

# READING JACQUES FERRON

## Jacques Ferron's *Wild Roses*: Blurring the Boundaries Between Madness and Sanity

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Each person has a biography, a story to tell that is their own and serves as a testament to their existence. Dr. Jacques Ferron believed that, in modern society, our fear of human uniqueness forces us to erect walls and create boundaries to separate those considered *normal* from those considered *other*. These walls can be as visible as those of an insane asylum or as invisible as a simple refusal of those who are normal to communicate with the other. According to Ferron, this categorisation of humanity creates a downward spiral leading to the loss of individuality. The *other* has been subdivided by the medical world into well-defined and analysed categories, such as psychosis, schizophrenia, manic-depression, dementia, post-partum depression – the list is endless. The names, identities and biographies of those considered “other” are lost, hidden or silenced once their otherness is neatly categorized. Their medical condition becomes their sole identity.

In his novel *Wild Roses* and the “Love Letter” that follows it,<sup>1</sup> Jacques Ferron questions our need to categorize and, in doing so, offers his readers not only a gentler and more accepting perspective of the other but also a severe critique of society’s and the medical world’s treatment of the other, the insane, from his unique standpoint as a doctor for the mentally ill. *Wild Roses* was written while Ferron was practising at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu psychiatric hospital in Montreal. As the story progresses, it becomes clear that Ferron saw his own reflection in the other, in madness, but, more importantly, that he also saw in it a side of humanity that he believed to be an integral part of its very essence, its shadow, in a sense.

In *Le Desarrois*, a book of correspondence between Ferron and psychiatrist Julien Bigras,<sup>2</sup> Ferron is quoted as saying:

*Far from being an insult to freedom ..., [madness] is her most beautiful companion, madness follows her movement like a shadow. And the being that is man not only would not be understood were it not for madness, but he would not be the being that is man, if he did not carry madness in himself as a limit to his freedom.* (p. 16, my own translation)<sup>i</sup>

*Wild Roses* challenges our concepts of madness and normality. It demonstrates for the reader how these two states of mind, generally considered binary opposites, are in fact two halves of a whole. In *Wild Roses*, it is through a series of autobiographical references and reflections of the real world that Ferron is able to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction and enable the reader to see his or her own reflection in the fictive space. In the “Love Letter,” he lends his skills as a writer to allow the biography of one woman to be heard. Through his voice, she is able to, in Ferron’s own words, “testify.” *Wild Roses* and the “Love letter” are, in fact, testaments to all things that can be considered noble or beautiful in madness.

Ferron dreamed of writing a novel dedicated entirely to the women he met at the asylum at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu. He felt he needed to pay homage to these women and to expose the atrocities of asylum life and the incompetence and indifference that he believed came with the practice of psychiatry. *Wild Roses* represents a sort of meeting of Ferron’s earlier storyteller side, from his *Contes* (the short stories, or tales),<sup>3</sup> and his later style, in “Le pas de

<sup>i</sup> “Loin qu’elle soit pour la liberté une insulte (...), elle est sa plus belle compagne, elle suit son mouvement comme une ombre. Et l’être de l’homme non seulement ne peut être compris sans la folie, mais il ne serait pas l’être de l’homme, s’il ne portait en soi la folie comme limite de sa liberté.”

Gamelin,"<sup>4</sup> in which he fulfills his need to openly and explicitly attack psychiatry. *Wild Roses* starts much like a fairy tale:

*Once, in fun, she called him Baron, and the name stuck, for he did not take offence, feeling, if anything, flattered by it. A tall, handsome young man, he took pride in his appearance and always dressed with quiet good taste. He was always courteous and considerate in spite of his natural exuberance, and above all he was very conceited; he took all the light and never spoke of the dark. (p. 7)*

The appropriated style makes the social message woven into the background intricate and subtle, and much like Baron, the author begins by showing his reader all the light of the couple's happy and normal suburban life and withholding the darkness. However, once we encounter madness for the first time in the text, with the post-partum depression of Baron's wife, it becomes omnipresent in the fictive space, each character having their own shadow of madness. While Ferron's later work, "Le pas de Gamelin," is a semi-autobiographical account of his time working at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu psychiatric hospital, *Wild Roses* takes a step back to examine the beginning of madness, its social roots and its causes. It is perhaps for this reason that he chooses to write in the third person. By stepping back into society and out of the walls of the asylum, Ferron reveals the awful truth that we are all susceptible to insanity. Although the novel is a work of fiction, the author creates a series of reflections of the real world to challenge the opposition of real and fictive, therefore bringing the madness of the text into the reality of the reader.

Initially, this blurring of distinctions takes the form of a phonetic game. A reader who is familiar with Ferron's works would not ignore the phonetic link between Ferron and Baron. Moreover, the phonetic palimpsest thickens with the reference made to writer Louis Hémon. Other links also bind these three men. Personal life similarities link Baron and Hémon, autobiographical facts that Ferron transposed to his protagonist create a bridge between them, and the writing profession links Ferron and Hémon. However, the connection that ultimately weaves all their worlds together (Baron's fictive world, Hémon's literary world and the real world of the writer) is madness. Each man has been somehow defined by madness. The interpenetration

of these worlds blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality and incites the reader to contemplate the vast scope of madness. The fact that it dominates all three of these worlds underlines Ferron's belief that madness represents an integral part of existence. In her preface to the 1990 French edition of *Les roses sauvages*,<sup>5</sup> Betty Bednarski points out that one must see not only connections between Ferron, Baron and Hémon but also a sort of lineage that runs through all of Ferron's works, connecting "author and characters; fiction and reality; writing, madness and life." (Bednarski, p.13, my own translation)

The blurring of boundaries is further compounded by the interpenetration of Ferron's real experiences and his beliefs. Ferron deemed correspondence to be a necessary link to the other and passes this intrinsic need for epistolary communication on to his protagonist. Correspondence represents for Baron a way to testify to his daily experiences. However, much like Ferron, he needs a correspondent to keep him anchored in reality, and the absence of a correspondent, this other person to listen to his testimony, is the final blow that exposes Baron to madness. In an essay dedicated to an analysis of the importance of correspondence in Ferron's life, Ginette Michaud insists upon this same concept of anchorage in reality, saying that epistolary exchanges represented for Ferron a landmark to guide him through an experience as disorienting as madness.<sup>6</sup> Letter writing permitted him to reread his own writing and exposed him to the point of view of his correspondent. In *Wild Roses*, epistolary writing represents a sort of antidote against madness. When Baron's wife attempts to write him back she finds herself incapable: "...[S]he could only repeat conventional phrases. Each letter she sent to Baltimore told her of her humiliation." (p. 10) This inability to write foreshadows her decline into madness; Baron's daughter Rose-Aimée becomes extremely depressed and flees Montreal when her lover Ronald does not reply to her letters, and when Baron is interned, his letters represent his only way of staying in touch with the outside world: "His letters alone gave him the strength to overcome the inertia of the asylum and kept him from becoming utterly degraded." (p. 76)

This relationship of the self to the other reveals an important element of Ferron's ontology. The ability to communicate through writing and to be understood by a correspondent founds an essential part of human existence. Once one loses an element

of this process of communication (whether it be through one's own inability to take part in the exchange, as in the case of Baron's wife, or through the lack of a correspondent, as in Baron's case, or in his daughter's), then one can no longer maintain the distance held between the normality and the madness within. When one element of the epistolary act is missing, communication is no longer a relationship between the self and the other person, but an interior relationship with oneself. Ferron once said in an interview with Jacques Pelletier:<sup>7</sup>

*To be normal, one must imagine oneself as another, to be a man like all other men, one must see oneself from the exterior, be looked at and seen, not confined to the interior of this shell where we are unique, absolutely unique.* (Pelletier, p. 399, my own translation)<sup>ii</sup>

While all of the real-world references and autobiographical facts bridge a connection between the writer's world and the fictive space of the novel, on the one hand, and the reader's world and the fictive space, on the other, they also give us a better understanding of the elements that may lead any normal person to become "mad." For Ferron, madness is not necessarily in someone from birth. It can come from neglect, abandonment, exploitation, contamination and abuse. All of the characters of *Wild Roses* have one thing in common that we all share: a need to search for meaning and meaningful communication in life. Ferron aims to convey his belief that madness is not as easily definable as the medical world may think. He tries to challenge the defining characteristics of madness by instilling in his characters attributes that make their place on the spectrum of human uniqueness problematic.

According to Robert Viau, author of *Les fous de papier*,<sup>8</sup> all of the characters in *Wild Roses* know secrets that transcend human understanding. Their madness is often a sign of depth, of fantasy and of spiritual illumination. They live on the other side, having crossed through Alice's mirror to achieve wonderment. But in doing so, they have revealed their difference, their abnormality. In an organized society, what is abnormal threatens the established order, and this threat must be contained. In Ferron's novel, Baron's internment is even questioned by some at the asylum:

*Some of them were surprised too that Baron should be confined for so little, but the doctor would point out to them that this was*

*a businessman, still well off, familiar with the world and with methods of travel, and therefore infinitely more dangerous than the imbecile who is let out and causes a public outcry the minute he makes a pass at a little girl.* (p. 76)

The ambiguity of these characters' place on the spectrum of human uniqueness challenges concepts of madness and of normality: Are the boundaries between the two as clear and precise as we would like to think? Moreover, even if the presence of madness is impossible to ignore in some cases (as it is, arguably, in Baron's), is the perceivable difference so offensive that society must physically separate this *other* from the outside world? Baron's internment represents the only instance in the novel where Ferron explicitly reveals his mistrust of asylums and psychiatry. The chief medical doctor at the asylum says: "It's man's duty to fight man and keep him from becoming too powerful, and dangerous." To which an intern replies "But you'd have mankind reduced to nothing!" (p. 76)

But no words in the novel speak as loudly as Baron's final act: when he climbs up the red brick tower, crawls through the small window that just barely fits his frame and throws himself into the wild-rose scented air. Baron was lucid enough to realize that all he had to do was renounce Casablanca, but he refused to do so. His suicide demonstrates that one's need to preserve their uniqueness is more desirable than freedom or being part of the norm. Ferron seems to suggest that Baron's internment is the *cause* of his death and the symbolic weight of his suicide allows for a plethora of possible meanings: it could represent the impending solitary death, brought about by abuse or neglect, that Ferron believed awaited all of the patients he met at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu; it could also more simply symbolize the death of liberty that comes from internment, or, keeping in mind all of the autobiographical links between Ferron and his protagonist, it could represent the death the author foresaw for himself were he ever to experience life in an asylum as a patient.

Also annexed to *Wild Roses*, is Ferron's introduction to the "Love Letter," the letter written by a woman patient at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, and carefully re-written by him. And while *Wild Roses* is a work of fiction, the simple fact that this introductory essay

ii "Pour être normal, il faut se prendre pour un autre [...] pour être un homme comme tous les autres, s'apercevoir de l'extérieur, être vu et regardé, ne pas être enfermé à l'intérieur de cette coquille où nous sommes uniques, absolument uniques."

tells the story of the patient Aline Dupire further blurs the fictive nature of the novel. The reader notices an undeniable connection between Baron's life and the biography of Aline Dupire: both negate the fact that they have been abandoned by their spouses and continue to write to them and speak of them as if nothing had ever happened. In *Les fous de papier*, Robert Viau questions the nature of the "Love Letter." Could it be a first and more referential version of *Wild Roses*? (Viau, p. 276) As I have shown, there are various shadows of reality that lurk behind *Wild Roses*, and the simple fact that the "Love Letter" is placed alongside this story suggests that the novel may be a biography invented to pay homage to the lost past of Aline Dupire. In her preface to the French edition, Betty Bednarski asserts that in lending his voice to Aline Dupire, Ferron allows her writing to attain a level of "readability" and "dignity" it would otherwise have lacked (Bednarski, p.13). The "Love Letter" represents the first, but not the last time in Ferron's career where he would lend his voice to the neglected patients at Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, in order to take back their history, their story, and shed light on madness, the most unique side of human individuality.


In closing, the following excerpt from Ferron's introduction to the "Love Letter," reveals not only his deep understanding of and compassion for the mentally ill, but also summarizes, in his own words, why he felt it was his responsibility to speak for madness:

*The insane are witnesses. Their language is hermetic. No one knows what cause they plead nor what the charges are. And no one listens to them. We shut them up together in places where time stands still and nothing happens, only what has already happened somewhere else, only what they insist on bearing witness to, shouting to make themselves heard above the senseless clamour of voices, drowning each other out. They all talk at once and no one listens, except for those who pretend, those whose job it is to be kind and patient, those authorized to listen, who are around less than anyone else. While time in the asylum stands still, outside the walls real time marches on. Before long the trial is suspended for want of all the parties. The case cannot be heard, and the evidence of the insane becomes meaningless, proof that*

*they have not been locked up for nothing, that they really were mad. (Wild Roses, p. 87)*

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