

# My Road to Damascus

by Theodore Dalrymple (April 2016)

Whenever I think of some of the journeys that I made and countries through which I passed earlier in my life that could not be made or passed through now other than by someone suicidally reckless, I feel a certain melancholy. Surely the downfall of communism (almost but not quite complete) was supposed to usher in a new world order, an era of peaceful co-operation and mutual advantage? It did nothing of the kind, of course, and those who saw in the demolition of the Berlin Wall a kind of Hegelian apotheosis of history, after which nothing of meta-historical significance was supposed to happen, have been proved not merely wrong but foolish – as I thought them at the time.

Progress, even when it has predominated over regress, has seldom been without loss. Moreover, since we take progress for granted almost as soon as it has taken place, it never quite meets our expectations, at least not for very long. Progress is like a present given to a child who already has too many presents: it causes a very brief moment of delight and then, immediately afterwards is forgotten. Indeed, when it comes to technical improvements, we forget what it was like to be without them. For more than half of my life I did not have a computer, and for more than two thirds no access to the internet; but I find it difficult to recapture imaginatively what it was like to have lived without them. When I see an old film with, say, a scene in an old typing pool, with twenty women clacking away furiously at typewriters, I cannot resist laughing, so alien and bizarre does such a scene seem to me now. Try as one might to avoid doing so, one despises them a little for having been so backward, as if it were their own fault that they were in their prime of life fifty years ago instead of now, and as if we were personally responsible for having made all the technical progress since then. In fact, most of us don't even know how a light switch works, let alone a computer. We are like rats in a behaviourist's cage, except that it is technology, not a psychologist, that conditions us.

I know two or three people who have resisted the siren-song of communication technology (I am not one of them). A friend of mine, for example, a retired doctor, does not have a mobile telephone, which seems these days almost like the height of eccentricity. Never having had one, he does not miss it and is only

dimly aware of the change that it has wrought in people's lives. He still writes letters – a technology that I hope the young terrorists of today do not discover, for the use of it would make them more difficult to catch in the planning stage before the act.

Another acquaintance of mine, a writer of more distinction and talent than fame, stopped his technological education at the stage of the portable typewriter. I should imagine that he has increasing difficulty in obtaining typewriter ribbons and such commodities as carbon paper. I haven't tried the experiment, but I wonder whether young people even know what carbon paper is.

Is this refusal to compromise with modernity admirable or stupid, or a little of both? I remember having to trek down to the library to look up a single entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a trek that would take me half a day and wear me out – though it also gave me a slight sense of achievement to return with the information that I needed. But my friends have decided that we make of convenience, as of comfort, too much of a god, and that there is a price to be paid for it, not least of which is a nearly permanent temptation to distraction – indeed distraction from distraction, a kind of meta-distraction, as it were – and the destruction of our powers to fix our attention on anything for long.

It was in a remote part of Colombia that I first learned of the powers of the new technology. I am not a close follower of technological developments, rather I limp after them slowly and adopt them late and with a degree of fear and reluctance; I read in a Colombian newspaper that the guerrillas in the jungle through which I was passing, who were the most prolific kidnappers in the world, were able, no matter where they were, to discover through satellite communications the financial situation of their victims and adjust their ransom demands accordingly. This did not seem altogether good news to me, as I did not want to have to liquidate my assets to pay a ransom demand, and the risk of being kidnapped was more than entirely negligible.

It is said that the mobile telephone has transformed the economies of many African countries, one of the previous difficulties being that those who produced had so little ready knowledge of the whereabouts of those who wanted to consume, which limited the possibility of trade and therefore the motive to produce. By contrast, I remember the days when it could be necessary to go several hundred miles to make a telephone call home, and even then success could

not be guaranteed – if, for example, it rained. This had its drawbacks, of course, especially where emergencies were concerned, but I feel a little like Talleyrand when he said that no one who had not experienced life under the *ancien régime* (as an aristocrat, it goes without saying) knew the true sweetness of life. No one who has not known what it is to be incommunicado for weeks or months on end does not know how carefree life can be, and increasingly it is impossible for anyone to know it, at least without aiming for it so self-consciously that the delight of it is lost. We only truly appreciate what we do not aim at directly.

My delight at having been incommunicado for months on end is a very small thing to weigh in the balance against the economic development of a continent in which scores of millions lived, and still live, in abject poverty, but I do not look forward to a world in which the only way not to be in constant contact with others is to become a misanthropic hermit.

The other day I bought a thin paperback book by Joseph Kessel called *En Syrie*, (*In Syria*). It was first published in 1926 and is a series of short but graphic articles about the then recent French mandate in Syria (which included the Lebanon), republished because of what the blurb calls – for once quite accurately and without exaggeration – its surprising contemporary relevance.

Kessel was a remarkable man and writer, kind of André Malraux minus the self-advertisement and dishonesty. He was born in Argentina in 1898 of Jewish parents who had fled pogroms in Russia, but subsequently grew up partly in the Urals but mostly in France. He was a pilot in the First World War, he early saw and wrote about the extreme danger of Nazism, he joined the French Resistance during the Second World War, and subsequently wrote very prolifically, including a fine novel about Himmler's charlatan doctor, Felix Kersten, who was the only person who could relieve the monster's psychosomatic abdominal troubles, as Rasputin was the only one to relieve the Tsarevich's pains. He was elected to the French Academy in 1962 and died in 1979.

Syria was placed under French mandate by the League of Nations at the end of the First World War, though the Arabs had joined the Allied side against the Central Powers and Turkey (to whose Empire all the Arab lands had long belonged) on the understanding that they would be granted independence afterwards. In short, the French and British ratted on them.

At this distance from the end of the First World War, it is not easy to see what the French wanted a mandate in Syria *for*, other than maintain their prestige and be generally important. The British at least wanted Iraq for its oil; and between them the two countries carved out territories that had no real meaning for their inhabitants but whose borders held for a hundred years, which is said by some to be at the root of the present troubles. I don't really believe it: I doubt that the Middle East would have become some kind of sandy Scandinavia if it had been left to its own devices. Admittedly it is difficult to imagine how things could have turned out very much worse in Syria.

Kessel writes:

Syria? What do we know of it? Let us admit without false pride: a few historical memories of the Crusades, a few famous pages, the beautiful names of Damascus, Palmyra and the Euphrates, that is the totality of our baggage for a large and fertile region placed under French mandate.

And he continues:

Who – other than a very few specialists – could draw a political physiognomy of this country? Who could explain why and who we fight there?

There is only one excuse for this ignorance, says Kessel, and that is the sheer complexity of the country.

The French mandate stimulated armed opposition almost immediately. The French had an inadequate number of troops to fight it and tried to fight it from the air. According to Kessel, the French made the mistake of changing their top administrators too often, so that by the time any of them began to grasp something about the country they made way for a replacement who knew nothing. And French policy was almost a mirror image of what it ought to have been. Kessel heard someone who knew the country well say:

There are four classes of Muslims [in Syria]: the aristocratic landowners, who need neither money nor position, and who ask for nothing more than courtesy; the lesser aristocracy, ruined by the war, who would like positions, but who cannot be bought; the people who can be bought; and finally the masses who must be ruled with a rod of iron.

And what, asks Kessel's interlocutor, do the French do?

They beat the aristocratic landowners; they try to buy those who only want a position, giving it instead to those who want money, and suck up to the masses.

Kessel, who never doubts the French right to be in Syria, ends by saying that it would be better to abandon the mandate than to be worn out by exercising it badly.

It all sounds painfully familiar.

But actually I bought the book (\$3) because of the picture on its front, the photograph of a street in a still-Ottoman Damascus taken, I should imagine, about 1914, in the subtle shades of early colour postcards.

It is a beautiful narrow street, leading (I think) to the Great Mosque in the distance. It conveys peace and above all a civilised existence. In the foreground a couple of men who ride donkeys; in the middle distance are the only wheeled vehicles, a couple of caleches; the sun is overhead and the pedestrians cast strong shadows, two of them walking with parasols. The architecture is pure Ottoman, with delicately-latticed moucharabiehs overhanging the unpaved road below. Life continues at a pleasingly slow pace.

The picture excites a kind of nostalgia for something that one has not even known and never existed; it provokes an almost dream-like state, a pleasant reverie of a life without politics and ideology, a cultured utopia in fact, where there is an abundance of beauty and taste rather than of things, where people treat each other with ceremonial courtesy rather than in business-like fashion at best, and even the smallest and most ordinary of things are infused with a concern for aesthetics. A more fully-human life, in fact.

In my peregrinations, I occasionally came across somewhere in which I thought, or rather preferred in my ignorance, to imagine that there was such a life. All those places have since descended into chaos and massacre, with millions fled or displaced and the vilest doctrines propagated. Appearances are deceptive.

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