Dalrymple’s Diaries Part VI

Diary of a Journey through Europe Part VI

By Theodore Dalrymple (May 2006)

We cross on the ferry to Ireland. Most of the passengers have a convivial breakfast in the ferry’s restaurant. It does me so much good to see them that I decide to join them myself and have a second breakfast.

They are out of condition, most of them. I suppose many of them would now be classified as obese. The very effort of eating makes one or two of them breathless. They have before them plates piled with the most fattening food imaginable: rashers of fried bacon, two or more fried eggs, sausages that consist largely of fat, black pudding, fried tomatoes, even fried bread (excluding the toast piled high on side-plates and eaten with a thick layer of butter). A few of them wash it down with beer. They certainly don’t have a problem with their appetite.

I suppose that, as a doctor, I ought to be appalled, and upbraid them for their treason to their own health; certainly, the pathology that is building up inside them will one day wreck their lives. As a doctor, I have handed out the conventional advice about a healthy lifestyle a thousand times, though always with an awareness that it was unlikely to be taken (since I don’t really take it myself), and that therefore the proffering of such advice was more a religious ceremony than anything else.

But now we live in so highly regulated a way – officially prevented from doing this, officially enjoined to do that, all in the name of our own health and safety – that it comes as a kind of relief, a balm to the soul, to see people en masse

doing what they want to do rather than what they are told to do. As Dostoyevsky once remarked, even a government whose regulations we knew to be entirely for our own benefit would evoke our revolt, simply because we cannot remain human by following a path laid out for us by others.

Not, of course, that the opposite extreme, that of never doing anything merely because to do it would be at the suggestion of someone else, is the solution to our need to individuate ourselves. The conscious adoption of any policy or lifestyle in order to differentiate ourselves from others confers at best a kind of ersatz individuality. What I liked about the people on the ferry, eating themselves to death or worse still to disablement and an early wheelchair, was that their utter disregard of medical advice was unselfconscious, entirely natural; it never occurred to them for a moment to comply with it.

I am sure that when they go to the doctor, if they ever do, they say something like, 'I only have to look at food, doctor, and I put on weight.' And what is more, they believe it.

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We are met by our friends, who are two doctors. Ireland has changed out of all recognition in the last two decades. It is now one of the richest countries in the world, after centuries of having been dogged by poverty. And poverty in a damp climate at that.

Dublin has become a city of bistros and boutiques. Its real estate is astonishingly expensive. The traffic – which is quite abominable – is full of the snazziest German saloon cars. The price of Irish art, previously unregarded, has gone through the roof. If I'd invested in a single Jack Butler Yeats a few years ago, instead of in my wretched pension fund, I'd be sitting pretty by now.

At the same time, one can’t help feeling that the city has lost some of its savour, its soul even. For one thing, the smoky bars are no more: smoking has been banned completely and the Irish public has obeyed the law without a murmur of dissent. I don’t understand why there can’t be bars for smokers; no one would be forced to go into them, after all. The usual argument is that the health of workers in such bars are adversely affected by the smoke they inhale, and they – poor things – don’t have any choice where they work. Much as I dislike smoking myself, honesty compels me to admit that bars in which there is smoking are generally better fun than bars in which there is none.

It is all designer labels now.

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One of the ways in which Ireland, particularly Dublin, has changed is in its attitude to the Catholic Church. When I first came to Ireland, nearly forty years ago, the clergy were the aristocracy of the country. A priest’s word was law. Now in Dublin at least, priests do not dare wear clerical garb once outside church grounds. It is not yet illegal for them to do so, as in Mexico, but they think it prudent to do so; for these one-time demi-gods, or deputies of God on earth, are now regarded with such distaste by some of the population that they are likely to be insulted, spat at or even punched as they walk down the street. One of the many ironies of history is that it is now much safer for a Catholic priest publicly to avow what he is by his dress in England, traditionally a virulently anti-Catholic country, than it now is in Ireland, where Catholicism was for years the bastion of Irish resistance against English domination.

Another irony is that the priests are now reviled because of the paedophiles within their ranks. Of course, only a minority were ever paedophiles (though the church undoubtedly covered

up for them), but they are all tarred with the same brush, at least in some people's minds. The militant secularists have seen the recent revelations of paedophilia within the church as a heaven sent – so to speak – opportunity to make propaganda for a more secularised society, one of whose major goals is the relaxation of the sexual mores. A consequence of this relaxation, of course, is the sexualisation of children at ever-younger ages. Those who were once calling for tolerance and understanding are now calling for condign punishment; while those who called for condign punishment are calling for tolerance and understanding. Those who believed that all morality was relative have discovered absolute evil in paedophilia; while those who believed in a rigid and even draconian morality have discovered that circumstances do alter cases. The whirligig of timer brings in its revenges.

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A friend of mine, a cultivated man, is a fierce anti-clerical. He was educated by the Christian Brothers, who inculcated learning by means, or at least with the assistance, of a cane. He won't hear a word said in their favour: as far as he is concerned, they were purely evil. Yet the fact remains that they were dedicated teachers, and they gave an opportunity to many children of the poor to rise above their social circumstance. If they were bigoted, they were also enlightened.

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We go for a run in the country, to a preview of an auction. Even the small country town in which it is to take place is very prosperous by comparison with the small Irish country towns that I remember. At one time, the food available in such towns was very limited, and very wretched, but now it has undergone multiculturalisation. For the first time, Ireland is the target of immigration from all round the world. The

problem is how to keep people from arriving rather than how to keep them from leaving. A woman on a bus in Dublin was said to have been overheard to lament that ‘These Chinese, Africans and Russians – they all look the same to me.’ Having for so long been underdogs, the Irish now find themselves in being in the unaccustomed position of being overdogs (if I may coin a logically-necessary phrase); and like all overdogs, they are not always generously disposed to those who are underdogs, whom they suspect of exploiting them.

When I was a medical student, a group of us hired a horse-drawn caravan for a couple of weeks to tour the lanes of County Cork. Among our number was an Ethiopian – Eritrean actually, but in those days the difference seemed to matter less than now, and in any case he possessed a photograph of himself shaking hands with the Emperor, which raised him immeasurably in our esteem – who caused something of a sensation in the Irish villages of the time. No one had ever seen a black man before, and one small boy actually stroked his cheek to see if the black came off. Trying to post a letter to Ethiopia from a village post office was no easy matter, and required much explanation as to where Ethiopia was.

I can’t quite make up my mind whether or not I wholeheartedly welcome and applaud the globalisation that means that no one anywhere is as isolated as he was in the villages of Ireland when I first visited them. In the name of diversity, everywhere – at least, everywhere in the developed world – is in danger of becoming the same, and the worst social gaffe anyone can make is to admit an unfamiliarity with the cuisine of, say, the Gulf of Guinea or of Tierra del Fuego. I have felt this terror myself; quite often, when people ask me whether I like the national dish of Laos or Swaziland, I say that it is my staple diet, for fear of appearing parochial and unsophisticated.

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I go to a dinner party with a medical friend who is, like me, a bibliomane. To those who do not suffer from this particular disease, the attraction of dusty tomes, from which even the silverfish and the earwigs have long since fled, is inexplicable. We go to my friend's Arthur Conan Doyle corner, where he has a fine collection of firsts (first editions), while the other guests talk among themselves.

Conan Doyle was, of course, a medical man, and in my view possessed of genius. He was also a thoroughly decent person, a living refutation of the romantic notion that genius and decency were incompatible, and that great talent almost required, and certainly excused, equally great character defects.

The soup beckons, and cuts short our caresses of the first edition of The Tragedy of the Korosko (Conan Doyle's brilliant and prophetic tale of Islamic terrorism in Egypt). As it happens, it is not a particularly valuable book, but yet a first edition somehow seems to put one in direct contact with a defunct author. I know that there is nothing logical about this: intellectuals should value books for their content only. Yet try as I might, I – who loathe romanticism – cannot entirely rid myself of the notion.

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I have to return to London to address a meeting of senior surgeons. Contrary to many of my medical colleagues, I admire surgeons. There are few acts more courageous than to cut into living human flesh (with the intent to cure rather than to kill, of course). Moreover, surgeons have to maintain their concentration for hours on end. There may be tasks that are as demanding physically, intellectually and emotionally as surgery, but if so I do not know them.

I discourse on the government's attempts, largely successful, to corrupt and control the medical profession, a process that seems to be worldwide; the surgeons are delighted to agree with every word.

They are, of course, very well off: most of them earn at least $1,000,000 a year. It is a curious thing about the age we have reached: most of us have never been so well off, and yet we feel with great conviction that the world has gone to the dogs, and will never attain the heights it reached when we were young

As I drive through the city in a taxi, its prosperity, its wealth, staggers me. I can't believe that it is real or lasting; in fact, I don't think it is real or lasting. But it would take too long to explain why. The seven fat years will be followed by the seven lean.

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Back home in France, our neighbour, M. Q…, a man of peasant shrewdness, is up to something. He has bought 200 acres of woodland next to our land, and has employed a giant machine, like a science fiction insect, to devour the trees The rumour is that he wants to raise ferocious hunting dogs, while collecting government subsidies for planting oaks. Not very far away, some people have tried to introduce wolves into the landscape. All I want is peace and quiet. Europe, of course, is the wrong continent for that.

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