

Memory Gaps

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (April 2019)



The Policeman, George Bergen, 1931

One of the most remarkable transformations during my lifetime

has been that of Ireland from being a profoundly Catholic country into a militantly secular one. When first I visited, nearly fifty years ago, I should not have dreamed that such a thing was possible. I am not sure whether anyone else foresaw the change either, but at the very least it should alert me to my very limited powers of foresight or prophecy. Who would have guessed that Catholic priests, who once bestrode Irish towns and villages like moral colossi, as the arbiters of what could and could not be done, would lose all their authority and even be reviled, so that in Dublin they will not walk out in priestly garb for fear of being insulted or worse?

The scandal concerning sexual abuse by priests is bound to be mentioned whenever the subject of the decline of Catholic power or influence comes up. But in reality it is almost irrelevant; the scandal has been more a final nail in the coffin rather than one of the deeper causes of the transformation, which would have happened to exactly the same extent with or without it.

When social historians look back upon western society in a hundred or two hundred years' time (assuming that such a discipline as social history still exists), they will surely be struck by a paradox or at least a contradiction that characterises our era: namely the contradiction between sexual licentiousness on the one hand, and excesses of zealous outrage about sexual misconduct on another. It is as if we cannot make up our mind whether to be militant hedonists or po-faced puritans and so veer between almost drunkenly the two.

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Our inconsistency or confusion is considerable. On the one hand there are public displays of lasciviousness if not quite everywhere, at least very commonly; on the other we appear to be reaching the stage in which consent to sexual relations resembles, or is believed that it ought to resemble, that of consent to an operation, or even a job interview, rather than a seduction or an expression of mutual love.

Then, of course, there is our increasing tendency in these matters to abrogate in our minds the principle that a person is to be presumed innocent of an accusation until proven guilty. This principle is always difficult for us psychologically: the tendency of the human mind to believe that there is no smoke without fire is very strong and I doubt whether anyone can clear his mind of it altogether. (Guilt by association is one of the commonest manifestations of this among intellectuals.)

When someone is accused, we also have the tendency to believe not what the evidence in the abstract ought to lead us to believe, but what we want to believe in the first place. This was evident in the recent confirmation hearings for the elevation of Brett Kavanaugh as judge to the Supreme Court of the United States. I think in 99 per cent of cases, you could have predicted whether someone believed him innocent of guilty of the allegations against him by knowing the person's political views.

Evidence of the type levied against him is often very ambiguous and can satisfy neither the criminal nor the civil standard of proof. The French radical newspaper, *Libération*, recently carried a long feature on paedophilia among Catholic priests, and among the articles was one of testimony by a man called Jean-Yves Sallier under the headline 'The Father put me on his knees and held me tight . . . '

The article says that M. Sallier, now a teacher aged 48, doubted whether he would be able to make his telephonic 'confession' to the newspaper. ('Confession,' a word apparently chosen by the newspaper rather than by M. Sallier himself, is surely rather a curious choice of term in this context, implying some kind of guilt on his part, and furthermore with a distinctly Catholic connotation. M. Sallier, after all, is reporting what happened to him when he was between seven and nine years old. What in the newspaper's estimation could he now be guilty of, then, except of not telling the truth?)

But M. Sallier's evidence is better than Dr Blasey-Ford's, at least to begin with.

I came back from the group of Father Preynat's scouts near Lyon . . . I was 7 years old. I can't put a precise date to the first time he touched me. I can't give a precise number of times either. My memory of the facts has gaps. But I know that this sexual aggression happened and that it went on for nearly two years . . .

This is surely credible (though not by itself proof of truth).

A boy of that age does not usually lay down a cinematographic memory of events, but on the other hand is capable of genuine memory of events.

Then M. Sallier goes on to describe the attacks in credible detail and is able to say where they took place.

The tone then changes.

Then there was the night of September, 1978, camping in Germany. Father Preynat asked me to come into his tent. I have no memory of the subsequent events. It is a total black-out. All that I know, when I think about that night, is that my whole body shakes. It is as if the the events that I have forgotten were inscribed in my flesh. I have lived for a long time without fully having understood what happened to me. I haven't developed obvious pathology, unlike many abused children. My brain had buried all these memories and kept them at a distance.

Then something really terrible happened to him:

In 2014, however, they resurfaced. It was after an intimate discussion with a friend, who confided in me that she had been abused as a child. I was then 44 years old. This confidence exploded in me, and suddenly everything was mixed: disbelief and certainty, tears, pain and liberation, choking and vomiting. That day for the first day in my life I put my past into words: *I am a victim. The victim of a paedophile priest.* From then on, the veil began to lift and images of that period slowly reappeared.

To my ear, at least, we have passed from the authentic to the inauthentic. His talk with his friend seems to me to smack of the religious conversion rather than of genuine recollection. I do not think he is consciously faking, but I do not think he is straightforwardly remembering either. He has reached a supposed illumination rather than the truth about his past, a sudden explanatory scheme of the world. By rehearsal of scenes in his mind, they become experientially no different from memories and he can no longer distinguish between memory and other kinds of content of the mind. He believes himself to be telling the truth not merely about the contents of his mind but of the external world. It is conceivable, perhaps even likely, that something similar happened to Dr Ford. On some kind of foundation or basis, she built a whole superstructure.

At any rate, M. Sallier's case he began to suffer the kind of pathology that he did not suffer until the revelation came to him. It sounds as if his mental equilibrium was destroyed by it. He now suffers from insomnia and a griping in the guts when he thinks of his supposedly recovered memories, whereas he did not suffer from them before.

I was reminded of the medico-legal reports I used to do in civil litigation. It was often quite clear to me that what caused the suffering was not the original injury (which more often than not was *not* of a sexual nature), but the litigation itself. From the purely empirical point of view, that is to say that of the real causation of the suffering, it would be a better service to truth for the plaintiffs to have sued their own lawyers and who advised them that they had a case than whoever caused the original injury. This was not so in every case, of course: I knew of cases where the original injury was

unequivocally the cause of the subsequent suffering. These cases, however, were almost always marked by a complete absence of exaggeration or dramatisation. They never said, 'It's ruined my life, doctor,' even where it had ruined their lives. By contrast, many of those whose suffering emerged with the litigation said precisely that. And indeed, their lives had been ruined: but by the litigation, not the original injury—even where there had been such an injury. As with psychoanalysis which in Karl Kraus's famous apothegm, according to which it was the illness it pretended to cure, so litigation is the wrong it pretends to right.

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I was rather proud of my one, very minor encounter with sexual abuse as a child. It was in one of the local parks that we called the Duck Park because it had a pond with ducks, a pond in which we fished with clandestine nets for stickleback which we put in jam-jars and then put back in the pond, minus one or two who had died in the meantime, because they were useless as pets, let alone as food. We hoped for males who had bright red bellies during the mating season, but our efforts were often interrupted by the park-keeper who, in those long-lost days, wore a uniform he was proud to wear and didn't hold with boys, who—like men today—were all guilty until proven innocent, which was never.

One day a man in a raincoat which he opened, masturbated in front of us. I remember that he had his back to a large rhododendron or laurel bush into which he could no doubt have

backed if anyone had approached. I think I must have been about eight years old at the time but couldn't swear to it, nor could I provide much of a description of him. I thought he was very old, which probably means more than thirty, but, poor man, he must by now have been dead for a long time, this being sixty years ago. I was with a couple of friends of my own age—in those days, all we had to do was ask our parents whether we had permission to go down to the Duck Park, and no adult had to accompany us—and I don't think we really understood what the man was doing.

I told my mother what I had seen, though, and how to my surprise there had been a milky fluid. She obviously called the police, for after I went to bed as usual and was reading my bedtime book, a policeman came in to ask me questions (he, too, must be long dead by now). I was extremely proud to have him all to myself in my bedroom, especially as he listened carefully to my answers to his questions and even took them down in a notebook. This must have increased my self-confidence considerably, that not only an adult, but a policeman into the bargain, should think that what I had to say was important. Probably I was insufferable for a few days afterwards, or perhaps I should say more insufferable than usual (I blush to think of myself as a child and adolescent).

Whether they ever found the man I cannot say, or what they did with him if they did. As far as I remember, he made no further appearances in the park: perhaps he widened his net. I do not remember being in the least frightened by him, only surprised.

In the prison in which I was much later to work, all sex criminals (of whatever degree) had to be protected from the other prisoners. The only crime that approached theirs in evil

as far as the other prisoners were concerned was cruelty to dogs. Murder in the course of robbery was almost a cause of admiration, or at least respect. It was a normal man's crime.

I draw no wider conclusions from any of this.

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [*The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd*](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [@NERIconoclast](#)