

# READING JACQUES FERRON

## Exploring the Limits of the Self: Birth and Death in the Writing of Jacques Ferron

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**B**irth and death are inseparable and recurring themes in Jacques Ferron's work. As a physician, the author had an intimate knowledge of life's beginning and of its end. He saw the births he attended as privileged moments in his practice, and as a writer, he would draw on his experience of both birth and death. In this paper, we will show how the doctor goes beyond his clinical experience of these two events and attempts to invest them with meaning. We will focus on three very personal texts: "Credit Due" ("La Créance"), from the book *Quince Jam*,<sup>1</sup> in which Jacques Ferron stages his own birth, *The Cart (La Charrette)*,<sup>2</sup> a fantastic novel about the death of its own narrator, who could be the author himself; and "Les deux lys,"<sup>3</sup> Ferron's very last text, a testament in which the author, once again, faces death while returning to his own roots, to the beginning of it all, the point where, for him, everything begins.

In these three texts, the author tries to answer the existential question, "Who am I?". In his quest for identity, Jacques Ferron has looked for answers in the margins, at the limits of life. Birth is therefore part of the answer to this question. However, the quest is in no way simple, as we can see in "Credit Due," a text in which life and death, Eros and Thanatos are intertwined. As for *The Cart*, it is a dark novel about a first-person narrator, a doctor in the suburbs. This narrator dies of a heart attack and then is brought back to life by the author, no longer as a subject but as an object. Instead of narrating, he is the object of an omniscient narrator's gaze. The cart, on which the corpses of the dead, including that of the doctor, are gathered, symbolizes death. In "Les deux lys" in particular, birth and death become associated with Ferron's own literary project, as well as with

the life and death of the Quebec nation. We will begin by discussing "Credit Due" and *The Cart*, ending with "Les deux lys."

### Writing about taboo

In "Credit Due," this text in which Jacques Ferron has described his own birth, the author writes about the beginning of his life and at the same time describes Louiseville, his hometown. What is interesting in Jacques Ferron's narrative is that not only do we have a personal description of the Ferron family, but we also have a social portrait of a small Quebec town of the 1920s with its powerful people and its outcasts.

Madame Théodora, the midwife, who also washes the dead, is the key character of "Credit Due," because she is linked with both birth and death: "She stood at the two poles of life near those forbidden doors hidden behind thick drapes in an obscure place, a place one seldom mentioned, at least openly." (*Quince Jam*, p. 186) She is a marginal and mysterious character because she deals with two major taboos for human beings: birth and death.

Birth is taboo because, as Bataille explains in *L'érotisme*,<sup>4</sup> blood during birth is a sign of death and of violence; it is a rupture, an excessive force without which nothingness could not evolve into life. Blood is a major part of birth in "Credit Due." In fact, it is a text of the "indicable" – the "unsayable" or "unspeakable". The baby is described as "puffy, soiled and mean, grimacing like a hell-fire preacher screaming like one possessed." (*Quince Jam*, p. 206). In this text, birth is seen as a sacrifice. In fact, there is a clear reference to Isaac's sacrifice, when the attending doctor, Doctor Hart, is compared to "a prophet from the old testament," covered in blood

(Quince Jam, p. 207). The bed in which Adrienne gives birth reminds us of a sacrificial table. Adrienne, the “younger mother,” as Ferron always calls her in his writing, once he himself has passed the age at which she prematurely died of tuberculosis, is ultimately going to be the victim of her own child, a “little abuser.” Death is already lurking at Adrienne’s bedside; it is obvious that she is going to die, albeit ten years later. Another element announcing Adrienne’s death is the name that she chooses for her son: Jean-Jacques, a reference to the French author Rousseau whose mother died while she was giving birth to him.

This same idea of taboo is also to be seen in *The Cart*. Rouillé, the driver, is the one who gathers the dead corpses on the cart. After the narrator’s death, he arrives among the pedestrians crowded around the corpse and shows his card that says: “Sanitary Perfection”. So, we obviously have an obsessive need to keep the streets clean and immaculate. No corpses or dead animals are allowed to soil the streets. The dead corpses are strongly associated with dirt and impurity. But once they are taken off the ground and put on the cart, they reach another status, more dignified and honorable. There is an interesting ambiguity arising from the fact that Rouillé is in the employ of the Devil, Belial.

## Staging the limits

Birth and death are two moments that humankind cannot control or describe, yet they are key moments in a human being’s life. In *Autour de Ferron*,<sup>5</sup> Betty Bednarski has shown how Ferron tried to capture those moments in “Credit Due” and *The Cart* (p. 85-86). What we would like to stress is his desire to “stage” them, almost theatrically. There is, in Ferron’s work, a way of living and a way of dying; thus they have to be properly staged.

In “Credit Due,” Madame Theodora could be seen as a stage director. In fact, she is the one who chooses who can be present in the play, the birth of the author that is taking place behind “thick drapes.” She expels Adrienne’s husband from the couple’s bedroom to keep a women-only cast. The importance given to Madame Théodora by Ferron is a way for the author to pay tribute to midwives. In fact, during his practice he learnt much from these women (like the left lateral posture, which is described in his story “Little William”<sup>6</sup> and discussed by Betty Bednarski and Vivian McAlister in an article in *Literature and Medicine*).<sup>7</sup> Madame Théodora knows her cues. The tough love she gives Adrienne helps the young and innocent woman to give birth and become a mother. In the same way that the line she uses to tease the father, Alphonse, helps the young man to become a father: “Look at that now, Mr. Notary, *how he looks*



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like you, the horrible little lady-killer.” (*Quince Jam*, p. 207, our emphasis.)

In the case of *The Cart*, this desire to stage his narrator’s death reminds us of the circumstances in which Ferron wrote the text. That is, after his sister’s death, when he himself almost died of a heart attack: “*Je croyais pouvoir disposer de ma mort*,” he tells Pierre L’Hérault, – “I thought I could keep control over my death.” (*Par la porte d’en arrière*, p. 224, our translation)<sup>8</sup> In other words, he imagined himself as able to master this death, to stage it to a certain extent. According to Ferron, dying of natural causes is not “valuable,” not “valorizing,” especially not in the way his narrator died, collapsing among people walking by in the street. The rebirth the author gives to the narrator enables him to redeem himself, in the same way that Ferron, the author, redeems himself with the writing of the novel.

## Birth and death as a splitting of the self

The act of describing one’s birth and one’s death implies a splitting of the self that can be seen through grammatical death (Ferron’s term), narrative shift, and distancing. In Jacques Ferron’s writing, death is clearly perceived as an enrichment, and thus ensures the continuation of life. In *The Cart*, death means rebirth first and foremost through the change of speech, and more precisely through the change of pronouns. In the fifth chapter, the narrator dies. Death is described as a grammatical phenomenon, a concept which is specifically Ferron’s. We switch from the “I” to the “he.” Barbara, one of the secondary characters in *The Cart*, helps dead people “get used to their new grammar.” At first a subject, the narrator becomes the object and thus is relegated to the same level as the other, more secondary, characters. The narrator is not able to speak for himself, to say “I” any longer. He is no longer in control of the narrative. Through death the author enables the narrator to live again. Since he is no longer able to say “I”, the narrator’s self is perceived differently by the “other” as well as by himself.

## Birth and death of the nation

In *The Cart*, the fact that the narrator’s death is put in the context of his country – his “pays,” Quebec – gives value to the individual and to his death. Death is bound up with human dignity and is closely

related to that of the country, if not influenced by it. In this novel, individual self and national self are merged. All the tensions and historical events focus on a single theme which is the country, “*le pays*.” The “pays” is a recurring theme in Ferron’s work, and in Quebec literature more generally speaking. Needless to say, much of his work is an obvious reflection of his political involvement and deep love for Quebec. The individual self is inseparable from the national self. In *The Cart*, dying is closely related to losing faith in one’s country. When you do not believe in yourself, your identity, and your culture, you are dying inside. Protagonists in the novel do not lose faith in their country. Even Frank, the English Canadian, senses the value of belonging, even though in his case this is highly problematic, and he strongly affirms his Quebec identity and his right to belong to this country, with the poem “*Je suis de nationalité québécoise*.”

In *The Cart*, these few words spoken by another character, Marsan, to Frank, emphasize the dilemma of the death of both the individual and collective selves:

*My country is shrinking like a shagreen skin.  
It offers us twin death: ours and its own,  
whereas it should have given us a way to  
outlive ourselves. Oh, death most foul! In the  
beginning was the word... Is that really so?  
No, the word comes at the end. Language is  
the seat of the soul. (The Cart, p. 102)*

A strong and independent country either helps to push back the advent of the individual’s death, or permits a rather more glorifying death to help the individual lead his new life in death. The stability of the country grows with the faith people put in it.

## “Les deux lys,” Jacques Ferron’s testament

Jacques Ferron’s very last text, “*Les deux lys*” (which means “the two lilies”) was published posthumously as the final piece in the collection *La conférence inachevée*. It is a text whose testimonial value cannot be denied. “*Les deux lys*” is, interestingly, a synthesis of *The Cart* and of “*Credit Due*,” as we can find there elements from both texts, for example the “younger mother” (“*la mère cadette*”) character. As we have already mentioned, with the expression “younger mother”, Jacques Ferron refers to his late mother who died at a very young age. Once the

author reached that age, he thought of her as being forever younger than himself. In *The Cart*, Barbara embodies the young mother, the narrator's wife, Marguerite, and his lover all at the same time. The narrator is somehow impressed by her persona: she is familiar to him and he shows her respect.

"Les deux lys" is a text about the agony of a man anticipating his own imminent death and living again a day in his early childhood during which his mother asked him to bring a bouquet of white lilies (the symbol of France) to a politician neighbor, Senator Legris. The white lily (the French one) and the orange lily (the "English" – or Protestant - one) are opposed, one against the other, and the "younger mother" is able to make France triumph by giving the white flowers to the senator. The orange lilies are considered weeds and the plant is slowly invading the land. Through this metaphor, the death of the nation is once again evoked. As Betty Bednarski indicates in "De l'anglicité chez Ferron,"<sup>9</sup> the mother's efforts to cultivate the delicate white flowers, and their arrangement as a bouquet, are suggestive of aesthetic creation, and thus of Ferron's own literary project (*L'Autre Ferron*, p. 210). This story takes place in Louiseville, as it does in "Credit Due," and once again death is lurking near Adrienne, the "younger mother." Death is present through the little horse-drawn cart, which bears a strange resemblance to the death cart in the novel of the same title. Reverend Soçauze, the "English" Protestant, is part of the crew. He reminds us of Rouillé, the carter in the novel, and he seems to know the "younger mother."

In "Les deux lys," impending death implies a return to one's roots. Again, the beginning and the end are inseparable. Images are circular: life is a cycle in which birth and death are just passages. Both birth and death stand out in this very short text as an evidence of Ferron's obsessive wish to explore the limits of the self, to get back to his roots as death is drawing near. This is a text of agony, a funeral song in which a man invokes both the Devil and the Lord while facing his past demons: the death of his mother and the lost country. It is a text of surrender; life is giving up on him and he is giving up his past hopes. That is why Ferron concludes his work with the following words: "Aurais-je vécu inutilement dans l'obsession d'un pays perdu? Alors Seigneur, je te le dis: que le Diable m'emporte." – "Could it be that I have lived uselessly in my obsession with a country lost? If so, then, I say to you Lord: let the Devil take me." (*La conférence inachevée*, p. 222, our translation.)

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