

Philosophical immunology and literary immune strategies

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The SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic directed general attention to issues of health and biological immunity. The global crisis it triggered also provoked inquiries of a different kind, concerning the role of the state and the competences of supranational institutions, the nature of freedom and the limits of democratic powers. The matter of individual immunology proved to be inextricably intertwined with socio-political problems that could be called issues of collective immunology.

This intertwining was often described by means of paradoxes. Judith Butler pointed out that the pandemic is a factor exacerbating social inequality, thereby worsening the situation of the elderly, as well as precarious and low-wage workers, while simultaneously highlighting the economic and social roles of these groups and the importance of invisible forms of social welfare¹. At the level of political governance, the virus was equated with a terrorist threat, which involved the suspension of many of the rights of liberal democracies. Giorgio Agamben saw the pandemic as a pretext for expanding biopolitical power and implementing new mechanisms of social control². Byung-Chul Han diagnosed the failure of liberal democracies and the triumph of the Asian state model, which enforced obedience and was more willing to use surveillance technologies³. In a more dialectical view, the pandemic was sometimes presented as a test for Western democracies. After all, citizens of liberal states expected resolve in their governments' management of the crisis, at the same time fearing restrictions on their freedoms. This contradiction gave rise to further paradoxes: as

¹ Judith Butler, "Capitalism Has Its Limits", Verso Blog 30.03.2020, <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4603-capitalism-has-its-limits>, accessed 11.03.2025.

² Giorgio Agamben, *Where Are We Now?: The Epidemic as Politics*, transl. by Valeria Dani (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

³ Han Byung-Chul, *The Palliative Society: Pain Today* (Cambridge-Oxford: Polity Press, 2021).

Ivan Krastev argued, COVID accelerated the deglobalization trend, triggered by the 2008-2009 crisis, while exposing the limits of renationalization; it provoked processes of national unity, simultaneously deepening pre-existing social divisions and inequalities⁴. It could also - or at least it should, according to Slavoj Žižek - not only expose the fragility of human life, the illusion of individualism and the weakness of capitalism in the face of danger, but also draw attention to the need for developing other patterns of collective action, new forms of social solidarity⁵.

Language games applied to describe these legal-economic and socio-political entanglements often referred to the vocabulary of the sciences of immunity. This is how the social pathology caused by the virus was described by Donatella Di Cesare. In her view, the introduction of the “rule of experts” was, in fact, the decreeing of a state of emergency, which reinforced the brutality of the capitalist system and resulted in social “suffocation” (as reflected in the metaphor of asphyxia). The resultant, unprecedented immunity logic, in the words of the “sovereign virus” theorist, further excluded the poor and vulnerable⁶. Let us note that even diagnoses that did not draw from the language of immunology - such as those cited above - can be easily reformulated in those terms. The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of biological organisms and community ties and made visible the subcutaneous system of tensions between the individual and the collective, the self and the alien, the friendly and the hostile - a system that permeates every domain of human activity and can be precisely described in the methodologies of immunity studies.

Dialectical adventures

As is generally known, immunology is the study of the body’s immune system, its structure and functioning, i.e., its ability to respond to pathogens (bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites, allergens, etc.). At another level, it also describes emergencies of the entire system, i.e., immune disorders, immunosuppression or autoimmune diseases. The transition from the diagnoses of the biological and medical sciences to the domain of philosophy does not, of course, happen by mechanically copying a system of concepts or ordering schemes; this is an attempt to outline similar perspectives, to transfer techniques for capturing and problematizing phenomena, to sensitize to the peculiar dynamics of change. Central to philosophical immunology are issues familiar to (not only modern) political thought, such as the self-determination of individuals, the cohesiveness of social groups, exclusions and antagonisms. These are reformulated by means of a specific vocabulary that is based on an endless dialectic, and imposes an anti-essentialist approach, preventing static approaches. Moreover, these issues are extrapolated to other areas of thought - from anthropology to cultural studies or the sciences of art and literature.

Following from its etymology, the dialectic of obligation and lack thereof is the primary one. The Latin word *munus* meant obligation, service, debt or gift, while *immunus* describes exemption from these obligations. In the words of Roberto Esposito, perhaps the most important thinker of this trend,

⁴ Iwan Krastew, *Nadeszło jutro. Jak pandemia zmienia Europę* [Tomorrow has come. How the pandemic is changing Europe] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2020).

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemia! COVID-19 trzęsie światem* [Pandemic! COVID-19 is shaking the world] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Relacja, 2020).

⁶ Donatella Di Cesare, *Un virus souverain. L’asphyxie capitaliste* (Paris: La Fabrique Editions, 2020).

insofar as the members of the *communitas* are bound by the same law, the same obligations or gifts to be given (these are the meanings of *munus*), *immunis* is the one who is free from them or exempt from them, who has no obligations to the other and can thus preserve their intact substance of the subject, being master of themselves⁷.

Thus, the poles that determine the pendulum movement of immunization processes create, on the one hand, boundless submission to law and duty, complete melting into the community, and on the other hand, the severance of all collective ties or neutralization of their impact, the achievement of complete inbreeding and autonomy. They are unattainable, and approaching each of them risks upsetting the state of unstable imbalance (deregulation of the collective bond, dissociation of the individual self). Pendulum movement by no means denotes simple diachrony, for example, in a pattern of alternation. Esposito presents this permanent, irremovable tension in terms of a “perfect co-implication of the two concepts,” which

precludes the possibility of a simple historical succession, assuming the succession of one after the other and the replacement of the original community (through its transgression or loss) by the individual, society or freedom, depending on the optimistic or pessimistic assumptions of some philosophy of history⁸.

Community forces one to go beyond what is one’s own. As an expropriating force, it threatens the individual and blurs their boundaries, forcing them to turn toward others: “it exposes everyone to contact, and to – a potentially dangerous – infection from others”⁹. At the same time, it is a prerequisite for the constitution of the self, since this process does not mean locking oneself into what is idiomatic and idiosyncratic but negotiating autonomy through the renewal of conflict and the tension it creates. The Italian philosopher sums up this dialectical process in these words:

If the former [*communitas*] commits individuals to something that pushes them outside of themselves, the latter [*immunitas*] rebuilds their identity, protecting them from risky proximity to that which is different from them, freeing them from any obligations to which they are subject, and locking them back into the husk of their subjectivity. Where *communitas* opens, exposes, and expels the individual to the outside, releasing them toward their exterior, *immunitas* brings them back to themselves, locks them anew into their skin, and, eliminating what is outside, directs externality inward. After all, what else is immunization if not a preventive internalization of the external, its neutralizing appropriation?¹⁰

Let us try to list the consequences of such thinking in a community. It leads one to abandon traditional conceptions of the social contract – as argued provocatively by Giorgio Agamben or Jean-Luc Nancy¹¹ – and even to consider *communitas* as an entity that is as necessary as it is impossible, relatively “melancholic” (where melancholy means the source difference that “separates the existence

⁷ Roberto Esposito, *Pojęcia polityczne. Wspólnota, immunizacja, biopolityka* [Political concepts. Community, immunization, biopolitics], transl. by Katarzyna Burzyk et al. (Kraków: Universitas, 2015), 69.

⁸ Esposito, *Pojęcia polityczne*, 70.

⁹ Esposito, *Pojęcia polityczne*, 83.

¹⁰ Esposito, *Pojęcia polityczne*, 84.

¹¹ Greg Bird, *Containing Community. From Political Economy to Ontology in Agamben, Esposito, and Nancy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016).

of the community from its essence”¹²). Immunization and communization are forces with opposite vectors affecting a perpetually dangling, collective body, which is never identical with itself.

The self/non-self distinction is - as in biological immune systems - a necessary element in establishing and defending communal rights and interests. Hence, the inevitable consequence of the formation of *communitas* is projecting the other/stranger and sometimes moving them to the position of the enemy. Exclusion, stigmatization, hateful rejection and elimination turn out to be a potential effect of the constitution of the community's exterior. Esposito depicts these processes in terms proposed by Carl Schmitt, where politics is the domain of antagonism, a renewed division into friends and enemies, which is a condition of state sovereignty. However, the Italian thinker shifts the emphasis: he recognizes hostility as a systemic product, resulting from the logic of immunization, from the work of defense mechanisms which they set in motion and which recognize threats and respond to them. He acknowledges that this leads to the exclusion of individuals and groups and the strengthening of biopolitical power¹³, but does not claim that different practices of politics are impossible. The politics of immunization may lead to violence and war, but it is possible to develop an alternative conception of community. Schmitt's theory of politicality seems insufficient, and his critique of liberalism needs to be taken up and moved in a different direction: individualism, designed to fully autonomize the subject, isolates the subject against risk and alienation, but leads to alienation and weakens social ties. It is necessary to move away from purely negative categories, to think of *communitas* as an open entity, to allow individuals to function outside the ideology of self-sufficiency, in overt relationality and interdependence¹⁴.

Neutralizations and complications

A special (and particularly interesting) case are autoimmune diseases, in which the body's immune system recognizes - rightly or wrongly - danger and begins to act to its own detriment. This is an example of a paradoxical intertwining of stability and change: the desire to defend the status quo triggers a mobilization that changes the basic parameters of the entire system and turns out to be self-destructive. However, it also seems important to maintain a sense of the dynamic struggle of opposites when thinking about the excesses of hyperprotection. Transgressing the dialectic often results in a monolithic and static view, as in the case of closed system thinkers like Jean Baudrillard and Byung-Chul Han.

The author of *La Transparence du mal* [*The transparency of evil*] focuses on the phenomena of over-prevention, or hyper-immunization, which, in his view, ultimately leads to the abolition of defense mechanisms. The Specter of the Same¹⁵, circling over the globalized world, announces the risk of self-destruction. The social body of Western countries is destroying its own defense mechanisms by failing to expose itself to the virus of otherness. Cultural homogenization and

¹²Esposito, *Pojęcia polityczne*, 39.

¹³See Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, transl. by Timothy C. Campbell (Lanham: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

¹⁴See Roberto Esposito, *Politics and Negation. Towards an Affirmative Philosophy*, transl. by Zakiya Hanafi (Cambridge: Polity 2019).

¹⁵Jean Baudrillard, *Przejrzystość zła: esej o zjawiskach skrajnych* [*The transparency of evil: an essay on extreme phenomena*], transl. by Sławomir Królak (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Sic!, 2009), 74.

the intensification of mechanisms of disinfection and sterilization give birth to new pathologies, of which terrorism remains a symptom, but the basic threat seems to be devouring its own cells, stunting development and growth. A catastrophic vision of an imploding system was developed by Byung-Chul Han, a philosopher of excessive immunization which leads to the disappearance of otherness and turns into a terror of positivity. According to the author of *The Burnout Society*, the ultimate triumph of globalization is the moment of utter aestheticization of difference and the blocking of the vitalizing powers of negation of negation. Infections, or pathogen threats from outside, are replaced by diseases of surplus and overload, or infarctions.

The new violence of positivity, signaled by exhaustion, does not provoke any defensive reaction, and the primary threat is “manifestations of neuronal violence, which is not viral, because it cannot be reduced to any immunological negativity”¹⁶. Both approaches propose holistic and monistic visions¹⁷; they similarly disarm the tension arising on the lines of the individual-the collective and the same-the other¹⁸. Thus, they neutralize the problematic potential offered by dialectical variants of philosophical immunology.

There are, however, complications prompting not so much the abolition as the sublimation of the game of differences. The paradigm based on the our/ foreign distinction has been in crisis for a variety of reasons - the impetus has also come from biological sciences. New research has prompted a reformulation of the old concept of the immune self. On the one hand, it has been discovered that the autoimmune response is an important part of the body's physiology, and on the other hand, that the recognition of harmless foreign bodies as part of the body remains important for maintaining integrity and health¹⁹. Autoimmunity and tolerance have challenged many “obvious truths”, such as the anatomical distinctiveness of the organism (which turns out to be part of a symbiotic system) or the constancy of defensive reflexes (which do not include “beneficial” viruses and parasites). In the new model, the immune system combines protection, repair and development. It not only protects from potential threats but also builds and cleanses the body and maintains internal homeostasis²⁰. Without encapsulating the continuous (synthesis-free) dialectical process, such an approach better captures the difference inherent in all identity.

It is worth noting that the modern understanding of biological immunity emerged in connection with changes in political and social thinking. The concept of immunity originally had a legal-political meaning, describing, as I have already pointed out, exemption from social obligations (especially taxes and military service), so it first referred to the social body and only later to the physical body. Medicine assimilated this way of thinking, contributing to the individualization of the body, i.e., to conceiving of it as a self-sufficient system that must defend itself against foreign

¹⁶Byung-Chul Han, *Społeczeństwo zmęczenia i inne eseje* [Burnout society and other essays], transl. by Rafał Pokrywka, Michał Sutowski (Warszawa: Krytyka Polityczna, 2022), 23.

¹⁷Inge Mutsaers, *Immunological Discourse in Political Philosophy. Immunisation and its Discontents* (London, New York: Routledge, 2016), 97–101.

¹⁸It is central to Jacques Derrida's reflection on hospitality and autoimmunology. See Michał Kłosiński, *Ratunkiem jest tylko poezja. Baudrillard – Teoria – Literatura* [Only poetry can save us. Baudrillard – Theory – Literature] (Warszawa: Instytut Badań Literackich PAN, 2015), 208–227.

¹⁹Bartłomiej Świątczak, „System odpornościowy, ja immunologiczne. Wprowadzenie” [“The immune system, the immune self. An introduction”], *Avant* 1 (2012): 216–217.

²⁰Thomas Pradeu, *Philosophy of Immunology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019): 9–11; Mutsaers, 48–50.

elements. This approach remained consistent with the modern idea of individual sovereignty and liberal individualism²¹. Questioning the latter beliefs, in turn, dovetailed with challenging the immunological understanding of the body - the fiction of a separate system struggling against an external threat. In both domains, there was a parallel shift away from the concept of the monadic subject, abandoning the logic of confrontation and military rhetoric, and instead adopting a more relational approach that considered the interconnectedness of the organism and the environment, as well as the individual and the collective. In this way, the modern paradigm of immunization, which can be characterized by the dispositions of sovereignty, ownership and freedom, or, to put it briefly, self-ownership and free disposal of property, started to crumble²².

This has a crucial impact on redefining the concept of subject. Since a clear division into “one’s own” and “foreign” is disappearing in favor of a tangle of functions and dependencies, it is impossible to distinguish a unified bionomy of a living organism. Alfred I. Tauber argues that

from this ecological point of view, there cannot be a narrowed self-defining entity referred to as the self. Thus, if one refers to the overall ecology of the immune system - a broader context that includes universes perceiving and acting both internally and externally - boundaries must remain open to allow free exchange between the host and its environment²³.

The concept of *ego* must give way to the term “self”. The philosophy of the subject thus names a specific form of self-referral - one that accepts its own opacity, non-sovereignty and entanglement; one that resists the compulsion to discursiveness and self-explanation²⁴. The philosophy of the natural sciences depicts the resistant self as a process, a continuous elaboration of its own definition based on dynamic patterns that emerge in the process of defense/preventive attack²⁵. Tauber himself proposes a broad spectrum of these empowerments, the so-called punctual-elusive continuum. Its boundaries are defined by the purely hypothetical (if not impossible) punctual self and the perfectly ungraspable self²⁶, and in between is an infinite multiplicity of practices and techniques of the self.

Immunological plots

The paradox of immunization is that it is meant to protect the community, but it can also weaken it. In addition to the risk of confronting a stranger/enemy, there is a threat of excessive isolation, which induces stagnation. “What protects the individual and collective body is also what prevents it from developing. What is more, it is that which, beyond a certain point, destroys

²¹Ed Cohen, *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

²²Mikołaj Ratajczak, „Poza paradygmat immunizacji: biopolityka w projekcie filozoficznym Roberta Esposito” [„Beyond the paradigm of immunization: biopolitics in Roberto Esposito’s philosophical project”], *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 3 (2011): 178.

²³Alfred I. Tauber, „Od immunologicznego ja do działania moralnego. Komentarze” [„From the immunological self to moral action. Commentaries”], *Avant* 1 (2012): 314.

²⁴Roma Sendyka, *Od kultury „ja” do kultury „siebie”. O zwrotnych formach w projektach tożsamościowych* [From the culture of „I” to the culture of „self”. On reflexive forms in identity projects] (Kraków: Universitas, 2015), 14–18.

²⁵Maira Howes, „The Self of Philosophy and the Self of Immunology”, *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 42 (1998): 127.

²⁶Alfred I. Tauber, *The Immune Self: Theory or Metaphor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 135–136.

it”²⁷. Because of this healing-poisoning power, one can venture a claim that the logic of immunization is *phármakon*. Violation of the fragile dialectic of constancy and change leads either to neolatry, i.e., unbridled worship of novelty, or to neophobia. Change, as A. David Napier, writes

is necessarily a dangerous process. Not only can society, as many intellectuals fear, control our actions with ruthless precision, it also attempts to limit continuous and unlimited transformation. In other words, inhibitory cultural tendencies exist not only to enslave us, but also to protect us from uncontrolled growth, which we can witness biologically in every tumor²⁸.

The stories of societies are arranged in tales of disequilibrium or the dominance of one member of this opposition of stagnation and death or evolution and rapid transformation. What has been outlined above in strictly synchronic terms, when transposed to a timeline, becomes the basis of immunological plots. Diachronic depictions are proposed by almost every thinker cited here. They usually portray Western modernity as an era of limiting social mutations and a growing inability to contact the other, to replace communication with confrontation. This perspective explains both the triumphs of nationalisms and political extremisms, and the growing obsession with security, in the name of which individual freedoms are confiscated. Esposito even proposes forgetting traditional characterizations of *modernitas*, such as “secularization” or “rationalization,” and presents the history of the West in terms of the progresses of immunization. In their course, the unit becomes an “absolute” individual (set apart from the collective and secured from relation to others), whereas *communitas* loses its sense-making powers. “Absolutism”, literally meaning detachment and uprooting, becomes the hidden destiny of the era²⁹.

The most interesting grand narrative, however, was constructed by a philosopher using the immunological vocabulary on his own terms. Peter Sloterdijk distinguished between three types of synchronized immunization systems: biological, socio-cultural and symbolic. “Above the automated and unconscious biological basis,” he writes in *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* [*You must change your life*], “rise mechanisms that help to cope with strangers and aggressors, and with random events and death, respectively,” that is, those that provide a sense of existential security and the relative permanence of the image of the world, “compensation for the obviousness of death and the transgenerational permanence of norms”³⁰. This is firstly about systems of solidarity (of the hospitality kind) and their extensions (legal systems), and secondly about religions and cultures³¹.

There is no room here to discuss the two elaborate contexts in which Sloterdijk’s immune reflection appears: the theory of anthropotechnics, i.e., the study of historically variable forms of human self-discipline and self-formatting practices, and the theory of spheres, those “forms of

²⁷Esposito, *Pojęcia polityczne*, 100.

²⁸A. David Napier, *The Age of Immunology. Conceiving a Future in an Alienating World* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 101–102.

²⁹Roberto Esposito, *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, transl. by Timothy C. Campbell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 12–13.

³⁰Peter Sloterdijk, *Musisz życie swe odmienić. O antropotechnice* [*You must change your life. On anthropotechnics*], transl. by Jarosław Janiszewski, Arkadiusz Żychliński (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2014), 14–15, 625.

³¹Peter Sloterdijk, *After God*, transl. by Ian Alexander Moore (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 191–192.

space equipped with an immune-systemic effect”³², protecting against external dangers, and taking on a wide variety of forms (from caves, houses and cities to nations, religious communities or shared worldviews). Let us just recall the immune plot as told by the philosopher. Modernity is supposed to become a period of catastrophe spread over centuries. The post-Enlightenment era proliferated rational explanations of the world, disenchanting it, which in immunological terms meant the over-compensation of symbolic (religious and metaphysical) systems. Their place was taken by pure externality, exposed by the processes of globalization (during which it turned out that we do not live inside the sphere, but on its surface). In the end, a comprehensive twilight of immunity happened. Sloterdijk depicts this twilight using a spherological vocabulary as the disintegration of social macrospheres, their pluralization and entering the “foam” stage; society turns into “an aggregate of microspheres of different sizes (couples, families, enterprises, associations)”³³. The task of philosophy is to study the cognitive, ethical and political consequences of this state of affairs, as well as to design possible actions. As for the latter, the author of *Die Verachtung der Massen* [*Contempt of the masses*] reiterates the call for a new “co-immune bill”, that is, balancing losses and communal gains³⁴, even calling for a reflexive co-immunization, that is, the establishment of a universal “macrostructure of global immunizations”³⁵.

In this perspective, applying above-cited conceptual games, I have recently tried to interpret Michel Houellebecq’s *Anéantir* [*Annihilation*]³⁶. Spherology, which can be read as a “genealogy of the sense of solidarity”³⁷, enables one to see the inherent sense of cooperation in various community practices, while at the same time highlighting everything that limits it or renders it ineffective. The French writer paints an evocative picture of a world in which co-fragility and co-isolation inhibit a sense of security and true interpersonal closeness. However, one could ask a more general question: what function does literature play in this arrangement? Does its role boil down to making epochal diagnoses (which would make it a kind of undogmatic symptomatology)? Or does it operate in yet another way? Belonging, along with other cultural practices, to the symbolic sphere, does it stimulate or weaken social immune mechanisms? Does it not itself weave great immune plots?

Literary strategies of resilience: six hypotheses

Let us state the following: the point here is neither to highlight works, concepts and currents inspired by crises of resilience (such as pandemics³⁸), nor to examine literature through a thematic key as representations of themes of collective health (this is especially true of science

³²Peter Sloterdijk, *Bulles. Sphères I*, transl. by Olivier Mannoni (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2002), 31.

³³Peter Sloterdijk, *Écumes. Sphérologie plurielle*, transl. by Olivier Mannoni (Paris: Hachette Littératures, 2002), 52.

³⁴Sloterdijk, *After God*, 192.

³⁵Sloterdijk, *Musisz życie swe odmienić*, 629.

³⁶Jerzy Franczak, „Komunikacja i koimmunizacja. Wokół Unicestwienia Michela Houellebecqa” [„Communication and co-immunization. On Michel Houellebecq’s *Annihilation*”], *Konteksty. Polska Sztuka Ludowa* 4 (2024): 42–49.

³⁷Przemysław Wiatr, Peter Sloterdijk – ćwiczenia z prowokacji [Peter Sloterdijk – exercise in provocation] (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2024), 123.

³⁸For example, Elizabeth Outka demonstrates, how the Spanish flu of 1918 r. influenced Modernist literature – Virginia Woolf’s and T.S. Eliot’s fragmentary essays are supposedly the products of pandemic fears. Elizabeth Outka, *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

fiction, but not only³⁹). This is not even about analyzing the interference of immunological and poetological discourses⁴⁰. This is about trying to reformulate the basic issues of literary studies in terms of this relatively new vocabulary.

Let us begin with the simplest of assertions: literature is one of the symbolic practices, which is part of a process pervading the entire social body; one which creates, (re)defines and revitalizes communities, while enabling the constitution of subjects. It takes an active part in the dialectic of immunization and communization, whose mutual negation is, as Esposito writes, “the source of all vitality, as both collectivities and individuals establish themselves by negating what negates them”⁴¹. Let us try to break down this process into movements with specific vectors and illustrate them with simple examples from modern literature.

1. Literature negates the collective in the name of the individual or negates the individual in the name of the collective

On the one hand we are dealing here with the discourse and practice of communal duties, or obligations - depending on the variant - to the nation, religious or civic community, ethnic group or social class. This involves the alternation of romantic and positivist attitudes, a shifting of emphasis, a remodeling of grand narratives, and a reformulation of political strategies. Nevertheless, the ethics of service and the depreciation of the individual prevail. This happens in heroic-insurgent, martyrdom and messianic narratives, as well as loyalist-socialist and revolutionary narratives, developed by both conservative modernism and the avant-garde. They are favored in periods of danger to the collective body, i.e., turmoil and war - the culmination of 20th-century Romanticism is simply the imposing language of messiahship - and weakened by moments of peace and social relaxation. This scheme is curiously complicated by the revolutionary-collectivist option, which maintains similar slogans (“the individual is nothing, the individual is nonsense!”) during periods of relative social order, yet, viewed in terms of class struggle.

On the other side are the fierce defenders of the individual, usually associated with high modernism, striving to uproot the individual from the bondage of social patterns of behavior, falsified values and inauthentic identities, crafted worldviews, collective beliefs and madness. This strategy of resilience is summarized in Witold Gombrowicz’s audacious project to “reassert oneself in the self against everything,” especially against an era that repeats “stern admonitions: you are nothing, forget yourself, live others”⁴². Notably, this defense of the individual forced a constant distancing from the expropriating forces - it is not a coincidence that having repeated the “I” four times, the author of *Dziennik* [Diary] takes to paging through the London press only to enter into an impassioned polemic with it. Endless war - this is the way of being of a subject shedding the communal *munus*.

³⁹Glyn Morgan, “New ways: the pandemics of science fiction”, *Interface Focus* 11 (2021); Ronald De Rooy, Monica Jansen, “Immunity and Community in Italian War Novels Set in Afghanistan”, *Configurations* 3 (2017): 373–392.

⁴⁰Huiming Liu thus described immunological plot lines in T.S. Eliot’s essays and postcolonial mutations of these issues in J.M. Coetzee’s works. See Huiming Liu, “Immunological Poetics and Postcolonial Echoes: Traversing the Medical Narratives From T.S. Eliot to J.M. Coetzee”, *Literature Compass* 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.70017>.

⁴¹Ratajczak, 177.

⁴²Witold Gombrowicz, *Testament. Rozmowy z Dominikiem de Roux* [Testament. Conversations with Dominic de Roux] (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2012), 98–99.

2. Literature stages paradoxes of double (multiple) negation

Each of the above-outlined movements can be described in terms of a double negation, i.e.: “in the name of the individual, literature negates the collective, which negates the individual,” etc. Somewhere in the background, there is a *regressus ad infinitum* (“...negates the individual, which negates the collective,” etc.), which is a sign of the unleashed game of opposites. The language of immunity which we rely on sensitizes us to this coupling, to its consequences and side effects. Attempts to subordinate the individual to the collective give rise to unconscious or denied emotions; aggression and self-aggression, grief and melancholy accompany mobilizations and metamorphoses, self-persuasion and self-love (when the mobilized self of today puts to death its incarnation of yesterday). Even in the most schematic works (e.g., Tyrtaic lyricism, social realism or anti-socialist realism) they are present as symptoms.

Regardless of the intertwining of these contradictory affects, the negation of that which negates that which negates, etc., builds up a perspective of duplicate reflections and multiplies, on a *mise en abyme* basis, the image of that which was to be annihilated. The same applies to literature, which presents itself as an anthropology or politics of the strong subject, and which reveals a deep dependence on its negativity - if only on that national-religious community that tries to “kneel” the wayward individual (as in Kazimierz Brandys’ *Wariacje pocztowe* [*Postal variations*]), and which turns out to be indispensable for self-poetic gestures⁴³.

Literature thus keeps alive many themes and “cursed problems”, not only by deliberately addressing them, but because it allows them to persist as dialectical background. They are present *per negationem* on multiple floors of immunization and communization. The meaning of the work thus seems difficult to stabilize - in a critique of the “posthumus births of a bygone era”, the negated image of the maladjusted or hostile individual may prevail over praise of the collective, and the fieriest apology of the anarchized individual may be underpinned by a longing for a (negated) communal horizon. Of course, there is no need to reduce all of this to symptoms, and it need not always be about a simple juxtaposition of the singular and the plural - literature is, after all, one of the most subtle tools for a deliberate problematization of the psychic and social worlds.

3. Literature shows or provokes complications and neutralizations of immunization/communication processes

Generalizing from the above-mentioned arguments, one might point to two variants of dissolution of the individual in the collective: the utopian and the dystopian one, and the way in which they are connected by an inverted symmetry with two variants of the individual’s struggle for their rights. Utopian depictions (good collectivity absorbing unhappy and alienated individuals) are accompanied by pejorative depictions of the individual refusing to enter the collective, while dystopian depictions (evil collectivity destroying the happiness and autonomy of individuals) are accompanied by positively valorized images of the individual fighting for

⁴³Siege can also be considered a metaphor for the condition of the individual. A simplified version is exemplified by the struggle between Scheme and Sensitive Exception, shown in *Kropka nad Ypsilonem* [*Dot on Ypsilon*]. Notably, the destruction of one is linked to the annihilation of the other, which in Edward Stachura’s strange allegorical poem is rendered with the figures of the atomic apocalypse.

freedom and the right to self-determination. Nevertheless, against the temptation of such chiasmatic figures, literature excels at constructing complex, asymmetrical or unstable systems.

Of course, what is meant here are not just utopian or dystopian works in the generic sense (although it is not hard to find examples of highlighting maximum ambivalence, from Stanisław Lem's *Powrót z gwiazd* [*Return from the stars*] or Aldous Huxley's *The island* to Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy), but a proliferation of questions that disrupt the clarity of divisions and criteria of valuation. Is the social body compact or dispersed? Singular or plural? Homogeneous or multivariant? Does it obliterate the difference that individuals bring, or does it incorporate it and undergo change itself? Or does this relationship fall outside the schemes of whole and part, alienation and disalienation? Similar complications arise in thinking and writing the subject. Even the above-quoted beginning of *Dziennik*, despite the strength of the subject's assertion, gets caught up in paradoxes of deixis (what subject is indicated by the pronoun "I"?), hypostasis (is there an essence of this subject?) and iterability (is it tense-sensitive, is Tuesday's "I" the same as Monday's?). The "I" problematized by literature often turns out to be entangled, relational and decentralized, now oscillating towards the "self", now approaching the edge of disappearance. This happens to the accompaniment of doubt: is the individual not a function of the social? Is it not the result of disciplinary actions, the sum of internalized orders and prohibitions? What if it constitutes an abstract entity, a hanger-on for roles and identities? We should add that this applies as much to social roles as to gender roles: "immunity-as-defense", operating on the principle of autoimmunity, manifests itself in the mechanisms of producing femininity and masculinity, setting in motion a system of differences and creating threatening forms of queerness (like the discourse of effeminacy⁴⁴).

Complicating the relationship that philosophical immunology places at the heart of social life leads to significant corrections. For example, the self-determination of the subject turns out to be contingent and highly problematic, while freedom becomes a unifying, de-individuating power. For Esposito, it appears "as a relation and in relation: the exact opposite of individual autonomy and self-sufficiency"⁴⁵. It is "the inner exterior of the community - that part of it which resists immunization, does not identify with itself, remains open to difference"⁴⁶. What the thinker includes in general formulae remains the matter of literary reconstructions and deconstructions. Complication turns into neutralization when the play of opposites endures for a moment, when the tension between the members of a dichotomy is subject to reduction or momentary invalidation - if only through inverting patterns, generating incongruence, and exploiting various forms of comedy.

The stakes of fictional, textual and linguistic games are higher than establishing the individual in opposition to the collective or reinforcing the collective at the expense of the individual, and even higher than gaining insight into their life-giving nexus, i.e., the dynamics of multiple creation through negation. Complicating the picture of this relationship leads to the displacement of oppositions

⁴⁴Tomasz Kaliściak presents his biopolitical project of masculinity in these categories. See his *Płeć Pantofla. Odmienne męskości w polskiej prozie XIX i XX wieku* [The gender of the henpecked ones. Non-dominant masculinities in Polish prose of the 19th and 20th centuries] (Warszawa, Katowice: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich PAN, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016), 11–19.

⁴⁵Esposito, *Pojęcia polityczne*, 87–88.

⁴⁶Esposito, *Pojęcia polityczne*, 93.

(own/others', created/imposed, authentic/fake, private/public) preserved by other social discourses. In this way, literature becomes a form of action enmeshed in the fluctuations of social systems.

4. Literature negotiates its immunology with systemic response mechanisms or it confronts them

Resilience has been described outside the thematic key as a metaphorical space for literary self-reflection. Johannes Türk noted that many writers (from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Marcel Proust and beyond) viewed writing in terms of a protective inoculation; on this basis, he defined literature as a communal immune institution that "offers forms that expose and provoke conflicts in order to provide protection against them"⁴⁷. In doing so, he came close to the well-known view of rhetoric as a form of resistance, where original communication strategies can protect individuals and groups from manipulation or propaganda⁴⁸. However, it is worth expanding this kind of thinking beyond the model of symbolic prevention.

Such an experiment was proposed by Przemysław Czapliński, who combined reasoning in terms of "social hormones" with immunological concepts and distinguished different types of collective immunity, as well as different types of literary interventions in different socio-political systems. The immunology of totalitarianism achieves homeostasis at the price of society's destruction, while dystopian visionaries warn of the dangers of a politics of happiness (Aldous Huxley) or hatred (George Orwell), which eliminate the ability to fight and to build bonds, respectively. The immunology of liberal democracy - especially in the brief inter-episode of the "end of history" - turns into immunosuppression, as there are no clear threats in a world transformed into a job market and a giant amusement park. Neoliberal immunology, on the other hand, transfers the basic mechanisms of a society of discipline to the model of a society of achievement; it turns orders and prohibitions into incentives and opportunities. In the latter two systems literature (drawing on tradition, taking up historical utopias and strategies of revolt) seeks a new type of hormonal and immune balance. Examples cited by the researcher illustrate the thesis that "for democracy not to be devoured by capitalism and/or turn into authoritarianism, it is necessary to weaken voluntarily an individual immune system and make room for social foreign bodies"⁴⁹. Literature attempts to transform the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, to change the rules for counting minority groups and communities of resistance in the communitarian calculus.

This seems to coincide with Donna Haraway's recognition, in which she views the contemporary immune system as a kind of biopolitical map that enables self-recognition in a network of social differences, that is, "maintaining the boundaries of what can be considered the "self" and the "other" in key spheres of norm and pathology"⁵⁰. The areas of interest for us, which represent a privileged field of exploration for literature, span beyond the pattern of

⁴⁷Johannes Türk, „L'Immunité de la littérature: Introduction", *Acta fabula* 7 (2024), <http://www.fabula.org/acta/document18395.php>.

⁴⁸Charles Paine, *The Resistant Writer: Rhetoric as Immunity, 1850 to the Present* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

⁴⁹Przemysław Czapliński, „Kłopoty z równowagą. O immunologii, polityce i francuskiej literaturze XXI wieku" [„Problems with balance. On immunology, politics and 21st century French literature"], *Teksty Drugie* 4 (2024): 120.

⁵⁰Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 204.

simple confrontation. For, as the philosopher writes, resilience can be seen in terms of shared specificities. This umbrella term encapsulates “semi-permeable selves, capable of interacting with others (human and non-human, internal and external), but always with specific consequences; situated possibilities and impossibilities of individuation and identification; partial mergers and threats”⁵¹. In this frame, literature is not so much a representation or diagnosis as a specific social activity, jointly responsible for creating patterns of being and ways and directions of action, shaping the collective imagination and drawing horizons of expectations.

Let us quote a simple example. If philosophical immunology defines culture as “a set of preventive measures (norms, laws, practices, exercises, rules, recommendations, etc.) whose task is to neutralize threats known to a given culture”⁵², then clearly literature takes part in pointing out and/or calling into existence these dangers. Even if it creates a future that is not coming - thus building a kind of counterproductive immune systems - one should remember that unrealized futures also affect the present. The perception of “today” is, after all, connected with the vision of tomorrow, “anticipated visions of the future,” as Justyna Tabaszewska writes, “shape our behavior in the present”⁵³. The gap between the anticipated future and the one that has occurred gives rise to active “affective differences”⁵⁴, but also those past futures that reside in the realm of fiction exist in the form of affective facts. “Every event that may have come, but which has not,” says the researcher after Brian Massumi, “leaves behind an unresolved excess. This excess shapes how we perceive the present, and with it, the past”⁵⁵. Literature can both support ontological power (ontopower), with its affective mobilization, prevention and pre-emption⁵⁶, as well as attempt to disarm it, but whether it aligns itself with dominant immune systems or works against (in spite of) them, it remains an essential and active part of them.

5. Literature creates and strengthens relationships between resilience, responsibility, responsiveness and narratability

The way literature operates can be linked as much to healing (reworking of traumas) as to a preventive support of resilience. Tabaszewska suggests treating it as “a space for exercising and strengthening collective resilience”⁵⁷. At this stage of our deliberations, we can expand this proposal. To do so, let us take advantage of the polysemy of the Polish verb *odeprzeć* ‘to fend off’/ ‘to give a reply’, whose primary meaning is “to force someone or something to back away, to reject, to repel someone or something, to defend oneself against an attack,” and secondarily “to answer, reply.” The latter meaning exceeds a purely defensive frame; it no longer involves merely repelling an attack or argument but simply participating in a conversation - the one described by the form *odparł(a)* ‘he/she’ replied’, ubiquitous in dialogue. Resilience would thus involve the responsiveness of the individual (refining patterns of expression, remaining in a reactive coupling with the

⁵¹Haraway, 225.

⁵²Wiatr, 122.

⁵³Justyna Tabaszewska, *Pamięć afektywna. Dynamika polskiej pamięci po 1989 roku* [Affective memory. The dynamics of Polish memory after 1989], (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2022), 23.

⁵⁴Tabaszewska, 38.

⁵⁵Tabaszewska, 28.

⁵⁶Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

⁵⁷Tabaszewska, 69.

outside) and the collective (responding to what is idiomatic, maintaining contact with otherness), as well as communal and subjective responsibility (a network of ethical obligations and relations of concern). It is also impossible to separate it from the constant testing of the limits of narrating that which is singular and that which is plural, of existence and the co-inhabited world.

In Sloterdijk's anthropological reflection, man is a technopoetic animal, whose condition is founded on an ecstatic way of life, that is, on the taming of the exterior using technology and speech. "Coming into the world" is inextricably linked to "coming into language," and the taming of the inhuman or "monstrous Exterior" happens precisely through linguistic mediation. In the digital age, as Sjoerd Van Tuinen adds, "written compositions (*Schriftsätze*) of technology develop beyond translation and no longer generate taming (*Anheimelungen*) or make the world friendly. On the contrary, they expand the scope of externality and that which is unassimilable"⁵⁸. Thus, the role of literature may be subject to redefinition. Modernity bet on expressing the inexpressible and searching for the "missing word", recognizing the limitations of anthropocentrism and seeking access to reality *in crudo*, to the minutiae of experience and the atoms of the soul. What matters today is sustaining the anthropotechnical exercise, the ethical appeal and the taming of a world that has become alien.

6. Literature internalises the processes of immunization and communization

The phrase "a world that has become foreign" appears in Wolfgang Kayser's memorable definition of the grotesque, which points to yet another plane of immunological analysis, making it possible to reformulate the recognition of historical poetics. Definitions of literature, discourses and conventions of reception that shape its understanding, the genological system, the rules of decorum and dominant poetics, are subject to constant change, which operates on the principles of action-reaction and unification-differentiation. The history of literary forms is arranged in stories of their codification and decodification, structure and destruction, consolidation and decay, making them resemble vividly the great immunological plots. The grammaticalization of the major poetics at specific stages of development can be likened to literary communization, while the activities of revolutionaries and the search for more capacious forms are a kind of immunization practices, relieving them of their duties to the system and serving to protect the individual writing project.

In this context, it would also be easy to present the specifics of particular techniques and figures. For example, parody, whose role remains crucial both for the birth of great forms (the novel) and for the programmatic and intergenerational dispute - would be a vituperative defensive reaction (negation of what it negates). Pastiche, a recreative form, would be a communicative attempt to regain what is lost through negation, or an attempt to de-escalate dialectical processes. This perspective also prompts general reflections. One can wonder whether modernism was a formation that supported immune (immunization) processes, while postmodernism attempted to go beyond this paradigm and operate in the space of post-immune relaxation and "overcoming" (i.e. "recovery" in the Nietzschean/Vattim sense), while the avant-garde, which is positioned so differently in this constellation, worked to intensify the violence of dialectical processes, declaring revitalizing goals, while producing unpredictable complications; sometimes - neutralizations.

⁵⁸Sjoerd Van Tuinen, "Transgenous Philosophy: Posthumanism, Anthropotechnics and the Poetics of Natal Difference", in: *In Medias Res. Peter Sloterdijk's Spherological Poetics of Being* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 56.

These remarks necessarily concise and general in nature, and probably not free from simplifications and risky leaps of thought. This is a derivative of the experimental mode of thinking: after all, this is about terminological attempts that cover all areas of literary research. I hope that this preliminary reconnaissance may encourage polemics or further research, and that the benefits of transferring the immunological dictionary to literary studies will at least offset the potential harm.

translated by Justyna Rogos-Hebda

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KEYWORDS

philosophical immunology

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ABSTRACT:

The article opens with a recapitulation of the most important theories in the field of philosophical immunology - from the pioneers of this reflection, working at the intersection of the medical sciences and the humanities (Alfred I. Tauber) to closed system thinkers (Jean Baudrillard, Byung-Chul Han), with a particular focus on dialectical (Roberto Esposito) and diachronic (Peter Sloterdijk) approaches. This overview is followed by an analysis of the processes of immunization and communization, as well as the complications associated with the constitution of communities and individual subjects. Finally, literary strategies of immunity are the object of consideration; this is a proposal to reformulate traditional literary issues through the vocabulary of immunology.

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LITERARY THEORY

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