The Evaporation of Exteriors

by Theodore Dalrymple (November 2017)

A Battery Shelled, Wyndam Lewis, 1919

The first man whom I ever met who had killed a man (I was afterwards to meet many) was an employee of my father's, Mr B. True, I had an uncle who, long before I was born, had been suspected of murder, but he had been swiftly cleared of suspicion. A maid had been murdered in his flat by the boyfriend with whom she was "walking out," in the terminology of the day and, after killing her, he had left the flat wearing my uncle's hat. (In those days, even murderers wore hats.) This led some of his neighbours to identify him as the man who left the flat immediately after the murder, apparently—according to my uncle—with enthusiasm as well as certainty. It was not that his neighbours bore a grudge against him; rather, their identification was for the pure pleasure or thrill of denunciation. This was one of my first lessons in the malice of Man.

Anyway, Mr B kept the accounts of my father's small company.

He was the embodiment, the soul, of respectability. He wore a dark suit and tie and would no more walk out without shoes so polished that you could see the world reflected in them than he would have—I almost said “killed.”

In those days, we still used pounds, shilling and pence. There were twelve pence to the shilling and twenty shillings to the pound. There were therefore two hundred and forty pence to the pound. There were also guineas (though no coins or banknotes thus denominated) which were twenty-one shillings, and were used mainly for the sale of superior goods such as Vermeers and Rembrandts. We had sixpences and threepenny bits, forty and eighty respectively to the pound, and florins (two shillings) and half crowns (two shillings and sixpence), ten and eight respectively to the pound. There were halfpennies and even farthings (a quarter of a penny), of which there were four hundred and eighty and nine hundred and sixty respectively to the pound. As a system, it was not very convenient and it drove foreigners mad, but we who grew up with it found it perfectly easy and natural, and its other advantage—other than driving foreigners mad—was that it gave us an agility in mental arithmetic which in my case has lasted to this day.

In those days also, there were no mechanical aids to calculation, except for adding machines which were contraptions of many cogs and wheels (once you took their covers off and looked inside). You entered a figure by pressing buttons and then pulled a lever; then you entered another figure and pulled the lever again; and so on until you wanted them added up, whereupon you pressed another button, pulled the lever, and the sum emerged on a piece of paper of which there was a roll in the machine. I suppose any young person would now look on such a machine with disdain or

contempt, and probably would laugh at it (as I am inclined to laugh at the memory of typewriters). Adding machines are now to calculation what scythes are to combine harvesters.

Mr B did not use them in any case because his one great gift was for adding up. He could add up an immense list of pounds, shillings and pence far quicker than anyone could enter it on an adding machine. I remember him still, pencil in hand, going down the list with a kind of inexorability (provided he was not interrupted, which it would have been a kind of sacrilege to do, like interrupting a priest at prayer). He never made a mistake, as far as I can recall; no one would ever have questioned his calculations, any more than his probity. I watched him with awe.

I went to my father's office during my holidays to help. Whether I was of any great assistance, I rather doubt. When I had finished a task, I would ask "What shall I do now?" a question to which an answer had to be found. Perhaps I was being taught that one had to earn one's living.

At lunchtime, I would walk to the park (Regent's Park) nearby to eat sandwiches with Mr B. He had been a soldier during the war and I remember his gait to this day. He walked stiff-backed and progressed by a kind of rhythmic jerking forward, rather like a mechanical tin soldier, in fact. Whether he learnt this in the army, or whether it came naturally to him, I do not know; but Mr B, whose black hair, incidentally, was always brilliantined so that it shone like his shoes, had a solidity and even stolidity that I much admired. I wished he had been my father, to avoid the storms and tempests of my home.

The mention of brilliantine reminds me, incidentally, though not germanely to my story, of antimacassars that still adorned the backs of many armchairs of those days. They were white, often lace-frilled cloths thrown over the upper rears of armchairs to prevent the upholstery of the armchairs from staining or becoming impregnated with hair oil – originally Macassar oil from the orient. “Where are the snows of yesteryear,” asked Villon; I ask where are the antimacassars of yesteryear? They have gone the way of brilliantine. And although I have no particular emotional attachment to either brilliantine or antimacassars, the thought that young people now have no idea what either of them might be fills me with a kind of melancholy, which is both pleasurable and painful.

Mr B had been at the Battle of El Alamein where one of his duties, being good at figures, had been to count the bodies on the battlefield afterwards. He had also shot a German soldier dead as he emerged from his foxhole. He was not sure whether he should have done so, because it was possible than the German soldier was surrendering to him. Of course, one does not in the heat of battle have the time or the inclination to indulge in an interior Socratic dialogue about the moral propriety of one’s actions.

One would never have guessed from his exterior—Mr B kept his umbrella more neatly-furled than Mr Chamberlain’s—that he had ever had such dramatic experiences. Nor, as far as I could tell, had he been traumatised by them, in the sense that they affected his day-to-day existence ever afterwards. Indeed, I suspect that it was a matter of pride with him that they should not, and that this very pride prevented them from doing so. This, of course, was completely against what was soon to

become the zeitgeist: such stiff-upper-lippery would soon become the object of derision, if not of outright hatred. Among other things, it offered no job opportunities for a regiment of carers.

My father, I think, despised Mr B, mainly because he was his employer, and therefore he was *ex officio* contemptible. In a way, this was a kind of self-contempt: for how could anyone be so lacking in character as to consent to be employed by me? But I did not despise Mr B. On the contrary, I admired him and wished I could be like him when I grew up (which I already knew that I could not).

Mr B must have been in his mid-forties when I knew him—immensely old to me then, but more than twenty years younger than I am now. Actuarially-speaking, he must long have been dead, though there is the very faintest of possibilities that he still lives. But in my mind, he is forever at the age at which I knew him—a fly in temporal amber, a victim (if that is not overdramatising) of memorial egotism.

He was an important figure for me because he taught me a lesson, or rather, planted a seed in my mind that has become ever more important to me as I grow older: namely that exteriors do not, or at any rate ought not, capture the essence of a man and that an ordinary, conventional appearance may, and perhaps often does, conceal a wealth of experience and even heroism. For to have gone through much and yet to continue without any demonstrative conduct that inconveniences others or puts them off their ease is, in my view, a high kind of heroism. This, of course, is a very old-fashioned view. Today, self-disclosure, as publicly as possible, is what we admire and call brave. It is known in prolefeed journals and

internet sites as *opening up*.

Nowadays, I constantly wonder what the lives of the people are or have been. For example, in the small town in which I live when I am in England there are some Indian restaurants. I recognise their waiters and sometimes I see them on the bus. This gives me something of a shock, for it reminds me that they are not waiters twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, twelve months a year, but have lives other than serving me with a smile. They come mainly from India and Bangladesh and must have an interesting story to tell, and probably a deeply moving one, if I had but the time or temerity to elicit it. I never will do, of course, and neither will anyone else, so their stories will never be told, at least not outside their family circle. This is a shame, not because I want to promote their self-dramatisation or encourage them to think of themselves as victims, but to promote our imaginative appreciation of the lives of others.

I have talked to a couple of them in a superficial way, however. On the whole they are well-treated by the people in the small town; they receive little abuse and are never threatened. But when they worked in the nearest big city, they suffered both abuse and threat. The atmosphere changed about midnight, as definitively as in Dracula’s Transylvania once the sun had gone down. After midnight, only the drunks (of whom there are many thousands in every English city, militantly and proudly drunk) wanted a meal, and they would often behave insultingly and try to leave the restaurant without paying, doing so as if it were their right and resenting any opposition or demands for money. Sometimes these mild-mannered men, the waiters, would have to take the law into their own hands because the police could or would not arrive in time. It sounded a horrible way to live.

I could imagine what it was like to be a waiter, but I could not imagine what it was like to be one of the fat, shaven-headed, tattooed monsters who behaved towards them in so vile a fashion. Many such were my patients, but I could never enter imaginatively into their lives, though they were my countrymen far more than were the waiters. Did I really want to do so? I confess that I did not.

What had made them what they were, other than of course their decision to be what they were? Their lives, it seemed to me, perhaps wrongly, were circumscribed by beer (too much of it), football, television and pop music, to the enjoyment of all of which work was a regrettable interruption. Sex for them would have been an itch that had to be scratched, but not otherwise associated with any form of affection, other possibility than the exclusive possession of someone as a means of bolstering their egos. Of all the forms of common existence which I have encountered in the world, this was easily the ugliest, the most charmless, the only one without any redeeming feature whatsoever. I exclude North Korea from my strictures, of course: but North Korea is not another country, it is another universe.

I suppose that I should see this way of life as being in some way a symptom of underlying wretchedness, but my sympathy and imagination, like everyone else’s, is limited. I can sympathise with waiters, servers in shops, washers-up, peasants, office cleaners, street-sweepers, dustmen, mortuary assistants, delivery men, taxi drivers, illegal immigrants, and a thousand others, but not with them. There I draw a line; and if, underlying all, they are miserable rather than evil, I can only say they are not nearly miserable enough or as

miserable as they deserve.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *The Proper Procedure* from New English Review Press.

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