

# Unnecessary Journeys

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (March 2020)



*New York*, George Bellows, 1911

I think I may be a reactionary (I write this as someone who says 'I think I might have cancer'). At any rate, I now understand the Duke of Wellington's objection to railways, that they would encourage the lower orders to travel round the country unnecessarily. I go even further than the Iron Duke,

at least in my privacy of my own thoughts.

The fact is that most journeys are like most work, which is to say unnecessary. But huge areas of countryside have to be ruined aesthetically in order to make such unnecessary journeys feasible, though not easy. Therefore, travel should be discouraged as far as possible, for example by bad roads or heavy tolls, trains that are unreliable, airports that are even more hellish than they already are, and so forth.

The motor car, which was once a symbol of personal liberty—until, that is, everyone had one, or even more than one—has become an instrument of enslavement, in which untold millions of people are, obliged to spend up to a fifth of their adult waking lives, often in traffic jams that jangle their nerves, cause their blood pressure to rise, and make them breath polluted air. Recently, for example, I arrived in Paris from my house deep in the countryside, the last part of the journey on the *Périphérique*, the road that circles the edge of the centre of Paris and which, together with a similar road in London (which, however, is much further from the centre of the city), is one of the most unpleasant thoroughfares known to me. It passes through a dystopic, graffiti-covered townscape of unexampled ugliness, a visual hell, which must, however, be endured to reach the City of Light.

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I was aware of a disagreeable sensation in the back of my throat caused by a kind of acidic grittiness. I also became aware of a slight shortness of breath, mildly laboured breathing. The traffic, as ever, was abominable. It was about the time when many people had to make their journey home from work, and the *Périphérique* was jammed in both directions, with much stopping and starting. Many of the drivers, I suppose, had to make this hellish journey twice a day, no doubt to the great detriment of their temper and sense of well-being. It is rarely that I take this road (or its equivalent in London) without a long stoppage somewhere along it caused by an accident. The best that I can say for the experience is that it never ceases to arouse my gratitude for the fact that, in my entire career, which is now over, I never had to make regular journeys like this. I was always able to walk to work, a blessing that I hardly appreciated at the time. Commuting is one of the great evils of our time,

But how much of it is really necessary? During the war in England, when consumption had to be pared to the bone, there was a famous poster which asked the population whether the journey it was undertaking was really necessary. Of course, the marginal increase of consumption caused by any individual journey must have been very slight, for if taken in a train or bus, the train or bus would have had to depart in any case, with or without you. It was as if the poster was designed not to so much limit consumption as to make people feel guilty about the frivolity of their activity in times of national crisis. But a poster asking people whether their work was really necessary (other than as a means of earning enough money to live) would stimulate a deeper reflexion, if not necessarily much contentment. And even much work that might by some criterion or other be deemed necessary could probably be done in much less time than presently necessary. Many people are kept at work well beyond the hours necessary to complete

whatever it is that they have to do, and are rather like children kept behind after school because they have misbehaved—except that their detention is prophylactic against what they *might* do with their time if they were not at work, rather than punishment for what they *have* done during school hours, as in the case of misbehaving children.

Thus untold millions, no doubt billions, of man-hours are spent year after year travelling in horrible conditions (whether by car or in overcrowded public transport) to a place of work in which mere activity is taken as a kind of metonym for work in the sense of necessary achievement. In America, people are kept in offices well beyond the time when they could possibly do anything useful or avoid mistakes through mental fatigue. They are expected to show commitment to their employers by their willingness to ruin their private lives, and if it were possible to increase the number of hours in the day, for example by slowing the rotation of the earth, they would do so, just to their employers that they were working-harder-than-thou. And, of course, much work is not merely unproductive, it is counter-productive, its main effect, if not its deliberate aim, being to prevent others from doing anything useful. Bureaucracy, including in the private sector, avoids work by creating work.

When I pass through a busy airport, I look about me and wonder how many of the journeys of the thousands of people around me are really necessary? Indeed, is my own journey really necessary? When I come to think of it, I have rarely undertaken a truly necessary journey. Of course, I go to conferences and must travel in order to deliver my communication. But those communications are no sooner delivered than forgotten, and the world would hardly have been a worse place without them. I suppose it is much the same with

the other passengers, if they are not travelling from mere whim. In these days of vastly increased means of electronic communication, it should be ever less necessary for people to go anywhere: instead of which passenger numbers keep rising. Trains are more overcrowded, new airport runways are built. Pascal said more than three centuries ago that many of the problems of the world arose because of the inability of people to sit quietly in a room. Now they arise because of the inability of people to remain within a short bus-ride of where they live (I do not exclude myself from this stricture).

Then there is the destructive effect of tourism. Many places in the world are worth visiting in inverse proportion to the degree to which they *are* actually visited. Everyone knows of the blockbuster art exhibitions in which it is scarcely possible to catch a glimpse of the works exhibited, in which they are seen as through a crowd darkly. Now whole cities are prey to the same phenomenon. Quite often in the major tourist destinations of Europe it is scarcely possible to move freely for the number of tourists; it is as if a crowd were perpetually emerging from a large football stadium. Vast cruise ships, carrying thousands of people, overwhelm the places they visit, and destroy their charm even as they bring much sought-after money to them. I know nothing of particle physics, except that the act of trying to observe particles changes their behaviour. It is the same with tourism, at any rate above a certain level: it destroys everything it touches.

The *ne plus ultra* fatuity of mass tourism, perhaps, is the large numbers of Chinese and other tourists who arrive in England and are taken straight from the airport to a place called Bicester Village, which is not a village at all but an extensive and contiguous collection of shops selling so-called designer-products (as if there were any products that did not

have to be designed). These products are available the world over, and are all dispiritingly similar, mainly expensive-cheap trash. I don't know whether they are notably cheaper in Bicester Village than elsewhere, but they would have to be very much cheaper, or bought in very large quantities, to justify (economically) the cost of the journey to the tourists. The fact that the tourists are taken straight from their aircraft (give or take an immigration procedure or two) in fleets of buses is enough to make you despair of the human race. No doubt environmentalists are horrified by the sheer polluting waste of resources that this phenomenon entails, but my horror goes deeper: to the very nature of human nature, at least in its modern incarnation, that this fatuity suggests.

I happened recently to be reading a book about the poet R.S. Thomas by Justin Wintle, a British writer best known for his books about Vietnam and the Vietnam War. Thomas was a very curious figure, having been both an Anglican priest and a fierce Welsh nationalist, a man whose real target, I think, was the emptiness of modern consumer society and the ugliness, spiritual and material, that it spreads everywhere. Wintle, who was born in London, moved to Wales, where he appears to have taken the trouble of learning Welsh—the very considerable trouble and intellectual effort, considering the difficulty of the language and the fact that nowadays all who speak it are bilingual in English, which has now been the case for many years. Thomas, too, was born into a monoglot English-speaking environment, but having become a Welsh nationalist learned Welsh, and even wrote his autobiography in that language.

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Early in the book, Wintle analyses a poem of Thomas' titled *The Small Window*. The poem begins by extolling the beauty of the country, which we are inclined to call natural, though it is partly man-made, in so far as the fields, stone walls and hedgerows are the work of man. Indeed, the beauty of the country is extolled as almost its *only* asset or virtue:

In Wales there are jewels  
To gather, but with the eye  
Only.

That beauty, however, is for an elect, not for the *hoi polloi*:

Have a care;  
This wealth is for the few  
And chosen. Those who crowd  
A small window dirty it  
With their breathing, though sublime  
And inexhaustible the view.

By 'those who crowd the small window,' Thomas means the large numbers of English tourists and trippers who crowd into Wales to look at the countryside and crawl all over it. Wales should be for the Welsh, and perhaps not even all of them: only those born to the areas of beauty and capable of appreciating it

(though people born to something often take it for granted). Mr Wintle points out the unpleasant corollary of this belief or attitude:

What is on offer is a version of paradise reserved for some and denied all others not even on any moral basis, but simply according to birth and provenance . . . And that sort of thinking, though it may be acceptable to some Bosnian Serbs, for most of us is not.

But surely there is a paradox here, a dilemma or a contradiction: for who would deny that a crowd in such a paradise would indeed destroy it as a paradise, and turn it into something very different and much less valuable in itself? There are, for example, caravan parks in Wales that are no doubt necessary for people of moderate means to enjoy the landscape at all, but which detract from (or rather ruin) the very landscape to be enjoyed. So it is everywhere: mass tourism destroys everything that it touches.

Cars were liberating when they were relatively few in number, and used to tour the open road, but that is no longer their principal use. I cannot of course give a precise figure, but I would imagine that at least three quarters of their use are a kind of torture for those who have little practical choice but to use them. The struggle for a parking space, which seems trivial viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*, is now one of life's unpleasantnesses, an enslaver, and most of us have probably witnessed, if we have not actually participated in, furious arguments over who found the parking space first and therefore has a natural right to it.



Mankind has a genius for transforming its liberty into enslavement.

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