

Looking at the Dying Patient: The Ferdinand Hodler Paintings of Valentine Godé-Darel

By Bernhard C. Pestalozzi

We have to take a good hard look at our own attitude toward death and dying before we can sit quietly and without anxiety next to a terminally ill patient.¹

—Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

IT TAKES a certain amount of courage to be an oncologist. Working with dying patients and their families demands considerable communication skills and emotional stability. More specifically, the mere sight of a dying patient may cause anxiety among family and staff members. Anxiety may be enhanced by manifestations of severe illness taxing our other senses.

In this article, we share with the community of oncologists the impressive paintings which the Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler (1853-1918) made of his beloved Valentine Godé-Darel before, during, and after her illness.² In January 1914, only 3 months after the birth of their daughter, Pauline, Godé-Darel had an operation for a gynecologic cancer, from which she died 1 year later. Between 1912 and 1915, Hodler painted her many times. He documented her wasting and eventual extinction without mercy and yet with intense sympathy. He created a series of paintings that force the viewer to face the process of dying. It may be helpful to an oncologist to sense his or her reaction to these visual stages of suffering.

Figure 1, the youth. This portrait in shades of red from 1912 shows Godé-Darel as a beautiful, healthy young woman.

Figure 2, the illness. Godé-Darel is a bedridden patient. Hodler made this painting with roses and clock in June 1914, after Godé-Darel had undergone a second operation.

Figure 3, the exhaustion. On January 2, 1915, the eyes have closed. The head is hanging loose off the neck. The patient is sleeping. Her traits are becoming sharper, angular, bony. "Before anything else, Hodler is an interpreter of



Fig 1. The youth, 1912.

people, who can create the soul by painting the body, better than anybody," wrote Paul Klee, in 1911, regarding his fellow artist.²

Figure 4, the pain. The dying patient is in the last days of her life. On January 19, 1915, Godé-Darel speaks for the last time to Hodler, who continues to portrait her. This gruesome sketch shows her tormented face; her head has fallen deep into the pillow.

Figure 5, the agony. One day before her death, the patient has lost consciousness. The mouth is wide open; one imagines hearing a loud rattle. During this phase, it becomes impossible to communicate with the dying person. If it lasts a long time, death usually comes as a relief for the family and the nursing staff.

Figure 6, the last painting of the dead Godé-Darel. In this painting, made on January 26, 1915, 1 day after her death,

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Fig 2. The illness.



Fig 3. The exhaustion.



Fig 4. The pain.



Fig 5. The agony.



Fig 6. The last painting of the dead Godé-Darel.



Fig 7. Sunset at Lake Geneva, 1915.

Hodler symbolically transforms the image. It is dominated by many horizontal lines. The blue stripes at the top appear to symbolize heaven, where the soul will disappear. The dark base of the bed points to an underground world. The header and the footer of the bed do not seem to be made of

wood. Rather, the two brushstrokes may symbolize the measures of time, the beginning and the end.

Figure 7, sunset at Lake Geneva, 1915. Hodler repeatedly painted this view as seen from the place where Godé-Darel died.

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