Dr. Brian J. Troth //

The Latin *crudus* has two meanings it bequeaths upon modern English. That which is crude can either be seen as that which is *natural* or that which is *lacking taste*. Humans have a natural state, but that state is ephemeral. As soon as the child exits the womb, it is socialized according to the norms of its caretakers. If socialization is 'successful,' then the child's natural, crude form is left

behind. If not, social *faux pas* reveal a gaucheness that might be characterized as awkward, unsettling, perhaps rude. The implication appears to be that that which is *refined* is the golden standard. In other words, nature is somehow inferior. We have such an invested interest in refining the natural human form that the naked human body itself is endowed with shame. We call for it to be covered, even when it would be beneficial or more pleasurable at its *most* crude.

Erik Rémès is a French writer and journalist who entered the literary scene in France with his first book, the semi-autobiographical, eroticized *Je bande donc je suis* (1999). The publication of his first book embroiled Rémès in a public feud with AIDS advocacy groups such as Act-Up Paris. Some context is important to understand why.

Deaths from AIDS peaked in France in 1994. In that year, AIDS accounted for 8.59 deaths per 100,000 individuals in France (source, IMHE). In 1995, the HIV-positive porn actor Scott O'Hara became public as a barebacker. That is, he refused to use condoms and furthermore did not care to prevent the seroconversion of HIV-negative individuals (see Scarce). This was a political move as much as it was a sexual one. In becoming a self-proclaimed barebacker, O'Hara was taking a stance against condom usage, a memory created out of the urgency of the 1980s and first half of the 1990s (see Castiglia and Reed). Rémès's own support of barebacking and the publication of his pro-barebacking manifestos earned him the ire of Act-Up Paris.

In recognizing barebacking as a political move, we also understand barebacking as a time-bound phenomenon that *ceases* to exist once the political apparatus shifts. Indeed, condomless sex persists. However, we in the Global North cannot claim that HIV has the same virulence as it did in 1994. For myriad reasons (see Troth), condom usage as a means of preventing HIV has become a weaker cultural memory for gay men.

That said, a study of Rémès's corpus highlights the fine lines that *crudus* straddles in our language. Condomless sex is sex at its most natural, the human body freed of artifice. Natural sex, in the 1990s especially, might be seen as more than tasteless. It was downright dangerous. Or perhaps not: could serosorting not eliminate risk because all parties were already carriers of the virus? And if heteronormative society sees sex between men as fundamentally unnatural, then perhaps sex between men need never obey the rules that govern 'refined' society.

Rémès, a trained clinical psychologist and philosopher, plays with Cartesian logic with the title of his debut book. *Je bande donc je suis* could crudely be rendered as *I am erect, therefore I am*. In Rémès's literary world, the essence of oneself is removed from thought and given to the realm of the physical and the sexual. How, though, should we understand our essence? Rémès provides guidance in a passage of *Je bande donc je suis* where he envies the simple existence of a kitchen utensil.

Unlike the complex life that he leads as an HIV-positive gay man, Rémès wrote that he wishes he could be a simple, heterosexual coffee mug whose only purpose is to serve as a vessel for warm liquids. He writes of all the things that one would do to him were he a mug, each activity more sexually explicit than the last. One would caress him, clutch him, fill him with warm liquid, lick

him, kiss him, have sex with him. Yet he is not a simple, heterosexual cup. He is a gay man living with HIV.

A 'simple' mug is a crude object that fulfills its purpose. It has no existential crisis, he writes, for it is allowed to simply exist. Yet existence, for him, is indissociable from the physicality of sex. We see this not only in his description of the mug but in the book's title itself. In a world where mugs can stand in for sexual beings, the sexual being's purpose is to have sex. Lose that and one enters an existential crisis. Can a coffee mug continue to be a coffee mug if it no longer serves as a vessel for hot liquid?

Rémès is best read when one can appreciate his humor. He goes on to write that were he a straight coffee mug, he would undoubtedly *still* become an HIV-positive gay man because one can't very well put a condom on a mug. The metaphor of the mug, the sexualized logic of his Cartesian title, and the futility of resisting his sexuality guide us toward the following conclusions:

1. Existence is corporal, sexual, and sensual.
2. Existence and his essence can hardly be separated.
3. Hindering the body hinders existence.

In this literary world that he creates, the human body at its most crude is when it is most fully realized. If a mug is unable to serve its purpose, then it cannot truly be seen as a vessel. Covering up, even if we see it as the civilized, refined, or even responsible thing to do, is thus fraught with controversy. The passage of time has not diminished the importance of the questions that Rémès may have raised. Instead, they guide us as markers as we reconsider the importance of covering up, rework our sexuality, and redefine risk.

At the same time, a global pandemic has made covering our faces a mandatory step toward protecting our health and our loved ones. Will the rise of anti-maskers mimic that of the barebackers? Or will the severity of the coronavirus's virulence and pathogenicity result in completely novel ways of how we talk about the human body at its crudest?

Featured Image by Klaus Nielsen via Pexels

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