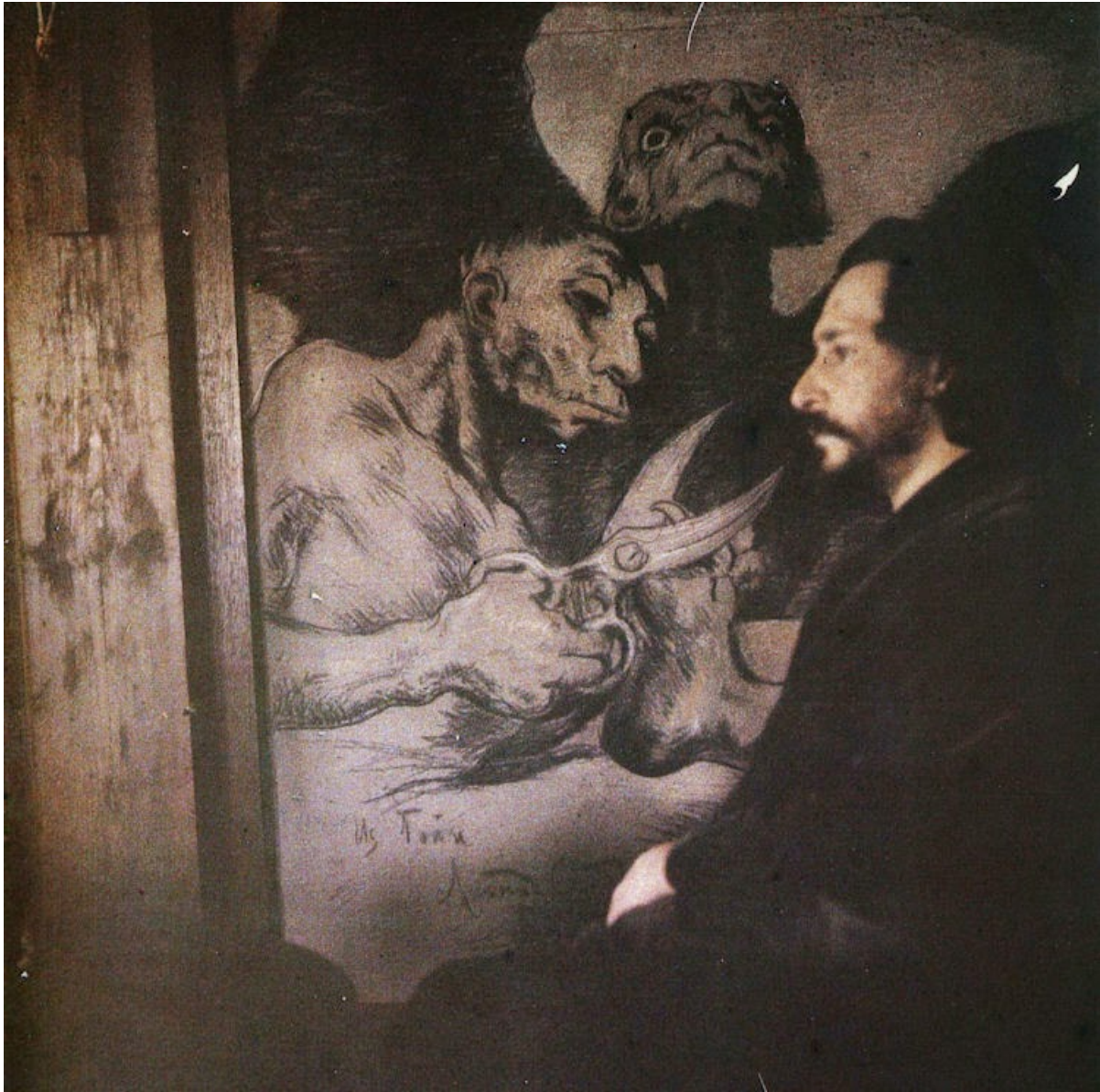


# The Predictability of Predictions

by Theodore Dalrymple (October 2017)



*Andreyev and the Devils*, Leonid Andreyev, prior to exile posing with his Goya etchings he had made.

Projection is not prediction and prediction is not prophecy. Of these three, projection is the easiest and most beguiling. It is simply the extension of a current trend into the future,

as if nothing could occur to change or halt it. By this method, many a catastrophe that has not eventuated has been projected to happen. Recently I bought a book titled *Famine 1975!*, published in 1968, by two respectable American intellectuals, one of them an agronomist, in which the authors claimed that it was already too late to avert famine on a mass scale throughout the Third World: that population growth would ineluctably, as Malthus claimed it would, outstrip food production, with only one possible consequence, a culling of the population by death from hunger. There was a vogue for such projections at the time, and many people thrilled to them: most famously, Paul S. Ehrlich who, on the basis of his projections, thundered that it was far too late to avert mass famine, and that it was as certain that the sun would rise tomorrow that millions would die horrible deaths.

True, there was a famine in Ethiopia in 1974, that brought down the seemingly immemorial regime of the Emperor Haile Selassie: or more accurately, perhaps, it was the publicity about the famine that brought it down, thus heralding the age of the virtual in which the representation of things is often more important than the things themselves. But terrible though that famine was, it was local, not general (and by the way, was the commencement of a regime infinitely worse than that of the murdered ancient Emperor, a regime that, greatly more culpable, brought famines of its own). Famines ever since have been strictly local, and always the consequence of political disruption rather than of population growth. Since the publication of *Famine 1975!*, Mankind's main nutritional problem has become obesity, which in the western world has become almost a metonym for poverty, and elsewhere that the age of scarcity is over.

Projections of famine having failed, the baton of projection, as it were, was taken up on the subject of that obesity which

is now Mankind's greatest nutritional challenge. On the basis of a very short history, it has frequently been projected to increase to the point when almost everyone will become of stranded-whale-like proportions, although the indications are that, in the United States at least, the percentage of obesity among children is beginning to decline.

We love projections, however, because they always lead to immoderate (if only imaginary) results. The human mind loves the dramatic and the sensational and abhors the banal and the ordinary. La Rochefoucauld said that there is in the misfortune of our friends something not entirely displeasing; he might justly have added that there is in the contemplation of future catastrophe something extremely pleasing. No one ever gained notice by pointing out that a deleterious trend was now at an end, and that the rapid growth of a particular problem was over; but many a person has enjoyed his quarter of an hour of fame by projecting exponential growth of something or other to the point of the abyss. The absurdity of this is obvious: by means of projection, one could conclude that, given the extremely rapid growth in the number of people in the United States dying of overdoses of opioids, by such-and-such a date, everyone in the United States will die of opioid overdose, there will be no other way for them to die. But absurd as is the method of projection when applied to human affairs, we are all inclined to it in the same way as we are inclined, no matter how many times we are enjoined against it, to take correlation for causation.

Not all projections, however, are of disaster. My financial adviser comes to me with charts showing that, if only I put my faith in him, I will become, if not rich beyond the dreams of avarice, at least rich beyond my dreams of avarice: which are actually those of having enough to live on at my present level for the rest of my life. He brings me graphs that show my

investments progressing like dogged mountaineers trudging up a steepish slope, and he doesn't have to say anything for me to project the graphs in my mind to the point at which any possibility of impoverishment, bar some rush of blood to my head in the form of extravagance, would be behind me. And I do this projection even though I know perfectly well that my financial adviser has chosen the scale of his graph, and the date of its commencement, to show his efforts on my behalf (if any) in the best possible light. Moreover, I take no notice of the warning statement at the bottom of every page of every document that he gives me, to the effect that past performance is no guide to or guarantee of future performance, in other words that he could lose everything for me and he will take no blame for it. No, for me the happy projections into a cloudlessly prosperous future are almost as good as a reality.

Prediction is another matter from projection, though perhaps not another matter entirely, since even the strictest scientific predictions presume that the operation of natural laws will be the same tomorrow as today: a presumption that is very likely to be correct, but cannot be known to be true beyond all possibility of doubt. All the same, the prediction of the next appearance of Halley's Comet is of a different order of intellectual rigour, as well as of difficulty, from the projection of obesity on to all Mankind based upon the experience of the past few years. Is true prediction possible in the realm of human affairs?

There are of course, lucky guesses; and if you make enough guesses, some of them will be lucky. By forgetting your failures and remembering your successes, you can no doubt persuade yourself that you are a person of exceptional foresight. I am proud of only one of my political predictions, and try as I might, I cannot think of it as having been merely a happy guess. Nevertheless, one accurate prediction does not

make me exceptionally-gifted in the faculty of foresight.

After the widespread riots in 2005 in the French banlieues (the areas of public housing around French towns and cities, where the youth issued from North and Sub-Saharan African immigration lives, and which has rates of unemployment of up to 50 per cent), I predicted that, if the French government introduced any reform, however timid, to liberalise the labour laws to make it easier for the unemployed to find work, there would be protests on the Boulevard St Germain in the centre of Paris: and that is precisely what happened.

My reasoning was as follows:

The French have long had a tendency to protest any reform that a section of them does not like.

Those who are in work like the protections with which the rigid labour laws provide.

They would see even the slightest move to reduce those protections as the thin end of the wedge.

Therefore, there would be protests against making it easier, or less onerous, for employers to employ new staff, by the weakening of legal protections.

My prediction (which came true) was, then, more than a lucky guess; but I would not, on its basis, recommend myself for any position in a consultancy: albeit that I am far from certain that consultants are chosen, or choose themselves, on much better grounds. It seems to me likely that, at least in some uncertain fields such as politics, consultants are chosen, or choose themselves, on the basis more of self-confidence than of any other quality: but the credulous have you with you always.

Prophecy is another matter from prediction, though again perhaps not another matter entirely. I suppose one of the main differences between prophecy and prediction is in its scope: one doesn't prophesy (if one prophesies at all) small or particular events, such as that it will rain tomorrow and wash out a garden party, but rather pertains to large-scale changes or dramatic events affecting millions. The means by which prophets apprehend future reality is also distinct, more instinctive than deductive. Few have the necessary instinct to any large degree: which perhaps is as well, since a population of prophets would be uncomfortable and no doubt tiresome to live among.

Even one prophet can be discomfiting, which is why prophets are so often without honour in their own country. It is the occupational hazard of true prophets to be disregarded, mocked, excoriated or to have to go into exile.

This was the fate of Leonid Andreyev (1871–1919), a Russian writer of the Silver Age of Russian literature and photographer. He died in exile in Finland only two years after the Bolshevik coup d'état, having seen with prophetic clarity where Bolshevism would lead. He saw it even before the October coup: in September, 1917, he wrote a short text, *Veni creator!*, which I happened upon recently, in which he foretold the dreadful future that was to befall Russia, with Lenin as its demonic demiurge.

*Here is your conqueror, Russian people, acclaim him more loudly, and yet more loudly, welcome him with even more veneration! Fall face down on the earth! Abase yourselves before the great conqueror who enters in all his glory into your powerful city of Petrograd!*

Andreyev continues:

*Receive my salutation also, o conqueror! I deeply regret being only a writer . . . not a trumpet of Jericho, a Cerberus barking from its three mouths or a chorus of winged cherubim! How can I express by simple words all my enthusiasm, all my admiration? You are so great, you are so divinely magnificent, o extraordinary conqueror who has crushed his country, who has risen above the laws, and who despises all other gods but himself. You are almost a God, Lenin, do you know that?*

This was all written, one has to remind oneself, before Lenin had done very much. Somehow Andreyev had seen into the very essence of the man, none better or more clearly, even a hundred years later:

*You are almost God, Lenin. What does anything earthly or human matter to you? Pitiful little humans tremble for their pitiful lives, their weak and fragile heart is filled with torment and fear, but you, you are unmoveable and hard as a granite rock. They cry, but you, you have dry eyes. They supplicate and curse, but you, you do not hear them. What does anything earthly matter to you? You are above tears, above curses, above scorn—you are yourself Scorn itself come to Earth!*

This is prophecy of a biblical intensity. Lenin had not yet reached power, let alone killed hundreds of thousands or millions, before his cult had even begun except among a few

followers.

In one of the most remarkable passages I have ever read, Andreyev asks (and one must remind oneself that he was writing in September, 1917, before the Bolsheviks seized power):

*Who, then, comes after you? Who is this creature so terrible that even your face of smoke and flames turns pale? The shadows darken, and in them I hear a voice: "He who comes after me is stronger than me. He will baptise you with fire, he will take the grain from the granaries, he will burn the straw with an inextinguishable fire. He who comes after me is stronger than me." He will be thin and vicious—'this Tsar-famine.'*

There may somewhere be secular prophetic writing stronger than this, but if so I do not know it.

Have I met any prophets myself? In retrospect, I met one more than thirty years ago in an unexpected way. It was in the South Seas. He was a jovial professor of medicine from Melbourne called Professor Paul Zimmet. He was studying the extraordinary incidence of Type 2 diabetes among the Pacific Islanders (50 per cent of the inhabitants of the island of Nauru were diabetic). I thought he was wasting his time studying a curiosity; in fact, he was studying the future. He was, in an undemonstrative way, calling down anathema on no one, a prophet.

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