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Introduction

In April 1936, there appeared in Paris the first issue of what was to be a short-lived review founded by Georges Bataille. A maverick intellectual whose activities ranged through Maussian anthropology, Hegelian philosophy, Marxist political theory, Nietzschean vitalism and Sadean pornography, Bataille called the review *Acéphale* – or *Headless*. It was a title that he subsequently gave to a new secret society – one obsessed with the fate of religion in a secular society, hostile to the tedium and uniformity of modern bourgeois life and preoccupied by the need to combat the contemporary rise of fascism by recourse to the most extreme remedies – even (somewhat counter-intuitively) human sacrifice. The emblem of this clandestine movement, as figured on the review's front cover, was a drawing by André Masson of suitably disturbing power and mythical resonance. A naked man stands four-square, his assertive posture recalling that of Leonardo's *The Proportions of the Human Body According to Vitruvius* (as if Masson's emblem were a dark parody of the humanistic geometry of the Renaissance); in his right hand he holds a flaming heart, in his left an erect dagger; his coiled entrails are laid bare, and his genitals are covered by a grinning skull. And he is headless – decapitated, cleanly, as if by a guillotine.

Bataille was convinced that the work of the French Revolution was incomplete. The Revolution had decapitated the King – but modern society continually gave birth to new forms of equally false sovereignty and illegitimate authority. Power is a hydra:

cut off one head, and ten more spring into being. A kind of permanent revolution was necessary to prevent the energies that Bataille located in the lower depths of society and in the base impulses of the human body at its most animalistic from being drained upwards to a new head that would sublimate them into docility, depriving them of their capacity for subversion. Hence his fascination for the Place de la Concorde (previously the Place de la Révolution and the site of the guillotine); the “concord” to which it alluded was a phoney peace, and Bataille (whose very name, of course, is the French for “battle”) longed to unleash the dark and violent energies that still lay untapped at the site of all that bloodshed, under the obelisk (another monument to sovereignty – a Pharaoh’s) around which the Paris traffic still swirls.

Dumas, for all his republicanism, did not, of course, share Bataille’s unnerving and apocalyptic political vision: but he does seem to have shared his obsession with the guillotine – hardly surprising given the role played by that invention (originally at the very cutting edge, so to speak, of judicial technology) in the collective psyche of France. Many of the stories in *The Thousand and One Ghosts* keep coming back to the question of whether the guillotine really was such a humane killer as the kindly Dr Guillotin had intended it to be. What if – horrible to imagine – the severed head still had some vestiges of consciousness? The question has not gone away, though the abolition of the death penalty in France (a matter that was already being discussed in Dumas’s day, as he remarks in a footnote) means it is no longer quite such a life-and-death issue as it was for Dumas; the topic was once raised in the *Guardian*’s ‘Notes and Queries’ section – to be met, as one might expect, with some rather inconclusive replies, one

writer suggesting that the sudden rapid drop in blood pressure on the severing of the neck's arteries would entail almost immediate blackout, while another – alas – mused that this effect might be anything but instantaneous.

The first sequence of Dumas's narratives shares the pessimism of this second view, and the stories of severed talking heads (biting heads, in some cases) have a certain spine-tingling matter-of-factness to them, underscored by the deployment of an array of medical and scientific terms. Even the tales that are not about decapitation turn out to be about hanging (the Scottish judge pursued by a vengeful criminal he had sent to the gallows; the penitent thief L'Artifaille grimly making sure, from his own gibbet, that the hangman doesn't despoil his corpse of its most sacred belongings) or vampirism (as in the last tale, which moves far from France to the Carpathians): sooner or later, everyone gets it in the neck. But this severance (of head from trunk, of soul from body) is never final. Whether consciousness persists for a short while in the dismembered head, or the "dead" person returns in a more phantasmic form (as a real ghost or a vampire), the past persists.

Of course it does, you might say – these *are* ghost stories! But what marks them out, perhaps, is the extent to which many of them are not just about ghosts, but also about politics: about the ghostliness of politics. Ever since Marx first focused on the strange unreality of the mid-nineteenth-century French political scene, with Louis Napoléon (himself a weird, pallid waxwork of a figure, capable of behaving with the stiffness of an automaton) trying with farcical unsuccess to reincarnate his uncle, the "great" Napoleon, French history from the first revolution of 1789 to the drama of 1870–71, with its Civil War, the bloody repression of the Commune and defeat in the

Franco-Prussian War, has often seemed somewhat spectral. This may seem odd: what century in French history could be more *solid* – more full of things, commodities, furniture, new technologies, machines, industries – than the nineteenth? But the sheer pace of change itself could mean that, as *The Communist Manifesto* put it (in a phrase that continues to haunt our current world, changing as it is even *more* rapidly), “All that is solid melts into air”.

Even the new industrial landscape was often best described in mythical terms. One of the most haunting passages in Dumas’s *Thousand and One Ghosts* occurs at the opening of the narrative, when the author sees modern labourers in the quarries outside Paris performing an endless task of drudgery like so many modern Ixions, in surroundings eerily reminiscent of Goya. Dumas is generally very economical in his ghost stories, focusing on the skeleton of the plot rather than the flesh of evocation; thus he rarely bothers to describe ambiance in much detail, so it is significant that he should lavish some of his more atmospheric writing not on the supernatural but on the everyday aspects of the contemporary French scene.

Regime change in France throughout the century meant that revolution and one form or another of restoration succeeded each other every twenty years or so. The French Revolution of 1789 – so radical, in the view of some of its protagonists, that it demanded a new calendar (“Year One of Liberty”) – gave way to the Napoleonic Empire, then the return of the Bourbons in 1815, then another revolution (that of 1830), which sent Charles X into exile (he and his ministers should have been guillotined, fumed Stendhal, whose reputation for avuncular bonhomie has been much exaggerated) but still threw up yet another monarch, albeit in the distinctly unregal guise of Louis-Philippe,

all pear-shaped body and neatly furled umbrella. It is to this point in history (1831) that Dumas's narrator dates his opening story, the frame for all the following tales: he cannot as yet, of course, foresee the coup d'état of Louis Bonaparte (1851) or the violence of 1870–71; and yet to many observers and participants, each new revolution in nineteenth-century France mimicked a previous one, and seemed uncannily fated to lead, sooner or later, to a restoration of a form of government that had seemed definitively ousted. Revolutions and restorations were all *revenants*: this French word for “ghosts” implies that ghosts are what *return*. Heads may fall under the guillotine, but they continue to speak and act. The bodies of long-dead kings and queens may be disinterred and insulted, but they seem quite able to take their revenge. Relics – a lock of hair from a corpse, a medallion of the Blessed Virgin – still seem (even in Dumas's period, the heyday of French positivism) imbued with numinous power. Monuments that had been profaned and despoiled – the abbey of Saint-Denis, France's royal mortuary – come back to ghostly life.

All of this raises two interrelated questions, simple enough when stated in the abstract, but perplexing in their consequences. Firstly, is the past really past; are the dead really dead? All ghost stories touch on this problem. Secondly, in more concrete terms, what do we *do* with the past, and in particular with the concrete embodiments in which it survives – whether they be souvenirs, or monuments, or, indeed, written texts? It is pious to preserve, as Alexandre Lenoir (who figures in Dumas's story as one of his narrators) tried to, some of France's historical monuments from the ideological zeal of the Revolutionaries: annihilating the remnants of the past may make it more difficult to heed the lessons and warnings they contain. There is a

similar debate these days over what to do with statues of men and women who were once highly esteemed but are now seen as fatally flawed (Confederate generals in the US, Rhodes and others implicated in colonialism in the UK, Lenin and Stalin in some of the former East Bloc countries). Should they be destroyed, or removed to a museum because of the historical lessons they can teach? But what if the things we preserve are not just pieces of the past that can be dispassionately labelled and safely stowed away in a cultural museum, but a form in which that past can continue to live and work its will among us?

The persistence of the past need not be simply threatening (Marx, writing his own ghost story: “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living”): in a ghost story, of course, it usually is, and here Dumas dwells poignantly as well as horrifyingly on the persistence of consciousness after judicial murder. But in some of these tales (by no means all), the “revenants” mete out a kind of rough justice; in a couple of them, the dead live on in more consoling ways; and more importantly, the ghost story itself is a narrative that questions the way we impose beginnings and ends on stories without really knowing where those limits lie. As Dumas says at the end, *The Thousand and One Ghosts* is only the beginning of a whole sequence of supernatural stories that he is going on to write; and the book’s title, as well as its form, allude to the *Thousand and One Nights*, where stories breed stories and where the energy of storytelling itself – as a means of survival – seems well-nigh immortal.

Michel Foucault (who greatly admired Georges Bataille) once remarked that, when it came to politics (and political theory) we have “still not cut off the king’s head” – we are still too much in thrall to the models of power and authority that we

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have inherited. But maybe the guillotine is too crass an instrument for such a task – like Alexander’s trenchant but cheating solution to the problem of the Gordian knot. Maybe what is needed is a more patient and subtle engagement with history and its continuing impact on our lives – another way of telling its stories and allowing it to persist, but in less malevolent ways. Be that as it may, Dumas’s tales certainly suggest that what may seem to be mere leftovers from the past, chopped-off bits and pieces detached from a once vital organism (relics, remnants, ruins and other *superstitions* – a word that itself etymologically means “survivals”) can at times have more disconcerting energy in them than might be imagined by those who think they can get through life’s uncanny vicissitudes without ever, at some stage or another, losing their heads.

– Andrew Brown

*The Thousand
and One Ghosts*

1

The Rue de Diane in Fontenay-aux-Roses

ON THE FIRST OF SEPTEMBER in the year 1831, I was invited by one of my old friends, the chief administrator of the King's private land, to attend, with his son, the opening of the hunting season at Fontenay-aux-Roses.

I was a very keen huntsman at the time and, being a great hunter, it appeared to me a matter of no small importance where, each year, the opening of the season would be held.

Usually, we would go to some farmer's, or else to the home of a friend of my brother-in-law: it was at his place that I had killed a hare and thereby taken my first steps in the science of Nimrod and Elzéar Blaze.*

His farm was situated between the forests of Compiègne and Villers-Cotterêts, half a league away from the charming village of Morierval, and a league from the magnificent ruins of Pierrefonds.

The two or three thousand acres of land that constitute his farm comprise a vast plain almost entirely surrounded by woods, intersected by a pretty valley at the bottom of which can be seen, among the green meadows and the trees with their changing hues, a swarm of houses whose presence is half concealed by the foliage but revealed by the columns of bluish smoke which, initially protected by the shelter of the surrounding mountains, rise vertically into the sky and then, once they reach the upper layers of the air, curve and

fan out like the tops of palm trees, in the same direction as the wind.

It is on this plain, and on the two slopes of this valley, that the game animals of the two forests come to disport themselves, as if on some safe and neutral terrain.

So you can find everything on the plain of Brassoire: roe deer and pheasant along the edges of the woods, hare on the plateaux, rabbit in the folds of the slopes and partridge around the farm. Monsieur Mocquet – the name of our friend – was thus sure of our attendance; we would hunt all day long, and the next day, at two o'clock, we would return to Paris, having hunted and killed, between the four or five of us, one hundred and fifty items of game – not a single one of which we had ever managed to persuade our host to accept.

But this particular year, unfaithful to Monsieur Mocquet, I had yielded to the obsession of my old office colleague. I had been seduced by a painting which had been sent to me by his son, a distinguished pupil of the *École de Rome*, representing a view of the plain of Fontenay-aux-Roses, with stubble full of hares and alfalfa fields full of partridge.

I had never been to Fontenay-aux-Roses: nobody is less familiar with the environs of Paris than I am. When I go through the city gates, it's almost always to head off on a journey of five or six hundred leagues. So the slightest change of scene makes everything an object of curiosity to me.

At six in the evening, I left for Fontenay, my head stuck out of the carriage door as ever: I crossed the *Barrière d'Enfer*, passing on my left the road to La Tombe-Issoire, and I set out on the Orléans road.

It is well known that Issoire is the name of a notorious brigand who, at the time of Julian, held travellers heading for

Lutetia to ransom.* He was pretty much hanged, so far as I know, and buried at the spot that today bears his name, some distance away from the entry to the Catacombs.

The plain that starts to stretch before you as you enter Petit-Montrouge has a strange appearance. In the midst of artificial meadows, fields of carrots and beds of beetroot, there rise what look like square forts, built in white stone, with a big toothed wheel similar to the skeleton of an extinguished Catherine wheel. This wheel has, round its circumference, wooden struts on which the labourer presses with each foot in turn. This squirrel-like labour, which makes it seem as if the worker is in continual movement though he does not actually move from the spot, is performed with the aim of winding round an axle a rope which, as it winds on, slowly brings to the surface a stone cut from down in the quarry.

This stone is brought to the edge of the pit by a hook, where there are rollers awaiting it to transport it to its destined place. Then the rope is lowered back into the depths, to fetch up another load, thereby giving a moment's rest to the modern Ixion,* until the moment he hears a shout announcing that another stone is awaiting the labour that will deliver it from its natal soil, and then the same effort begins all over again, and again, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

By the time evening falls, the man has done ten leagues without changing place: if he actually rose one step in height each time his foot rested on a strut, after twenty-three years he would have reached the moon.

It is in the evenings especially – just at the time when I was crossing the plain separating Petit-Montrouge from Grand-Montrouge – that the countryside, thanks to those countless moving wheels that stand out so strikingly against the flames

of the setting sun, assumes a fantastic appearance. It looks like one of those Goya engravings where, in muted colours, tooth-pullers go round extracting teeth from hanged bodies.

At around seven o'clock, the wheels stop: the day's work is done.

The stones here being wrested from the earth – great oblong blocks fifty to sixty feet long, and six or eight feet tall – are the building blocks of the future city of Paris. The quarries from which these stones are wrenched grow bigger day by day. They are a continuation of the Catacombs from which the old Paris emerged. They are the suburbs of the subterranean city, which incessantly gobble up more and more territory and expand at their circumference. When you walk through this meadow in Montrouge, you are walking over an abyss. From time to time you notice a sudden dip, a miniature valley, a wrinkle in the ground; this is a quarry that was insufficiently propped up from beneath, so that its gypsum ceiling has cracked. A fissure has developed, through which water has leaked into the cave; the water has pulled the earth along with it, hence the shifting terrain: this is called subsidence.

If you are unaware of this fact, if you don't know that this fine layer of verdant earth that seems so alluring rests on nothing, you can, if you set your foot over one of these cracks, quite easily disappear, just as people disappear on the Montanvert* between two walls of ice.

The populace that inhabits these subterranean galleries has not only a separate existence, but also a separate character and physiognomy. Living in darkness as they do, these people have some of the instincts of nocturnal animals: like them, they are silent and ferocious. You often hear of an accident: a prop has collapsed, a rope has snapped, a man has been crushed. On

the surface of the earth, this is taken to be a misfortune: thirty feet under, it is known to be a crime.

The appearance of the quarrymen is in general sinister. In daylight, their eyes blink, and in the open air their voices are hoarse. They wear their hair flat, pressed down to the eyebrows; a beard which renews its acquaintance with the razor only every Sunday morning; a waistcoat from which emerge sleeves of coarse grey canvas, a leather apron turned white by contact with the stone and blue canvas trousers. On one of their shoulders lies a folded jacket, and on this jacket rests the handle of the pickaxe or twibill which, for six days of the week, digs out the stone.

Whenever there's any civil unrest, it is rare that the men we have just been trying to depict do not get involved. When the shout goes up at the *Barrière d'Enfer*, "Here come the men from the Montrouge quarry!", the people living in nearby streets shake their heads and shut their doors.

This was the scene that I had before me – that I gazed on during that twilit hour which, in September, separates day from night. Then, once night had fallen, I jumped back into the carriage, where none of my companions, to be sure, had seen what I had just seen. So it goes: many look, but few see.

We reached Fontenay at about half-past eight; there was an excellent supper waiting for us, and after supper a walk in the garden.

Sorrento is a forest of orange trees; Fontenay is a bouquet of roses. Each house has its rose bush winding up along the wall, its foot protected by a small plank fence. Once it reaches a certain height, the rose bush blossoms out into a gigantic fan; the passing breeze is perfumed and when, instead of a breeze, there is a real wind, it rains petals of roses, as it used

to at the Corpus Christi celebrations, when the worship of God was still celebrated.

From the end of the garden, we would have had an immense view, if it had been daylight. Only the lights scattered across the expanse indicated the villages of Sceaux, Bagneux, Châtillon and Montrouge; beyond that stretched out a great line of russet red, from which came a muffled noise like that of a living Leviathan; it was Paris breathing.

Our hosts had to order us to bed, like children. Under that lovely sky with its beautiful scattering of stars, caressed by that perfumed breeze, we would have happily stayed out until daybreak.

At five in the morning, we set off on our hunting expedition, guided by the son of our host, who had promised us mountains and marvels, and who, it has to be said, continued to boast of how fecund his land was with game animals, deploying a persistence that could have been put to better use.

By midday, we had seen a rabbit and four partridges. The rabbit had been missed by my colleague on the right, one of the partridges had been missed by my colleague on the left and, of the other three partridges, two had been shot by me.

By midday, at Brassoire, I would have already sent to the farm three or four hares and fifteen or twenty partridges.

I love hunting, but I hate going for walks, especially walks across fields. And so, on the pretext of going off to explore a field of alfalfa situated on my extreme left and in which I was quite sure I would find nothing, I broke line and headed off by myself.

What lay in this field – what I had spotted in my desire to beat a retreat (a desire that had already seized me a good two hours ago) – was a sunken lane which, concealing me from

the eyes of the other hunters, would lead me back along the Sceaux road and straight to Fontenay-aux-Roses.

I was not mistaken. As one o'clock was striking at the belfry of the parish church, I reached the outskirts of the village.

I was following a wall which seemed to enclose a rather fine property when, as I reached the place where the Rue de Diane comes out onto the Grand-Rue, I saw coming towards me, from the direction of the church, a man who looked so strange that I came to a halt and instinctively cocked both barrels of my rifle, impelled by a mere sense of self-preservation.

But the man – pale, his hair sticking up, his eyes popping out, his clothes in disarray and his hands spattered with blood – passed by me without seeing me. His stare was both fixed and lifeless. He was rushing ahead with the unstoppable momentum of a body bouncing uncontrollably down the steep sides of a mountain, and yet his breathless panting indicated more panic than fatigue.

At the junction of the two roads, he left the Grand-Rue to dart into the Rue de Diane, where there was a door to the property surrounded by the wall I had been following for six or seven minutes. This door – on which my gaze came to rest that very same minute – was painted green, with the number 2 over it. The man's hand stretched out towards the doorbell long before it could actually touch it; then he reached it, pulled it violently and almost immediately, spinning round, he sat down on one of the two bollards that serve as the outer fortifications of this door. There he remained, motionless, his arms hanging and his head sunk on his chest.

I retraced my steps, fully convinced that this man must have been an actor in some unknown and terrible drama.

Behind him, on both sides of the street, a few people on whom he had doubtless produced the same effect as on me had emerged from their houses and were looking at him with an astonishment that equalled mine.

Following the violent ringing of the doorbell, a small door built into the wall near the main one opened, and a woman of between forty and forty-five appeared.

“Oh, it’s you, Jacquemin,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“Is the mayor at home?” asked the man she had addressed, in a hoarse voice.

“Yes.”

“Well then, Mère Antoine, go and tell him I’ve killed my wife, and I’ve come to give myself up as a prisoner.”

Mère Antoine uttered a scream which was echoed by two or three terror-stricken exclamations from the people close enough to hear this terrible confession.

I myself took a step backwards – into the trunk of a lime tree, against which I leant for support.

Everybody else within earshot of his voice had remained rooted to the spot.

As for the murderer, he had slipped from the bollard to the ground, as if, after uttering those fateful words, his strength had abandoned him.

Meanwhile, Mère Antoine had disappeared, leaving the small door open. It was clear that she gone to find her master and carry out the errand Jacquemin had given her.

After five minutes, the man she had gone to fetch appeared on the doorstep.

Two other men were following him.

I can still remember the sight of that street.

Jacquemin had slipped to the ground, as I have said. The mayor of Fontenay-aux-Roses, who had just been fetched by Mère Antoine, was standing over him, looking down on him from all his considerable height. In the opening of the door, the other two people – about whom we shall shortly have much more to say – jostled for space. I was leaning against the trunk of a lime tree planted in the Grand-Rue, but from this position I could see all down the Rue de Diane. On my left was a group comprising a man, a woman and a child, the child crying for his mother to take him in her arms. Behind this group a baker was sticking his head out of a first-floor window, talking to his apprentice downstairs, and asking him if that wasn't Jacquemin, the quarryman, who had just come running by; then there finally appeared, on his doorstep, a blacksmith, his front all dark but his back lit up by the gleam of his forge, where an apprentice was continuing to draw the bellows.

So much for the Grand-Rue.

As for the Rue de Diane, apart from the main group that we have described, it was deserted. However, at the far end, two gendarmes had just appeared; they had been making their rounds through the plain asking to see people's shooting permits; and, without suspecting the task that awaited them, they came marching slowly and calmly up to us.

The clock struck a quarter past one.

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