

Zerbran at the Bozar

by Theodore Dalrymple (August 2014)

My wife and I decided to go to Brussels from Paris for the day to see the Zurburán exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts. The train, however, would have cost us \$450, and a flight even more, though the distance is not great. Those are the kind of prices paid by businessmen and bureaucrats (or should I say by taxpayers on behalf of bureaucrats?), to whom they mean nothing, not by art-lovers such as we. We almost gave up.

But by one of those coincidences that make you sometimes believe in divine providence, I happened on an article in the newspaper on the very day we looked at prices to go to Brussels on the internet. It was about a young Frenchman, Frédéric Mazilla, who had founded a company called BlaBlaCar. The idea came to him one Christmas when he wanted to go home to a provincial city from Paris. The trains were full and so he had to drive. He noticed en route that thousands of cars were driving in the same direction as he, but that most of them were empty apart from the driver. A website offering lifts to people who wanted to travel from people who were going anyway to the same destination would kill several birds with one stone: it would assist the drivers and the passengers, and reduce waste.

The drivers are not professionals: there are maximum charges according to the respective distances of the trips, and the drivers do not make a profit, they simply get their expenses back. The site allows passengers to comment on the drivers in whose cars they have travelled. Millions of people a year in Europe now use the site, of whose existence I had not previously been aware: a valuable lesson in how a large-scale development may now occur in our societies without one being aware of it.

It would cost us \$120 for a round trip using BlaBlaCar, and so we booked. I would still have preferred to go by train, but I managed to persuade myself that it was an adventure and that the journey in the car would add something to the day.

And so, in a way, it proved, especially on the outward journey. When I had told my friends that we were taking BlaBlaCar they thought we were mad, or at least foolhardy; what if the driver were a serial killer? It is an interesting reflection upon the fear that reigns in our society that thoughts of serial killers came instantaneously to everyone's mind on learning of our trip, extremely rare though serial killers are. The only way to overcome unreasonable mistrust, and to re-establish trust, is to act trustingly.

It happened that our drivers on this occasion were a couple in their early sixties on their way to visit their daughter in Brussels. They were taking her vegetables from their garden – mainly cauliflowers which, en masse, exude quite a strong acrid smell (I had not realised this before, being only a small-scale consumer of cauliflower, so I learned something at once). Fortunately there is a physiological law – another sign of divine providence? – according to which awareness of a stimulus declines as it is prolonged. Before long, the odour disappeared of its own accord.

Unfortunately, a large truck had caught fire on the highway we were taking northwards out of Paris and it took us more than two hours to go about twenty miles. This, however, was not without its compensations (of a kind): for it allowed us to see what we should otherwise have sped past without seeing, or noticing, namely the bidonvilles, the settlements of corrugated iron, plastic sheeting and concrete tiles, that have recently sprung up on wasteland by the highway on the outskirts of Paris, just beyond the roadside fringes of bushes and small trees. I say 'sprung up,' but really I should have said 'been erected,' for of course they did not grow by force of nature, they were erected by hand of Man. They were what one expects to see in rapidly-urbanising Third World countries, not in France nowadays. They were not a pleasing sight.

From the look of the inhabitants, they were gypsies from Eastern Europe. They had beaten-up old white vans and cars, and they were the kind of people who have an infinite supply of broken fridges and cookers to leave behind them when they go. The women were dressed in long colourful skirts, the men in American ghetto costume.

Several of the bidonvilles have been abandoned or razed, making it look as though an army with a scorched-earth policy had recently passed through; the police were busy in one of the still-inhabited settlements. My reaction to these settlements was that of the average citizen, namely one of irritation and disgust; I associated them with crime, violence and intimidation; and the fact is that no one, whatever his political principles, wants such a settlement anywhere near his own home. Gypsies should be free to do as they like, but please God not near me: that is the lazy thought of most people in Europe. Of course, everyone is at least subliminally aware of the Nazi attempt to exterminate the gypsies which has made the exertion of authority over them, let alone high-handedness with them, politically and psychologically near impossible; and as we drove on, very slowly, I averted not so much my gaze as my thoughts from the problem, as being impossible to solve within the bounds of the ethically permissible. I preferred to think of Zurburán.

As we approached the site of the accident we were diverted from the highway on to another

road. We were now being denied the spectacle of a large burnt-out vehicle which might have been another slight compensation for our unpleasantly wasted time. We all felt cheated, a proof of an essential difference between Man and the animals: Man is the only creature capable of prurience.

We reached Brussels. The centre is a bourgeois city gone thoroughly to seed. It is dirty and unswept, the houses, once instinct with bourgeois pride and prosperity, are neglected. About half the women, it seemed, wore the scarf proclaiming them Moslem – in actual fact, 25 per cent of the population of Brussels, unadjusted for age, is Moslem – and were dressed modestly, that is to say in a fashion that made them look like females poured into sacks, as unbecoming a costume as it would be possible to design. (Not all Moslem costumes for women are such: the salwar kameez, for example, which is often of the greatest elegance, and vastly more grateful on the eye than the way in which many western women now dress.)

We parted from our drivers at the Gare du Midi, the South Railway Station, and took a taxi to the Palais des Beaux-Arts. The driver was of Moroccan origin, and was clearly very proud of Brussels, 'three times capital,' he said, first of Belgium, then of its own region, and lastly of Europe. Given its degeneration, I am not sure I found this entirely reassuring: a capital that, despite the fact that the public sector accounts for 50 per cent of GDP, remains dirty and uncared for, and is architecturally ever more a hideous mish-mash. Many of the buildings were defaced by graffiti, the architectural equivalent of tattoos and just as idiotically egotistic. On one of walls opposite the station we saw the following slogan in Flemish:

NO ONE IS ILLEGAL

Presumably this meant that, in the opinion of the person who painted it, Belgium (and Europe) should not attempt to restrict in any way whatsoever the number of people entering it to settle. I doubt that it meant that other countries should allow Belgians (and Europeans) to settle wherever in the world they chose.

The Palais des Beaux-Arts has moved with the times. It now projects itself as the *Bozar*, orthography more suited to the age of text and twitter that combines youthful informality with the totalitarian tradition of language reform. But no change of name can disguise the fact that the *Bozar* is undoubtedly the ugliest of all the major art galleries of the world, a building in the fascist style but without the courage of its megalomania, designed as if by a pocket Albert Speer.

Of Zurburán I will one day write elsewhere; but here I will mention that the exhibition, which was not excessively well-attended (thank goodness, for it is horrible to have to peer at

paintings as though through a crowd, darkly) attracted, as far as I could see, not a single non-European member of the public. And this is curious because if the museum had held an exhibition of African or Islamic art I think this would not have been so. There would, of course, have been many Europeans, but also non-Europeans, Moslems to look at Islamic art and Africans to look at African art. It has often been remarked that the Europeans, for all their military conquests and depredations, have long been the people with the deepest interest in the culture of others, and there seemed to be confirmation of this at the *Bozar* – though I suspect that interest in their own culture, at least their own culture of the past, is on the wane among Europeans.

We had another driver to return to Paris. He was charming, a Belgian who had at temporary job in IT in France to which he was now returning after a long weekend. His father was Congolese, his mother Romanian; he seemed completely at ease, without complexes, and described himself as a *métis*, a crossbreed.

We met him at the Gare du Midi, where we had arrived in Brussels. Having time to kill, and being hungry, we searched for somewhere to eat. There were some pretty unsavoury-looking bars where we would have been out of place among the loudly laughing and squabbling habitués. Before long we found an excellent cheap Moroccan canteen where alcohol was not served and where, as a result, quiet reigned. The staff – all men, of course – welcomed us warmly and even showered us with hospitality. The food was copious and good, and I thought of the mistaken saying, by an Italian journalist or professor I think it was, that multiculturalism is not couscous, it is the stoning of adulterers. This is wrong because multiculturalism *is* couscous, even if it is other things as well.

At the far end of the canteen a large flat-screen TV relayed pictures (the sound was turned off) of another crisis in Africa, hungry refugees in a camp queuing for a bowl of what looked like an appalling porridge made by an NGO on an industrial scale. The scenes, now banal, had no effect upon my appetite.

By contrast, I could not help but wonder what the lives of the men serving in this canteen were like when they went home. Where and how did they live? What, if anything, did they hope for, both for themselves and their children? Were they happy, unhappy, or something between the two? What amused, moved or angered them? These are the kind of questions that I ask myself ever more frequently when I am assisted by others in ways that I am inclined to take for granted. I think, at least I hope, that they have made me more polite, less inclined to become irritable when I am not served immediately and to my liking.

Our driver dropped us at the Porte de Bagnolet, one of the entrances to *intramuros* Paris. It was a fifteen minute walk from there to our flat. It was late at night, it was quite warm, and we thought it would be nice to have a cold beer when we arrived back. We stopped at a small store which, as usual in Paris, was owned by a North African. He was polite and helpful as we made a few other purchases as well. What was his life like when he shut up shop past midnight? Who would do this work if he did not?

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is