

Driving in France

by Theodore Dalrymple

While driving in France recently I picked up a young hitch-hiker. I give a lift to young hitch-hikers whenever I can as a symbolic means of thanking all those (most of whom must now, alas, be dead) who gave me a lift all those years ago when I was a young hitch-hiker.

Needless to say, I form a very swift and rough estimate of their character from their faces before I offer them a lift. So far I have not been mistaken: though I suppose it is the one time you are wrong that is more important than the hundred times you are right.

This young man looked a rather timid, studious type. He was very polite; he was eighteen and going home from his part-time work. He wrote lyrics to songs, about love and the condition of France (very bad under M. Hollande, he said). After a few minutes he asked me whether I was from the North, that is to say from the north of France, which pleased me greatly; no, I said, I am English.

He then recounted his experience of England. He had gone the year before and had been put up by a family who were '*adorable*,' extremely kind to him. He had loved London. He visited all the museums, the parks, the stores, and in general found it an exciting place to be.

'And the English,' he said, 'are very polite – much more polite than the French.'

I would have fallen off my seat if it had not been for the seat-belt. The strange thing is that I have found precisely the opposite: that the French are much more polite than the

English.

Our opposite impressions, it seemed to me, were a cause for optimism, for they suggest that a) people are not generally xenophobes and try to be nice to foreigners and b) are still proud enough of their country to want to give foreigners a good impression of them. One explanation of our opposite impressions is that they were both correct but that people are in general *more* polite to foreigners than they are to their fellow-countrymen.

We should, of course, be polite to everybody all the time, but this is against human nature. When I was a child I was told when I went visiting to be on my best behaviour, so as not to disgrace my parents: from which I naturally concluded that my best behaviour was unnecessary at other times.