

Spoilt Rotten: the toxic cult of sentimentality *Theodore Dalrymple*

Dalrymple draws out his thesis over many years, but surely the apotheosis is reached (and he describes it towards the end of the book) in the horribly manipulative yet then swelling mawkish public response to the death of Diana Princess of Wales. How so many otherwise ordinary members of the public could become lemming-like depositors of soon-to-rot bunches of flowers outside the home of someone they had never met passes rational understanding. Sentimentality indeed. And that master of sentiment and insincerity Tony Blair exploits the event oh so cleverly, drowning the then leader of the opposition, William Hague, in his wake.

Some interesting points are made about education, especially the (again Blair-inspired) dictum that 50% of the UK population must now go to university. That despite the sad truth that many of those so privileged can hardly read or write properly, thanks to the disastrous failure of state education to that point: eleven years imprisoned and fed soppy gruel. Then it only takes a renaming process worthy of a banana republic to declare that all technical colleges, polytechnics, and sometimes even further education institutes are henceforth to be called universities. Dalrymple hits the nail on the head here.

An especially poignant note is struck with devastating simplicity in the story of Julius Nyerere's Tanzania: the aim of education during the colonial era had been to equip the aspirant with the chance of entering the civil service. So that's what people aspired to afterwards. Unfortunately the result was a bloated, corrupt bureaucracy and starving peasants whose coffee crops were now effectively un-tradeable. So, the lesson is that education policy must be designed, not in the abstract, but to serve the needs of the population at the time.

Good is contrasted with bad as black and white. We know from our own lives that good and bad are relative terms. We live in a world of spectra: from poor to rich, from countryside to town, from ugly to beautiful, from nasty to nice, from dependant to self-reliant, and so forth. Yet the sentimentality idea throws this knowledge away. We are either one thing or the other. Opinions expressed in moderate terms are cast by the raucous clamour by almost illiterate commentators into stark categories, to be either lauded or condemned with extreme expressions of love or hate. So we end up defiling language. Can anyone remember what fantastic once meant? Or unbelievable? Or amazing? How sad.

Dalrymple cast a harsh light on the family impact statement, and the criminal justice system's required response to it. It turns out the whole thing is an exercise in hypocritical mendacity, a bromide for the victim, to be ignored by the judiciary. I have an anecdote along similar lines. I was asked to support the defendant in a drug case in prison. Some time ago drug offences (and other offences) by inmates were handled by the prison governors: rough justice, but at least economical. Now, that is disallowed. A district judge has to rule on a case and hand down the sentence. The prisoner is able to call friends in aid. So it was in the case I am describing. I sat through several hearings for minor drug offences. The my man was brought in, shame-faced. The charge was put and he admitted guilt. I made my supportive speech. The district judge said a few words and then awarded my man two days extra detention. All the other prisoners on similar charges were dealt exactly the same two days extra, even though no-one had spoken up in their favour. A ridiculous waste of time.

As an aside: Dalrymple mentions (on page 109) the family impact statement made by his wife in the case of a Filipino sailor who had murdered his crewmate. I knew the man in question, and helped him to recover some of his property held for a time by the police. It may be worth noting that the family impact statement, whilst ineffectual, would not have been the

most important thing for Joel's wife. She would have been more concerned with the reaction back home: for she had to leave her village and go into hiding to avoid retribution by the family of the murdered man.

Denominators are important, says Dalrymple. How right. He goes too far, I think, in one or two examples, but in general he's spot on. We hear of £xx millions being spent or saved, and are led to think that's a lot of money. We should always relate that quantity to a relevant denominator. Suppose £30 million is to be added to the tax bill. What a lot of money? Not really: it's only 50p per head of population, or if you prefer, £1.00 per member of the workforce. What about £30 million annually? Then that's 2p a week each. You can't even buy a gumdrop, let alone a lottery ticket for that.

On the hospital front, we are reminded of the need to keep a professional distance from the patient. Thus it should be 'Mrs Smith' rather than 'Betty' for the woman in the third bed on the left. Quite right—unless, I would say, Mrs Smith says she would prefer to be called Betty.

Dalrymple regrets the supervening of managerial control over the decisions of clinical staff: form filling to conform with directives, at the expense of good sound clinical judgement. Dalrymple makes the point with force that doctors have spent up to thirty years reaching the apogee of their profession, whereas managers... However, I was a little confused when Dalrymple made statements vindicating the two experts Roy Meadow and David Southall. Roy Meadow had been instrumental in the conviction of Sally Clark, whose two young children had died. Sally Clark was convicted of murder and served three years in prison before her sentence was quashed. As it happens I know Sally Clark's father, Frank Lockyer, who had been the police chief, in Salisbury, had inspired (!) the Salisbury Spire Appeal and as a result had met and subsequently married a generous Spire benefactor, Rosemary Squires. On several occasions Rosemary had joined my friend Tony Carter and his band in performances in Beaulieu Abbey Church. I am inclined to think that Meadow was (to say the least) arrogant in his peremptory judgements about mothers caring for their children.

Dalrymple dwells a lot on the case of Stephen Lawrence. One aspect of that chimes with a view I have held for some time: the foolishness (I would say) in differentiating crimes according as they are *racially motivated* or not. It seems to me that if I and five friends stab someone at a bus stop and he then stumbles and dies, I am his murderer. It matters not whether he is BME [Get with it: Black and Minority Ethnic].

Dalrymple sees bullying in the behaviour of bureaucrats and others who have the power to treat people necessarily in a supplicant position as fair game for power plays. He remembers two incidents clearly still raw in his memory, when he asked social services for special help in cases where a patient of his was in extreme danger. I can relate well to that. Here are three examples.

First, Bill Lunt, the personnel officer of the company to which I was seconded whilst working in Saudi Arabia. Lunt held our passports and flight tickets. We were told it was Saudi official policy that this should be so. Non-one ever found out if that was true. At any rate, Lunt held (and exercised) overweening power as a result.

Second, and more apposite really: I had been asked by the manager at the homeless hostel where I had placed a mentally disturbed ex-prisoner, to collect him from the general hospital A&E department. I asked if I should bring him back to the hostel. Oh, no, we can't have him back here; his blood is all over his room and possessions. We've had to burn everything and have arranged for industrial cleaners to sterilise the room. (My man probably had hepatitis

and/or AIDS). As expected, I found him in A&E, looking chipper. This was not the first of his curious experiences in the night-time, by the way. His arm was bound up nicely, where he had cut through his brachial artery. I discussed with him his options. He now had nothing in the world, except his underpants: no mobile phone, no money, no trousers, no shirt, no shoes, just the pair of pants he was wearing in the hospital bed. It seemed to me he needed proper care and supervision, and warm comforting shelter. He agreed to my suggestion that he be sectioned. So I found the duty psychiatrist and asked him to arrange this. Oh, no we can't section him. There's no evidence there's anything wrong with him. He will be discharged. But this is the third time he's been here this week; he's clearly not of sound mind; he has no clothes, and it's raining outside. That is not the hospital's concern. Fortunately I was able to find the CPN he had seen earlier in the week and she arranged for him to be transferred to the secure unit at the specialist mental hospital, where he was well looked after.

Third, whilst managing a group of about a hundred consultants (I mean business consultants, not doctors) I needed to advertise for young (25-28 year-old) recruits, in order to fuel the fount of new talent destined, we hoped, for a long career with the company. The personnel department (here we go again; although by that time I think their name may have mutated from the chummy *personnel* to the unpleasant-sounding but now common *Human Resources*) insisted I remove the age restriction from my advertisement. It seemed this would be discriminatory. Oh dear, we must not discriminate. Never mind that we would discriminate when sifting through the thousand applications we were to receive. In fact the instruction was really that we were not to *show* that we were discriminating. Appearance is everything. In fact I successfully argued against the Gestapo and got my advertisement in the paper as I wanted. In the course of our argument they insisted I follow the mandatory guidance in their bible: the standards of the Institute of Personnel and Development. I read this palpably foolish document and was able to demonstrate that it was full of unfounded assertions, was devoid of either facts or logic, and was very badly written; so they left me to it, exiting with tails between legs. One must never be cowed by the bureaucrats if one can possibly manage it. Ah but I never did get round the man Lunt, I have to admit.

We are on a slippery slope. Or rather there we are on several slippery slopes at once, and seem to have even lost track of which slippery slope we are on. Language becomes ruder. Argument gives way to insult. Just look at newspaper message boards: full of invective.

There's a lovely aphorism concerning Tony Blair. He's "authentically bogus".

As another amusement: I learnt at least two new things (for me); the meaning of *Gestalt-shift*, and of *encomia*. Dalrymple does like unfamiliar words and phrases.

This book has confirmed many of my instinctive thoughts about the way we are now, has made me realise there is much further I ought to go in standing up against the dreadful sentimental agenda, and has taught me things I had not previously worked out for myself or just did not know. A salutary read.