
The Imaginative Invalid: The Exaltation of Illness in Alan Pauls' *Wasabi* (1994)

NICOLAS LICATA

Université de Liège



Abstract

In the medical discourse, as in some of our social practices, disease is sometimes associated with deficiency and suffering. Literature has the power to challenge, and even reverse, these negative connotations established by other institutions. This is what Alan Pauls does in *Wasabi*, a novel whose narrator and leading character – the author's very own alter ego – is apparently in poor health. In addition to frequent narcolepsies, he suffers a supernatural metamorphosis that he refers to using the lexicon of illness. The vision of illness *Wasabi* offers is in no way a pessimistic one, however; it is presented not as a problem to be solved, but rather as a positive life experience through which the narrator and central character is able to reach a higher state of consciousness.

Resumen

En el discurso médico, como en algunas de nuestras prácticas sociales, la enfermedad se asocia a veces con la deficiencia y el sufrimiento. La literatura tiene el poder de cuestionar, e incluso de invertir, estas connotaciones negativas establecidas por otras instituciones. Esto es lo que hace Alan Pauls en *Wasabi*, una novela cuyo narrador-protagonista –alter ego del autor– goza en apariencia de mala salud. Además de frecuentes narcolepsias, padece una metamorfosis sobrenatural a la que se refiere usando el léxico de la enfermedad. Ahora bien, la visión que *Wasabi* ofrece de la enfermedad no es de ningún modo pesimista; esta se presenta no como un problema que tendría que resolverse, sino más bien como una experiencia de vida positiva a través de la cual el narrador y personaje central alcanza un estado de conciencia superior.

Para mí la enfermedad es el momento en el que un cuerpo empieza a transformarse y, junto con el cuerpo, absolutamente todo lo que define a un sujeto. [...] Creo que las enfermedades son maneras de percibir el mundo. A. Pauls, 'Literatura de la intimidad'

As a science, medicine teaches us that disease is a dysfunction of the body that stops an individual from moving and acting freely in the world; as such, disease

should be anticipated, diagnosed and fought.¹ The body is a strange and complex thing, however, precisely because it cannot be reduced to the status of a ‘thing’. The body is a ‘thing’, indeed, but a ‘thing’ that one *is*. It is always the incarnation of a person, able to live and witness the events of his or her bodily life in a different way to that determined by medical theory. In his novel *Wasabi* (1994), the Argentinian writer Alan Pauls (Buenos Aires, 1959) reveals through fiction his own conception of illness.² He does not consider it only as an alteration of health, but also, like Virginia Woolf before him, as the opportunity to stand back from the obligations of daily and professional life, to clear one’s mind, and to recreate oneself. In Pauls’ view, illness does not appear to be a diminution, or at least not primarily, nor does it correspond to emptiness or nothingness. Rather, it is represented in the novel as another modality of existence, characterized by withdrawal and slowness, and from which existence may be perceived in a new light. In this essay, I study how this peculiar conception of illness manifests itself in *Wasabi*, firstly analysing how the topic is dealt with as a whole in the novel, and then by focussing more specifically on the narrator-lead’s process of corporal metamorphosis, that he himself describes as an illness.

First of all, though, I should begin by offering a brief introduction and summary of the novel. Published in 1994, *Wasabi* was written in the spring of 1992, during Alan Pauls’ stay at the Maison des Écrivains Étrangers et des Traducteurs (MEET) of Saint-Nazaire, a port city located in western France. The novel fictionalizes its own material conditions of production. The narrator, a fictional projection of Alan Pauls, is accommodated at the MEET for two months with all of his expenses covered, just like the author. He must, also as the real Pauls, compose a short literary piece during this period to repay the invitation. Unlike the real author, however, the narrator suffers from writer’s block. Despite all of his efforts, he is incapable of writing a single line of the text he owes his hosts. Moreover, his body has been acting strangely ever since his arrival in France: the texture of the cyst on his neck begins to change, and every day he suffers one to three episodes of narcolepsy. It is during one of these episodes that the narrator has a curious idea: to kill the French writer and painter, Pierre Klossowski.

With this idea in mind, the narrator heads to Paris. This moment constitutes the turning point for the novel: in the French capital, not only is he successively attacked by Klossowski’s doorman and three drunk Irishmen, who beat him and

- 1 Warm thanks to Kristine Vanden Berghe and Ella Mingazova for their critical revision of this text.
- 2 Throughout this essay I use the concepts of ‘disease’ and ‘illness’ as understood by Bryan Turner in the first pages of the chapter he dedicates to this topic in *The Body and Society* (1984): the former describes in a supposedly neutral way (on a scientific basis) a disturbance in the organism, a deficiency or atypical deviation from a norm that is judged as natural, while the latter is essentially cultural in the sense that it refers to the social norms around health problems and to how each individual experiences them on a personal level. ‘Disease’ is thus an observable and measurable fact; ‘illness’ is to some extent a personal appreciation that may vary from one individual to another (Turner 2008: 174–75). It should be noted that this distinction is inexistent in Spanish, where the term *enfermedad* conveys both a descriptive and an evaluative meaning.

rob him of everything he has, but simultaneously the tiny cyst that had begun to surface discreetly in his neck transforms itself into a disproportionate bony protrusion. Together with the blows he receives, this protrusion gives him the appearance of a monster. Unrecognizable, and with no money left, the narrator has no other option than to loiter in Paris until, seven days later, another MEET resident miraculously recognizes him and helps him off the street. The colleague, a Chinese playwright whose name we do not know, tends to each of his injuries with endless patience, and, once recovered, the narrator sets out for the Salon du Livre, where Klossowski is about to give a public talk. There, he sees Klossowski, accompanied by the director of the MEET, Christian Bouthemy. He pushes his way through the crowd, shouting Christian's name, but Bouthemy only reacts with disdain.

If the whole novel seems strange, the seventh and final chapter is without any doubt the most intriguing. Frustrated, the narrator leaves the Salon and gets lost in a lugubrious neighbourhood of Paris. To escape from the insults and abuse he receives, he hides in the basement of a prostitute, who, fascinated by his excrescence, starts fondling it, pinching it, and pricking it with a fork. She then mounts the protuberance and begins to move up and down on it, whilst the narrator's attention is entirely captured by a vision that appears to him in the glass of a nearby window. He sees himself next to his wife, Tellas, in the Saint-Nazaire flat, just a few weeks earlier, although he seems surprisingly younger: 'Yo (alguien con mi cara y mis gestos, alguien mucho más joven que yo) estaba sentado en el piso con el pie del sillón a modo de respaldo, un libro abierto olvidado entre los muslos' (Pauls 2005: 152). The novel ends with these puzzling words, told by the narrator: 'Supe entonces cuánto más extraña es la juventud que la ficción, y supe que el hijo que velaba insomne dentro de su madre dormida había encontrado por fin a su padre' (2005: 155).

What does this oversized cyst stand for? And, by extension, what can the intercourse with the prostitute mean? As Kristine Vanden Berghe observes (2015: 33), the cyst is an *in absentia* type of metaphor which, to some extent, could be compared with Gregor Samsa's transformation in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915). Like Kafka, Pauls offers the reader the vehicle of a metaphor (an oversized excrescence) without revealing its tenor, so that there can exist an infinity, or almost, of possible interpretations for it. Alejandra Laera has argued, for instance, that the cyst embodies the conflict that writers experience from the moment an advance is received for their work (2009: 462). Marcelo Méndez, for his part, has highlighted the existence of an intertextual link with the story of Quasimodo, based on two elements: the hunchback figure in Paris, as well as the persecution that the narrator faces in the last chapter, which evokes the violence, both verbal and physical, that Hugo's character also suffers (2008: 106).³ I would like to argue

3 One might also see in the hump-backed protagonist of *Wasabi* a wink to the short story 'El jorobadito', by Argentinian writer Roberto Arlt (*El jorobadito y otros cuentos*, Córdoba, Argentina: Ediciones del Sur, 1933). Alan Pauls is likely to be familiar with Arlt's work since the journal *Babel*, in which Pauls actively participated between 1988 and 1990, has

that the enigmatic cyst and narrator's metamorphosis as a whole are emblems of illness. In fact, the narrator himself explicitly makes this association. Through this analysis I pursue the efforts developed in a limited but growing number of works that emphasize the presence of the theme of illness in Latin American literature and methodically analyse it, such as Lina Meruane's (2012) and Alicia Vaggione's (2013) monographs on the representations of AIDS, Wolfgang Bongers and Tanja Olbrich's (2006), as well as Patricia Novillo-Corvalán's (2015) collective volumes, and the recent issues of *Orillas* and *Letral* edited respectively by Laura Scarabelli (2019) and Jorge Locane (2021).

Illness

As reflected in my short summary of *Wasabi*, the body holds a privileged position in this literary work. Its deformations, illnesses and other apparent dysfunctions are key issues in the novel. In the interview conducted by Bernard Bretonnière on the occasions of the French translation of *Wasabi*, Alan Pauls admits that he feels deeply attracted to any slight hints of disorder, to any small differences that may disrupt the proper functioning of something or somebody, and that these are for him a real 'generator of fiction' (*machine à fictions*) (2006: 152). Aside from the depictions of his own body, the narrator is also decidedly meticulous when it comes to describing the bodies of the other characters, a majority of which are singled out because of a notable physical trait. Christian Bouthemy, director of the MEET, is bald (11); the Chinese playwright's feet are of an effeminate size (85); and the prostitute who appears in the last chapter has a pale forehead, characterized by a tuft of black hair forming a 'v' (148). When the narrator consults a homeopath about his cyst, he tells us that she has 'los ojos de dos colores distintos, lo que daba a su mirada un aire ligeramente estrábico; una sombra tenue de vello corría paralela a su labio superior, y un pequeño lunar liso colgaba como un aro flotante bajo el lóbulo de su oreja izquierda' (13). The special attention paid to physical details is not just reserved for the novel's main characters. We are told, for example, that the employee of the airline from which Tellas buys her ticket

published various reviews and articles about Arlt's books. However, the most fundamental intertextual link forged by Pauls in *Wasabi* is probably the one with François Rabelais' giant characters, which in Mikhail Bakhtine's opinion represent the most eloquent realization of the grotesque body (1970: 36). In *Pantagruel* (1532) Rabelais reveals the origin of a race of giants, who were born after Cain, Adam and Eve's son, killed his brother Abel. The earth soaked with Abel's blood resulted in a year that was particularly fertile in fruits and the men who ate those fruits instantly grew immense. Some began to swell in a homogeneous manner, while others saw only a very specific part of their body inflate, like their legs, their belly, their ears, their nose or (here really lies the intertextual connection with *Wasabi*) their shoulders: 'Les autres employent par les espaulles, et tant estoient bossus qu'on les appelloit *montifères*, comme *porte montaignes*, dont vous en voyez encores par le monde en divers sexes et dignités, et de ceste race yssit Esopet, duquel vous avez les beaux faictz et dictz par escript' (Rabelais 1962: 223). Once again, it is legitimate to suppose that Pauls knows Rabelais' work, at least through Bakhtine's study, since he refers to the latter in the review of Milan Kundera's *The Art of the Novel* he wrote for the first issue of *Babel* (Pauls 1988: 5).

back to Buenos Aires is incapable of ‘congelar el tic que lo obligaba a parpadear de un solo ojo cada dos segundos’ (2005: 114).

The multiplication of this type of details in the description of the characters reflects nothing less than the intrinsic variability of bodies, evoking an idea thoroughly explored from a philosophical perspective by Georges Canguilhem in *Le Normal et le pathologique* (1966) and in Maria Michela Marzano-Parisoli’s *Penser le corps* (2002), which builds on Canguilhem’s work. Since each individual is different, they argue, it is to some extent ‘normal’ that he or she should have some ‘anomaly’ when compared with someone else. ‘L’anormal n’[est] pas ce qui n’est pas normal, mais ce qui est un autre normal’, writes Canguilhem (1972: 135). Similarly, Pauls’ novel also emphasizes the constitutive vulnerability and finitude of bodies, in the sense that various characters suffer from health problems: the narrator, of course, with his cyst and narcolepsies, the Chinese playwright suffers from a bronchitis (Pauls 2005: 13), Bouthemy loses his hair (2005: 11), and Klossowski, who the narrator describes as an individual in ruins (135), has ‘una palidez cadavérica’ (56–57) attributed to him by La Bachelarde, one of his ex-models. Perhaps the most significant element in this respect is that even the doctor (the individual expected to predict, prevent, diagnose and treat health problems) does not appear to be particularly healthy, either, as can be inferred from these words pronounced by the narrator, who sketchily describes him as ‘un practicante que el amigo pintor de Tellas había recomendado, y que interrumpía su caligrafía de miope para sonarse la nariz con hojas que arrancaba de un viejo recetario’ (61).

This doctor, it should also be pointed out, does not seem to be fully knowledgeable about his subject. In the introduction to *Medicine and Literature. The Doctor’s Companion to the Classics* (2002), a book intended for both practising and would-be doctors that includes more than fifteen analyses on the topic of medicine in novels by Flaubert, Calvino, Kafka and Joyce, doctor and professor of medicine John Salinsky writes: ‘Doctors have a way of creeping in at the margins of literature: it is difficult to keep them out. When they do appear, I find them fascinating, as I guess all doctors do [...]. Unfortunately, most literary doctors show a dismaying lack of moral fibre, decency or even professional competence. The only truly heroic fictional doctors seem to be those who appear in novels written by doctors themselves’ (Salinsky 2018: 4). What Salinsky indicates regarding the representation of his profession in literary fiction holds true in *Wasabi*, where the character of the doctor diagnoses Tellas as having issues with her liver (Pauls 2005: 61), while what she feels are in fact the first symptoms of her pregnancy, of which she is still unaware at this point in the novel. As a figure standing for alternative medicine, the homeopath does not do a much better job than the doctor who auscultates Tellas. When, in the first pages of the novel, the narrator tells this homeopath about the change in texture of the protuberance on his neck, she recommends the use of a balm meant to soften his skin. This balm does not have any effect on the cyst, however, which shortly after becomes as rough as fish scales (2005: 30). Curiously, it is a character who has no medical training, the Chinese playwright, who gives the most effective care in the novel. The narrator even tells about his

colleague: ‘Fue el enfermero más fiel, el más atento y desinteresado. No me hizo preguntas: trabajó con mi enfermedad como con un material opaco que tuviera que doblagar a fuerza de obstinación y de confianza, no de curiosidad’ (87).

From the presence of various ill characters, of an unhealthy doctor and a homeopath whose interventions prove to be unsuccessful, it does not seem unreasonable to deduce that in Alan Pauls’ view, illness is at least as common or ‘normal’ as health. On this point, too, the novel echoes *Le Normal et le pathologique* (1966), where Canguilhem addresses at length the simple but profound idea that what is ‘abnormal’ is not to fall ill; it is rather to be in a continuous state of perfect health (1972: 76–134). In the same line of thought, it is worth noting that *Wasabi* does not present illness as a problem which necessarily requires a solution. In their essay *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependence of Discourse*, David Mitchel and Sharon Snyder (2000) argue that not only disability but also any physical or mental deviation from the norm are commonly presented in fiction as problems to be solved, and that most often the characters that suffer from them are ‘normalized’ – that is, they are relieved, cured or see their difference effaced at the end of the story:

A simple schematic structure of narrative might run thus: first, a deviance or marked difference is exposed to a reader; second, a narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation’s origins and formative consequences; third, the deviance is brought from the periphery of concerns to the center of the story to come; and fourth, the remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner. (Mitchel and Snyder 2000: 53–54)

This is how the introduction of a disability or illness at the beginning of a narration conditions its reception, according to Mitchel and Snyder. *Wasabi* calls this pattern into question. Reading the first lines of the novel, the reader might assume that information will be given about the circumstances of the formation of the cyst, that at some point it will cause some concern to the narrator, and that eventually it will have to be removed. This is never the case, though; despite the gigantic dimensions of the cyst and its effects on the narrator’s body, which progressively bends down under its weight, at no point in the story is this considered as problematic. The narrator accepts his enormous lump and even feels proud when the Chinese playwright asks him if he might take a picture of it (Pauls 2005: 95–96).⁴

4 *Wasabi* is not the only contemporary Hispano-American fiction at odds with this theoretical model described by Mitchel and Snyder. In previous work I have related the metamorphosis of Alan Pauls’ alter ego in this novel to the more global phenomenon of the autofictional characters’ deterioration, as manifested in, among other works, Valeria Luiselli’s and Mario Bellatin’s autofictions (Licata 2020); another feature common to these three writers’ autofictions is, precisely, that they do not represent physical deviation as a problem; quite on the contrary, in *Los ingrátidos*, Valeria Luiselli (2014) portrays blind Mexican poet Gilberto Owen as having faculties of perception superior to those of her sighted characters (Licata 2019), and in various of his autofictions – especially in ‘La verdadera enfermedad de la sheika’ (2007), Mario Bellatin discusses the question of the orthopaedic prostheses imposed upon him since childhood though he did not need them, since he was born without a right forearm and, consequently, he says, this has always been his ‘normality’ (Licata in press). A hypothesis about the relationship between the genre of autofiction and this kind of representation of illness and disability is formulated in the conclusions of the present article.

Considering the cyst as an illness might draw some objections, and, as a matter of fact, unlike the narrator's narcolepsies it cannot strictly be considered as such, since it does not impede – at least initially – his body to exercise its normal functions. In Western culture, indeed, illness is often conceived of as an alteration of health, and health is, in turn, defined as the harmonious coincidence with the body, as the state in which organs are silent and function normally (Canguilhem 1972: 72; Le Breton 1992: 97). Based on the enormous proportions the cyst gradually acquires, however, it is not an exaggeration to call it an illness, not to mention that the narrator himself applies the lexicon of illness to the metamorphosis caused by the protuberance, as in the extract already quoted above, in which he says that the Chinese playwright was the most dedicated *enfermero* in the treatment of his *enfermedad* (Pauls 2005: 87).⁵

The fact that the cyst is not considered as a problem is echoed in the attitude of various characters, starting with the Chinese playwright, who cures each of the narrator's injuries carefully but, significantly, does not try to eliminate the protuberance. He even refrains from doing anything that could hinder its proper development:

[La deformidad que persistía intacta en la parte superior de mi espalda] lo había cautivado desde el primer día; sus cuidados, que siempre fueron minuciosos, adquirirían un carácter sentimental cada vez que los consagraba al espolón, como si esa anomalía no fuera la aberración ósea que era sino un prodigio del cuerpo, el milagro que alguna providencia había puesto en su camino para que él, su único devoto, lo mantuviera vivo. (Pauls 2005: 94–95)

'Consagrar', 'prodigio', 'milagro', 'providencia', 'devoto', in this excerpt the narrator applies a religious lexicon to his cyst, which stresses the divine nature it acquires in the eyes of the Chinese playwright. As for Pauls' wife, Tellas, she does not express doubt or worry over it either. Rather, she ridicules the cyst, hanging a bodice and a hat on it (2005: 53). She even confides that she has thought of buying a woollen hat for it,⁶ and nicknames her partner 'coat stand' (*perchero*) (2005: 53).

Tellas makes fun not only of the cyst but also of the narrator's narcolepsies. She invents a game whose goal is to readopt, at the end of the seven minutes

5 In this regard, it is also possible to read between the lines of Alan Pauls' dialogue with Bernard Bretonnière that the author has indeed conceived the novel as an illness story: "Tous mes romans (*Wasabi* aussi) se terminent en général par des extases sexuelles ou criminelles. Je ne les vois pas comme des impasses et elles ne m'inspirent aucun dégoût. Plutôt une sorte d'euphorie, comme si les dernières pages d'un roman me réservaient toujours une récompense privée. Puisque j'écris des histoires de maladie, qui suivent presque toujours les traces d'une contagion ou une décomposition, il me semble presque normal que ces expériences s'achèvent par une espèce d'apothéose clinique" (Pauls 2006: 153–54). In her own study of the novel, entitled 'Cuando el autor deviene monstruo', Adriana López-Labourdette also considers the narrator's cyst and the transformation it causes as an illness (2019: 305–06) without, however, justifying this aspect of her reading or formulating an interpretation of the subject.

6 Tellas says about this hat, not without irony: "Un gorrito, bah", se corrigió: "en realidad era como una media de lana, o más que una media una especie de guante de un solo dedo, elástico, capaz de adaptarse a cualquier tamaño" (Pauls 2005: 104–05).

that the narcolepsies last for, the exact same position she found herself in when the narrator collapsed, so that he would not become aware of his short absence and return to his activities as if he had never fallen asleep. Moreover, similar to the Chinese playwright, who treats the cyst as divine, the narrator's wife attributes to the narcolepsies a superhuman character. While the narrator tends to consider them as a pure loss of time, Tellas is of the opinion that they are a sort of quotidian time-saving that one day would allow him to prolong his life:

Sin duda otra persona habría aprovechado el privilegio, el poder terrible que le confería su condición de único testigo, único aunque intermitente, de mi enfermedad. Ella, en cambio, prefería no alimentar falsas esperanzas. Tampoco tenía motivo para hacerlo, puesto que se negaba a tratar como un mal esas defeciones de la vigilia [...]. ¿Qué hacer, me decía, con esos siete minutos perdidos? Si no eran ni sueños y tampoco un descanso, ¿por qué pensar en deducir de mi vida esa parcela de tiempo y no en ponerla a un costado como una especie de ahorro, como la reserva que, atesorada en esa dimensión en la que naufragaba al desvanecerme, alguna vez habría de reaparecer bajo la forma de una prórroga? (Pauls 2005: 22–23)

Like the Chinese playwright, who admires the cyst and elevates it to the status of a religious miracle, Tellas turns into a 'capacidad sobrenatural' (2005: 23) the loss of time that her husband associates with his narcolepsies.

In the medical discourse, as in some of our social practices, disease is sometimes associated with deficiency and suffering. However, as Javier Guerrero and Nathalie Bouzaglo aptly write in the introduction of *Excesos del cuerpo*: 'La literatura como productora de metáforas tiene la capacidad de inventar, reforzar, invertir, resistir, desconectar o reconectar las metáforas que otras instituciones y hasta la propia literatura instalan' (2009: 25). This is precisely what Alan Pauls does in *Wasabi*, a novel in which illness is presented not only as a difficult condition to avoid, as is manifest in its presence in various characters in the novel and the failures of medicine, but also as an empowering factor, a physical state even superior to health.

We can now address the issue of the narrator's metamorphosis, which will allow me to deepen this analysis of the treatment of illness in the novel.

Metamorphosis

In the fragment of the last chapter quoted in my summary of the novel, the prostitute's window provides the narrator with the vision of a younger Double: 'Yo (alguien con mi cara y mis gestos, alguien mucho más joven que yo) estaba sentado en el piso con el pie del sillón a modo de respaldo, un libro abierto entre los muslos' (Pauls 2005: 152). This manner of describing himself has nothing strange in itself, but it must be noted that the events related in the novel happen in a very short time frame. Only a few weeks pass between the *in medias res* beginning in the homeopath's office and the final encounter with the prostitute. This is why the projection of himself that the narrator faces cannot be much 'younger' in the common and physical sense of the term.

What, then, can this ageing metaphor mean? It appears for the first time after the narrator's period of convalescence in the Chinese playwright's house. 'Una semana de reclusión y el invierno retrocedía ante el verano', declares the narrator when leaving the house. Suddenly everything seems new to him, including himself:

La atmósfera me parecía tan irreal como la noche que se desploma sobre nosotros cuando salimos de un cine, dos horas después de haber entrado, todavía víctimas de esa ilusión luminosa que era el mundo en el momento en que nos tragó la sala a oscuras. Si dos horas de llamas falsas ardiendo en una caverna nos condenan, cuando recobramos la vista, a un puro estupor, entonces era probable que mis siete días de convalecencia extendieran esa perplejidad al universo entero. [...] Todo me parecía intacto y limpio, sentía el privilegio de atravesar un lugar que nadie antes había usado. [...] *Había envejecido*. Si mis ojos eran sensibles sólo a la novedad, al impacto de lo inesperado, debía de ser porque el tiempo consumido por la enfermedad y la rehabilitación se había llevado consigo meses, años, la escoria de eras enteras, y con ellos todos los mundos conocidos. *Había envejecido* tan inadvertidamente como en un sueño, volver atrás era imposible. Tal vez por eso había, en la felicidad que me embargaba, [...] una especie de palpitación acongojada [...]. *Había envejecido*. Caminaba encorvado, como siempre, pero ya no me resistía a las imposiciones del espolón. (Pauls 2005: 101–02; emphasis added)

The whole process the narrator has gone through until then, the transformation and his recovery from it, are assimilated to ageing. If everything that surrounds him seems new, it is because he would have aged. From the novelty the narrator talks of, his apparent enthusiasm,⁷ and the fact that he says he no longer resists the impositions of the cyst, it can already be deduced that the ageing process has its positive side.

To better understand the meaning and scope of this metaphor, it is worth delving further into the novel. In the next few pages, the ageing process is mentioned again twice. After Tellas announces her pregnancy to the narrator, the latter starts to imagine, with minute detail, the various men with whom his wife could have cheated on him during her recent stay in London. He then declares: 'Si podía verlo todo era precisamente porque había envejecido' (Pauls 2005: 112). Shortly after, on his way to the Salon du Livre, where he hopes to see Klossowski, the speed of the Parisian RER leads him to reflect on the paradoxes of velocity: 'Descubrir las distancias que yacen invisibles en el espacio entre dos puntos me parecía un triunfo de mi envejecimiento, una especie de facultad nueva que sólo se manifestaba después de haber dejado atrás la juventud' (2005: 126). In these two examples, as in the example of the departure from the Chinese playwright's house the ageing process does not connote the senility nor the decrepitude that it can evoke in other contexts. In the present case, the substantive is,

7 The plenitude the narrator expresses in this fragment perfectly illustrates the comments made by David Le Breton in *Corps et sociétés* (1985) on the recovery of the sick individual: 'L'homme qui relève de la maladie [...] redécouvre le monde avec stupeur, à travers une sorte de jaillissement de sa sensorialité. Longtemps retenu, privé de stimulation, le corps s'ancre pleinement aux effluves de l'extérieur' (Le Breton 1991: 125–26).

rather, synonymous with superior lucidity and, in this sense, it echoes the way many philosophers have defined it, among whom is Arthur Schopenhauer, who dedicates a chapter of his timeless *Counsels and Maxims* to the different ages of life. 'From the point of view we have been taking up until now', writes Schopenhauer (1890), 'life may be compared to a piece of embroidery, of which, during the first half of his time, a man gets a sight of the right side, and during the second half, of the wrong. The wrong side is not so pretty as the right, but it is more instructive; it shows the way in which the threads have been worked together' (Schopenhauer 2007: 102). Clear-sightedness derived from experience and hindsight, this seems to be the meaning of the narrator's ageing metaphor, just like in the broidery analogy.

In the excerpt detailing the departure from the Chinese playwright's house, the ageing process is associated with another metaphor: the cave (*caverna*). To be more precise, in this same excerpt the cinema is a metaphor for the seven days the narrator has just passed in the Chinese playwright's house, but the cinema experience is, in turn, qualified by the cavern metaphor, which brings to mind Plato's famous allegory. Just as the man escaped from the cavern in Plato's allegory, the narrator of *Wasabi* gets out of the Chinese playwright's house and discovers a new world. In this way, the cavern metaphor reinforces the meaning of clear-sightedness given to the ageing metaphor.

Let us now turn back to where we began: with the narrator looking at his own Double (a seemingly much younger version of himself), in the Parisian prostitute's basement. In this vision, Alan Pauls' alter ego sees himself alongside his wife in the Saint-Nazaire flat playing a game, which consists in trying to identify a set of simultaneous sound sources (television, freezer, the vibration of the windows, etc.). Before he gets lost in this lugubrious neighbourhood of Paris and takes shelter with the prostitute, the narrator was never able to recognize all the simultaneous noises, unlike his wife Tellas, who invariably won the game. But now that the narrator has grown older, and we have seen that this metaphorical ageing brings with it greater acuity, he is able to name each of the sounds that accompany the prostitute's groans:

Oí el choque frenético de las nalgas de la mujer contra mi espalda, oí el ronquido que su garganta inhumana dejaba escapar a medida que el arpón sondeaba, abriéndolas, sus vísceras, y los pasos en la vereda, el goteo de la canilla, la radio, la caldera, todos los sonidos que me rodeaban, y que yo reconocía con una soleada nitidez, se ensortijaron en el cuerpo de la empalada, como atraídos por la fuerza de gravedad de su suplicio. [...] Sólo yo podía percibirlos así, orquestados en un mismo punto del tiempo y del espacio [...]. Sólo yo hubiera podido enumerar ese inventario secreto; yo, que había sido desterrado para siempre de la nubosidad luminosa de aquella tarde en Saint-Nazaire, yo, que contemplaba a ese hombre joven, sentado en el piso, con un libro olvidado entre los muslos, como quien se compara con el retrato de un muerto. La mujer gritó, su aullido de bestia redujo a polvo todos los sonidos del mundo. Supe entonces cuánto más extraña es la juventud que la ficción, y supe que el hijo que velaba insomne dentro de su madre dormida había encontrado por fin a su padre. (Pauls 2005: 154-55)

In this vision, the narrator observes who he was before his ageing process, that is to say, before the revelation that coincides with his convalescence, as is suggested by the cavern metaphor. He is now wiser, more perspicacious, and, in this sense, he finds himself facing an Other, or, if you wish, a Double who has gained its independence rather than a simple Double; as in Borges' short story 'El otro' (1975). 'I am an Other', this is how one might synthesize the narrator's situation when the novel ends.

If the protuberance evokes in some respect the theme of otherness, in the first place – in the chronological order of the story – it contributes to metamorphose the narrator. In the initial pages of the novel, the homeopath who examines the cyst diagnoses 'sólo una acumulación insignificante de grasa' (Pauls 2005: 9). Her mistake soon becomes clear: in a short time, what she had diagnosed as a benign cyst becomes 'una saliente ósea, como la hoja irregular de uno de esos puñales hechos con un fémur tallado' (2005: 46). In Paris, the narrator's transfiguration accelerates radically. The deformation that started with the supernatural and terrifying growth of the cyst is aggravated when the narrator is severely beaten. While he is surveilling Klossowski's house, the narrator is discovered by his doorman. He tries, in vain, to flee; Klossowski's employee catches him and strikes him on the head with a violent blow. Three drunken Irishmen then ransack his hotel room, steal everything he has and hit him with a revolver. Now that he cannot pay for the room, and convinced that his story, told by a Latin American, will inevitably look like an attempted fraud, he flees from the hotel where he had been staying. After several days of wandering in the streets of Paris the narrator recites this eloquent soliloquy about his ongoing transformation:

¿Era el transcurso de los días lo que yo padecía, o más bien el privilegio de ser contemporáneo de mi propia degradación, el testigo de las evidencias que con el correr de las horas iban apartándome de lo humano? [...] A cada minuto sentía adelgazarse la diferencia entre mi cuerpo y su herida. [...] Cada día que pasaba mi sufrimiento dividía el mundo por alguno de sus componentes. Un día eran las calles, otro el cielo, después eran los rostros, la luz, el idioma, y así de seguido. El transcurso del tiempo no era más que esa obstinada voluntad de dividir [...]. ¿Llegaría alguna vez a cero? Esa esperanza fue la última en abandonarme. El mundo, en efecto, es infinitamente divisible; tiende a cero, pero la cifra ínfima a la que esas divisiones lo acercan refleja menos un decrecimiento que una depuración. (Pauls 2005: 82–83)

The narrator's metamorphosis reaches here its climax: he talks about degradation, about shifting away from the domain of humans, about the inexistence of the difference between his body and his wound. At the same time, his transfiguration seems to impact his surrounding reality: the ground, the sky, the light all disappear. Following his assault by Klossowski's doorman, the narrator's link with the world of men hangs by a thin thread: partly because of the swelling due to the beating; partly because of the colossal protuberance, he cannot look at people's faces any more (2005: 72). The three drunk Irishmen's aggression breaks that thread.

The narrator's transformation, intense though it is, is not perceived by him negatively. On the contrary, the disintegration of reality that accompanies it is

a 'deputation' (*depuración*) that brings to mind the platonic world of Ideas once more. Like the ageing process, it is associated with the notion of revelation. Indeed, during the division of the world that has just been mentioned, the only tie that the narrator maintains with the world from which he was banished is the memory of a stormy afternoon that he enjoyed with his wife, sat on a wooden bench in front of the estuary (83). This memory is described as a 'rayo de sol' (84), and when the Chinese playwright discovers him lying in the streets of Paris and interrupts this memory, the narrator observes that: 'Eso debía de ser, pues, "volver en sí", un desperfecto de la contemporaneidad: mirar algo y descubrir que otros ojos acaban de confinarlo en el pasado' (85). Consequently, what the narrator refers to when he talks about 'contemporaneity' is not, as it should be, all the events he witnesses as he speaks, but a determined memory of the past that seems to have an enlightening importance for him, and whose meaning escapes us.

The deputation of the reality that surrounds the narrator and the plenitude that the latter manages to find in it support my provisional conclusions on the positive conception of illness that Alan Pauls exposes in this novel. It must be remembered, in effect, that the whole transformation process is related by the narrator to illness. The state of higher consciousness brought about by illness has been aptly described by Virginia Woolf in an essay entitled 'On Being Ill', which appeared in 1926 in the journal *The Criterion*:

We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. [...] There is a virgin forest, tangled, pathless, in each [...]. Here we go alone, and like it better so. Always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable. But in health the genial pretence must be kept up and the effort renewed – to communicate, to civilise, to share, to cultivate the desert, educate the native, to work by day together and by night to sport. In illness this make-believe ceases. Directly the bed is called for, or, sunk deep among pillows in one chair, we raise our feet even an inch above the ground on another, we cease to be soldiers in the army of the upright; we become deserters. They march to battle. We float with the sticks on the stream; helter-skelter with the dead leaves on the lawn, irresponsible and disinterested and able, perhaps for the first time for years, to look round, to look up – to look, for example, at the sky. (Woolf 1967: 196)

In Woolf's opinion illness does not necessarily, or primarily, equate to discomfort or pain. The indisposition it entails can also be perceived as the opportunity to slow down the mechanical concatenation of daily actions, and to stop and give them some thought. An ill individual can look at the sky for hours and study its relentless activity, a spectacle that working people cannot appreciate. Further, if the ill individual stares at the sky long enough, writes Woolf, he or she will understand that regardless of his or her illness, and regardless of the agitation of everyone's daily routine, the world keeps spinning and time goes by implacably: in short, through illness a man or a woman can become fully aware of his or her finitude and richness. The Uruguayan writer Roberto Echevarren (2009) expresses something similar in 'Denis', a short story of his published in Guerrero and Bouzaglo's anthology. 'La naturaleza nos enferma', Echevarren enunciates, 'para darnos ocasión de descansar y de restablecernos. O de romper con ese bloque

duro, la disciplina del ganapán, y la responsabilidad de la familia' (Echevarren, in Guerrero and Bouzaglo 2009: 174–75).

In Echevarren's reflections, as in Woolf's, illness offers the time and concentration necessary to take a broader perspective and examine what is paramount and what is superficial in the existence that one leads. The metamorphosis in *Wasabi* also works in this way. In the accelerated space-time of the novel, this transfiguration immobilizes the narrator and allows him to serenely contemplate all the elements that surround him. He is able to ponder each of the components of his existence, a process represented in the form of a depurative 'division' of the world. He is able to distinguish what is important from what is secondary, what is essential from what is deceptive: the city, the faces, the language, volatilize as if they had never existed, while the only fragment of life that subsists is the previously mentioned memory of the time he spent with his wife on a rainy afternoon in Saint-Nazaire. For that reason, and for all the aforementioned reasons, I partially disagree with what Fabienne Bradu writes on this matter in *Los escritores salvajes*:

Inventor y observante del *sick art*, Alan Pauls concibe la literatura como el registro de la enfermedad que todos padecemos y llanamente llamamos *vida* en sus distintas modalidades. Esta enfermedad suele ignorarse o encubrirse con velos variopintos, tal una seductora y sañuda Salomé, cuando se disuelve la conciencia de que la muerte nace y crece dentro del cuerpo desde el primer instante de vida. Tampoco la advierte quien no está lo suficientemente quieto para observar el sigiloso progreso del deterioro. (2011: 68; emphasis in the original)

It is correct to say that Alan Pauls relativizes the exceptionality of illness, given that, in *Wasabi*, it can be found under different forms in various characters; but at the same time, this novel also indicates, in my opinion, that Pauls overcomes the association illness-deterioration suggested by Bradu (2011). *Wasabi* is not a story about degradation or diminution, or at least not exclusively; as I read it, it is also a story about the emotional and intellectual fulfilment that can be found in ill health.⁸ And, in this connection, it should not be forgotten that the narrator's metamorphosis, that he himself associates with an illness, is in the end what allows him to solve his writer's block. Only after living this experience does he have the inspiration necessary to write the literary piece he owes his hosts. Only

8 The last chapter of *La vida descalzo* (2006), an essay published twelve years after *Wasabi* in which the author tells memories of his childhood summers spent in the seaside city of Villa Gesell, provides another illustration – far less rocambolesque – of his positive approach to illness, similar to that defended by Woolf in 'On Being Ill'. On a sunny morning, young Alan Pauls wakes up with fever and, though the day is ideal for a swim, his parents force him to stay home. Initially upset, and even slightly jealous of his 'amigos todos asquerosamente saludables', he then realizes that his situation is as privileged as theirs in that it gives him the occasion to finally read, comfortably lying in his bed and in the greatest tranquillity, the book that until then the summer temptations had not let him open: 'Descubre que ese libro es el otro lugar que tiene la forma de la felicidad perfecta, y que, como escribió alguien a quien él leerá recién veinte años después, [...] quizá no haya habido días en nuestra infancia más plenamente vividos que aquellos que creíamos dejar sin vivirlos' (Pauls 2018: 115; emphasis in the original).

after his long and intense transformation and subsequent recuperation, not before, is he able to give birth to the novel the reader has before his or her eyes: the novel analysed in this essay.

Conclusions

This reading of *Wasabi* should not be regarded as a critique of medicine, physicians or the medical perspective on disease. It is certainly not its goal. I would not want it either to be interpreted as a lack of respect for the suffering medicine strives to alleviate daily. The medical progress achieved over the last centuries, and even decades, is undeniable and invaluable in many respects. Who would accept to live tomorrow with yesterday's medicine? But admirable as it is, this progress should not make us forget that the biological and medical theorization of bodily phenomena, including diseases, is not the only vision possible, even if nowadays it has turned into a dominant vision, or even a 'religion' as Giorgio Agamben called it a few months ago in a polemical article (2020). Alan Pauls offers a lesson as modest as it is encouraging in the time of a pandemic: there is a priori no reason why illness should be limited to a bodily diminution, a threat or a failure, nor does it need to be evaluated exclusively in statistical terms. It can also be the occasion to re-examine under a new light some of the fundamental questions of life, as the author suggests in *Wasabi*, where a strange and nameless affliction that resembles no other illness, and for this very reason represents at the same time all illnesses (including, why not, the newly discovered coronavirus, for which it could perfectly stand as a metaphor), appears as the source of his own character's self-realization. His illness is, indeed, inextricably intertwined with a metamorphosis that is not only physical but also mental, as it culminates in moments of revelation of incontestable importance for him, though the reader will never know what their ultimate meaning is, as happens with the cyst. But in its deliberate interpretative openness (Eco 1962) lies precisely the richness of this novel, that can be read and reread from a multitude of analytical perspectives or according to different events of the personal and/or world history. In 'Coronavirus: del miedo a la esperanza', the poet and essayist William Ospina sends a message that I consider in line with the one Pauls articulates in *Wasabi*:

Después de siglos de atesorar nuestro conocimiento, de valorar nuestro talento, de venerar nuestra audacia, de adorar nuestra fuerza, llega la hora en que también nos toca ponderar nuestra fragilidad, estimar nuestro asombro, respetar nuestro miedo. [...] Dicen que lo que no nos destruye nos hace más fuertes. Esa inminencia del desastre pone también un toque de magia aciaga en lo que parecía controlado, un sabor de alucinación en los días, suelta una ráfaga de locura sobre todo lo establecido, un destello de Dios en la prosa del mundo. Y sentimos que hay algo que aprender de estas alarmas y peligros. Si todo lo más firme se conmociona, nos enseñan que todo puede cambiar, y no necesariamente para mal. Que si la tormenta lo estremece todo, nosotros también podemos ser la tormenta. Y que en el corazón de las tormentas también puede haber, como decía Chesterton, no una furia, sino un sentimiento y una idea. (Ospina 2020: s. p.)⁹

9 (See paragraphs 6–10).

In my view Pauls represents in *Wasabi* what Ospina says here in conventional terms, he transposes this idea to the world of fiction and favours suggestion rather than clear and direct affirmation.

Lastly, I have mentioned several times that *Wasabi* is structured around the author's very own alter ego. I could not conclude without stressing the fact that this novel integrates in reality a larger corpus of autofictions that also thematize illness, or in certain cases disability, and share on them a point of view different from that of medicine, showing sometimes scepticism (even severity) towards medical knowledge: I am referring to some of the autofictional narratives written in recent years by Valeria Luiselli and Mario Bellatin, and also Guadalupe Nettel, Julián Herbert and Lina Meruane, to name but a few. Surprisingly, with the exception of an article signed by Ana Casas (2017), the secondary literature on autofiction does not make much reference to the questioning look this literary category takes on medicine. For the theorists Manuel Alberca (2007: 38–45) and Philippe Gasparini (2008: 214–22), the concept of autofiction is indissociable from the postmodern cultural context, which brings into question some of the very foundations of the modern subject, such as the reliance on the notions of truth and objectivity and on the transcendence of human actions. Unlike autobiography, which presupposes that an author has the capacity to retell his/her life without modifying it, according to a principle of exactitude and truth that Philippe Lejeune (1975) calls the *pacte référentiel* (Lejeune 1996), autofiction assumes that any human being is imperfect and that he or she is incapable of knowing (observing, telling, explaining) anything, least of all himself or herself, without systematically resorting to invention. These doubts over human objectivity seem to manifest themselves more specifically in a certain number of autofictions, including *Wasabi*, through a relativization of medical knowledge, a rather unflattering portrait of the men and women who represent it, as well as a revalorization of illness and disability. This is, at least, a stimulating hypothesis that future investigations on autofiction, based on the close analysis of a broader corpus, should not fail to explore.

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