

Humanities Research Methodology. Literary Art in Pandemic Times

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— Abstract—

In this article I will address in the first instance the relationship between methodology and research in the humanities, and then focus on literature as an object of study. Second, I will touch on some fundamental challenges that we face in the analysis and interpretation of the new Mexican literature. Specifically, I will focus on texts by three authors who have written during or about COVID 19 (Daniela Tarazona, Karla Montalvo and Guadalupe Nettel), to reflect on the representation of the pandemic. To do this, I will be guided by the hermeneutical vision of Roman Ingarden, Hans George Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

Keywords:

Methodology; research; humanities; mexican literature; pandemic.

The mimesis' issue or representation of reality in literature is perhaps, what most makes us think about the difficulty of establishing a dialogue between humanities and the physical or natural sciences. The objects of study are different, but so are the methods used to approach them, which continue to be viewed with an abysmal distance. Following the positivist legacy that survives in many academic circles, the objectivity/subjectivity dichotomy is still viewed with suspicion, in keeping with the old distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities. However, the path to truth in both depends, as Hans George Gadamer would say, on the nature of our object of study. In fact, the German philosopher asserts that what we have "is not a difference in methods but a difference in the objectives of knowledge" (Gadamer, 1988, p. 11). In this regard, the method will be marked by the hermeneutic approach as a practice that begins with the recognition of the assumptions or prior information we have, as beings embedded in a tradition, and our dialogue with the object of knowledge.

But what is the relationship between methodology and research in humanities? How is research conducted in literary studies? How do we understand the relationship between real-world problems and what we "solve" through literary criticism? This study reflects on these questions, before tackling the fundamental challenges of analyzing and interpreting new Mexican literature, based on three contemporary authors who have written about the COVID-19 pandemic (Daniela Tarazona, Karla Montalvo, and Guadalupe Nettel). To reflect on the representation of the pandemic in the works of these authors, we are guided by the hermeneutic vision of Roman Ingarden, Hans George Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH IN HUMANITIES

The twenty-first century has brought to the forefront of universities the need to educate individuals from a comprehensive and humanistic perspective, teaching them to be supportive and responsible towards others and their environment. Research generated within the educational sphere, in dialectical relation to teaching, has also changed. It seeks new paths through inter-, multi-, and transdisciplinarity to examine problems that impact human integrity. So the question posed by hermeneutists such as Gadamer arises once again: what is the method for arriving at this multifaceted truth that concerns us? What is the path for producing and accessing knowledge? The relationship between methodology and research thus becomes clear. Our object of study and the objectives we pursue mark the critical path for advancing in our search, increasingly with the support of other strategies, of perspectives that, from other areas, illuminate our steps as researchers. But it is not only the humanities that justify their research practices with

support from other areas; the natural sciences—medicine, for example—also draw on other approaches, humanistic and social, and even ancestral community practices that serve as support for their research work.

Thus, we find that today's research is conducted in a more horizontal manner. Terms such as “participatory research” and “informant-researcher” emerged in what has been called interculturality or intercultural research. This broadens the fields of action in the knowledge ecosystem and blurs the positivist pedestal on which the researcher was seen as the sole owner and master of knowledge.

Science has changed in this ecosystem, in this “knowledge society”; today it must adhere to international parameters and agreements in favor of a better understanding of society. But other sectors of the population must also change along with the sciences and humanities. As Beatriz Pescador asserts:

Knowledge can no longer be limited solely to academic circles. It must be part of the agendas of national, regional, local, and urban governments, non-governmental organizations, health officials, entrepreneurs, producer associations, environmentalists, and consultants (Pescador, 2014, p. 6).

Only in this way can the knowledge society contribute to regional development. But how can humanities guide and orient this development? How can humanistic research influence public policy? What problems does literature solve, and, even more so, literary criticism?

On the other hand, we must consider that conducting research nowadays, in any field of knowledge, implies facing new technological challenges. Whether as project managers or as trainers of new researchers, we see at least three aspects worth considering: 1) The need for new skills to search repositories, data bases and files of various kinds; 2) The relevance and management of digital tools in the analysis of information; and 3) Time management that is increasingly fragmented in the research exercise.

Both initial aspects require a reformulation of what it means to be a researcher in the humanities field and demand urgent digital training for those of us who have experience in other forms of research practiced before the pandemic. In this sense, both teaching and humanistic research have been pushed to seek solutions in recent years to read, analyze, and judge their objects of study with new tools and from other perspectives.

Regarding the timing of the research, we face a hurdle characteristic of the twenty-first century. We live in a scattered, fragmented, ephemeral time, typical of the contemporary culture, as Machado points out.

To this we must add, as George Steiner reminds us, the hypertrophy of technological and mathematical language —often used only in its superficial

aspects— to create the illusion that all knowledge is univocal, that it always has unique and exact meanings, without admitting discrepancies, contradictory or opposing arguments, or logical expositions (Machado, 2006, p. 125).

This leads us to turn our attention to the role of the humanities. We conduct research to explain ourselves, to understand ourselves and our environment. Seeking meaning in our daily lives is a task for the humanities, for art as the primal expression of myths. That is why it is necessary to conduct and disseminate research from social sciences and humanities. This helps «to foster critical thinking among the population» (Figuroa as cited in Gutiérrez, 2021). In times of pandemic, we also «need a humanistic vaccine, doses of philosophy, sociology, anthropology and economics to spark interest and raise awareness among the population» (Sierra, as cited in Gutiérrez, 2021) about complex problems such as «increased levels of suicide levels, frustration and domestic abuse, migration, the impoverishment...» (Gutiérrez, 2021).

Literary research

When we talk about research in literature, we must make it clear that our object of study is part of a very broad spectrum that we can call the literary phenomenon. But without a doubt, it is the literary work of art that generates the theoretical and critical ecosystem that makes us wonder about the author and their environment, the textual structure, the themes represented, or what happens to the reader when faced with a novel, a poem, etc. Like all research, humanistic research —and literary research in the case we are addressing— seeks to answer questions and build knowledge about an object of study.

Twenty-first-century Mexican literature is no stranger to the various social problems and as an object of knowledge it reveals answers to the inquiry into the problems represented there and their relationship with reality. In fact, art in general analyzes and criticizes, highlighting various cultural practices that denigrate human beings. But, although it seems obvious, we must ask ourselves whether art today fulfills a social function and what its role is. This is because we must not forget that the reality represented in literary works is purely intentional, that it has its physical basis in language, as Roman Ingarden points out. As close as it may seem, as “real” as it may seem, we only have a *habitus* of what we experience outside the work of art. In other words, it’s essential to remember that reality, no matter how vivid it may be, is a literary truth, not a historical or social one. However, as Paul Ricoeur affirms, as a metaphorical truth, the reality of the work points to our reality; this second-degree reference provokes us, makes us identify with it and experience it as if it were real. In *Aesthetic Experience*

and *Literary Hermeneutics*, Hans Robert Jauss discusses the roles of identification that arise at the moment of reading, during the aesthetic experience. This experience of «as if» is what makes it possible to understand our reality and ourselves through art, as Gadamer points out in *Truth and Method*.

The representation of reality and the pandemic in three contemporary Mexican female authors

To reflect on the mechanisms of representing reality in Mexican literature, we approach, by way of example, three contemporary Mexican authors who have written about the pandemic and during the pandemic. Although texts by other authors are mentioned, our focus is on a brief but significant sample by Daniela Tarazona, Karla Montalvo, and Guadalupe Nettel.

Daniela Tarazona

Letters from Lockdown (March 2020) marks the epistolary genre as the space from which Daniela Tarazona will open a dialogue not only with her interlocutor Karla Zárte, but also with others, with readers, and with her otherness that emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second installment of the exchange between the Mexican authors is imbued with vampire allusions and the extraterrestrial world, in a clear inclination toward the strange that touches on the narrative and the real.

The correspondence enlivens a genre that is already dead and buried on paper, at least in our culture, and not precisely because of the technological boom, but because of Mexico's terrible postal service. However, these letters are not sent by mail; they are published in a magazine, *Nexos*, even with a certain fear of exposing themselves to other readers, as Karla Zárte says.

The epistles of both writers that chose one another for this experiment “soften” the isolation of confinement due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In her letter dated March 30, 2020, Daniela Writes: «Have you gotten your results yet? Please let me know. They say that a high percentage will be infected with the virus, although that doesn't mean they will get sick. Will we be infected or will we get sick?» (Tarazona, 2020). The tests, vaccines, the causes of the disease are discussed amid the uncertainty caused by misinformation. The first thing that emerges from the representation of the pandemic is the cause of its origin, which takes on a fantastical tone. Overpopulation of the planet seems to trigger everything else. «There are too many of us on the planet, Karla. Anything could trigger a pandemic. Bat poop or rotten grapes from a vineyard» (Tarazona, 2020). Bat excrement shows, on the one hand, the scatological nature of the world represented and, on the other, the intrigue of the strange and terrifying, such as the realm of the vampire.

Bat excrement is part of the breath of anyone sick who contracts the virus. It's an exaggeration, I know, but bats feed on blood, and our reality has been vampirized. So let's stay at home, unless we want to start sleeping upside down tomorrow [...] A hug from Dracula. Daniela (Tarazona, 2020).

Karla has the test, but it is not enough to overcome the anemic mood of the pandemic. Contagion, the fear of being different, entering that strange world, becomes vital. It is the edge of madness that gives way to stigmatization. Here we see how the problem represented concerns multiple disciplines, as it touches on aspects of physical and mental health, emotions, feelings, and reasoning that disrupt the way we perceive the world.

Dear Daniela with a D for Dracula, thank you for asking: the email with the test results has arrived. I open it, I don't open it [...] I can tell you: I'm not infected with the dreaded virus. This does not reassure me, and I am still worried. To feed my paranoia and delusions, there's a final note: a negative result does not rule out the possibility of infection (Zárate, 2020).

In this space, we see how Daniela recognizes herself and is recognized by the "D" for Dracula, because although irony is the motive behind the representation, the identity label works in this transformation of individuals. The reference and meta-reference thus become a recurring literary strategy, more so than at other times in Mexican literature. Everything takes on new meaning, becoming associated with other texts, authors, moments, illnesses, circumstances. In her letter, Karla reveals the multiple connections between the COVID-19 pandemic and other pandemics and moments in history: «I don't know if we have returned to the plague of Athens, to the scurvy of the Middle Ages, or if we have reached a future with brain chips and chemical weapons controlled by *cyborgs*» (Zárate, 2020).

Daniela defined this time of the pandemic as transformative, not only in terms of life, but also death. Yes, death changes; this *modus operandi* of death leaves the living shaken, making them feel its sharp edge due to the overwhelming nature of its actions.

Now that times have changed, we might think that death takes on new meanings. Isn't it amazing that death, illness, and love are always something new? That's why, I think, quarantine is more shocking than the fall of a medium-sized meteorite. (Tarazona, 2020)

What we see in this impact of illness and death is being stripped of all the aspects that previously defined them as human. Karla highlighted What we see in this impact of illness and death is a being stripped of all the

needs and desires in the face of the restrictions imposed on life: « We need flavors, smells, textures, lips without masks, flesh, skin, caresses, and glances without screens in between. Today I am content with cyber affection and three-dimensional French kisses» (April 5, 2020). But the fear and uncertainty, the nostalgia caused by the involuntary separation we see in *Letters from Lockdown*, gave way to doubt and courage; political criticism of the pandemic emerged.

Outside the fictional space of the letters, Daniela Tarazona shows what remains as the effects of this pandemic; that is, the disarticulation of the subject:

In the realm of the new normal, personal data matters little. In other words, since we have become products to be bought and sold in digital life, surveillance has focused on our bodies. Our sweaty, salivating organisms, our mucus, are now the only source of truth. The cells that do matter, the abrasions that always tell the truth. The gene, the spit, the unique information of living bodies (Tarazona, 2021).

The third table shows the different foreign investments through international companies in the three cities. Singapore is the leader in this indicator, and Querétaro, although every year more international companies of different branches open in the city, still does not reach high levels of foreign capital.

Karla Montalvo

Karla Montalvo, who chose to share her texts on a blog and directly referred to her writing as *Words of the Pandemic* on the digital platform, built a link between the pandemic and art, based on everyday life: cooking, wearing pajamas. In her text “Slippers,” we see the notion of illness not only physically, but also as another dimension that consumes us spiritually. Montalvo described the atmosphere, the feelings that arise inside and outside the body.

Today I stayed in bed most of the time. An ordinary time. Fleeting. Insignificant. A time of oblivion, in a way. A time of crumpled tissues, glasses of water, *tylenol*. But with my slippers on, so I can rest and allow my body to suffer the virus, its final ravages before it leaves. That's on the outside. On the inside, what my body is suffering is part of the process of returning to the ordinary (Montalvo, 2020).

The empty time of so long not being, settles in the subject; that time that weighs like filth also takes hold of objects, the environment, houses. In the kitchen, the stove moves the narrator. «I confess that during this pandemic I have let my stove become filthy beyond belief. More than once. Never in my

life had I reached such dishonorable, such unworthy extremes» (Montalvo, July 17, 2020). In “Times of Pandemic: The Screen,” Montalvo alluded to the representation of the body and the role that technology has taken on in our daily lives. The literary essay allowed reflection on what the pandemic implies as a disease spread by the body, as in “Slippers”. Similarly, the inhabited space was observed in “Stove,” and we can think about its scope in work and technology in “Screen.”

The screen in quarantine may be the limit of self-representation. Its extreme experience. It forces us to realize that we are not the image it reproduces we are not totalized or exhausted in that frame, in that face. The experience of the screen-death, of the screen-madness, is also a return to the unfinished self, prone to change, to flow. A living self. A living me. Vertiginously alive (July 2, 2020).

The unfinished, the void, the madness, are added to the neo-existentialist vision of everyday death. But death is no longer intimate, it is public, it is displayed. Death is long, agonizing. In this time of pleonasm, Montalvo found himself surprised by the only way out, writing that promises to be long: «This essay will be long. A warning so that you don't end up like me with the lockdown: I imagined it would last three or four months, and we've already been at it for nine, and there are days when I thought I had reached my limit» (Montalvo, January 7, 2021).

In *Times of Pandemic*, Montalvo presented a meta-writing; there, the act of writing is an essential activity. During confinement, the body is not inhabited because life remains outside, suspended. There is an I, a Me, who desires it, who thinks of life as something external that will resume at a given moment. But life is interrupted by confinement, and confinement, which is no longer known to be voluntary or involuntary, has lost its limits.

During the first months I put my life on hold. As lockdown unfolded and imposed its routine, its different way of working and living in spaces, my life was outside, waiting for me to pick it up right where I had left off. The lockdown was a pause; it wasn't going to last long, and every night I could watch — even with genuine interest — the conference on the pandemic (Montalvo, January 7, 2021).

Confinement is the motive behind the unfinished. Additionally, it became symbolic of a gestation of emptiness when the writer refers to the waiting period, which up to that point had been nine months. Those nine months that “normally” concern the new life that will arrive with hope, here become madness as hope is lost, boundaries are blurred. The author states: « Nine months later, it would be crazy of me to believe that I will pick up

my life where I left off » (Montalvo, January 7, 2021). Because lockdown is no longer seen as a pause, unlike previous minor confinements, which were viewed almost as a break. In this part, as Rivera Garza stated, there is a forced landing. In the waiting we transform ourselves, we begin to spin around, seeing that there is no way out. The life that we believed was outside, after all those months, is now sought within, recognized as part of the illness. « It is here, tired of being forced to change course so radically. The pandemic is part of it, with its danger, with the suffering it has brought to so many people, and with the lockdown dragging on and on » (Montalvo, January 7, 2021).

For Montalvo, confinement controls new, intimate, threatening confinements. On the one hand, it is the mechanism that pushes us toward a new life dominated by fear of the other, as Jorge Volpi also notes; and on the other, the uncertainty of the ghostly brings a mysterious, fantastical dimension to this new life.

At this point, confinement is not a matter of walls; it is a matter of limits. Even those who go out and party and hug each other, are they really not confined? Even if they don't believe in the coronavirus, the coronavirus is real. And it even mutates. A friend who has to go out to work receives news of people dying from COVID and lives with a doctor, suddenly overcome with emotion, she told me, I feel surrounded by death. Another lockdown. Of a different kind. And one without being able to hug (Montalvo, January 7, 2021).

The micro-lockdowns mentioned by Montalvo give rise to small bubbles that seem to get lost in the new everyday life, anchored in nostalgia, in memories, in brief desires dampened by the urgency of being, of saving oneself, of confining oneself from head to toe. For Montalvo (2020), the time of the pandemic inaugurates lockdowns within the lockdown. But the pandemic also led us to new rhythms, after the forced landing and the false delight of recess that turned into suspense. Now there is a staggering, grinding acceleration.

I believe that the pandemic has not brought us a time of contemplation, as Rita Segato calls it. On the contrary, productivity has subjected us with greater intensity. It would be very easy, as the protagonist of *Kindred* noted, to end up sleeping in our uniforms, just like Gregorio Samsa's father does. We must imagine ways out. Draw lines of flight, as Deleuze and Guattari would say. Smell the ingredients we use to prepare our food. (Montalvo, January 7, 2021)

Guadalupe Nettel

In addition to writing about the pandemic herself, Guadalupe Nettel compiled a book in which various writers leave their mark in the form of a diary. There, we find texts by Cristina Rivera Garza, for whom the pandemic has meant an emergency brake for humanity. With this metaphor, which indicates the extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rivera showed that we must be conscious of our relationship with the environment. In this case, the voice of the *Diary* lent greater veracity to the author's demand.

The pandemic is not a heaven. Much less a time of peace. We have certainly come to a screeching halt, and although it is clear that the hand that pulled the brake is a human hand —climate change and the alteration of terrestrial ecologies are the very form of the savage capitalocene— it is less clear whether that brake will be enough to transform an economic system that, in its quest to produce the greatest possible profit, has systematically devastated the Earth. (Rivera, as cited in Nettel, 2020, p. 73)

The author agreed with Jorge Volpi, for whom metaphors of illness have been triggered by incarceration and the regimented, extremely controlled life of these times. Fear, panic, and mistrust have taken hold of humanity. Thus, we live with “the specter of the viral apocalypse” (Volpi, as cited in Nettel, 2020, p. 12). We are a society in a coma, as activities that define even culture have become non-essential.

In this regard, apparently literature is not relevant, because it does not offer a solution to any problem, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. So why write? We could say that it is to survive, to comfort. «That is the comforting function of narrative, the reason why people tell stories and have told stories since the beginning of times» (García, as cited in Gutiérrez, 2021). And, precisely through literary criticism, we can realize and understand that today, as in other eras, art serves as a hinge between reality and identity-based hope, if we want to call it that. Narrating these extraordinary moments frees not only the writer, but also the reader. In what sense does art liberate? From what? Because it is a process that has to do with the liberation of feelings and emotions, which make a person hopeful. Art is not a medicine that we can take in small doses, as Jaime Sabines illustrates in his poem:

La luna se puede tomar a cucharadas
o como una cápsula cada dos horas.
Es buena como hipnótico y sedante
y también alivia
a los que se han intoxicado de filosofía (Sabines, 2017).

Art brings reconciliation to the human condition from a metaphorical platform. And literary criticism makes this reconciliation evident. In other words, what literary criticism resolves is a problem of knowledge. It makes evident what art makes evident. And Guadalupe Nettel and Jorge Volpi took on the task of making visible the terrible circumstances of humanity in this *Diary of the Pandemic*.

Given the impossibility of telling — or explaining — the total shock of the pandemic, we could at least break it down little by little. At the end of March 2020, Guadalupe Nettel and I began to search for witnesses who, from different parts of the world and from different perspectives, were willing to share with us one of their days during this extraordinary time (Volpi 2021, p. 24).

Diary of the Pandemic is something very personal, an intimate yet social record of a period in time, of something that concerns us, from a social perspective. It shows the need to turn our eyes toward the community, toward the diversity of voices that crowd together in times of emergency.

The work as a whole is a historical document about the fear of these years, a record of the unease we are experiencing. We are all entangled in the polyphony of voices. Nettel asserts that just as we continue to talk about World War II, a long time will pass, and the subject, the trauma of the pandemic, will remain in everyday narrative. *Diary of the pandemic* highlighted the need for reflection on society, reflecting global pain, death tolls, the spread of disease, the many ways in which we face death in the absence of a cure, and even the inability to bury the dead. « We don't know how many have died; we are left with the statistics. The tragedy is of unprecedented proportions» (Nettel, 2021). Nettel spoke of a suspended time in which she gradually realizes the transformation of human beings. Through her narrative, as readers we relive aspects of the pandemic, the initial circumstances, the uncertainty, the fear of fear, as she calls it.

The week before I went into quarantine was giddy. I had been living in a hurry, stressed out, for three years, and during those days I did so even more. I had the feeling that a big door was about to close, and before that happened, it was essential to deal with the most urgent matters, as I didn't know how long I would be isolated or what would happen next. During one of those last days of freedom, my aunt came to visit us. I remember that during lunch, she sneezed at the table and blew her nose with a paper napkin, which she then placed in front of her plate. No one was wearing masks yet but seeing her made my hair stand on end. Was it possible that she had been infected and would infect us all? That fear began to spread to my neighbors and colleagues at work. I felt guilty, but at the same time, I couldn't help it. I was not only afraid of contagion, but also afraid of my fear of others (Nettel, 2021, p. 259).

As with the COVID-19 pandemic, new Mexican literature depicts aspects of violence in its various forms, migration, and other intertwined problems in these turbulent times. Through literary criticism, we see how literary art reveals itself as a cog in the wheel of society. It is the hinge that allows access to that world through language, as Hans George Gadamer would say in *Truth and method*.

CONCLUSION

Twenty-first-century Mexican literature faces realities that generate change both in the media in which its ontological nature is inscribed (from innovations in print to digital, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) and in its structure (fragmentary, palimpsestic, hybrid) and themes (violence, war, confinement, disease). This represents feelings such as fear, uncertainty, anger, and despair, while projecting a fragmented identity. In art during the pandemic, reality is seen as something immediate, as if there were no mediation with words, as if language were the same violent reality it represents. All of this calls for new ways of conducting literary research, new ways of creating aesthetic distance to see ourselves and escape the harshness of the disease, of the diseases that surround us as an agonizing society. As today, reflection is closer to creation, and literary criticism must become creative, taking on roles that were previously marginalized. In this sense, literature in times of pandemic requires, more than ever, the critical eye of the reader as co-creator, because where the work takes shape, as Ingarden saw it, is also where the investigative work begins.

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