The One-Man Band of Pain
Alphonse Daudet and His Painful Experience of Tabes dorsalis

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Abstract
Like many of his contemporaries, Daudet suffered an early syphilis that accompanied his adult carrier, eventually extending into a disabling and painful neurological syndrome of locomotor ataxia. We provide here a quick picture of Daudet’s life and work, his relationships with the high-society of late 19th century Paris, including Jean-Martin Charcot of whom he was the patient. We then proceed to describe Daudet’s condition, with the available treatments of his time and their – largely ineffective – effects. We conclude with reflections on the experience of disease and pain on the author’s work and life. Special attention is paid to a posthumous and unachieved work called La Doulou, a grim and most valuable first-person perspective document on the personal experience of unbearable pain.

Pain, you must be everything for me. Let me find in you all those foreign lands you will not let me visit. Be my philosophy, be my science [Daudet, 2002, p. 42].

…from the day that Pain entered my life [Daudet, 2002, p. 13].

Alphonse Daudet is classic reading in French-speaking school programs. Usually associated to his contemporary naturalists, he provided a realistically raw picture of 19th century Parisian life through his novels, chronicles, souvenirs, theatricals and musicals. However, he is mostly renowned for his marvelously witty and nostalgic depictions of his native sunny Provence in his many short stories. As this volume is devoted to the experience of neurological illness

1 Except for the admirable, and only, English translation of La Doulou by Julian Barnes [2002], including its introduction and notes, all quotations in this chapter are translated by the authors from the French.
by famous artists, readers of Les Lettres de mon Moulin, Les Contes du Lundi, 
Les Aventures Prodigieuses de Tartarin de Tarascon or Le Petit Chose might be 
surprised to learn that their author suffered at an early age from a syphilis that 
deteriorated into a severely painful and disabling tabes dorsalis. Indeed, 
Daudet’s work is most frequently qualified as being charming, light-hearted, 
sunny, funny, Provencal, etc. Less known is a posthumous work called La 
Doulou (‘The pain’), which is none else than a pain diary. It is a terrifying work, 
dry, cold, helpless. And it is one of the most valuable literary documents on the 
personal experience of disease and pain. Perhaps more than any other artist 
included in the present collection, Alphonse Daudet spoke explicitly and 
uncompromisingly about his physical ailments. Was Daudet by any extent, as 
the custom goes in the Midi, exaggerating his symptoms for literary purposes? 
This is unlikely. The contrary seems more plausible, as we know from the 
numerous biographical writings of his relatives, including his own sons Léon 
and Lucien, Alphonse Daudet may well indeed have tried to naturalize, to 
describe as externally as possible, so as to dissociate from it, what was in fact an 
insufferable physical distress impossible to transcribe as such in words. What’s 
more, in many places we can read his wish to not impose his sufferings to his 
fellows and readers, so he transformed complaints in sharp descriptions and 
striking metaphors. Thus, in this chapter, we don’t have to unearth hidden or 
dubious ‘evidence’ from here and there to reassess our subject in hindsight, or 
even speculate on the proper impact of Daudet’s disease on his work. We quite 
simply only have to take a look at his writings themselves, for they speak 
directly to the clinician’s ears and to the heart of anyone.

We begin with a rapid tour of Daudet’s biography and work, including a 
few words about his early friendship with the founder of modern neurology, 
Jean-Martin Charcot – of whom he was the patient. We then proceed to describe 
Daudet’s condition and the symptoms he presented, and also the colorful treat-
ments of his time. We conclude with reflections on the experience of disease 
and pain in the author’s work and life, paying special attention to a posthumous 
and unachieved work called La Doulou, a grim and most valuable first-person 
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Alphonse Daudet: His Life, His Work and His Time

‘I remember when I first met M. Alphonse Daudet. That was a long time 
ago, about 10 years back … He was handsome, subtly and nervously handsome, 
like an Arab horse, with an abundant mane, a silky barb, split like a two-headed 
fork, a big eye, thin nose, an amorous mouth; and on top of all this, a ray of 
light, a breath of tender sensuality that I can’t quite figure, which drowned his
whole face in a smile at once witty and sensuous…” (fig. 1). This is Emile Zola’s description of Daudet in his 1881 book Les Romanciers Naturalistes [cited in Daudet, 1997/1872, p. 170]. Of short stature, endowed with an irresistible smile, he was the beloved dreamy meridional darling of such famous figures as Dickens, James (who translated him into English), the Goncourt brothers, Mistral, Charcot and many others who literally adopted their ‘petit Daudet’ at the first encounter. Of course, ladies didn’t ignore him either.

According to Bonduelle [1993], we know everything of his life. We have a quasi complete picture of it from multiple sources, including from many documents written by himself (Trente ans de Paris, Souvenirs d’un homme de lettres, Lettres familiales, Notes sur la vie, La Doulou, etc.) and his sons Léon and Lucien. Like many of his contemporaries, Alphonse Daudet is literally everywhere in the Journal of the Goncourt brothers. It was a time when everyone wrote about oneself and everybody else, a time when there was an abundance of diaries and Mémoires, just like now, but in that era people could actually write. Paris was a little place, the playground of virulent polemists, of which Léon, Alphonse’s first child, would become a major controversial figure, the spin-head of the nascent pre-fascistic Action Française, among other little glorious etiquettes. Alphonse himself is part of the game, as he never was reluctant to ferociously describe his contemporaries – although with various disguises and tricks – in his works. This brought him much trouble, including incredibly violent critics and even various duels. To give a quick taste of the complexities of the character, and the harshness
of that era’s public ‘debates’, we found particularly telling that Alphonse has been, at the same time, labelled with disgusted contempt as a ‘Jew’ by Octave Mirbeau on the one hand, while on the other hand being considered in republican circles as an anti-Semite for his acquaintance with Edouard Drumont, author of *La France juive*. It surely was a time of intellectual fury, the soil on which *l’affaire Dreyfus* would arise, and some would even say far worse later events.

**Biographical Sketch**

He was born in Nîmes (southern France), on the 13th May 1840, the 6th child of a bourgeois family. Alphonse will then be brought up by a peasant from Bezouce, near Nîmes. His schooling will be somewhat hazardous. Ruined by a father with poor talent for business, the family leaves to Lyon. There he goes to the Lycée Ampère, but seems mostly interested, already, by his precocious discovery of the bohemian life-style. Virginity abandons him at 12, as will in 1857 the idea of obtaining his baccalaureate. That year is full of upheavals for Alphonse. His elder brother Henri dies, he goes back to Provence for a job of school prefect in Alès – he will later write of his teenage miseries with the snobbish pupils that gave him a hard time in *Le Petit Chose*, a touching collection of memories –, is fired after 6 months, and decides to rejoin his brother Ernest in Paris in the explicit goal of becoming a writer. Lyon will quickly be forgotten, but his native Provence will always stay in his heart and work.

On a freezing November day in 1857, at age 17, pockets filled with ‘quarante sous’, he is greeted by his brother at the Gare de Lyon. Ernest was at the time a journalist for *Le Spectateur*, and also a fine connoisseur of the bohemian and fashionable capital. It wasn’t long before Alphonse was introduced to the vibrating underworld of the Ville Lumière. Ernest and him share a room in the animated Grand Hôtel du Sénat, their young neighbor is Léon Gambetta, who will later proclaim the third Republic in 1870 and, incidentally, introduce Alphonse to Jean-Martin Charcot. Those were financially hard times for the brothers, but Alphonse is determined to become a poet and confident that better days are coming. Much later, he will write that ‘literature was the unique goal of [my] life, and [I] know of no one else that started a career in the same state of absolute bareness as [mine]’ [quoted in Caracalla, 2003]. In the carefree atmosphere of Parisian cafés, cabarets and bistrots, he meets the very finest grain of local characters: Verlaine – *absinthe*-minded as ever –, Mallarmé, Baudelaire, D’Aurevilly, the contemporary Parnassists, etc.

And ladies, too. Marie Rieu, a famous model of her time, becomes his official maîtresse. *Official*, but by no means *only*. Indeed, Daudet’s sexual needs are known to be untimely, others shall say excessive. In the words of neurologist Macdonald Critchley: ‘Daudet – despite his exquisite sensitivity and his warm domesticity – had been an incorrigible sensualist since the age of 12’ [Critchley,
And in those of British author Julian Barnes: ‘[H]e had always been “a real villain” in matters of sex…he slept with many of his friend’s mistresses; about ten times a year he felt the need for the sort of “ordure” he could not ask his wife to permit… In 1884 he had an operation for a hydrocele. Having a grossly swollen testicle painfully drained… would probably make most men sleep in their trousers for weeks; Daudet’s reaction was to go straight out in search of sex. In 1889 he reported to Edmond de Goncourt a dream in which he was caught up in the Last Judgment and defending himself against a sentence of 3,500 years in hell for “the crime of sensuality”’ [Daudet, 2002, p viii].

At this time, Ernest had to leave Paris for a new job. Daudet is left all by himself, pockets empty. Nevertheless, he manages to get his poems published, a collection named _Les Amoureuses_ dedicated to Marie Rieu. This early work came to the ears of Impératrice Eugénie and Princesse Mathilde thanks to a _lectrice de la cour_ (young ladies were appointed to select and read aloud from the literary releases of the time). Ironically, it was precisely from that reader who introduced Daudet into the highest spheres of intellectual circles and thus put an end to his material worries, that Daudet got the pox! He was only seventeen. After a short detour in le Midi, were he met with his life-long friend Mistral and the provincial poets of the félibre tradition, he is appointed as third secretary by the Duc de Morny thanks to the encouragements of the princess. More than a secretary he becomes a friend and a literary aide, although Morny, desperately would implore him on a daily basis to cut his long hair once and for all.

The disease showed its first signs early on, as will be developed below. But Daudet’s career was launched by then. He travels to Corsica and Algeria, from where he would come back with many striking images and anecdotes that will fill the adventures of Tartarin de Tarascon published in 1872, his own pathetic Quixote. Meanwhile, he is busy with his poems, chronicles and theatrical plays, and in 1865 he meets the woman he would marry two years later, Julia Allard (fig. 2). Of course, in exact bohemian spirit, this couldn’t happen without _chien vert_ – Marie Rieu’s curious nickname – making an extravagant scene in which she literally rolled at Daudet’s feet!

According to Charles Mantoux [1941], Julia saved Alphonse from a dreadful life of careless debauchery and idleness. She became a precious collaborator to his work and a stabilizing element as his disease took hold of him progressively. With her affectionate guidance, success would not be long to come. The _crème de la société_ is invited at the Daudet’s on a weekly basis (les jeudis des Daudet). Many persons were to be found both there and at Charcot’s Tuesday evenings. Daudet’s Thursdays and Charcot’s Tuesdays went somehow hand in hand and couldn’t be missed by any Who’s Who wannabe. This brings us to say a few words about this friendship, which gave to historians of neurology the best intimate picture of the great man of La Salpêtrière.

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Alphonse Daudet
Charcot and Daudet

We don’t know exactly how and when Alphonse Daudet and Jean-Martin Charcot first met. According to Bonduelle [1993], it was Léon Gambetta that probably played a role in their meeting, as he knew both separately. The first record of their simultaneous presence is the 11th April 1882 entry in the Goncourt brothers’ Journal. A frequent visitor of Daudet Tuesdays, Charcot was usually seated by Léon Daudet between Edmond de Goncourt and Emile Zola. It is precisely Léon that will become Charcot’s best memorialist, through his many memoirs [Bonduelle, 1993, 1999]. An early friend of Charcot’s children Jean and Jeanne, Léon spent at their house, almost next to that of the Daudet’s, ‘the golden years of his childhood’ [quoted by Bonduelle, 1993]. Léon was to marry in 1891 Jeanne Hugo, sister of his long-time friend Georges Hugo – both grandchildren of Victor Hugo and adopted by the great writer since their father’s precocious accidental death – instead of Charcot’s daughter, as the neurologist so profoundly wished for very long. Maybe this is part of the reason why Léon had to abandon his medical career, following his definite failure at the internship exams of 1890. It appears that at the time Léon was very busy not studying, but flirting with Hugo’s grand-daughter, and that Charcot had more than his word to say concerning the student’s notations… Anyway, 5 years later Jeanne and Léon divorced. She remarried to Jean Charcot, whom by the way succeeded at the very same internship exams that Léon failed, but he never was to practice since he preferred the cold air of open seas and became a famous maritime explorer, who lived up to experience every captain’s fantasy, namely to sink with his boat. To stretch it further, we will only add that in 1903 Léon

Fig. 2. Painting of Julia Allard by R. de los Rios (1894). Taken from Jouveau [1980].
remarried to Marthe Allard, whose father was Julia Allard’s brother, and mother was Alphonse Daudet’s sister…

As we know, Léon Daudet wholeheartedly took advantage of the abrupt ending of his medical career to become that notorious right-wing polemist who could rip apart any prestigious career in a few lines. He always expressed sincere respect and fascination for the neurologist, whom he called ‘the extraordinary classificator of the most arduous problems’, a significant privilege under Léon’s acerb pen. It is through his eyes that we know something altogether from the man behind the professor. He certainly was a despotic and arrogant figure, but also a shy man, a loyal friend and an erudite of the letters [Bonduelle et al., 1996; Daudet, 1915, 1939/1897, 1940]. When Daudet’s health began to seriously deteriorate, it was Charcot – together with Potain, professor at Necker and la Charité and also a close friend of the Daudet’s – that came to his bed to watch after him. Léon recounts: ‘Thus these two augurs were at my dad’s bedside. I was alone with them, my mother having gone. Charcot first took a look and my anguish was terrible. But he stood up and uttered out: “Nothing serious” and turning to Potain, whom was about to imitate him, “Unnecessary my dear friend, it is plain to see”. Then Potain, in a breath: “Nevertheless, I prefer…”’. He made himself sure, then, turning towards me, his hand on my shoulder: “That’s right… no serious lesion”. Nevertheless, it was decided that my father would go to the waters of Allevard, in Savoie’ [Daudet, 1940, p. 113].

What was the kind of friendship that united Daudet the writer and Charcot the professor? It was mutual admiration, without the worries of envy and competition. They had in common their fantastic observational skills. ‘A fine mind which has no disdain for a writer. His style of observation: many analogies with my own, I think’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 19]. French neurology acute memorialist Michel Bonduelle likes to quote this anecdote from Léon Daudet: ‘There was between the rue de Bellechasse, where we lived, and the vast garden of the hotel occupied by Charcot, a blacksmith. The great scholar and the great writer often discussed which of the two would hear the last hammer bang. It turned out it was my father, although Charcot was pretty sure it would be himself’ [Daudet, 1940, chap VII]. Of course, Charcot was as delighted with Daudet’s works as the latter was fascinated by the great clinician. He was often a spectator of the fashionable Leçons du mardi, and upon receiving a printed edition of those teachings, he thanked his prestigious friend like this: ‘Limpidity, solidity, concision and those broad strokes à la Tacite, which are those of a poet as much as of an observer, that’s what gripped me in your book, which I read in fever and pain. But you know that inside me, until now, the literary hack and the dreamer are stronger than the tabetic. Thank you dear Master friend, for having thought of your old patient…’ [quoted in Bonduelle, 1993, p. 1643].

Alphonse Daudet
Daudet’s friendship with Charcot also reflected in his work. He wrote *A la Salpêtrière*, a ‘short study’ were he describes the symptoms of hysteria, then a most fashionable disorder [Mantoux, 1941]. On many occasions, Charcot suggested to Daudet that he exploit some of his clinical observations or other, ‘Daudet, you should relate this, I took some notes, I’ll give you the details later…’ [Daudet, 1940, p. 113].

Finally, circumstances coalesced to put an end to the Daudet-Charcot relationships, not the least notable being his son’s eviction from the internship exams and the barbaric – and useless – treatment imposed by Charcot (the terrible Seyre’s suspension, see below). However, it was primarily Julia that broke off communication, as she never could suffer the coldness and lack of tact of the man. It is true that he was the archetype of the ‘medical power’ denounced later by Léon in his *Les Morticoles*, a clinician more concerned with disease labels and prestige than by the patients themselves. However, Alphonse and Léon didn’t bear a grudge on Charcot (though the younger Lucien passionately hated the man).

**Work and Style**

Daudet’s contributions are multiple in form and content. He wrote poetry, prose, plays, musicals, novels, tales, souvenirs, chronicles and serials for newspapers, and even his notes on pain were published, although posthumously. He wrote about humbles and riches (*Le Nabab*, 1877; *Les Rois en exil*, 1879), beauty and misery (*Le Petit Chose*, 1868; *Les Lettres de mon Moulin*, 1869), true love and debauchery (*Les Amoureuses*, 1858; *Sapho*, 1884 – clearly devoted to his torrid affair with Marie Rieu), contemporary habits (*Fromont jeune et Risler aîné*, 1874), literary ambition (*L’Immortel*, 1888), religious fanaticism (*L’Évangéliste* 1883, dedicated to Charcot), luck and the lack of it (*Jack*, 1876), politics of the day (*Numa Roumestan*, 1881), etc. And of course, about pain in *La Doulou*, published posthumously in 1930.

For a time, he was courted to enter the *Académie Française*. But he rejected the opportunity altogether on many occasions, for instance in this short notice he asked *Le Figaro* to publish on his behalf: ‘Please do me the favor to insert this in one of your news items: I am not applying, I never applied, and I will never apply for the Académie. Yours, truly, Alphonse Daudet. (Paris, 31 octobre 1884)’ [in Benoit-Guyod, 1947, p. 205]. Daudet’s characters were colorful and grandiose, often composites of celebrities of the time or inspired by the numerous people he met on each of his travels. In his pages, they became the heroico-burlesque Tartarin, Mr. Seguin and his goat, the Curé de Cucugnan, etc. However, far from the comical and light-hearted tone for which he is famous, his fascination for the morbid constantly appears in his work. Mantoux [1941] draws an impressive list of sick children, disfigured men, lunatics, depressives, idiots, hysterics, etc.
Daudet himself is described as ‘obsessed by the thought of death’. Indeed, there is not a single book of him without at least one of the characters dying. He once told his friend Antoine Albalat: ‘The idea of death has poisoned my existence. Every time I move into a new apartment, my first thought is: how will they get the coffin out? They’ll have to pass here, turn there…’ [quoted in Mantoux, 1941, p. 54]. But Daudet’s real talent was precisely to convey a myriad of affective nuances through the experiences of death and suffering.

His style was a unique mix of two almost antithetic schools, naturalism and the méridional spirit embodied by the félibrige. Naturalism refers to a quasi-philosophical approach that is based on the absolute diktat of reality. It is rooted in the nascent scientific materialism of the 19th century and proposes a raw and uncompromising depiction of things as they are. Of course, it is Emile Zola’s work that first comes to mind, with his epic and rigorous observations of characters subjected to the implacable determinisms of society and heredity. That determinism is everywhere in Daudet’s writings, and it is his acerb and laser-like ability to observe and dissect his fellow contemporaries that makes him a worthy representative of the naturalists (alongside with Flaubert, Maupassant, Huysmans, etc.). He described himself as a ‘marvelous feeling machine’, a skill he owned, according to his son Lucien, to his exceptional myopia that enhanced his hearing and smelling. In the words of the latter: ‘He felt and listened to a landscape as much as he looked at it, or rather his eyes, his nostrils and his ears were accustomed, from his very primary perceptions of things, to unite in mutual aid’ [Lucien Daudet, 1941, in Daudet 1997/1872, preface, p. 17]. Naturalism implied raw revelations about taboo topics, a process from which Daudet wouldn’t flinch ‘for he thought that cruelty was the paroxysm of truth’ [Mantoux, 1941, p. 40].

However, the effervescence of pre-industrial Paris was not everything to Daudet. He is indeed remembered above all for his exotic depictions of his native Provence. He was very close to his friend Frédéric Mistral, founder in 1854 of the félibrige, a literary association which still exists ‘devoted to favor, organize, safeguard and promote the langue d’Oc and the cultural specificity of South of France’ (quoted from the félibrige official website: http://www.felibrige.com). An excellent entertainer, Daudet took full advantage of his southern sensibility frequently inspired by his many visits to his fellow félibres [Jouveau, 1980]. Bypassing strict naturalist standards, he loved to twist reality, play with counter-factuals and evoke dreamy metaphors. His writings are often said to be light-hearted, charming, precise, exact, luminous, easy, rhythmic, melodic, sometimes nervous, and febrile.

We find it ironic that Daudet’s reputation is today that of a sober, well-behaved and harmless author, an entertaining and gentle storyteller that can be fed to little schoolboys eyes shut. Yet death, suffering, pain and betrayal are all
around in his tales and novels, and few figures of the time were spared his wit and irony. He did not back away from the preposterous duels in which he got involved, and several times took great risks with his career, for instance making fun of the catholic church, his fellow provençaux, and even the prestigious Académie Française, the accession of which remained for him forever closed after his sarcastic novel L’Immortel. More to the point, La Doulou definitely vindicates him as a genuine explorer of the deepest human torments and certainly would make any ex-schoolboy reconsider his former opinion of the ‘charming’ Nîmois.

**Daudet’s Syphilis and Tabes dorsalis**

As strange as it may seem, despite the omnipresence of syphilis in the social landscape of the time, the word itself rarely appears as such in the literature [Wald-Lasowsky, 1982]. It is altogether absent from Daudet’s work for instance, and it doesn’t even appear in La Doulou. One commentator wrote: ‘ Barely suggested here and there, it is the great absentee of the text, as if the disease withdrew into the indivisible core of pain, black violence and only certainty’ [Solal, 2002]. If there was a taboo on the word, such was not the case with the idea, as it was omnipresent in late 19th century literature. It even came to be fashionable in intellectual circles to be afflicted by it. Barnes [2002, p. 85] recalls the famous anecdote of Maupassant howling triumphantly when he was definitely diagnosed with it in 1877: ‘My hair is beginning to grow again and the hair on my arse is sprouting. I’ve got the pox! At last! Not the contemptible clap… no, no, the great pox, the one François Ier died of. The majestic pox… and I’m proud of it, by thunder. I don’t have to worry about catching it any more, and I screw the street whores and trollops and afterwards say to them, “I’ve got the pox”!’ [see also Hayden, p. 9–16]. In brief, syphilis was proof of virility, originality, an unmistakable sign of creativity, the true seal of the artist, in short, the real thing.

**Syphilis Then and Now**

As late as 1937, it was considered that about 10% of Americans were at risk to be infected with syphilis in their lifetime [Golden et al., 2003]. What happened then, of course, was the introduction of penicillin in the 1940s which almost eradicated this medical and social catastrophe. Infection rates declined dramatically during the rest of the century, only to slightly re-emerge with the new millennium.

It is a complex disease. Not anymore an etiological mystery since the discovery of the bacteria Treponema pallidum by Schaudinn and Hoffmann in 1905, but still a clinical puzzle to practitioners of many medical disciplines.

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Indeed, syphilis as been dubbed ‘the great simulator’, it can disguise itself in innumerable differential diagnoses liable to mislead any clinician from the dermatologist to the neuropsychologist. Its other strategy is to hide and wait. It is such a Machiavellian disease that some even argue that the incriminated agent rapidly evolved, upon his appearance in 16th century Europe, precisely to produce milder forms in early stages, which would in turn favor its spreading in the population [Knell, 2004].

Syphilis is a progressive disease par excellence and its manifestations present themselves through three stages, although only a meagre 10% of patients with first stage syphilis end up developing a full-blown third stage [Janier, 2004]. Unfortunately for him, Daudet did with his progressive locomotor ataxia (Duchenne de Boulogne’s term for Romberg’s tabes dorsalis). This is one of the many clinical appearances of third stage syphilis, which is almost always synonymous with neuropsyphilis. Meningitis and the ever terrifying dementia called general paresis are other little enviable presentations. That classification of syphilis in three stages, by the way, was first established by Philippe Ricord at the beginning of the 19th century [Janier, 2004]. He was the one who first diagnosed Daudet’s disease, possibly in 1861. Another simpler distinction is made between early and late syphilis, distinguishing the severe manifestations of advanced neurosyphilis from the mildest manifestations of the years immediately following the inoculation of the bacteria. Nowadays, diagnosis is based on the careful study of the cerebrospinal fluid and T. pallidum serology. Brain imaging is useful in advanced cases to look for vascular lesions and the presence of gummas in the parenchyma, but mostly to exclude other diagnoses [Conde-Sendín et al., 2002]. All this was of course unavailable in Daudet’s times, so Ricord and all others had to rely solely on clinical observations. The course of the disease is as unpredictable as is its clinical variety. In Daudet’s case, as much as 20 years separated its infection from his first severe tabetic manifestations. But as we will show, even though his last 10 years were the most excruciating, the disease was in one form or the other always present in his writing career and life as a family man. The dreadful spirochete T. pallidum can attack the central nervous system very early on. Indeed, in 25–40% of untreated cases the invasion occurs within 3–18 months of the infection [Silberstein et al., 2002]. Most often, this results in asymptomatic meningitis, but it may be relevant in Daudet’s case for he presented painful fits, sleep disturbances and mood lability well before reaching his full-blown tabes, which was diagnosed by Charcot only in 1885.

**Daudet’s Early Syphilis**

As we briefly hinted before, he caught it at 17 from a *lectrice de la cour*. The first manifestations of early syphilis were examined by Doctor Philippe
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Ricord, one of Morny’s medical advisors and a founder of syphigraphy. The specialist was absolutely positive in his statement: it is syphilis. Alphonse confessed to his friend Edmond de Goncourt: ‘I caught the pox with a lady from the top drawer, a terrible pox with buboes and all, and I gave it to my mistress’ [quoted in Caracalla, 2003, p. 92]. He was by then a new member of the prestigious French literary syphilitics club, right in the top five with Baudelaire, Maupassant, Flaubert and Jules de Goncourt [Daudet, 2002]. However, Daudet was not as proud as Maupassant, he considered his ailment as a form of penance. Anatole France reported that shortly before he died, Daudet declared: ‘I am justly punished for having loved life too much’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 85].

He was immediately treated with mercury, a substance used since the XVI century for the treatment of syphilis [Hediguer, 1985]. The disease mostly lay dormant for a time, and Barnes [2002, p. viii] notes that ‘[he] worked, published, became famous, married…, had three children. He also continued an active, carefree, careless sex life’. However, before the full emergence of tabes, we know that Daudet had various unpleasant disturbances, which he reports in hindsight in La Doulou: ‘Warning signs going back a long way. Strange aches; great flames of pain furrowing my body, cutting it to pieces, lighting it up… A burning feeling in the eyes. The hideous pain from light reflected in a window. Also, from that time onwards, pins and needles in the feet, burning feelings, hyper-sensitivity… Hyper-sensitivity of the skin, loss of sleep, the coughing up blood… The first moves of an illness that’s sounding me out, choosing its ground. One moment it’s my eyes; floating specks; double vision; then objects appear cut in two, the page of a book, the letters of a word only half read, sliced as if by a billhook; cut by a scimitar’ [Daudet, 2002, pp. 6–7]. It is difficult to precisely date these disorders, but other sources, like the Goncourt brother’s Journal, show the ineluctable progression of the disease and the intermittent acute crisis, like those of hemoptyisis that almost killed him on a few occasions [Benoit-Guyod, 1947; Mantoux, 1941]. Nevertheless, it is about Daudet’s debilitating late syphilis that we have the most information, perhaps too much information we might say.

**Daudet’s Tabes dorsalis (Progressive Locomotor Ataxia)**

As every psychiatrist knows, the clinical picture of general paralysis is at the very heart of modern neuropsychiatric reasoning, or better stated of ‘the organic model of mental illness’ [Collée and Quétel, 1994]. That a bacterial infection could produce disorders of the soul was indeed a revolutionary advance in medical thought. Tabes also has its own history, not devoid of controversy either. Moritz Romberg first described the condition, but didn’t mention syphilis as a possible etiology. In his 1840 textbook, he did, however, insist on a past history of excessive drinking and sexual activity as being frequent
among victims. It is of course the long lapse of time since the inoculation of the spirochete to the various signs of spinal undermining that made it difficult to postulate, and prove, a causal link. Indeed, tabes dorsalis (also called simply tabes, the Latin word for consumption) is the very later form of appearance of third stage syphilis, usually 18–25 years post-infection. Duchenne de Boulogne, Charcot’s master before he became the Imperator of neurology, was the first to have an intuition of the causal relation between pox and tabes (which he named progressive locomotor ataxia). This was in 1858, and it wasn’t until 1875 that Jean-Alfred Fournier proposed his strong hypothesis, based on careful clinical and epidemiological studies. Thanks to his work and insight, syphilitic infection was soon widely accepted as the etiology of tabes dorsalis [Nitrini, 2000]. Well, not by everyone though. The causal link wasn’t acknowledged by Charcot (fig. 3) or by Gilles de la Tourette at the time. Interestingly, as Daudet was followed by both Fournier and Charcot, the writer was inclined, though secretly – so as not to hurt the feelings of his long-time friend – to favor Fournier’s opinion.

As Daudet very well knew, tabes is characterized by painful fits in the lower limbs that are distributed in multiple dorsal roots territories. Visceral disorders also sometimes manifest as abdominal pains. Next may come the loss of deep sensitivity, with painful paresthesias, areflexia, incontinence and, of course, locomotor ataxia. Pathology is multiple: atrophy of the dorsal columns of the spinal cord, local inflammation of the meninges and large arrays of

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Alphonse Daudet
metabolic abnormalities, leading to a diminution of neurons in selected areas of
the nervous system [Conde-Sendín et al., 2002]. Ache definitively entered
Daudet’s life in 1879. He was 39 and was to suffer incessantly and cruelly until
his death 18 years later. An entry in Goncourt’s *Journal* from 1879 reads: ‘It
was the last Sunday at Flaubert’s. Daudet appeared for a short moment. His
entry was that of an anxious sick man questioning the faces around him. He sat
down. I was struck by his hands, the paleness of wax’ [quoted by Mantoux,
1941, p. 28]. It was in 1878 that a terrible crisis of hemoptysis marked the
beginning of the end: ‘All of a sudden, at the heart of the book [he was then
writing *Les Rois en exil*], in the effervescence of those cruel hours that are the
best of my life, sudden interruption, cracking of the overworked machine. It
began while working, by sums of minutes, dozes like those of birds, a trembling
of handwriting, a languor interrupting the page, disquieting, invincible… Then,
bluntly, without pain, a violent hemoptysis woke me up, the mouth acrid and
bloody. I thought it was the end’ [cited in Mantoux, 1941, p. 27]. Doctor Potain
sent him for the first time to the spas of Allevard, a thermal station located in
the Alps between Grenoble and Champéry, to cure what he then believed were
rheumatisms. It helped to momentarily alleviate his pains, but somehow he
knew that nothing would ever be the same as before. He wrote in his memoirs:
‘I could feel it, something was definitively broken inside of me; from now on, I
would not be able to treat my body like an old rag anymore, deprive it from
movement and air, extend evenings until the morning in order to bring it to the
fever of beautiful literary inspirations’ [quoted in Mantoux, 1941, p. 27].
In *La Doulou*, he remembers the very first alert: ‘Memory of my first visit
to Dr. Guyon in the rue Ville-l’Evêque. He probed me: some tenseness in the
bladder, the prostate a little sensitive. In a word, nothing. But that nothing was
the start of *everything*: the Invasion’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 6].

He will henceforth remain intensely focused on observing the changes
inflicted by his affliction. At the beginning of 1880, it becomes clear that his
symptoms far exceed those of rheumatisms. Potain suggests trying another
thermal station, and sends him during the summer of 1882 to the spas of Néris,
in Auvergne. He will return there in 1884, but to absolutely no curative effect
(though during this period he managed to write *L’Évangéliste* and *Sapho* – two
remarked novels at their publication – and to travel in Switzerland). One day,
upon his return to his country house at Champrosay, he realizes to his astonish-
ment that he can’t run anymore. The pains in the legs are already unbearable, as
we know from his notes for *La Doulou*. He decides to consult Charcot, not
without apprehension: ‘Conversations with Charcot. For a long time I refused to
talk to him: I was scared of the exchange we would have. Knowing what he’d
say to me. I told him, ‘I’ve been saving you up for last’.’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 19].
Léon Daudet relates a discussion with his father right after that encounter: ‘The
sufferings of my father kept increasing and as he complained incessantly to Charcot, the latter told him: “Come talk to me about it. You will take your time. I’ll spend an entire day with you”. I was very anxious of that consultation… I thought it was something serious. [My father told me]: “So there it is: Charcot told me the truth, which I also sensed. But do not worry. I am affected with tabes, in an indisputable way, classic tabes. (He examined my reflexes with his little hammer, and with such a dexterity!). But it is a kind of slow tabes. I can go like this until ninety, which gives me a reasonable margin of time. Pains are located in the legs and the belt, sometimes in the bladder. Walking is faulty. I have a bit of steppage [a word referring to the characteristic ample forward steps of the tabetics, which alleviate their pains]. It is very possible that I’ll just stay in the present state. A regression of symptoms is also very possible. There are frequent cases”. I was stunned, but tried not to show it.’ Alphonse Daudet went on: ‘As a treatment, he suggested the spas of Lamalou in the first line. Then gold chloride (chlorure d’or), which gives results. Against acute flashes of pain, morphine, but keeping it below a certain dose and switching times, so as to not become an addict. “In that case, Léon will give you the injections and I’ll talk to him. Don’t do that by yourself (…) Don’t get yourself too worked up. It was better to warn you, I did it”. Come give me a hug… and not a word to your mother’ [Daudet, 1940, p. 212]. Not a very useful advice, since Charcot will secretly tell her the grimmer truth, in his characteristic blank fashion [Clébert, 1988]. Indeed, a few months later, all signs of hope vanish in Alphonse’s mind: ‘Long conversation with Charcot. It’s just as I thought. I’ve got it for life. The news didn’t deal me the blow I would have expected’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 23]. So Charcot finally declared him lost. Daudet is 45 years old at that time, he will not make it up to 90 but still will live, or survive, 12 more years in increasing pain, and he did eventually become a morphine addict.

A Litany of Symptoms

Before pain set itself up as a chronic ailment, Daudet was already marked in his flesh by various problems. We already quoted the note where he depicts his ‘warning signs’; to these we can add the following: ‘gastric and laryngeal crises, bone problems, rectal and urinary crises’ [Daudet, 2002:83]. However, the most colorful symptoms are those he meticulously describes in La Doulou, the manifold manifestations of pain.

Excruciating pain is all over La Doulou. In fact, the reader of this little collection of notes – this diary of pain – from the beginning gets the disturbing impression that pain is treated as the central character. Indeed, Daudet manages to give it a life of its own, as if it was taking control of its victim’s superior writing abilities. Indeed, the epigraph he chose for his project was ‘Dictante dolore’ (Latin for ‘with pain dictating’). Pain is described sometimes as an entity – ‘the
most despotic and possessive of Imperial hostesses’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 42], sometimes as an activity – ‘What are you doing at the moment? – I’m in pain’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 3]. Subtle ‘Varieties of pain’ fill the pages, often in powerful metaphors. It is a swarming, a burn, an invasion, an infiltration, a prison, an armor, a breastplate, even a crucifixion. It takes the form of ‘an impish little bird hopping higher and thither, pursued by the stab of my needle; over all my limbs, then right in my joints’. Unfortunately, ‘the injection misses its target, then misses again, and the pain is sharper every time’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 28]. Some notes are amusing comparisons, like: ‘Spasms in the right foot, with pains shooting all the way up my sides. I feel like a one-man band, tugging on all his strings and playing all his instruments at once… This is me: the one-man band of pain’ [p. 26]. Other depictions are more shivering: ‘Sometimes, on the sole of the foot, an incision, a thin one, hair-thin. Or a penknife stabbing away beneath the big toenail… Rats gnawing at the toes with very sharp teeth. And amid all these woes, the sense of a rocket climbing, climbing up into your skull, and then exploding there at the climax to the show’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 21]. Several notes are plain descriptions, but still manage to convey a powerful sense of the pathetic: ‘Intolerable pains in the heel, which only calm down when I move my leg. I spend hours, sometimes half the night, with my heel clasped in my hand’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 21]. And so on. There’s a deep insight that is conveyed by Daudet’s various descriptions. For him, there’s ‘[n]o general theory about pain. Each patient discovers his own, and the nature of pain varies, like a singer’s voice, according to the acoustics of the hall’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 15].

But pain was by far not the only inconvenience of Daudet’s disease. As the name implies, progressive locomotor ataxia involves a severe disturbance of gait. This worry also appears constantly in his notes: ‘Torture walking back from the baths via the Champs-Elysées’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 4], ‘concentration on walking straight’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 5], ‘a change in my condition: walking badly. Not being able to walk at all’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 41], ‘No strength anymore. On the Boulevard Saint-Germain a carriage nearly runs me down, and I react like a berserk marionette’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 9], ‘Return to childhood. To reach that distant chair, to cross that waxed corridor, requires as much effort and ingenuity as Stanley deploys in the African jungle’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 47]. He courageously insisted on walking despite its horrible difficulties, and developed interesting strategies to do so, based on visual feedback information: ‘I walk with more confidence when I can see my own shadow, just as I walk better when someone is alongside me’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 16]. Some notes allude to a loss of the feeling of ownership of his own legs, akin to what we know as asomatognosia: ‘Sense of losing control of a leg, of it slipping away from you, like something inanimate. Sometimes an involuntary jeté’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 22]. Sense of posture was sometimes altogether absent: ‘you close your eyes and chasms
open to right and left. Five-minute cat-naps filled with harrowing nightmares: skidding and sliding, crashing down, vertigo, the abyss’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 19]. Indeed, sleep was almost impossible without morphine, as we will illustrate in the next section on treatments.

Worrisomely for an author, writing became an insuperable task: ‘The change in my handwriting’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 28], with an embarrassing episode in 1885: ‘At times, my hand trembles so much that it’s impossible for me to write, especially if I’m standing up. (Signing the register at Victor Hugo’s funeral. People all around, watching me – dreadful…)’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 16]. In his last years, he was compelled to give dictation to his relatives. Weight loss and apparent ageing were spectacular: ‘In my cubicle at the shower-baths, in front of the mirror: what emaciation! I’ve suddenly turned into a funny little old man. I’ve vaulted from 45 to 65. Twenty years I haven’t experienced’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 3], ‘Crossing the road: terrifying. Eyes don’t work anymore, can’t run, often can’t even hurry. I have the terrors of an octogenarian’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 10].

We also noticed a few signs suggesting disorders of higher functions, although they very likely were due to the powerful analgesics he took. These notes seem to bypass the poetic to enter the space of confusion, indeed, derealization, depersonalization and disorientation are apparent in a few places. For instance: ‘Effect of morphine. Wake up in the night, with nothing beyond a mere sense of existing. But the place, the time, and any personal sense of self, are completely lost. Not a single idea. Sense of extraordinary moral blindness’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 43]. He recounts a strange episode: ‘Last night, in my study, around 10 o’clock, I had a couple of minutes of pure anguish. I was fairly calm, writing an unimportant letter. A servant came in and put a book or something on the table. I raised my head, and from that moment I lost all sense of everything for 2 or 3 minutes. I must have looked completely stupid, because the servant, taking my blank face as a question, explained what he’d come for. I didn’t understand his words and no longer remember them. What was horrible was that I didn’t recognize my own study: I knew that’s where I was, but had lost all sense of it as a place. I had to get up and find my bearings, running my hand along the bookcase and the doors and saying to myself, ‘That’s where he came in’. Gradually, my brain began to work again, my faculties returned. A kind of hypnotic effect, compounded by fatigue’ [Daudet, 2002, pp. 27–28]. That was not the first time he experienced such derealization, or jamais-vu, though. He immediately added: ‘This morning, hurrying to write all this down, I remembered being in a cab a couple of years ago: I shut my eyes for a few moments, and when I opened them I found myself on the lamplit quais of a Paris I simply couldn’t identify. I ended up leaning right out of the cab door, staring at the river and a row of grey houses opposite. I was bathed in a sweat of fear. Then, as we came to a bridge, I suddenly recognized the Palais de Justice and the Quai des
Orfèvres, and the bad dream faded away’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 28]. Subtle executive difficulties also are apparent, as in this statement: ‘Very happy with the state of my brain. Full of ideas, and the phrases come fairly easily, but it seems to me that coordination is now more difficult’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 17]. And after speaking with a patient at Lamalou (the spa where he was regularly sent by Charcot): ‘How I understand what he said to me yesterday: “Pain stops me from thinking”.’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 68]. At other times, thought was agitated: ‘It’s truly horrible. The only thing the will has no effect on is the perpetual motion of the brain. It would be so good just to be able to stop, but no, day and night the spider goes on spinning; a few hours’ respite can be gained only through doses of chloral’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 23]. At Lamalou, in the company of other patients, Daudet makes an amusing remark on memory and language disturbances: ‘No one remembers anyone’s name; brains are racked all the time; there are great holes in the conversation. It took ten of us to come up with the word industrial’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 56]. And also very simply: ‘Memory. Feebleness. Ephemeraly of my impressions: smoke against a wall’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 11].

**A Litany of Treatments**

*La Doulou* is also a fascinating document in its depiction of the treatments then available and their diverse (and adverse) effects. Daudet was followed by about the finest medical authorities of his time: Marchal de Calvi, Guyon, Potain, Charcot, Privat, Ricord, Keller, Fournier,… None of them could help him, though. Even on his deathbed, Gilles de la Tourette and Potain brutally tried to reanimate him during several hours, to no other effect than to fill his family and friends with revulsion. From the moment he was diagnosed with syphilis by the pioneer of syphilography Dr. Philippe Ricord, he was immediately prescribed mercury, the usual treatment for that disease for several centuries. Such was its popularity that a joke arose from it, it went like this: ‘spending one night with Venus and the rest of your life with Mercury’ [Daudet, 2002, pp. 85–86]. Other substances frequently alluded to in *La Doulou* include: laudanum, chloral, bromide, antipyrine, acetanilide, and of course morphine. These were either given in conjunction or in alternation. Barnes [in Daudet, 2002, p. ix] also mentions two bizarre treatments that Daudet tried: David Gruby’s esoteric diet, which apparently was a less enviable solution than death, and Brown-Séquard’s injections of an ‘elixir extracted from guinea pigs’ (which Zola tried – to no effect – with the purpose of increasing his sexual powers…). Daudet really did try everything. He even wondered if ‘[he] shouldn’t apply for a course of Pasteur’s inoculations: the strong analogy between [his] extreme bouts of pain, [his] furious shaking and writhing, [his] drowning-man contortions, and a fit of rabies’ having struck him [Daudet, 2002, p. 17]. All these treatments had cruel effects on Daudet’s organism and mind. For instance, he

In the end, only morphine gave him a rest, despite the nausea and delirious states it induced. ‘Morphine gives you wakeful nights in which you are gently rocked in a heavenly manner’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 18]. Daudet’s relationship with morphine was ambivalent, it was a benediction and a torture at once. ‘Morphine. The irreplaceable anaesthetic. The imbecilic rages it stirs up’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 39], ‘Morphine. Its effects on me. The attacks of nausea are getting worse’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 16]. But it allowed him to sleep comfortably, and to detach his mind from his aching body: ‘Morphine nights: effect of chloral. Erebus, thick black waves, and then sleeping on the edge of life, the void beneath. As delightful as slipping into a warm bath! You feel yourself being taken hold of, enfolded. Pains in the morning; a feeling you’ve been bitten all over; but your mind is clear, perhaps even sharper – or simply rested’ [Daudet, 2002, pp. 18–19]. Julian Barnes adds there an interesting note: ‘In 1895, Daudet answered a survey of the famous by a certain Dr. Lacassagne; for the previous 5–6 years, he said, he had slept only with the help of narcotics, as a consequence of which he had lost all capacity to dream’. In his last weeks, looking back at his life he said to his son Léon about morphine: ‘I am aware of its inconveniences and hazards, but all in all, it helped me to live and without it I do not know what I would have become’ [quoted in Daudet, 1940, p. 254]. Indeed, such were his sufferings that Daudet soon became a morphine addict, something he felt sorry and shameful about. At some moment or other, he was given several times a day his shots of morphine by his son Léon, his wife or, mostly, his father-in-law, himself an opiate addict. It is the latter’s ‘little house’ that is often referred to in La Doulou, as in this note: ‘The little house in the rue***. I dream about it. For a long while I fight the temptation. Then I go. Immediate relief. Sweetness. The garden. A blackbird singing. Leg cut off. No pain. Horrors’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 9]. He went there until Julia’s father died in March 1889: ‘If I were to write in praise of morphine, I’d talk about the little house in the rue***. Well that’s all over now. My old companion, who used to give me injections, is dead. (…) My poor friend. It’s all over now’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 40]. One can discern a hint of envy in that last comment.

Despite the lull offered transiently by morphine, his pains kept increasing. Charcot decided to try a method he just introduced in France from Russia: the so-called Seyres’s suspension (fig. 4). Many commentators have described this barbaric treatment, and again they are Daudet’s words that brilliantly catch the imagination: ‘Suspension. Seyre’s apparatus. The hanging up of poor ataxics, which takes place at Keller’s in the evening, is a grim business. The Russian
they hang up in a seated position. Two brothers; the little dark one writhing away. I am suspended in the air for four minutes, the last two solely by my jaw. Pain in the teeth. Then, as they let me down and unharness me, a terrible pain in my back and the nape of my neck, as if all the marrow was melting: it forces me to crouch down on all fours and then very slowly stand up again while – as it seems to me – the stretched marrow finds its rightful place again’. And the implacable conclusion: ‘No observable benefit’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 30]. Keller was a hydrotherapist to whom Charcot used to send many of his patients for showers, baths and suspensions. Those took place ‘in a dark corner of the baths, after everyone had left’, and were sometimes operated by Gilles de la Tourette, one of Charcot’s most brilliant disciples. Daudet underwent 13 such suspensions, and had eventually to stop when he suffered a serious crisis of hemoptysis in February 1889. That was the beginning of the end of the friendship between Daudet’s and Charcot’s families.

Since the mid-1880s, Daudet had frequented a thermal establishment at least once a year. As was the case with his other treatments, when one spa didn’t contribute any benefit, his doctors simply sent him to another. He was first sent to the waters of Allevard, then Nérin, and finally, from 1885 to 1893, to Lamaloules-Bains, which he mostly wrote about in La Doulou (fig. 5).

As we now know, none of these ‘treatments’ ever came close to a solution. Syphilitic degradation remained incurable until the introduction of penicillin in
the 1940s, and from the very beginning of his discipline the neurological clinician gained the reputation of being a brilliant classifier conspicuously unable to heal whatever problem he was presented with. In the words of Léon Daudet [1940, p. 226]: ‘I wondered why a man like Charcot never tried to heal. It was very well to describe lateral amyotrophic sclerosis. But it would have been even better to rescue all poor humanity from its claws. I also wondered why those who send their patients to the spas never investigated the origins of their certainly mysterious, but definite virtues. For there were cases of recovery thanks to those waters, and many of them. They acknowledged their happy results, but went no further. They left them with their secrets.’

**The One-Man Band of Pain**

It would be tempting to draw a chronological parallel between Daudet’s works and the course of his illness. Indeed, it is true that his earlier works – *Les Lettres de mon Moulin*, *Le Petit Chose*, and *Tartarin* – might be more light-hearted than his latter productions. However, such a meticulous approach may be misguided, since it appears that suffering and writing are interlinked since the very beginning of Daudet’s career as a man of letters. This at least is the central thesis of the French literary scholar Charles Mantoux in his book *Alphonse Daudet*.
Daudet et la souffrance humaine [1941]. We quite agree with his choice of considering the largest issue of distress (souffrance) rather than solely physical pain per se (douleur). Suffering translates into innumerable nuances under Daudet’s pen, thus building the very essence of the human condition into his writings. The work of the artist is to dissect human nature and restore its pieces into living images. Therefore, resorting to one’s own distress is not an opportunity, but a necessity. Mantoux thus claims that Daudet’s work and life are on the whole plagued with suffering. He calls him ‘the painter of human suffering’, and writes: ‘An unhappy youth; the experience of life acquired through marriage and war; the always alert anguish of the creator, all this was enough to make Daudet a mature and conscious man, apt to understand and paint all of human suffering. However, one last ordeal was still missing, cruel and capital: that of physical pain, which added to this physiognomy – already so lively and tormenting – the pity, the sweetness and the nobleness of heroism’. Summarizing his life with a poignant shortcut, Daudet said to his son (Lucien): ‘In the first half of my existence, I have known misery; in the second one, pain’ [Mantoux, 1941, pp. 26–27].

Of course, there is nothing original in saying that a writer’s personal problems have an influence on his work, the contrary would be quite astonishing. However, it seems clear that no exact prediction can be drawn from a particular experience of pain and misery to a particular type of creativity. As Julian Barnes puts it [Daudet, 2002, pp. v–vi]: ‘The prospect of dying may, or may not, concentrate the mind and encourage a final truthfulness; may or may not include the useful aide-mémoire of your life passing before your eyes; but it is unlikely to make you a better writer. Modest or jaunty, wise or vainglorious, literary or journalistic, you will write no better, no worse. And your literary temperament may, or may not prove suited to this new thematic challenge’. Léon Daudet, however, had another opinion: ‘Nervous illness raises to the power of two – squares, as the algebraists put it – both the qualities and faults of those it touches. It sharpens them like pencils, as my father used to put it. The miser becomes a hyper-miser, the jealous man surpasses Othello, the lover turns frenetic. On the other hand, noble, generous, disinterested souls acquire, in the face of incessant pain, a strengthened sense of altruism; an almost saintly goodness blossoms forth. Such was the case with Alphonse Daudet’ [Léon Daudet, 1940; quoted in Daudet, 2002, p. 16]. Author and academician Jules Lemaître thought that suffering had shrunk and dried out Daudet’s style. Again, such was not the opinion of Léon: ‘His thinking became purified, like that of Pascal, by the courage to endure pain. Then he reached serenity, a terrestrial serenity, through pity. Great pain leads to either meanness and belligerence, or pity. He chose the second way’ [Daudet, 1940, p. 238]. As for Marcel Proust, then a young protégé of Alphonse and a close friend of Lucien Daudet,
he wrote: ‘I saw this handsome invalid beautified by suffering, the poet whose approach turned pain into poetry, as iron is magnetized when brought near a magnet’ [quoted in Critchley, 1969].

In his concise style, Alphonse Daudet simply put it this way: ‘Pain leads to moral and intellectual growth. But only up to a certain point’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 43]. That is to say, too much pain, too much distress or too much misery won’t enhance anybody’s talent. Skills have somehow to be there in the first place. Nevertheless, Daudet remained humble in front of his task, indeed, he wasn’t convinced at all that his writings on his own terrible condition could satisfyingly convey his personal experience: ‘Are words actually any use to describe what pain (or passion, for that matter) really feels like? Words only come when everything is over, when things have calmed down. They refer only to memory, and are either powerless or untruthful’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 15]. He once confessed to his son Léon: ‘It is bitter, this disproportion between what my pen determines and what my mind has conceived. I feel the suffering of the inexpressible’ [quoted in Mantoux, 1941, p. 24].

He constantly fought to keep a normal social life and to go on with his work despite his torments. As we see it, this involved a twofold effort. First he had to be constantly focusing his mind even for the simplest things, a tiresome exertion that allowed him not to give up altogether and, mostly, not to scare his relatives and be too much of a millstone for them. ‘Even the simplest and most natural of actions requires an effort of will: walking, standing up, sitting down, staying upright, taking your hat off or putting it back on. It’s truly horrible’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 22]. That attitude of consciously controlling his actions and thoughts included the careful observation of his own condition: ‘I can date each moment of my pain’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 23]. The second kind of effort he had to make was more natural to him, it consisted, in his words, in dissociating his ‘second Me’, which he also called the ‘observing machine’, from himself. Of course, it would be purely speculative to assert that Alphonse Daudet showed signs of dissociation in the strict psychiatric meaning, however, as many writers, he permanently kept an eye on himself as if from the outside, and qualified this skill by saying he was ‘homo duplex’: ‘I’ve often thought about this dreadful duality. This terrible second Me is always there, sitting in a chair watching, while the first Me stands up, performs actions, lives, suffers, struggles away. This second Me that I’ve never been able to get drunk, or make cry, or put to sleep. And how much he sees into things! And how he mocks!’ [Daudet, 2002, p. xiii]. And remembering the death of his brother Henri when he was 16, Daudet wrote: ‘My first Me was in tears, but my second Me was thinking, What a terrific cry! It would be really good in the theatre!’ [Daudet, 2002, p. xiii]. Maybe this long-standing attitude of ‘duplicating’ himself, at first mainly on intellectual grounds, eventually helped him to detach himself from his aching body. This can also be seen in the way he
wrote sometimes about pain, as if it were an entity separated from him, with a life of its own. As his life had been reduced to the acting and experiencing of his pain, it is possible that in the long run he managed to somehow dissociate from his insufferable body. Indeed, recent research shows that dissociation is not an uncommon reaction to chronic pain, a kind of spontaneous equivalent to what happens with dissociative analgesic-hypnosis [Merskey, 1993; Morse and Mitcham, 1998; Fishbain et al., 2001].

La Doulou: Pain, Life and Art

We will now take a closer look at that most valuable document which already guided us so much in this chapter. In the 50 riveting pages of La Doulou, Daudet paints with sharp uncompromising strokes a raw picture of his experience of pain. It is not really a book, rather a collection of notes he took from 1885 to 1993 for a project that remained unclear in his mind. A distant and vaguely stated goal was to describe ‘the sexual desires and longings for death that illness provokes’ [Daudet, 2002, p. xi], which would make the notes akin to a confession. Of course, the immediate purpose of taking these notes was cathartic, a way to try coping with unimaginable conditions of living. But it is apparent that Daudet wanted to construct a consistent narrative out of these notes, in his usual auto-fictional approach. Barnes [in Daudet, 2002, p. xi] quotes an interesting exchange with Edmond de Goncourt that took place in 1888: ‘[I]t begins like this. The terrace of the hotel at Lamalou. Someone says, “He’s dead!” Then a character sketch of myself, done by myself. Then the dead man’s servant slips his notebook into my hand. You see, like that, it’s not me. I’m not even married in the book, and that will give me a chapter to make the comparison between suffering in the midst of a family and suffering alone. This notebook allows me a fragmented form, so that I can talk about everything, without the need for transition’. Indeed, Julian Barnes remarks that ‘notes seem an appropriate form in which to deal with one’s dying’ [Daudet, 2002, p. xiv]. Critchley [1969] said of La Doulou that ‘the writing is of a superlative order’, which is probably unique for a plain notebook. Léon Daudet called it ‘a terrible and implacable breviary’. Although the exact nature of the project was unclear from the beginning, the title was certain. La Doulou is Provencal for ‘pain’. The word seems to sing with the crickets and to smell of lavender, it completely de-dramatizes the topic. The word also carries Daudet back to his childhood and innocence, a ‘regression’ which gives to some notes a deep sense of nostalgia. At first difficult to enter in, La Doulou progressively takes shape, becomes more consistent. Central ideas that would have constituted the heart of a fiction begin to arise page after page. The notebook was only published in 1930 by his widow Julia Allard, and the original manuscript is currently nowhere to be found, probably scattered around. It was not his last
work though, for he continued to write or dictate in his little home study until his last breath.

We already described the colorful symptoms and treatments Alphonse Daudet went through with many quotations from *La Doulou*. Now we will deal with the existential experience of pain as it is so brilliantly revealed in numerous notes, showing that pain in itself isn’t, by far, the only topic dealt with in them. Daudet manages in very few words to extend his main topic into its many ramifications, which we will tentatively enumerate below.

The experience of pain evoked contrasting impressions, behaviors and social consequences in his life. As an immediate result, he felt deeply alone. Not being able to communicate his sufferings with words, compelled to immobility by locomotor ataxia, and not willing to impose his torments on his relatives, he felt confined to loneliness. In several places, he even uses the metaphor of imprisonment to describe his condition. This forced loneliness was not akin to the usual withdrawal of many artists, it was accompanied by distress and anxiety: ‘Dread. Anguish in my heart. Since I’ve been left alone with pain, the life I have known has been so harsh’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 48].

Along with loneliness came fear in its manifold manifestations: ‘Very strange, the fear that pain inspires nowadays – or rather, this pain of mine. It’s bearable, and yet I cannot bear it. It’s sheer dread: and my resort to anesthetics is like a cry for help’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 9], ‘Bad night, woken with a jolt at three; no actual pain, but highly strung and in fear of pain’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 8]. Most notable was his fear of degradation in the form of dementia: ‘Since learning that I’ve got it forever – and my God, what a short “forever” that is going to be – I’ve readjusted myself and started taking these notes. I’m making them by dipping the point of a nail in my own blood and scratching on the walls of my *carcereduro*. All I ask is not to have to change cell, not to have to descend into an *in pace*, down there where everything’s black, and thought no longer exists’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 24]. That was a real concern for him. Here’s the entry in Edmond de Goncourt’s *Journal* for July 14, 1890, cited and translated by Barnes [in Daudet, 2002, p. 61]: ‘Poor Daudet, who is haunted by an *idée fixe*: the fear of degradation, and the physical shame which paralysis entails. And when you try to reassure him, he tells you that he has studied the progression of his disease among his fellow-sufferers at Lamalou: he knows what will happen to him next year, and what will happen to him the year after’. Indeed, many of his fellow tabetics at spas ended with blindness, dementia or aphasia. Daudet was spared those tragedies, but not the angst of it.

Despair, death and suicide are explicit in many notes: ‘My friends, the ship is sinking, I’m going down, holed below the water-line… Beginning of the end’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 7], ‘The end is near’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 46], ‘It’s all going… Darkness is gathering me into its arms. Farewell wife, children, family, the
things of my heart… Farewell me, cherished me, now so hazy, so indistinct…’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 31], ‘I’ve passed the stage where illness brings any advantage, or helps you understand things; also the stage where it sours your life, puts a harshness in your voice, makes every cogwheel shriek. Now there’s only a hard, stagnant, painful torpor, and an indifference to everything. Nada!… Nada!…” [Daudet, 2002, pp. 64–65]. We know from Goncourt that the only thing that held him back from suicide was his family: ‘Daudet confides in me that 3 or 4 years ago his wife, having clearly seen into his heart and read the desire to make an end of it by suicide, forestalled his confession, and made such an eloquent plea for him to live for her sake and that of the children, that he renounced his intention of killing himself’ [Goncourt, December 1, 1893, quoted in Daudet, 2002, p. 10]. In La Doulou, a short and implacable note states: ‘Musing on suicide’; however, he immediately adds: ‘One doesn’t have the right’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 10].

On the other hand, Daudet very often showed signs of hope and expressed many reasons and ways to fight for life. His deep sense of empathy certainly was one of these ways: ‘My existence is effectively over: I live only through the novel – that’s to say, through the lives of others’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 48], ‘We also inflict wounds, wounds to the pride of those who love us’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 48], ‘Pride in not imposing on others the bad moods and the somber injustices of my suffering’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 47]. He once confessed to his friend and secretary André Ebner: ‘Suffering is nothing, it’s all a matter of preventing those you love from suffering…’ [quoted in Daudet, 2002, p. x]. The same Ebner recounts a telling anecdote of Daudet’s behavior towards his relatives: ‘His last secretary, André Ebner, remembered Daudet sitting with a friend one morning, eyes closed, barely able to speak, martyred by pain. The door-knob gently turned, but before Mme Daudet could enter, her husband was on his feet, the color back in his cheeks, laughter in his eye, his voice filled with reassurance about his condition. When the door closed again, Daudet collapsed back into his chair’ [Daudet, 2002, p. x]. The sick Daudet also felt angry to be so helpless as a spouse and father. In 1890, Julia fell seriously sick. He recounted his feelings this way: ‘Painful hours spent at Julia’s bedside… Fury at finding myself such a wreck, and too weak to nurse her. But my ability to feel sympathy and tenderness for others is still well alive, as is my capacity for emotional suffering, for emotional torment… And I’m glad of that, despite the terrible pains that returned today’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 25]. Young Marcel Proust was also impressed by Daudet’s attitude: ‘[T]his poet detached from himself and entirely devoted to us all, absorbed in my future and the future of other friends, smiting us and glorifying happiness and love’ [Proust, quoted in Critchley, 1969, p. 211]. Daudet himself said it all in this poignant note: ‘I only know one thing, and that is to shout to my children, “Long live Life!” But it’s so hard to do, while I am ripped
apart by pain’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 49]. Besides his family, Daudet also expressed empathy for those he called his ‘doubles in pain’ (Julian Barnes prefers ‘Doppelgangers’ to translate sosie). Thus, in La Doulou’s pages, one can read his concern for other literary syphilitics like Baudelaire, Heine, Léopardi and of course Jules de Goncourt, along with the unknown curists he met at thermal establishments. One of those worth mentioning was a Russian traindriver who suddenly became aphasic and started to speak a strange and unintelligible language. A young staff member of Spanish descent recognized the patois from the Balearic Islands, which turned out to be the first language the Russian ever heard as he had been entrusted to a nurse from there until he was five!

But empathy wasn’t enough, he had to struggle vigorously to cope with his condition: ‘Pain took its time to settle in me, and I fought hard against it, as much as I could’, he was quoted by his son Léon, who added: ‘My father, in speaking like that, was saying the plain truth, and anybody who reads La Doulou carefully will know so. From the day his sufferings became more acute and frequent, from the day walking began to alter, he required to his will an additional effort towards his work and his family life, which thus became, amidst his many works, his daily masterwork, a masterwork of love and perseverance’ [Daudet, 1940, p. 235].

Time and nostalgia also appear as a watermark throughout La Doulou. Daudet was extremely attentive to the changes slowly taking place. This showed in his remarks on how places and things didn’t appear the same as his illness progressed: ‘Coming back again and again to the same place, like the wall you stood against as a child and on which they marked your height. A quantifiable change every time. But whereas the marks on the wall always demonstrated growth, now there is only regression and diminution’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 67], ‘The torment of coming back to the same spot again: I used to do that… I used to be able to do this… Well, now I can’t anymore’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 73]. He never got used to his condition in the long run: ‘Pain is always new to the sufferer, but loses its originality for those around him. Everyone will get used to it except me’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 19]. However, some notes may convey a sense of resignation, if not routine: ‘Nothing but terror and despair at first; then, gradually, the mind, like the body, adjusts to this appalling condition’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 48]. And also: ‘What we want diminishes to fill the smaller space available. Today, I don’t even want to get better – just to keep on at the same level. If they’d told me as much a year ago!’ [Daudet, 2002, pp. 17–18].

Another personal way to cope with his condition was through escapism. He retained until the very end his powerful imagination and his passion for writing that allowed him to flee from his dolorous body. Also, reading Montaigne and accounts of explorers like Stanley – who he met in London in 1895 – were for him delightful diversions.
‘Life Consists of Antagonisms’: To Conclude

In one of his lapidary notes, Daudet scribbled ‘Life consists of antagonisms’ [Daudet, 2002, p. 49]. We found it particularly telling, although we can’t be quite sure what he really intended to say or if he was alluding precisely to something. Taking a close look at Daudet’s life and work, one is indeed struck by his many ambivalences and sheer contradictions. Consider for example the following: from a young age until the very peak of his career, he experienced the contrast between his native Provence and Paris; there he met Marie Rieu and la bohème, contracted the pox and lived in misery, until he married his loving Julia Allard and became a successful author and a devoted family man; his style was in the line of the naturalists but he managed to lighten it by incorporating his southern and fantasist streak; he described an inner double, a severe and mocking second ‘me’ that constantly kept watching him and his work; and, of course, his painful tabes dorsalis didn’t quite fit his charming face and witty spirit. Instead of withdrawing in his ‘armor of pain’, Daudet fought courageously to spare his relatives from his distress and, with a little help from opiates, to carry on his work, the observation and satire of his fellow contemporaries.

We will conclude by quoting Charles Mantoux [1941], whom we think captured well the intricacies of Daudet’s destiny with the sufferings he cruelly underwent: ‘In Daudet, the larger audience obstinately only saw the author of Tartarin and Les Contes du Lundi. However, another wholly different aspect of Daudet, without doubt the greater, is barely known: it is that of the deep and solemn writer, to whom no human problem remained unknown, who observed life at length and who, from this contemplation, came out bitter and thoughtful. Indeed, a work solely comical cannot possibly be true and lasting. The spectacle of life is saddening and tragic. Anatole France said “In the middle of the eternal illusion we are shrouded in, only one thing is for sure: it is suffering. It is the cornerstone of life”. Daudet showed us every aspect of pain and suffering in his work, and he could only succeed for he sustained them in his life’.

References

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