Quasimodo, the syndromic Hunchback of Notre Dame?

Quasimodo, le bossu de Notre Dame : un syndrome ?

Is that Notre Dame de Paris on fire? That was the question bewildering Parisians and tourists on the spot and TV viewers worldwide. As the news was confirmed, it spread like a shock-wave. Monday, April 15, 2019, 6:50 pm, and passers-by were rubbing their eyes as flames shot up from the scaffolding, unable to believe it could be true, and then realizing in anguish just how hard it was going to be to bring the violence of the blaze under control beneath the growing pall of thick smoke.

Whatever their country, whatever their beliefs, witnesses around the world froze at the sight of this Cathedral, which might have been a symbol of division but which, in its conflagration, united them in contemplation. The “Oh no!”, when the flaming arrow collapsed, that rose in a single groan from the crowd gave voice to the intensity of the emotion aroused by this disaster, like a vision of the Inferno itself.

The image of Notre Dame de Paris, this edifice celebrated by Victor Hugo, was implanted in minds the world over, a historical singularity shared by all.

Victor Hugo, in Notre Dame de Paris, published in 1831, created a character, Quasimodo, abandoned by his parents at the age of 4 because of his physical deformities. He was taken in by Archdeacon Claude Frollo, who named him Quasimodo: “Quasi modo geniti infantes.” (“As newborn babes…”), from the first Epistle of Peter the Apostle. Hugo wrote: “He (Frollo) baptized his adopted child, and named him Quasimodo, either because he wished to mark in this way the day upon which the child was found, or because he wished to show by this name how imperfect and incomplete the poor little creature was. Indeed, Quasimodo, one eye, hunchbacked and knock kneed, was hardly more than half made”. His work as the bell-ringer of Notre Dame added traumatic deafness to the list of his infirmities. Although cophotic, Quasimodo was by no means deaf to the charms of Esmeralda, a graceful and innocent 16-year-old gypsy dancer for whom he developed a deep platonic love, protecting her against the demon of lust that consumed his master Frollo.

In this issue of the Annals of Endocrinology, Dr. Michael Hafi, a Pediatrician-Endocrinologist, at the University of Texas, Houston, revisits Hugo’s Quasimodo in an attempt to line him up to a known clinical syndrome [1]. The author gives Hugo’s original description of the physical traits of Quasimodo and suggests that the bone malformations, facial dysmorphism and skin growths may correspond to the description of neurofibromatosis by Van Recklinghausen in 1882. The comparison to Proteus Syndrome [2], described in 1976 and brought to cinema audiences as the “Elephant Man”, is more convincing. This syndrome could well match the physical aspect of Quasimodo, whose deformities reached back into infancy. Illustrations, drawing on the artists’ imagination, represent Quasimodo with a deformed asymmetrical skull, a buried eye and twisted silhouette, relatively tall, with big hands (see 1). This clinical picture corresponds closely to Proteus syndrome, named for the shape-shifting Greek god who could take on all kinds of physical appearance.

Notre-Dame, like all cathedrals, is rich in symbolism handed down to us from the Middle Ages. “Its stones, held together by cement, synonymous with charity, form the four great walls of the basilica, the four Evangelists, according to Prudence de Troyes, and according to other writers, the four main virtues: Justice, Strength, Prudence, Temperance.” [3,4].

Victor Hugo takes up this universal, ecumenical allegory in the strange character of Quasimodo, whom he makes a hero. By giving him the repulsive body of the stereotypic “bad guy”, Victor Hugo defends the cause of those beings to whom nature has dealt a bad hand. He suggests that, behind an odd appearance, there may hide a pure, generous and sensitive heart.

May Notre Dame de Paris continue to conserve this symbolic intuition.

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References


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1 See illustration: Esmeralda giving Quasimodo a drink. “A tear for a drop of water”, oil on canvas by Luc-Olivier Merson, Maison de Victor Hugo, 1903.