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Putrefaction and Purity: Death and Denial in Andrew Miller's *Pure*

Set in 1785, Andrew Miller's 2011 novel, *Pure*, is a fictionalised account of the removal of les Innocents cemetery from the centre of Paris and the mass disinterment that this entailed. Miller was inspired by Philippe Ariès's *The Hour of Our Death*, a history of Western attitudes to death since the Middle Ages, which posits the removal of cemeteries from the centres of cities and towns as symptomatic of a general banishment of death from cultural life. With its connotations of cleanliness and contamination, virtue and original sin, virginity and sexuality, the novel's title is inherently provocative. Tightly locked in a binary with its opposite, purity is impossible to imagine without reference to some notion of impurity, and this implicit antagonism animates the book. Purity suggests flawlessness; it is an ideal and an abstraction, opposed to the real, the actual, the physical. Purity denies the body, denies animating life, and, ultimately, denies degeneration and death. The Enlightenment championing of reason, as the supreme virtue, impressed on modern man the notion of an essential self, a thinking self elevated from a

decaying body. Prioritising the life of the mind, modern man feigns immortality and is thus condemned to denial and a denunciation of the fullness of life. Ernest Becker claimed that it is ‘only if you “taste” death with the lips of your living body that you can know emotionally that you are a creature who will die’ (Becker, 1973, p.88). And in this novel, death is a taste on the lips. Those that live around the cemetery exude its odour on their breath; it flavours their food and permeates the insides of their bodies. Over the course of his year at les Innocents, Jean-Baptiste Baratte, the young engineer commissioned to oversee the excavation, tastes death till it sickens him; he descends into common graves, digs up bones, hauls corpses, and buries a man. He also comes very close to dying himself, and is immeasurably changed by the experience. A celebration of the triumph of the individual over ideology, *Pure* has a heroic quality at its core that is rare in contemporary literary fiction. To achieve this without descending into mawkishness is something of a masterstroke and is testament to Miller’s light comic touch, a deceptive whimsicality that almost, at times, obscures the genuine engagement with the fact of death and its consequences in a post-religious world.

The tone of the early part of the novel is one of levity, as Jean-Baptiste’s overzealous rationalism is drolly contrasted with the ingloriousness of the task ahead. Although he is alarmed by the enormity of it and repulsed at the grisly nature of the work, Jean-Baptiste vows to ‘try to find some way of thinking of it more ... abstractly. He is, after all, a young man of ideas, of ideals’ (Miller, 2011, p.17). A follower of Voltaire and a fervent rationalist, he tries to see it as ‘a problem of pure engineering’ (p.63). Every night, in place of prayer, but with equally earnest solemnity, he recites a catechism of selfhood: ‘Who are you? I am Jean-Baptiste Baratte. Where are you from? From Belleme in Normandy. What are you? An engineer trained at the Ecole des Ponts. What do you believe in? In the power of reason...’ (p.30). There is a good deal of parody in Jean-Baptiste’s propriety and when he is disturbed by Ziguette, the daughter of the house in which he is lodging, while attending to his erection, he is not able to go through with his little mantra of self-possession: ‘Some nights more convincing than others’ (p.52).

Despite Jean-Baptiste’s initial priggishness and his mission to cast death out of the city, the perverse attraction of death as spectacle is foregrounded in the novel. Jean-Baptiste is taken to the Palais Royale to see Zulima, a putative

Persian princess, her corpse preserved for over two hundred years by virtue of her purity: in reality a waxwork model of a naked female body that could be viewed for a few sous. Later, when two preserved corpses of young women are unearthed from the pits of les Innocent, all those present are overawed by the sight, and Jean-Baptiste and his colleagues are invited to view the bodies later that evening. There is something sexual about the scene and the men are embarrassed at the arrival of Jeanne, the sexton's daughter. The repression of death is attended by a salacious fascination with the corpse as erotic object. The higher reason is elevated, the more insistent the resistance of the repressed body, and high-mindedness is invariably yoked to base physicality throughout the novel.

Among the vulgarities Jean-Baptiste hears about, when he visits Versailles to receive his appointment, is an elephant, gifted by the king of Siam, 'a great, melancholy beast that lives on Burgundy wine' (p.6). A year later, when he returns to the palace to deliver his final report, he will find this forsaken creature dead, marooned on a hoard of empty wine bottles. By the end of the eighteenth century, and by the end of this novel, death has, quite simply, become an elephant in the room. This final image is a grotesque form of the repressed physicality of death configured in the bloated abomination of the fetid corpse.

Public execution is still a bloodthirsty pageant in eighteenth century France and Jean-Baptiste recalls the barbaric torture and death inflicted on Damiens, before a crowd of thousands, for grazing the king with a penknife. Madame Monnard, Jean-Baptiste's landlady, remarks of the spectators that had gathered to watch a piano being hoisted into the house: 'you'd think they was at a hanging!' (p.49). And, with the exhumation in full swing, the caravans of bones winding through the streets transporting the centuries of human remains to the Porte d'Enfer become a popular attraction for Parisians and visitors to the city. A decade later, the guillotine will provide a similarly perverse form of recreation. Death, as entertainment, will, in the future, be a much cleaner, more pragmatic business. Indeed, Dr Guillotin, who gave his name to that efficient device features in the novel, explicitly foreshadowing the massacres to come; a bloodbath, the scale of which is made possible and palatable by the advent of this more rational method.

But the presence of Dr Guillotin and the inclusion of various other well-known figures of the period through the use of epigraphs, serves not only to contextualise the scene. With these touches, Miller draws the reader away from the minutiae and invites projection of the novel's events onto a wider canvas. Copernican moments are rarely moments but approximate loci of much longer periods of transition and complexity, and we should be careful of oversimplifying the forces of history. However, with Jean-Baptiste, Miller has captured something of the zeitgeist of pre-Revolutionary Paris, particularly in terms of the clash of rationalism and romanticism.

In many ways a traditional Bildungsroman, the novel charts the development of its central character from self-conscious young provincial, anxious to be thought modern, to something of a romantic hero. One night, early in the novel, Jean-Baptiste is standing at his window looking down at the cemetery he is soon to begin razing. In a whimsical gesture, inexplicable to himself, he moves his candle as if signalling to someone. He cannot say to whom: 'Some hollow-eyed watchman of the million dead? Or some future edition of himself, standing in the time to come and seeing in a window high above him the flickering of a light?' (p.64). Sure enough, towards the end of the novel, he is about to climb into one of the excavated common grave pits to bury the body of Lecoœur, his former friend, when he looks up and sees, in an upper window, a light moving, as if signalling. From the lofty heights of youthful idealism to the bottom of a stinking pit, Jean-Baptiste has undergone a radical transformation. His self-relation is no longer a mechanism for affirming his ideal notion of self but has a temporal dimension. And this disjunction in Jean-Baptiste's reflexive consciousness is figured in various ways throughout the novel.

Very early on, his faith in the power of reason begins to waver, in the face of the task ahead of him, and in the presence of so much death. For the most part the narrative is tied to Jean-Baptiste's consciousness through free indirect discourse, but, as he looks down from the window, the narrative voice shifts. There is an ellipsis and the point of view pans out: 'Over Paris, the stars are fragments of a glass ball flung at the sky' (p.64). The narration drifts away from Jean-Baptiste to the nocturnal lives of secondary characters. The mechanism of his self-consciousness is disturbed as he becomes the object of another's regard. Marie, the maid, watches through a hole in the ceiling as he

lets himself go, 'his mind like a ball of black wool rolling over the floor, unwinding, unwinding...' (p.65).

Ironically, it is Marie's surveillance, rather than his own earnest self-composure, that will save his life when, one night, later in the novel, Ziguette enters his room and splits his head open with his engineer's ruler. This marks a real hiatus in the narrative, and another drift away from the central subjectivity. In a parody of his former self-examination he recalls the doctor questioning him: 'Who are you? ... He is Adam alone in the garden. He is Lazarus roused out of his tomb, one life separated from another by a slack of darkness' (p.205). After the assault, he confesses to Armand that he thought he was dying, and seeking some comfort, he could find nothing, merely emptiness. Immediately prior to the assault, he chastises himself and pledges to draw up a rational plan for his life. 'Is he to be nothing but a body? A briefly animated example of what they dig up every day at les Innocents?' (p.187). And yet, after the attack, it is as if he is all body: 'his head is a dead weight, a fist of living gristle sown onto the stump of his neck. The pain is not on the surface but buried in the depths of his brain. Its rhythm the rhythm of his blood' (p.204). He suffers headaches during which 'the world is covered with a livid purple membrane' (pp.229-30). No longer does he hold himself at a height from the physical world. In the aftermath of the attack, he suffers a form of aphasia that causes him to lose the names of certain everyday objects. He determines to 'follow the world. The world, the things of the world, will prompt him. He will do what they suggest' (p. 208). This is cloaked in the same phraseology as his pursuit of the prostitute, Heloise: 'He will follow the route and so discover her again and deliver his message—whatever the message is' (pp.217-18). His new spontaneous, immersive relationship with the world coincides with the development of this romantic relationship with Heloise, who brings out a markedly more impulsive and passionate side to him.

An unintended mystique begins to develop around him. Leading him on a late night drunken expedition, painting propagandist graffiti around the city, Armand, the rambunctious organist of the church of les Innocents, bestows on Jean-Baptiste a nom de guerre, *Bêche*, French for spade, the gravedigger's tool. Despite being ill-suited for the role of revolutionary, he grows into the name and haplessly gains notoriety. Jean-Baptiste may be a gauche provincial, but, as the novel progresses, *Bêche* becomes something of a romantic legend

around the city with graffiti appearing such as: 'FAT KING SLUT QUEEN BEWARE! BECHE IS DIGGING A HOLE BIG ENOUGH TO BURY ALL VERSAILLES!' (p.155). Again, the subtle comedy in Jean-Baptiste's inadvertent stumble into this Scarlet Pimpernel type role acts as a smokescreen for the significant maturation of his character resulting from his confrontation with death.

In a pivotal passage in Miller's 2001 novel, *Oxygen*, also a meditation on death, one of the characters ponders on the measure of human success; what will survive of us after death? Concluding that it is not professional success or prizes, or even love, but rather impromptu tests of bravery in the face of death: 'Those moments when you must step forward from a line of silent faces and declare yourself; say yes when others say no; run back to the burning house without the least hesitation' (Miller, 2001, p.130). This is a lesson that Jean-Baptiste learns from his year at les Innocents. Losing faith in the abstractions of pure reason he vows to take a more empirical stance: 'To stand as firmly as he can in the world's fabulous dirt; live among uncertainty, mess, beauty. Live bravely if possible. Bravery will be necessary, he has no doubt of that' (Miller, 2011, p.307).

It is disconcerting, uncomfortable even, to find that there is, in fact, a moral to the story. Pedagogy has the effect of putting most contemporary readers on edge. But there is more going on here, and the rhetorical power of the novel resides not in its explicit message, but in the transmission. The novel's force lies in the sensuousness of the language and the extravagant corporeality of the imagery. This is a novel drenched in bodily fluids. A chair is said to have 'blooms of human grease' (p.94), and piss, shit, sweat, semen, blood, both menstrual and otherwise, feature profusely throughout. In her theory of abjection, Julia Kristeva associates these emissions with death. The waste products of the human organism, they smell of decay and are portents of death. The disgust they elicit is visceral, exorbitant; operating outside the symbolic order, pre-rational and pre-linguistic, and the repulsion they provoke is unmeditated and unmediated: 'These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death' (Kristeva, 1982, p.3).

The corpse resides in that dissolution between self and world; the waste matter of human life, it disturbs the boundary between life and death. And this

is at the heart of the death taboo. It is not death per se, that ethereal abstraction, which provokes disgust and fear. It is death infecting life, in the form of the abject corpse or the wounded body. The confrontation with death—one's own death—cannot be accommodated within discursive language; it lies outside rational logic or an abstract signifying relation. Kristeva writes, 'a wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death ... refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live' (p.3, Kristeva's italics). Jean-Baptiste's encounter with death lingers in his aphasia, which serves as a reminder of his closeness to death. It is a source of both shame and terror for him, reminding him of his base corporeality and his glimpse of the void beyond bodily existence.

The discovery of the preserved corpses of the two women is affecting, not only because of the perverse attraction they provoke, but also because of the horror they arouse in representing death's infringement of life: 'Now that death has looked so like life, should there not be some ceremony to make the moment decent?' (Miller, 2011, p.176). Shortly afterwards, Jean-Baptiste declares a holiday and the cemetery gates are opened to a troupe of prostitutes. A carnival atmosphere prevails as Lecoœur and Jean-Baptiste crank up the organ pumps and Armand begins to play. The evening is like a crescendo in the narrative, as the workers and the whores gather and the music builds until it is 'something very like a brawl, a riot' (p.184). It is as if the discovery of the preserved corpses and the trauma of exposure to so much death has unleashed some unruly force; boundaries are broken down. The old priest Pere Colbert, engulfed with rage pelts the crowd with his missal missiles and is taunted and heckled by the visiting women: 'it is hard to believe the priest will not soon start to shit his own entrails' (p.185). This is similar to Kristeva's alliance of the scatological and the eschatological: 'Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver. [...] It is no longer I who expel. "I" is expelled' (Kristeva, 1982, p.3).

Death as the breakdown between self and world is also figured in the process of putrefaction that pervades the novel. A liminal state that challenges the very contours of life and death and therefore of the self, putrefaction fuses life, fertilisation and proliferation with death, disintegration and degeneration. This continuity is what interests the doctors Guillotin and Thouret who have

been appointed to carry out medical research during the exhumation, 'Every stage of decomposition will be apparent, down to the last handful of dust, a most complete view of our fate after that event we call death' (Miller, 2011, p.139). Such a conception of death as an event along a time-line then obscures the disjunction between the living body and the corpse, so that life is a process of dying, and the living become the dead, rather than an absolute division of inanimate object from living subject.

The language of contamination and contagion used throughout the novel serves to accentuate the fear of death and the horror of the scenes at the cemetery, 'this place that is poisoning Paris!' (p.29). But it also equates death with disease, and positions it as something antagonistic to life. The purification of Paris has its corollary in the medicalization of death, which took death out of the home and into the hospital. Rather than being a natural part of life, death became something against which one should fight, at all costs. This was the advent of the invisible death, a cultural repression that remained largely unchallenged until the latter half of the twentieth century when scholars from various disciplines, Ariès included, began to challenge this tacit prohibition.¹ Today, the taboo is discernibly weakened with the proliferation of art, literature and scholarship about death, and with writers, artists and public figures even documenting their own deaths and those of their loved ones. Despite continuing advancements in bringing death back into the circle of life, to which this profusion of discourse attests, the corpse, which lies outside discourse, with its stubborn materiality, its grotesque allure, and its persistent power to horrify, remains a final anathema. In *Pure*, Miller captures the spirit of pre-Revolutionary Paris, but he has also written a very contemporary book, an *ars moriendi* for our times.

Note

¹ Ariès's *The Hour of Our Death* was one of a spate of books that emerged in the sixties and seventies that began to nudge death out of the closet, so to speak. Some of the most important of these were Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), Geoffrey Gorer's *Grief and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (1965), Elisabeth Kubler Ross's *On Death and Dying* (1969), Ernest Becker's Pulitzer Prize winning *The Denial of Death* (1973) and Susan Sontag *Illness as Metaphor* (1978).

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