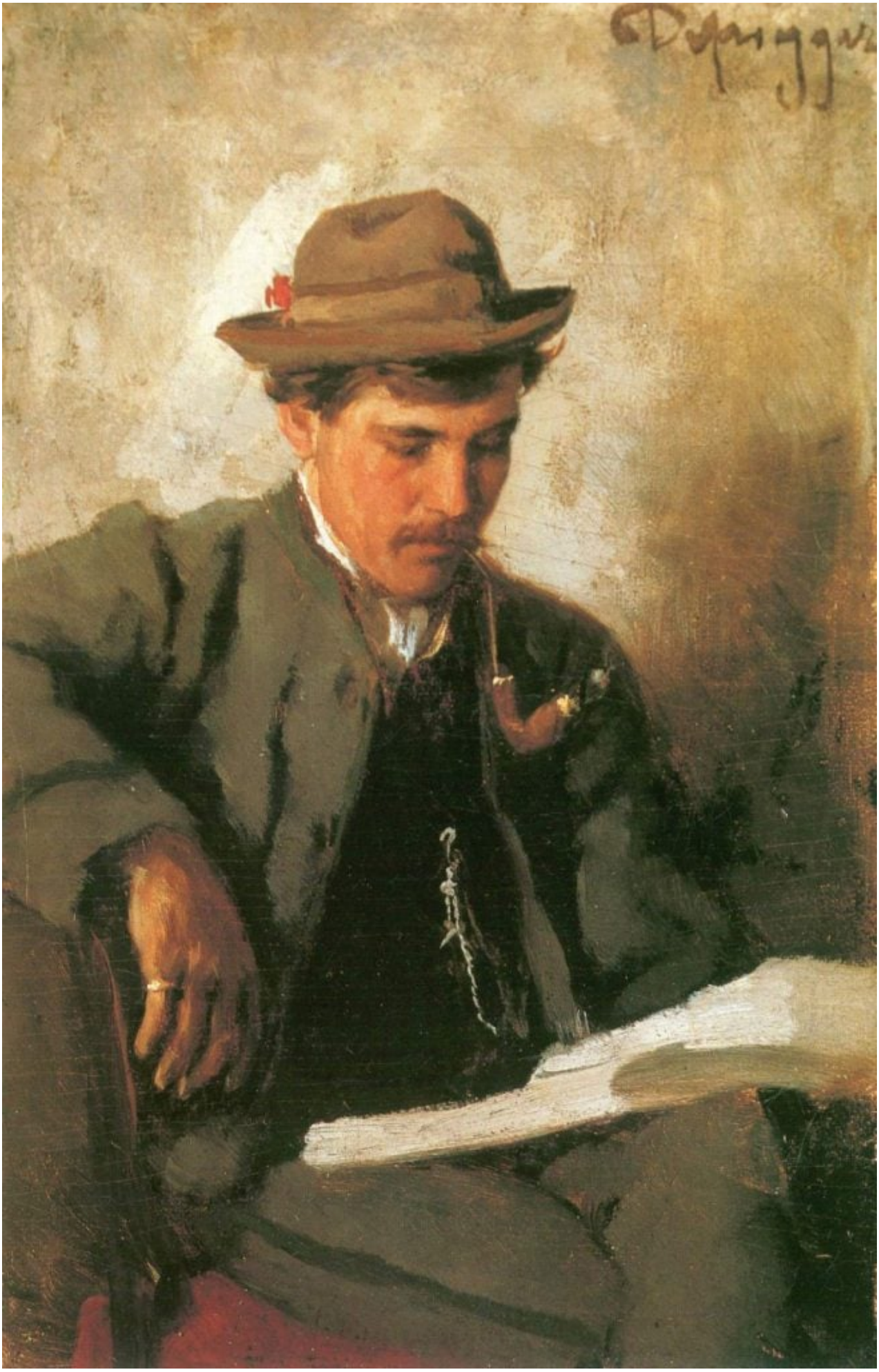
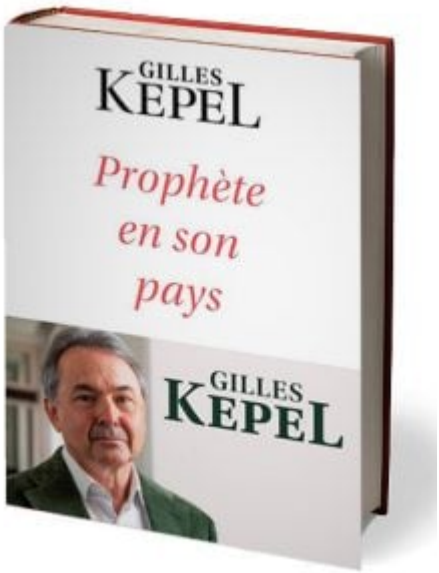
A Good Man

by Theodore Dalrymple (November 2023)



Reader, Franz von Defregger, 1883

Gilles Kepel is one of France's foremost commentators on Islamic and Middle Eastern affairs and has long been a realistic pessimist or pessimistic realist about them. Not surprisingly, he has made many enemies along the way, especially in the academic world, and has sometimes been accused (as if it counts as an accusation) of being Jewish, mainly on account of his name, which to many sniffers-out of the Judeo-Masonic-type conspiracy has a Jewish ring. Actually, his father was a Czech Catholic: but in these supposedly enlightened times, the errors of people with whom one disagrees are usually ascribed to their origins rather than to faulty logic or poor evidence. So much for Man as the rational animal.



Another of Kepel's great faults, from the point of view of his fellow academics, is that his books, though highly informed and thoroughly researched, sell very well in more than one language. Having travelled extensively for many decades in the Moslem world and had many interesting encounters and adventures, Kepel is far from Dryasdust, and is able to move seamlessly between anecdote and analysis. There is nothing like worldly success to arouse academic hostility, envy being disguised as disdain for popularisation, or popularity. True scholars should write only for each other, preferably in the kind of impenetrable language that they can only pretend to understand.

Now M. Kepel has written a kind of intellectual autobiography, *Prophète en son pays* (Prophet in His Own Country), an ironic

reference to the verse in the Gospel According to Luke, ‘Verily, I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country.’ Possibly he overplays the degree to which he has been sidelined by the French establishment, but it is nonetheless amusing to read how he has sometimes been commissioned to produce lengthy, detailed reports for the French government, only for them to be docketed unread by the minister who commissioned them.

This, indeed, seems to be a pathology of all modern democracies; it suggests the difference between serious and unserious people, as all politicians are now almost obliged, *ex officio*, to be. There is an element of magical thinking about it too, the belief that if one has commissioned a report, and the report has been delivered, one has actually done something to tackle or solve the problem the report is about. I remember as a student carrying a pathology book around with me in the hope that by doing so I would absorb some knowledge of pathology.

Kepel very early recognised the dangers of Islamism when he went to Egypt in 1979. That was at a time when most people in the west still had difficulty, despite the Iranian Revolution, in believing that religious sentiment of any kind could possibly put what they considered the inevitable and unidirectional secularisation of the world into reverse anywhere in the world. Religious power was like the blush of a grape: once it was gone, it was gone for good.

He quickly grasped the significance of the Moslem Brotherhood. Scholarship is not everything: one needs antennae to understand the significance of what may seem little more than a tiny cloud on the horizon. Sovietologists, clever and learned men who devoted themselves for decades to their arduous and arcane studies, did not, on the whole, foresee the upheavals in the Soviet Union, that is to say the transfer of power from the Communist Party to the KGB; the sports correspondent of the *Sun* newspaper, one of Britain’s less

cerebral newspapers (of which there is a plethora), landing at Moscow Airport for the Olympic Games, never having given a moment's thought to the survival of the Soviet Union, said, 'This can't go on.' And whatever one may think of subsequent events, it didn't.

Kepel went to Asyut, the city in Egypt that was the hotbed of Islamism at the time. He was there shortly before I went myself. Unlike him, of course, I was not an Arabic-speaker. This was only a year after the assassination of President Sadat and after Islamist civil disturbances in the city. I knew it was dangerous, which is why I wanted to go and smell its atmosphere: I was still a foolish and callow young man and thought myself invulnerable. Although a year or two older than M. Kepel, I was later to mature and take serious things seriously; my curiosity, unlike his, was idle. I still thought the world a great joke and surely no one could hate me, or my mere presence, sufficiently to do me any harm?

My only memory of Asyut was of an excellent witticism made by an Egyptian as I was sitting in a café there reading a book. He was about fifty, dressed in western clothes, and approached me as I read.

'What are you reading?' he asked, in perfect English.

I showed him: *A Good Man in Africa* by William Boyd.

'A good man in Africa?' he said. 'I'd like to meet him.'

It was difficult to believe that a man who made such a joke could be an Islamist: a sense of humour or irony not being a feature of that particular mode of thought (the Ayatollah Khomeini once spoke against humour and laughter as a snare and delusion, like music and pleasure in general). The joke was one that has stayed with me ever since, as one of those that remains funny no matter how many times repeated, like some of Oscar Wilde's best witticisms.

The last thing I expected to take away from Asyut was the memory of a joke.

Kepel also stayed in Syria, and this brought back memories of my one brief sojourn there, in 1977. I was on my way to India, and had taken a ticket with Syrian Airways as being the cheapest way to get there, and I thought a stopover in Syria might be interesting. Hafiz al-Assad, father of the present Assad, was the President, and even though the 1982 Hama massacre had yet to take place, his regime was already well-known for its ruthlessness and brutality.

But that was not how I was to remember Damascus. On the contrary, I remember is as having been a most charming city, whose way of life, at least for men, seemed very pleasant. How much time they all seemed to have to sit around in cafés, smoking hookahs, drinking tea or coffee and chatting! If they were poor, they lived a kind of luxurious poverty: they were rich in time, a commodity that cannot be bought.

I stayed at a hotel called the Venezia. It was not a grand establishment, but I have little doubt that there were much worse. Although I had booked, they were not ready for my arrival. However, they were very accommodating. It was quite late at night. They took down the heavy curtains of the dining room, put two tables together, and let me sleep between the curtains. I was not in the least put out by this and in those days, I was perfectly capable of sleeping on a stone bed, so that dining tables with heavy curtains seemed almost luxury to me.

My room was made ready at some very early hour in the morning and I was taken to it. The bed was still unmade and deep inside I found a half-eaten bread roll. I suppose that the hotel must have been an *hôtel de passe*, but I was amused rather than outraged. In those days, I was prepared to put up with almost anything.

No doubt while I was wandering, charmed by the city and its sights, the secret service were busy torturing opponents of the regime in secret and perhaps not so secret locations. (There is no sense in a dictatorship resorting to torture unless everyone knows that it does it. Doctor Johnson, let us remember, argued in favour of public executions, for he thought they failed of the educative purpose if carried out *in camera*.) The atmosphere of the city did not strike me as one of fear and oppression, however, perhaps because I was insensitive and unobservant, or perhaps because the population expected no regime that would do otherwise, and torture was as ineluctable in Syria as the weather. The rules, unwritten of course, were known by all: you did not involve yourself in politics, nor did you compete in business with any of the ruling elite's enterprises. If you observed these two prohibitions, you were largely left alone: hence the atmosphere of pleasant normality.

I recall in particular that when I left Syria on the airline's 747, all the passengers had to point out their own luggage on the tarmac before it was loaded into the aircraft. The assumption, I suppose, was that no one would load a bomb on the plane he was about to fly on: there were fewer willing to be 'martyrs' in those days. The attractions of heavenly reward were evidently less compelling than they subsequently became.

I have since often observed that countries with the most frightful governments may nevertheless retain the charm of their way of life. This was so, for example, of Burma under the military socialist rule of General Ne Win. Of course, he was a corrupt and vicious villain, a hypocrite of the worst order, and his rule kept the country both oppressed and impoverished, but still it had an enormous charm that I knew would be destroyed utterly if (as admittedly seemed not very likely at the time) it were ever ruled by a better government. Of course, I experienced it as a very privileged person who did not have to experience the daily rigours of an oppressive

and impoverishing regime.

My favourite recollection was of taking a taxi to visit a temple. There was a driver and his manager, a Bengali who spoke English. In those days, all the cars in Burma dated from the early 1950s, at the latest, and were in an astonishing state of dilapidation. The side windows of the taxi, for example, were of plywood, broken glass being irreplaceable. The taxi moved crabwise and bellowed like a wounded buffalo as it did so, under the greatest protest. There was a downpour and we had to stop because the water down the windscreen was like a waterfall through which nothing could be seen in any detail.

Shortly after the downpour ceased, we continued on our way—but not for long. The car ground to a halt with, indeed, a grinding noise. The rear left side was now on a much lower level than the rest of the car.

Having thus halted, the driver and the manager engaged in a furious discussion about what had gone wrong. It was evident to me that there had been a puncture. I think the discussion would have continued for a long time had I not suggested that we got out of the car and had a look. This struck the two men as a novel idea, but they eventually agreed to it.

The tyres, of course, were as bald as Kojak's head, and they had evidently been patched many times. The left rear tyre was as torn as a rag. It would need its hundredth patching. The manager of the taxi looked down at the wheel, whose rim was now resting on the ground, and exclaimed, in his strong Bengali accent, 'Stones in the road bloody!'

My heart leapt with joy at this exclamation. The simple reversal of the word order—not 'Bloody stones in the road!' but 'Stones in the road bloody!'—was wonderfully, if unconsciously, inventive, and moreover subtly different in meaning or connotation. It was beautiful. 'Stones in the road

bloody!’ suggested that there was something not deeply but nevertheless palpably wrong with the constitution of the universe, or with fate, rather than the mere trivial accident of stones having been present on the road as we happened to pass by. There was something strangely consolatory about it: misfortune was beyond human capacity to avoid, and therefore had to be accepted almost with good humour.

I recounted this incident to my closest friend, and whenever, during our subsequent conversations, we have to mention a misfortune that has befallen us, we always say ‘Stones in the road bloody!’

‘A good man in Africa? I’d like to meet him!’ and ‘Stones in the road bloody!’ —such are the treasures that I have brought back from my travels.

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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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