

Moral Philosophy Hanging by a Thread

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (April 2021)



Triumph of Death (detail with gallows), Pieter Breugel the Elder, 1562

The only man I ever knew who was executed by hanging was the Nigerian writer, Ken Saro-Wiwa. Murder perhaps would be a better word for it, because it was clear that the military dictatorship of the time wanted him out of the way.

I used to see Saro-Wiwa whenever I went to Nigeria or he came to London. He wrote at least one book that will endure, *Sozaboy*, a fictional account of the Nigerian Civil War seen through the eyes of a young semi-literate village boy who joins one of the armies so that he can have a uniform to impress his girlfriend and future wife with, but who ends up

having to fight on both sides without having the faintest idea of what he is fighting for. His wife is killed, his homeland is devastated, his village destroyed; written in a kind of pidgin (but not so different from standard English as to be incomprehensible), he says at the end that war 'have uselessly many people' –that is to say crippled them– and that 'now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely.'

This is very affecting. Saro-Wiwa had seen the horrors of the war from the inside, but although he came from a region that was included in the breakaway state of Biafra, he took the federal side in the war. He felt that his minority ethnic group, the Ogoni, would fare better in a larger Nigeria than in a Biafra dominated entirely by the Igbo.

Subsequently, however, he gave up his career as a writer (he also wrote a television comedy series in which he set the whole country laughing at itself) in order to campaign politically for a better deal for his people. Ogoniland was in the delta region of the River Niger from which the oil came. Not only did the oil companies ruin the delta by careless oil spills, thus destroying the livelihoods of the local people and turning its night into a kind of hellish day by means of perpetual gas flares, but the Nigerian government returned very little of the oil revenues on which it was utterly dependent for its expenditure, powers of patronage and self-enrichment, by way of compensation. Saro-Wiwa started a movement for compensation from the oil companies and a bigger share for Ogoniland of the government revenues from oil; disaster soon followed.

When I discussed his turn to politics with him, Saro-Wiwa said that he knew that the government would end up killing him. I thought this an exaggeration: the government at the time, though fantastically corrupt, was not brutal, at any rate not more brutal than the society itself of which it was the government. But it was replaced (by coup, of course) by a

government that was much more brutal. Moreover, by questioning the division of the oil spoils, which was what Nigerian politics was all about, Saro-Wiwa had touched an exceptionally raw nerve. My attempts to persuade Saro-Wiwa not to enter politics but to continue writing, on the grounds that Nigeria had few writers but many politicians, were unavailing; he said the situation was too urgent for him not to take political action.

He was hanged after a military trial in which he was accused of ordering or inciting the murders of opponents. The verdict was a foregone conclusion; the witnesses against him were bribed; the regime needed to kill Saro-Wiwa, who was very well-known in Nigeria.

Saro-Wiwa, along with eight others, was hanged, apparently at the fifth attempt, so that he is said to have said that, in this country, they can't even hang someone properly. In the aftermath, there was much moral outrage and talk of economic sanctions against Nigeria; I wrote an article that still troubles my conscience, in which I argued against such sanctions even though Saro-Wiwa was my friend. The executions were indefensible as well as horrible, but sanctions on a country as populous as Nigeria and with an economy as fragile as Nigeria's would hurt the wrong people, if they hurt anyone at all. International relations, I said, were not the proper sphere for gusts of moral outrage that would soon dissipate and give way to prevailing economic interests.

I am still not sure whether I was right or wrong. I feel guilty because in some sense (almost beyond the question of right and wrong) I betrayed Saro-Wiwa who, after all, was my friend. Even if I were right, my silence would have been better. On the other hand, one might say my argument, if it were right, was strengthened, at least rhetorically, by the very fact that I *was* his friend. But he would not have wanted to me write that article, and I very much regret having done

so.

That he met his terrible fate open-eyed and without illusion is certain. Thus he was a man of the greatest courage; but unlike many of the very courageous, the ruling characteristic that I remember him by was his sense of humour. When he laughed, as he did often, his laughter shook him and seemed to penetrate him to the very core; it was not superficial. Rather, it was if the whole world were a great joke; and he called the enemies who were to kill him (which he knew and I didn't) *the rascals*, not a term that anyone would use to denote deep or visceral hatred. True, their rascality led them to evil, but he thought that, ultimately, they were motivated by commonplace desires, wishes and ambitions; they were bad men, but very ordinary.

One incident I remember very clearly. He picked me up in his Mercedes in Port Harcourt, where he lived and where he was eventually to be killed, to take me to his office. (He had, by the way, also been a successful businessman, to secure himself competence to be able to do the other things he wanted to do.) *En route*, we saw the body of a naked male corpse on an overpass, bloating in the sun like a dirigible, just as a radio announcer was asking for its 'owner' to come and collect it. Saro-Wiwa laughed. 'Only in Nigeria,' he said, with a mixture of horror and amusement. Nigeria was certainly not a boring country.

It is hardly surprising, perhaps, that every time I come across a reference to the death penalty that I should be reminded of Ken Saro-Wiwa—though I am astonished now to realise that he was killed, murdered, executed, fully a quarter of a century ago. But his memory is kept vivid for me because some of my favourite reading, in times of leisure such as I have recently had because I was placed in quarantine for ten days after my return to England from France, is the transcript of old English and Scottish trials for murder which, when there is a finding of guilt, end in a mandatory

sentence of death, which was often carried out by hanging (in fact 9 out of 10 death sentences were commuted). The trials were dramatic, the arguments subtle, the judges and advocates of high intellect—the murderers generally less so.

With a few afternoons to spare, I read the transcript of the trial, in the *Notable British Trials* series that ran from 1905 to 1959, of a man called J.A. Dickman. It was published in 1914 after a murder committed in 1910. Dickman was hanged, notwithstanding petitions and pleas for mercy, there having been much public disquiet about the safety of the verdict. And probably, if he hadn't testified in his own defence in the witness box, he would have been acquitted. There, he made a bad impression on the jury by his unnecessary equivocations under cross examination:

Q. Was it usually on a Friday (that you visited Mr Hogg)?

A. It might have been. I think it was.

Q. I asked you was it?

A. Yes.

Q. It was?

A. Yes.

The point was important because the murder was committed on a Friday, and Dickman had sounded shifty in at first making it sound doubtful that he was in the habit of travelling on Fridays.

There was only circumstantial evidence against him, but it was strong. A man called Nisbet was shot dead on a train going from Newcastle to Morpeth. (The introduction to the transcripts begins with the following words: 'Since the introduction of railways only seven murders have been committed in railway carriages in England.' The use of the

word *only* is interesting here, for it implies that it is fewer than might have been expected. But how many might have been expected? This, surely, would have been impossible to say, for the factors of the initial conditions of the calculation were too complex for probability to be worked out.)

There was no doubt that Dickman travelled on the same train as Nisbet. Nisbet travelled in a compartment with another man. Before the train departed, Dickman was seen in the company of another man who resembled Nisbet who, as Dickman well knew, was carrying the two-weekly wages in cash from a bank in Newcastle to a mine in Morpeth, and Dickman was in dire need of money. His previous journeys on the same train on other Fridays could be construed as a kind of rehearsal for the crime. He had received under an assumed name a pistol in the post (in those days in England, anyone could buy a gun). Spots of blood—which in those days could not be proved to be human, let alone as that of any particular person—were found on one of his gloves and in the pocket of one of his trousers, for which he could not account. But Dickman denied having travelled in the compartment with the murdered man, and all the identification evidence was uncertain. He denied that he was guilty, and when sentenced to death, he simply said ‘I declare to all men that I am innocent.’ He was hanged without ever having admitted guilt, and Winston Churchill, Home Secretary at the time with the power to commute the sentence, refused to do so.

Reading the book revealed the power of the internet to me once more. One of the principal prosecution witnesses was an artist called Wilson Hepple, who also travelled on the train in which Nisbet was murdered. I looked him up: born in 1854, he died in 1937, and in 1910, when he was aged 54, the defence in the trial tried to argue that his testimony was unreliable because he was so old. This, presumably, would not have been argued if it would have been regarded as *prima facie* absurd, suggesting a view of the age at which senile

feebleness of perception set in that is very different from our own.

Hepple was a painter of cats in general, especially of kittens, and his work, it pains me to say, was kitsch to the highest degree.

I also managed to trace, pictorially, the house in which Dickman had lived, including its interior. It was a respectable late Victorian or early Edwardian house with four bedrooms, thoroughly modernised on the inside. It would now cost about \$600,000 to buy, an indication of the asset inflation there has been since Dickman's day, when a man of his habitual impecuniosity could afford to live in it, albeit as a renter rather than owner.

I doubt that the owners who were selling it knew that it had once been the home of a man who was hanged as a murderer. Very few of the original architectural interior features remained, apart from a couple of fireplaces and a few plaster mouldings; it had been modernised in a semi-minimalist fashion. Oddly enough, the owners had a penchant for black walls, black decorations and black furniture, and in one room was a picture of a white skull on a black background. One might have thought it the residence of 'cool' Satanists.

A coincidence? The spirit of the place? In the latter case, I suppose it depends on your belief as to Dickman's guilt. Some have argued that he was, in fact, guilty of two other murders, including of a money-lender in Sunderland. For myself, I think that he was probably guilty, but that he should not have been hanged. But I don't think that he shouldn't have been hanged as strongly as I think that Ken Saro-Wiwa should not have been hanged, even though, strictly speaking, either you should or shouldn't be hanged, there are no degrees of should- and shouldn't-ness in being hanged. Moral philosophy is odd.

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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](#)