The Bodies That Remain

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Not long after their arrival in Rome at the start of April 1867, the brothers Edmond and Jules de Goncourt noted, in a journal entry anticipating the style if not the sensibility of Thomas Bernhard, that everything that is beautiful here is beautiful in a course, material way. The pair would stay for six weeks, touring the city’s galleries with an eye that seemed in no way softened by the languors of travel: Raphael’s Transfiguration is reported to give the impression of wallpaper, while his Resurrection is judged purely academic. This, a supernatural event, a divine legend? I know no canvas which depicts it in a commoner prose, a more vulgar beauty. And it’s true: for a recently resurrected body, Raphael’s Christ does seem kind of jaded, but I’m less interested in the value or the vehemence of the brothers’ judgement here, than in the way the Journal slides, as it often does elsewhere, so casually and without warning, from the first-person plural to the first-person singular. After their mother’s death in 1848, the brothers were apart for more than twenty-four hours only twice. While working together on their novels, plays, art criticism and journal entries, Jules would hold the pen while Edmond — eight
years the elder—stood behind him, pacing back and forth, leaning over his shoulder with suggestions. *It is impossible to attribute any entry to one or the other,* their translator notes. Theirs is an *I* containing more than itself. It is a singular pronoun of multitudes. It is a crowd, a site of excess.

When the Goncourts visited the Vatican during Holy Week that summer, they were struck by the *sly ecclesiastical malice* they believed the prelates put into *humiliating and torturing the foreigner’s curiosity.* Sceptics of high-standing and sickly dispositions—each one tortured all their life by the other’s stomach, liver and nerve complaints—the brothers did not appreciate having to queue outside in the blistering heat of their Roman holiday, sometimes for hours at a time. Once inside the Museo Pio Clementino, however, the two were left awe-struck before a two-thousand-year-old fragment of a nude male statue which they refer to as the Vatican *Torso.* Believed to represent Ajax contemplating suicide, the fragment is signed with a name that’s mentioned nowhere else in any surviving ancient literature or art: this is all that remains of Apollonius, son of Nestor, his entire output lost except for this, a piece of work that’s largely lost as well. The figure has no head or neck or arms, no feet or calves or shins. It has nothing but a squat marble cock-and-balls; two muscular marble thighs; and of course that abdomen, that perfect marble abdomen, created with such sympathy, such skill, that the Goncourts—writing not only in the *Journal,* but in their book of criticism, *L’Art du 18ème siècle*—would hail the *Torso* as the only fragment of art in the world which has given us the complete and absolute feeling of being a work of art. What got the brothers going here was not the myth of the thing, nor the lyricism of an allegory half-told, but rather, the way in which the surface of the represented abdomen—that twisted torso, its muscles tensed—had given them both to imagine the processes taking place beneath it: *this fragment of breathing chest,* they write, *these palpitating entrails in this digesting stomach.* For all
that’s lacking here, for all the ravages of oblivion that this body has incurred, what we have is a work of art, a piece of matter, that gives no sense of less, but of more.

The Goncourts returned to Paris just long enough for Théophile Gautier to introduce them to an upscale Champs-Élysées brothel (its extravagant Renaissance decoration in the worst possible taste) before they headed south again, this time to Vichy, a place where they report one loses the illusion that sickness is a distinction. Nine days into the trip, the brothers read that the poet François Ponsard has died. Sickness was the spirit of the age, as the Journal will reflect when they return to Paris, becoming more and more a catalogue of visits paid by friends to the city’s many doctors and specialists. Not until the last months of 1869, however, do the horrifying symptoms of tertiary syphilis—a disease contracted by Jules, an enthusiastic patron of brothels, as many as fifteen years before—show up in the text and take hold of it.

18 October, 1869. *Left Trouville after spending twenty days there, the worst twenty days of our lives.*

1 November. *The agony of being ill and unable to be ill at home, of having to drag one’s pain and weakness from one place to another.*

14 December. *Nervous illness transforms all moral pain into physical pain, such that the body suffers a second time what the soul has already suffered.*
The entries in 1870 are shorter, fewer. 1 January. *Today, the first day of the year, no calls, none of our friends, nobody: solitude and suffering.*

10 January, another short entry. *Dizziness, uneasiness, a sort of terror: such is the effect that crowds have today on my poor nervous system.*

A little later in the century, syphilis would manage to acquire what Susan Sontag described as *darkly positive associations*—a whole artistic mythos concerning feverish mental states and creative spells—but such glamour had yet to attach itself to the disease when Jules first noticed the early tell-tale chancre. His affliction is never named as anything more specific than a *nervous illness*, but the brothers would have had a pretty clear sense, not only of what the disease was, but of the hell it was about to visit upon Jules. After two years in a semi-paralytic state, unable to understand or formulate language, Charles Baudelaire had died, ruined by syphilis, in a *maison de santé* in 1867.

Only one more entry is made after 10 January before the pen falls from Jules’s hand: a long final showing in which it is reported that, in the late-stages of his own nervous illness, the composer Vaucorbeil had developed a horror of all things velvet. *My poor nervous system* would be the last phrase Jules wrote with the first-person singular outside quotation marks: *our* lives, *one’s* pain, *our* friends, but *my* poor nervous system. The switch to the first-person singular seems far less casual here than usual. For here their *I* splits open, becomes discrete. Here sickness is a
distinction. For once it’s clearly Jules who speaks, who speaks in and of and for himself; who screams in fact, desperate to make one last mark that’s all his own, a single phrase will do, a fragment to survive him, a figure with no neck or head, no arms or feet or shins, no excess and yet more: mon pauvre être nerveux.

For the next six months, Jules will read aloud from Chateaubriand’s Memoires d’outre tombe more and more obsessively, oblivious to his brother’s indifference to it, but still oppressively conscious of his own decline. By June he has forgotten the name of every book they’d written together, yet he remains lucid enough to feel shame. On Saturday, 11 June, Jules manoeuvres a bowl clumsily in a restaurant. It’s not my fault, he cries across the table, where in tears he continues with cryptic incoherence: I know how it upsets you, but I often want to and I can’t. The following weekend, on 18 June, Jules will suffer a stroke that leaves him bedridden for two days: his body thrashing round in horrifying pain, sleepless and mute; his mind haunted by some apparition in the curtain which he does not have the words to describe. A disintegration of the brain had occurred at the base of the skull, says the doctor. Not until the second stroke hits him will he die.

The night of Sunday–Monday, 19–20 June. All night long, that rasping sound of breathing like the sound of a saw cutting through wet wood, punctuated every now and then by heart-rending groans and plaintive cries. All night long, that beating and heaving of his chest against the sheet.

Monday, nine at night. I touch his hands: they are like moist marble.
Monday, twenty to ten. He is dying, he has died. God be praised, he died after two or three gentle breaths, like a child falling asleep. How frightful is the immobility of this body under the sheets, no longer rising and falling with the gentle movement of respiration, no longer living the life of sleep.

That rasping chest. Those hands like marble. The immobility of his body under the sheets. These states and textures always make me think of the Torso which the brothers so admired. A sublime work of art, they called it, which derives its beauty from the living representation of life. Though the account of Jules’s death-agony is very bleak and often gruesome, it is unquestionably beautiful as well, a sublime work of art which, since its existence was a secret to everyone until 1883, it is difficult, maybe impossible, to date exactly. In the italicised passage just after Jules’s final entry, Edmond is no more specific than to tell us that it had been an interval of many months before he took up the pen fallen from my brother’s fingers. For at least nine months in any case, the immediacy that so marked the writing of the first nineteen years is lost, sacrificed in the service of recounting to myself the story of his death-agony and despair. These sheets in which Jules dies are backdated: the work of memory, moments recollected with the help of notes jotted down during nights of distress and so comparable to those cries by which we relieve the pain of great physical suffering. Inscribed into these lines is the echo of that suffering, those cries. For the I inhabiting them is a voice in which lurks an absence, something that was there but is not; a voice grown echoic in its emptiness. These sheets derive their beauty from the deathly representation of dying. Here is an account of a death, told by a voice that holds this death inside it.