

Our Dreams Are Such Stuff As We Are Made On

by Theodore Dalrymple (September 2015)

The other night—actually, early in the morning—I had a strange and disturbing dream. Normally I do not attach much importance to the symbolism of my own dreams, which are often banal and indicative of a most elementary or basic need, such as that to relieve myself. But this dream was very odd; as usual, it woke me before its denouement, but unusually I was able to remember it, or a good part of it.

Two friends of mine had quarrelled and agreed to have a duel with revolvers. If the dream vouchsafed me the cause of their quarrel, I have forgotten it; but I do know that it was trivial and not worth losing a life over.

I was a second in this duel, which was appointed to take place a short time hence. During this time I asked a legal friend, a judge of one of the highest courts in the land, whether there was any legal step I could take to abort the duel. He assured me that there was not, but I did not really believe him even though he was incomparably more learned in the law than I. Surely in this day and age (an expression people use only in an argument of last resort) so primitive a manner of behaving had been outlawed?

The morning of the duel arrived. It was appointed for nine o'clock precisely. It was to take place in front of a medical school, though neither of the men who quarrelled was a doctor. The other second and I arrived on the duelling ground—a small patch of grass—at twenty to nine. For some reason this small detail was preserved in my memory. In the twenty minutes remaining, I was desperate to find a reason or means of stopping the duel.

I ran into the medical school because my lawyer had an office there (in my dream, that is). I was worried that he might not have arrived at work yet, but I knocked on his door marked Probyn and Co. (Probyn is the name of a character in a novel I had been reading the night before, and otherwise I knew no person of that name.) To my immense relief he was sitting at his desk. I recognised his face: it was that of my former literary agent, in the days when I still had one.

I was about to ask his advice when I suddenly thought of a solution myself: I would ask the police to come and arrest the duellers on a charge of conspiracy to murder, or illegal possession of firearms, and if necessary they could arrest us, the seconds, as accessories to these crimes—anything, but they must intervene.

This struck me in my dream as a brilliant, if obvious, solution, but I woke up before it could be put into operation. Perhaps the nightmare trauma of having to explain to the police on the telephone, and of convincing them that I was not just a time-waster or a crank, was more than my reticular activating system (the part of the brain that controls wakefulness and the transition between sleep and consciousness) could bear. I resolved to write down the dream before the memory of it faded, as it usually does.

One particular aspect of the dream puzzled me: not its illogicality or its implausibility, for we are all accustomed to the fact that dreams do not proceed as if they were a short story by Maupassant with a satisfyingly neat ending. It was rather that I felt a compulsion to continue to act as a second in the duel, that unless I could persuade the police to do as I asked I should have to go through with it, even unto the death of one of the duellers, and even though I knew the duel to be ridiculous. I could not just walk away from it.

Why not? It seemed a matter of honour, and the maintenance of honour was a stronger motive than any merely ethical consideration. But what is honour worth, asked Falstaff?

Can honour set to a leg? no: or an arm? no: or take away the

grief of a wound? no. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then?

no. What is honour? a word. What is in that word honour?

What is that honour? air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? He

that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? No. Doth he hear it?

no. 'Tis insensible, then. Yea, to the dead. But will it not live

with the living? no. Why? detraction will not suffer it.

Therefore I'll none of it. Honour is a mere scutcheon: and so

ends my catechism.

This is the probably greatest indictment of honour as a virtue, or supposed virtue, in literature. In effect it reminds us not to run after false gods, so many of which are linked in some way to honour: titles, medals, prizes and so forth, which are all evanescent and ultimately ridiculous. Present mirth hath present laughter, to quote Feste the Fool (who was no fool); when you are dead, you are dead for a long time. Enjoy life while you have it and do not throw it away on an illusion.

But of course things are much more complex than Falstaff allows. If there is unease in our laughter at his speech because we know that in some circumstances he is right, when the standing on honour would be absurd and the throwing away of one's life foolhardy or reprehensible, we also know that he is prepared to use precisely the same argument to justify all dishonourable conduct whatsoever, in any circumstances. Like most of us, Falstaff is a philosopher after the fact; he uses philosophy to justify past actions, or actions that he has already decided upon, not to determine what action to take.

When I was asked, in some preliminary to my dream to which I do not have access, to be a second in the duel, I should have refused there and then; my initial acceptance was what started me on the downward slope to nightmare. I thought, or would have thought if I had thought of it at all, that to withdraw having first agreed would be a dishonourable thing to do. Therefore the descent was inexorable.

To break one's word is generally a dishonourable thing to do, and a world in which no one ever kept his word would be intolerable. Even in countries in which personal honesty is not the first characteristic, people must often be trusted in the small change of existence, usually with good result. But always to keep one's word, when circumstances have greatly changed, when to do so would cause useless hardship either to oneself or others, or when one should not have given one's word in the first place, turns honour into a species of spiritual pride. A man who says that he always keeps his word is either a liar or is to be avoided as pridefully inflexible.

Honour, then, is one of those virtues that is not free-standing, as it were.

Whether or not it is a good thing depends on what the person is honourable about. You can admire the honour of an enemy or opponent up to certain point. He may, for example, refuse to take advantage of information that is discreditable to you, though not strictly relevant to the matter in hand, because it would be dishonourable to use it. To do so would be to infringe the rules of civilised opposition or debate to which he has agreed, implicitly or explicitly, beforehand: and he refuses such conduct even if it would secure him victory. The best recognition of his honour in so doing is not to resort to such conduct oneself, in other words to place a limit on what one is prepared to do oneself to secure victory.

But an enemy may be so dangerous or evil that even if he is honourable in some aspect of his conduct, the honour counts for nothing. If his cause is dreadful and he pursues it with vigour, then no conduct will extenuate it. Fidelity to others in joint pursuit of an atrocious end is not admirable but horrible and terrifying. In this respect, honour is like bravery: beyond a certain point of badness of cause, it is not, or should not be, the occasion of admiration.

Indeed, honour can turn into a kind of cowardice. Having agreed to act as a second in the duel, I dare not withdraw, as clearly I should have done. I did not want to go to my friend afterwards and tell him that, his duel being absurd and his willingness to kill his opponent abominable, I would have no further part in it. What was it that I feared?

A few moments' embarrassment, that's all. I did not want to face his reproach, his accusation of untrustworthiness. And to avoid this I was prepared to see him or his opponent go to his death. My honour was a device for disguising pusillanimity.

In public debate I try always to remain courteous (not with invariable success, but I try). Sometimes this courtesy slides into cowardice, however, my desire not to offend being greater than my attachment to truth, even when untruth (as I see it) is being propounded for someone I believe to be dishonest, unscrupulous or in some other way unworthy, an even when the untruth is a dangerous one. What is a virtue in many circumstances turns into a vice in others.

The fact that there is no precise point or moment at which virtue turns into vice suggests that there will never be any categorical imperatives, at least not

of any use to the person who is trying to behave well. Kindness turns into cruelty when it helps to maintain the need for kindness to be exercised; it then becomes an exercise in self-congratulation rather than in doing good. On the other hand, laudable awareness of the need to avoid the point at which kindness transforms itself into cruelty or self-congratulation easily itself becomes indifference or callousness. The ethical life is a course steered eternally between Scylla and Charybdis, between the rock and the whirlpool of different manifestations of intransigence.

That there is no rule for discerning when virtue turns to vice does not mean that there is no real distinction between them, any more than the fact that there is no precise point at which a man becomes tall means there is no distinction between a tall man and a short one. No one has any difficulty in recognising the difference between an achondroplastic dwarf and an acromegalic giant. But the lack of such a rule is often used by people to justify conduct that has clearly passed over into vice, because the distinction between vice and virtue, having no decisive algorithm to distinguish them, is then (temporarily, for purposes of self-justification) held to be arbitrary and therefore unjust.

Did my dream mean anything? I have never dreamed of duels before, but oddly enough an antiquarian bookseller had sent me a catalogue some days before (printed catalogues, that so delight book-buyers, are going the way of books themselves) in which was offered for sale *A Hint on Duelling, in a Letter to a Friend*, published in 1751, and of which only two other copies are known.

The bookseller has evidently read the book and writes:

The author [unknown] would not have duelling entirely suppressed, but suggests the establishment of a proper Court of Honour would lessen the frequency of the practice..

and he then quotes the author:

The Decision of Men of adequate Character and Authority would in most Cases after Insults received prevent Duels; and where that fail'd, a due-proportioned Punishment judiciously and impartially inflicted would soon lessen the Frequency of the Practice.

And the friend to whom I was to be second in the duel had recently invited me to give a talk at a conference in Illyria, and I been recently engaged on writing an essay on the character of Malvolio (*Twelfth Night*, you will vaguely remember, takes place in Illyria).

Our dreams, then, are such stuff as we are made on. Could it really be otherwise, and does it matter? I doubt it.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is [here](#).

To help New English Review continue to publish original and thought provoking essays like this one, please click [here](#).

If you have enjoyed this article and want to read more by Theodore Dalrymple, please click [here](#).

Theodore Dalrymple is also a regular contributor to our community blog, *The Iconoclast*. Please click [here](#) to see all his contributions on which comments are welcome.