

Warmth is Cool

by Theodore Dalrymple (December 2014)

There are two types of men: those who divide men into two types of men, and those who don't. But just as there is an infinite number of ways of dividing a sphere into two, so (because of Man's infinite variety) there are an infinite number of ways of dividing men into two.

The other day, for reasons unnecessary to mention, I returned to Hume's essays. Hume was once a hero of mine because of the coolness and irony of his prose, the coolness of his thought and the coolness of his temperament. He was cool, not in the debased modern sense, but in the sense that the Stoics might have recommended and admired. I was attracted to him because by nature I was the opposite, hot-tempered and passionate. Temper and passion do not bring lasting happiness, and Hume exerted a lasting and I think beneficial effect on me.

In his first essay, *Of the Delicacy of Taste and Passion*, published in 1753, Hume divides humanity into two by two different criteria, related but not identical. Some people, he says, 'are subject to a certain *delicacy of passion*, which makes them extremely sensible to all the accidents of life, and gives them a lively joy upon every prosperous event, as well as a piercing grief when they meet with misfortune and adversity.'

We have all met people like that: for them there is nothing between triumph and catastrophe. Life in their eyes is ever a drama and minor incidents are for them indistinguishable from the Thirty Years' War or the discovery of America. Their emotions are to feeling what the primary colours are to a painters' palate.

People of this character, Hume says, 'have more lively enjoyments, as well as more pungent sorrows, than men of cool and sedate tempers.' But Hume is in little doubt that the latter are, on the whole, more fortunate, on the somewhat pessimistic grounds that in human existence sorrows are more commonly met with than joys. He does not say actually say so, but the sum total of human happiness (the utilitarian measure of all things) would be greater if people were of more phlegmatic disposition.

Hume goes on to say that people differ in much the same way in their aesthetic reactions as in their emotional ones. Those who are quickly and peculiarly susceptible to beauty are likewise quickly and peculiarly pained by ugliness; while those who are indifferent to aesthetics enjoy neither the pleasures of beauty nor the pains of its opposite.

Does this mean that Hume thinks that an absence of aesthetic sensibility would be to the good or conduce to contentment? No, because though the two cases are analogous they are not the same, and he gives his reasons for saying so.

He says that, while we have little control over life in general, and that 'the good or ill accidents of life are very little at our disposal,' it is quite otherwise with matters of taste. We can, for example, choose the books we read and cultivate our taste. And this will cure us of any tendency that we might have to that exaggerated 'delicacy of passion' that he thinks so injurious to human happiness. For, he says, if we cultivate our taste 'we shall form juster notions of life [and] many things which please or afflict others, will appear to us too frivolous to engage our attention, and we shall lose by degrees that sensibility and delicacy of passion which is so incommodious.'

I am not sure that Hume is entirely right. It is true that we can arrange the aesthetics of our own tiny little corner of the world as we wish, provided that we have the time and means to do so, but we are as powerless over the aesthetics of the world in general as over the 'good or ill accidents of life,' and an excessive aesthetic sensibility, given the ugliness of the world, or much of what Man has done to the world (though he has also added to its beauty), will likewise pain us excessively. I think I am of that ilk: when I look at an otherwise beautiful landscape ruined by an excrescence, by no means an uncommon experience, I feel not pleasure at the beauty but pain at the ugliness. I cannot be grateful for the beauty and overlook the ugly. My sensibility is therefore too raw-nerved to go happily through the world and I sometimes envy those who are indifferent to what they see or hear. My problem is exactly that of those people who are 'extremely sensible to all the accidents of life;' I am ecstatic over the beautiful and crushed miserably by the ugly. And since one can hardly walk in this world of ours a step without seeing or hearing the ugly, it is an unfortunate excess of sensibility to have. It is only by the constant exertion of the will, the willing suspension of aesthetic judgment, that I avoid feeling crushed by ugliness all the time.

There is one field in which I think I have achieved the right balance of sensibility and indifference, and that is in gastronomy. I like very good food and will choose it in preference to bad, but at the same time I am fundamentally indifferent to it. Good food gives me pleasure, sometimes great pleasure, but not the kind of pleasure that I would find it hard to live without. If someone were to tell me that, for the rest of my life, I would have to live on stale cheese sandwiches, I should be a little sad, but I would soon make peace with the world. But if someone were to tell that, for the rest of my life, I could listen only to rock music and read only airport novels, I should pray for a swift death.

Moreover, passion, not necessity, is the mother if not of all, then at least of most invention. People who achieve something in life usually overestimate the importance of what they are doing, and if they did not they would hardly achieve anything. There are, of course, overachieving dilettantes, but they are a minority of dilettantes and they are a minority of people who achieve something. Great poets think poetry the most important thing in the world, great entomologists, insects. At least in respect to their chosen fields, both are likely to be 'extremely sensible to all the accidents of life,' the poet, for example, elated by a good line and downcast to the point of despair by his inability to find the right word for what he wants to express. And of course it is that unhappiness that drives him on.

Clearly Hume would be more in favour of classicism than of romanticism, and on the whole I am with him there. But virtues, aesthetic as well as moral, turn into vices when pushed too far; classicism can become dry, formalistic, and deadening if it is permitted to go on for too long, while romanticism, called into being as a revolt against it, can become in time posturing, insincere and hectoring. Clearly there is a need for both, but what is the happy medium between them? Can it actually exist?

I once met someone who said that Alexander Pope was the greatest poet in the English language (once the habitual obeisance had been made to Shakespeare, of course). Now I am a great admirer of Pope both as a writer and as a man. There is no doubt that he was one of the wittiest persons who ever lived. His wit, if I may so put it, is deep: it infuses everything he does. It is not the wit of witticism alone; it is the wit of a world outlook.

It could be said that he wrote to a formula, a formula that he took from his times. But with what brilliance he used it! Here are the opening lines of *An Essay on Criticism*:

'Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill
Appear in writing or in judging ill;
But of the two, less dang'rous is th'offence
To tire our patience, than mislead our sense.

When one considers that Pope was only twenty years old when he wrote this, one is astonished; for my part, I think that, after a lifetime of reading, I could rack my brains and not come up with anything half so good.

Nor were these four lines a luck hit: wherever you look, in *An Essay* or elsewhere in Pope, you find the same brilliance. Here are another four lines from *An Essay*:

Of all the Causes which conspire to blind

Man's erring judgment, and misguide the mind,
What the weak head with strongest bias rules,
Is *Pride*, the never-failing vice of fools.

Could you, reader, have *thought*, let alone written, anything like that when you were twenty?
Can you now, indeed? Pope was a living example of his own dictum:

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd;
Something whose truth convinced at sight we find,
That gives us back the image of our mind.

When I wrote once of the brilliance of Doctor Johnson, I could think of no better way to put it than to say that he often said or wrote things that strike us immediately as simultaneously obvious and self-evident, and yet revelatory, and that this combination is joyful. But here was Pope, aged twenty, saying the same thing (not about Doctor Johnson, of course, but about wit in general), only better.

I open my Pope at random and anywhere find the same brilliance. Here are a few lines from *An Essay on Man*, in which never was a false philosophy expounded with so much aplomb. But it is not the falseness to which I draw attention, but the brilliance:

Look next on Greatness; say where Greatness lies?
'Where but among the Heroes and the wise?'
Heroes are much the same, the point's agreed,
From Macedonia's madman to the Swede;
The whole strange purpose of their lives, to find
Or make, an enemy of all mankind!
No one looks backward, onward still he goes,
Yet ne'er looks forward further than his nose.

(The Macedonian, of course, was Alexander the Great, and the Swede Charles XII, whose constant warmongering ruined his country.)

Pope was not just a satirist, a good deal deeper than many give him credit for having been; his descriptions of nature were precise, the fruit of close observation (and no one observes closely what he neither values nor thinks important). Anyone who has lain in grass will recognise the aptness of this line:

The green myriads in the peopled grass...

Nor was he devoid of feeling who could depict ageing beauties around a table thus:

Beauties, like tyrants, old and friendless grown,
Yet hate repose and dread to be alone...

But there is no denying that rhyming couplets, however coruscating their brilliance, their wit, their aptness, pall after a time, and give rise to a sensation almost of inhumanity. One senses how bad an example Pope would be for an imitator of lesser brilliance than he: a revolt against the Augustan manner was necessary, and one finds it in a romantic who could without absurdity be called the second greatest poet in English after Shakespeare, namely Keats. Surely the following lines are beyond the emotional power of Pope's rhyming couplets to convey:

Darkling I listen: and, for many a time

I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain...

Pope and Keats did share one thing: tuberculosis, Pope of the spine and Keats of the lung. Indeed, Pope's appalling health (for years he needed mechanical supports to stay upright, and not a day passed for him without pain and discomfort) called forth one piercing line from Pope that was no mere self-pitying exaggeration, and acted like a flash of lightning in a dark landscape:

The muse but serv'd to ease some friend, not Wife,
To help me thro' this long disease, my Life...

This long disease, my Life: who could ever forget these words, having read them?

In fact, we need both the coolness of classicism and warmth of romanticism, but they are not easily reconciled: which is yet one more reason why human life is not perfectible.

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is