Dalrymple’s Diaries Part V

Diary of a Journey Through Europe
Part V, by Theodore Dalrymple

It is time to cross to England. We go to the Hook of Holland to catch the ferry to Harwich. The route we have taken – from Ghent to Brussels, from Brussels to the Hook of Holland, and the Hook of Holland to Harwich – is precisely that followed by the great criminal Valentin, and also by the French detective Flambeau who was trying to catch him, in the first of the Father Brown stories by G K Chesterton.

There doesn’t seem to be anybody particularly notable on board. I am not a good sailor, and I can make myself sea-sick just by thinking about boats. But the crossing is smooth: the only inconvenience is the impossibility of escaping the pop and rock music that leaks everywhere like a poison gas. It is also quite difficult to station oneself somewhere to avoid the malign flickering of huge screens, relaying drivel at a volume exactly calculated to make it impossible alike to follow it or ignore it. It is as though the ferry company believes that no passenger can bear to be alone with his thoughts, not even for a second. Perhaps it is right; I have noticed that people brought up in an age of continuous entertainment find silence disturbing and even frightening.

We find a seat that is comparatively quiet: it turns out to be next to the ferry cinema, and once the film starts, a variety of muffled screams and gunshots start coming through the walls. Every time there is a scream, I wonder whether I am being a bad citizen by not rushing in to lend the victim assistance. The ferry cinema would be the perfect place for a murder.

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We drive off the ferry into the gathering dark. The first thing I do on my return to my native land is to buy the newspapers. They are full of reports of terrible crimes; even when the culprits are caught, which is

seldom, thanks to the demoralisation of the police and bureaucratic tasks that have been imposed upon them, the punishments are derisory. For example, two young men who attacked a lawyer for no good reason and inflicted permanent brain damage upon him (and furthermore had already amply demonstrated their violent criminal propensities) were sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment each, which means, thanks to automatic remission, that they will serve only nine. In sentencing them, the judge said that he intended the sentence to be a warning to others: but if so, it was a warning only to victims, not to perpetrators, that they should not expect the state to take their lives very seriously.

The Britain of my childhood was a well-ordered society. When I was less than ten years old, it was perfectly safe for me to cross London on public transport, and it occurred to no one that I could come to any harm by doing so. On the contrary, it was a means of teaching me independence. Nowadays, a parent who let her eight or nine year old child wander like that would be accused of neglect.

Of course I know that people have been saying this kind of thing for the last two thousand years at least – come middle age, everyone complains that it is not he alone who is falling to bits, but the world around him – but it just so happens that this time it is true. The fact is that in Britain, the young have imposed a de facto curfew on the old: practically no old person dares go out after dark, for fear of what or who he will meet and what will be done to him.

This is all the more distressing since the country is so obviously much richer than it was. One feels that material progress ought to be paralleled by moral progress. The fact that it hasn't been induces – at least in me – a profound pessimism.

Another cause of pessimism is my difficulty in persuading my liberal friends, who are interested in every cause of crime except the decision of criminals to commit it, that the principal victims of crime are not the rich and strong but the poor and vulnerable. It is they whose everyday life is dominated by the fear of crime (often disdainfully regarded or dismissed as neurotic by criminologists). While it is true

that most burglars are poor – E W Hornung's Raffles is so rare that, despite having met thousands of burglars in the course of my career as a prison doctor, I have never met a single one like him – it is also true, of the British burglar at least, that he is rather lazy or unimaginative: he steals mainly from the people who live near him. Quite often, in fact, a fight breaks out in prison because two burglars meet who have burgled each other's houses.

While on the subject, let me just recount one story to illustrate how seriously the British state takes the defense of the property of its citizens. I was looking through the criminal record of one of my patients in the prison and discovered that he had not long before been convicted for the fifty-seventh time for burglary. Since most criminals will happily admit, in confidence, that they have actually committed between five and fifteen times as many crimes as they have ever been caught for, it was quite possible that this man had committed more than five hundred burglaries. And what was his terrible punishment for his fifty-seventh conviction for burglary? A fine of $85, presumably paid for from the proceeds of his activities.

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We spend the night at my best friend's house, not very far from Cambridge. Most of it is Elizabethan, built on far older foundations, some of it Georgian. When he bought it, it was crumbling inside to ruins. The main rooms had been used to shelter cattle, but he restored the ornate plasterwork of their ceilings. To the uncomprehending annoyance of certain bureaucrats, he refused public subsidies to do so, preferring to work hard to pay the very high cost, so that he was free of their inspections, supervision and incessant demands afterwards.

He had understood what so many Britons, and Europeans in general, do not understand: that with benefits received from the state, comes servitude to the state.

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The house actually belonged to the Malory family, that is to say the family of the author of Morte d'Arthur. My friend thought that, in the circumstances, he ought to read it; but found that, despite a special interest in doing so, he just couldn't. Life was too short.

In fact, I don't think I have ever met anyone who has read it through. No one reads it who doesn't have to. Every time I hear it mentioned, I recall Dr Johnson's remark about Paradise Lost: No man ever wished it longer than it is.

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Waking up to a romantic mist over the glorious moat, we set off for another friend's house, in Shropshire, about a hundred and fifty miles away. Shropshire is mostly rural, even though it is one of the cradles of the Industrial Revolution, and seldom visited. It is the county where Algernon, in the Importance of Being Ernest, claimed to have a friend called Bunbury, who was always at death's door, visiting whom provided an excuse for his otherwise inexplicable absences.

The house once belonged to the Lee family, that is to say the ancestors of Robert E Lee, and from time to time a Southerner turns up and asks – always with exquisite politeness – to look through it. It has a ruined chapel in the grounds and a tunnel to the nearest village, though which supplies were once bought by the local tradesmen. Perhaps it was also an escape route in times of emergency.

It is curious how people with an interest in an historical figure imagine that they have learnt something about him by visiting somewhere connected to him, however remotely. This is very odd, but we all feel it. When I handle a book signed by the author, for example, especially if he is long dead, I feel some connection to him that an unsigned copy does not confer. Absurd, but I can't rid myself of the idea.

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My friend is an admirable man. A refugee from East Germany, he made a

fair bit of money from property when he was still young, and then decided it was enough. He never tried to make any more; he simply wanted to live independently and pursue whatever interested him, such as the history of art, science and philosophy.

In fact, I don't think I know anyone else who has made a lot of money and who has not wanted to make even more. He made money not to enslave himself to Mammon, but to liberate himself from it (or is it him?).

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Since our object in coming to England is to go to Ireland, we drive to Holyhead. We have booked a ferry to Dublin.

The drive to Holyhead through North Wales is of great beauty: but the modern British cannot see a beautiful landscape without throwing litter at it. This litter is composed of the wrappings of the food and drink they consume en route, and dispose of much as a cow relieves itself in a field, unselfconsciously. A cow, you will have noticed, can defecate and eat at the same time; the same is true of the British and their litter. It is all a sign of their dreadful loss of self-control, which is now so bad that they believe that self-control is a bad, psychologically dangerous thing.

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By the time we reach Holyhead, the weather is dreadful – when we get out of the car, we are immediately attacked by hailstones, which sting horribly – and we learn that some of the employees of the ferry company have gone on strike. This is because the company has employed Polish and Baltic sailors at 3 Euros per hour (those countries having recently acceded to the European Union), instead of paying several times more to British and Irish sailors who are no better. For the most part, the British and Irish sailors have accepted redundancy payments, but a few have barricaded themselves into the bridge of the ferry that will not, therefore be sailing (besides, said the ferry company, the weather is too

bad). No doubt globalisation is a wonderful thing, all in all, but it has its minor inconveniences.

This means that we have to stay overnight in Holyhead: as, of course, do hundreds of other passengers.

Holyhead is dismal at the best of times, and these are not the best of times. We find the best places to stay, but are told, not without a certain Schadenfreude (or am I paranoid?), that there are no vacancies.

Eventually, we find a very dismal bed a breakfast establishment in a small, terraced house covered in scaffolding. My wife tells me to take the dog with me so that the owner knows that we have a dog with us and can see that he is very small and nice.

The owner is a man in his late thirties, with greasy hair and an unhealthy look. Behind him stands his mentally-handicapped son. I ask whether he has a room and whether he minds the dog. He has, and he doesn’t. He asks me whether I would like to see the room.

I follow him up the stairs with the dog under my arm. The house is dismal and physically redolent of Britain in the 1950s. I feel a surge of nostalgia for this atmosphere.

The room is tiny and has been slept in by so many chain smokers that the smell of smoke and ash has impregnated everything beyond any hope of ever removing it. It is the kind of place you come out smelling like a fag-end yourself.

As if inspired by the atmosphere of the place, my dog – whom we have forgotten to walk en route, though normally we are passionately attentive to his needs – begins to urinate. First I feel something warm and damp, then I see a golden stream. So does the landlord. Horribly embarrassed, I turn the dog upside down in the hope that gravity will stop the flow, but it seems only to make it worse. Then I put him in the wash-hand basin, where he continues until he has finished.

Humiliated, I say, ‘He’s never done that before,’ which is true, but I wouldn’t believe it if I were the landlord. Fortunately, he needs the money, so he pretends to believe me; and it is true that the smell of old cigarettes is so strong that the dog’s performance makes no impression on the overall aesthetics of the room.

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Holyhead has never been famous for its catering. We go in search of dinner, with no very high hopes of finding any. Two and three-quarter centuries ago, Jonathan Swift, en route like us to Ireland, wrote:

Lo here I sit at holy head,
With muddy ale and mouldy bread…

Things don’t seem to have changed much in the meantime. Holyhead was so dismal that Swift continued:

I never was in haste before
To reach that slavish hateful shore…

But there has been change, after all: no town in Britain the size of Holyhead, or indeed much smaller than Holyhead, can be without its Indian restaurant, and thus it proves to be.

Fish and chips is no longer the national dish: curry is, thank goodness. There is moral progress after all.

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The following morning, we go down to breakfast. How dreadful it must be to have strangers invading you living space all the time!

What I discover, to my great surprise, is that the landlord is interested in history and his shelves are covered with learned and academic tomes. He is a man of high intelligence. I suspect he is running his business in a desperate attempt to secure the future of his mentally handicapped son, whom he treats with great affection. The strange fact is that real tragedy and affliction is often nobly borne, even nowadays, while the spoilt and the egotistical utter their shrill, insincere complaints.

We catch the ferry to Ireland.

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