

Strolling through the Turning World

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (April 2022)



The Stone Bench in the Garden of Saint-Paul Hospital, Vincent Van Gogh, 1889

When the weather is fine and I am in England, I take an afternoon stroll in the pleasant and well-kept public gardens in the small market town in which I live. Though very tranquil now, evidence of less peaceful times is present in the park: the ruins of the castle blown up during the English Civil War

by the parliamentary forces (the town was staunchly royalist) and a moving war memorial commemorating the town's 'glorious dead' during the two world conflicts.

The memorial moves, in part, because of the list of names inscribed on the metal plaques on the plinth. My plumber's family lost three of its young men during the Great War, the family of the hardware store from which I buy household goods lost four, the butcher's family (now the richest in the town) lost one, as did that of the auctioneers, whose local economic activities go back two centuries.

I do not know whether the four young men lost in one family were brothers, or brothers and cousins, or cousins alone; but in a small town such as ours, the family must have been close-knit and the imagination trembles at the thought of the grief of such losses. And for what, one is inclined to ask? Ask anyone in the street what the Great War was about, what it was fought for, ask even those people who take an interest in history, and I doubt you will receive a succinct and convincing answer. The Great War for Civilization it was called, but it appears in retrospect to have been a war that ended civilization, or at any rate altered it much for the worse, rather than a proud crusade to preserve what was worth preserving.

There is a reassuring aspect, however, to the inscription of names on the memorial that one recognises as still prominent in the town. It speaks of continuity and rootedness such as one had feared no longer existed in our fast-moving times. I myself have been a wanderer rather than rooted and have both admired and envied those who are rooted: though no doubt had I been rooted by family pressure or tradition, I should have kicked against the traces and gone wandering all the same. I wanted both rootedness and freedom from the restrictions and limitations that rootedness entails; in other words I had contradictory and irreconcilable desires. As Dr Johnson says in *Rasselas* (through the words of one of the characters), you

cannot at the same time drink from the source and the mouth of the Nile.

Still, in times of freedom of movement, rootedness such as that testified to by the war memorial bespeaks a level of long-term satisfaction and contentment with life—on the whole, of course, not in every detail. Perfect satisfaction or contentment with life is not of this world.

Along the pathways in the garden are wooden benches for the public to sit or take their rest upon, and practically all of them are inscribed with the carved names of people whom relatives or friends have wanted to memorialise thus. Now this seems to me a civilised custom, in part because it is modest rather than flamboyant. It is a little gift to the town, a manifestation of a belief in continuity, as well as a memorial. The idea of human permanence is relative, of course: if we donate a wooden park bench in perpetuity to a town, we think it permanent though a moment's reflection is more than enough to convince us that by any measure other than three score years and ten, our perpetuity is fleeting indeed.

Most people sit on the park benches without giving a different moment's thought to the name or names inscribed on them. I suspect that most people do not even notice that there *is* a name or *are* names inscribed on them: for them, the benches are just there, assumed always to have been there, for it is easy to assume that what exists has always existed. How quickly we forget how things were in the past, even the recent past!

I always look at the names on the benches as I walk in the gardens. I have an absurd and illogical idea that to do so is in some way to rescue the deceased from total oblivion: for as the Jews say, there are two deaths, one when a person dies and one when no one remembers him anymore. And actually, the names are an education not only in affection but in human tragedy and the unfairness of life.

I always pause before a bench that commemorates an eminent scientist born in the town in the year of my birth but who died twenty years ago. He was an astrophysicist and meteorologist who has had a prize and a crater on the moon named after him, so important was his research. I feel a peculiar, and it must be admitted a fleeting, guilt as I look on this bench, first that through no merit of my own or fault of his I have survived twenty years longer than he (the world does not distribute its rewards with strict regard to justice), and second that he, no doubt through a combination of superior talent and harder work, contributed important positive knowledge to the human store, while I have done no such thing, as I might have done had I been more determined to do so.

One bench has a distinctly enigmatic inscription: *For J..... S.....: It couldn't have happened to a nicer guy.* What was the *it* that happened? An accident, an illness, death itself? Was this the revenge of someone on his despised or hated memory? Given that J..... S..... must be presumed dead, surely the *it* must have been something unpleasant or nasty, for if *it* were a posthumous award for some glorious or worthwhile achievement, surely it would have been mentioned or described by name? A peculiar way, then, to carry on a vendetta beyond one of the party's deaths.

Then there is the bench dedicated to the memory of her son by his mother. This is always affecting, especially as we are lucky enough to live in a time when the biblical span seems not only assured but an underestimate of how long we shall live, and therefore that parents will always die before their offspring. The death of a child—in this case, an adult child—thus seems a reversal of the natural order of things and therefore doubly cruel. But what is impressive about the inscription on bench is its gentle humour. Having given her name, the mother puts in parentheses *the maid*. These are the words of a doting mother who, one suspects, not only did much

cooking, cleaning and ironing for her son, but was glad to have done so, and remembered the past with happiness as well as grief for her son. No doubt this inscription would not please the more militant feminists of our times, who want or need to deny that domestic tasks can be anything other than a *corvée* for women that ought therefore to be shared fifty-fifty by men, including (retrospectively) by the son memorialised by the bench, by definition an exploiter of a woman, his mother; in a subtle way, then, the park bench stands as an implicit challenge to an entire world outlook, and if our town were what, thank goodness it is not, a hive of the various radicalisms that afflict the western world, no doubt some *enragé*, not necessarily a woman, would deface the inscription on the bench as an insult to all women, held to be a glorification of past oppression. To point out that the inscription was obviously an expression of genuine feeling would in no way assuage or deflect the *enragé*: on the contrary, it would only inflame him or her further, because he or she would reply that the mother's feeling only went to show how insidious was the false consciousness produced by the patriarchy, reconciling the oppressed to their own oppression. The bench is a statue wating to be toppled.

Then there was a bench dedicated to the memory of a man who died in 1975 who had survived both Dunkirk and D-Day and was 'remembered with pride.' He would not have died a very old man, I imagine (his date of birth is not given, only that of his death), probably in his fifties. How much he would have had to recall, and how little young men (such as I was at the time of his death) would have asked him to recall it! Of course, his experiences might have been so terrible that he would have been glad, if not to forget them, at least to put them to the back of his mind—forgetting and putting to the back of the mind often being taken as the same thing, though they are obviously very different. On the other hand, it might have been extremely painful to him that the younger generation, wrapped up in its own, somewhat less dramatic

life, was so uninterested in what he might have told them. Primo Levi, after all, had the nightmare that, when his time in Auschwitz was over and there was a return to normal life, no one would be interested in or believe what he had experienced, and this was almost worse than the experience itself.

Looking at this bench dedicated to the memory of this man 'remembered with pride,' I could not but regret that I had taken so little interest in the memories of my elders, who actually witnessed or participated in so many momentous events. I was too egotistically concerned with my own small life, too unaware, except intellectually, that I would one day be old myself and therefore vastly more interested in the past than in the future, to take an interest in the memories of the old, which in any case I thought would always be available to me should I ever want them: for when you are young, time moves slowly if at all. There will thus be time enough for memories later; now is for living, not remembering.

This, I regret to say, is a mistake I have made repeatedly, I might almost say chronically, throughout much of my life; and now, of course, it too late to repair the damage. As Marguerite Duras puts it beautifully in one of her books, 'Very early in my life, it was too late.'

Not, of course, that I am alone in this, indeed it is almost a constant of human existence, at least in the modern world. To say that I am outraged by the uninterest in my experiences, slightly above average as they have been in dramatic quality, that the young people of my acquaintance evince, would be to exaggerate: rather I am mildly disappointed, though not altogether surprised, by it. Perhaps they will regret it later in their lives, when it will be too late: I even slightly enjoy in anticipation their future regret. But they are only repeating my own mistakes.

One of the benches commemorates a terrible tragedy, not

directly, for it gives only a name, date of birth and death, and the fact that it is a beloved son and brother who is commemorated, and 'who is with us always': but the internet soon reveals the nature of the tragedy already 13 years old.

The son was 46 when he died and had returned to live at home with his parents. Those parents would now be very old indeed, if still alive. One day, the son said that he was going for a walk and he never returned. Months later, his skeleton was found on an island in a river. Cause of death was never elucidated.

What a wealth of suffering, acute, prolonged, and unassuageable, is implied by the mere outline of this story. It is enough by itself, this outline, to render absurd the notion that, for every instance of human suffering, there is a countervailing technical procedure by which it can be alleviated. Human life is inherently tragic, or at least its tragic dimension cannot be avoided, albeit that some lives contain more tragedy than others. But all contain some.

Oddly enough, this is a consoling rather than a dispiriting realisation.

I shall continue my walks in the town gardens.

[Table of Contents](#)

Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are [The Terror of Existence: From Ecclesiastes to Theatre of the Absurd](#) (with Kenneth Francis) and [Grief and Other Stories](#) from New English Review Press.

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