

In the Road Bloody

by [Theodore Dalrymple](#) (December 2022)



Procession of Nuns, Steve McCurry, 1994

On the day on which I went to see the exhibition at the Musée Maillol in Paris of Steve McCurry's beautiful, startling photographs, there were reports that a whole armoured battalion of the Russian army had been destroyed as it tried to cross a river on pontoons. According to those reports, at least 35 tanks had been annihilated and up to 1000 troops killed. I would not be telling the truth if I denied that I experienced a moment of exultation on hearing the news, for I believed that the defeat of the Russian invasion was essential for the peace of Europe. This, of course, is a received opinion, but an opinion is not necessarily wrong because it is received. If it is wrong, it is wrong because it is wrong, not

because it is received.

One of the photographs in the exhibition was of a burnt-out Iraqi tank during the first Gulf War, which turned out to be the mother of all military massacres, rather than the mother of all battles as Saddam Hussein promised, insofar as the Iraqi army, seemingly so large and powerful, turned out to be almost as defenceless against superior technology as a newborn baby. In the foreground of the tank is the charred and contracted body of an Iraqi soldier, presumably one of the crew of the tank. It is a terrible sight.

The pictures of the destruction of the Russian armoured brigade, assuming that they were genuine (by contrast with McCurry's picture, taken on the ground) were taken by drones so high above the scene that no detail on a human scale can be seen, just explosions and smoke, as if they were merely a sequence in a video game. But the tanks were operated by real, live human beings who, however bad the cause they were fighting for, were loved by someone and no doubt had their own dreams of a future which did not include being incinerated by remotely-operated drones. McCurry's picture teaches us not to rejoice at military triumph in the abstract, which is precisely what the pictures taken from the drones encourage us to do.

But McCurry is not really a war photographer, albeit that he first became known for his pictures of Afghan resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He is, rather, a recorder of human dignity, his region of predilection for finding it being central and south Asia. What his photographs convey, at least to me, is that the richness of human existence is not to be measured by levels of consumption, and that in some respects our own existence—for example, in its disconnection from any landscape—is a deeply impoverished one.

There is a twin temptation when we regard cultures other than our own: to dismiss by denigration on the one hand and to

romanticise on the other. If anyone has ever earned the right to romanticise a little, it is McCurry. He has travelled for thirty years in Buddhist countries, and he says 'I love the serenity which Buddhism exudes,' and I certainly know what he means. There is to Buddhist contemplative life a tranquillity that is rarely to be found in Western society apart from in exceptional individuals: the monasterial way of life having been all but eliminated within my lifetime and now seen as archaic as typewriters or the starting handles of cars. Our very addiction to constant activity and perpetual stimulation causes us to long for, if not a tranquil life for ourselves, at least the theoretical possibility of such a life, proved by its existence elsewhere.

Though it is easy to dissolve into dithyrambs, however, certain inconvenient facts arise in my mind. Countries in which Buddhism is the principal religion or philosophy have not been notably peaceful or less prone to the horrors of the twentieth century. Cambodia, immemorally Buddhist, was the location of one of the very worst episodes in a century of mass murder and genocide. True, it was committed by a regime that expressly rejected Buddhism and adopted an alien ideology in its place: but if, after so many centuries of Buddhism, almost incredible cruelty was so easily and quickly unleashed, it could not have changed human nature very profoundly.

Sri Lanka was the location of a long and vicious civil war in which tens of thousands were killed. Again, the war was inter-ethnic, one side of it not being Buddhist, but Buddhist belief did not prevent the other side from committing atrocities.

One of my favourite photographs in the exhibition was of four young Buddhist nuns walking in a line in the rain early one morning in Rangoon. They walk tranquilly past an old and run-down brick building of the colonial period, painted red, blue and yellow. Nothing could capture better the serenity of which McCurry speaks: it is a photograph that, like music, has charms to soothe the savage breast.

And yet, since independence from Britain in 1948, civil war has raged there and continues to this very day. The war has not been carried out with any notable reluctance to use extreme violence or vicious repressive methods, and no political settlement is in sight even for the core Burmese population, let alone for the ethnic minorities in perpetual revolt. The Burmese army is not noted for the serenity or even restraint of its conduct.

My one visit to that country, now forty years ago, had a profound effect on me. In abstract political theory, it had everything to make it terrible. The military government claimed to have an ideology of its own; it was a one-party state, the one party being the Burmese Socialist Programme Party. General Ne Win, though no longer in power, was still the éminence grise of the regime, his mind being a strange amalgam of socialist dogma, nationalism and astrology. He believed in autarchy, keeping foreign contacts to a minimum, with the result that the country was physically crumbling into ruins. There had been no development of the economy, and of course all opposition was suppressed with violence.

It should have been appalling but I loved it. First was the graceful charm of the people, who made most westerners look lumpen in their way of moving. Neither their grace nor their charm could have been decreed, created or even encouraged by the government, all-powerful as it seemed (and wanted) to be. Culture is therefore something deeper than politics, though we are increasingly liable to look at the world through the single lens of politics, and to attribute all differences to political differences.

My impressions were superficial—as how could they not have been? —but yet, though they were superficial, they influenced me ever afterwards.

While in Rangoon, I visited the Shwedagon temple with its gold-covered stupa. The Shwedagon is said to contain eight

hairs of the head of the Buddha, but there is a temple in Sri Lanka that lays claim to the same hairs. In those days, there were very few foreigner visitors to Burma and as I approached the stupa I was surprised suddenly to be approached by a saffron-robed monk with a black umbrella who raised the latter and struck me with it, shouting 'Get out of Burma! Get out of Burma!' This was not the serenity one expected of Buddhists.

I saw at once that, in a sense, he was right. The country's charm depended on its inaccessibility, on a very strict limitation of the numbers of the idly curious such as I. It should not be, like a prostitute, promiscuously hospitable. The fact is that tourism has an inexorable tendency to deplete the worth of whatever attracts it. It is a solvent of charm. When everything is easily accessible, the value of accessing it declines, sometimes to the point at which the value of a visit becomes negative.

Moreover, to see development as an unequivocally beneficial process suddenly struck me as false, or at least simplistic. If development were to occur in Rangoon, I thought, it would turn it into an impoverished Bangkok, with higher levels of consumption than at present, but also with the kind of traffic jams that have such a deleterious effect on the quality of life. Speed, noise, pollution, continual agitation in daily life, aggravated ambition with its natural corollary, frustration, would follow. Then would come painful nostalgia, the awareness that one had destroyed what one had not even realised that one valued. The beauties of a country and its way of life are not encompassed exclusively by its political virtue.

The charms of undevelopment, or even of reversal of development, were considerable—though of course I realise that I was a privileged visitor and they may have been considerably less for those who could not escape them. The hotel in which I stayed, the Strand, had once been a grand colonial establishment, and had not changed except for the workings of

time, the climate and lack of maintenance upon its fabric. The certificate of safety in the lift [elevator] stated 'This lift has been inspected and found safe...' -dated thirty years earlier. The night watchman's notebook was on a windowsill in the corridor on which my room opened. 'All guests sleeping soundly,' it said its last entry-dated twenty years earlier. For me, at any rate, there was an irresistible charm to this inspissated indolence, a kind of philosophic realisation that most of what we do to busy ourselves is futile. When in doubt as to whether your activity is really necessary, it is best to assume that it is not.

A taxi ride in Rangoon reminded me of the beauties of irregular English, in this case a simple reversal of the order of words. The taxi in question was a very early 1950s American model, much battered and all but a wreck. It progressed slowly and only under protest, bellowing somewhat, and because the body of the car was at an angle to its chassis, one had the impression of advancing crabwise. When it began to rain torrentially, there was no means of wiping away the water: it was like looking at the world from behind a waterfall, and we had to stop until the rain passed. The side windows were made of plywood.

The taxi had a crew of two: the Burmese driver and a man who appeared to be his manager, a loquacious Bengali. Suddenly, a little way out of Rangoon, the car almost ground to a halt. It not only went crabwise, but jerked or limped up and down. The driver stopped, and there followed a long discussion between him and the manager as to what had happened. I suggested that it might have been a puncture, and in principle they thought this might have been an explanation and began to discuss it.

'Why don't we get out and have a look?' I said.

This struck the two men as a novel, unorthodox and perhaps not altogether welcome idea, for they would have preferred to discuss it further, perhaps even endlessly. However, they felt

obliged to follow my example when I got out of the car.

It was obvious that there had been a puncture of one of the rear tyres, which of course had absolutely no tread left and was as bald as a coot. The manager looked down at it in disgust and exclaimed, 'Stones in the road bloody!'

Stones in the road bloody! The heart of what native speaker of English would fail to leap with joy at this beautiful reversal of the order of words, so much more expressive than the correct order (though dependent for its expressiveness on there being a correct order)?

In Singapore, a Chinese taxi driver with very little English said something to me admirable in both its concision and its suggestiveness. I had tried to hail a taxi but none would take me. It turned out that I had been standing about a yard or two from the correct pick-up point prescribed by regulation. Eventually I realised this and stood in the correct place whereupon I had a taxi straight away. I expressed my surprise to the driver, who said, with a strong Chinese accent, 'Singapore velly, velly law.'

I think it would be difficult to express in four words the omnipresence of regulation in Singapore (whether for good or evil, or a little of both) better than did this taxi-driver with his limited command of our language. Correctness is not expressiveness.

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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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