ILLNESS AND METAPHOR: TRANSLATING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE BETWEEN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND THE POLITICAL

DOENÇA E METÁFORA: TRADUZIR A EXPERIÊNCIA PESSOAL ENTRE O AUTOBIOGRÁFICO E O POLÍTICO

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ABSTRACT

In 2019 Anne Boyer publishes *The Undying*, a memoir of her experience as breast cancer patient. Her depiction of illness is dense with metaphors: the images employed span from the domain of biology to the textual one. This contribution intends to discuss metaphors in relation to autobiographical writing of illness in two complementary directions. On the one hand, metaphors are forms of re-writing, translating subjective and emotional narratives into cultural objects. In this framework, language functions as a tool for translation in the intricacy of possible meanings, able to bridge private experience and public sharing. On the other hand, the gap that subsists between metaphorical representation of individual experiences and collective space of discussion can lead to harmful consequences in socio-political terms. This is the position defended by Susan Sontag, who covers in two essays three diseases (tuberculosis, cancer, and HIV/AIDS) over two centuries and the harmful impact metaphorical discourse has brought to both patients and civil society. This paper aims to question the interconnectedness of autobiographical memory, metaphors and illness as well as the implications of this both subjective and social phenomenon. Theoretical discussion is followed by a close analysis of the aforementioned texts by Boyer and Sontag.

Keywords: metaphor, illness, memoir, public discourse, rewriting

RESUMO

Em 2019, Anne Boyer publica *The Undying*, um livro de memórias da sua experiência como paciente com cancro da mama. A sua representação da doença é densa em metáforas: as imagens empregadas abrangem desde a biologia até ao domínio do textual. Este artigo pretende discutir as metáforas em relação à escrita autobiográfica da doença em duas direções complementares. Por um lado, as metáforas são formas de reescrita, traduzindo narrativas emocionais e subjetivas em objetos culturais. Nesse quadro, a linguagem funciona como uma ferramenta de tradução na complexidade dos significados possíveis, capaz de unir a experiência privada e a partilha pública. Por outro lado, a lacuna que subsiste entre a experiência individual e o espaço coletivo de discussão pode levar a consequências prejudiciais em termos sociopolíticos. Essa é a posição defendida por Susan Sontag, que aborda em dois ensaios três doenças (tuberculose, cancro e HIV/SIDA) ao longo de dois séculos assim como os impactos nocivos que o discurso metafórico trouxe tanto para os pacientes como para a sociedade civil. Este artigo aborda tanto a interdependência entre memória autobiográfica, metáforas e doença como as implicações dum fenómeno subjetivo e social. A discussão teórica é seguida por uma análise detalhada dos textos supracitados de Boyer e Sontag.

Palavras-chave: metáfora, doença, memória, discurso público, reescrita

INTRODUCTION

Metaphorical images are often employed in personal narratives to translate subjective experiences into literary representation. To some extent, whether written or spoken, language itself functions according to metaphorical correspondences, whose meaning is shared by their users. Following a social contract, each word or group of words relates to an experiential act that finds its corresponding meaning in the outer world. In the particular frame of literary production, the association of different semantic categories through metaphors is an effective tool in the attempt to vividly express significant events, enigmatic psychical experiences, particularly joyous or hurtful

feelings, unprecedented phenomena, and many more. Metaphors by nature allow the illustration of the unknown through the known. As Aristotle writes in his *Poetics*, a metaphor "consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else" (Aristotle *apud* Sontag, 1989: 93). Among many experiential categories, illnesses are, for their unpredictability and disrupting impact, often narrated employing metaphors, both in their subjective first-person experience and collective portrayal today (*apud* Hanne and Hawken: 2007).

How are metaphorical images employed to tackle the experience of illness in personal and public narratives? And, in translating both a physical and emotional experience into words, what is the contribution of metaphors to today's complex discussion of illness in the medical, socio-political, and cultural space? To answer these two leading research questions, this paper aims to address the generalised use of metaphors in the personal and public depiction of illness and its impact in cultural and political terms, since it has become the primary way to discuss diseases in the narratives of patients, relatives, health professionals, and mass media (*ibidem*: 94). Later, the research follows a close reading of two works that, despite finding a point of contact in being deeply critical of today's health policies, differ in positioning themselves regarding the use of metaphors in the description of the experience of illness.

While on the one hand Anne Boyer widely uses metaphorical images in *The Undying*, writing for instance that her breast cancer had the agency of a thinking subject endowed with a proper ideology and vocabulary to express itself, Susan Sontag on the other hand highlights in the two essays *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* the harmful impact addressing illness through metaphors has on the public sphere. Among other examples, she claims "the effect of the military imagery on thinking about sickness and health is far from inconsequential. It overmobilizes, it overdescribes, and it

powerfully contributes to the excommunicating and stigmatizing of the ill" (Sontag, 1989: 182).

Following the two works, the purpose of this paper is to understand the political, personal, and literary relation between illness and metaphors, its possibilities and dangers. The proposed argument aims to acknowledge the inevitable resorting to metaphors in the description of human life, and in particular of those conceptually and emotionally complex psychophysical experiences to which illness belongs (*apud* Hanne and Hawken, 2007: 94), and their undeniable creative value. However, the introduction and recourse to metaphors in public, political, and medical discourse have often led to ambiguity (whether intentional or not) and erroneous understanding of the medical and social condition of patients. This paper confronts these two contexts where metaphors can be found, with their common points and discrepancies.

I. WRITING ABOUT ONESELF: BELIEFS, METAPHORS, ILLNESS

Producing art about oneself or, rather, shaping artistic narratives out of personal experience is a long-conducted practice. Here, subjects translate their physical world into the designated medium of artistic production, moulding their self-image out of personal experience. These narratives not only include a mediated version of reality but also of self-perception and self-representation. According to Edmund Feldman, the discrepancy between these two depends on and is intelligible according to the combination of three factors that bring together individual imaginary with cultural codes and models, "(a) the physiological differences between thinking and seeing; (b) the capacity of the individual to distort, edit, or rearrange visual perceptions of himself; and (c) the power of the dominant culture to instill visual and other norms – norms that every person tries somehow to live up to" (1976: 10). In sum, the production of one's

own image presupposes the impact of cultural models and the filter of intentional and physiological acts on the interpretation and depiction of the physical self.

The sphere of the personal finds its representation in the possibility of negotiating between daily objects, that directly pertain to personal experiences through perception, and cultural ones, that allow to aesthetically translate and disseminate those experiences to a broader audience. The production and consequent consumption of artworks inspired by autobiographical events are supported by the possibility of understanding individual singularities through elements that, belonging to a collective sense, anyone can relate to. Arguably, familiarity with media of expression and images of representation is the cornerstone for meaning-making.

Giving particular attention to textual and literary production that draws inspiration from actual experiences, American feminist theorist and memoirist Nancy Miller claims that sense-making "[i]s about identifying with another experience, while recognizing that a space of difference between identities will always exist" (Green et al., 1992-93: 58). However, she argues, this does not mean that everybody is referring to the same shared elements creating similar stories. On the contrary, recurrent codes and particular discourses exist, and they can be ascribed to the production of autobiographical art as a field (or, in the case of literature, a whole genre), allowing, through recurrence, its understanding. The question is, along with anecdotes, style of prose, and storytelling, what tools are often employed and considered suitable and effective to deliver intimate stories. Metaphors are one of them.

In social psychology the perception of the self is understood as a "set of beliefs" (*apud* Moser, 2007: 151), and since there is no uniform way to directly conceptualise the self, as a complexity of psychic, physical, and emotional components (whether inwardly

or outwardly perceivable), different tools can contribute to its perception, decipherment, and depiction. Language is one of the predominant symbolic contexts within which inner perception, self-description, and socialisation are possible, along with the physical and sensorial dimensions, among others. Language functions as an instrument for translation in the intricacy of possible meanings according to which, Karin Moser claims, "[t]he difference between a working self-concept and the full self-knowledge also means that different and even inconsistent beliefs about the self can coexist", and "[t]he organization of self-knowledge into different self-schemata is thought to be quite loose (…) and to differ in complexity" (*ibidem*: 153). In other words, the self may be complex and ungraspable as a whole, but the formation of concepts and definition of images can support its expression and decipherment.

In this context, metaphors are central linguistic tools employed for representation, action, and sense-making, while they also play an essential role in intersubjective negotiation and knowledge transfer. On a basic level, a metaphor is an analogy, and it functions as a "projection of one schema (the source domain of the metaphor) onto another schema (the target domain of the metaphor)" (*ibidem*: 155). However, metaphors, even if employed in self-expression or self-definition, reach far beyond the limited sphere of the personal. Whether explicitly or implicitly, they involve and refer to cultural concepts, social rules, and shared references. As French philosopher Sarah Kofman argues, metaphors "must be understood (…) not as a rhetorical figure but as 'a substantive image (…) in place of the idea'" (1993: 8), and they support both expression and reception likewise. Moreover, even when articulating similar phenomena, the possibilities provided by metaphors are numerous and diverse, guaranteeing a multiplicity of perspectives as wide as individual expression. The range of representative possibilities

of rewriting personal experiences into language offered by metaphors covers any aspect of human action. As Kofman claims in her philosophical study on metaphors, "[t]he deliberate use of metaphors affirms life" (*ibidem*: 19). Metaphors are employed in the creation of images that, adopting elements pertaining to the sphere of the known, support the familiarisation and comprehension of the unknown. It is in particular the case of rare experiences characterised by intense joy or deep struggle. They work, in the combination of direct bodily knowledge and cultural beliefs, as insights into thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Among many other fields, metaphors are recurrently used to portray the singular experience of illness. As psychology professor Raymond W. Gibbs Jr. claims, metaphorically describing and visualising illness substantially contributes to reveal and shape patients' experience of disease and healing. In fact, he continues, "[m]etaphor is by no means a distraction from understanding some of the complex human realities of illness, but provides unique insights, both psychologically and biologically, into what people experience when ill and on the road to better health" (Gibbs, 2020: 2). However, translating the experience of illness into words through metaphors exceeds the private sphere, as a praxis that can be observed in political discourse and in the language of mass media communication, shaping the popular shared conception of sickness. An illustration of this can be seen in the hero-patient fighting for survival metaphor, but also the frequent incorporation of lexicon associated with mental illness outside of clinical contexts (referring to depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety, as examples). As a consequence of this phenomenon, a long-term impact on the behaviour of individual "to both prevention and treatment of illness and on the mindset with which they consult (or fail to consult) medical professionals" (Hanne and Hawken, 2007: 98) is recorded. Language appears to not only affect ideas

and emotions but also ways of acting and responding to different circumstances.

Thinking and expressing oneself through metaphors might offer a path to open up to the outer world. Narratives on illness affirm the recognition that such experience is human, offering the possibility to translate it into words and thus communicate it with the outer world, as means of reconnection and consolation (*apud* Casal, 2023). In her study on the role of metaphors in the representation of the body, anthropologist and philosopher Susan DiGiacomo argues that metaphors are essential to translate any sort of human experience, cultural phenomena, and social structures in terms of collective language (*apud* 1992). Metaphors enable multiple possibilities of imagination, description, and action, but also a diversified symbolic repertoire in communicating a particular personal experience and, in this specific case, giving shape to the physical and emotional complexity of illness. Last, through figurative description metaphors allow the comprehension of one's understanding and experience of the disease among individuals, and for this reason they are used by patients to express themselves to their loved ones, but also by medical staff to be better understood in more accessible terms. In fact, Gibbs writes, "people create metaphorical understandings to make sense, in an adaptive manner, of their ongoing life via embodied simulation processes" (2020: 5), where embodied simulation is the possibility of imputing meaning to language by mentally simulating the evoked physical experience.

In the following sections, the use of metaphors in narratives about disease is examined through the analysis of two works by female authors, Anne Boyer and Susan Sontag, which, despite sharing a critical approach towards the political discourse on illness and the reality of healthcare in the United States of their time, are opposed in their view and use of metaphorical images of illness. While in Boyer's

book metaphors abound in the depiction of her personal experience as a breast cancer patient, the danger of metaphors in public discourse is key in Sontag's refusal to associate them with illness.

II. SNAKES AND A NEW LEXICON IN ANNE BOYER'S *THE UNDYING*

American essayist and poet Anne Boyer published in 2019 *The Undying: Pain, Vulnerability, Mortality, Medicine, Art, Time, Dreams, Data, Exhaustion, Cancer, and Care*, for which she was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction the following year. *The Undying* alternates and overlaps two complementary dimensions of illness, and in particular breast cancer: the personal and the socio-political.

The description Boyer does of her experience as a cancer patient is vivid in images and metaphorical depictions. Disease is often described by the author in the form of a process rather than an event, and she concludes the last chapter by disclosing her writing intentions with a powerful metaphorical image for the change brought about by illness. In this respect, Boyer writes "I decide the question posed by this book is, *Are you going to be the snake or are you going to be the snake's cast-off skin*?" (2019: 215). The snake's image and function in history and mythology recurs throughout the book, from Medusa to Cleopatra and the Asclepius's temple,[1] and it is employed by Boyer

[1] Snakes are often found in ancient mythologies as symbols of danger and harm, but also healing, transformation, and evolution. The references given by Anne Boyer as examples trace back to both imageries. Particularly interesting is the figure of Asclepius, the Greek god of medicine, who was symbolised by a snake. According to the myth, after spotting a snake crawling out of a ship landing on the Tiber Island, the Roman senate ordered the construction of a temple dedicated to Asclepius hoping it would be propitiatory to control the plague that was hitting the city. Once erected, the plague ended in 289 BC. However, both the story of Medusa and Cleopatra are characterised by a tension between empowerment and death

in particular to portray her body going through change during the complicated and painful months of illness. "To see a snake is to also think of the way a snake slithers out of its skin, the way it has to rub its skin against something hard so that the skin begins to loosen and also the way the snake must generate sufficient new skin so that the old might be left behind" (*ibidem*), she explains. The metaphor results extremely powerful not only for the vivid depiction presented, but also because Boyer expresses her experience starting from the assumption that the image she chose can be immediately grasped and shared by all readers, and in particular by those who are going or went through analogous experiences. In fact, "I am confident", she adds, "that every person who has ever lived knows exactly what I mean when I describe feeling like a snake on the path in the dappled sunshine that turns out, on close inspection, only to be a snake's discarded skin" (*ibidem*). The visual universality of the image of the snake moulting underpins the power of the leading metaphors chosen by Boyer in her writing on cancer.

Multiple forms of metaphorical images follow one another in the book, and Anne Boyer aims to expand autobiographical writing into a collective imagery. For this reason, writer, editor, and educator Marie Scarles maintains that Boyer does not aim to be a memoirist. Her work "does not tell a story", *The Undying* "privileges metaphor in conveying its message, and it aspires to literature, not testimony" (Scarles, 2019). For instance, a strong image evoked by Boyer overlaps the disease affecting her body with the external social and political environment that impacted her experience of

embodied by the lethal power of snakes. While the Gorgon used it to turn to stone whoever looked at her, Cleopatra let a poisonous snake bite her once Antony's troops were defeated, fearing the humiliation of being brought to Rome as a prisoner during the celebration of Octavian's triumph.

illness, including the mainstream narratives about cancer. Both cancer and its discourse contributed to her sickness and healing as they were physically affecting her body. In this regard, she writes, "[i]t is as if I am both sick with and treated by the twentieth century, its weapons and pesticides, its epic generalizations and its expensive festivals of death. Then, sick beyond sick from that century, I am made sick, again, from information–a sickness that is our century's own" (Boyer, 2019: 115).

Another recurrent metaphorical domain in *The Undying* is the association of the biological and the textual. Anne Boyer explicitly links her experience of cancer with the urgency of translating it into words. Words play multiple functions in the imaginary of Boyer. They are employed to describe her experience through an often deeply poetic narrative, as if illness guards inside itself the possibility of rewriting. The author describes the agonies of being sick going hand in hand with the endeavour of finding the words to talk about breast cancer, while her disease resists common forms of expression. She explains, "[t]hese agonies are not only about the disease itself, but about what is written about it, or not written about it, or whether or not to write about it, or how. Breast cancer is a disease that presents itself as a disordering question of form" (Boyer, 2019: 10). Boyer's illness cannot but generate new words and meanings, attempting to be louder of mainstream lexicon and narrative through its own voice. The author refers to the urgency of writing about her experience as "breast cancer's extraordinary production of language", bearing in mind that "[i]n our time, the challenge is not to speak into the silence, but to learn to form a resistance to the often obliterating noise" (*ibidem*: 11). Subsequently, she continues addressing her readers going through the same treatments she faced, "[y]our hair will fall out onto every surface you come near: it will fall into new alphabets and new words. Read these words to discover the etiology

of your illness: If you are lucky you will read another word that means 'illness has turned you into an armament'" (*ibidem*: 45). Boyer claims the importance of private stories rewriting the existing public discourse on cancer.

Boyer uses this image to counteract the potential isolation associated with cancer, as its impact extends beyond her clinical case to encompass its historical, cultural, and public value and ideology. There are disparate and singular experiences of cancer, but they are also shaped by the capitalised, unequal, and misogynistic history of cancer within the profit-driven aetiology of the American healthcare system. The author's use of metaphors becomes essential in establishing a new shared language for a more democratic narrative on cancer and pain. She aims to challenge the influence of public discourse, particularly its "sensationalist connotations of the metaphor" (Hanne and Hawken, 2007: 93), on illness and its experience, a discourse that often generates mystery and distorts scientific facts. Anne Boyer's personal history serves as the foundation for a robust forceful critique of the prevailing economic and political narrative about being ill, woman, and ill and woman today. Her own cancer serves as a metaphor for the social crisis and inadequate public policies she experienced first-hand. Here, breast cancer is examined with human agency ("Disease is never neutral. Treatment never not ideological" (*ibidem*: 103)), historically and geographically situated and endowed with its own privatised and capitalist morality. Illness is an entire "ideological regime" (*ibidem*: 224).

Hence, metaphors for Boyer serve a double function. On the one hand, they allow the author to express the whole spectrum of meanings cancer meant for her, a destructive but also creative illness, a beast, a new language, and an entire ideology. On the other hand, metaphors help readers, through vivid images and familiarity, to attribute new value to recognising and sharing each other's pain.

In *The Undying*, Anne Boyer includes Susan Sontag among female writers who discussed cancer before her, often referring to Sontag's work. American philosopher and writer, Sontag tackled illness in many of her essays. However, she explicitly refused to link herself with her illness and long criticised the risk of metaphorical images in the discussion of disease and healing. The next section directly addresses Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*, first published in 1978, and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, originally from 1989, and the debate around the benefits and dangers of depicting illness metaphorically.

III. AGAINST METAPHOR

Looking back at her work, Susan Sontag refers to her essays as an attempt "to calm the imagination, not to incite it. Not to confer meaning, which is the traditional purpose of literary endeavor, but to deprive something of meaning: to apply that quixotic, highly polemical strategy, 'against interpretation,' to the real world this time" (1989: 102). Metaphors kill, she believes, and it is crucial to look at illness "as if it were just a disease (…). Not a curse, not a punishment, not an embarrassment. Without 'meaning.'" (*ibidem*).

As a recovered cancer patient herself but committed to never making her writing personal (as Anne Boyer points out "Sontag does not write 'I' and 'cancer' in the same sentence" (2019: 7)), Susan Sontag argues the urgency of avoiding the use of metaphors in the portrayal of illness (both in private and, most importantly, public discourse). According to her, moral contagion can be as dangerous as physical one, and for this reason illness should be collectively de-mythicised.

In her two essays *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors* Sontag covers the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their three most significant, medically, mediatically, and symbolically, diseases (tuberculosis, cancer, and HIV/AIDS). Traditionally, disease

metaphors were used to vehemently address the ill (*apud* Sontag, 1989: 72). Health and hygiene were considered social matters that required collective endeavour, when tuberculosis first and cancer later completely changed this perspective. New critical standards were proposed by these two diseases, and illness started to be tackled as a danger for society, a physical manifestation of dissatisfaction (the industrial city is looked at as a tumoral organism to natural perfection, for instance), a condition of imbalance, a serious threat to public order.

Sontag goes through different sources (from literature to media coverage) to understand how narratives about illness has been shaped in the past two centuries. Multiple metaphors were employed to tackle tuberculosis. Understood as a disease of the soul, tuberculosis was a sign of poverty and degradation, both material and moral. However, having a tubercular look was also a synonym for romantic sadness, and it became popular among the aristocrats to interpret tuberculosis as a disease of love, a matter of ardour consuming the body.[2] On the other hand, cancer was (and often still is) described as a pathology of space, something proliferating and spreading all over the body of the ill. While it was first conceived as a "rare and still scandalous subject for poetry (…) unimaginable to aestheticize" (*ibidem*: 20), it quickly became a symbol for resignation (both in Tolstoy and Freud), the natural order's surrender to external attack and contamination. As Sontag continues, "controlling metaphors in descriptions of cancer are, in fact, drawn not from economics but from the language of

[2] Susan Sontag gives various examples that effectively explain this romantic myth. In 1957 Eugene O'Neill's theatre play *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1957), Edmund, the young sensitive artist of the family, is sick with tuberculosis. In *The Magic Mountain*, published in 1924 by Thomas Mann, the burgher Hans Castorp is spiritually and emotionally refined by tuberculosis. Lastly, many letters written by Franz Kafka include reflections on the possible inner meaning of the disease.

warfare: every physician and every attentive patient is familiar with, if perhaps inured to, this military terminology" (*ibidem*: 64). Among the terms used for both the illness and the ill, invasion, colonisation, survivor, and defence can be often found. Both diseases were linked to moral and psychological judgement, occasions for redemption as psychic voyages through recovery. As Sontag highlights, "TB is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of nineteenth-century homo economicus: consumption; wasting; squandering of vitality (...). Cancer is described in images that sum up the negative behavior of twentieth-century homo economicus: abnormal growth; repression of energy, that is, refusal to consume or spend" (*ibidem* 63). In both cases, illness is associated with some sort of deviance, whether of the individual as an outsider, or society as a whole losing its core values. The individual, physical body is understood as an extension of the social body, whose reality, ideology, history, and even artistic taste cannot but shape the physical experience. The relentless exchange between the two categories blurs the line between the natural and the social, the bodily and the political: one is the other and vice versa.

In these narratives grounded on metaphorical images, Sontag suggests, illness becomes expression of the individual character, their psychology, emotional sphere, and even fantasy. Great importance is given to will and intention, and some form of responsibility is attributed when receiving a diagnosis and credit for the subsequent healing (or not). She explains, "there is a peculiarly modern predilection for psychological explanations of disease, as of everything else", an attitude that ends up providing "control over the experiences and events (like grave illnesses) over which people have in fact little or no control" (*ibidem*: 55). The paradox of the relationship between metaphors and illness needs to be understood, according to Ulrike Kistner, within the archaeology of knowledge in the medical and

scientific context. Myth has long been part of medicine, she explains, and this tendency emerges "as a result of precarious causal relations due to the fact that the etiology of the diseases concerned was not understood" (Kistner, 1998: 20). Although we are experiencing a progressive demythologisation of illness and medicine in the Western world, many diseases are still heavily charged by cultural meaning, as well as their experience is culturally and socially constructed. As cultural and metaphorical images constantly affect subjects on the perception of their disease, what they are going through and ultimately how to feel about it, these images are rarely neutral and reflective of the systems of power they are embedded within, often affected by misogynist and racialised narratives.

Moreover, whether a nightmare, an attack, a punishment, or a mystery, the primacy of spirit over matter establishes the relationship between cure and will. Abandoning metaphors is according to Sontag the only way to shift the attention from an individual narrative of illness to a conscious social, political, and medical action towards finding solutions, rather than just a matter of (harmful) description. As she writes in *AIDS and Its Metaphors*, "[m]aking AIDS everyone's problem and therefore a subject on which everyone needs to be educated, charge the antiliberal AIDS mythologists, subverts our understanding of the difference between 'us' and 'them'; indeed, exculpates or at least makes irrelevant moral judgments about 'them.'" (Sontag, 1989: 152-153). In many of her writings, Susan Sontag firmly advocates for a departure from narratives on illness based on metaphors towards a collective effort to discuss diseases in mere terms of science and policymaking.

The position maintained by Susan Sontag does not question the importance of individuals metaphorically translating their experience, but she sheds light on the risks of including these images in political discussion and media coverage. Even though many lessons have been

learnt since Sontag published her essays (in particular referring to cancer, as a consequence of contemporary medical advances), there is still much to do in the direction of favouring scientific discourse on illness.

Metaphors are still very much part of the medical discourse, as a vehicle for better understanding and transferring knowledge from one domain to another, both within scientists and as facilitators towards broader audiences. However, metaphors are also powerful rhetorical tools in support of political agendas and specific educational purposes. As a constituent element of language and linguistic expression, metaphors impact the way we think about our world, including medical science and illness in this case. As proper technological instruments (Reynolds, 2022), metaphors lead to a proper change in the nature of the illness to which they refer.

As Hanne and Hawken write, "[w]hile Sontag's absolutist demand that we abstain altogether from metaphor in reference to sickness was unrealistic, it seems likely that repeated use of certain metaphors not only reflects, but may substantially shape, attitudes to sickness– our own and that of others" (2007: 94).

CONCLUSION

The discussion around the relation between metaphors and illness is convoluted and insidious. While we can see the strong presence of metaphors in public discussion, often distracting politicians and civil society from the real matter in terms of health and patients' support,[3] as Susan Sontag argues, it is also fundamental to empower individual

[3] A recent example of this phenomenon is the widespread denomination of COVID-19 cases intensifying in terms of 'waves', as if they were unexpected and out of control. This terminology aims to linguistically justify weak and inadequate measures taken by governments and international political bodies to face the pandemic.

subjects shaping their own narrative of disease. As Anne Boyer claims, the process of writing about her cancer has been difficult and impossible to fully achieve, but metaphors were central in it. "I am sorry that I was not able to write down everything", she writes, "[t]he great orbs of the unsaid continue to float through the air" (Boyer, 2019: 224).

In this regard, anthropologist Susan DiGiacomo addresses the tension that the use of metaphorical images entails when speaking of disease. In fact, she maintains,

> the afflicted are twice victimized, either by a dearth or by an excess of meaning that denatures and even denies their experience (…). No one ever experiences cancer as the uncontrolled proliferation of abnormal cells. Indeed, we can experience anything at all only through and by means of culturally constructed and socially reproduced structures of metaphors and meaning. (DiGiacomo, 1992: 117)

Metaphors open a set of new meanings that can help and harm at once, but medicine, as well as any other human practice, relies on the meaning and logic of the world that human beings construct. Metaphors are one of the central tools we use to shape and decode reality, and they have an impact on research, bodies, biology, and policies, among others. An example DiGiacomo brings is depression as a clinical condition, whose understanding recalls images similar to the homonymous geological phenomenon (*apud* Scheper-Hughes and Lock in DiGiacomo, 1992: 125-126). As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson notoriously write (1980), we live by metaphors.[4]

[4] In the famous book *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson claim that metaphors are essential tools for people to make sense of abstract categories of experience (including emotions, time, and artistic concepts among many others) using physical and social elements of everyday life.

At the same time, narratives grounded in metaphorical images have caused serious damage to the general perception of illness. In this regard, Sontag claims that "[w]e are not being invaded. The body is not a battlefield. The ill are neither unavoidable casualties nor the enemy. We–medicine, society–are not authorized to fight back by any means whatever.... About that metaphor, the military one, I would say, if I may paraphrase Lucretius: Give it back to the war-makers" (1989: 183).

Perhaps, rather than trying to find a univocal position in praise of or against metaphors, it is important to reclaim the distance that should exist between the public and the private sphere. If metaphors can be useful for people to describe their experiences and express the struggle of facing the unknown, they should be encouraged and valued as a tool for sense-making in a condition of suffering. However, we should avoid metaphors to become the dominant instrument to publicly address illness: clear and accurate science-based discourse is beneficial for patients, their dear ones, and all citizens. Metaphors have often been used to perpetuate the myth of individualism, internal force, and will. They can also entail disparagement, when "investing the disease with meanings that call for violent, repressive (…) responses" (DiGiacomo, 1992: 124-125). As the translation into narratives can be both individual and collective, metaphors are beneficial only in relation to their contextual grounding.

If "the interest of the metaphor is precisely that it refers to a disease so overlaid with mystification, so charged with the fantasy of inescapable fatality" (Sontag, 1989: 87), what we collectively need first is to understand the physical and social consequences of illness, as well as the ways in which it can be translated into words.

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