

# All the Charm of Hyenas



by Theodore Dalrymple

Driving through what my sister-in-law calls *la France morte*—the France that is dead—my wife and I were struck by the peculiar gloom of so many of the small country towns that would once have provided services for the farmers of the surrounding agricultural areas. Now the towns' principal economic activity seems to be the collection of pensions and the provision of the very few services that those who drew such pensions required or could afford.

The death of the towns was brought about by the replacement of small farms by agribusiness, which I suppose must be more efficient in one sense or others than small farms, but which has nevertheless coincided with the transformation of France from a net food exporter to a net food importer, at least if an article in *Le Figaro* is to be believed.

Stopping overnight in one of these small dead towns, we discovered to our displeasure that the only inn was owned and run by English people, and that the garden outside was full of English attracted to live in the area by the cheapness of the property. The only Frenchman among them was a severe alcoholic with an earring, the outward sign of his nonconformity, his desire to drink in public outweighing the disadvantage of having to do it among the English.

What an unattractive people the English have become, how utterly charmless! They are not necessarily bad people in themselves as individuals, but their contemporary culture has turned them into the least appealing people in the world, at least of those known to me.

The women are worse than the men. They come in two basic shapes: thin from smoking too many cigarettes, or fat from consuming too much alcohol and fried food. The fat ones defy the common prejudice in favor of slimness by exposing large areas of their pudgy flesh to public view. Much of it is tattooed, in an attempt to exhibit independence of mind.

The men, of course, are scarcely more dignified. When they have reached the age of 55, they dress as if they were athletes aged about 20. They accentuate their ugliness by every possible device. One wonders what they see when they look in the mirror, that reflecting surface that always lies.

They are at their worst when they are enjoying themselves, or at least trying to enjoy themselves. It used to be said that the English took their pleasures sadly, but now, alas, they take them loudly, which is much worse. It is as if the more noise they make, the more they are able to convince themselves that they are having a good time. There is desperation in all this, I think. The horrible sound of the English enjoying themselves is almost identical to that of them having a violent dispute. Indeed, once in a hotel in Manchester I woke at two in the morning to hear what I thought was a standard

English drunken rabble enjoying itself, only to discover in the morning that in fact it was murdering someone. Of course, murder and enjoyment are not entirely incompatible or directly opposite for such a rabble.

When the women laugh, they emit a very loud sound, or noise, that is half cackle, half scream. It penetrates like a laser and cannot be ignored. But there is something desperate about it also, as if it is emitted in order to persuade others and themselves that they have a sense of humor and that the world is a great joke whose punchline they have understood. Quiet enjoyment for them is, by definition, not enjoyment. Not "I think therefore I am," but "I make a noise therefore I am," is their philosophical starting point.

The worst of it is that the vulgarity of the English is not entirely spontaneous, but a matter of pride and ideology. They are proud to be vulgar because they think it politically virtuous to be so. They are not merely lacking in refinement, but they have come to hate and despise refinement as politically suspect in itself.

They have been instilled from an early age with the following pseudo-syllogism:

*The masses are good. The masses are vulgar. By being vulgar, a person expresses his solidarity with the masses, imitation being the highest form of flattery and identification. Solidarity with the masses is democratic and therefore moral and virtuous. The more vulgar a person is, the more virtuous.*

The assertions and premises of this pseudo-syllogism are all debatable, though it is certainly true that the more they are accepted, the truer they will become. Certainly, extreme vulgarity has become a predominant feature of English life.

The use of demotic language, no matter how inexpressive, is now also taken as a sign of liberation from the terrible

constraints of gentility. The more demotic one's language, therefore, the more liberated one is.

Another strain in the ideological vulgarity of the English is that of multiculturalism. If all cultures are equal, and if you must accept without demur the culture of others, it follows that others must accept *your* culture without demur. The distinction between habits and culture is slight: If enough people habitually swear, scream, and drink to excess, then swearing, screaming, and drinking to excess become a culture, and no one has a right to criticize it because there is no Archimedean moral point from which to do so.

Thus, it is not necessary to imagine how other people in another country view your behavior when you are there: They have an inalienable duty to accept how you behave, provided that how you behave is a part (or the whole) of your culture. In other words, multiculturalism is a justification for radical egotism. You can scream and shout in public if it is in your culture to do so.

It was obvious, as I watched and listened to the English in this dead town in France, that the question of how they might appear to others did not cross their minds for an instant, or even a fraction of an instant. Such people have self-esteem but no self-respect. They have social rights but no social duties. They frequently stand on their dignity but have no dignity to stand on. They have all the charm of hyenas.

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