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Luke Davies, *Interferon Psalms*

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Anyone on an interferon treatment for hepatitis C might expect for 24 or 48 weeks:

Arthralgia	33%
Fatigue	70%
Nausea	46%
Depression	36%
Insomnia	39%
Dermatitis/rash	28%

These some are the side-effects of one of the improved treatments in use for about four or so years. Obviously, though, medical science will not tell you what it *feels* like to take interferon. By analogy, the science of neurobiology might tell you the chemical processes involved in seeing lilac. But no matter how much a scientist knows about neural networks, she would not understand what the experience feels like if she were colour blind.

Describing his own journey through interferon in thirty-three cantos, Luke Davies' *Interferon Psalms* tells us what the side-effects feel like. For example rigor (another very common side-effect) and sleeplessness are described p.13: "Capacity for corrosion ever-present, ever-still. My shoulders locked and I lost all touch with sleep." Weight loss (e.g. p.93, also common) and fatigue (e.g. p.9) are similarly personalised. Many interferon

patients must quietly compare subcutaneous injection to IV drug use; Davies does so openly (p.34). Having been on 48 weeks of treatment myself, I found Davies' work uncanny. He writes of an eerie sensation familiar to sufferers of hepatitis: "The cells bubbled silently in my liver" (p.20).

This means that *Interferon Psalms* could appeal where other contemporary Australian verse might not. Most sufferers caught hepatitis C via drug use, so the expanded audience must be dealt with in a certain way. In a 1977 TV interview for *Music is all around us*, a young Rowland S. Howard, later iconic guitarist, confessed he found most literature a letdown. Yet, had he not died of hepatitis-related causes in 2009, Howard may have picked up *Interferon Psalms*. Davies' writing harbours traces of Dransfield's distant genealogies of junk, Tranter's dry insiders view of 1970s and 80s counterculture and gravelly echoes of Burroughs and Faithful. The 110 pages of actual verse should not daunt a reader suspicious of belletrist excess.

Still, much more could have been done, even within this short format. I once suggested to Linda Selvey, then head of Population Health Queensland, that sponsoring poetry could redress widespread ignorance about interferon. Many sufferers and some medical practitioners do not know interferon can clear hepatitis C, and the public is even more ignorant. Despite being a hepatitis advocate Dr.Selvey regretted that her budget was already overstretched. It is a missed opportunity that Davies is unconcerned with such a project. He dismisses broader society as a vast preordained war of all against all (p.87). Besides references to a shadowy and estranged soul-mate/anima, *Interferon Psalms* is a Jeremiad, and so is primarily addressed to God (e.g. p.73). The reading public is sidelined.

Neglect of both fact and reader reflects the central theme of *Interferon Psalms*. While “Mysticism 38%” would seem an odd statistic in the above list of side-effects, mystical experiences have common features. These include an awareness of the vastness of the cosmos, an intuition of wholeness and notions about ultimate human purpose. The sense of bodily decay on interferon reminds us, as Davies hints, of medieval *sachettes* or St Teresa of Avila. Davies starts with vastness. On p.17:

...I was trying to imitate the large scale structures of being
But superclusters aside, I was generally part of the problem not the solution.

Davies rightly, in my experience, suggests certain psychotropic side-effects of interferon can begin with an *idée fixe*. In rigor this can erupt into a full blown epiphany of some sort. So here too, Davies remains accurate if unusual. But to write informatively about these feelings, we cannot simply be carried away by the moment.

Firstly *Interferon Psalms* obscures how important it is to put these experiences in perspective. To stay sane on the treatment, and encourage others to do likewise, critical thinking is required. The treatment may well provide insight, but certain questions should never be far from one’s parched lips. What is the sufficient reason (as stressed by Richard Dawkins) for any resulting ideas? Are these trains of thought logically coherent? Can these add anything to one’s understanding? The hepatologist might not prescribe it, but take interferon with 100 milligrams of saline.

It is disappointing that, under the influence of a psychotropic drug, Davies uses his quirky accuracy to transcribe wasting sensations into a Neo-platonic idiom. This expresses Davies’ mystical wholeness intuition. God emanates being and the ex-junkie fades away to dirt on the peripheries of existence. It is also the second way Davies’

religious sentiment displaces an informative poetic. He not merely ignores the basics of the treatment; he loses these down an abyss of atonement. Here Davies' relation to his previous drug-themed work *Candy* meets religious intuitions about ultimate purpose. Reading *Interferon Psalms* you would not guess that two standard strength paracetamol tablets are sufficient to relieve rigor.

Poetry cannot and should not be the *MIMS*, but nor does it have to obscure the already obscure. Particularly in this case, poems could give us handy personal phenomenologies compatible with a realistic world view. Poetry does not *have* to do this of course, but there remains a concern with what could otherwise have been accomplished. Besides which, a more realistic poetic architecture would have harnessed formal innovations notable in *Interferon Psalms*. These already suggest a more natural, and naturalistic, direction for the text.

For instance, Davies reuses the layout of popular editions of the Bible: remarks to the side of the text summarizing the spiritual message. Yet at best the marginalia promise information not delivered. One on p.99 – “What to do when the treatment ends” – flags only a complaint about intellectual elitism in Christian theology. Davies could have imported this layout to juxtapose facts with feelings. His occasional landmarking of passing months – and, on p.50, “familiarity with the geography of the hospital” – shows this. Similarly, Davies' thirty-three cantos enumerate resurrection of the dead far more than renewed living, much as thirty-three did for African philosopher St Augustine. The numerology could have marked out a more critical odyssey/renewal, unconfused by a Dark Age doctrine regarding zombies.

Interferon is a proper subject for a critical and informative early 21st century poetics. Davies squanders the possibilities he himself opens up by writing his treatment up as a trip back to the medieval times. In 1980 interferon was a miracle cure without a disease. The comparatively recent match with hepatitis C and ongoing improvements to interferon technology are reasons why it is interesting to readers, and also for the almost universal ignorance about it. Despite being omnipotent and omniscient, God is not going to remedy that.