they belonged to a common space, and they met in it and through this little writing exercise.

This gave us the opportunity to repeat Rita Charon's conclusion[15]. "While one person pays attention, the other exposes his or her representation, and while one person exposes his or her representation, another pays attention. These are reciprocal and collaborative processes – no attention without representation and no representation without attention – that draw the one who is attentive and the one who exposes himself or herself into situations of penetration, capitulation, mutual need, and representation, thus creating intertwined spirals within the self and between the self and the other. These practices invite us into an intersubjective relationship."

Discussions

We reread Han Kang's text. This time, with the text in front of us so that every detail would be easier to notice. The participants understood the role, first and foremost, of the meeting as a formative one. Attention is a skill that can be developed through training. Our first attempt had shown that only 60% of what we had read had been retained, and not by everyone in the same way.

The text, apparently simple, had presented them with a list of 15 words related to representations of the colour white.

Loaded with metaphor, the words evoked and stimulated memories for each of the participants. They understood that the addition of terms that were not found in the text read added a subjective element to our dialogue. We invited them to compare it with the anamnesis dialogue and the attention paid to the patient's words.

The simple exercise of writing made self-representation, the intersection of motifs, and affiliation possible.

We hadn't gone through the entire *White Book* by Han Kang, but we already had elements that came together in open conclusions about how much attention meant in active

[15] Rita Charon, *Narrative Medicine: Honoring the Stories of Illness*, 2006, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195166750.001.0001

listening and how coherently representations of human pain were emerging without us having explicitly talked about pain.

Moreover, the participants were surprised to hear their own texts spoken aloud as well as the ideas contained in them, considered revelatory, in first stage and then identity. They had dotted the i's themselves:

A6: — Oh, God, what was I able to pull out of myself? I didn't even know I was thinking like that. I never put them together like that! I'm genuinely interested in a training in narrative medicine. There's really something to be learned here. When is the next meeting?

Conclusion

A drop in the ocean: the beginning seemed to have caught the meaning of water currents, to remain in the space of metaphor. The meeting, achieved with considerable difficulty due to the so-called permanent time crises and the serious things with which medical personnel are overloaded, had already created the outline of a possible framework in the Romanian clinical environment as well. It was clear that a coherent training in narrative medicine could give very good results in communication, but also in personal identity representations, two lines of knowledge in constant need of development.

The literary text and its techniques impose reflection and invite knowledge. Here lies the core of defining the concept of narrative medicine. Its connections with other specific tools of cultural anthropology (be it literary, medical, social) only bring us back to our inner humanity in a world of extremes and in which we either talk a lot and without meaning or we don't talk at all, leaving the images already served by the media to create the "over a thousand words" in the head of the confident interlocutor who does not always become a dialogue partner. We have to make a journey together towards the clinical space, alongside patients, weaving stories about ourselves and offering knowledge in open dialogues.

The concept, once well understood, gave way to future workshops, with the enthusiasm of writing texts inspired by each of the 15 words on Kang's whitelist, except for the first name Yulan, which was to be replaced with the first name of a close person, a choice motivated by our theme, white - the colour of pain and having as its motto this line from Han Kang:

"Even the smallest task is left suspended as I concentrate on simply enduring the pain, sensing time's discrete drops as razor-sharp gemstones, grazing my fingertips.[16]*"*

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