Lunch Conquers All, Part 2

by Theodore Dalrymple (February 2015)

There is no such thing as a free lunch, they say, and perhaps this is so in the abstract: but no doctor really believes it. His personal experience leads him to conclude otherwise: thanks to the pharmaceutical industry there are many free lunches, as there have been for many a long year.

As a student I loved those free lunches, indeed they were essential to my welfare and frequently staved off malnutrition if they did not quite save my life. They were available at grand rounds in the hospital and I (and my friends) gorged ourselves on them because we were so hungry. Needless to say we took no notice of what was being advertised at those lunches; we were too busy eating. And we were hungry because had spent what little money we had on champagne and other essentials, and were reduced as a consequence to existing much of the time on beer and bread and butter. Man – or at least Student – often really did live by bread alone.

What is peculiar is that the avidity for free lunches remains active in many doctors well after they have reached the stage of prosperity and the ability to afford any lunch they like from their own resources. I suppose men do not become wealthy by neglecting small economies, and doctors are not unique in their appreciation of this fact. A free lunch is therefore as attractive to the millionaire as to the pauper. And there are no more avid would-be consumers of supposedly free lunches than the contemporary English. For them, a free lunch rights any wrong, changes any enemy into a friend, and is in general devoutly to be wished, if it is not actually the *summum bonum*.

After NATO ceased bombing Serbia in 1999 – the alliance was militarily humiliated in that war, for it failed by immense numbers of bombing raids even seriously to scratch the Serbian armed forces, which were hardly formidable – I suggested in a prominent British weekly journal that, now that the cruise missiles were no longer needed in the Balkans, they could usefully be turned upon some of the dreadful buildings by which our own green and pleasant land had been dreadfully disfigured in late years: disfigured by a symbiosis of corrupt city councillors, grasping property developers and criminally-bad architects inspired by a barbaric modernist ideology. I said in the article that everyone would have his favourite building that merited destruction by cruise missile, but that mine was the Giffard Hotel in Worcester, a concrete-clad building to gladden the heart of the Ceausescus or Le Corbusier (the latter being far

worse than the former, of course, because his influence was worldwide rather than confined to a single country), right in the precincts of the city's magnificent cathedral. No single building has ever done more than this to ruin an ancient townscape once and for all, beyond possibility, while it still stands, of repair; and an acquaintance of mine remembered the elegant eighteenth-century building that was demolished to make space for it, the wonderful wooden panelling of the drawing and dining rooms being thrown into the street as so much rubbish (where my acquaintance recuperated it for nothing). No building, for purely architectural reasons, ever merited bombardment more.

The following week, the local newspaper ran a headline, MAGAZINE SAYS 'BOMB WORCESTER.' This was not quite the message I had wished to convey or, I think, the message that any sensible person would have thought I wished to convey. Local newspapers have to sell copies like any other newspapers, however, and such a headline would undoubtedly have caught the attention of the city-folk.

Shortly thereafter a local radio station asked me to explain myself to the good citizens of Worcester. Also appearing on the programme was the manager of the hotel whose destruction by bombing I had so strongly advocated. I felt a little sorry for him, for his job was to defend the indefensible. It was not a job I should have liked.

I explained why I thought the hotel should be demolished. It was a brutal eyesore and waste ground, even a pile of rubble, would be preferable to it. The manager – a perfectly pleasant young man – was asked for his response.

'What you have to remember,' he said, 'was that the hotel was built in the 1960s.'

'Yes,' I said, 'that is precisely what I am complaining of.'

It is surprising how often people think that the repetition or rephrasing of your complaint is an answer to it.

'Well,' the hapless manager said, 'have you ever been inside?'

'I don't need to go inside ,' I said. 'I can see it's monstrous from the outside. Going inside will not help.'

Actually, this is not strictly true. Once you were inside it, you couldn't see its exterior, which was an inestimable advantage.

'What,' said the manager, 'if I offered you lunch?'

I admit that I was taken aback by the brazenness of the suggestion. I had not expected it.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ I said. ‘It’s a terrible building and ought to be demolished, that’s all there is to it. Lunch won’t alter the fact.’

Perhaps the manager thought that, if he gave me a nice free, well-lubricated lunch I would change my opinion and print a retraction in the magazine. Then the local newspaper would be able to run a headline, ‘MAGAZINE NOW SAYS WORCESTER SHOULD *NOT* BE BOMBED.’

What struck me so forcefully about the proposition that we should have lunch was not the proposition itself, for as a man of the world I am sure that this is often how things are arranged, but that it was made in the most public way possible, over the radio, with thousands of people listening. And this could mean only one thing (other, possibly, that the manager was surpassingly stupid), namely that the manager expected that no one would notice the deeply corrupt nature of what he said because everyone thought it perfectly normal to buy people’s opinions in this way, and in fact that this was the usual way opinion was formed and unformed. In other words, what the manager said was so corrupt that it was almost innocent: for where everyone is guilty, everyone is innocent. It brought to mind the title of one of J K Galbraith’s books (his last, published when he was 95), *The Economics of Innocent Fraud*.

In the article in question I happened to mention also another building in another town, Shrewsbury, that I considered in urgent need of destruction. Now Shrewsbury is a very beautiful ancient town, and the building I mentioned was so transcendently awful that I alleged that the town council that permitted it to be built must have been bribed to do so. Again I was asked to explain myself on a local radio station, this time with an irate member of the council.

‘Are you saying that we are corrupt?’ he demanded to know, beside himself, almost, with indignation.

‘Don’t you understand,’ I replied, ‘that that is the charitable interpretation? We all like money, and if you did it for money it wouldn’t be good, but we could at least understand it. But if you did it for some other reason…’ Here I almost rendered myself almost speechless with the horrible thought of it. ‘No,’ I said, ‘I can’t think as ill of you as that.’

Shortly afterwards I reviewed a book for the same magazine. It was quite a good book, fluently written, but not really more than a competent scissors and paste job. It was by a doctor, and I therefore felt some professional solidarity with him. I praised the book as much as I was able while remaining within the bounds of truthfulness, and was relatively gentle in my

criticisms. Some, I suppose, might have construed me as damning with faint praise, but such was not my intention; and in every book that I review that is not actively pernicious, I try to insert some words that can be torn by the publisher without too much violence or dishonesty for use as a blurb. When I started to review books many years ago it is true that I thought it would be fun to criticise slashingly and without mercy; but I soon discovered that praise was more pleasurable to bestow than was condemnation to hurl, and that unless a book was actively dishonest in some dangerous way I refrained from severity. After all, even a bad book has cost its author some considerable effort and he must believe that it has some worth or value when he sent it into the world. (The only exception was a book that the author claimed to have written in three days. I think he meant us, the readers, to be astounded by his genius: so short a time, so deep a book. I wrote that I was surprised that it took him as long to write it as that.)

No sooner was my review published than I received a letter from the author – in those days letters still existed and were written – suggesting that we must meet because we had so much in common, and inviting me to lunch at the Savoy (an expensive rendezvous in London). I was puzzled by this, for I had not written ecstatically in praise of his book, but somewhat lukewarmly. But it took me not more than a second or two to grasp what he was at: I thought he must be in the process of writing another book – my surmise turned out to be quite correct – that he thought I was likely to be asked to review. Having been lunched expensively it would have been difficult for me to write an unfavourable review, or even a non-committal one: for lunch in the Savoy creates its moral obligations. You have to be something of a swine to lunch at someone’s considerable expense and not feel any obligation at all to him.

I wrote to thank him, but instead of saying that it would be wrong of me to accept, I rather cravenly made some footling excuse as if I much regretted my inability and would have liked to accept another time. And indeed, he tried it once more to invite me but then gave up. He was no fool and must have realised that my second excuse was precisely that, an excuse.

I was right that he was writing another book, and he was right that I would be asked to review it. My other surmise at the time – that his second book would not be as good as his first because he was really a one-book man, being without much imagination – also turned out to be correct. I was free to criticise it (albeit gently) as I should not have been had I lunched with him at his expense. I should have felt constrained to praise his book beyond its merit, my obligation to him personally far outweighing in my mind that to the public in the abstract. When I read very favourable reviews of this book elsewhere, I wondered how many of the reviewers he had succeeded in lunching.

Yes, lunch conquers all, more than love. When, as happens occasionally, some politician's corruption stands revealed in the press, what shocks me about it is often the trifling amount by which he has benefited and by which he had allowed himself to be corrupted. Just as it is the small insults, humiliations and acts of disdain that people have suffered rather than frightful injustices that move them to political anger and even violence, so it is small obligations that are more corrupting than large. Large sums of money transferred to a secret account are impersonal; lunch is a social event.

The doctor who tried to extract a good review from me by means of lunch was soon afterwards in trouble. He was caught with his fingers in some till or other in which they had no business to be and, though he claimed it was by inadvertence, he lost his licence to practise for a time.

In a way, I suppose, his invitation was flattering, for he obviously thought that my good opinion in print was likely to result in sales that would yield him more in royalties than the lunch would have cost him. Today, as it happens, I spoke to a publisher who, *inter alia*, said, 'Of course, reviews don't sell books.' But lunch buys reviewers.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is