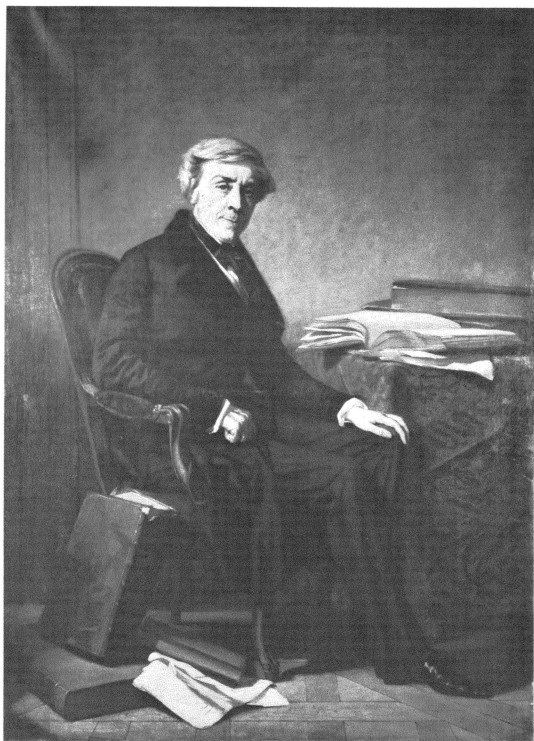


Mother Death
The Journal of Jules Michelet,
1815-1850

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—MICHELET NEVER gave up his primitive yearning to return to the womb. His wishes to die and to be reborn underlie his books on nature—first conceived during Mme Dumesnil’s fatal illness and then urged to literary expression by his second wife, Athénaïs. These four essays traced his conversion to a natural religion and exhilarated readers in turn; they sold amazingly well and allowed the historian, for the first time in his life, a measure of financial security. The historian had in fact formulated his natural philosophy before he inaugurated the series, when he underwent mud bath treatments at Acqui, Italy, from 5 to 28 June 1854. The *Journal* entries of those dates brought his deepest subconscious strivings to the surface. Fourteen years later, *The Mountain* transmitted his experiences to the public.

Michelet had become severely depressed and physically ill after he left Paris in 1852, and his energetic wife attended him, organized his routine, and revived his passion for living. But he did not recuperate fully until 1854, after the hot mud therapy he received at a health resort in the Piedmont region of Italy. The small town of Acqui was the former Roman settlement of *Aquae Statiellae*, whose springs brought Michelet into direct contact with Mother Earth. It was almost a complete psychoanalytic regression when his imagination took over. He was healed and reborn by surrendering to Nature’s womb.

Death, rebirth, marriage, and incest became one in this extraordinary event. Chapter 9 of *La Montagne* (part I)—which I here translate in its entirety—conveys Michelet’s full range: dramatic autobiography; vivid descriptions of landscape and its history; animistic, quasi-scientific, and philosophical speculations; social commentary; and the author’s analysis of his own mind. This sensuous visionary accepted his symbolic death and resurrection as literally true.

THE BOLLENTE AT ACQUI

“Work is my god. It preserves the world.” As for me, work has truly preserved me. Thanks to work, my life has passed quite smoothly, has always maintained itself while increasing its productive energy. Except

for one accident when I was about thirty years old,¹ I suspected nothing of the body's woes.

Confined within history, as I constructed my gigantic pyramid, only rarely did I gaze toward Nature, and quite late in life. Nature herself had to warn me, prove to me that I could not safely stay distant. My heart touched, guided by beloved care, one morning I found myself plunged into the life sciences. Not as a curious amusement seeker but as an imperiled voyager aboard a fragile skiff, who seeks to see through the unpredictable waves. It was quite helpful. Such passionate interest gave me a sort of second sight. It magnified my attention and at least allowed me to seize some vivid glimpses of things.

Reassured in one area, in the other I was afflicted. I was distressed, surprised (I almost said indignant) to find that I fell ill in 1853. **The world gripped me for the first time.** I languished at Nervi, near Genoa. That magnificent nook of the Apennines enveloped me. I was protected by the Italian sun, the light air, and the basaltic ledge where I would drag myself around noon. **On that arid coast, I consumed myself in rest, a companion of the lizard. For a person whose soul remains complete, action is a growing, demanding, tyrannical necessity.** It may be that the idler, who doesn't really live, or who has lived excessively, can depart more easily when his soul is thrown to the winds. But the person who is stopped while racing at full speed feels the blow quite differently. I was dying, although filled with life, with ideas, studies, and projects, powerful works that I had imagined or already begun. History, my lofty responsibility, made its claim and lamented that I could not complete it. Nature was protesting. Through science and marital happiness I had caught a glimpse of her. **By what savage spite, while opening her breast to me, did she suddenly push me away?** What a violent irony to say while shat-

¹ Michelet alludes to the near-fatal pneumonia he contracted in November 1826; see above entry of 20 October 1839 and note 44 (chap. 2).

tering me: "Live and continue to enjoy life!"

Italy is still the country of great doctors. Their infallible oracle imposed an extreme remedy upon me. This was their sentence: "He should return to the earth. Buried under the scorching earth, he will live again."

The health-giving and funereal town, where people are buried, was Acqui, in the Monferrat district, a meager and wild little region that would have remained unknown had it not been for its strategic location and the wars in which so many perished to secure the portal of the Alps. The region itself is composed of iron, sulfur, and flint. A few scanty woods on the outskirts, and small vineyards that produce a warm, white wine that smells of flint. Through the valley flows the Bormida—a river? stream?—that doesn't lack water, but its waterfalls and abrupt leaps make it antisocial and inhospitable like its sister rivers of the Piedmont. Those watercourses which are put to such little use, on which boats never appear, seem sad and violent. The animals as well, it seems. I once saw a small ox, which looked suspiciously at me, leap forward for no reason and impale a horse with its horns.

The remains of a Roman aqueduct decorate and ennoble the valley. The ruins still stand on empty land covered by water during certain seasons. One day they will disappear under the sudden fury of waters from the Bormida and will abandon this place to its monotony.

Hot springs flourish on the two banks. The town is on the left, with its beautiful renowned spring, the Bollente. Its huge bubbles flow, transparent but strongly impregnated with sulfur. The water flows, or rather it shoots, with a pressure that suggests the height from which it comes, the rich depths at their origin. In the old days, the Roman aqueduct received these waters and carried them above the river to the baths on the other bank. Neglected now, in the Jewish section, they endure the fate of the town, which was formerly a sovereign bishopric but is now sparsely populated. However, the town

is interesting, with its noble belt of impressive plane trees which surround one side and which themselves become increasingly barren as they ascend the bank of the denuded Bormida.

The right bank houses the great mystery. The earth is completely honeycombed and the hills deeply eroded with hot springs. In fact, the secret is that the mountain dies; by incessantly sifting its waters, it destroys itself in the process. Three centuries ago, the Roman baths had been swallowed up in a collapse. Now the same process occurs and will cause it to happen again. After the cave-in, the entire region was seen to be boiling. Before any building could be erected, they had to enclose and block up innumerable tiny springs. **The waters became silent but remained alive underground. They made the earth vibrant. In the small groves around the baths, at the fountain where one drinks the water cold, in the hills, and everywhere —you feel as if someone, mistakenly buried, fidgets and shudders under your feet.**

The baths are a kind of cloister with living quarters made up of three sides. The fourth, with a little garden and shrubs, forms an open entrance. The poor are housed at a distance, completely separated from the paying boarders. Forty years ago that separation did not exist. It is regrettable in one respect. If we lived closer to their affliction I believe we would be less frivolous. Willingly or not, we would become more mindful of our common human fate. Our venerable director, Chevalier Garrone, was quite proud that he himself checked the food they received. We were moved to see this worthy soldier, quite tall, return each morning with his buttonhole decorated with the spoon he used to test their food: noble insignia of charity.

Even if the poor were well fed, their lodgings, on the contrary, were gloomy and cramped. The narrow and bare courtyards were treeless and without shade in that scorching climate. We were told, nevertheless, that they were healed more quickly and in greater number than the rich patients. Their orderly and sober life was the reason. That

expression impressed me: "They were healed." It recognizes their true right: the water, the springs, belonged to them. Nature made them for those who are able to recover.

I said to myself: "Ah! If instead of that cramped dwelling, there were a double amphitheater, a huge hospitable double pool, along the two banks of this river, a welcoming place for entire peoples, it could become a center for the future brotherhood of the Italian nations. Here Italy, that great invalid, could be cured of her pervasive sickness, the spirit of isolation and divorce!" (I wrote this in 1854.)

The baths are secondary, as is the cold water the patients drink. The main point of this treatment is the very hot mud in which you are buried.

It is not dirty mud. Its base is silica and crushed pebbles reduced to finest powder. A mixture of sulfur and iron gives it a blackish tint. In the narrow lake in which this silt lies concentrated, I admired the energetic effort of the waters which, after preparing it and sifting it in the mountain, then coagulating it, struggle against their own labor, striving to pierce the earth's opacity, and upheave the mud with slight quakings of the earth, piercing through in little jets of mud, like microscopic volcanoes. One jet may be only air bubbles, but another, permanent one shows the continuous presence of a stream that, blocked elsewhere, after immense friction has successfully conquered and obtained what it seemed to desire: the effort of these little souls delighted to see the sun.

I fixed a serious gaze on that black, living earth. I said to her: "Beloved Mother of all! We are one. I come from you, and I return to you. But frankly, then, tell me your secret. What are you doing in your dark depths, from where do you send me that warm, powerful, rejuvenating soul, that soul which wants to make me live again? What are you doing there?" She answered: "What you see. What I do is before your eyes."

She spoke clearly, rather softly, but with a gentle voice, distinctly maternal.

Her mysteries are exaggerated. Her work is simple and obvious in those places where she works, as it were, in the sunlight.

I arrived on 5 June, still quite weak.² I had fainted as I left the carriage. Then I slept for twelve hours straight and awoke somewhat recovered. We had a beautiful bedroom with a terrace that opened on the limited but pleasant view of a little wood, crossed by rather attractive arbors, which you saw at the entrance. The vegetation was scanty, and the strong odor of sulfur was everywhere.

Powerful smell of life. The water in some of the neighboring springs intoxicates you as much as wine. The intoxication of the air and waters stimulates and awakens the senses, well before it restores your strength. You forget that you are ill. My spark returned on the ninth. Already I felt alive.

The night was a fairylike scene. The atmosphere of sulfur and love intoxicated our fireflies. Nimbler than those of the North, these winged creatures, in their burning dances, glittered in the dim darkness of the little wood, which seemed all the darker as background to those diamond showers. Their flames changed infinitely, sparkling at their meetings, sometimes pale and faint from desire or weariness.

These insects are not the only ones. In the absence of noisy pleasures, Nature acts even more, and with little mystery, in this deeply serious place where there exists true, infinitely painful suffering. Blind human fireflies reach out to each other for a moment, flutter about, and then withdraw without remembering. Our life was more concentrated and held us rather apart. During the evenings we preferred to walk on the banks of the Bormida, illumined by a beautiful

² The following sections condense the *Journal* entries of 5–28 June 1854 (vol. 2, pp. 262–74).

sunset, or climb the hill by the former Roman road. From there the town on the opposite bank was revealed. You see the meanders of the river. To one side you can even catch a glimpse of the Viso, so elevated, which crowns the landscape without lending it grandeur. Everything disappears on the other side of the hill, and you see nothing but the narrow, rugged valley of the stream, the Ravanesco, and, far away, the cemetery and some deserted houses.

One day, on that hill, on a lovely day of Corpus-Christi, we encountered a sorrowful funeral procession that had been organized hastily and late. Burials here are quite brief, so as not to depress the patients, especially the convalescents with their petty diversions. A young man was being buried who, like them, had forgotten why he had come. That unexpected funeral, during a beautiful time of year, made me reflect, penetrated as I was with the strong, gentle feeling of the Italian summer, fate, death, and the Alps. All these great and lofty ideas said that only love could cure all the empty seductions of the world. Love is life's measure, its limit. With its tender solicitude, love is wisdom itself.

On 19 June, having been well prepared, I was finally buried, but only up to the waist. In my magnificent coffin of white marble, I received the first application of black, oily mud. However, it hardly soiled me, for it was essentially sand. Alongside, another marble bath receives you afterward and cleans you instantly.

Signor Tomasini, the *fangarolo* who applied the mud to my body, was an intelligent, pleasant, and clever man. He was even educated and had completed the philosophy class. We talked. He told me that in the winter he hunted for his living, snaring small birds, for there was no other game. He owned a little land, worth about twenty-five thousand francs. One of his sons was to inherit it. But he wanted the other to become a notary. He did not regret his own fate. He only worried about rivalry with the senior *fangaroli*, whose positions were

until now hereditary. They hated him as a newcomer since he had worked there for only twenty years.

On 20 June the earth encroached further upon me, to my stomach, covering me almost completely. On the twenty-first I disappeared. Only my face remained free to let me breathe. I could then appreciate my burier's talent. He was a skilled sculptor in the Egyptian style. I found myself (except the face) completely and beautifully molded in this funereal clothing. I might already believe myself a citizen of the dark kingdom.

Strange disguise. Yet nothing that should be too surprising. Will I not someday be placed in the earth, probably in a few years? There is little difference between this grave and that one. Our birthplace, the earth, where our race was born, is it not as well the birthplace from which we are reborn? Let us hope so. We are in good hands.

At first I felt only a vague well-being. State very much like dreaming. After several experiences, I distinguished between the successive stages, which were different from each other.

During the first quarter-hour, complete peace. The mind, still free, observed itself. I questioned myself, my sickness and its cause. I blamed only myself and my badly regulated will, my excessive efforts to revive the life of humankind all by myself. The dead with whom I have conversed for so long enticed me and wanted me on the other shore. Nature still holds me and wants me to remain on this one.

During the second quarter-hour, her power increased. Thinking disappeared in my deep absorption. The only idea retained was that of *terra mater* [Mother Earth]. I felt her very plainly, caressing and compassionate, warming her wounded child. On the outside? Inside as well. For she penetrated me through with her vivifying spirits, entered me and blended herself with me, infusing me with her soul. The identification between us became complete. I no longer differentiated myself from her.

From this point to the last quarter-hour, that part of me she did

not cover—my face—, the part that remained free, bothered me. The buried body was happy, and it was I. The unburied head protested and was no longer I. At least that is how it seemed. So complete was the marriage—and more than a marriage—between the Earth and me! One might say an *exchange of nature*.³ I was Earth, and she was man. She had taken my infirmity, my sin, upon herself. As for me, in becoming Earth, I had taken her life, her warmth, her youth.

Years, labors, grief, everything remained at the bottom of my marble coffin. I was renewed. When I emerged, my body was covered by some sort of oily glow. It was a certain organic element whose nature we do not know, different from minerals. It gives the impression of a living contact, of having communicated with the invisible soul and the benevolent warmth it then transmits.

Nature, whom I had forgotten for the fierce work that so blindly evaded happiness, did not hold it too much against me. With infinite gentleness she had again opened her arms and was waiting for me. She had increased my life and power. I said to myself: May I deserve it, drink from her streams, and with a more fertile heart enter into her sacred unity!

The Bird, The Sea, The Insect were born of this experience, as was *The Renaissance*, and the book which made them, and which makes everything: *Love*.⁴

³ Michelet's italics (in French, *un échange de nature*).

⁴ Michelet resumed his historical epic at *The Renaissance*, published in February 1855. His first book on marriage, *Love*, appeared in November 1858, followed by *Woman* in November 1859.