Feeling Listless

By Theodore Dalrymple

Some years ago, I asked the owner of the Poetry Bookshop in Hay-on-Wye, the only specialist secondhand poetry store in Britain, whether he had any books by poets with one leg. He said, perhaps not surprisingly, that it was the first time that he had ever been asked the question.

I knew of only two, W.E. Henley and W.H. Davies, and since I was writing an article about one-legged poets, I had hoped for more, but between us we found none.

Henley's most famous poem is known as "Invictus," a title he did not give it himself. There are lines in it that have become almost clichés, so well-known are they:

> *In the fell clutch of circumstance*
> *I have not winced nor cried aloud.*
> *Under the bludgeonings of chance*
> *My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

This was not mere exhibitionist self-pity: Henley spent two years or more in Edinburgh Royal Infirmary, where the great surgeon Joseph Lister saved his remaining leg, his first having been amputated for tuberculosis. Henley knew physical suffering, all right; and he was Robert Louis Stevenson's model for Long John Silver in *Treasure Island*.

W.H. Davies lost his leg when he was riding a train as a tramp in North America. One of his poems was the first adult poem I learned at school, when I was 10:

> *What is this life if, full of care,*
> *We have no time to stop and stare.*

I wrote the article to satirize, very mildly, the habit of grouping authors together who have some characteristic or other in common, and assuming that they must therefore have an intellectual or spiritual link between them. If I had found more than two poets with an amputated leg, I might have gathered an anthology of *One-Legged Verse*, but an anthology of only two such authors would not work.

On a slightly more elevated plane, I also thought of writing a study of the mordant humor of authors with hunchbacks: for

example, Pope, Leopardi, Lichtenberg, Kierkegaard, and others, who suffered mainly from tuberculosis of the spine. Was their mordancy in any way attributable to their condition, or was it completely incidental to it?

There are, of course, an infinite number of characteristics that humans, and authors, can share, and therefore there are an infinite number of ways of dividing them up demographically. There are authors who smoke, those who do not, fat authors and thin authors, blue-eyed and brown-eyed authors, bald authors and those with diabetes, marathon-running authors and those with rotten teeth, bad breath, or flat feet. In the end, of course, all that counts is whether what they write is any good.

I was therefore struck by a headline in the *Guardian* newspaper:

> *The Guardian's view on the Booker Prize shortlist: a cause for celebration.*

The Booker Prize is the most valuable British prize for new fiction, awarded every year.

Why was the list a cause for celebration? The answer: "The most female finalists in the award's history." And then came the question, "What took it so long?"

This last question is, of course, rather silly. There being six finalists on the shortlist, there could in theory have been six years in which there were the most finalists in the award's history. In fact, on this list, there were five, apparently chosen by the judges blind as to the books' authors.

But in what way is the predominance of women on the list a cause for celebration? The only cause for celebration of the list would be if the judges had succeeded in choosing the best

six books offered to them (out of many) for their judgment; and even then, the word *celebration* would be an exaggeration, typical of the inflated language in a time when people are unable or unwilling to distinguish between an inconvenience and a tragedy. To celebrate the preponderance of one demographic group or another in some area of achievement is a mark of identitarian politics, the kind of politics that is destructive and enfeebling. I would rather say that the judges were to be congratulated on choosing the six best books—if they succeeded in doing so—than that their choice was to be celebrated.

I have only twice been on a literary jury, and on each occasion we had to choose the three best entries in order of merit from a shortlist of twenty, which we had whittled down from 200, themselves whittled down by other judges from more than a thousand entries (the prizes were considerable, at least for prizes in this field).

There were three of us, so that in theory there could always be a majority decision. But in fact, the process was extremely difficult and even painful. Compared with the recent formation of a new French government in the absence of a clear parliamentary majority, choosing the three best entries in this literary competition, let alone putting them in order, was extremely complex. I was reminded throughout the process of the play and film *12 Angry Men*.

Before long, we judges started to bargain and haggle like carpet merchants in a Moroccan souk. We said things like, "I will agree to drop No. 17 if you will admit No. 3." We read out extracts to prove our case, but this often failed to convince the others, who often failed to grasp the point. It was exhausting, and by the time we arrived at a decision, it was more because we were exhausted and had other things to do than because we had reached a marriage of true minds. Strict literary merit was by then the least of our considerations. Not a single one of any of our first choices won a first

prize, and all of the prizes were awarded to someone whom at least one of the judges should not have been awarded even a third prize.

Our cause for celebration was the end of our own deliberations. Luckily, there were only three of us. The Booker Prize has five on its panel of judges. From my experience, I think the motto of literary prizes ought to be "May the second-best man (or woman) win!"

Theodore Dalrymple's latest book is *Ramses: A Memoir*, published by New English Review.

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