





Mr. F *, a distinguished sculptor and creator of forms in likeness of numerous beasts of all species and orders, carefully walked down the street, looking left and right, listening cautiously, as he inevitably knew that in this hectic time, with clocks mounted above each deity, on the domes of the railway stations, on post offices and ministries, on the facades of insurance companies and marine associations, one could just too easily end up under the wheels. Wasn't that to be the unhappy fate of C. who, as he walked out of his studio, perhaps his senses a trifle numbed from the all-day sketching of the models – the unemployed workers with their expressive, tired faces, posing now for a group of

cavemen, now for the composition of the cursed Cain's caravan – thus, maybe a little pensive, but never careless, and certainly with no guilt of his own, fell under the multi-speed brand new device of the De Dion Bouton production, as under the claws of a tiger? And to Mr. F, now crossing the street in which, to tell the truth, there is no sign of traffic, nothing else remains but to reluctantly imagine the damage that a rather large human body can cause to a car, while he no doubt remembers very well the opposite outcome, though not in the case of an encounter with such a solid vehicle, the end-of-century achievement of the motor industry, rather perhaps with some of its forerunners of twenty or thirty years ago, from the time when, in the stifling underground city morgue on the Île de la Cité, as a part-time lithographer, he had drawn corpses. The morning was humid with a dazzling mist shining like a polished stone, the rims of the sky over distant rooftops thickening in shades of sickly red, like a rash.



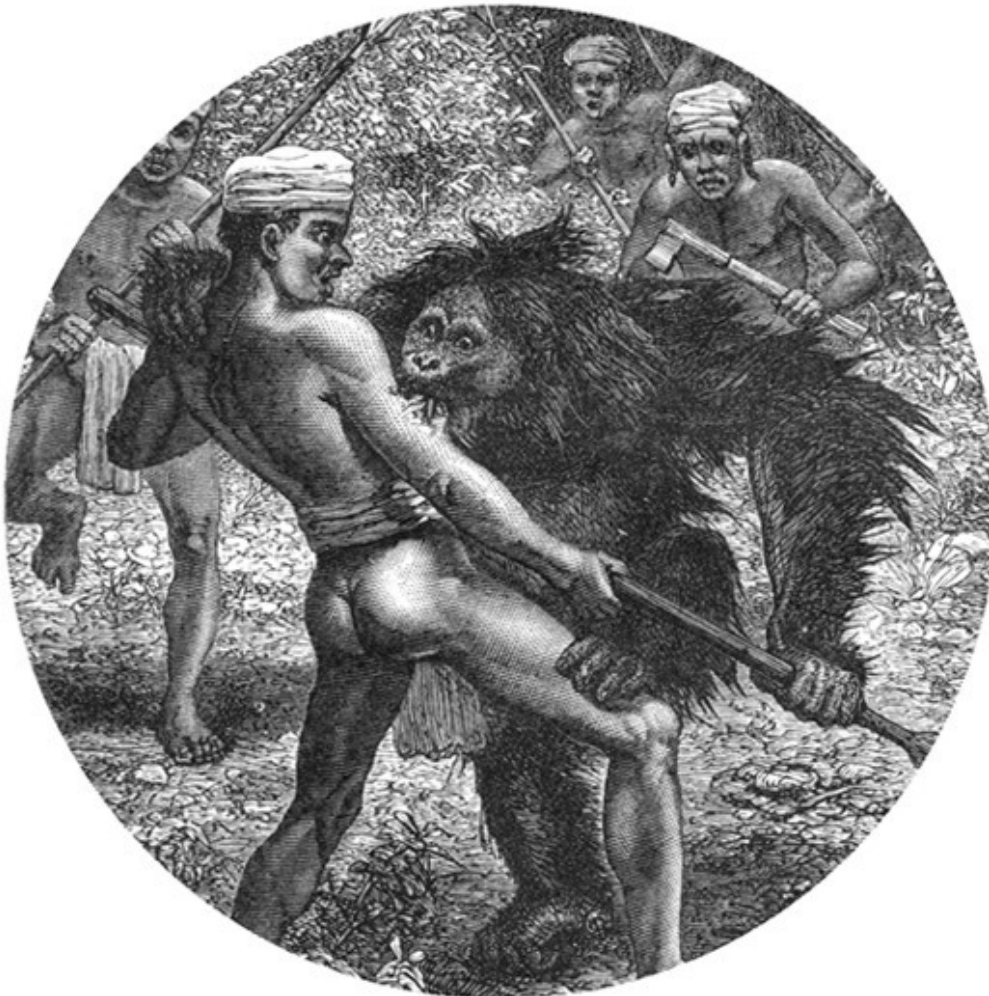
Mr. F. is now facing the entrance to the Jardin des Plantes, where the recently opened Museum of Paleontology proudly holds a vast collection of bones of fantastic animals, massive jaws and beaks to tear flesh, leviathans and dragons, griffins and unicorns, behemoths, chimeras, harpies and centaurs, all together with earthly beasts – no less miraculous, but from the worlds that man had inscribed in his maps, or even seen with his own eyes – sea lions and gazelles, tapir and platypus, the dodo bird, gorillas and white whales – and the whiteness of their intertwined bones join to form a single milky, ivy-like skeleton that carries all the weight of the building. Retaining walls, corridors and balconies, arches and stairways, windows made of cast iron, all rest upon this carcass like the meat of some

giant mammal unknown to science and hidden in the details, for it is in the nature of Knowledge to hide under the veil of smallest, endlessly classifiable things, and to a man it remains nothing but a task – after all the original one – to devote himself to the naming of the multitudes. Among the bones, under the flickering phosphorus light, numerous visitors walk through a kind of huge, withered womb, as if in the midst of an electric ship, like the one from “Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea”, watching the collected body parts as fragments of some enormous disconnected mechanism – levers, screws, springs, axles – and while touching their own wrists, they marvel at the similarities, as if every body that ever existed owed its origin to some primordial, shattered, mechanical puppet.



It should be noted, however, that Mr. F. is not at all fond of comparing bodies to machines (to machinery of any kind) much rather to some glorious palace, to the confusing architecture of a Pantheon, a mausoleum or a bank, a place full of words and signs, to flowing corridors and skeletal colonnades with deities nested like glands inbetween the ridges, mercuries and neptunes, two-faced januses, atlases and fertile venuses, but above all with numerous deities without a name, figures of unknown gods with their hands full of hourglasses and sharp instruments aimed at pointing out the time that remains to carve out of their own flesh some superior, sublime and infinitely useful form.

And then, just at the end of this last thought, before Mr. F. there stands a human skeleton, female, alone, as if astray, of a recent date, in a glass case for some reason left in the shade near the exit, marked by tiny, stark inscription that barely indicates its origin: *femme italienne*; and below, in even smaller letters: *empoisonnement à l'arsenic*. Confused for some unknown reason and suddenly embarrassed, as one may be when failing to pay respect to a friend, Mr. F. looks away from this scene, as if to dedicate himself to his business obligation, after all the reason for this visit, and inspect the honorable place in the middle of the atrium, meant for his new monumental work, which by the conclusion of the contractual and financial formalities, carved in marble, will display with unprecedented clarity nothing less than the essence and nature of the modern times.



It will be a complex, magnificent sculpture and, if so desired, perhaps even a clock could be installed somewhere – right there – embedded in the imaginary rock on which, as in a dioramic view, a cruel crime is taking place: inspired by an in-its-day very popular etching – an illustration of a journey into unknown lands, the sculpture shows an act of murder. With a face of an uncomfortably human likeness, with a smile full of pleasure, in complicity of an obnoxious calf on one side, and one nosy, indolent snail, on the other, a female orangutan, with huge hands, is strangling a savage from Borneo, transforming the latter by this act of violence, and by the poor man's wounds which seem to derive from some high-precision surgical device, into a useful object of anatomical research. And now, why,

Mr. F, do you consider it necessary to put in front of our eyes this simultaneous occurrence of the murder and the autopsy? Because modernity is inconceivable in the absence of murder - replies F. in response to this imagined question - just as it is remains beyond words in the lack of autopsy, and therefore the coincidence of murder and autopsy stands as a perfect allegory of agreement between nature and reason. Consequently, I give you a crucifixion, a slumped ancient god who carries, deposited in his body, a thousand years' worth of scenes of carnality, the principles of beauty, of harmony and sensuality, now about to be cut in pieces, and by the effect of sublime brutality turned into endless kaleidoscopic fragments.



How sweetly unworthy, how shamefully exciting it is – Mr. F. thinks as if encouraging himself – to surrender, to abandon oneself to the violence of nature, and in a single gaze perceive the superiority of the motives, the necessity of self-defense, the eroticism of hysteria, the hierarchy of victims... and ending this inventory Mr. F. turns again, like someone who has been called by name, to the absent eyes in the skull of that femme italienne, that skeleton full of arsenic in the elevated glass cabinet, as if she were a receptionist of some sort, and he sees that their eyes, his living and wet eyes, and her extinguished eyes turned to dust, missing between dry and sharp bony spheres, in an instant find

each others gaze. Then, quite unexpectedly, Mr. F, confident that nobody is watching, quietly, almost in a whisper, talks to the skeleton; because there is no one near to whom he would otherwise address his words, nor anyone that he could see, only us, invisible observers, and we are quite close, and even what is barely audible we read from his lips and notice that he speaks exactly these words: Isabelle ... mon Dieu ... Isabelle ... étions-nous morts sans nous en rendre compte? And once again, agitated, he looks away as if, all of a sudden, painful as a sting, he had received an answer, as dark as a locked cabinet.



Many years ago, in the basement of the morgue, F. studied with great attention a corpse of a man, a hunter surprised in his sleep by a very hungry bear, and he felt then, from the moment he first laid his eyes on that mutilated body, a disturbing experience of a mutual sympathy, not with the human victim, but with that beast of ferocious teeth, the perpetrator of that deep and devastating bite. For, in that gaping hole of missing flesh, F. immediately saw something like a mirror – a reflection that nature puts before man as if offering a truce. Indeed, in that cold underground, in the stench of ammonia, the remains of all sorts of tragedies were brought, to the delight of the public fascinated by the surprising forms that death cuts deep into the bodies (and death, like any death – once it would see all those various people, bakers, housewives, street cleaners, children with smeared mouths, dusty chimney sweeps, poets and tailors, all of them pushing each other and leaning over the fence for a better view of the suicides, the prostitutes, the drowned and the revolutionaries – it would immediately grab them by their eyebrows, by their long noses, by their hair until they would fall through those cuts as into abysses) and despite the frozen breath and numb fingers, the insightful gaze of the artist and the meticulous gaze of the scientist recorded every detail of the organic landscape, patiently scrutinizing its glades, its dark canyons, its luxuriously braided vessels and the streams of its fluids, with the eyes that fixed the truth as the light on a photographic plate.

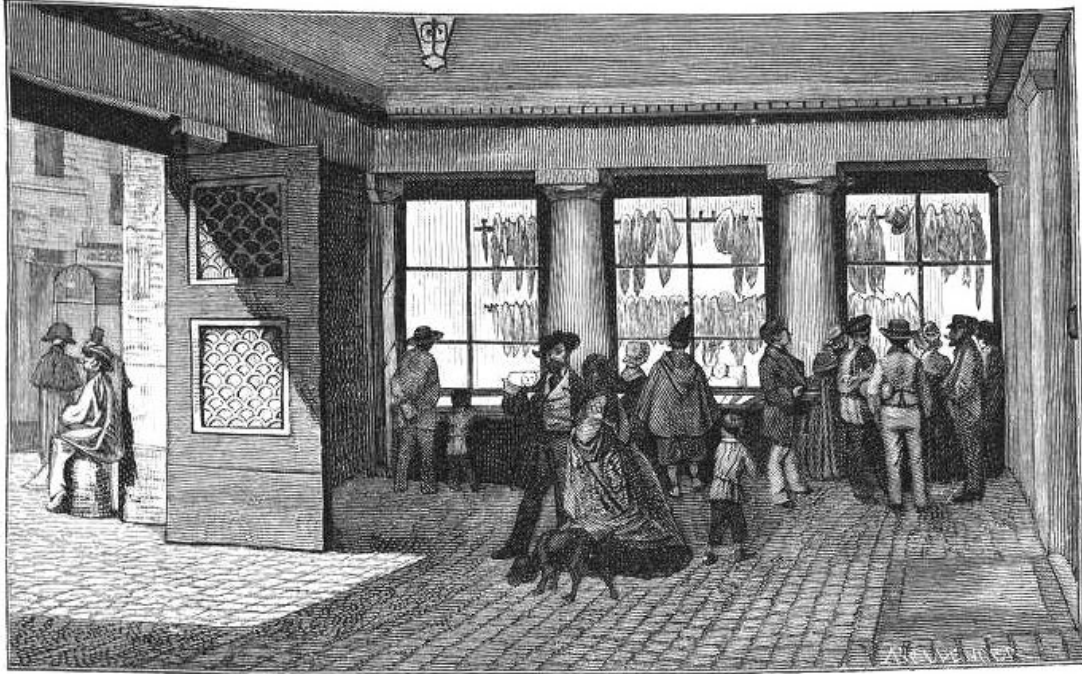


Fig. 40. — Vue intérieure de la Morgue en 1855.

And yet, there was always a need to know how, in the name of truth, truth could be overcome: what is it that begins where the body ends? – this was a question to which no one, not even Mr. F, could ever offer a comprehensive answer. For the body sometimes ceased so suddenly, so unexpectedly, its parts separated in order to reveal at the point of the intersection, even if only for a second, the mystery of mirrors. And as fate would have it some parts would often be missing, and to be honest, sometimes many things of interest, a head or a hand, a part of the chest or the womb, not to mention the lack of a name, a history or a social class, because everything and everyone, the dead and the living, that, in the name of sacred Knowledge, were received by the underground hall of the city morgue, for better or for worse, before God and before Time, were equal.



Mr. F. is now looking at his pocket watch and sees on its glassy surface only a reflection of the bright morning light that reaches him from the half-open gate of the main entrance to the museum. There stands a tall, slender man who F. at first sees only in outline, but a second later the stranger of a swift pace is already in front of him, his broad-brimmed hat in his hand as a sign of respect and, to the eyes of Mr. F, his forms now become clear: a narrow face, long white hair and goat beard, bright eyes and a friendly smile that, to Mr. F, no doubt, brings an immediate relief, because it is not in his nature to have meetings so hastily arranged through dispatch and envoys. But the stranger had demanded an immediate encounter, and it would have been considered at the very least disrespectful to ignore the

emergency of such a request, especially since it had come from a visitor so famous by name and by deed, which had left F. in doubt as to whether it all may have been a matter of mistake. But there was no mistake. Cody, the stranger said. William Cody.

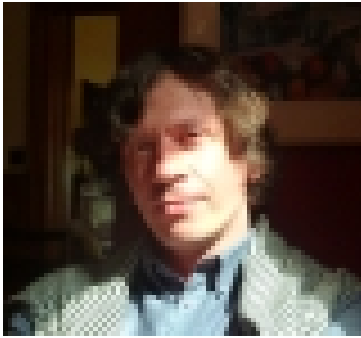
** Emmanuel Frémiet is one of many, now mostly forgotten, artists of the nineteenth century who was granted highest honors in his time. Known for his faithful representations of animals – monkeys, horses, bears, elephants – his sculptures adorn several public spaces and museum collections of Paris. One of the most famous, “The Orangutan” from 1895, is located in the foyer of the Museum of Paleontology and it shows a suffering native of Borneo losing a battle against a giant ape.*

Last summer I spent a few days in Paris casually looking for traces of the sojourn of William Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, and the contribution of his theatrical/circus company to the Exposition Universelle of the year 1889, when the Eiffel Tower was raised and one of the most notorious human zoos, Village Nègre, was opened with over four hundred forcibly transported African natives. Since 1887, Buffalo Bill has brought his Wild West spectacle, with authentic cowboys and Indians, to several European cities, including Florence, an event documented on several photographs now kept at the Florentine Museum of Anthropology.

But an encounter with Frémiet’s sculpture in Paris somewhat distracted me from the pursuit of Buffalo Bill. Coincidentally, a friend who lives in Paris, a historian of photography, drew my attention to the nineteenth-century obsessive misconception about orangutans as physically exaggerated, terrible and dangerous beasts, and showed me an engraving that illustrated a travel diary from the Malay Archipelago in 1869, which, just like the Frémiet’s sculpture, shows an orangutan attacking a “savage from Borneo”.

Frémiet’s sculptural composition is also preceded by the famous Edgar Allan Poe tale, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, which is considered to be the first-ever detective story, the originator of the genre, and the amateur detective, Dupen, who, in a lucid analysis reveals that behind a monstrous murder case in Paris there hides an escaped orangutan, is seen as a precursor and prototype of future literary detectives, such as Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dejan Atanackovic

Dejan Atanackovic's work includes diverse media and methods: writing, video, installations, interventions in public space, as well as curatorial projects. He has held personal and collective exhibitions in Italy, Serbia, Canada, USA, Slovenia, Bosnia, Albania, Germany, Mexico etc. He teaches several university courses (Multimedia, Installation Art and Body Archives) in Florence and Siena. He lives in Florence and Belgrade.

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