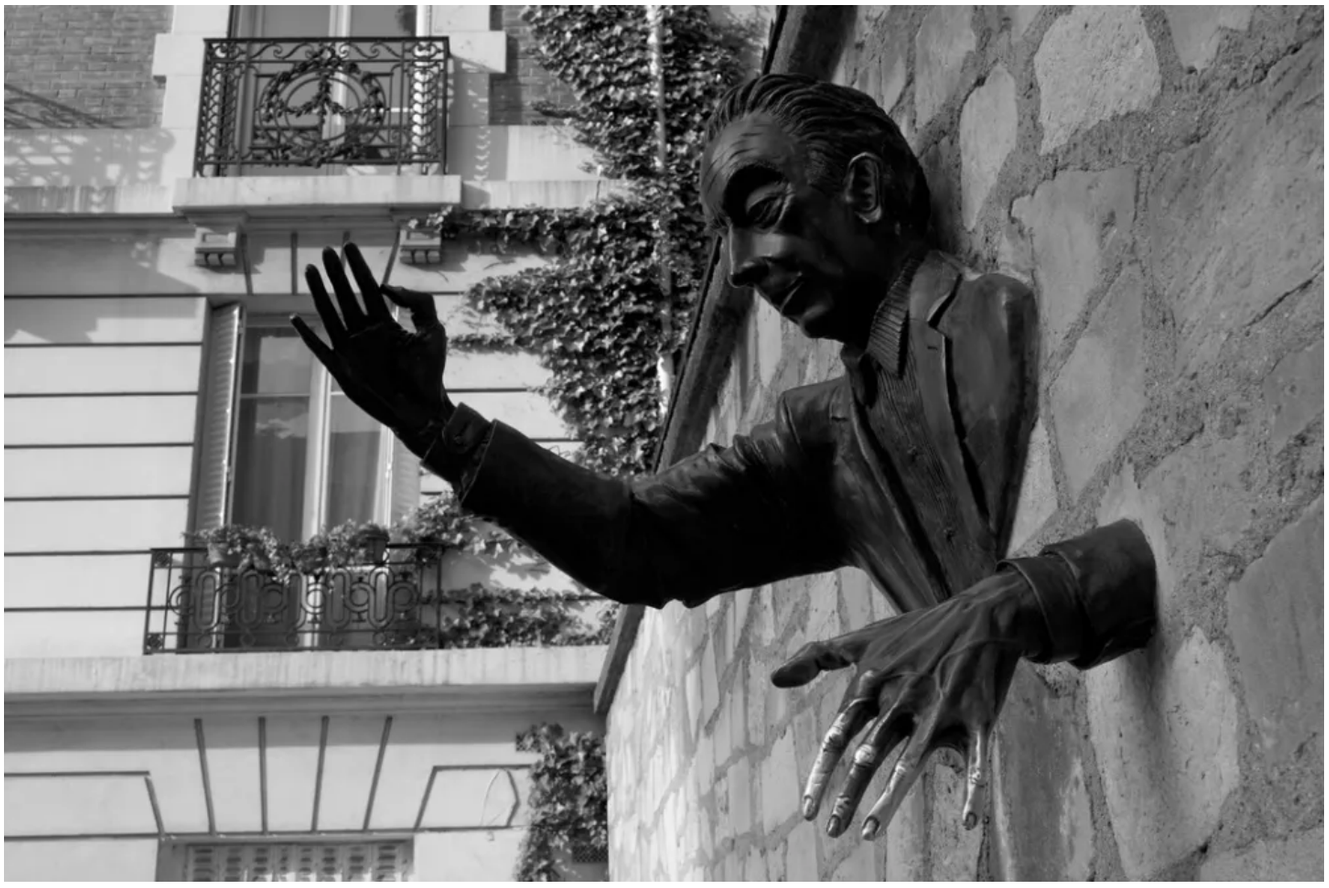

Benjamin Gagnon Chainey // One day, as he was assaulted by journalists in a scrum outside Québec's legislative assembly, the now-former health minister, Gaétan Barrette, became impatient. Harassed with specific and sensitive questions on healthcare accessibility for patients, he exclaimed: "We're not here to do literature!" With this statement, lightly expressed but heavy with meaning, the former health minister may have ignored, ironically, that he was doing literature. Although he insisted by all means – medical-scientific and especially monetary – to trample on literature, the art of language overflows the health *system* that Gaétan Barrette was trying to impose as a *closet*.

"Hide those dying bodies that I cannot see and celebrate our reforms!" demanded Gaétan Barrette. And if the slogan of the (Neo-)Liberal Party of Québec was "we take care of real business," obviously, our little language-bodies, our literature corpuses past and future, whether advocating or suffering, exalting or dying, were not real business. As an epigraph to the French edition of *Semiotike*, Julia Kristeva put forth the hypothesis that literature is often left aside, *closeted* when it comes to dealing with "public policy," "concrete knowledge" and "science," for the complex and bad reason that literature *overflows* forms of knowing, while also being fundamentally part of it. I may be unable to convince you to vote for a party that takes no heed of healthcare accessibility and humanity for the poor, the sick and the dying, but I would have no trouble convincing you that literature shakes up, disturbs, deconstructs, turns answers into questions, common sense into doubt. Literature is a language-body that cannot be *closeted*, that cannot be held between walls, whether those of Ignorance, of the Bastille, of Berlin, of the American-Mexican border, or… the flesh and bone walls of a healthy or sick body, bodies that never quite know who they are, who are afraid or ashamed, perhaps of who they are, but are not willing to give up their quest for the Unknown, be it at the price of suffering.

Literature is, in that sense, a language-body that is continuously *coming out*. From an epistemological standpoint, the American critic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick advances, in her 1990 *Epistemology of the Closet*, that *coming out* is, beyond its common meaning of public affirmation of one's homosexuality, a recognition, an acceptance, and even a "celebration" of the *unknown as unknown*: "Just so with coming out, it can bring about the revelation of a powerful unknowing as unknowing, not as a vacuum or as the blank it can pretend to be but as weighty and occupied and consequential epistemological space" (EKS p. 77). *Coming out* is not an epistemological end in itself. On the contrary, it is an epistemological means *through* the other. *Coming out* means opening up the space of knowledge and celebrating the power of the unknown that thrives in that space, alive, whether it is buried in our bodies of flesh, our language-bodies, or our social-bodies, as if these three could be separated into *systems*, like the health system so dear to our honest and moral leaders.

If today's health politicians took the time to do literature, perhaps they would not be closeted–unbeknownst to them in some cases–in the Closet of so-called Progress and of the Pecuniary Cult of Health. These ideological, political and medical-scientific closets are not new. They find their source at the very heart of literary history, in particular at the end of the 19th century, which critics commonly call the "Century of the Scholars." As that great century's medicine celebrated its triumphs, which advanced along with the steam engine on the "definitive scientific path" predicted by Claude Bernard, the father of experimental medicine, the language-body of August Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, a visionary writer in France at the end of the 19th century, was distrustful of the powder of progress thrown in the eyes of the ill. In his *cruel tale* entitled 'Dr. Tristan Chavassus' Treatment,' published in 1877, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam exclaims, at once ironic and euphoric:

> *Hooray! It's over! In joy! Forever!!! Progress takes us in its torrent. Hurtling as we are, stopping would be true suicide. Victory! Victory! The speed of the flow takes the proportion of a haze so admirable that we can barely distinguish anything besides the tip of our own nose[1]!*

At the heart of the great century of scholars, the discursive closet that challenges the language-body is vicious. Resolutely scientific and claiming to be beneficial, the closet erected by "Dr. Tristan Chavassus' Treatment" does not mean to condemn the poor people who criticize it or question it, as might so many journalists or, worse, over-sensitive bookworms. No, Dr. Tristan aspires to heal, to cure the language-bodies who "*hear wrong*, a disease that has become contagious these days" (DT). To sugar-coat his pill, Dr. Tristan Chavassus…

> *… speaks, in an intellectual manner, to these nervous people who feel too quickly, as the saying goes, a flea in their ear! — It soothes the itches that, for instance, the sensation of "outrage" awakens behind the auricular appendix of some humans who are belated or who remain overly susceptible! But his triumph, his specialty, is his cure for people who "hear voices," Joan of Arc for instance. — That is his main claim to public esteem. (DT)*

The treatment of the great century of scholars, not unlike the political neo-liberal treatments of today, is a *rational* treatment that censors… rather than heals. A treatment that *encloses* the

sensitive language-bodies, too susceptible, fragile and vulnerable to equivocal vices with which voices, inside and outside, try to tempt them.

Dr. Chavassus' treatment is all rational; his slogan is: "All for common sense, through common sense!" No more heroical inspirations to be feared, with him. This prince of knowledge would prevent a sick person to distinguish even the voice of their consciousness, if needed (DT).

With Dr. Tristan, archetype of a scholar drunk with scientific knowledge, true knowledge, science becomes literally *without conscience,* and Gargantua turns around in his grave. For, in the scientific closet of the 19th century, …

> *… No more of these thoughtless spurs, caused, for example, by the excitement stirred by the old songs of the motherland, morbidly, in the hearts of the few last enthusiasts! No more childish games! Let's not fear conquering back provinces from the lightheaded! The Doctor is here. Are you tormented by the the faraway calls of the sirens of Glory? … Chavassus will help relieve those buzzing ears. — Do you hear sublime accents in the silence, as the spirit of your country spoke to you? … Do you suffer from spurts of revolted honor when the feeling of defeated courage and untameable hope of a greater tomorrow blazes in your heart and makes your earlobes blush? … — Quick! quick! to the Doctor's: he'll cure those itches! (DT)*

Or, to sweeten the taste of scientific insensitivity, the curfew over feverish outbursts, the curative panacea for vile sensory awakenings, Dr. Tristan Chavassus is astute. He plays on words to convince the sickly language-body to swallow its medicine. For if health politicians are not there to do literature, Dr. Tristan, for his part, understands its power and anchors his medical-scientific treatment directly in language. If the popular saying states that fire must be fought with fire, Dr. Tristan Chavassus fights words with words. Faced with poor little language-bodies, "sick" with all the voices they hear wrong, Dr. Tristan…

> *… suddenly [rushes] to your hear, sticks his mouth over it. First with a low and slow tone, that fast inflates like the roaring of thunder, he articulates a single word: "HUMANITY." His eyes on his chronometer, he manages, after twenty minutes, to pronounce it seventeen times per second, without mixing up the syllables, a result reached after many such vigils! fruit of many and perilous exercises. (DT)*

It is by repeating *ad nauseam* the word "humanity" that, paradoxically, the treatment of Dr. Tristan denies that humanity. With strong doses of science without conscience, of insensitive science, political, carnal and literary, the treatment of Dr. Tristan silences exalted inclinations and the discovery of the voices that populate the poor little language-body condemned to heal, to the closet of health and of political and medical-scientific reason.

> *Second spark. Crack! Enough. Victory! … The ear-drum is pierced, — that is to say the mysterious point, the sick point, the worrying point that, in the ear-drum of your miserable ear, brought to your spirit those buzzes of glory, honor and courage. — You are saved. You*

> *cannot hear anything more. Miracle! Abstraction and the Tail of words cover, in you, all the screams of anger towards the murdered old Ideal! The exclusive love of your health and of your comfort inspires an enlightened despise of all offenses! there you are, now, shielded from ten thousand slaps.—FINALLY!!! You breathe, Chavassus delivers a flick on your nose, as a sign of healing; you stand up;—you are FREE… […] You feel Common Sense flow, like a balm, throughout your being. Your indifference… knows no boundaries. You are blessed with a reasoning that makes you superior to all your shames. You have become a man of Humanity. (DT)*

This man of "blessed Humanity," an ironic and insensitive ideal enclosed in the sterile closet of medical-scientific Progress, and propelled at high speed since the 19th century of scholars, is alas not so different from the one that today's health politicians attempt to trap in a closet, with the pecuniary discourse of administrators of torture, emptied of all sensitivity, of all literature.

"We're not here to do literature" amounts to saying, literally, "we're not here to be human." Sickness may not be a space of healthy emancipation, but as the French philosopher of medicine and science Claire Marin expresses, "without a doubt, it is the experience of another facet of existence."[2] To be able to read, express and live this experience fully–in order to cure others humanely, outside of the political and medical-scientific closets of an insensitive medicine that only seeks curing at all costs–it is imperative that medical humanities continue to polish their pens. That the literary language-bodies we are continue to demand, loud and clear, proudly and without shame, that their voice be heard in the Polis. Our future former ministers of the Cult of Health can take notice: we are not here to do literature; we are here, whether sickly or healthy in body and in mind, suffering at times but always eloquent, to *be* literature.

Featured image: Photo of *Le Passe-Muraille* from Peter Rivera via Flickr. Some rights reserved.

[1] Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. 1883/2013. « Le traitement du docteur Tristan » dans *Contes cruels*. Paris : Les Classiques de Poche. p. 241-245 (My translation. Now DT in the text)

[2] Claire Marin. 2018. *Hors de moi*. Paris : Éditions Allia. p. 10.