

Apocalypse Now

by Theodore Dalrymple (July 2014)

Practically all journalism is forgotten the day after it was written, even by those who wrote it. This is fortunate, for it means that the inevitable idiocies of the genre receive a swift and decent burial, never to be disinterred: nothing ever comes back to haunt a journalist and oblivion overcomes all. That is why journalists can afford to be fearlessly outspoken; no one will ever remember, except in the vaguest term, what they wrote. Fairness, accuracy, consistency: these are qualities with which the journalist can easily, and in some publications must, dispense.

I do not exclude myself from these strictures, far from it. Sometimes at the end of a day when I have written two or even three articles I relax with friends and they ask me what I have written that day. Not only can I not remember the details, I cannot remember even the subject of my articles. Keats thought that his name was writ in water; in what then, we might ask, are journalists' names written? Perhaps they are not written at all.

The evanescence of one's effusions in print notwithstanding, their oneness with Nineveh and Tyre, it is good for the character to reflect upon one's own grosser errors. I was reminded of one of these the other day by a comment posted on the internet about a book I wrote more than a quarter of a century ago, all the more troubling because it was written by someone by no means hostile.

The book was an account of a journey across Africa that I made by such means of public transport as I could find. On that journey I passed through Rwanda – about seven years before a genocide of the kind that was supposed never to happen again after the Second World War. I was of course aware of the conflict between the Hutu and the Tutsi (whom I remember a Belgian expatriate describing as 'the long, tall ones') but I gave as my firm opinion, founded upon only the slightest and most superficial acquaintance with the country, that the conflict had by then been settled once and for all, irredeemably, in favour of Hutu predominance and power. President Juvenal Habyarimana was so firmly in power that it was difficult to believe that he would ever be unseated from it; his National Revolutionary Movement for Development, the only permitted political party, was ubiquitous. Children became members of it, *ex officio*, at the moment of their birth; they had no choice in the matter and there was no escaping it, notwithstanding the fact that one's political opinions at the age of a month are a little undeveloped.

It seemed to me likewise indisputable that Rwanda was, by African standards, an efficient and well-administered state. You had only to stand at the frontier with Zaire (as the Democratic Republic of the Congo then was) to see that this was so. On the one side, the Congolese, all was disorder and chaos; on the other, the Rwandan, all was order and neatness. This might have been as much to do with the pressure of circumstances as with the political arrangements, for while humans to work the land were in short supply in Zaire, land for humans to work was in short supply in Rwanda. The one circumstance favoured carelessness, the other care; perhaps the respective political regimes of the two countries were irrelevant to the evident difference in the way the land was looked after on either side of the frontier. After all, Mobutu had a sole political party of his own, the Popular Movement of the Revolution, to match Habyarimana's. The difference between Rwanda and Zaire was like that between North Korea and Cuba, and whether one prefers one's dictatorships ferociously obsessional or slovenly bohemian is a matter of taste.

Anyway, I did not foresee the invasion of Tutsi exiles, driven out of the country by previous ethnic violence, only two years later: an invasion that would lead before long to what was possibly the most thorough and efficient attempted genocide in history. Such, then were my powers of prediction, my insight into the workings of the future: I was completely oblivious to the approach of one of the greatest political catastrophes of my adulthood.

I was not alone in this, of course; but not many of those who failed to foresee it committed themselves so firmly to paper. One interesting question that I have never seen asked let alone answered, is whether, had the invading rebels foreseen the genocide that their invasion unleashed, they would have acted any differently? In other words, would they have sacrificed the attainment of power to save the lives, or rather to prevent the murder, of hundreds of thousands of their kinsmen? Either they foresaw the genocide or they didn't; if they didn't they were as blind as I, which is some consolation to me for my lack of powers of foresight.

Lack of knowledge of a country or a situation never stopped anyone from prognosticating about it. In his famous book about the *Anschluss* of 1938, and the subsequent dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, called *Fallen Bastions*, the then-celebrated British correspondent, G. E. R. Gedye, who wrote for both the *Times* of London and the *New York Times*, tells how he wrote an article soon after his arrival in Vienna in which he praised the charming and easy-going tolerance of the people, published by ill-chance on the very day of a vicious pogrom against the city's Jewish population. And even if Gedye were on closer acquaintance to write no more on the celebrated *Gemütlichkeit* of the Viennese, even if he were to become only too aware of the extreme brutality of the triumphant Nazis (he wrote the book, 500 closely-printed pages long, at high speed in the British legation in Prague, whither he had been expelled by the

Gestapo), even he who had read *Mein Kampf* and was aware both of what he called its 'insane incitements against the Jews' and its clear blueprint for a general war which he took completely and correctly at face value, why even he had no inkling of the approaching Holocaust. He foresaw – as he saw – endless persecution of Jews, but he did not foresee their total annihilation.

Even close acquaintance with a situation, then, and study of it to the exclusion of all other objects of the mind, does not guarantee insight into the future, even in rough outline, and even only a few years off. When, for example, I was in Central America during the era of civil wars there, virtually all the foreigners who had made the region the object of their researches believed that the triumph of socialist revolutions was inevitable, in the sense of being immanent in the present and the past. This was in part wishful thinking – I met no one who thought such revolutions both inevitable *and* bad – but I doubt that many of them have acknowledged their mistake since to the extent of abjuring further prognostications. Like me, they make excuses for their own lack of foresight. And for this I do not entirely blame them, for Man is a prognosticating animal, he peers into the future as a short-sighted man at landscape. But often he makes no clear distinction between what will happen, and what will happen *unless* something else happens to intervene. It is a crucial distinction, for that 'something else' is precisely what cannot be predicted.

If only time ran backwards rather than forwards, how much wiser we should be! But time, it seems, makes fools of us all; there surely can be no one who has never confidently predicted what never happened.

One way to avoid humiliation by time is to impose no time limits upon one's predictions. This is the technique of all financial experts. For some years I have received by internet various financial newsletters which mainly catch my attention by predicting an economic apocalypse and giving me only three days to take avoiding action to ensure the value of my paltry investments. The newsletters speak of collapse, meltdown, crisis, even Armageddon. My wealth will be halved, quartered, decimated; I might be left penniless, and at my time of life I will have no time to recover my losses. The depression will last for years, decades; sometimes the newsletters state that in the entire history of the world there has never been a recovery from a financial situation like this, in other words that we are entering the economic dark ages. Gangs of the ruthless desperate will roam the ruined cities, robbing everyone of everything. The last few years of my earthly existence will be lived out in Hobbesian misery amidst the rubble of civilisation.

Quite right, I think! I always knew the world was going to the dogs, and here is the

confirmation of it. The graphs provided prove it! Debt of all kinds is increasing exponentially, the balance of trade is unfavourable, the demographics appalling. Soon half the population will be over ninety, and the other half will have to look after them. Abandon hope, all ye who read online here.

No, that is premature. It so happens that the financial newsletters have just the strategy for the enlightened and prudent few such as I (oh, how flattering!) to avoid the catastrophe. It all seems to me a little like those back garden nuclear fallout shelters that they used to try to sell us in the days when nuclear war was more feared than financial collapse – perhaps there is a law of the conservation of anxiety as well as of energy. But just because nuclear war hadn't happened yet never meant that it wasn't about to happen. And I myself have often preached, or at least implied, that social collapse is near. Imminent catastrophe is more interesting to contemplate than dull continuity. Besides, pessimists are seldom disappointed.

But whom can you trust? The week before the Crimean crisis broke, I was strongly advised by one of the financial newsletters to buy Russian shares. I didn't follow the advice, for two reasons, the stronger being inertia and the better being that I trust the Russians to play the game of capitalism fairly and honestly about as much as I would trust a great white shark to eat up its greens. Within a week of the advice the Moscow index was down by twenty per cent or more: that, of course, would have been the time to buy, for I knew that the index would be up again almost immediately once the preening impotence of the Mr Obama and the European Union (here a prediction would have been almost certain) became obvious even to the fund managers.

Just as there is compassion fatigue, so that depictions of terrible suffering no longer excite our desire to alleviate it, so I now suffer from apocalypse fatigue. No firm date is ever given for the supposed forthcoming apocalypse, such that if it fails to happen by that date the theory by which it was predicted stands refuted. Old apocalypses never die, therefore; they just recede into the mental background, while another comes into the foreground. But my financial newsletters have warned me for so long and so often that the end is nigh, that doom is at hand, while all the time I seem to have become somewhat more prosperous by the simple expedient of spending less than I earn and keeping my more luxurious instincts under control, that I no longer take any conscious notice of them. They – the financial newsletters – are like those religious enthusiasts who predict the end of the world on next Thursday afternoon, but seem hardly disconcerted at all when it does not happen, and merely move the date forward by ten days.

They are also like those epidemiologists who predict that the next flu epidemic will be of a mutated virus so virulent that it will wipe out half of humanity. The epidemic duly comes, and

half of humanity is not wiped out; the epidemiologists smoothly transfer their hope, if such it may be called, to the next epidemic.

There is a famous passage in *The Problems of Philosophy* by Bertrand Russell, first published in 1912, in which the difficulty of induction is clearly laid out.

The man who has fed the chicken every day throughout its life at last wrings its neck instead, showing that more refined views as to the uniformity of nature would have been useful to the chicken.

A thousand apocalypses that have not happened do not mean that there will be no apocalypse tomorrow. A large part of wisdom, therefore, is in knowing when things will and will not repeat themselves, and to what extent. There is no formula for it, not even in principle.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is