

Vulgarity as Virtue



by Theodore Dalrymple

Not having visited Edinburgh for ten years, I was appalled by what it had become in the intervening period. It was now filthy; narrow passages smelled of urine; empty beer cans cluttered the gutters. In many places, the trash had clearly lain undisturbed for a long time. No one seemed to care: so much for “the Athens of the North.”

The last time that I was in the city, the building known popularly as the Golden Turd had not yet been built. This appalling structure now dominates—and ruins—Edinburgh’s skyline. It is part of a hideous \$1.25 billion redevelopment scheme known as the St. James Quarter, which replaced the equally hideous 1970s brutalist building, the St. James Centre. One can see it as the very embodiment of modern intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic vacuity. The main building is a giant hotel, a round building wrapped in a bronze spiral that points meaninglessly skyward. Nothing could

be more emblematic of the implosion of Scottish (and British) taste than the incapacity of modern architects and government officials to build even a minimally pleasant building on, and appropriate to, the site—in a city whose elegant but simple Georgian architecture is world-renowned.

Modernist architects, retained by patrons such as the University of Edinburgh, have worked for a long time to destroy the city's fabric. Between 1960 and 1963, for example, the university constructed a 14-story building in George Square that would not have seemed out of place on the outskirts of Novosibirsk. With a kind of shameless impudence, they named it David Hume Tower—about as appropriate as naming an abattoir after Jane Austen. Even more impudently, the building has now received a preservation order as a monument of Scottish modernism—as if such an order could disguise or excuse the ugly banality of the building on the grounds that it once represented the future (as, alas, it did).

But with the surefire misguided aim of modern intellectuals, university students and staff recently objected not to the building itself, but to its name, because Hume had written a few passages that do not fully accord with modern views of race. Never mind that he also wrote, in 1758: "Those who pass the early part of life among slaves, are only qualified to be, themselves, slaves and tyrants; and in every future intercourse either with their inferiors or superiors, are apt to forget the natural equality of mankind."

For a man to be worthy, according to the present-day secular pharisees, of having a building named for him, every last sentiment that he ever uttered must be compatible with current moral orthodoxy. Being a great philosopher and historian, or great at anything else, is not enough. Oddly, though, Alexander Stoddart's Hume statue still sits in the Royal Mile of Edinburgh, where it is subjected to a different kind of humiliation: Chinese tourists burnish Hume's toe by rubbing it to bring them luck. Of no thinker could this superstitious act

be more inappropriate. It is like lighting a candle on the Welsh hills over which Bertrand Russell's ashes were scattered.

Not far from the statue of Hume is the same sculptor's statue of Adam Smith, on whose head was placed a traffic cone, like a dunce's cap. Adam Smith a dunce! Presumably, this was a student prank: and thus did young Scotland, doubtless with a vast hinterland of arrogant ignorance, honor one of the great figures of the Scottish Enlightenment.

How far mass tourism is to blame for Edinburgh's deterioration, I cannot say. It seemed as if sports crowds constantly surged in all directions, in a desperate search for fast food and teddy bears in tartan T-shirts (not made in Scotland, of course) and other tourist kitsch, to prove that they had visited Scotland. This was all good for the economy, presumably, but not for my mood. I almost longed for the gloomy old days in the mid-1960s, when I first visited the city and the influence of Calvinism remained strong. I had gone with a friend, and we stayed with a landlady, who served a boiled egg for breakfast—one egg, with two spoons, for the pair of us. We ate our egg with John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion glowering down on us from the mahogany bookcase. We dared not ask for an egg each, lest we be thought sybaritic, gluttonous, and heretical.

I went on my recent trip to a secondhand bookshop that I had known from years ago, but loud rock music pulsing through it soon drove me out. Was this a case of market failure, or have the habitués of these shops changed such that they now cannot browse without the accompaniment of gross aural stimulation? The shop had a basement, and I thought to get away from the music there: but no, the owner had placed loudspeakers high up in the basement corners, so no escape was possible. It reminded me of North Korea, except that the inescapable was loud music, not political propaganda. It is increasingly difficult in commercial establishments to avoid amplified

popular music; I had hoped that a used-book shop might be a last bastion of silence, but I was disabused. I had heard the future, and it was noise.

Such compulsory noise is not the only manifestation of modern British culture that has become like the nitrogen and oxygen of the air: so has vulgarity (nothing is specifically Scottish about it). This vulgarity is not a mere absence of refinement, such as has always existed among a section of any public, nor is it a satirical commentary on the overrefinement of a self-appointed cultural elite. On the contrary, it is a conscious, positive ideology: vulgarity as political virtue. It partakes of a false syllogism:

The common people are vulgar.

I am vulgar.

Therefore, I have empathy with, and sympathy for, the common people—the highest form of political virtue.

Only the second of these three statements is unequivocally true, though perhaps the first is increasingly true as ideological vulgarity seeps, or pours, downward. Vulgarity's great advantage is that it is within the reach of all; no effort is necessary to achieve it. Everyone can be vulgar and therefore politically virtuous.

Such, at any rate, were my reflections as I passed the sandstone building, near the bookshop, of what was once the Salvation Army's women's hostel, but whose ground floor was now given over to the Kick Ass Café. The clientele was not proletarian but intellectual, bohemian, and feminist.

The name was of some cultural significance, since "kick ass" is not British, but American, usage. Ass in British usage is arse; to kick someone's arse in British usage is not the same as to kick ass in American. The usage is vulgar on both sides

of the Atlantic, true; but the Edinburgh Kick Ass Café patrons, if surveyed, would almost certainly object—fiercely—to Donald Trump, and not least because of his vulgarity.

“So,” I can hear a good social liberal object, “you would prohibit a café from availing itself of that name?” Social liberalism has become so debased that it thinks that anything not prohibited by the law is permissible in all other senses. Therefore, if I object to the name, I must be calling for its prohibition.

No. What I am commenting upon is a culture in which such a name is not only considered unobjectionable but, on the contrary, is taken as an expression of democratic sentiment and liberation from oppression, and objection to which constitutes reprehensible political reaction. This debased culture is a phenomenon not susceptible to mere legislative correction; what is needed is the cultural equivalent of a religious revival, but this, of course, would pose dangers of its own. At any rate, I do not expect to see any such revival in my lifetime.

Further up the road was the office of V. Good and Company, Defence Lawyers, which, according to its website, offers “Quality legal assistance for any crime.” By that, I assume that the firm means assistance to any *person* accused of a crime—not quite the same thing. As I passed, I took a photograph of a fat young woman walking by, with greenish swept-back hair that looked like seaweed after the tide had gone out, dressed skimpily in tight-fitting cutoff denim, exposing acres of white puckered flesh and emphasizing her obesity. The backs of both her white calves were tattooed, presumably with something meaningful to her.

This determination to make the worst of oneself is now a mass phenomenon, almost obligatory in some quarters. That nature does not favor everyone equally is true and unfair; but a lack

of dignity is, in most cases, a choice. This person's mode of dress was a challenge to the world: you must accept me as I am without remark; you must notice how I look and fail to notice at the same time. I therefore demand of you a psychological impossibility. By assaulting you with my appearance and demanding that you accept, notice, and ignore it at the same time, I exert my power over you.

She was a kind of Falstaff who implicitly decried dignity, not, as did the fat knight, honor: "Can dignity set to a leg? no: or an arm? no: or take away the grief of a wound; no. Dignity hath no skill in surgery, then? no. What is dignity? A word. What is in that word dignity? what is that dignity? air. . . . Therefore, I'll none of it."

Yet absence of dignity must not be the mere unconscious absence of care; it must be chosen, selected, and have unique features, with a tendency to innovation and extremity, or else it fails to serve the permanently wounded ego.

On my way to the bookshop, I had passed a strange establishment dedicated to assisting the drug addicts of Edinburgh. Its front window was illuminated by red and blue neon lights, and enjoined passersby to "Take drugs seriously." As the linguistic philosopher J. L. Austin might have observed, this sentence in the imperative mood has more than one possible interpretation, and possibly was meant in more senses than one. The establishment was closed, though it was a weekday afternoon. Perhaps addicts do not do weekday afternoons.

Scotland, and not least Edinburgh, has the highest rates of drug addiction and overdose deaths in Europe; by some measures, its fatal overdose rate outpaces that of the United States as well. About one in 60 Scots between the ages of 15 and 64 is addicted to heroin or other drugs. Last year, however, the rate declined significantly—it is highest among those aged 35 to 54. Perhaps the Reaper had already harvested

many of the susceptible, and new cohorts of volunteers have yet to replace them.

In 2021, methadone, a drug used in the supposed treatment of heroin addiction, was a necessary cause of nearly half the drug deaths in the country. (Most fatal overdoses involve the use, or abuse, of more than one drug.) Those prescribing methadone to addicted patients, it turns out, failed to hold them to the condition that they cease taking other drugs. This failure stemmed partly from fear—such patients are inclined to threaten physically when they do not get their way—and partly from sentimentality, on the assumption that patients must always receive another chance for treatment to work because, after all, they suffer from a chronic illness over which they have no control. Treatment, even if it kills the addicted patient, must never be stopped through mere censoriousness; and understanding, by which is meant a willingness always to find fresh excuses for them and accept their point of view, must never be withdrawn.

In the window of the establishment that took drugs seriously were lots of little messages, like *billets doux* to addicts and their supporters. One advertised a “Kiltwalk” for CREW. Kiltwalks are sponsored walks, with Scots dressing in kilts to raise funds for charities. CREW 2000 is one such “charity,” though a little research demonstrates that it is, in fact, a typical example of the sink of corruption into which Britain has fallen. This corruption is not of the straightforward money-under-the-table kind. It is worse: it is legalized corruption, masquerading under a cover of public purpose.

CREW 2000 says that it is “a harm reduction and outreach” charity. “We neither condemn nor condone drug use: we exist to reduce harm, challenge perceptions and help people make positive choices about their use of cannabis, stimulant and other social drugs and sexual health by providing non-judgmental, credible and up to date information and support.” Taking—using—drugs is morally neutral, then, though choices

about this can be positive (or, presumably, negative). How choices about anything can be positive or negative without the exercise of judgment is hard to imagine; but obviously, CREW 2000 dreams of a world emptied of moral meaning. This, in effect, is the promotion of drug abuse.

CREW 2000 is not really a charity, though. It is virtually a department of state, or, at least, it is overwhelmingly publicly funded. Charitable giving as normally conceived accounted last year for only 5.4 percent of Crew 2000's noncommercial income (it raised some money by "training," that is to say, by propagandizing its "non-judgmental" viewpoint). Funds from public sources, at 84 percent, were 16 times greater than from charitable giving by private individuals; a publicly funded organization called the Edinburgh Alcohol and Drugs Partnership Counselling Services Consortium alone provided almost seven times more money than individual private donations combined. A bank also donated 66 percent more than all the individual donations, though its contribution, too, was dwarfed by that of public bodies.

Staff costs, including pension contributions, accounted for 77 percent of CREW 2000's spending. Thus, to call the organization a charity is willfully to misuse a word in its common meaning, and the private individual donations to it are best thought of as voluntary, if unintentional, taxation. Not only does CREW 2000 in effect promote drug abuse, then; it does so using taxpayers' money. On the plus side, however, it provides some employment in hard times.

Among the lettering on the window that, *inter alia*, invited people to take drugs seriously and announced that August 31 was International Overdose Awareness Day was an imaginary and highly unrealistic dialogue between a drug-taker and an unspecified interlocutor. The drug-taker opens: "Managed to get some of the white stuff sorted for tonight, mate!" This colloquial beginning was meant to establish with drug-takers the *bona fides* of what followed.

The interlocutor replies: "What is it? Have you had it tested?" The drug-taker then asks about how to do this. There follows a slightly confused conversation about drug-checking kits, which test chemically for the presence of drugs such as cocaine and heroin. These kits actually do not test for the presence of impurities, so they can tell the prospective taker only whether what he had received is completely fraudulent, containing none of the desired drug. "The use of a drug-checking kit is a harm reduction strategy that rules IN the presence of a drug," says the interlocutor.

Where alleged harm reduction comes, can public spending be far behind? A petition to the Scottish Assembly from a campaign called "Help Not Harm," run by the Scottish Young Socialists, asked that testing kits be made available free of charge (that is, free to their users) in all public places, such as libraries, universities, pharmacies, and so on. The response to the petition quoted a passage from a report of the Scottish Drug Deaths Taskforce, a quasi-governmental body of 15 members: "Change is needed, but it will only be possible when we accept that this is everyone's responsibility," the passage says. "Any person can save a life. They can do so through direct action like carrying and using naloxone and challenging stigma whenever it is seen."

This seems to imply that every citizen should walk around with naloxone in his pocket in case he comes across someone who has overdosed. Further, he must never think, even in private, that heroin addiction could be partly the fault of the addicted, for that would be stigmatizing. An assembly rejected the petition—for now—because the proposed kits do not test for impurities, which cause much harm. Perhaps when such kits do check for impurities, the petition would be reconsidered.

Nowhere does anyone mention that people who paid for their drugs might reasonably be expected to pay for their drug-checking kits if they thought them important. This omission suggests an infantilized population for which the governing

class has infinite responsibility—and therefore infinite economic power to tax and spend.

Meantime, the population can urinate in the streets with impunity, and no one collects the trash.

I slipped into the Scottish National Gallery, one of the world's great unsung art collections. It remains free of charge, but it was still a haven of peace from the crowds outside. It has many great paintings, but my favorite is Sir Henry Raeburn's *The Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch*. The reverend, a clergyman of the Church of Scotland, is dressed elegantly in black (except for a white cravat), including a splendid black hat. A Turner-esque winter mist hangs over the background hills. The Reverend Walker leans forward as he skates, his arms folded before him; he is evidently an accomplished and confident skater, but his face, that of a fiftyish man ruddy with the cold, betrays no signs of frivolous enjoyment, rather that of a schoolmaster enjoining his flock to virtue—or else. And yet he must be enjoying himself immensely, deeply, profoundly, in a manner very different from the enjoyments of the crowds I encountered outside.

How wonderful to commune for a short time with Leonardo, Vermeer, and Velázquez! But even in the gallery, the contemporary world intrudes. A notice on the wall reads:

National Galleries of Scotland is reviewing the information we hold about the national art collection. This is part of our research purpose as well as our commitments to equality, diversity and inclusion.

This review explores the previous ownership of artworks, artists, their subject matter, sitters depicted and existing interpretation. It considers the experiences of diverse backgrounds and issues that impact upon them. It also includes colonialism, slavery and their legacies.

Building on ongoing activity in this area, new and additional content is continuously being developed in gallery and online. We would be pleased to receive any information which supports this work.

But none, of course, that criticizes it. By their wooden language shall ye know them.

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