

How Healing Are Books?

The idea that novels, theater, or poetry often help us live, that they help us feel cleansed or feel stronger, more energized, more alive, or that they at least help us survive by giving us the boost we need to hang on a little longer, is not simply a constant topos of literature, be it western, eastern, or universal. It is an indisputable truth for those who make use of it, whether they write it, read it, comment on it, or transform it into a first-aid kit of maxim-prescriptions and citation-medicines to use as needed.

There isn't time to go into the history of this truth. We'd have to start with Aristotle, the son of a doctor, who couldn't find a better word than the awful "catharsis" (purge, which is anything but appetizing) to designate tragedy's strange power to deliver us from our worst passions, that is, humanity's perpetual illnesses (for an ancient Greek): terror, pity, and enthusiasm. But we'd probably have to go back even further, to the great therapeutic poems of Parmenides, Heraclitus, Empedocles, to all the lyrical poetry of ancient Greece, and advance step by step through time until today. We'd take a lengthy pause over the long-running tradition of doctor writers in France, from Rabelais to Céline, as well as the long tradition of sick writers—Proust, Artaud, Raymond Roussel, Max Blecher, Fritz Zorn, etc.—and go through each writers' private notebooks and diaries, which are so often seen as private therapeutic tools, trying each time to distinguish as clearly as possible the various medicinal virtues ascribed to literature: a bulwark against suffering, sadness, despair, madness, loss, solitude, stupidity, aphasia, disability, physical illness, etc.

It is a long and complicated history. We won't venture into it for now. But in truth, we don't need to understand the problem inasmuch as the therapeutic power of poetry, prose, novellas and stories, fiction as well as narrative, is in fact an age-old and almost universal experience. An experience that Le Clézio, in *Haï* (haï means both energy and health in the

language of the Indians of Panama), sums up the best: “Someday maybe we’ll know that there was no art, only medicine.”

And yet, there’s something wrong with this therapeutic conception of literature, far beyond any specific criticisms one might make of Le Clézio’s book: his seeming reinvention of the myth of original innocence and the noble savage, his sometimes disturbing foray into magical thinking, his slightly facile mysticism, etc. Because as true as it may be historically and experientially, there is in fact something not quite right in such a conception, something fundamentally inadequate. Several things in fact. At least three.

First of all, experientially speaking, we can see that the opposite is equally true: literature can help, heal, and strengthen, but it can just as easily hurt, mislead, poison, and even devastate. Not only because, even among the greatest of books, there are burning, terrible, completely black and destructive works, but also because we can never foresee the effect a book or poem will have on the reader or the writer. After having read Sade, some readers felt especially calm, others were on fire, and still others joined a convent or committed suicide. As for Sade himself, the debate continues as to what writing about pleasure, fantasy, and death might have created or destroyed in him. For another, less extreme example, let’s think about the magnificent, pathetic lines in Virginia Woolf’s *Diary* when she writes about reading Proust: she is crushed, shattered, rendered barren. Proust has said it all, and she no longer feels anything but the faint reminder of a splendid, though self-destructive, admiration. There are so many works that are too high for us, that leave us in pieces without our even being able to regret it. In this way, while literature can indeed be a remedy, remedy must be understood in the Greek sense of *pharmakon* (drug), that is, as both remedy and poison, vital stimulant and sticky narcotic.

Let's take this a little further. Not only is the writer both doctor and patient and literature both remedy and poison, but we don't even know if the remedy will always be preferable to the poison or the doctor to the patient. After all, it is possible to like literature that, far from treating us gently, mistreats us, whips us about, makes us suffer, and leaves us with nothing but scars, with no other compensation. This is undoubtedly to teach us about life and to teach us to love it, including in its most incurable, painful, inconsolable aspects. That is, to remind us, on the one hand, to what extent suffering is a necessary spice of life and that those who don't know how to suffer don't know how to live, and on the other, to what extent everything has a cost and that it is childish to claim to embrace everything: truth, beauty, and struggle, and at the same time health, serenity, and care. In truth, each almost always pays the price of the other: life's truth, beauty or laughter comes only at the cost of its destruction, and it is good for literature to occasionally remind us of this. Think of Beckett in *Endgame*: "There's nothing funnier than misfortune . . . it's the funniest thing in the world." Or Fitzgerald in *The Crack Up*: "Of course all life is a process of breaking down."

The second restriction arises from the precise reality of the benefits literature procures us. To return to Le Clézio, to what extent can we take him seriously when he claims in *Hai* that his becoming-Indian "saved him from illness and death," enabling him to rediscover "the infinite indulgence of the species"? In a way, it's splendid, but in another, it's grotesque because when literature speaks of illness, it's usually a sham. It is a sham to use real, painful, individual illnesses (tuberculosis, cancer, AIDs) as metaphors for the supposed ills of the day, in the manner of Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain*, making a Swiss sanitarium into a vast metaphor for European decadence: in *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag said almost all there is to say on the subject. But it is also a sham on the most intimate level inasmuch as a truly ill person can no longer read, write, or give a fig about literature. Foucault defined

madness—real madness, not its imitation or imminence—as “the absence of work.” In a way, this fact must be extended to every serious illness. Like no one else, the truly ill experience illness as being rendered idle and expelled from the literary field. “I have been stripped,” said Valéry Larbaud after his stroke rendered him aphasic for a while and put an end to his writing. Which Roberto Bolano summed up more amusingly in one of the last conferences he gave before his death, entitled: “Literature + illness = illness.”

At the same time, of course, it is also true that this aspect of the writer or poet—as imposter, con artist, charlatan—is not necessarily blameworthy. Literature also serves to teach us to not just tolerate but affirm and even want their impostures, their various masks that at once hide and protect us from the gaze of others as well as our own. Melville thus painted a spectacularly accurate and ambiguous picture of writers in his last novel, *The Confidence-Man: His masquerade*, which for once was fairly well translated into French as *Le Grand escroc*. Because the writer as conman is a medicine-man as well as a charlatan: s/he sells snake oil and also bares each reader’s truth. From this perspective, it is therefore still possible to define writers or poets as doctors or shamans, provided we have no illusions as to their real powers and constantly remind ourselves that the real-life specificity of doctors and shamans is that they are unable to cure the genuine illnesses they encounter and are at best able to bring a little respite and all too human comfort. In other words, literature no doubt has a place in hospitals, but closer to the palliative care unit than the surgical unit. Or perhaps we should be even more radical and replace the overly presumptuous, overly virile doctor-shaman image with the more feminine nurse or midwife image. That is, an image that favors a subjective link over an objective result (healing, strength, fertility). The great poets don’t heal us, make us stronger, or make us fertile: they live simply nearby with a modest, barely perceptible yet tenacious presence.

Finally, a last restriction on the conception of literature as therapy, cure, or method of self-healing comes from the deep confusion caused by such promises to save us and bring us health or real life. What are we really talking about here? The Latin word *salus* became both health and salvation in French. But maybe literature goes astray by playing on this ambiguity too much; it risks mixing everything up this way. On the one hand, it “religifies” (if we can say that) concrete health-related procedures that in fact having nothing to do with our souls’ salvation: the former are always precise, individual, and finite, while the latter is always unclear, vaguely universal, and allegedly infinite. On the other, it lowers the justifiable demands of our spiritual life—knowledge, going beyond oneself, strength of character—to strictly negative ends: the absence of pain, resistance, survival at any price. In other words, by confusing literature as health and literature as salvation, we lose across the board: we make literature as incapable of healing our bodies as of elevating our souls. Nietzsche rightly hated the kind of romanticism represented by Schopenhauer in philosophy and Wagner in music: the symptom of a sick art, of a dying culture that turns a work into a deathbed. And some contemporary literature may still be stuck in such a deadly or complacent romanticism, crumbling under the never-ending accounts of its poor private experiences and forms of spirituality that are as ignorant as they are mediocre. Writing about illness is much less often a real exorcism than illness’s most pathetic symptom.

But here again, it may be that such a restriction is not definitive. For after all, this impure territory between objective knowledge and blurry affect is and always will be, for better or worse, the place of literature, that is, the place of life and healing. If we think about it, this is exactly what heal and live mean. To heal is to strive to find a solution between the impossible cure and the impossibility of giving up. To live is to strive to carry on between an inaccessible real life and mere survival, which is sometimes more terrifying than death. In this way, romanticism is as much the enemy of literature as it is its truth: it is the thing from which

we continually have to free ourselves, and the thing that constantly returns. And great literature is no doubt literature that succeeds in not giving an inch on either of these two truths.

Thinking of literature as self-therapy or a promise of renewed health therefore continually faces intractable objections: literature is also death; it is also objective, sentenceless suffering; it is also the disdain for the sick and the weak that we must constantly divest ourselves of to write and read, to learn to live our lives instead of constantly seeking to save or heal them. Worse yet, the desire for literature does not simply break on such reefs, it is torn apart and quartered because these reefs very quickly appear to be contradictory: we become disgusted with therapeutic literature because it works and because it doesn't, because it is both living and dead, because it is merely a literature of the healthy and because it is but a literature of the "poor little sick one," as Roussel said. And yet, despite all these shocks, contradictions, and rifts, we have to admit that the desire for literary therapies is still with us: it cannot be spent or eliminated. Which is perhaps the sign of its truth—forever precarious and needing to be proven anew, but always decisive. For, as Nietzsche said, "all that is decisive comes into being only in spite of."

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