

# Physicians' interdisciplinary character

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## ABSTRACT

Along time, physicians have been perceived by society as either a last hope, or have been watched with reverence or, if they have not responded to expectations, have been blasted. There was the case of physicians who, for the fault of not managing to heal, especially in the case of those employed by the potentials of their times, paid with life for the alleged errors. Even literature has perceived their guild differently; something easy to understand considering the influence that physicians can have on others' lives. A characteristic of physicians who have created aesthetic values is that they have not been bound by artistic currents. The multidisciplinary character of these personalities that have influenced society not only in the field where they have been prepared but much broader, of the culture cannot be denied. And the explanation for this "retreat" of physicians in culture is the need that these Hippocrates' descendants have felt to expose their soul, to create beautiful. The multidisciplinary character that doctors demonstrate, their ability to bring together the most varied fields, including culture, are the proof of distinguished and always open-minded spirits.

**Keywords:** pluridisciplinary approach, culture, physicians, literature, aesthetic values

Dominated by gravity, physicians have created in an individualist manner and have eluded rigid styles in various artistic movements. Being some of the earliest receivers of the precepts of the ancestors and living with the discoveries of their times, it is natural for them to become cultural propagators and to produce cultural values. The interdisciplinary character of Aesculap's followers has been found not only in literature, but also in painting or even music, for physicians have loved beauty in its varied forms. As far as literature is concerned, the hallmark that doctors have put is a twofold one: on the one hand, many writings have as central characters physicians; on the other hand, doctors have created literature in their turn. Examples of physicians converted to writers or who have practiced concurrently both arts, healing and writing, are multiple. The explanation of this need to express themselves through literature comes from the ability of these therapists of the body to connect areas of human knowledge that were not at the expense of ordinary people. Secondly, literature or any of the arts where they chose to produce aesthetic values were a way to escape from the daily life of a perma-

nent struggle with vicissitudes and inexorable of sufferance. Physicians have kept pace with the scientific and social development of society. In turn, they have influenced society only through the profession they practiced but also through the psychological, moral and cultural stamp they have put on the development of human society. Feeling the pulse of society, anchored in economic and social realities, physicians are one of the social categories that produced, as neophytes, the most amount culture. Medicine has given apart from excellent practitioners of the noble profession, as well as literary critics (Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve), philosophers (Avicenna), theologians (Averroes, James Bovell), poets (Vasile Voiculescu, William Carlos Williams), musicians (Hector Berlioz), painters (Ion Țuculescu), politicians (Georges Benjamin Clemenceau), historians (Sir William Osler), promoters of literary currents (Sașa Pană) and literary characters with real qualities in writing (Axel Munthe, Marcel Proust, Georges Duhamel, Ferdinand Destouches, A.J. Cronin, Abraham Verghes etc.). The multidisciplinary character of these personalities that have influenced society not only in

the field where they have been prepared but much broader, of the culture cannot be denied.

The present article aims at highlighting of some medical personalities who, beyond the scientific formation, have influenced the world they lived through artistic creation. “They are reluctant to the low-end traditionalism, as to the chameleon avant-garde. They have not committed themselves to rural foot ware with bells, nor to poems-mollusk, to invertebrates of fake modern primitivism. Seriousness accompanies their talent, even their humor” (1). All these apostles in Aesculap’s work are those who bring the scientific thrill to the realm of literature, miraculously succeeding in completing the two threads in an indestructible whole.

Since older times, doctors were not just healers of the body but also cultured people who approached various other fields of human knowledge. Thus, **Sir Thomas Browne** (1605-1682), who was to influence Osler-another literary physician-over centuries, was not only interested in medicine but also in religion and esoteric sciences. Browne studied medicine in Italy (in Padua) and in France (at Montpellier) but practiced it in the country of origin: England. *Religio Medici*, his first book, was published only in 1643 although the author had written it well before. Three years later, the doctor signed another book *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*. This work applies the principle of systematic research in the field of natural sciences. Browne attempts to scientifically neutralize by recommending empirical testing, some popular beliefs about the existence of animals, insects, or plants. Thus, the doctor refers to the notions of geography, physics, medicine, history, chemistry, and even astronomy. The book also brings together experiments the doctor did, the remedies he found (such as the use of bitter almonds against intoxication). Another book bearing the signature of the British physician is *Hydriothaphia* (which is a philosophical essay initiated by an archaeological event, the discovery of clay pots from the Bronze Age in the Norfolk region) which was edited in 1658 together with *The Garden of Cyrus* (also an philosophical essay in Platonic style). Browne proposes as method of scientific knowledge in general and in medicine, in particular, the system of getting from the individual to the general but the ambiguity and duality of his literary writings lies in the way in which he connected rational sciences with religious belief. In the lexical field, Browne was the one who introduced neologisms related to science and medicine, especially from Latin. Among these, many terms are used

even today biped, carnivores, temperamental, polarity, cylindrical, rhomboid.” (2)

Years later, Browne’s writings would influence writers such as Thomas Carlyle and modernists as Virginia Woolf as well as the Argentinian representative of magical realism Luis Borges. Last but not least, he was praised by the romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Although his philosophical system is eclectic and often laconic, Browne has the merit, besides inventing terms used extensively nowadays, to open the road to an innovative perspective on the world: “This willingness to maintain an open mind on virtually all matters of faith and science produced a remarkable synthesis and intellectual equilibrium that could not have been sustained much before or after his time. Browne has evolved and styled completely into his thought, a supple and contingent instrument of great investigative power and meditative beauty, able to comprehend the almost inconceivably diverse and sometimes competitive range of his learning and belief.” (3).

**Carl von Linné** (1707-1778), physician of Swedish origin, studied at the University of Uppsala in his country where he would become a professor of medicine and botany after graduation. Begun during the faculty years as a hobby, studying plants would become, along with examining animal species and minerals, a major concern for the scientist. This interest was to catch a voice in a first work signed by Linné, in 1720, *Praeludia Sponsaliorum Plantarum*. This was followed by *Genera Plantarum* and *Botanical Critique*. Adventurer spirit, the doctor has also made a trip to Lapland in an attempt to discover new species of plants and animals. As a result of this trip Linné wrote *Flora Lapponica*, a taxonomy attempt. After this adventure, the Swedish doctor went to the Netherlands to take his doctorate in medicine at the University of Harderwijk.

His thesis, entitled *Dissertatio medica inauguralis in qua exhibetur hypothesis nova de febrium intermittentium causa*, was devoted to malaria. If, from the scientific point of view, in the light of current knowledge, Linné enormously mistook regarding this disease, the doctor was right about the treatment with southernwood that could be applied to it. Between 1727 and 1730 Linné worked at *Manuscripta Medica*, which brought together texts and engravings about plants and their medical use. In 1735, the Swedish physician would print *Systema Naturae*, a plant classification, and three years later *Hortus Cliffortianus*. In *Öländska och Gothländska Resa*, a paper written in 1741 in Swedish, the doctor described the medical use of plants. His

notoriety in the medical field attracted his appointment as King of Sweden-Adolf Frederick's physician, and three years later, in 1747, he was appointed rector of the University of Uppsala. His name was given to a plant: the cow's cup with the official denomination *Linnaea borealis*. Linné's merit, from an editorial point of view, is to accompany his writings of engravings and pictures drawn by himself, of various commentaries that make encyclopedic references to various branches of the exact sciences and humanities, but also of how he tried to create a unitary system of animal and plant classification, a system that he thought was a starting point for future research. All of these make its works transform from simple classes of notions into true encyclopedic references.

Although he was a known botanist, Linné had an artist soul. His works go beyond the narrow framework of science and become sometimes lyrical: "In his lively style Linnaeus poetically describes the celebration of love and nuptials in plants, in the bridal bed provided by the petals" (4). Not the science of medicine, in fact his basic profession, was left aside, the Swedish physician putting the plants in its use. Thus, he correlated botany with the study of practical knowledge of healing by publishing papers such as *Drugs – a classic guide*, *Types of diseases* and *Key to Medicine*. Promoter of taxonomy in the modern sense, Linné based his judging system on the idea that any kind of nature must first be investigated and then ranked in a classification. This very way of thinking has led the Swedish to the conclusion that the human being is related to the primates almost a hundred years before Charles Darwin and to the Swedish physician mankind owes the division people into four races according to skin color and geographic location.

But what astonishes the modern reader is how the Swedish doctor managed not only to create a classification system for plants and animals, but also to connect the knowledge of botany and zoology with human society. This demonstrates the broad views the researcher had in relation to the world. Natural things, insofar as they are useful to humanity, can influence their existence in the most diverse domains, said the author: "All that is useful to man originates from these natural objects; hence the industry of mining or metallurgy; plant-industry or agriculture and horticulture; animal husbandry, hunting and fishing. In one word, it is the foundation of every industry of building, commerce, food supply, medicine etc. By them people are kept in a healthy state, protected against illness and recover from disease, so that their selection is highly

necessary. Hence the necessity of natural science is self-evident." (4)

**Marcel Proust** (1871-1922), even if he did not attend courses of the Faculty of Medicine, came in contact with the cruel reality of physical ailments both through the fragility of his own person – suffering from asthma – and by his father, Adrien Proust who had been the head of a medical clinic and who published a book on encephalomalacia. Both his father and his brother were practitioners of medicine and this, unavoidably, marked Marcel's literary becoming. Two years before his son Marcel was born, Adrien Proust was sent on a research trip of a scourge of the time: cholera. Returning to Paris, Adrien Proust taught hygiene courses and insisted that his son walk down the trail of medicine. But Marcel was not made for medical rigor and meticulousness, and he turned his attention towards literature. In the first phase he wrote pastiches, translations and essays and finally his own work: *À la recherche du temps perdu* (started in 1909 and containing seven volumes). In fact, his brother, Robert Proust, followed the medical career and became a known surgeon. The passion for the art of writing was flowing through the veins of his brother also; so he posthumously published part of the volumes of his brother *La Prisonnière* (1923), *Albertine disparue* (1925) and *Le Temps retrouvé* (1927). His name is related to the term medical Proust's sign-vivid grief at the contact of the Douglas' sack in an ectopic pregnancy. Marcel, a suffering child, experienced the boundary between life and death: "He discovered that, beyond the boundaries of sleep and death, or in the vicinity of this receding lesion, human lucidity disappears and the absolute unknown begins." This experience would find its voice in his future writings, and would determine his literary destiny, for he had learned that "in the midst of supreme pain, in the state of agony, the clemency of nature anesthetized the patient, and that no sick person brought back to life from the state of coma remembers to have been experiencing pain." What Marcel Proust brought new to his literature is the probing of these awesome areas of memories that can be revived: "Beyond all the paroxysms of suffering, he retained his analytical lucidity, serving art and science" (1).

But why has medicine, perhaps more than any other guild, given the world so many creators of culture? Whether it was literature, painting, music or any other form of expression of aesthetics, physicians have brought their contribution. Some of them have even left the chosen craft of healing bodies in favor of artistic creation. Everything that en-

compasses the human being reverberates in its very existence. And in the case of doctors, the inurement to see the suffering, pain, and misery of the human body has sometimes made them insensitive to beauty. By treating disharmony, these Aesculap's calling practitioners have lost the sensibility of perceiving aesthetics. Under these conditions, the more should be appraised the noble practitioners of medical art who have chosen not to invest their over-spirituality in producing art. Nevertheless, the vast majority have kept under their medical attire the artist. Active participants to human suffering, physicians even when they have done literature or have debated various issues, have kept their combatant spirit. Maybe professional deformation but even in lyricism, they have not lost pragmatism: "Interpersonal contacts, extensive experience, the credibility of which they enjoyed, desperation caused by pain that pushed people to them, all resulted in a social and especially huge cultural impact. Many times, even the great artists of the world have acted upon society through doctors and not directly over others. Physicians were «active agents» that have spread culture, providing creations with a human dimension, translating them to the understanding of people" (5).

Medical profession is probably the most difficult of all. Not only that it requires a tremendous knowledge storage capacity and deduction skills, but it is also demanding by imposing real dedication to the practitioner. These qualities in medicine can only hinder the aesthetic task that many doctors have assumed. Medicine puts her practitioners face to face with real life, because they have access to the symptoms that remain unknown. The close schesis between medicine and art is, in essence, the man. Both address the same receiver only the means of conveying the message differ. One is addressed to the body, the other to the soul. "The connection between medicine, a precise science, but human by excellence, and art in general is perfectly explicable if we think that both of them address man in a direct and at hand manner, both interfere

with the sphere of human sensitivity. Not in few instances, doctors have shown us that their lab has become and is also a laboratory of inspiration and creation" (5).

Roaming to the realm of suffering, physicians have found the power to identify and promote in themselves beauty. Trained in identifying of pathophysiology, have been endowed with the "instruments" for feeling human nature, and it is the merit of some of them that they can have the knowledge gained scientifically put in the service of aesthetics. In the case of a man of ordinary letters this excess of rationality would seem strange, literary doctors are allowed this oddness and even is expected with great thrill by the general public, readers who hope to find in the physicians' written page some answers to silent questions. And, perhaps, the greatest mastery lies in the ability to transform under their pencil (in the case of those who have chosen literature), under their brush (for those who have chosen painting) or under their quint (for those who have chosen music) to translate pain into artistic ecstasy. It is precisely this aspect of the doctors' existence that is devoted to the present work which seeks a neology to those of the Hippocrates' followers who have succeeded in overcoming the frame of their profession and managed to put it in the interest of aesthetics. The present article is just a glimpse into the fascinating world physicians created through their vast knowledge.

#### Acknowledgements

This paper has been drafted in the period of sustainability within the project entitled "*Horizon 2020 – Doctoral and Postdoctoral Studies: Promoting the National Interest through Excellence, Competitiveness and Responsibility in the Field of Romanian Fundamental and Applied Scientific Research*", contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140106. This project is co-financed by European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme for Human Resources Development 2007-2013. **Investing in people!**

*Conflict of interest:* none declared

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