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## **Medical Humanities and the Imagery of Illness in Romanian Literature**

Emanuela Ilie (coord.), *Infernul cotidian. Imaginarul bolii în literatura română*, Eikon, Bucharest, 2025.

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The volume *Infernul cotidian. Imaginarul bolii în literatura română* is the first within the *Medicine and Literature* collection, published by Eikon and is intended to be an interdisciplinary study, positioned in the sphere of medical humanities, as specified by the volume's coordinator, Emanuela Ilie (8). Thus, the book shows the openness of literary criticism and theory to the areas of intersection between literature and other fields of knowledge such as medicine, anthropology, sociology, and theology.

This openness is particularly necessary in the recent context of the publication of more and more Romanian literature on the experience of illness, trauma, and on corpor(e)ality. In fact, this is not Emanuela Ilie's first volume to focus on areas of interdisciplinary study. Her book *Corpuri, exiluri, terapii* (Cartea Românească Educațional, Iași, 2020) anticipated the present volume and revealed the author's interest in areas of work that highlight the intersections between literature and other fields of knowledge. Emanuela Ilie is not only interested in the places where literary studies meet cultural, sociological, and anthropological research, but also in the places where people can meet through their common concerns in the study of literature. The book *Un dicționar al exilului feminin românesc*, published in 2024, was also a collective volume, as is *Infernul cotidian*. Both bring together researchers, some experienced, others younger, but equally valuable: Bako Alina, Băcilă Florina-Maria, Handru Ciprian, Ilie Emanuela, Negură Luiza, Pietraru Iulia, Victoria Sorina, Rucăreanu Alina Marieta (Nun Alexandra).

Although it is the result of the work of several authors, Emanuela

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Ilie's book has thematic coherence across all axes and strong scientific consistency. On the one hand, it offers a serious theoretical bibliography, useful for exploring the imaginary of illness in literature. On the other hand, as Diana Câmpăn observes in the book's preface, the authors' research revolves concentrically around the illness as a *topos* (9). From this thematic core, other lines of research emerge that focus on disabilities, neuroses, anxieties, in other words, the illnesses of the body, mind, and soul, sublimated in novels, poetry, and memoirs. The literary works considered do not belong only to recent Romanian literature, but also to canonical writers, and goes from Ioan Slavici to George Cornilă.

Organized into two sections, the chapters of the book are distributed according to their thematic area. The four chapters of the first section, belonging to Alina Bako, Emanuela Ilie, and Iulia Petraru, have a primarily thematic approach. In her well-researched chapter, Alina Bako writes about disabilities in Romanian novels, attempting to identify a typology of disability (26-27), preceded by a theorisation of the concept of disability and how it influences the definition of identity. In Romanian literature, she traces instances of disability (especially those resulting from infirmities) up to the middle of the 20th century. Sometimes, disabilities are also linked to power and therefore to politics (33). From this point of view, Alina Bako's study extends diachronically to the observations of chroniclers. Also, by studying disability as a form of marginalization, we find examples in this chapter from the literary works of Slavici or Rebreanu (36). This type of social marginalization caused by disability creates the prosthetic character in novels, the character "who supports the narrative of the text" (40).

The second chapter, by Emanuela Ilie, deals with characters with addictions (to drugs, sexuality, and alcohol) (63), traumas, and "pathologies of excess" (86) in postcommunist prose, based on a multidisciplinary bibliography. The author of the study considers the literature of narcotics as a manifestation of "ruptures or even convulsions of identity of extreme harshness" (67). Literary works by Mircea Cărtărescu, Alexandru Vakulovski, Claudia Golea, Ioana Baetica, Radu Aldulescu, Doina Ruști, Octavian Soviany, Bogdan Coșa, Cristian Fulaș, George Cornilă (with *Silex*, 2024) and many others are mentioned.

Iulia Petraru's well-written chapter focuses on contemporary Romanian poetry and discusses anxiety and depression, but not before analysing psychopathology as a social and historical construct. The study is drawn on the theories of Michel Foucault and Susan Sontag. It discusses the military metaphor that shows the confrontation with

illness and the phenomenon of ghosting that leads to the marginalization of the sick, stigmatization and social exclusion (98). Also, psychopathology is seen from a diachronic perspective (from romantic melancholy to the fragility of the human psyche in the 20th century), starting with the poetry of Bacovia and Mircea Ivănescu and continuing with the poetry written by Ionel Ciupireanu, Dan Coman, Judith Mészáros, Svetlana Cârstea, Șerban Axinte, Teodor Dună, and Radu Vancu. The last chapter of the section, written by Emanuela Ilie, is dedicated to cancer memoirs, the illness diary. The chapter focuses on the experience of illness and hospitalization, on therapies and coping strategies. Memoirs written by Rosana Nedelciu, Matei Călinescu, Camelia Răileanu, Oana Stroe, and Mădălina Andronache are being analysed.

The second section of the book, which is more extensive, comprises eight chapters that maintain the thematic line, of course, but which start from the writers and move towards the theme. Thus, the chapter that opens the section, written by the volume's editor, analyses pathology in Sorana Gurian's novel. The second chapter, by Florina-Maria Băcilă, focuses on Traian Borz's poetry and deals not so much with illness as with convalescence and healing. The emphasis is also on the kiss as a "symbol of understanding, reverence, and affection" (207), being the central element of the poems. In the third chapter, Ciprian Handru re-reads the work of writer Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, referring in particular to the novel *Balaurul*, "a (false) war diary" (253) and to the way in which war, a generator of pathologies and suffering, becomes itself a cure for the minor sufferings of the self through the humanitarian activities in which the self is involved. Luiza Negură dedicates the next chapter to Ilena Mălăncioiu's poetry and the avatars of illness (273), while Alina Marieta Rucăreanu (Nun Alexandra) writes, also in an optimistic tone, a chapter about Vasile Voiculescu, about suffering and salvation, about pain and healing love. Alina Bako deals with Romulus Guga's prose in a chapter about the morphologies of illness, about the body and the spaces of illness. The researcher proposes new ways of reading literature and pathographies, similar to the act of pathomorphology. The second last chapter, written by Victoria Sorina, considers Rodica Braga's poetry and the condition of poetry as illness. Starting from Susan Sontag's perspective, the chapter analyses illness as a metaphor and trope, not as a physical condition (361). The book ends with a chapter written by Emanuela Ilie about lupus in Radu Aldulescu's novel, *Ana Maria și îngerii*.

Overall, *Infernul cotidian. Imaginarul bolii în literatura română* proves to be a coherent, well-documented research and an

example of how literary studies can engage in a fruitful dialogue with the field of medical humanities. The diversity of approaches, the rigor of the research, and the relevance of the topics analyzed make this book not only a necessary contribution to understanding representations of illness in Romanian literature, but also an invitation to reflect on how the fragilities of the body and spirit shape the cultural imagination.