Slaves of the Combustion Engine

by Theodore Dalrymple (March 2016)

The motor car used to be a symbol of personal liberation. You could go anywhere you wanted, any time you wanted, without being tied to the timetable and destinations served by public transport. The wind, as it were, was in your hair thanks to the motor car. But increasingly in a small country such as Britain the car is an instrument almost of torture, a symbol of a peculiar kind of enslavement. It imposes financial costs on me that I cannot avoid however little I use it. In fact, I use my car as little as possible, and I pity those who have to drive to work every day.

By contrast, I love public transport because of the opportunity it gives me of eavesdropping on what ordinary people talk about. A bus is like a bar without the drunkenness and the undertow of aggression. It always surprises me how important medical matters are to people who travel on buses and you can never go far in England before you hear something like, 'The doctor says to me, 'e says…'; there following something that no doctor in the whole long and convoluted history of medicine could possibly have said to a patient. No doctor, for example, ever told a patient that he had a *cardiac heart* (a very dangerous condition, incidentally). I get the impression that people *love* their illnesses as old friends, provided that they are not too serious and have enough variability of symptoms to provide a talking-point, in other words something for *them* to contribute to the conversation. There is an implicit pact in such conversations: I will listen to your symptoms with feigned interest if you will listen to mine with real interest, for everyone knows that his own illness is the most interesting that has ever occurred. It is illness that gives meaning to life.

The other day, though, I wanted to go somewhere inaccessible to public transport and so had to drive. It was an art gallery 150 miles away where there was an interesting exhibition about to close and that I did not want to miss. I looked up the route on the internet, which assured me that it would take just under

three hours, information in which I placed about as much confidence as I now place in the emissions data of Volkswagen (and all other) cars. Incidentally, I don't care much about the fate of the planet – it is too large an entity for me to have any warmth of feeling towards – but I can quite see that it is bad thing to pollute the air.

I was right about the internet's unwarranted optimism, alas. Into the fifth hour of my journey, I found myself going at 8 miles an hour on average along a highway with five lanes on either side. Someone once claimed that traffic in central London now moves no faster than it did in Victorian times, so congested is the city; and on this highway, I could very well believe it.

How soul-destroying are the seemingly endless stops and starts and false hopes aroused by the sudden acceleration to 17 miles an hour (which feels like supersonic speed after half an hour of walking speed), hopes only to be dashed after a few seconds by the grind to an absolute halt, progress in total having been made of a length that in the mud of Flanders during the First World War would have cost 800,000 lives to make. Only a recital of Schubert piano music on the radio soothed my savage breast a little: without it, I think I should have had a stroke from rage and frustration.

It is one of the fundamental laws of the universe that, in any traffic jam, the traffic always moves quicker in the adjacent lanes: or at least that is what most drivers (including me) seem to think. All my life I have chosen the slowest lanes of traffic, just as I am always seated next or near to the one crying baby on an airliner. What have I done to deserve being dogged all my life by ill-fortune such as this? And why is it, that in all these years, that I have never learned how to choose the fastest lane?

I am not alone, though: everyone else in the traffic jam is cursing his luck at being in the slowest lane. That is why, when he sees a gap in the adjacent lane, he dodges into it with quick furtiveness, usually only to be disillusioned a few yards further on, so that he tries another lane or returns to the lane from which he first absconded. But in either case, he does not stay long: he moves again. It is not so much hope that springs eternal in the human breast as despair.

There are of course, the stolid or stoical ones who are content to stay in the

lane they first entered, who do not protest or fight against fate, who will drink the cup of their choice of lane to its bitter dregs. I am afraid I am not one of them. I recognise the irrationality of the other lane-dodgers, who are misled by the temporary speeding up to their right or left and take it as a sign that *this* or *that* lane is faster than theirs. I do not draw such unscientific conclusions from what lasts only a few seconds and is soon proved wrong. No; before moving I try to work out in which lane the trouble really lies. On a three-lane highway, for example, I abjure the middle lane because, if there has been a crash on either the inner or the outer land, the cars in that lane must join the middle lane, causing it to go slower. I therefore make a comparison for a few minutes of the speed of the inner and outer lanes, and select the faster.

On a four-lane highway, however, the lanes to watch are the two middle ones. Whichever of them is the faster is adjacent to the fastest of all, the inner or the outer. But on a five-lane highway it is easier: the middle lane, theoretically, is the best bet, the least likely to be blocked or slowed by an accident.

I amuse myself for a time in traffic jams with these speculations. I compare myself with the poor dolts who go by superficial appearances only, while I judge on a firmer, more scientific basis which lane to join. The other drivers, I tell myself, are like those people who, knowing an uncle who smoked fifty cigarettes a day for eighty years and lived to be a hundred, conclude from this that cigarettes are perfectly harmless for the health. But as soon as I act on my supposedly scientific speculations, they prove to be false: the ineluctable law of the universe re-establishes itself, namely that whichever lane you are in, it is the slowest. The universe persecutes me.

Eventually, though, fatalism supervenes, I give up changing lanes and start to wonder about something else, namely a question derived from or stimulated by the novels of J.G. Ballard. Supposing the traffic ground to a permanent halt, not stopping and starting as now but remaining perfectly motionless for reasons completely opaque to the drivers, how long would it take before the veneer of civilisation was stripped away from the drivers and their passengers, revealing without disguise not the wolf but the sabre-toothed tiger that is Man?

How long would it be before the law of the jungle supervened, and bands of drivers and passengers started roaming up and down the lines of cars in search

of food and water, how long before the first driver was beaten or killed for not handing his bottle of water over to such a band? How long before fights developed within cars as well as between them? Only a matter of hours, surely, certainly not of days? And then warfare would break out between the bands themselves for control of lengths of the stationary cars.

I first thought of this scenario in a traffic jam in London, in which it took me about an hour and a half to go a hundred yards. There were shops on either side of the road and I imagined the glass of their fronts being smashed by the desperate drivers and passengers as they sought something to eat and drink, the terrified owners of the shops having barricaded themselves inside, having frantically but futilely called the police. I had read too much Ballard.

Ballard always imagined the effect of catastrophe on collective human behaviour: flood, freezing, civil unrest and so forth. It was not difficult to guess from his personal biography why his imagination worked in this way. Born in Shanghai as a privileged westerner before the war, the city was occupied by the Japanese and he went as a young boy from being spoilt and cosseted to a member of a group that had to struggle without much scruple for bare survival. This was the outline of the story to which he returned again and again, it was his theme and variations.

It is a beguiling theme, as if only great misfortune could reveal to us the deepest layers of our being. According to this line of thinking, saying please and thank you are not really part of my character if in a concentration camp I would cease to say them, politeness being only of a patina that covers very inadequately the inner psychopath raring to emerge in the right (which is to say the wrong) conditions. This is the assumption not only of Ballard but of William Golding in his first and most famous novel, *Lord of the Flies*, in which a party of English schoolboys are marooned on an uninhabited tropical island. There, freed of any adult control or restraint, they soon become violent and pitiless savages under the leadership of the most ruthless of their number. Golding, a schoolteacher, wrote the book in the early 1950s to counter the moral self-satisfaction of the British in their victory over the Nazis, who congratulated themselves that they wold never behave like *that*. Golding was concerned to show that, underneath our more polished exteriors, we were all potential Nazis.

This argument, or rather trope, is one whose force I understand and yet which

irritates me. Why is character revealed more fully by disaster or catastrophe than by the continuance of ordinary, everyday life, say, or good fortune? Why is any behaviour not 'real' if we would not continue it under all possible circumstances or conditions whatever? A man may be brilliantly effective in a crisis but perfectly useless in conditions of routine: but routine is just as real as crisis, indeed crisis could not exist unless routine prevailed most of the time.

In fact success, or perhaps I should say good fortune, is at least as much a test of character as its opposite. I admire people who struggle through adversity to some considerable achievement; but I also admire those who, born to great good fortune, also achieve something of their own, because such good fortune can so easily have as enervating an effect upon effort as constant ill-fortune.

Sometimes it is difficult even to distinguish good- from ill-fortune. When I returned from my day-trip, having spent at least four hours stuck in traffic, far longer than I spent in the exhibition itself, I discovered that there was only one space left in my road for a car to park, and that was but a very few inches – not more than six or seven – longer than my car. Was I in luck or out of it? At first I thought I was out of it, but with the recklessness of despair I managed to park in the space without even hitting the car in front or behind me. Despair transmuted swiftly into euphoria: such is the triviality of human emotion under normal conditions. Our life hangs by a thread, but so does our mood.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *here*.

community blog, *The Iconoclast*. Please click here to see all his contributions on which comments are welcome.