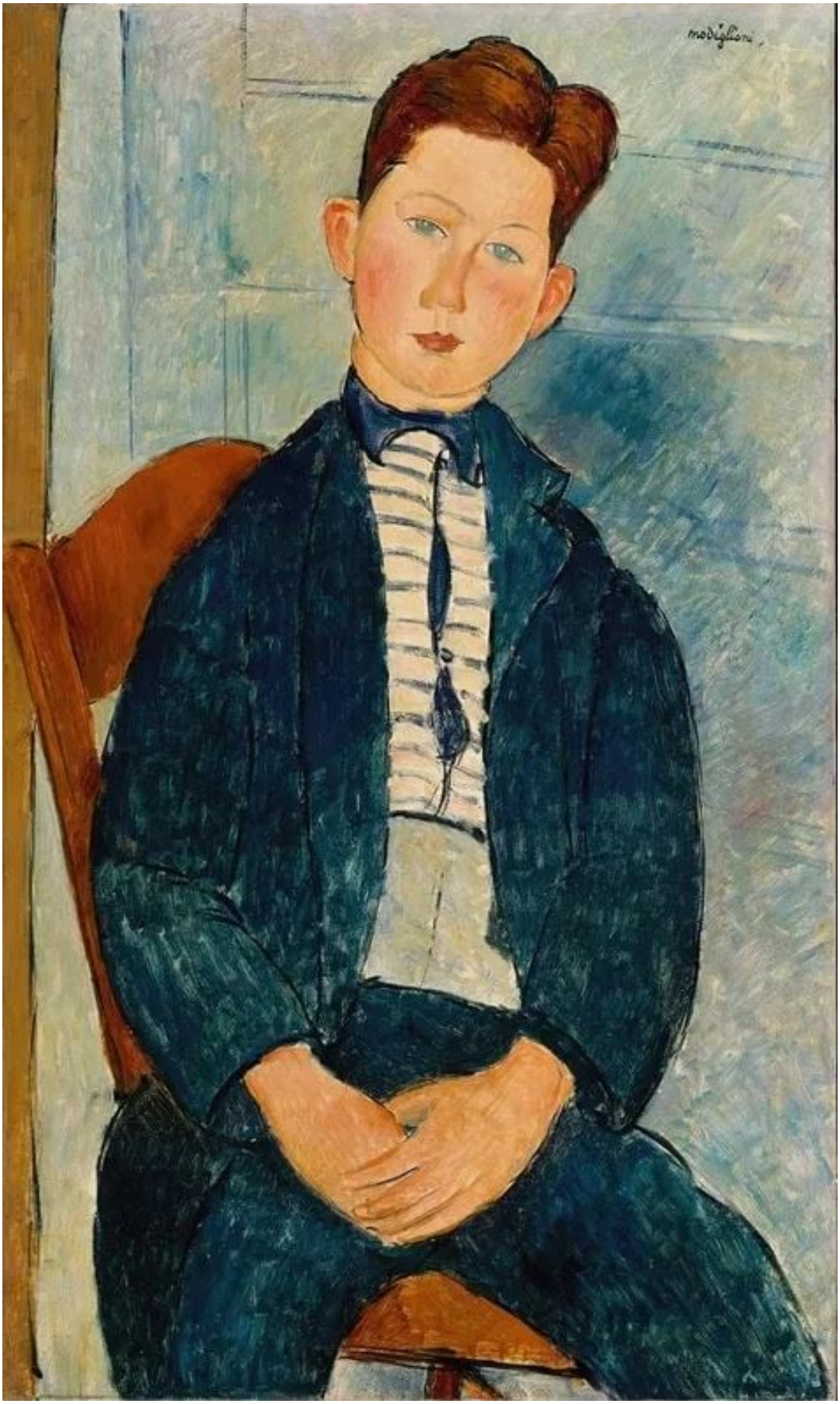
A Brilliant Future

by Theodore Dalrymple (October 2024)



Boy in a Striped Sweater (Amedeo Modigliani, 1918)

Yesterday I watched a large beetle, about three inches long, walk laboriously across a tiled floor. It was, I think, a specimen of *Carambyx cerdo*, a protected species in Europe (not that beetles need much protection from *me,* I always do my best to preserve them, even if of very common occurrence).

While I recognise that it did not evolve to walk across tiled floors, generally preferring rotting oak trees, it nevertheless seemed an ungainly and even clumsy beast. I thought it was very large—for a beetle. If it had been a mammal, I should have thought it very small. Its antennae were as long as itself, but not nervously active as some insect antennae are.

The absurd thought came to my mind that its progress across the floor was so laboured that really it would have been much better off with four rather than six legs. Why had evolution not arranged for this? Perhaps in its natural habitat it did not have to go walk far, but which came first, the slowness of its locomotion or the habitat in which it lived? At any rate, it would be wrong to mock such a beetle, because it—I mean its species—was almost certain to outlast humanity, whose life on earth was probably destined to be a short one, though whether in could be described as merry as well rather depends on your view of history and experience of life. If survival goes to the fittest, it is unlikely than Man will prove himself to have been the fittest form of life to have evolved on our planet, if for no other reason than his seeming vocation for self-destruction. However, in species as in individuals, longevity is not everything: no one would say that Schubert had an unsuccessful life because he lived sixteen years fewer than Al Capone.

We were visited recently by a little boy aged six, the grandson of a former cleaning lady of ours, the son of her daughter who is the chef of a local restaurant. The lives of these two have been, and are, very hard; I feel like a spoilt brat by comparison. But the little boy was happy, well brought

up, and highly intelligent. In time, however, he began to grow bored with our adult conversation, and so I tried, successfully, to distract him with my illustrated guide to insects, spiders and myriapods (centipedes and millipedes).

I was astonished at the speed of his learning. I pointed to the symbols for male and female, and he did not have to be told twice. He pointed with alacrity to the male and female forms of the insects, guided by these symbols, though no doubt my pedagogy might be criticised by some for inducting him into a binary view of the world which would inevitably result in transphobia.

His reading level was superior, I suspect, to that of many adults. He pronounced words which he could never have seen or heard before, such as *coléoptère*, *hymenoptère* or *myriapode*, without the slightest hesitation, and with perfect pronunciation. This single ability at the age of 6 might be, perhaps, too slight a thing upon which to predict a brilliant future for him, but his mother told me that he was far in advance of the rest of his class at school, and this was without any special tuition; in other worlds it was entirely natural, a free gift of nature, or a mere throw of the genetic dice. Indeed, his advance on the rest of his class was something of a problem, for he grasped at once what others in his class struggled to master, and quickly became bored by reiteration of what he had already learnt. He was desperate to go on to the next thing; and boredom, not the devil, or as well as the devil, makes work for idle hands to do. The vast majority of schools are ill-equipped to cater to the exceptionally gifted, and perhaps ideologically disinclined to do so. There is more rejoicing in the halls of pedagogy over ninety-nine mediocre pupils than over one brilliant one.

Teachers, it may be, also fear brilliant pupils, who may, without really meaning to, expose their own limitations of knowledge or ability. It takes gifts of character for adults genuinely to welcome being surpassed by youngsters a third or

even a quarter of their age. I think there is reluctance in the other direction also: if young people have a proper respect for their elders, they will not be too eager to display their superiority.

A brilliant future! It takes more than mere ability, or at least one type of ability, to procure such a future. Of course, ability is necessary, but it is not sufficient. It is said that above a certain economic level, happiness does not increase, and perhaps something similar might be said of ability, though with regard to worldly success rather than happiness: it does not increase with yet more ability. Dedication to a task in hand, collegiality, honesty and other traits of character, are just as necessary.

In all my school reports were the fatal words, 'Could do better,' and the teachers were not wrong, for I never used such gifts as I possessed to the maximum. For me, good enough was good enough, and since I could get by with very little effort, I made very little effort. I was under the impression that I could always catch up later, without of course ever specifying when that later would be. In any case, I thought *later* was of infinite duration and discovered quite late in my life that it wasn't.

I was five years older than my clever young visitor when a teacher (a man whom I immoderately admired and who first brought the potential beauty of prose to my attention) told me that I would be able to do anything I chose, without adding the important rider, *if I worked hard*. Perhaps he thought this was so obvious that it was not worth saying, but alas, I took it to mean that success would drop into my lap like ripe fruit from a tree under which I was sitting. Needless to add, what I took him to mean accorded with my own inclination to laziness.

At more or less the same time, I had another unfortunate experience—unfortunate, that is, from the point of view of my educational development. The teacher on this occasion was one

I admired less, and of whom I had a visceral physical fear, though he was never violent or even particularly strict. He lisped because he was missing three or four front teeth. As I was to learn much later in my life, most people with missing front teeth have had them knocked out, for the front teeth are not the first to rot; and the most common reason for a man who is in his late thirties to have his teeth knocked out is a drunken brawl. For statistical reasons also, a man is more likely to have a drunken brawl if he is frequently drunk in pubs or bars. Moreover, aggression not being an inevitable consequence of drunkenness, perhaps he was what is often called a nasty drunk. Certainly, he was unkempt for that time and place, though not by contemporary teachers' standards. I did not deduce all this as if I were Sherlock Holmes, but I *sensed* it.

He was a history and geography teacher, and one day, I do not know, or cannot remember, why, he drew a large triangle on the blackboard with his chalk. In the triangle, he wrote the following words:

PARIS

IN THE

IN THE SPRING

He told us to write down what was written, and then wiped off the triangle and the words, allowing us only a few seconds at most to read it. Then he asked us to write down what we had seen.

'Hands up,' he said, 'those who wrote 'Paris in the spring.''

Perhaps a fifth of the class, among them me, put up their hands.

‘Hands up those who wrote ‘Paris in the in the spring.’

The other four fifths put up their hands.

‘’Paris in the in the spring’ was what was written,’ he said with a smile that we never trusted.

We were mortified to have failed his simple test, but then he added, ‘Those of you who write ‘Paris in the spring’ are the more intelligent of you. You do not have to read every word to get the meaning. You anticipate.’

The teacher rose in my estimation. Clearly, he himself must have been intelligent to recognise my intelligence; but this little incident, which I never forgot, had a deleterious effect on me. It gave me a conceit which took many years to rub off. Even if it were true that I was intelligent, it would no more redound to my credit than that I was the particular height that I was. It is what one does with one’s intelligence that counts, and in truth I did very little with it.

By the time I decided to employ it, I also began to wonder what success was. By what criteria should it be judged? Who is successful by comparison with Mozart (I think Bertrand Russell once remarked that whenever he listened to Mozart he thought himself a worm by comparison, and Bertrand Russell was far from the most inconsiderable of people).

The question raises that of the good life. What is the proper end for a person to pursue? Does anything actually matter, given the size of the universe, the second law of thermodynamics, the transience of life, the inevitability of death and the infinitude of time? Three quotations come to my mind when (as I do occasionally) think of this question.

The first is Macbeth’s exclamation—after he knows that his earthly ambition has been thwarted—that life is full of sound and fury but signifies nothing. (*Àpropos*, I recall a column in a now defunct but long-lasting and not very intellectual

British magazine called *Tit-Bits* that bore the title *The Sound and Fury*, presumably in the expectation that the readers would not know the next line, though like practically all journalistic columns the absence of significance of everything à la Macbeth was borne out by the complete obscurity into which the column, that once called forth effort, ambition and passion from its writer, soon fell.)

The second is Somerset Maugham's question: 'By the standards of what eternity is it better to have read a thousand books than ploughed a thousand furrows?' This is a very subversive question, for it demands to know the Archimedean metaphysical point from which one can lever objective moral (or for that matter, aesthetic) judgment. However strongly we may feel and desire that there must be such a point, no one has succeeded in finding it. No one truly believes that his judgments are simply expressions of whim, and yet no one can fully explain why, in the last analysis, they should not be taken as such. This leads to the conclusion, in whose truth again no one truly believes, that one think is as good as another: in which case, all human endeavour would become pointless or at any rate with no more point than any other endeavour. As Jeremy Bentham, who managed often to be both boring and inflammatory, put it, 'Prejudice apart, the game of push-pin [once a popular game] is of equal value with the arts and sciences of music and poetry,' shortened and sharpened by his disciple, John Stuart Mill (who, like most disciples, eventually diverged from him) to 'quantity of pleasure being equal, push-pin is as good as poetry.' I think it is easy to show that the ethical theory of utilitarianism is false, but that is not the same as finding an indubitably true theory.

The third quotation is from the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado. The last stanza of his poem, *I Have Gone Down Many Roads*, ends:

They are good people who live,
work, go by and dream,
and one day like so many others,
rest beneath the earth.

If ever I have an epitaph on my tomb, I think I should like it to be, 'He made no fuss.'

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Theodore Dalrymple's latest books are *Neither Trumpets nor Violins* (with Kenneth Francis and Samuel Hux) and *Ramses: A Memoir* from New English Review Press.

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