

What's in Store



by Theodore Dalrymple

Is it a sign of advancing age that the world seems to grow more absurd by the day, or does the world *really* grow more absurd by the day? If the latter, it means that there is an objective measure of absurdity, which I doubt.

Be that as it may, I was riding to Charles de Gaulle Airport in a taxi recently when I passed an electrically illuminated advertisement. "Do you prefer girls to boys?" it asked. If you didn't know, you could call the Sex Education Hotline to find out.

I could just imagine the automated choices you would have to make to get through to a real human being, the hotline's expert in sexual preferences.

With jobs like these, no wonder there is practically full employment in the Western world.

But why should there be helplines available only for sexual

preferences? Why not for culinary ones as well, for people who cannot make up their mind whether they prefer peas to carrots, beef to lamb, red wine to white? After all, food is the precondition of sex and practically everything else, and it is often difficult to make up one's mind what one would like to eat tonight.

The possibilities for the guidance industry are obvious. They are, in fact, limitless. No doubt artificial intelligence will soon replace the human being at the end of the telephone, for its advice will prove more than the equal of that of natural intelligence; but either way, the painful process of knowing your own preferences and making choices will successfully have been replaced by painless outsourcing. The greatest freedom of all, that from responsibility, will have been achieved.

How easily I am irritated these days, or rather, how prepared I am to see the signs of degeneration, decline, and collapse! Having time to spare at the airport, I went to the bookstore. I suppose I should have been grateful that there still was one, so far has the book fallen in importance in the mental lives even of educated people. The fact is that passengers these days need all kinds of things for their flights, from inflatable pillows to foot powder, but not a book to read. Nor is it the case that they read on electronic screens rather than in books. They do not read at all.

What did I find in the bookstore? About a third of the space was given over to children's books. Of course, I am all in favor of children having books, but they do not make up a third of the passengers. Another third had real books, although a fair proportion of those had titles such as *The Ten New Threats to Our Health*, *Together We Are Stronger*, *All That Prevents Us From Being Happy and What We Need to Know to Be Happy*, *Unlimited Knowledge: Discover Your Intelligences*, *Undo Self-Sabotage*, *Practice Speed Reading*, *Remember the Impossible While Enjoying Yourself*, and *Hack Your Brain*, and *The Women Who Think Too Much*. I was reminded of the old adage: "It's

better to know nothing than to know what ain't so."

A third of the bookstore, however, was given over to comic strips. I know that aficionados will claim that Tintin, Asterix, Maus, etc., are great classics (personally, I am fond of Babar the Elephant), yet I cannot help but see so large a proportion of a bookshop given over to comic strips, when only a few years ago there would not have been a single such product in the store, as a sign of the rapid infantilization of our people and culture, perhaps even of the capacity of the population to concentrate. What is true of the airport bookstore, incidentally, is also increasingly true of bookstores in general in Paris.

And then to keep my level of irritation high were the illuminated advertisements for scent. One was for a product called MYSLF, advertised by a very self-assured young man, apparently famous, with an expression halfway between insolence and aggression. But what a name for a product! I looked up its website on my phone: MYSLF is "The scent of modern masculinity, of the man free to be himself and who accepts all his emotion. It is to be fully and completely oneself."

Who on earth writes this rubbish? And at whom is it aimed? Could anyone be influenced by it or believe that he becomes fully and completely himself merely by splashing a bit of eau de cologne behind his ears? What kind of self would that be if it were true? And since the producers of this scent presumably hope to sell it by the bucketful (though not actually in buckets), presumably they are hoping for hundreds of thousands of men at least to become "fully and completely" themselves by this simple expedient, in other words that there are huge numbers of men who are little more than sheep or clones of one another.

I was not surprised that the manufacturers went on to make their obeisances to the environment, as writers on almost

anything in the Soviet Union had to make their obeisances to Lenin. The scent bottle was recyclable (as, indeed, is any glass), and of course the plants that went into making it were gathered with respect to Mother Earth. I was reminded of Dickens' great hypocrites: Uriah Heep, Mr. Pecksniff, the Reverend Chadband.

Next to this was an advertisement for a women's scent for those of "free spirit." In the background of a young woman on a flat roof was an ugly townscape of the type in which work was the only object of existence. The implication was that a woman could escape this ugly and charmless world merely by use of the scent.

This claim was relatively modest. Looking on the internet, I soon came across a cheap perfume of a baby-pink color called Rebel, with the word "Crazy" on it underneath a human skull: a perfume "specifically for audacious, positive, wild and free-spirited women."

Lord, what fools these mortals be!

Of course, the modern world is also very convenient. I had bought my tickets in a matter of minutes without having to leave my desk. This will no doubt seem perfectly ordinary to people who do not remember what a performance buying airline tickets once was. On the other hand, when I arrived at the airport terminal all the doors except one, on the other side of the building and far away, were closed, for "technical" reasons.

Is this not a metaphor for modern life: tickets to go to the far end of the world in a matter of minutes and doors that won't open?

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