Apocalyptica
No 2 / 2022
DOI: 10.17885/heiup.apoc.2022.2.24751

Mariarosa Loddo

Towards a Contemporary Poetics of Nonfiction about Disasters

Abstract: In order to assess which role catastrophe plays in contemporary literary nonfiction, in this essay I examine four narrative texts dealing with different disasters: *And the Band Played On* (1987) by Randy Shilts, *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997) by Svetlana Alexievich, *Underground* (1997) by Haruki Murakami and *News on the Disaster* (2001) by Roberto Alajmo. By adopting a narratological and comparative approach and identifying constants and commonalities underlying these texts, I make the case for a potential poetics of nonfiction about disasters. While I discuss characteristic plot features and alternative interpretations of catastrophe within the corpus, two main elements stand out in the analysis: first, the extreme events narrated make the authors compelled to declare their own ethical commitment and the methods and means of their enterprise, usually relying on paratextual and metatextual inserts, which signal not only the sensitiveness of the topic and its resistance to verbalization, but also how this kind of life writing does not occupy a stable and acknowledged place in the literary panorama. Secondarily, although authors have tried to find their own original way to account for catastrophe through their works, they seem to inevitably choose the choral form as the best narrative structure to represent disasters: no point of view is privileged, there is no single hero and the communal dimension is respected.

Keywords: nonfiction, contemporary literature, disaster, narrative

Art, literature, and media have constantly shown interest in catastrophe: if floods and fires have been a widespread subject in painting, the press has started very early to regularly cover earthquakes and other disasters, while catastrophic movies became extremely popular in the late

twentieth century. As far as the literary field is concerned, it appears that disasters are especially considered as a recurrent plot component of particular genres such as science fiction or post-apocalyptic novels, where, usually, alternative realities and projections of the end of the world or humanity provide fascinating, disturbing, and often engaging narratives.

Without depending on imaginative effort and dealing, instead, with actual dangers, mass deaths, and calamities, nonfiction about disasters constitute another communicative and artistic approach to catastrophe. Despite the specific nature of the extreme events narrated, these works, which combine literary and journalistic writing, present significant similarities, both in content and form, and are usually based on the testimonies of people who have experienced disasters. I suggest comparing four texts from the twentieth and twenty-first century which share a factual stance on describing or recalling a disaster, from epidemics to terrorist attacks. I argue that works such as *And the Band Played On* (1987) by Randy Shilts, *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997) by Svetlana Alexievich, *Underground* (1997) by Haruki Murakami and *News on the Disaster* (2001) by Roberto Alajmo[1] can be considered as part of a contemporary subgenre of life writing in which disaster plays a constitutive role. By adopting a narratological and comparative approach and identifying constants and commonalities underlying these texts, I will make the case for a potential poetics of nonfiction about disasters. Furthermore, the analysis will show that subjective and ordinary responses to catastrophe are especially addressed in these works, which often stand out as complementary perspectives or even counter narratives if compared to the official discourse provided by media, politics, and science about the same circumstances. Firstly, I will shed light on the plurality of points of view on disaster as the backbone of the narrative structure marking the texts, which, therefore, are openly choral and not focused on the story of a single victim or survivor. Subsequently, I will discuss the author's voice and the ethos it conveys in relation to the disaster that is recounted through the testimonies collected. Attention will be paid, in particular, to the ways in which this voice fully expresses its standpoint in the paratextual sections that introduce the work. Then, turning to the narrated events, I will highlight how the delineation of a chronology of the catastrophe is rather difficult, resulting, in terms of plot, in beginnings and epilogues that are hard to imagine and in an insistent recourse to repetition. Finally, some reflections will be devoted to the implications, especially the ethical ones, of the comparisons between catastrophes, since such analogies are widely present within disaster narratives.

As a preliminary step, it must be stressed that the selected corpus has been identified as an example of nonfiction about disasters, even if this

1 All the titles and quotes of these works refer to their existing English editions, with the exception of Alajmo's text, which is only available in Italian. Therefore, in this case the translations provided are mine, starting with the title, which is originally *Notizia del disastro*.

'label' is not consistently used by scholars. However, if I have decided to rely on this formulation, it is because none of the options currently offered by life writing studies prove to be sufficiently relevant.[2] In fact, these texts cannot be mistaken for memoirs or autobiographies, because the authors, by writing the social instead of writing the self, do not place themselves at the center of the narrative and the events they expose, regardless of their involvement in the disaster. Testimony appears less extraneous, although traditionally it is associated with the two world wars and the twentieth century genocides (see Detue and Lacoste 2016, 3; Detue 2012, 85; Rastier 2013, 116), a spectrum which turns out to be rather limiting, since it is evident that acts of witnessing are related to a huge variety of human experiences, as shown in *Chernobyl Prayer* by the words of a father who lost his daughter because of radioactive contamination: "I want to testify: my daughter died from Chernobyl. But they want us to keep quiet" (Alexievich 2016, 55). We could say, then, that works engaging with catastrophe, such as Alexievich's, expand and enrich the testimonial scope, also by means of their distinctive narrative structure, based on the plurality of points of view and the apparent absence of the author. Although their authors differ in nationality,[3] the four selected texts invariably display this feature, which necessarily imposes itself as a starting point for this inquiry, as the following overview of the corpus illustrates. In *Chernobyl Prayer* Svetlana Alexievich recalls the nuclear accident that occurred in 1986 by reporting the testimonies of several survivors she had previously interviewed; each story is autonomous, told in the first person, and presented as a monologue with its own title, while the author's questions are not included. In *Underground* Haruki Murakami collects the interviews he had conducted with a large number of people involved in the Tokyo subway sarin attack in 1994; the author intervenes in the text with his questions and introduces each witness with a short biography; as for Alexievich, the different memories of the disaster can be read independently. In *News on the Disaster* Roberto Alajmo, relying on the testimonies of 21 survivors, reconstructs the last hours of life of the 108 passengers who died in 1978 when their plane crashed in the sea near Palermo; although each personal story constitutes a chapter, it is embedded in an overall narrative of the disaster, signaled by a third-person narrator who recounts the events and sometimes adds details which cannot be found in the sources consulted by the author (for instance thoughts and perceptions of the deceased). Finally, *And the Band Played On,* by Randy Shilts, is the powerful and voluminous chronicle of the early years of AIDS in the USA (1980–1985), which features doctors, politicians, activists and patients as characters of a progressively developed storyline aimed at reproducing the alarming evolution of the

2 See the several types of autobiographical writings listed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in the "Appendix" to *Reading Autobiography* (2001).

3 Alexievich is Belarusian, Murakami is Japanese, Alajmo is Italian, and Shilts is American.

epidemic; by adopting an omniscient third-person narrator, Shilts makes extensive use of narrative techniques typical of the novel.

This initial comparison underlines some convergences between the four texts, primarily represented by the plurality of voices and perspectives through which the disaster is recounted. In fact, in these works no hero is recognizable, that is to say a figure who stands out as the protagonist of the story: first of all, because, with the exception of Shilts, there is no overarching narrative clearly developed in a sufficiently linear manner, from the beginning to the end of the book, whereas we are in the presence of many stories, however relating to the same events. In the introduction of the second edition (2022) of *News on the Disaster* Alajmo clarifies this narrative structure by referring to *Rashomon* (1950), the film by Akira Kurosawa in which one fact is told from several points of view, even in contradictory ways. Alexievich and Murakami create such a mosaic by giving voice to dozens of narrators of the disaster, while Alajmo lists one by one the names of victims and survivors in the opening of the text, as does Shilts with the protagonists of his chronicle in the section "Dramatis personae".

In all the cases the authors choose to 'disappear' from the scene, limiting themselves to introducing texts, asking questions or hiding behind the third-person narrator. If this choice seems obvious for those who are mere outside observers of what happened, such as Alajmo, it is not so for Murakami and Alexievich, who allude to a personal involvement.[4] In particular, Alexievich claims that since she comes from one of the contaminated areas, she struggled to find a form of distancing in her writing: "If, earlier, when I wrote my books, I would pore over the suffering of others, now my life and I have become part of the event. Fused together, leaving me unable to get any distance" (Alexievich 2016, 25). Faced with such an issue, Shilts opted for a drastic solution: if in *And the Band Played On* there is no trace of his health condition in the midst of the epidemic, the author exposed himself only in 1993, when he announced to the press that he was HIV-positive (one year before his death), explaining that he had kept it private since 1985 so as not to divert attention from his journalistic enterprise. Yet, although the authors choose not to appear among the witnesses and characters of the stories told, their gaze remains participatory and compassionate. In any case, these texts are very different from what Emmanuel Carrère does in *Other Lives but Mine* (2009), in which, as a witness to the tsunami of 2004, the French writer takes the disaster as an opportunity to reflect on his own existence, his personal relationships and his art, approaching the composition of a memoir.

4 This information is ambiguous in relation to Murakami, as in the Italian edition the author states in the introduction that he was also driven to write *Underground* by serious personal reasons, which he does not explain. However, the English and French editions completely omit this passage. The monograph that Jay Rubin, Murakami's American translator, dedicates to the author, does not shed light on the issue, simply suggesting that *Underground* was motivated by the writer's desire to reconnect with his own country after years of living abroad (see Rubin 2002, 237, 242).

In nonfiction about disasters, the authors' standpoints regarding the narrated events are related to the expectations associated with the literary genre of reference, which proves to be, as I have suggested, closer to testimony and reportage than to autobiography or memoir. Therefore, what emerges is a specific authorial ethos characterized by self-denial, participation, support for the victims, reliability, truthfulness, and commitment in placing one's literary art at the service of a social cause. These traits, which in *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation* (2014) Liesbeth Korthals Altes has investigated as part of engagé writing, are conveyed by the author's public image, reading strategies and textual clues, which constitute the element that is privileged in my analysis (see Korthals Altes 2014, 175–190).

The relevance of the choral structure is pivotal in determining how the selected works fit into the contemporary literary landscape dealing with catastrophe, which Amitav Ghosh has considered in his essay *The Great Derangement* (2016). Ghosh remarks the inadequacy of recent realistic novels in the face of climate change, namely their disinterest in the nonhuman and their predilection for individual experience. Furthermore, he argues that fiction started neglecting the collective realm and its transformations as a result of a social and economic system intended to produce isolation (see Ghosh 2016, 89). Nevertheless, Ghosh does not acknowledge the existence of nonfiction as a mode of narrating disaster, which is quite significant, but if he had taken it into account, he would have certainly noticed that it foregrounds collectivity, without overlooking subjective experience. In fact, what characterizes our corpus is the interest in individual destinies, which are, however, always placed in relation to events shared with many others. The choral dimension, therefore, lends itself to overcome both the representation of an isolated individual and the dehumanizing representation of shapeless and anonymous masses. Hence, our four authors are not that far from Rebecca Solnit's take on disasters, which she has elaborated in her essay *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009). Reflecting on the San Francisco earthquake of 1906, Solnit observes that:

> What happened after the quake has been told over and over as a story about geology, about firefighting, about politics, and about people in power. It has never really been told as a story of ordinary citizens' responses, except as the long series of first-person accounts that the San Francisco-based weekly *Argonaut* ran during the disaster's twentieth anniversary. In those accounts and the letters and essays of the survivors, a remarkable picture emerges of improvisation, heroism, and solidarity, similar to what can be seen in most disasters but is seldom recorded (Solnit 2010, 23).

Solnit does not overtly mention literature as an alternative to other kinds of discourse, however some authors have written about catastrophes emulating "first-person accounts, letters and essays of the survivors", such as Ibuse Masuji, who relied on multiperspectivity to compose *Black Rain* (1965), his historical novel about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. Similarly, in our nonfictional texts the plurality of points of view allows Murakami, Alexievich, and Alajmo to foreground the often unexpected "ordinary citizens' responses" instead of the power dynamics and the technical and scientific explanations related to the events. *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* constitutes a partial exception, as the presence of 'politics' in the subheading suggests. Nevertheless, Shilts' work constantly shows and highlights how major changes in the epidemic management and in medical research occurred thanks to the brave actions of private citizens and were interwoven, influenced, and even hindered by personal motives, such as ambition, shame, and selfishness.

This approach in the telling of catastrophe is usually disclosed in paratextual introductory sections, in which the authors outline in the first person the premises and methodology (largely based on interviews) underlying their work, and state their interpretation of the disaster. Employed in this way, the paratext is an almost constitutive element of this type of nonfiction. For example, Alajmo's reconstruction of the plane crash, which is precise and devoid of pathos, is only preceded by very few words that announce the list of names of the people on board the flight: "This is the story of how one hundred and twenty-nine people died and lived. Their names were: [...]" (Alajmo 2001, 9). The choice of verbs ("die/live") is crucial, since it not only indicates that both victims and survivors are remembered, but also that the whole life of those who perished, and not merely their final moments, is recounted, thus not reducing their identity to that of victim. Instead, in his preface to *Underground* Murakami extensively explains how he intended to present and investigate the stories of the people involved in the disaster, both survivors and followers of the Aum cult that was responsible for the attack. Resonating with Solnit's view, Murakami's approach complies with a collective vision, but on a small, human, personal scale:

> What I did not want was a collection of disembodied voices. Perhaps it's an occupational hazard of the novelist's profession, but I am less interested in the 'big picture,' as it were, than in the concrete, irreducible humanity of each individual. [...]

> The Japanese media had bombarded us with so many in-depth profiles of the Aum cult perpetrators—the 'attackers'—forming such a slick, seductive narrative that the average citizen—the 'victim'—was almost an afterthought. [...]
> Our media probably wanted to create a collective image of the 'innocent Japanese sufferer,' which is much easier to do when you don't have to deal with real faces. Besides, the classic dichotomy of 'ugly (visible) villains' versus the 'healthy (faceless) populace' makes for a better story. [...] Furthermore, I had a hunch that we needed to see a true picture of all the survivors, whether they were severely traumatized or not, in order to better grasp the whole incident (Murakami 2000, 6–8).

Murakami emphasizes the specific contribution of literature, since he identifies himself as a writer, a qualification he uses repeatedly in *Underground* to justify his responsibility, his impressions and his limitations with respect to the stories he is exposing. In contrast to the simplified narrative of the media, literature privileges details and nuances, without settling for sharp contrasts and superficial interpretations, and becoming a real cognitive tool.

With her work, Alexievich also aspires to offer a complementary view of the disaster, in particular by telling a hitherto untold story, namely the emotional, subjective perspective on the catastrophe, as she claims in the section programmatically entitled "The author interviews herself about the untold story and why Chernobyl challenges our worldview":

> This is not a book about Chernobyl, but about the world of Chernobyl. [...] What interests me is what I would call the 'missing history', the invisible imprint of our permanence on earth and in time. I paint and collect mundane feelings, thoughts and words. I try to capture the life of the soul. A day in the life of ordinary people. [...] Unable to find words for these new feelings and emotions, unable to find emotions for these new words, we no longer knew how to express ourselves [...]. The truth is that facts alone were not enough; we felt the need to look behind the facts, to dig into the meaning of what was happening (Alexievich 2016, 21).

Such statements express the author's desire to understand the disaster and let the readers know about the human experiences arose from catastrophe, hidden from view, and forgotten by collective memory. As Korthals Altes points out: "This role brings the writer close to the journalist, but also the social analyst, and suggests his work's affinity with genres

such as reportage and documentary. [...] Thus, beyond thorough information and analytic expertise, the writer- reporter's role is enriched with the task of discerning and interpreting the signs that lead to a deeper grasp of reality" (Korthals Altes 2014, 180). If for Murakami *Underground* is an attempt to "grasp the whole incident," while Alexievich "felt the urgency to look behind the facts," for Alajmo *News on the Disaster* is a blatant representation of unfortunate and inexplicable coincidences, as he stated in the introduction to the new edition of the work (2022), reacting to readers who had misinterpreted the text as a source for conspiracy theories behind the accident (which were applied to other plane crashes in Italy). On the contrary, Shilts approaches AIDS as a catastrophe caused by human behaviors, but, like the other authors, he is willing to reconstruct what happened by emphasizing the moral strength or weakness, the blameworthy or praiseworthy emotions of the protagonists, that is, politicians, scientists, doctors, activists and victims, as he announces in the prologue:

> The story of these first five years of AIDS in America is a drama of national failure, unfolding against a backdrop of needless death. [...] Fighting against this institutional indifference was a handful of heroes from disparate callings. [...] Because of their efforts, the story of politics, people, and the AIDS epidemic is, ultimately, a tale of courage as well as cowardice, compassion as well as bigotry, inspiration as well as venality, and redemption as well as despair (Shilts 2021, xxii–xxiii).

The principles of disaster storytelling discussed so far lead us to wonder when and how catastrophe begins. In fact, the temporal dimension of such an event is not of secondary importance: in the first place, it allows us to distinguish sudden and instantaneous disasters, i.e. those that can be located in the here and now (earthquakes, explosions), from those that instead have a slow gestation and evade perception, exemplified by environmental contamination (see Ligi 2009, 34–35). However, it is not always easy to pinpoint the beginning of a disaster and even less its end, especially when taking into account its prolonged effects. On the one hand, unlike earthquakes or fires, AIDS and radiation do not kill immediately, since they invisibly act over time; on the other hand, any type of disaster can cause psychological distress which deeply affects survivors' lives. Similar circumstances coincide especially with situations of post-traumatic stress disorders, prolonged medical issues and social marginalization, which Murakami addresses in *Underground* and are hardly identified when belonging to the aftermath of those disasters everyone considers

as over, except the survivors. In his work Alajmo includes this aspect only in passing, both suggesting its hard identification and the witnesses' will to forget the accident. For example, the pages dedicated to Fortunata Parlavecchio, who was rescued with her daughter, end with an uncertain epilogue: the woman, who was the most loquacious with journalists from her hospital bed just after the accident, committed suicide three years later, but none can tell for sure if it was because of her husband's financial issues or her continuous recalling of that night in 1978 (see Alajmo 2001, 43). Another survivor, Bepi Nicolazzi, was convinced that his permanent health problems were a sufficient reminder of the event and, after writing a recriminatory letter, stopped talking about the crash with anybody (see Alajmo 2001, 145).

As far as the beginning is concerned, from a narratological point of view, the traditional incipit of a disaster story is one that immediately emphasizes the unpredictability and abruptness of catastrophe. Thus, Murakami concludes his introduction by anticipating the sequence of events his witnesses are going to recount:

> The date is Monday March 20, 1995. It is a beautiful clear spring morning. [...] You get up at the normal time, wash, dress, breakfast, and head for the subway station. You board the train, crowded as usual. Nothing out of the ordinary. It promises to be a perfectly run-of-the-mill day. Until a man in disguise pokes at the floor of the car with the sharpened tip of his umbrella, puncturing some plastic bags filled with a strange liquid (Murakami 2000, 15).

The contrast between the clear sky and the ordinariness of the daily routine, followed by the absurdity of catastrophe, is a topos of disaster narratives, to the point of uniting the personal misfortune, such as the death of a loved one due to natural causes, and the collective, even though, in the individual experience of loss, the differences are ultimately irrelevant. This is effectively illustrated by Joan Didion in her memoir *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), which focuses on the mourning for the sudden death of the author's husband due to a heart attack, and therefore does not belong to our corpus. However, some of Didion's remarks are extremely useful to our purpose, since the author stresses precisely the common ground which characterizes narratives of equally traumatic and unaccountable events. First, she underlines the background, the habitual setting of everyday routine, whose striking opacity prevents one from seeing beyond its triviality any warning signs or anomalies: "I recognize now that there was nothing unusual in this: confronted with sudden disaster

we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred, the clear blue sky from which the plane fell, the routine errand that ended on the shoulder with the car in flames, the swings where the children were playing as usual when the rattlesnake struck from the ivy" (Didion 2005, 3). Then, Didion proceeds to give some examples of similar narratives, showing their pervasiveness; sometimes, their elliptical and concise form emphasizes the unintelligibility of events: "'He was on his way home from work—happy, successful, healthy—and then, gone,' I read in the account of a psychiatric nurse whose husband was killed in a highway accident" (3); other times, the reference to the invariable beautiful day confirms the traditional beginning of disaster stories, which Didion observed not only as a reader, but also by collecting the testimonies of survivors, just like the authors of our corpus did. Even considering the shift from personal tragedy to catastrophes such as Pearl Harbor and September 11, the constants remain remarkable, whether they appear in testimonies or in official reports:

> In 1966 I happened to interview many people who had been living in Honolulu on the morning of December 7, 1941; without exception, these people began their accounts of Pearl Harbor by telling me what an 'ordinary Sunday morning' it had been. 'It was just an ordinary beautiful September day,' people still say when asked to describe the morning in New York when American Airlines 11 and United Airlines 175 got flown into the World Trade towers. Even the report of the 9/11 Commission opened on this insistently premonitory and yet still dumbstruck narrative note: 'Tuesday, September 11, 2001, dawned temperate and nearly cloudless in the eastern United States' (Didion 2005, 3–4).

Catastrophe divides survivors' lives into 'before' and 'after,' often constituting a wound that will never be healed. It may also provide the people involved with a new identity that irretrievably and painfully separates them from who they had been until then, from the ordinariness of their existence:

> You're living your life. An ordinary fellow. A little man. Just like everyone else around you—going to work, coming home from work. [...] And then, just like that, you've turned into a Chernobyl person. A curiosity! Some person that everyone shows interest in, but nobody knows much about. You want to be the same as anyone else, but it's no longer possible. [...] In the beginning, we all turned into some kind of rare exhibits.

> Just the word 'Chernobyl' still acts like an alarm. They all turn their heads to look at you. 'Oh, from that place!' (Alexievich 2016, 43)

Through narrative, which is inherently posterior to any experience, we try to make sense of events, particularly when they occurred in a brutally sudden manner. *Underground,* then, is Murakami's search for meaning, that is, it is his attempt to shed light on the origins of the sarin attack, which he relates to a deep malaise affecting Japanese society. Takashi Hidetoshi's testimony, as a former proselyte of the Aum cult, elaborates on the reasons behind people's choice to join the leader Shoko Asahara. According to Hidetoshi, it was the apocalyptic anxiety that led towards Aum, a fear for the future which increased as society was approaching its end by reaching its highest point of prosperity:

> After an apocalyptic vision there's always a purging or purifying process that takes place. In this sense I think the gas attack was a kind of catharsis, a psychological release of everything that had built up in Japan—the malice, the distorted consciousness we have. Not that the Aum incident got rid of everything. There's still this suppressed, virus-like apocalyptic vision that's invading society and hasn't been erased or digested. Even if you could get rid of it at an individual level, the virus would remain on a social level (Murakami, 2010, 356–357).

The virus metaphor refers to something insidious and pervasive, silently spreading through space and time, and making difficult to determine when the phenomena it produced began. Therefore, it is not surprising that, focusing on the consequences of a real virus, Shilts necessarily had to deal with the problem of ascertaining when it appeared in the first place, hence establishing a starting point for his chronicle. Such a prelude is represented, in *And the Band Played On*, by the parties which took place during the 200th anniversary celebration of the United States, held in New York on 4 July 1976:

> Ships from fifty-five nations had poured sailors into Manhattan to join the throngs, counted in the millions, who watched the greatest pyrotechnic extravaganza ever mounted, all for America's 200th birthday party. Deep into the morning, bars all over the city were crammed with sailors. New York City had hosted the greatest party ever known, everybody agreed later. The guests had come from all over the world.
> This was the part the epidemiologists would later note, when they stayed up late at night and the conversation drifted toward where it

> had started and when. They would remember that glorious night in New York Harbor, all those sailors, and recall: From all over the world they came to New York (Shilts 2021, 3).

From the very beginning of his reconstruction, Shilts relies on the anticipation of what later came. In this passage, it is the moment when epidemiologists attempt to pinpoint the origins of the epidemic in the United States. Elsewhere, however, gloomy predictions and allusions are systematically employed to evoke the AIDS catastrophe, which is at that time already underway, even if people are not aware of it, unlike the narrator: placing himself in a time after the events have unfolded, he clearly uses his knowledge to generate this nervous anticipation of an unstoppable downfall. Readers of *And the Band Played On*, in fact, feel frustrated in witnessing the progression of the disaster and all the acts failed to contain it, while they are constantly reminded that things are getting worse: "This was a scenario for catastrophe, Dritz thought, and the commercialization of promiscuity in bathhouses was making it worse. [...] 'Too much is being transmitted,' she said. 'We've got all these diseases going unchecked. There are so many opportunities for transmission that, if something new gets loose here, we're going to have hell to pay'" (Shilts 2021, 40); "[s]lowly and almost imperceptibly, the killer was awakening" (49); "[t]here was a new virus that was killing gay men. Jesus Christ, some of these parties happened two years ago. It could be all over the place by now. God only knew how many people were going to die" (112); "[t]he horror. He couldn't escape the sense of impending doom. [...] He knew a dark secret. Something they didn't know. [...] Bobbi would die and so would thousands more. It had all been one big party and, now, it was about to end" (215).

Throughout *And the Band Played On*, the same dynamic is repeated: warnings that go unheeded, funds that are not allocated, constant delays in research and preventive measures. If this recurrent pattern emphasizes the irresponsible and scaring steps taken towards catastrophe, in disaster narratives reiteration can also be a mode of expression of traumatized memory, as a witness in *Chernobyl Prayer* shows: "It happened ten years ago, and every day it's still happening to me now. Right now. It's always with me" (Alexievich 2016, 43). More generally, repetition is an integral part of the choral structure adopted by Murakami, Alexievich, and Alajmo, since, by focusing on the same event narrated from several perspectives, it is inevitable that each story presents aspects already encountered at an earlier point in the text. Furthermore, in nonfiction detours from the facts are not welcome, hence even their repetitiveness should be respected. In such a context, invention and poetic license are not praised, as confirmed

by David Harris's disapproval of Shilts' narrative approach, namely his "need to invent scenes, overhear conversations, tap internal monologues, create suspense, devise artful foreshadowing, and evoke menacing atmospheres" (Harris 1997, 233).

Unavoidable repetitions, then, can contribute to the authenticity of a story, just as returning to the same set of experiences to describe extreme events stresses how the exceptionality of catastrophe challenges language as well. This aspect is clearly noticeable in *Chernobyl Prayer*, where Alexievich thematizes the difficulty to find the right words to conceptualize and communicate something that people have experienced for the first time. Thus, as readers, we continuously learn that some citizens are unable to leave the place where they had always lived, because, in their eyes, nature has not changed at all and cannot therefore threaten their existence: since it resists perception, radioactive contamination resists understanding and representation too. Equally widespread, in *Chernobyl Prayer*, is the reference to war, which witnesses constantly mention as their most extreme experience before the nuclear accident, identifying many similarities between the two events: the evacuations, the numerous deaths, the omnipresent soldiers, the oppressive fear. Orienting oneself in a new reality implies, also, evaluating it in relation to other circumstances, which can lead to different forms of adaptation to disasters. *Chernobyl Prayer* contains many examples of such responses, as that of a family who settled in the contaminated area after leaving Tajikistan because of war:

> I don't find it as scary here as it was back there. We're left without a homeland, we don't belong anywhere. [...] [W]e'd all forgotten what normal, peaceful life was like. That you can walk down the streets in the evenings. That you can laugh. [...] But they hadn't seen cream or butter in two years. Over there, you couldn't buy bread. It was war. You can't explain it to someone who doesn't know what war is, only knows it from the movies.
>
> My soul was dead there. Who would I give birth to, with my soul dead? There aren't many people here. The houses are empty. We live near the forest. I get frightened when there are too many people. Like at the station, in the war (Alexievich 2016, 23).

The inhabitants of a village are proud of having somehow gone back in time and built a sort of self-sufficient commune, where no authority is recognized, and contaminated nature is more hospitable than urban society:

> In our village, the people live together. As one community. [...]
> Nobody can trick us again, we're not budging from this place. We've got no shop, no hospital. There's no light. We sit around paraffin lamps and rushlights. But we're happy! We're home. [...]
> So long as there's no war ... I'm terrified of war! [...]
> We returned along with our cats. And dogs. We came back together. The soldiers and riot police wouldn't let us in, so we came by night. Took the forest footpaths. The partisan paths.
> There's nothing we need from the state. We grow everything ourselves. All we ask is to be left alone! We don't need any shops or buses. We go twenty kilometres on foot for our bread and salt. We can fend for ourselves (Alexievich 2016, 17–18).

For the family on the run, the most important thing was to save their lives, while for the villagers it was to return home. However, both are haunted by war, which is a present reality for the first and a memory brought back by the management of the disaster for the second. In the end, their decisions are reduced to a choice between the effects of two catastrophes: war and nuclear disaster.

In our corpus, previous disasters may be occasionally mentioned to hint at similar causes and mistakes, like in Alajmo's text, whereby the plane crash that occurred in 1972 is recalled, during the same route another plane would follow a mere six years later. Instead, in *Underground* the disapproving intent is explicit in the words of a doctor: "There is no prompt and efficient system in Japan for dealing with a major catastrophe. There's no clear-cut chain of command. It was exactly the same with the Kobe earthquake. The biggest lesson we learned from the Tokyo gas attack and the Matsumoto incident was that when something major strikes, the local units may be extremely swift to respond, but the overall picture is hopeless" (Murakami 2000, 222).

Authors and victims can borrow images and words related to other tragic events to compensate for the limits of language in front of the shock and obscurity of a new experience, which in *Chernobyl Prayer* is insistently highlighted: "They were comparing it with Hiroshima, but no one believed that. How can you believe anything if it's baffling?" (Alexievich 2016, 39); "I'd read about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, seen the documentary footage. It was horrific, but everything made sense: a nuclear war, a blast radius. I could imagine all that. But what had happened to us ... It was simply beyond me" (46).

Finally, recalling past catastrophes, such as the horror of concentration camps, contributes to motivate standpoints and behaviors in front of

a danger. As for Chernobyl people, it is a matter of choice between different disasters, which, for the HIV positive people, are represented by the epidemic and the prospect of persecution:

> Paul echoed the fears Curran was hearing so much lately, about how AIDS might be used as a medical pretext to round up homosexuals and put them in concentration camps.
> 'I know I'm not going to get AIDS, and I'll be damned if I'm going to spend the rest of my life in some camp,' said Paul, in his friendly Oregonian way. Curran thought the train of thought was curious. After all, nobody had suggested or even hinted that gays should be in any way quarantined for AIDS. The right-wing loonies who might propose such a 'final solution' were not paying enough attention to the disease to construct this Dachau scenario. Still, it was virtually an article of faith among homosexuals that they would somehow end up in concentration camps (Shilts 2021, 228).

Relating the catastrophe at the heart of the text to earlier atrocities generally implies an equation with those historical facts or the belief that the more recent tragedy stands out for its uniqueness. Even if such assumptions play different roles in the construction of disaster narratives, there is no doubt that they lend themselves to criticism concerning victimhood and historical memory. When the above-mentioned witness admits, in *Chernobyl Prayer*, that he can understand Hiroshima, but remains speechless about the nuclear accident, he is indirectly attesting to the exceptional nature of what he experienced and validating Susan Sontag's argument that "victims are interested in the representation of their own sufferings. But they want the suffering to be seen as unique. [...] To set their sufferings alongside the sufferings of another people was to compare them (which hell was worse?), demoting [...] [their] martyrdom to a mere instance. [...] It is intolerable to have one's own sufferings twinned with anybody else's" (Sontag 2019, 98–99). This reasoning explains why some deem as unethical, for example, the appropriations of Holocaust language and imagery, which entails that the preeminence of the extermination makes any other catastrophe comprehensible and representable in its presence. Simultaneously, the pervasiveness of the Holocaust in the mass culture of the United States, where there is an alarming lack of factual knowledge of the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis, has made it more akin to an ahistorical myth than an event that actually happened (see Rothe 2011, 11, 16–17). More broadly, becoming the symbol of absolute evil, "an archetype for emplot-

ting diverse experiences of victimization" (Rothe 2011, 8), and "the benchmark against which all other events would be assessed" (13), the Holocaust was "unethically appropriated as an exculpatory screen memory to evade responsibility for the crimes perpetrated throughout American history" (12). Curiously being both unthinkable, overwhelming, and reduced to a universal and simplistic moral lesson to be applied to almost any issue, the Holocaust paradigm can still operate as a powerful reminder to act in the face of a new catastrophe that must be stopped. If in *And the Band Played On* the "Dachau scenario" (Shilts 2021, 228) awaiting people with HIV is evoked as a nightmare, a dreadful future projection, however improbable, another passage of the text provides a different perspective. Larry Kramer, activist, writer, and one of the main characters of Shilts' chronicle, spends a month in Europe in 1983; three years before, the disease which was spreading around him did not yet have a name. Deciding to visit the Dachau concentration camp, Kramer is dismayed to find out that it was opened in 1933, which means that eight years still had to pass before the United States entered the war in 1941:

> In an instant, his fury turned to ice. He knew exactly how the Nazis could kill for eight years without anyone doing anything. Nobody cared. That was what was happening with AIDS. People were dying, and nobody cared. As the anger rose again in Larry, he knew what he would do. That night, he jumped a plane to Boston. He quickly made his way to Cape Cod and spent his first night in the States at the Hyannisport Holiday Inn. Within a few days, everything fell into place. He found a cottage on the water and sat down to write a play that would force people to care (Shilts 2021, 358).

Kramer's encounter with the historical catastrophe takes place at the site of those atrocities and the extermination is not understood merely on a metaphorical level. Moreover, what happened in Dachau is not taken as an excuse to escape one's responsibilities, especially when it comes to reckoning with the major problems the United States are currently experiencing. On the contrary, the Holocaust forces the community to face the deaths from AIDS, which, although due to different causes, have been going on for years, as Kramer remarks, amid indifference. Unwilling to accept this state of affairs, Kramer takes action as an author, committing himself to stir people's consciences by writing what was to become his most famous play, *A Normal Heart*. Hence, this ethos topos of engagé literature is embraced not only by Shilts as the author of *And the Band*

Played On, but is also staged in the text through the behavior of a character: both act as if they have a mission, which is to oppose, document, and denounce the wrongs that have been done (see Korthals Altes 2014, 182–183).

Although juxtaposing diverse catastrophes is far from unproblematic, writers dealing with disasters seem to agree that inaction and resignation before the suffering of others is in any case a moral posture to be rejected. Susan Sontag reflects on this in connection to AIDS and its interpretations:

> Stephen Jay Gould has declared that the AIDS pandemic may rank with nuclear weaponry 'as the greatest danger of our era.' But even if it kills as much as a quarter of the human race—a prospect Gould considers possible—'there will still be plenty of us left and we can start again.' Scornful of the jeremiads of the moralists, a rational and humane scientist proposes the minimum consolation: an apocalypse that doesn't have any meaning. AIDS is a 'natural phenomenon,' not an event 'with a moral meaning,' Gould points out; 'there is no message in its spread' (Sontag 1989, 86).

Although Sontag agrees that it is detrimental to give a disease a moral judgment, she cannot accept mass deaths with impassibility by relegating them among the natural phenomena. This sort of "complicity with disaster" (Sontag 1989, 87) is precisely what can invalidate crucial measures and hide human responsabilities related to extreme events: "The Indian and African famines were not just 'natural' disasters; they were preventable; they were crimes of great magnitude. And what happened in Minamata was obviously a crime [...]" (Sontag 2019, 31).

The comparative analysis of the four selected texts has brought to light significant elements which lead to hypothesize a shared poetics in contemporary nonfiction about disasters. However, this inquiry only constitutes a preliminary assessment, since the almost unexplored field of investigation necessarily requires more in-depth study and, above all, a broadening of the reference corpus. In any case, essential starting points emerged from the texts of Alexievich, Murakami, Alajmo and Shilts. In particular, the uses of the paratext, the modulations of authorial voice and the choral structure need to be foregrounded. If the paratext is where the author usually declares his ethical commitment, the methods and purpose of her/his project, at the same time the presence of such liminary sections, which have primarily explanatory functions, signals how such works do not occupy a stable and acknowledged place in the literary panorama,

as suggested by their difficult categorization as well. Ultimately, although each author addresses and expresses his/her own original and personal view of the catastrophe, the choral form seems to be inevitably chosen as the most suitable narrative structure to represent disasters. The ability of the author, then, consists in providing a polyphonic and complex story of the disaster, showing how any attempt to narrate and understand it has to deal with multiple actors and layers of meaning.

Mariarosa Loddo holds a PhD in comparative literature. As a postdoc she has conducted research at the Università del Piemonte Orientale (Italy) and at the Institut Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (France). Her work focuses on narratology, life writing, literature and medicine, nonfiction about disasters. She has dedicated several articles to these topics and published a monograph in Italian on pathographies (*Patografie: voci, corpi, trame*, 2020).

Bibliography

Alajmo, Roberto. 2001. *Notizia del disastro*. Milano: Garzanti.

Alexievich, Svetlana. 2016. *Chernobyl Prayer*. Translated by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait. London: Penguin.

Carrère, Emmanuel. 2009. *Other Lives But Mine*. Translated by Linda Coverdale. London: Penguin.

Detue, Frédérik, and Charlotte Lacoste. 2016. "*Ce que le témoignage fait à la littérature*." *Europe* 1041/1042: 3–15.

Detue, Frédérik. 2012. "Noter le futur: témoignage et politique suivant Svetlana Alexievitch." *Littérature* 168: 85–102.

Didion, Joan. 2005. *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Knopf.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2016. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Harris, David. 1997. *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*. New York: Hyperion.

Ibuse, Masuji. 2010. *Black Rain*. Translated by John Bester. New York: Kodansha International.

Korthals Altes, Liesbeth. 2014. *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Ligi, Gianluca. 2009. *Antropologia dei disastri*. Bari: Laterza.

Murakami, Haruki. 2000. *Underground*. Translated by Alfred Birnbaum and Philip Gabriel. New York: Vintage Books.

Rastier, François. 2013. "Témoignages inadmissibles." *Littérature* 159: 108–129.

Rothe, Anne. 2011. *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Rubin, Jay. 2002. *Haruki Murakami and the Music of Words*. London: Harvill Press.

Shilts, Randy. 2021. *And the Band Played On: Politics, People and the AIDS Epidemic*. London: Serpent's Tale.
Solnit, Rebecca. 2010. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*. London: Penguin.
Sontag, Susan. 1989. *Aids and its Metaphors*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Sontag, Susan. 2019. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. London: Penguin.
Watson, Julia, and Sidonie Smith. 2001. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.