Nota Bene, Part I

by Theodore Dalrymple (September 2016)

When I was young, which is now a long time ago, I was much impressed by the character of Trigorin, the writer in Chekhov's play, *The Seagull*. Trigorin always carried a little notebook with him to jot down snatches of conversation he overheard that the he might use, or to record any ideas that he might have. He thought his own epitaph ought to be: 'Here lies Trigorin. He was a good writer, but not as good as Turgenev.'

I sought for a time to imitate Trigorin in the matter of notebooks. I realised how much of life, even of one's own thoughts, was quickly forgotten. One remembered only some infinitesimal proportion of one's experience, and then inaccurately. For example, I would overhear something that I thought worthy to be recorded, but a little later I would recall only that there was something that I wanted to recall, but not what it actually was. Like a dream, it was gone forever, but much more frustratingly. I had forgotten what I thought was the unforgettable.

So I thought it would be a good idea to imitate Trigorin, but my imitation never lasted more than a day or two. It proved more difficult than I had thought to carry a notebook everywhere with me. It looked – it *was* – rather affected. Sometimes I would have the notebook with me, but no implement with which to

write in it. More often, I would forget to take it with me, and by some curious mischance it was precisely when I did not have it with me that I overheard or thought of something that was particularly worthy of record.

I had another problem in becoming a second Trigorin (beside that of becoming a good writer). I am not generally obsessional, but I nevertheless have some mild traits in respect of a few things, not bending the spines of books for example. Now I found that the kind of things I wanted to record fell into different natural categories. Among them were snatches of conversations – actually the conversations were often more like two monologues that passed each other like ships in the night, each person merely waiting his turn to speak – in which one of the interlocutors would have said something delicious, such as 'My doctor says I'm suffering from a cardiac heart.' (Intellectuals say things just as ridiculous but without the concision or the charm.)

Then there was the *bon mot* that came to me unbidden, on the train or in the butcher's. Without a notebook it soon evaporated from my consciousness, never to return. Of how many witticisms (or so they seemed to me at the time) has the world been deprived simply because I forgot to take a notebook with me.

Further, there were the things that I read in newspapers or magazines that I thought might serve me later on. Then there were ideas I had for articles that, if not written down, quickly fled my mind. And in second-hand bookshops I wanted to record the titles of the most boring books ever written: *The Development of Accounting Methods in the Fishing Industry*, for example, or *The Principles of Traffic Control in Saffron Walden, 1963 – 1980*.

A most important category of items that I wanted to record was the little lies, half-truths and evasions by which we are surrounded in advertisements, public announcements and the like. We hardly notice them, but it is precisely because we do not pay much attention to them that we live, and I suppose now expect to live, in an atmosphere or miasma of untruth. We breathe untruth as we breathe.

Now because of my slight obsessionality, at least in this regard, I wanted to keep these several categories separate, as if, in the same notebook, they might contaminate each other, or as if on looking through them some time later I should be unable to distinguish a bon mot from a lie or an overheard conversation.

But if I were unable to take one notebook with me everywhere I went, much less would I be able to take several. I like notebooks as physical objects, many are handsome, and I keep buying them in the hope that their very beauty will one day reproach me into keeping to my resolution. I now have so many notebooks that they might, after my death, form the core collection of the National Library of Unused Notebooks.

But the other day I came across a handsome spiral notebook, too large for a breast pocket but easily slippable into a jacket pocket, in which I had actually started a collection of public lies, half-truths and evasions. I had evidently kept up the effort for a few days, though I do not remember actually having done so.

The first entry ran as follows:

> On a bus from B…… to W……, 'Luggage must be stored safely in the areas provided and not in the gangway.' But no such areas were provided, not one.

Was this notice an oversight, or a deliberate attempt to raise anxiety or guilt among passengers with luggage, even to bully them? For to be given an instruction that you cannot obey, and that implies that you are endangering others if you do not obey it, is to insinuate worry into the minds of people who are inclined to conform. After all, one *can* easily conceive of circumstances in which luggage in the gangway of a bus might be hazardous. People could trip over it or the bus might crash and catch fire, the luggage impeding passengers' escape.

The second entry was about telephoning a newspaper for which I have been writing intermittently for twenty years or more. The automated answering announcement is made by a woman with a terrible nasal whine, the kind of voice that for some reason is increasingly chosen for public announcements in Britain and nowhere else in the world. 'Switchboard is very busy today' she said, to which I add in my notebook:

> Switchboard has been very busy today for several years. The lie is in the 'today,' with its natural implication that other days are different. They never are.

But of course, if taken literally, it might be true that switchboard was very

busy today as every day (because of an inadequate system, say). This is an admirable example – admirable from a certain phenomenological perspective, that is – of telling the truth and a lie at precisely the same time, and in precisely the same words.

I add in the notebook that the same voice, half-slut, half-harridan, requests callers not to ask for the e-mail addresses of individuals working at the newspaper because 'we will not be able to help.' No doubt there is a good reason why e-mail addresses should not be given out incontinently to all and sundry, the world is indeed full of maniacs, but 'not able to help' confuses unwillingness with inability and encourages a world in which no one is responsible for anything, where there is no distinction between *can't* and *won't*.

The third entry notes an announcement on a train:

> First class is found in the rear two carriages, standard class in the front carriages.

Why 'is found' rather than just 'is'? More importantly, why not 'second' rather than 'standard'? Does the train company think that the self-esteem of passengers in second class would be irreparably damaged and their lives laid waste if confronted with the fact that they were travelling second class, not first, and that therefore the company might one day be served with a class action (first class for the lawyers, a distant second for the litigants)? My notebook asks 'Are our egos really so delicate?'

Fourth in the notebook is a telephone call I received at home.

> This is a public service announcement.

I continue:

> It was by a private company offering professional assistance to debtors.

Here the deliberate confusion was between service to the public and public service. Private companies provide a service to the public, of course, but that is not the same as public service.

There follows in the notebook a headline in a newspaper:

> Applicants must do voluntary work

Must do voluntary work? I suppose there is not quite a logical contradiction in this, since applicants for a job might also be required to show that they do unpaid work for the good of humanity as a condition of employment. But the conjunction of the words *must* with *voluntary* puts one in mind of the sergeant-major who shouts at the ranks, ‘I want three volunteers, you, you and you!’ The most sinister thing about the headline is that no sub-editor noticed it. In Britain, people who are detained compulsorily in hospital are called their ‘clients’ by hospital staff.

Next I noted another announcement on a train, which was going to arrive late at its destination:

> We are sorry for the delay and for the inconvenience to your journey.

It was not my journey that was inconvenienced by the delay – journeys are not the kind of things that can experience inconvenience; it was *I* and the other passengers who were inconvenienced. (In my case, I was inconvenienced hardly at all, since I was not in a hurry and the delay was not long: still, one likes to *feel* inconvenienced, as it gives one a nice warm glow of having been wronged, which it turn masks one’s own sins.)

The internet is a wonderful purveyor of commercial lies, or at least of less-than-truths. In my notebook is the following:

> An e-mail from a bookseller: ‘Hurry, only two days left on your coupon.’

Strictly speaking, this was not quite a lie; the coupon (for a ten per cent reduction in price) would have expired in two days. But I knew, or at any rate have good grounds for believing, that I should receive another such coupon within a month at the latest, because I had received them regularly for years.

A certain famous newspaper, supposedly of record but also very dull, badgers me electronically almost daily with offers of special deals that seem always on the point of ending. ‘Hurry! Only 24 hours left to grab the deal! Don’t miss it!’ But I know, in the same way that I know the sun will rise tomorrow, that next day I will receive the following breathless announcement: ‘Sale extended!’

The decision to extend the sale can hardly be taken overnight: it must surely be

decided long before. In other words, the newspaper supposedly of record lies repeatedly about its own intentions, and has done so for years.

Now it is true that the common law doctrine of *Falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus*, that is that a witness who tells a lie about one thing is not to be trusted about anything, rests itself on very a doubtful basis of truth: there is no one in the world who has never told a lie, especially about what most nearly concerns himself (it is much easier to tell the truth about indifferent matters). If we extended the doctrine to life outside the witness box we should never trust anything that anyone said; and if a pathological liar were to say that two plus two made four, two and two would still make four. In other words, every statement has, strictly speaking, to be tested not against the character of him who makes it, but against what actually is, or was, the case.

However, human beings are not perfect calculating machines who are always ruled by logic and evidence (assuming, what may not be true, that these are infallible guides to reality). In practice, we have to be guided by our informants' reputation for honesty, truthfulness and probity; in fact, we often have to make an instant judgment of these on nothing but appearance. And if we have constantly been lied to by someone or some organisation, our trust is diminished.

Some of the little lies, half-truths and evasions that I recorded in my notebook might have been unintentional, the consequence of inexactitude of language. If it is possible to let a truth escape inadvertently, it must be possible to do the opposite. But there are further examples that I recorded in my little notebook that do not seem to me to have been wholly innocent, and that I will examine in a further article.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *here*.

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