Lunch Conquers All, Part 1

by Theodore Dalrymple (January 2015)

Men who bestride their academic disciplines and institutions like colossi are soon forgotten, in part because these days there are simply too many disciplines and too many institutions for them all to be remembered as they deserve and as their work merits. Names that once inspired awe or fear, or both, now evoke mere puzzlement among their successors, or at best ring the faintest of bells in the back of their minds. (Incidentally, when something rings a faint bell in the back of *my* mind, I feel it physically, somewhere inside my skull just above and to the left of the nape of my neck.)

Some, perhaps most, disciplines are too *recherché* for even their greatest scholars to be known to a wider public. How many of us could name a single Assyriologist, though to *be* an Assyriologist in the first place, let alone an eminent one, you must master of a formidable range of disciplines.

I came recently into possession of letters of two of the most eminent British psychiatrists of the twentieth century, Sir Aubrey Lewis and Eliot Slater. Sir Aubrey Lewis was the medical director (the second in its history) of the pre-eminent British psychiatric research hospital, the Maudsley, and Eliot Slater worked there too. Lewis had studied anthropology as well as medicine; and although he wrote no books as such, his erudite and influential papers were published in book form, and are still worth reading – which is not, of course, the same thing as saying that they are still read. In his time Lewis was renowned around the (psychiatric) world, and many honours were conferred on him. As for Slater, he was a polymath. An expert in the genetics of schizophrenia, he wrote a famous paper decrying the diagnosis of hysteria, showing that many people diagnosed with hysterical conversion actually turned out in the long run to have *bona fide* neurological disease (I think he was wrong). He showed the connection between temporal lobe epilepsy and schizophrenia. He was part-author of one of the best textbooks of psychiatry of his day. But he also wrote learnedly about music and the illnesses of composers, as well as about chess openings, he painted more than averagely well, and he was awarded a PhD aged 77 for his statistical work on the language of the play *Edward III*, showing that it was likely to be Shakespeare's.

Lewis and Slater were men of enormous intellect and energy, even if it cannot be said that they discovered much that was incontrovertible, in the last analysis the only criterion of greatness in science. But by the standards of their pygmy discipline, they were giants indeed.

It is delightful, then, to read the letters that Slater and Lewis wrote to each other, that prove (once again) that giants are not immune from pettiness, intrigue and wounded *amour propre*. At the time of Slater's letter (1948) to Lewis he was already very senior at the Maudsley, though Lewis, as director, was his superior. Slater wrote:

> Dear Lewis [in those days upper class British men addressed each other by their surnames, as Holmes did Watson and vice versa], You and I are old friends, and we are in danger of quarrelling; this is despite, on my side, warm liking, respect, and a considerable degree of gratitude for what you have personally done to help me.

Note the feline *on my side*, which indicates, to those alert to it, a sense of awareness of, and injury by, non-reciprocation. And of course there is a *but* in the offing, and actually the rest of the letter consists of a long elaboration of that *but*.

Slater continues:

> You have quarrelled with lots of other men who were your friends, and it always happens the same way. I do not think you have any natural intuition of the feelings of others [quite a handicap in a psychiatrist, one might have supposed, and therefore a deficiency the allegation of which would be especially hurtful], and so you are always doing things to wound them. If they express views which are different to yours, you see only the weaknesses in their position. You do not try to make allowance for them, and nearly every discussion with you becomes a battle – that is unless the other gives way entirely.

In other words, Lewis prefers triumph to truth: like Doctor Johnson, he talks for victory. The purpose of human intercourse is to establish a hierarchy of power.

The indictment continues:

> You spoke yesterday about the discontent at the Maudsley. Have you any conception that it is these traits of personality in yourself which is the principal cause of it?

One begins by now to wonder that if this is what Slater thought of those for whom he felt 'a warm liking,' what he thought of those for whom he felt a warm detestation?

Slater then gets down to a specific example:

> I should like to revert to your proposal to drop the title of Assistant Physician and to include all those with this rank among the Physicians. Have you any idea how this

> proposal would impress any of the Physicians?

Wounded pride could hardly be more clearly implied, but it is soon spelled out:

> The implication is that there is nothing in their professional standing to distinguish them from Assistant Physicians… [all] practically of the same status, and one immeasurably lower than yours. This is, in effect, an insult.

Slater sees behind his little game:

> There is the implication that by such an amalgamation of ranks our standing in the Hospital would be reduced, and your power correspondingly increased.

Nor was he alone (according to him) in thinking this:

> I am sure that all three Hospital Physicians… felt that this might be on your mind, and that the reasons you gave for your proposal did not express all your motives. Your proposal was in fact a direct frontal assault on us.

Whether secret motives are quite compatible with an allegedly direct frontal assault I leave to others to decide; but Slater is relentless:

> You refused to withdraw from your position and insisted flatly on maintaining it. Can you see how arrogant that is? It implies that our views were of no account; you must be, and we could not possible be right. It implies also that our feelings were not worth consideration. Do you seriously believe that you can never be in error? This is a quality which marks all your conduct of affairs…

Lewis could hardly have been pleased to receive such a letter, even from a *soi-disant* friend. He answered it, I must say, with a finesse that I found admirable.

> Dear Slater [he replied], I suppose it is salutary to know the faults our friends find in us, even if we don’t recognize the picture.

That is to say, ‘You are quite wrong, I’m not like that at all. I am perfect in fact.’ He continues:

> I don’t want to reply in kind to your chastening, or copy you in attributing rather base motives for your actions when they don’t please me.

In other words, this is precisely what I am going to do, but more subtly than you did it.

> I don’t question your assurance that you speak from conviction – why should I? – and I believe you are quite unaware how your arguments and actions sometimes appear to other people: but in case you interpret that as *tu quoque* stone-throwing, I can add at once that most people – including myself – seem to me to suffer from the same disability where their personal interests are involved, and weighing up comparative degrees of this insensitiveness is a nice calculation that I wouldn’t like to make.

In other words, I am not going to resort to *ad hominem* mud-slinging – unlike you!

Having got the insults almost out of the way, Lewis then proposes – ‘in spite of a few things you have done that seemed to me unfriendly’ – that they should deal with things in a better way:

> I would prefer to suggest friendly discussion of these things over a meal occasionally, without Maudsley company – my impression was that our fortnightly lunches, which I valued, in the earlier years of the war, fell through when Sargant started to come to them.

To understand the subtlety of this, it is necessary to explain that William Sargant was another eminent psychiatrist, a great believer of restoring people to sanity by physical methods such as insulin coma, electroshock and lobotomy. (It is an old principle of therapeutics that if you can make treatment more unpleasant than the disease, people stop complaining of the disease, even if they don’t get better from it.) Indeed, Sargant was evangelical in his fervour for such treatments, and he became as notorious in some circles as he was revered in others. Certainly he bore with fortitude the deaths of his patients under his experimental treatments. But in 1944, he was co-author with Slater of a book, *An Introduction to Physical Methods of Treatment in Psychiatry*, that was to go through five editions and was the first of Slater’s several books. It may be presumed, therefore, that the two were allies, so that Lewis’s remark, that the lunches were not so good once Sargant came to them, might be construed as an attempt to drive a wedge between the two: in other words, divide and rule.

Then came Lewis’s modest proposal:

> Will you come and have dinner with me at the Athenaeum one evening next week [the Athenaeum is the London club for distinguished men of letters, scientists and academics]? I leave it to your judgment whether before or after the next meeting of the academic Board would be better.

For a man without any ‘natural instinct for the feelings of others’ this was admirably subtle, though I dare say that Slater might have seen through it (I do not have the follow-up letter). He who was accused of behaving as if the views of others were of no account to him was now leaving it to his subordinate to decide something binding on them both: and there is no better way of flattering people than deferring to their decisions, even if they are only in small matters. This, of course, is the better to slip larger decisions, autocratically taken, past them.

The letters were highly literate, and one may wonder whether, in an age of instant communication, letters like them will ever be written again. But the petty querulousness of them certainly persists in the world today, or at least my experience of institutions suggests that it does. I have little doubt that both Slater and Lewis thought the matter of whether the Assistant Physicians and Physicians of the Maudsley Hospital should be lumped together as one category was of the first significance, and not just one of factional in-fighting. Perhaps they lost no sleep over it, but they probably expended much thought on it, scheming and counter-scheming, and wasting the energy of their considerable intellects on it. Clearly the matter engaged their emotions at a deep level, and yet how petty it all seems now! These men were, in point of education and intelligence, within the highest thousandth of the population, but that did not protect them from the self-obsession (disguised, of course, as matters of principle) of the other 99.9 per cent of humanity.

Needless to say, my own concerns, and I am sure those of my readers, do not partake of Slater’s and Lewis’ pettiness (such pettiness becomes clear only in retrospect). We do not fret, as did they, over the baubles of rank in a hierarchy, or over achieving predominance in an institution that, however illustrious in its field, was after all of small account in the history of the world. They – our concerns – are invariably matters of important abstract principle, and have nothing to do with the preservation or inflation of our *amour propre*. We are above such things.

But still I admire Lewis’ sinuous letter, and his resort to lunches and dinners to smooth relations with a fractious, disgruntled and potentially dangerous colleague. I wish I knew whether the dinner at the Athenaeum actually took place, and whether it restored relations between the two men. But if I had either written or received a letter like Slater’s, I would never again be quite at ease with its recipient or its author.

Theodore Dalrymple’s latest book is