

Driven Mad

by Theodore Dalrymple (November 2014)

The motor car, a friend of mine once said, is the most liberating of all machines ever invented. Suffice it to say that I have not found it so, at least not in Europe, which is small and overcrowded and full of traffic jams. Once, for example, when I was going to visit my aunt, it took me two hours to go a hundred yards along the North End Road in London. I did not find it a liberating experience, unless the bringing to the surface of the inner demon that caused me to bang my fists on the windows in sheer frustration be counted as a liberating experience (for the inner demon, that is, not for me). I didn't know either that I had it in me to scream so loud. The only thing that calmed me down, other than embarrassment at being overheard, was the thought that the traffic jam would make a wonderful setting for a dystopian novel of the J. G. Ballard variety, illustrating the swift deterioration of human conduct, the almost immediate descent to barbarism, under the stress of a perpetual traffic jam. How long would it be before the people in the cars started to loot the shops along the side of the road in search of food, or attack one another in search of a bottle of water? Not very long, I would imagine, not more than a few hours, a day at most, so that the story would illustrate not just the fragility of civilisation but also the thinness of its veneer over the 'real' nature of Man. Why extreme situations should be considered more revelatory of our true nature than everyday ones is rather a mystery: perhaps it is to give us scope to descant on our own moral turpitude as a species, which is always a great pleasure.

Of course, not every car journey ends in a traffic jam, but still I do not find my own car liberating. Indeed, I almost find it imprisons me. I am reluctant to go anywhere in it because I have found such a good parking space in the road in which I live, a delightful street that goes all round a church and is to be reached only up a narrow lane between houses that date from the 15th to the 19th centuries.

The trouble is, of course, that there are almost as many cars owned by the inhabitants of the street as there adult inhabitants of it, which means a shortage of parking spaces. If I go out in my car, therefore, I cannot be sure to have a parking space on my return; and my street is the only place I am allowed to park as long as I like without charge (or should I say without *further* charge, for I had to buy my parking permit in the first place). If I don't park in my street, I have to park elsewhere – for a limited time only. Then I have to move the car again, or risk a fine. It is best, then, on the whole, not to go out in my car, to stay put in my house. It gives me less anxiety in the end.

Motor cars, like many other things such as mobile telephones, were all right when they were the perquisite of the few (and I didn't mind at all not being one of the few); but as soon as everyone got one, or in some cases more than one, the nightmare began. The roads clogged up, it took just as long to go anywhere as it had done before the arrival of the cars. The old Soviet joke begins to sound not quite as absurd as it might once have done.

A political commissar is lecturing the troops about the differences between the United States and the Soviet Union when one of the recruits puts up his hand to ask a question.

'Is it true, Comrade Commissar,' he asks, 'that they in the United States have more cars than we in the Soviet Union?'

The commissar thinks for a moment and then replies:

'Yes, comrade, but we in the Soviet Union have more parking spaces.'

Not quite so absurd in view of my reluctance to go anywhere in my car for fear of not being able to park on my return. I am thus a prisoner, if not of my car exactly, at least of my parking space; and I carry this anxiety around with me in a ridiculous fashion.

I spend quite a lot of time in Paris at the moment and usually I go by public transport, but sometimes I drive. The result is that when I see a parking space in the city, wherever it is, I think it a terrible pity I have not my car with me to take advantage of it. I regret it as a terrible missed opportunity; and this is so even if it is a street far from where I am actually staying. 'Suppose,' I think to myself, 'I were driving in this area and trying to park. Never in a hundred years would I find a space, and there is one going begging.' The thought depresses me, as if I had failed to make the most of my opportunities in life; I suppose my philosophy has become 'Gather ye parking spaces while ye may.'

So I am not really a fan of cars, I prefer public transport. I find it more relaxing as it relieves me from parking anxiety (not yet a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association*, but surely destined one day to become one), besides which the human comedy on buses and trains is much to be preferred to the fruitless and frequently infuriated solipsism of driving. On a train, one can even sometimes read.

It was the absence of cars that makes me guiltily nostalgic for the communist days in Eastern Europe. You have only to compare Bucharest then with now to see what I mean. In good King Nicolae's day, traffic was very light and it was a delight, at least to me with my somewhat unusual tastes, to walk around the city, albeit that it was grey and dismal, its former

grandeur decayed and its louche gaiety long since departed. It had its own atmosphere, one of slight menace, like the faint tingle that a small battery can impart to wet fingers. When in an empty street there was someone walking behind you, you assumed for a moment that he must be following you, a hypothesis to be tested by turning left or turning right even when you didn't need or want to. It was flattering, in a way, to think that you were worth following, or that anyone was sufficiently interested in you to bother with where you went, whom you met, and what you did, but of course surveillance was as much a matter of prevention and deterrence as of the detection of anything that you had done. Cars (as well as neon lights and any advertising other than political slogans) would have ruined the atmosphere and been completely out of place. The few vehicles that there were in the streets, though the owners of them were highly privileged by Romanian standards, were in a state of dilapidation, and exuded in gusts the smell of incompletely refined fuel, as well as little explosions of gritty black smoke; the buses, which trundled reluctantly and infrequently along the streets had great divers' tanks on their roofs, full of some kind of maximally-polluting gas that was probably distilled from tar and mangelwurzels.

I did not miss motor traffic at all. Visiting only briefly, it seemed to me that the slow pace among the big and once grand buildings was a kind of luxury, a wealth in time rather than in goods. It wasn't really any kind of wealth, of course; as Patrick McGuinness puts in in his wonderful fictional evocation of the end of the regime, *The Last Hundred Days*, 'it was surreal, or would have been if it wasn't the only reality available.'

When I returned to Bucharest a couple of years later, I could have sworn that the first fruit of freedom was traffic jams. Where had all those cars suddenly come from? They reminded me of the ants that appear on the counter of my kitchen in France if I leave a peach or some sugar on it. What were the ants doing before I did so? Surely they couldn't have just been waiting for my mistake? Anyway, it seemed to me that the choking traffic, now terrible, did not add to the charms of the city.

Tirana in Albania was even better, of course. It was said that there were only 500 cars in the whole country, so few in fact that you could be sure that if a car came up behind you there was a party bigwig in it. (Once, in Cameroun, I was on a bus going along a rutted laterite road when a fancy car swept by extremely fast, leaving a tsunami of dust behind. 'C'est un grand,' said one of the passengers, a simple phrase that probably told you more about the running of the country than any number of books of political science.)

How wonderful was the peace of Tirana without cars! You could hear the faint murmur of conversation coming from the rickety apartment blocks so beloved of communist governments. You

could walk in the middle of the widest boulevards with complete safety from traffic. On the other hand you and all your family could be sent down the mines for making a careless or mildly critical remark: there is no gain without loss.

People say in defence of cars that they allow people to go where they want, which is no doubt true. But in a small continent such as Europe, the very ease with which things may now be visited removes a great deal of the pleasure to be derived from visiting them. During the season, the south coast of France is more remarkable for its traffic than its natural beauty: it is easy to be stuck the whole day in a jam trying to get to the beach.

Cars en masse are ugly, and gone are the days (if only they would return) when you could have any colour you liked as long as it was back. These days, alas, people are allowed to express themselves by their choice of colour, and there are turquoise cars or bright yellow ones (all right in a pre-war Rolls-Royce, Bugatti or Hispano-Suiza, perhaps, but not in a little compact). A single bright ugly car can ruin an entire landscape, and often does so. Bright red is my *bête noire*, as it were, because, quite apart from its visual offensiveness drivers of such cars are inclined to like noise as well and to drive aggressively, as is reflected in the accident statistics.

A car is a millstone round one's neck. I have to pay a tax annually on mine, and woe betide me if I forget. I have to insure it and I have a strong suspicion that my insurance company is overcharging me, though I also resent the time and effort it would take me to find a cheaper policy. I also have to pay annually for my parking space, and each year the amount rises (last year by more than 300 per cent), and no lifetime subscriptions are available. A few passers-by scratch my car with keys for the sheer fun of it, which makes me, no doubt irrationally, detest the whole of the human race. And a car is a depreciating, though initially expensive, asset. There comes a time in one's life when one is afraid of depreciating assets, and I have reached it.

Not many people in the modern world refuse to learn to drive, but two things I have noticed about those I know who have done so: not only are they happier and more serene than their driving contemporaries, but they are usually superior to them in some way as well. This cannot be entirely a coincidence.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is