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Mass Death and Funerary Transition: The Meudon Railway Disaster (France, 1842)

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ABSTRACT

On 8 May 1842, the deadliest French railway disaster of the nineteenth century occurred in Meudon, near Paris. The derailment of a train and the resulting fire caused the death of several dozens of people. Studying the mortuary and funerary management of this disaster is of twofold interest. First, in the early days of the railway, this type of collective death was still rare and strongly marked by its industrial character; it was therefore necessary to improvise. Second, a new funerary regime was emerging at the time that placed great importance on the body of the deceased, but the violence of the accident led to mortuary chaos. How could the growing imperatives of the cult of the dead be reconciled with industrial death?

A little before 6 pm on Sunday, 8 May 1842, an 18-car train was traveling at unusual speed through Meudon Bellevue, near Paris, when the axletree of the first of its two locomotives snapped. Both locomotives came off the rails, and the five cars at the front of the train, carried on by their momentum, crashed in a heap on top of the engines and caught fire almost immediately. The train was carrying 600 to 700 Parisians on their way home from Versailles, where they had been admiring the spectacle of the Grandes Eaux at the Palace. The violent impact of derailment and collision was followed by the ravages of fire: The cars were locked from the outside, trapping any wounded people who would otherwise have been able to escape. It was not until nearly midnight that the inferno formed by the piled-up cars was finally under control. Despite the efforts of the surviving passengers and the rescue workers who arrived on the scene, the toll was heavy: at least 40 deaths according to the first estimates.

The accident took place in the context of two larger trends: the emergence of mass deaths caused by industrial accidents, and the evolution of societal attitudes to death. To what extent did the funerary treatment of the bodies reflect the modernity produced by these new technological and cultural developments?

We will return to this twofold context. Ironically, the incident occurred at a time when members of parliament were discussing a law intended to regulate the development of the railway in France. Rail transport was still a very recent invention. The first lines, used for freight and mining, had been built at the end of the 1820s, but the first passenger trains were only put into service on the Right Bank of the Seine in 1837. The Paris–Versailles line, on which the accident took place, was opened in 1840. The disaster of 8 May 1842, was thus the first railway disaster in France; it was also the deadliest of the century. It marked the beginning of an era of industrial disasters, which could be added to the calamities of previous centuries, whether natural (earthquakes, epidemics) or human (fires, shipwrecks). These days, we have become sadly familiarized with the funerary culture of disaster (plane crashes, technological accidents, etc.), which places tormented bodies onto trajectories combining mortuary rituals, forensic requirements, and health measures, and culminating in collective ceremonies intended to mend a community devastated by grief (Clavandier, 2004). Nevertheless, this funerary culture had to be created. The aim of this study, therefore, is to understand its premises and to compare the novelty effects produced by the circumstances of the industrial accident (mass death, bodily injury) with the effects of the funerary transition that was underway at the time.

By funerary transition, we mean the shift, begun in the eighteenth century, from a funerary regime centered around concern for the salvation of the soul to one focused more around concern for the body (Bertrand, 2011). This change had practical consequences for the treatment of corpses, ceremonies, burial methods, memorial spaces, and relations between the living and the dead. These changes will be discussed below. In the 1840s, when the Meudon disaster took place, the funerary transition was still ongoing, and the models it promoted were not yet completely fixed.

The 1842 accident thus gives us an opportunity to observe the establishment of a funerary culture around industrial accidents at a time when funerary norms were in the process of changing. Considering both of these aspects together allows us to assess, by following the trajectory of the bodies as closely as possible, whether and to what extent the management of bodies deviated from the emerging norms. It also allows us to explore any material or symbolic attempts to reduce such deviation, as well as the limits of those attempts.

This study is based essentially on press reports. It does not intend to shed light on the causes of the accident, to establish who was to blame, or to calculate a precise death toll. Rather, press articles allow us to observe the emotions aroused in the wake of the incident by transgressions of or attempts to reimpose funerary norms.

A new face of death

For the French people of the time, the Meudon disaster was an unprecedented event, as one journalist powerfully expressed:

> Yesterday's incident is without precedent in the history of railways […] It is the first time such a large number of victims has been seen […] It was the first time that fire combined its horrors with those of a terrible collision, that flames finished off the unfortunate wounded lying amid the debris of the shattered cars, and disfigured their bodies to the point of depriving their families of the sad consolation of recognizing them and paying their last respects.[1]

The shock was due to three things: the number of victims, the violence with which death had struck, and the terrible effects of that violence on the bodies. Moreover, the unprecedented nature of the disaster and the emergency necessitated improvization and divergence from standard practice when it came to dealing with the victims. The difficulty for the historian is to evaluate deviations from a norm and from sensibilities that are no longer ours.

An uncertain and unsettling death toll

The Meudon accident was the first rail disaster involving passengers in France. The number of victims was immediately estimated to be very high, although difficult to establish. On the first evening, 41 bodies were pulled from the first car; some people attempted to extrapolate on the basis that each of the five cars at the front had been carrying 40 passengers. The extreme heat of the inferno, which had raged for several hours, led to fears that some bodies had been completely incinerated. In addition, body parts were gradually being discovered around the accident site or under the debris. Above all, many gravely wounded people who had been transported to private homes and to the Château de Meudon or evacuated in the subsequent days to Parisian hospitals later died, fueling the macabre accounting.

The estimated totals thus varied from one day to the next and from one newspaper to the next, ranging from around 40 to more than 150.[2] These variations increased the general anxiety. They also stirred up political debates: The regime of Louis Philippe, installed by the July Revolution of 1830, was the target of hostility from supporters of his predecessor, Charles X. The Legitimists therefore accused the government newspapers of underestimating the toll. The trial held a few weeks after the accident settled on an official figure of 55 deaths but was unable to dispel all doubts.

Moreover, in contrast to a boiler explosion in a factory, for example, where the victims are socially homogeneous, the train had been carrying a random and socially very mixed group of people. This meant that everyone was able to identify with the victims.

The opposite of beautiful death

The second element contributing to the anomic character of death in this case was its suddenness, its violence, its cruelty. Numerous eyewitnesses described the rapidity with which the enormous inferno devoured the bodies in the first few cars, while claiming that death was not instantaneous:

> We were forced to look ahead and watch, unable to intervene, as the fire in its voracious thirst devoured the bodies that were bending over, standing up, falling in every direction to try to escape the fury of the blaze.[3]

Death was thus preceded by agonizing suffering, in contrast to a peaceful "beautiful death" surrounded by loved ones, which was the model idealized by Christians as well as by the Romantic esthetic of the time (Ariès, 1982). Moreover, death left in its wake corpses that presented "an awful spectacle: under the rails, in plain view of the public, mounds of scorched corpses, completely disfigured, heads separated from torsos, severed legs, scattered arms."[4] The damage to the bodies included both injuries caused by the impact and burns from the fire; these terrible descriptions form an inverse image of the "beautiful" sleeping corpse, the ideal or idealized corpse that the funerary transition was gradually establishing at the center of the cult of the dead.

The bodies were indeed horribly damaged: Some "seemed hardly human," while others had been reduced to a shriveled and grotesque form. The disaster had compromised their individuality: first by tearing them apart and scattering them around, but also by effacing all distinguishing features to the point where it was impossible to discern age or sex. The bodies were too disfigured to be recognizable, as shown by this anecdote, which was repeated several times in the press:

> A young woman, also pulled alive from the flames, was asking for her husband … "He's there," she said, "save him; you will recognize him by his outfit." And she described his clothes, the color of his coat. Her burned husband was at her feet, but she did not see him; a bystander spread his handkerchief over him to hide him from the unfortunate woman's gaze.[5]

To add to the chaos, the corpses in the first car had formed an agglomerated mass, a composite material: "a heap of flesh and bones, blackened and charred by the fire, formless, disfigured, impossible to recognize," which had to be removed using shovels and poles, whose hooks "seemed to melt into the flames along with the corpses."[6]

The circumstances of the accident, therefore, compromised both the individuality and the identity of the dead. The consequences were not merely legal, but also emotional. The funerary transition underway at the time was characterized by an increasing rejection of anonymity and collective treatment, whether in relation to bodies or tombs. The warning *in pulverem reverteris* (to dust you shall return), which found a literal expression in the ashes produced by the fire, was no longer in step with new sensibilities; on the contrary, the 1840s saw the beginning of the popularization of embalming in France, a practice designed to ensure the eternal conservation of the dead (Carol, 2016, 2019), and of postmortem photography, which preserved their features forever (Burns & Burns, 2002; Heran, 2002). In this context, the anonymization, even reification of the bodies ravaged by iron and fire was particularly traumatic.

Handling the bodies after the disaster: Between improvization and new outrages?

The novelty of this type of accident meant it was necessary to improvise when dealing with the bodies. This improvization gave rise to actions or behaviors that aggravated the damage to the bodies, the impact of which must be assessed.

The procedures for removing the bodies from the fire caused new damage:

> Until ten in the evening, body parts scattered here and there, or dismembered and unrecognizable bodies that crumbled into scraps or ashes when they were pulled from the burned cars, were collected from the vines and fields.[7]

The first human remains collected on the evening of May 8 were initially placed by the side of the track before being transported to Paris and stored in a waiting room at Montparnasse station. They were then sorted: The most badly burned remains were sent to Montparnasse Cemetery, where they were vaguely reassembled and stored in a shed "near a mill at the foot of which victims of torture had been buried in the past,"[8] while the bodies that seemed potentially recognizable (seven in total) were taken to the Paris morgue on the Île de la Cité.

It is more difficult to find out the exact trajectory of the bodies of the wounded who could not be transported and who died in the following days in Meudon; some were reclaimed by their loved ones, while others seem to have been left at Montparnasse Cemetery while waiting to be claimed. By contrast, the smallest human remains gathered at the site did not receive any kind of funerary treatment: Although the newspapers mentioned that bone fragments and teeth had been found when sifting the ashes, they said nothing about what happened to them—a silence that reveals a great deal about the apparent lack of interest in them.

When the disaster was first reported, a crowd spontaneously flocked to the places associated with the incident. Since the French Revolution, the crowd had inspired fear: It was seen as irrational, prone to violence, or driven by the baser instincts (Barrows, 1981). These crowds thus threatened to jeopardize the respect due to the dead. The site of the accident was overrun for several days:

> The influx of curious people from all over who came to that part of the track where the accident had occurred was so great that, despite the surveillance in place and the number of troops sent there, all the fences were forced open.[9]

Those who gathered near Montparnasse station starting the day after the accident formed another hostile and agitated mob that held the rail company responsible for the disaster. When the bodies were redirected to the cemetery or the morgue, another crowd obstructed the nearby roads and had to be channeled.

In ordinary times, anonymous bodies were displayed in the morgue so that they could be identified; in a way, the display room was the exact opposite of the mortuary, where the dead, dressed and adorned by their loved ones, could be visited for the last time. The morgue was open to the public, who filed past these naked bodies all day long, driven at least as much by curiosity as by the desire to help the police (Bertherat, 2019). The bodies brought from Meudon kindled this curiosity still further thanks to the press coverage of the incident. Several newspapers described indecent behavior and scenes:

> Five to six thousand people hurried to the morgue this morning to see the sad, sickening spectacle of a few shreds of flesh that have been placed on display there […] Around 30 police officers and 150 municipal guards were tasked with controlling the curious people and making them walk on the left, as is the practice in the boulevard theaters.[10]

Montparnasse Cemetery also attracted a large crowd, and access to it was soon restricted to those seeking a missing person. Again, journalists lambasted the impropriety of the public's behavior:

> On the other side of those very walls, at the door of that very cemetery, where cartloads of empty coffins could be seen arriving to collect the misshapen remains of the unfortunates who had perished, the resounding gaiety of the cabarets formed the counterpart of the scene of desolation that reigned just next door. Musical instruments could be heard; people were drinking and dancing happily right in front of death![11]

Most of the disparaging comments came from the more conservative press, which was full of disdain for the populace. They emphasized the people's ignorance of contemporary etiquette regarding mourning, thereby revealing the still socially discriminative nature of the emerging norms around funerary behavior.

Scientific opportunities and health restrictions

The bodies of some victims were also used for medical research and experiments that interfered with the funerary process.

A few days after the accident, the press reported the results of the autopsy of a young woman who had died in the Necker hospital. Far from taking offense at the procedure, the writer even offered curious readers some extracts from the final report:

> The serous cavities were dry, the intestinal mucus membrane was bright red throughout. The skin was burned to the third and fourth degree on the face, torso, and limbs, and yet the clothes of the unfortunate woman were still intact.[12]

Moreover, a delegation of doctors, including the physiologist François Magendie, visited Montparnasse Cemetery to "carry out scientific observations on the remains of the unfortunate victims of the terrible accident of May 8."[13] At the time of the disaster, Magendie was teaching a series of classes at the Collège de France on the effects of burns on organic tissue. He had expressed aversion to the idea of subjecting animals to such experiments, but the disaster offered him an opportunity for direct observation, which he was quick to seize. He presented his conclusions to his class on May 11, where he also showed the audience some body parts he had taken from the cemetery, including a femur, a piece of lung, and an Achilles tendon. His descriptions of the burned corpses were precise, suggesting thorough examination and extensive handling. Some were reprinted in the press, such as his description of a "woman of imposing stature, as far as could be judged by the shapeless fragments that remained of her, [who] had been compressed in her skin as no corset could have done." By contrast, other parts of the class dealing with shriveled genital organs or blood, which was compared to a "blood sausage," were not mentioned in the press, presumably because they were deemed inappropriate for non-specialist readers.[14]

At a time when the bodily integrity of the dead was becoming increasingly important to the bereaved, autopsies and the public exploitation of bodies constituted an additional form of violence. The anatomical studies of previous centuries had been conducted on the bodies of socially vulnerable, anonymous, or infamous people, as well as victims of torture (Richardson, 2001). In 1842, far from being treated as sacred, as they would be later, the bodies of the victims were thus put to use for the furtherance of science. Although some of the remains were so unrecognizable or fragmented as to be anonymous, that was not always the case: The identity of the young woman discussed above was firmly established.

Moreover, the bodies of the victims were also considered and treated as a possible health hazard. According to a doctor cited in *La Presse*, the prefect of Seine had ordered that the most badly burned remains should be buried immediately without displaying them in the morgue, probably to neutralize any putrid emanations. It was only at the insistence of the prefect of police that the remains were eventually stored at Montparnasse Cemetery in the hope that they might be recognized. Rumors about a hasty, furtive burial, which had also been spread about the burials in Meudon itself, likely explain why the crowd headed to the cemetery. The fear aroused by the potentially dangerous nature of the remains also compelled the cemetery custodian to douse them thoroughly in chlorine, which was thought to neutralize miasmas.[15]

The disaster thus created a specific set of circumstances, especially because of its effects on the bodies. Their fragmentation, disfiguration, and dehumanization disrupted the expected response. Their status as victims did not, however, grant them any particularly careful or protective treatment in 1842. Their deformation or anonymization tended rather to elicit handling more in line with that of the most ordinary bodies, those of the poor who died in hospital (Hurren, 2014) or unidentified bodies that ended up in the morgue.

Reducing funerary abnormality

In response to the disruption caused by the catastrophe, attempts were made to channel the dead back onto more normal trajectories. These attempts followed religious logics traditionally associated with death as well as more modern funerary logics. In the first case, the essential concern was with the salvation of the soul: It was necessary to accompany the dying, bless their remains, and ultimately use the disaster to unite and strengthen the community of believers. According to the newer sensibilities driving the funerary transition, meanwhile, the body was still the incarnation of the person; reestablishing the personhood and individual identity of the remains was essential to neutralize the threat of reification.

The persistence of models of Christian death

In France, a highly Christianized society, the Catholic Church had for centuries been responsible for handling the dying and the dead. It also governed relations between the living and the dead, which were mediated by the Church in the form of masses or prayers. The funerary transition, coupled with the process of dechristianization that had begun in the eighteenth century, challenged this dominance by introducing new actors (doctors, the state, loved ones) and new logics (whether sanitary or family-related). This competition explains why the Church strove, from the moment of the accident, to both reaffirm the necessity of its presence and to give the event a providential meaning. The conservative press thus depicted the devotion of the clergy at the site of the accident, where, if the journalists are to be believed, the first calls for help were spiritual: "'For the love of God, bring us priests!' shouted those unfortunates in their agony."[16] The priests of Sèvres and Meudon competed for the honor of being the first to arrive, followed by the seminarists of Issy:

> It was the priest of Sèvres who was the first to arrive on the scene of desolation; in the middle of the debris and the fire, that worthy pastor gave absolution to the dying; then, after the disaster, he publicly recited prayers for the dead over the mutilated and burned corpses. All those present uncovered their heads and answered the prayers amid sobs.[17]

Likewise, the priest of Saint-Sulpice welcomed the remains taken to Montparnasse Cemetery. The archbishop of Paris, quickly followed by the bishops of Versailles, Beauvais, Melun, and Orléans, ordered the priests of his diocese to celebrate a Low Mass for the souls of the victims on Friday, May 13.

The Church strove to give meaning to the disaster and to orient the mourning toward traditional forms of devotion. The belief in purgatory was one such form: At the heart of Catholic pastoral care around death in the nineteenth century, it was subscribed to by the majority of believers (Cuchet, 2004). The power of this devotion is clear in the descriptions of the suffering of the victims trapped in the fire, where it is tempting to see traces of the iconography of souls in purgatory, half-engulfed by flames, that adorns chapels in churches all over France:

> There, on a car, we saw a young woman, beautiful, no more than 20 years of age, with her legs caught in the wheels, crying, sobbing, calling out in tones that cannot be reproduced: "Help me! Help me!" She struck her face when she saw the

> impotence of her efforts and of the help she was calling for. Then, understanding that death was inevitable, she raised her eyes to the sky and, crossing her arms over her chest, gave herself up to the flames.[18]

It was also important to relate the deaths to God. Where the liberal newspapers speculated on the earthly blame for the accident, the conservative press saw the disaster as a sign from providence, in the same way that natural disasters had been interpreted in the past. For the most reactionary, the accident was a second punishment sent by God against the reign of Louis Philippe, after the cholera outbreak of 1832. A rumor circulated in the newspapers about a mysterious ticket lost by the driver of the train, a man called Georges:

> A. N° 45. CHEMIN DE FER DE LA RIVE GAUCHE
>
> 8 MAI … – DEPART A UNE HEURE $^1/_2$ S.
>
> (A. NO. 45. RIVE GAUCHE RAILWAY
>
> MAY 8 … – DEPARTURE AT ONE THIRTY.)

… the letters of which could be rearranged to form a warning signed by “D,” or Dieu:[19]

> G … . UNE MACHINE A 4 ROUES TE FERA
> PERDRE LA VIE DIMANCHE 8 À 5 H $^1/_2$
>
> D.
>
> (G … . A 4-WHEELED MACHINE WILL CAUSE YOU TO LOSE YOUR LIFE ON SUNDAY 8 AT
> 5 THIRTY
>
> D.)

To protect and treat with dignity

Other approaches were adopted to attempt to mitigate the unsettling effects of death by industrial disaster. Although hesitant, they were firmly in the camp of the new funerary sensibilities.

Thus, going against the logistical or scientific treatment discussed above, there were also attempts to treat the bodies in a dignified way that came close to ordinary funerary customs. The bodies stored in the shed at the cemetery, for example, were raised up off the floor and placed “on two rows of unused tombstones”; they were also “covered by a large sheet that visitors could lift up,”[20] which served as a basic form of shrouding and prevented them being exposed to the curiosity of strangers, especially as entry to the shed was restricted. Moreover, there was a rumor in the press that the bodies had been embalmed (and not sprayed in chlorine, as the administrative sources more prosaically stated). The embalming was supposedly carried out by Jean-Nicolas Gannal, the inventor of the specific procedure purportedly used. In fact, the records of the Gannal business only mention the embalmment of six victims of the “incident of May 8,” including the Dumont d’Urville family, who were embalmed at no cost (Carol, 2016, 2019). Whether it was true or, more likely, false, the rumor of this collective embalming testifies to the general concern for the decent treatment of these human remains.

As soon as they had been identified, the bodies were removed from the common space and stored in a separate room, as was also the case in the morgue; they were then transported in individual coffins.

Recognizing and naming the dead

Another form of conferring dignity on the dead involved their identification. Of course, identification was primarily a legal requirement: It alone authorized the issuance of a death certificate. But it also responded to an oft-expressed anxiety: “When will one at least be certain of one’s misfortune and one’s regrets?”[21]

At the time, identification methods were still in their infancy. Initially, they imitated the methods used in the morgue: The remains were displayed along with objects or fragments of clothing that might aid recognition. In fact, four of the corpses displayed in the morgue, some of which were still wearing jewelry, were quickly recognized. But those stored at Montparnasse posed more problems: For one thing, the fire had considerably altered their appearance, and for another, it was not possible to be certain about the origin of any objects found nearby. Other strategies were thus adopted by the authorities: collecting missing person reports, and displaying the “orphan” objects found amid the debris.

Bodies that were still anonymous remained accessible at Montparnasse Cemetery, subject to authorization. More comprehensive identification methods were used on a case-by-case basis, presumably at the families’ request, but there were no systematic forensic procedures such as exist nowadays. One corpse, for example, was identified with the help of her doctor thanks to twelve cautery scars on the left arm; a woman was recognized by her dentist “by her tooth enamel and by the gap formed by the upper alveolus on the right-hand side, where a large molar had been extracted a few days before the incident.”[22]

The most spectacular identification was, however, that of Rear Admiral Dumont d’Urville. The celebrated explorer had been on the train with his wife and his son, Jules; all three perished in the accident. Contradictory rumors were soon circulating—for example, one claimed that his body had been horribly burned and reduced to almost nothing, but was recognized thanks to a piece of paper in his coat. In reality, the Société de Géographie, worried by his disappearance, sent a delegation of relatives and doctors to Montparnasse Cemetery on May 10 to inspect the remains. It was the science of phrenology that apparently enabled his identification:

> Mr. Dumoustier, a professor of phrenology who had been a member of the anthropological section of the final expedition of the *Astrolabe* under the command of the illustrious sailor, believed that he would be able to find Mr. Dumont d’Urville’s remains amid the fragments stored at Montparnasse Cemetery thanks to the unusual conformation of the latter’s cranium, of which he had taken casts on several occasions. Indeed, that very morning, in the midst of the shapeless remnants that the fire had rendered virtually unrecognizable, he recognized a cranium to which were still attached a few pieces of flesh and which, compared with the plaster cast in his possession, did not permit the slightest doubt as to the identity of these sad remains.[23]

His wife was also recognized thanks to a particular dental feature. The three corpses were immediately taken and stored in a separate room.

Although the identification of Dumont d’Urville attracted the most press attention, it is important to note that it was not the only such story reported. The newspapers kept a detailed list of identifications, updated daily; they assiduously reported not just the names of the dead, but also their histories: address, profession, age, family, life story. This could be seen as an attempt to reincarnate them in some way following the devastation of their bodily integrity. Various anecdotes did the rounds: For example, there was one about an unfortunate couple, married the day before, of whom nothing was found but their engraved rings. The proliferation of theories attests to the stubborn desire to transform the collective catastrophe into an accumulation of more or less fanciful individual dramas:

> At the edge of Meudon, near the river, the body of a young woman was found, around 20 or 25 years old; her refined appearance places her in a certain world; she was seated and still clasped between her arms the half-burned body of a little boy of four; the woman’s body showed no sign of injury, and it was assumed that, having managed to save her burning son, she had run to the river, where, upon realizing that she had pulled from the fire nothing but an inanimate corpse, the emotion and despair had killed her on the spot. She was carrying no documents that could be used to identify her.[24]

The disaster thus illustrates the competition between two ways of confronting death. While the Church, faithful to its principles, emphasized the collective fate of the victims’ souls, the press reflected the newer sensibilities, careful to give each body a name, a face, a history, in line with the epitaphs that were becoming common in modern cemeteries at the time (Bertrand & Carol, 2016; Etlin, 1984; Kselman, 2006; Laqueur, 2015).

The limits of collective mourning: Burials and memory

This division between an ancient, highly religious culture and an emerging culture that promoted the cult of the dead can also be seen in the organization of funeral services. In particular, certain features that would come to characterize collective deaths in disasters started to become established (Clavandier, 2004). Nevertheless, the diversity of the funeral ceremonies reveals the limits of both a return to “normality” and the collective dimension of the event. These ceremonies, like the forms of burial used, varied widely depending on the social status of the deceased.

A new funerary regime

The funerary transition was marked by the rise of the modern cemetery (Bertrand, 2011; Etlin, 1984). A law of 1804, motivated by hygiene concerns, laid the foundations for this development: Bodies had to be buried in individual graves that were deep enough and far enough apart to allow decomposition to occur; it was thought that a gap of five years between burials would allow the process to be complete and enable reuse of the plot without posing a health risk. In theory, therefore, the five-yearly rotation of graves became the general rule.

Nevertheless, from the beginning of the century, the higher social classes demanded the chance to buy a permanent burial plot in the new cemeteries that were formed on the outskirts of cities and so avoid the common fate of reuse. There were an increasing number of concessions, of varying durations, with permanent concessions being the ideal. The demand for such concessions was so high that the state ended up ratifying what was supposed to remain the exception and regulated the practice in 1843. Cemeteries started to take on a distinctive shape: Reproducing the urban topography, they featured rows of individual or family tombs topped with more or less extravagant monuments, identified by epitaphs, and visited and adorned with flowers by the bereaved. The proliferation of concessions along avenues masked the common ground where the five-year grave remained the rule for the vast majority of the population, too poor to purchase a concession. What of those who died in the accident in 1842? Did their status as victims gain them preferential treatment, and was it enough to transcend social differences?

The first point to emphasize here is the lack of any planned funerary treatment: The first dead victims to be identified were quickly buried by their families in private ceremonies. The press attempted to maintain a list of these private ceremonies as the days went by, connecting readers to the families' grief. Unsurprisingly, these ceremonies, which were for people from the bourgeoisie, combined traditional rituals with newer ones typical of the funerary transition. They comprised an initial religious part, with the body taken to church for a mass, before being taken to the cemetery. This second part was, however, carried out in the new style, in other words accompanied by an often-impressive procession (Bertrand, 2011). On May 10, a young student at the École Polytechnique was buried in Montparnasse after a funeral service at the church of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont; he was taken to his tomb by a large crowd, consisting mainly of teachers and students from the school, but also strangers. The same scene was repeated with a few variations in some other notable cases: for example, the boss buried on May 13, whose convoy was followed by "the whole working population of the 12th arrondissement," and whose coffin was carried by former workers, one of whom, according to the press, "spoke movingly over the tomb of the good man, whose patronage had been stolen from them by such a cruel catastrophe."[25] The custom of giving speeches over the tomb was spreading, entering into competition with the tradition of the last prayers. The conservative press took a dim view of this modern practice; regarding the burial of a young member of the Brotherhood of St. Vincent de Paul, a journalist commented bitterly that:

> Although these speeches were very touching and imbued with a religious spirit, we believe that the memory of the principles and practices of the Catholic faith by which the young man was so deeply inspired should have prevented any voice other than the priest's from being heard over the tomb.[26]

The ceremonies described above hardly differed from those at ordinary funerals. It bears repeating that they were exclusively for members of the wealthier social classes: Nothing was said in the press of the funerals of poor people recognized and claimed by their families or buried by hospital administrations. This ceremonial display, which allowed space for demonstrations of collective empathy, was made possible by the social status and renown of the dead. Spontaneous processions and the giving of speeches over the tomb were rituals that were already beginning to emerge, but we can hypothesize that they were in some way encouraged or consolidated in these specific circumstances.

Dumont d'Urville: An overinvested burial?

Beside these private funerals, did the disaster elicit any kind of official ceremony, any collective tribute? Curiously, that function was assumed by the funeral of Dumont d'Urville, in particular because, with the explorer's entire family having perished, the authorities were responsible for the service. The minister of the interior asked two of the rear admiral's close friends to organize the funeral, and the minister of the navy ordered funeral honors to be given to him; all naval officers in Paris were "summoned to attend the sad ceremony." Moreover, on May 12, the Municipal Council of Paris voted to grant Dumont d'Urville a permanent plot of 4m^2 in Montparnasse Cemetery:

> The council wishes to join, with this vote, in the expression of regret for the loss of a man who has rendered distinguished service to science, and of whom the country has just been robbed by a thankfully unparalleled catastrophe.[27]

The national dimension was reflected in the presence of officials and in the amount of space devoted by the press to reporting the burial. The procession had a "huge turnout": Leading it was the hearse carrying the coffin of the young Jules, followed by that of his mother; the rear admiral's hearse was itself preceded by various army corps. The minister of public instruction was in attendance, as were the minister of the navy and his general staff, peers, members of parliament, a representative of the court, members of the Institut de France and of various learned societies, writers, artists, and engineers. In the nave of SaintSulpice, which had been decorated with black drapes, the three coffins were placed onto a catafalque. The mass was accompanied by musicians of the 12th regiment. On its way to the cemetery, the procession was joined by a surge of strangers expressing "sympathy" with the illustrious deceased, while passersby uncovered their heads "with the most respectful alacrity."[28] Three speeches were given at the tomb before the military honors were paid. It was as if the funeral of the disaster's most famous victim had been tasked with channeling the public mourning and collective emotion aroused by the accident.

A second-class collective burial

The role assumed by Dumont d'Urville's funeral may seem surprising: Nowadays, when disasters occur, it is rather collective services or ceremonies that mobilize the authorities and concentrate the expression of grief. That was not the case in 1842: The burials of unidentified or unclaimed bodies, which were the responsibility of the government, were not invested with the same kind of symbolic power.

Faced with the impossibility of identifying some of the remains, the press very quickly concerned itself with the fate of these victims and, in response to rumors of rushed burials, reassured the public by announcing that they "will be buried in a devout and honorable way, one coffin for each body." Some extrapolated from this and promised "a separate grave […] allotted to each of the victims of the tragic accident,"[29] or even felt in a position to announce a "lavish procession."[30] The details of this burial were specified in the official press on May 14:

> Each body will be buried in a shroud and placed in a special coffin. A separate grave will receive the coffins; an enclosure and some signs will mark the place for the families.[31]

The specter of a haphazard burial was thus banished; the principle of a special site, separate from the common ground already being used, was established. But the planned grave was collective and had no guarantee of permanence. This is far from the treatment accorded to Dumont d'Urville: a permanent concession for him and his family. The arrangement chosen was that of the ordinary five-year graves, an arrangement that was not disgraceful but that prevented the tomb being used to preserve the victims' memory. There was nothing distinctive about the placement of an "enclosure and some signs": This treatment was given to all five-year tombs.

On top of these minimal provisions, the ceremony, planned for May 23, would also include, alongside the unidentified remains, four identified bodies taken to Montparnasse at the request of their families, who were presumably unable to pay for their funerals or to transport them out of Paris. Poor or anonymous, it was thus the most vulnerable victims who were grouped together for an unremarkable ceremony.

This ceremony took place early in the morning, at 8 am; attendance was subject to authorization. Despite there being a large crowd, the only people allowed to attend were families still searching for their loved ones, the relatives of the identified victims, and in one case, that of a man named Bouchard, a delegation from the École des Beaux-Arts in Nancy, where he was a student. As the bodies were already in the cemetery, there was no procession. The 25 coffins were placed on an open-air catafalque, with a wreath of immortelles on top of each coffin.

> Upon arrival in the enclosure, between two rows of municipal guards, we were seized by an undefinable feeling at the sight of all those inanimate bodies surrounded by kneeling relatives, in the midst of a silence broken by sobs and moans. Only a few were given the chance to pray over the objects of their grief; most, unable to recognize their family members among these misshapen remains, embraced all the nameless coffins in their prayers.[32]

The ceremony was brief and dominated by the Church; a mass was announced for the following day at Saint-Sulpice. Although the priests of Sevres and Meudon attended the ceremony, the public authorities were less well represented: Only the mayor of the 10th arrondissement, the deputy of the 11th, and two police chiefs, as well as the former member of parliament Henri-Georges Boulay, attended. The latter was the only one to speak publicly, but it was to pay tribute to the king, who had funded the young Bouchard's scholarship. The bodies were laid out in two rows:

> The bodies were placed in a grave dug in the 13th trench, to the left of the main avenue of the cemetery, to a depth of around 1 meter 50 centimeters, and entirely separate from the other graves. Each coffin was numbered (from 1 to 25) according to the custodian's records; they were spaced out so as to leave room for individual enclosures in the event that information in the official report led to identification of the bodies. The four identified bodies, which were the first to be deposited, were given enclosures right away.[33]

Fragmented remembrance

In the years after the disaster, remembrance was focused on two locations, neither of which was the collective grave. This commemoration was the result of private initiatives.

The first location was the tomb of Dumont d'Urville. A monument was erected on his tomb in 1844, financed by a subscription opened by the Société de Géographie following the announcement of his death. It featured a series of bas-reliefs by the sculptor Dantan depicting his illustrious deeds, but also a rather clumsy engraving representing the three Dumont d'Urville victims rising above a burning train car. The epitaph refers to his death on 8 May 1842, on "the Paris to Versailles railway." It is the only monument dedicated to the disaster in Montparnasse Cemetery, despite the latter being one of the major sites associated with the event.

The second location was a religious monument: the chapel of Notre-Dame-des-Flammes (Our Lady of the Flames), erected on the site of the accident at the initiative of the architect François Marie Lemarié, who had lost three family members in the disaster. He bought a plot on which he built a small building that was consecrated by the bishop of Versailles on 16 November 1842, in a ceremony attended by the bereaved families. Four annual masses were instituted as part of its foundation, one of which would be held on the anniversary of the accident; the victims' families could also request additional masses. Scenes of bones, skulls, and flames adorned the interior and exterior walls. The furnishings inside the chapel also evoked the disaster, without focusing solely on the relatives of the architect:

> Above the altar is carved a small image of the Virgin, her feet on a globe half-engulfed by flames, her hands pressed together, her eyes raised to the sky, in an attitude of prayer. On the table that supports this small statue is written: *To the victims of VIII May MDCCCXLII*; and underneath*, O good and tender Mary! Protect us against earthly flames, but above all save us from the eternal flames*. Further up, near the vault, is a stained-glass window in the form of a medallion. Its upper section represents the Trinity, while the lower section depicts the railway fire. Several unfortunate victims, half-engulfed by flames, raise their eyes and hands to the three divine figures, whom they seem to be invoking.[34]

The chapel was endangered by the proximity of the road, the fading of memory, and its gradual integration into the buildings of a neighboring school. It was still registered as a historical monument in 1938, but it was delisted in 1959 and demolished soon after. A postcard from the early twentieth century associates it solely with the "Memory of the death of Dumont d'Urville." The explorer's tomb in Montparnasse is now the only remaining funerary trace of the 1842 accident.

Confronted by the massive rise in railway disasters in the nineteenth century, society could no longer simply use the funerary practices inherited from premodern disasters, which had been governed primarily by hygienic and religious imperatives. Times had changed: The new funerary sensibilities placed great importance on the integrity of the body and the individual identity and personhood of the dead, which were all particularly affected by this type of accident. A new funerary culture of disaster thus emerged, of which Meudon was no more than a first draft, a compromise between past and future. After the shock caused by the severity of the damage to the bodies, and by extension to the dead people they belonged to, efforts were made to treat the bodies with dignity and respect. But these efforts were limited by the inexperience and improvization of the authorities, as shown by the socially discriminative variations in forms of burial and commemoration.

Fifty years later, French society gained more experience with industrial disasters. On 26 July 1891, the collision of two trains at Saint-Mandé station caused the death of 44 passengers, the deadliest toll since 1842. Although the violence of their deaths and its effect on their bodies were hardly comparable in the two cases, the funerary response to the accident took place in a context where industrial disasters had become more common and the funerary transition was complete. The difference was especially clear in the fate of the unidentified victims. In 1891, they were buried in a permanent concession granted by the town hall and paid for by the Compagnie des chemins de fer de l'Est. The collective ceremony was attended by the clergy (after some hesitation), a very large crowd (the entire population of the commune received an invitation, and packed trains carried Parisians who came to join the mourning), but also the minister of public works, who gave a tribute to the victims at the graveside. The Compagnie took responsibility for erecting a monument on the grave, which is still visible today. Mass death caused by catastrophe could no longer do without a funerary ritual designed to mend a devastated community and leave no one in the shadows of oblivion.

Notes

1. *Journal des debats politiques et litteraires*, May 10, 1842. **Translator's note**: Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign-language material in this article are our own.
2. In the archives of the Préfecture de Police (DA 30), a note drafted in the days after May 8 counted 87 deaths or missing person declarations, not including the 13 wounded who died later.
3. *Le Commerce*, May 11, 1842.
4. *La Patrie*, May 10, 1842. 5.
5. *La Presse*, May 11, 1842.
6. *Le Droit*, May 9, 1842.
7. *La France*, May 10, 1842.
8. *Le National*, May 10, 1842.
9. *La Gazette du Languedoc*, May 14, 1842.
10. *L'Hermine*, May 10, 1842.
11. *La Quotidienne*, May 13, 1842.
12. *La Quotidienne*, May 11, 1842.
13. *Le Commerce*, May 12, 1842.
14. "Accident arrive sur le chemin de fer de Versailles," *Gazette des hôpitaux civils et militaires*, Thursday, May 12, 1842. The newspapers also mentioned Velpeau's clinical class at the Hôpital de la Pitié on May 12, where the surgeon displayed several amputated limbs.
15. Archives of the Prefecture de Police, DA 30.
16. *La Quotidienne*, May 11, 1842.
17. *La Quotidienne*, May 11, 1842.
18. *Le National*, May 12, 1842.
19. *La France*, May 16, 1842.
20. *Le Constitutionnel*, May 12, 1842.
21. *Le National*, May 15, 1842.
22. *Le Globe*, May 19, 1842.
23. *Journal des debats politiques et litteraires*, May 12, 1842. It should be emphasized, however, that the archives of the Préfecture de Police do not support this version: Dumoustier is not listed among the names of those who identified the admiral.
24. *La France*, May 13, 1842.
25. *La Quotidienne*, May 14, 1842.
26. *La France*, May 20, 1842.
27. *La Gazette nationale*, May 14, 1842.
28. *Le Commerce*, May 17, 1842.
29. *Journal des debats politiques et litteraires*, May 11, 1842; *Le Moniteur universel*, May 11, 1842.
30. *La Gazette du Languedoc*, May 14, 1842; this statement was presumably inspired by the ceremonies to mark the reburial of the insurgents of 1830; those who had died in the revolution that installed Louis Philippe's regime had been solemnly and publicly reburied in 1840.
31. *La Gazette nationale*, May 14, 1842.
32. *Le Constitutionnel*, May 24, 1842.
33. *La Gazette nationale*, May 24, 1842.
34. "A Bellevue, anniversaire du 8 mai," *L'Illustration*, May 13, 1843.

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