

The Absence by Jacques Chauviré

Introduction

by Iain Bamforth

An austere, exacting and haunting vision of rural France died with Jacques Chauviré in the spring of this year. Born at Genay, in the valley of the Saône, near Lyons, in 1915, his father was killed in the trenches of Champagne the same year. He was to grow up in the company of anxious women, the family house dominated by a photograph of his father in military uniform. In 1942, in the middle of the next war, he opened his practice in Neuville-sur-Saône: he wanted to pursue a hospital career, but the war was on and he had a family to feed. Nevertheless, the tour of isolated farms and intimate knowledge of the elderly and impoverished in the hinterlands of Lyon gave him the great satisfaction of 'being close to people and enjoying their confidence.' He started keeping a diary in 1950: 'I started taking notes in the evening on people I'd seen during the day. Often a personal note about the particular person I'd seen would follow their medical entry.' Observing the human condition in the raw became his entrance to literature. He became a friend of Jean Reverzy, another doctor-writer from Lyons whose father had been killed in the same offensive as Chauviré's, and saw his first novel *Partage de la soif* published by Albert Camus at Gallimard in 1958.



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After the death by drowning of a child with scoliosis for whom he had recommended swimming lessons, Camus' retelling of the myth of Sisyphus seemed to Chauviré a precise description of his life as a doctor: 'Contrary to my expectations, my job as a doctor closets me in solitude because the responsibility it entails cannot be shared.' Camus encouraged him to continue writing, telling him that he would have liked to have been a doctor too; but, whether through personal diffidence or a deeper doubt about his avocation, Chauviré let his literary career peter out, and finally stopped writing altogether when Gallimard turned down a manuscript in 1980. That refusal coincided with his retirement from 40 years of practice: no longer being in the habit of seeing patients had veiled the sources of his inspiration. He surely wasn't talking just about medicine in the beautiful lines he confessed to his diary on 18 November 1957: 'the doctor is a character who goes in winter from house to house to warm his ears on the chests of fevered children.' But 2 years ago publication of his novel *Elisa*, a book of adoration to the women who brought him up in the long shadow of the Great War, brought an Indian summer to the life of Jacques Chauviré. Two small publishing houses have now republished the rest of his oeuvre to great acclaim, and Jérôme Garcin was able to record a series of five radio interviews with him on France Culture shortly before his death (*A Voix Nue*). Late recognition had given him the melancholy pleasure of having his childhood restored to him intact. But it is old age, with all its indignities and fortitude, its seemingly empty waiting and cruel reclusions, that Chauviré portrays with a kind of merciless sympathy. It is the old who are the real strangers in our midst.

The following story portrays a tale of a couple afflicted by old age that will be familiar to many doctors dealing with patients, or their own families. It

culminates in a disturbing episode that some readers will find shocking, and the author is presumably hoping that the shock will make us think more carefully about the rest of the narrative. Ed.

Jacques Chauviré's oeuvre in French:

Élisa, Mouettes sur la Saône, Journal d'un médecin du campagne (Editions Le temps qu'il fait);

Partage de la soif, Les Passants, Fins de journées, Passage des Emigrants (Editions Le Dilettante);

La terre et la guerre, La confession d'hiver (Editions Gallimard).

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