

MEDICINE-A THIN BORDER BETWEEN FICTION AND REAL LIFE

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Abstract: For Andre Soubiran, medicine was more than a choice of vocation, it was an assumed duty. It is a task assumed from morality and has two sides: the scientific one (which we can see in Dr. Soubiran translated prestigious activity) and the social one (assumed by the doctor through the literature he brought as a contribution to the French cultural fund). If doctor Soubiran tried to fight the physical pathology, the writer Soubiran carried this offensive on paper, through his narratives. The beginning of the last century brought Nietzsche's philosophy: God is dead! In the new social, political and cultural context, to which are added the sufferings brought by two conflagrations and economic crises, the doctors had to face in times of hardship a new enemy: themselves, their conscience. Soubiran is one of those "people in white" who understood his purpose; by active fighters with diseases but also by opinion formers. The task assumed by the French doctor is a rather ethical one, to unabashedly expose the inner struggles to which those who should heal fall victim. The beginning of the last century and especially the period of calm after the end of the Second World War are the proof of this new duty that the servants of Hippocrates assumed. Corruption, careerism and the grotesque do not bypass anyone, and therefore neither doctors. Identifying these strengths and revealing the mechanisms of consciousness are the first steps that Soubiran through his novels takes on the path to normalcy and healing of his guild. The fragility of the human being is doubled by an immeasurable power when he has a high goal and the doctors are among those called.

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Not only English or American physicians made their way into the literary world. The French physician **André Soubiran** (1910-1999) was one of them. After studying medicine in Toulouse and after completing his doctorate (in 1935), Soubiran took an active part in the world war. The same year, in 1935, Soubiran made his literary debut with *Avicenne, prince des médecins*, writing a biography focusing on the Iranian-born doctor and philosopher Ibn Sina. After only four years, the idealism of the French doctor will be tested in the horrors of war. Active participation on the front, being the doctor of a tank squadron, would disturb Soubiran's character. The French writer and physician was convinced that the doctor's role is not only to alleviate suffering and also to inspire hope, even if this means facing a harsher reality. There is a lot of suffering behind medical progress and patients should be seen not as suffering bodies but as souls to whom a helping hand must be given. For doctors, Death is a tangible entity that they must face daily. Some critics made a connection between Soubiran and other two physicians who were writers: A.J.Cronin and Frank G. Slaughter.¹

His experience on the battlefield would inspire him to write the novel *J'étais médecin avec les chars* (1943). The novel is a painful testimony both of the bravery of his comrades and of the horrors of which he was a direct witness. Endowed with perfect analytical thinking achieved throughout his medical studies, Soubiran also had the empathy needed to pass the drama of war through the filter of the consciousness of a

¹ Joël Ménard, *Médecin de passage: Du roman à la réalité*, Société des Écrivains, 2018, p. 46

participant in the world tragedy. The Battle of France is emotionally portrayed in the novel that propelled him into the world of letters. The preface to this first literary experience was also signed by the literary doctor Georges Duhamel. Published in the unoccupied part by the Germans, *J'étais médecin avec les chars* (1943), would bring the author the Théophraste-Renaudot Prize. Front diary, this novel impresses the reader by telling the cruel truths that sat at the base of winning each battle. Facing death day by day, moment by moment, can transform consciousness. Memories themselves are no longer what we think because reality expands, becomes difficult and oppressive. The universe that the human being experienced before the war is one recreated by shrapnel, shells and comrades in agony. All this distorted world, rebuilt according to new patterns, in which only survival matters, is the object of study of this painfully realistic novel.

Encouraged by the success of this first writing among readers, Soubiran returns with another novel, *Les hommes en blanc* (1947), which is aimed at analyzing, in the manner of an x-ray the doctor's soul, the inner transformations that those wearing white robes undergo. The young Jean Nérac, apparently an alter-ego of the author because he was born in Toulouse and takes the road to the capital to attend medical courses, discovers that instead of the brilliance of his medical career he is faced with harsh truths of life: his own poverty, corrupt bosses and the physical suffering of the sick. This brutal initiation by participating in dissections, the long hours spent in the hospital wards crowded with sufferers have a great impact on the provincial. The English translation of the novel *Les hommes en blanc* would take the form of a trilogy: *The Doctors, The Healing Oath and Good-bye, Doctor Roch*.

If the first part - *The Doctors* - was the tragic story of a novice's frustration, Jean Nérac, the second part - *The Healing Oath* - is the story of a mature doctor. Jean Merac, from *The Doctors*, the help of an old physician, discovers, following his own illness, the desolation of his own false identity: what he built as a medical career in the capital has little in common with real life. In *The Doctors* there are characters such as Marianne Duriez, an innocent medical student in *The Doctors*, who are appreciated for their qualities. Patient Old Monsieur Thury is a patient with a high intellectual level.² Although she wanted to be a boy, Marianne is a doctor who gains the patients' trust. Thury even goes so far as to praise her other colleagues in the hope that the girl will find a husband: "I tell you, the man who has the chance of winning that girl for his own is either a madman or a monster if he does not take it."³ But the girl seems to prefer the company of the sufferers, her empathic nature pushing her to identify with these sufferers, as in the case of psychological transfer: "When I was little and I saw another girl being punished and crying in a corner, I always wanted to run up and console her."⁴

In *The Healing Oath* Merac tries to get rid of the lie of his fake existence until that moment and realizes that the oath taken must have real facts behind it. Determined to change his destiny, Merac goes over the first step on the path to healing: awareness. The novel was highly appreciated when it was published, in 1954. As the author had already

² André Soubiran, *The Doctors*, Translated by Coburn O. WH Allen, London, 1954, p. 160

³ Idem, p. 61

⁴ Idem, p. 206

taught his audience, tis novel was a mixture of sensitivity and harsh reality, combining “the warmth and tenderness, as well as the stark realism, of a country doctor's practice.”⁵

The last part of the trilogy, *Good-bye, Doctor Roch*, is not a cliché. The action is placed, this time, in a mental hospital. The author constructed this narrative in the form of a diary. Jean Lacombe is hospitalized in Melun Hospital following a conviction for a crime he did not commit. Dr. Roch, the institution's new doctor, senses the injustice done and instructs Lacombe to take care of the hospital library. The patient has, in the new quality, the possibility to write his diary which represents the narrative structure of the novel but also to have access in all the wards. The connection between Roch and Lacombe is becoming closer, being based on mutual understanding and respect. The didacticism of these pages is due precisely to the author's desire to emphasize the strengths of an unjust society which, in order to justify its odious deeds, is willing to sacrifice individuals. In 1955, the novel's popularity led to its screenplay directed by Ralph Habib. The novelty of this novel is that all the feelings are reproduced from the perspective of active participant to the medical act by a doctor, not by a writer.

Soubiran manages to amaze his reader with harsh portraits of the medical staff. Sister Limagnac, known among the occupants of the wards as “rattlesnake” manages to irritate by her pedantry and dictatorial character: “yellowish face and hard suspicious eyes ... [She] spent her mornings snapping crossly at everyone, always on the lookout for mistakes or negligence. (...) She was as cantankerous and sadistic as a liverish sergeant major unleashed on a troop of raw recruits. (...) to confiscate the blissful banned cigarette or the comforting cup of coffee introduced on the sly.”⁶ Sister Limagnac only allows urine bottles to sit on the shelf above the sick and if the fact that patients have to put their things in the inappropriate places does not bother the despotic sister as long as the order of the ward is maintained “The patients' inconvenience did not bother Sister Limagnac so long as each shelf displayed a urine bottle and the beds were flawlessly aligned.”⁷

Already accustomed to breaking myths and shatter taboos, Soubiran is increasingly fascinated by the world of the written word. Thus, he also signs other novels: *L'île aux fous* (1955), *Bedlam* (1956), *Journal d'une femme en blanc* (1964), *The Good Doctor Guillotin and His Strange Device* (1964), *Le baron Larrey: Chirurgien de Napoléon* (1966).

L'île aux fous (1955) is a sequel of the previous novel. Jean Lacombe's silence in front of the law that unjustly accuses him and brings him an apparent “freedom”, by being hospitalized in a mental illness institution. The underlying idea transmitted by the author might be insanity is a possible salvation from reality. The question that arises is whether silence can be a way out of harsh reality or just a step into something much harsher. Soubiran seems attracted to the recesses of the human mind, to the mechanisms by which individuals try to evade their daily lives or become corrupt. The

⁵ *The Healing Oath*, Kirkus Reviews. 26 July 1954. Retrieved 9 May 2018

⁶ André Soubiran, *The Doctors*, Translated by Coburn O. WH Allen, London, 1954, pp. 136-137

⁷ Idem, p. 183

character claims to be mentally ill but plunges into a new world, the inner world of reflection. Like a traveler from one dimension to another, the main character dives into a much more profound realm.

The same world of degradation, madness, and despair is resumed in *Bedlam* (1956). Hope is the only thing that can keep human consciousness alive, but when it disappears, the fall occurs. The author spoke of this range of novels as fictitious memories, but their core is the authentic feelings of some patients he met. The originality of Soubiran's writings is the revelation, with objectivity, of deep human experiences from the perspective of a fine objective analyzer, accustomed to laboratory analysis. One can reproach a lack of naturalness, spontaneity, a certain degree of didacticism and thesis but all these imputations do not resist if we consider that the author is a neophyte, penetrated into the world of letters out of a sincere desire to unite the two: the world the servants of Aesculapius and that of the men of letters.

The next novel, *Journal d'une femme en blanc* (1969), continues the series of novels dedicated to the world of physicians. This time, Claude Sauvage, a 25-year-old medical student, specializes in gynecology at Gennevilliers Hospital. Driven by high ideals, Sauvage hopes to be able to emancipate women victims of a masculine world that restricts their freedom to dispose of their bodies through contraceptives. It is worth mentioning the historical context. In 1960, the first birth control pill appeared in the United States, representing a first step in gaining female self-determination. On the last night on duty in his ward, Sauvage receives a patient in a serious condition, Mariette. Victim of a clandestine abortion, she risks sepsis and eventually loses her life. Arriving in her hometown, Mesnil-en-Ouche, Claude ends up as assistant of the local doctor. The irony of fate is that the one who declared herself against abortions has to perform this surgical maneuver on a patient who had contracted rubella. Soubiran manages to capture the reader's attention by imposing a new type of female doctor character who lives in dramas that only a woman can understand. The subtlety, the delicacy but also the acuity and the clear understanding of some strictly feminine problems seem to put him in a much more sensitive light.

The Good Doctor Guillotin and His Strange Device, the English translation of *Ce Bon Docteur Guillotin* (1962), is the biography of the physician who linked his name to the French Revolution and who, in 1792, called for the use of the guillotine as a more humane variant in executioners carried out by the executioner with the help of the pole ax often failing. At the same time, the mechanism was perceived during the Terrorist Regime as a fair way, without favoritism, of executing political convicts regardless of their social status. Gradually replaced, but not entirely with incarceration, the guillotine would maintain a grim status and be used until the modern era, more precisely in 1977. The biographical character of the novel is striking. Soubiran also mentions the episode in which Voltaire dies and the astronomer Joseph Jérôme Lefrançois de Lalande as well as Benjamin Franklin, both Masons, come to understand the importance of Sirius and the pyramids. The novel is the sad conclusion that a terrible story can be linked to the name of a good man. In charge of bringing the reform in medical education, doctor Guillotin pleaded for a death as painless as possible in case of death punishment. Although the

instrument was not actually invented by him, to his horror, the new device would bear his name. Disappointed that his good intentions were misinterpreted, Guillotin chose to practice medicine in the army. After the fall of the Terrorist Regime, he returned to Paris where he became involved in vaccination against smallpox. Soubiran introduces in his novel even a short chapter in which he discusses the possibility that, for a few minutes after the guillotine, the individual may maintain a certain degree of consciousness.

The author reproduces a letter signed by the German anatomist S.T. Sömmerling, published on November 9, 1795 in the *Moniteur*. The anatomist believed that, despite the separation of the head from the body, the person's consciousness can persist for a while. The odious mechanism of life's end was first tested in a mental hospital, Bicetre in Paris, on a living sheep and on the corpses of patients. Enthusiastically received by politicians and the population, the deadly mechanism would be one of the nightmares surrounding the French Revolution. The novel of the French doctor is innovative not only by narrating some biographical data but also by the objective perspective of a doctor on some events that rewrote history.

The series of biographical writings is continued by Soubiran with the novel *Le baron Larrey: Chirurgien de Napoléon*. The strong personality of Dominique-Jean Larrey (1766-1842) impressed Soubiran especially because he combined military courage with devotion to the medical profession. Larrey was also the first author of works on military medicine and a reformer of the triage and transportation system for severely wounded soldiers with the help of "flying ambulances", a system he developed as early as 1793. In fact, Larrey used horse-drawn carts to transport the crippled to the trenches, a revolutionary thing especially since until then the wounded were effectively abandoned on the battlefield. The Baron won the British respect for this innovative method of rescuing people and the Duke of Wellington forbade his soldiers to attack these means of rescue. Participating in Napoleon's armed campaigns, including in Egypt and Russia, Larrey gained invaluable medical knowledge as he performed surgeries and amputations in battle.

His innovations, including craniotomies, in the case of surgery in the precarious conditions of his time and the unhealthy conditions of the front. Larrey was also a promoter of aseptic conditions using hypochlorous acid and saline for disinfecting wounds. Medical science still confirms its merits by retaining pathologies such as Larrey's (parasternal) hernia, Larrey's gap and pericardial puncture. A member of the Academy of Medicine and the Academy of Sciences, Larrey was a prominent figure in medicine. Soubiran's fascination with military medicine and the history of medical sciences also materialized in the preface to the novel *Médecins et soldats pendant l'expédition d'Égypte, 1798-1799*, authored by Jean-Marie Milleliri, published in 1993. Let's not forget that Soubiran had sensed the importance of the history of medicine from the time he was a medical student. Only by knowing the evolution of the field in which we work can we make a contribution to progress. Thus, in 1935, he defended his final thesis of medical studies on one of the most influential medical personalities: *Avicenne, prince des médecins, sa vie et sa doctrine*.

In the same year, 1966, Soubiran returns with another work dedicated to the Napoleonic era: *Napoléon et un million de morts*. Even the anxiety of today's world, stress as the main culprit in the evolution of the pathologies of modern man do not remain untouched subjects by the doctor-writer who signed in 1981 a study, *Le stress vaincu? comment dominer ce mal de notre temps et retrouver le plaisir de vivre* co-authored with Christen Yves. The book looks at the psychological and physiological effects of stress on the human being.

In 1975 Soubiran returns with a new narrative whose action is related to doctors: *Un Coup de grace*. This time the action is set in the contemporary era of a large Parisian hospital equipped with ultra-modern technology. The life of the hospital includes characters such as François Le Sénéchal, a famous oncologist, his daughter, Francine, the ardent journalist Pierre Stahler, the inexperienced Brunel intern, the compassionate doctor Atoumian and many nurses. The analysis of consciences, the ambivalence of these turmoil that oscillates between veracity and velearism, on the one hand, and munificence, on the other, is the core of this narrative. The upsetting truth that Soubiran presents is the impotence of the human being, even a famous physician, in the face of the twists of fate, of inexorable death, but yet another important theme of reflection proposed by the author is euthanasia: who has the right to death and life on another human being. The question that remains is a simple one: does a doctor, a simple man in fact, have the right to decide to euthanize a patient? This issue, found at the time of the novel's publication only at the beginning of discussions about deontology and medical ethics, has gained from the 1970s to the present a growing share in the debate involving both public opinion and the medical world alike.

The style of the epistles or the diary kept by one of the characters are literary strategies that Soubiran applied whenever he could. Thus the doctor wrote numerous narratives that appeal to this literary process: *Lettre ouverte à une femme d'aujourd'hui* (1967), *20 lettres à une femme dans le vent* (1970), *20 lettres, madame, pour sa santé ou Votre mari est surmené* (1971). At the same time, the doctor also signed short psychological narratives *Soyez belle* (1962) and *Le Sommeil En Vingt Leçons* (1972) but his literary merit is to bring closer to the reader troubled consciences, the medical world with all its flaws and dramas but and with those doctors, few in number, for whom the oath given is holy, ethical and moral problems which troubled the society of the moment.

For Soubiran, the world of "white robes" is one of salvation, and this perspective must be viewed diachronically, for the middle of the last century was the climax of amazing medical discoveries, especially antibiotics that managed to save many lives. Humanity's hope that the future can be much better is also felt in Soubiran's novels. His saga, *Les Hommes en blanc*, wants a plea for his confreres, a fight against misconceptions and a confession in favor of doctors: "ce Toulousain volubile et chaleureux, veut corriger des idées fausses et témoigner en faveur des médecins."⁸

⁸ Jean-Yves Nau, *Des «hommes en blanc» au «Dr House» (1)*, in *Revue Médicale Suisse*—www.revmed.ch—23 mars 2011, p. 678

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