

THE PHYSICIAN WRITING

La manière de Jacques Ferron – The Way of Jacques Ferron: Literature and Medicine

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This chronicle records facts that may appear unseemly, but life itself is not always seemly. What counts is that in the end events all fall into place, and around the wild foresaken bay, little by little, the gentle customs of the old country triumph over pagan fear, softening the cries of the birds that pass in the gusts of wind that sweep down off the land.

Jacques Ferron, “Chronique de l’Anse Saint-Roch”¹

I am a doctor. A doctor working on the fringes, it is true, but working all the same. I make my living and that of my family. I treat people. Or I attempt to treat them. I suffer. I use my own suffering to remain compassionate.

The other day, when I visited a friend who had agreed to read one of my texts, I realized that he was coughing a lot. He had been coughing for a week. Bronchitis, clearly. Contracted from his flatmate, who had been coughing for almost a month. It was probably mycoplasmal bronchitis, easily cured if one agrees to be treated with the appropriate antibiotics. I was happy to help this friend, to be there with him to question him better; to better “smell” the sickness that was giving him so much trouble. He was coughing every ten seconds, completely breathless, even though he does not smoke, and is not even thirty years old. While he sat on a small table in the lounge, his sweater pulled up, I put my ear to his back, as doctors used to do before the invention of the stethoscope. I had no instrument with me. I was nevertheless able to listen to his lungs very well. I listened for crackles, placing my ear firmly against the skin of his back on several different quadrants, changing position in a logical way to listen to all the lobes. It is not usual to examine someone this way! In spite of this, my friend was glad to have me give this attention to his cough. When I had finished, and had heard what he had to say,

I prescribed an inexpensive antibiotic for him, one I know to be effective against this kind of affection. As if to overcome the mild embarrassment I was feeling at having examined him this way, I asked him if he knew that the stethoscope had been invented because in the olden days, doctors visiting large women at home, had grown tired of having to place their heads under enormous bosoms, in constant fear of being suffocated! My friend smiled. It did not even occur to him to get out his health card. As a friend, one doesn’t think of paying for a service performed in such an unusual fashion. He told me that he would go for the medicine straight away. He was in a hurry to feel some relief. I left his home in a cheerful mood. I had once again been able to provide care, happy not to have really been a doctor, while being one all the same.

It is necessary to believe in values which go beyond the powers of science, although science is useful, often quite extraordinary, in fact. Of these values, the most essential one is still love, however obvious that statement may seem. At the end of the road, as at the very beginning of every road, at all the points along our common roads, only love counts. Without love, love for others, as well as love for the poor, it is quite possible that nothing is worthwhile. But to love, to really love, to love others as ourselves, turns out to be one of the most difficult tasks there can be. In my own life, health professionals have often given me the worst problems, worse than the patients themselves, as if the world of sickness had the power to contaminate health professionals by making them sickly or arrogant, and difficult to love.

We become doctors of medicine by learning an enormous number of things, by acquiring knowledge which allows us, among other things, to juggle with more and more powerful and extremely effective medicines. All my life, I have felt myself to be an

intellectual, even when this has involved cutting myself off from my emotional source and from my soul, which is capable of crying at the sight of a lilac in bloom, and even though I often rage against the misery of the world (and sometimes against the extreme misery of others). Nevertheless, one day, I said to myself that the poetic universe was better than the scientific one, because in poetry lay the essence of the world and its Truth. Ever since then, I have had to face the difficulty of making intellect and poetry coincide, as if both were destined to be eternally in opposition to one another. The modern world does not expect the poet who has succeeded in expressing truths about our essential feelings (Saint-Denys Garneau or Arthur Rimbaud, for example) to explain or to think. We believe that the poet has only to sing, to juggle or to dance, and that it is up to the exegete or the professor to make understandable the poetic magma that flows from the lips of this speaker, this beautiful madman stimulated by the Muses. This world is in a dreadful state of split, a split which has lasted for too many centuries, and which has always been unacceptable to me. That the poet can sing of the world with as much “intelligence” as emotion delights me, reassures me, gives me wings, restores meaning to my existence, which has so often been grazed by the sharpness of human suffering.

That suffering is the lot of marching humanity, this I am willing to accept! But that the absurd should

render suffering obsolete, and lead to suicide of all kinds, to this I say no, I mean no, I wish to rebel, I do rebel, although it requires a powerful energy which must be renewed daily. Without the presence of certain exceptional human beings (virtual, sometimes, in the case of authors whom I shall never know personally, such as Hermann Hesse, Albert Camus, Jacques Ferron, Carl Gustav Jung or Théodore Monod), I would perhaps have admitted my impotence, content to travel the forests or the tundra in search of what I have always found in nature, that is: peace and the feeling of belonging, of being in the right place at the right time, at my best, giving of my best, for those close to me and for the crazy people who agree to follow me.

Literature and poetry remain anomalous, a kind of pain, a beauty shouted in the face of the universe. Which no doubt explains the conclusion of the short story “Les Méchins,”² written by Jacques Ferron:

It was then that I had a revelation of distress greater than my own, and for the first time I felt pity that was not for myself. I loved this horse like a brother. He was my redeemer. Before that, selfish and unkind, I had deserved a thousand times to be struck down amid the rocks of Les Méchins. Since then I no longer think of myself and I thank God for it. He did not heal me, he saved me. When I do manage to find a little opium it is as though I were injecting it into that poor animal, with his docked tail, his bleeding mouth, his half-blind eyes and anxious ears. I have not forgotten him. His suffering haunts me. The storm rages about me still; the wind blows off the infernal rocks. The waves rise up towards me. The horse is encompassed by all the wickedness of the world. I must comfort him. Besides, I owe it to him: did he not save me? From now on, he is the drug addict.

Maybe we allow ourselves to engage with literature in order to sense that doubts can fade in certain privileged moments of our existence, and that the transcendent truth, the one which exceeds by far our small individual life, does exist, though always in a fog. And what a fog!

What can I say to a woman who appears at the emergency doubled up with the terrible pains of pancreatitis? Shall I recite poems to her? Or rather, do I have to take all possible measures to relieve her in her body? I inject a painkiller (medical science produces good painkillers), I hydrate her, then I

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transfer her somewhere else, to a hospital where there are specialists (as I practice medicine in Québec's Far North, I often have to use planes; even when they're falling to bits, these machines prove infinitely faster than dog sleds!). In this day and age, with all the risks but also all the positive effects of science and technology, one has to admit that the "poetry" of the Far North remains quite relative, even if we wish to believe in poetry, even if we have faith in the archaic, essential shamanism which accompanies any injection of painkiller.

My faith in the value of literature is not a matter of choice. It comes to me at the same time from deep down in my gut and from my rational consciousness, although I remain fundamentally a prisoner of an extremely down-to-earth existence, particularly when it comes to my professional practice. It seems to me extraordinarily difficult to reconcile the ideals of poetry with the inescapable reality of abdominal pains that bring on vomiting, this particular suffering being compounded by a thousand other difficulties of all kinds: social, economic, psychic, or metaphysical. What poet could honestly hope to change the world by really reducing the suffering in it? And yet, every poet feels that outside of the world of art, nothing really makes sense, and human suffering, which has the potential for total *non*-sense, remains essential in its intimate relationship with happiness, essential to the creation of happiness itself. Every poet senses that the mystery of life can be resolved, and *is* resolved, though usually only fleetingly, with all the suffering that implies, resolved *with* words and *through* words, in a brief flash, much as autumn light possesses the extraordinary capacity to set fire to the foliage of the birches of the North.

My God! How I suffer sometimes as a health professional! The dilemma is a major one. I need poetry, and when my poetic sensibility is kindled, I become unable to tolerate disease and death. Then, it becomes necessary for me to fall back again into the "apoetry" of the world, even though contact with this "apoetry" produces violent reactions inside of me. Poetry constitutes for me a vital necessity. But any exaggeration of poetic ecstasy can lead to death or destruction of the body, the body demanding, above all, simple things, such as water, songs, or cries of joy. Young children know this naturally. They do not need poetic words, being themselves "poetry," which is the explanation for Christ's important affirmation: "No man shall enter the kingdom of Heaven unless he first become like these little ones."

Poetry depends in fact on a horrible paradox: it is necessary to accept the unacceptable, to accept radical refusal as the cornerstone of a life which cannot be lived outside of suffering and rejection. To lose one's life in order to gain it: the idea is a religious one, even before being poetic.

To love, for a health professional, means listening and trying to help. As a friend who likes to take inspiration from Paulo Coelho confided in me:

We must never forget that spiritual experience is, above all, an experience of love. And, in love, there are no rules. However much we try to follow the textbooks, control our heart, have strategies for behaviour, in the end there is no point. It is the heart that decides, and what it decides is law.

This friend is one of the best doctors I have ever met.

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