

“Forced” Here they walk, they can do no other

By Theodore Dalrymple

Much though I try to avoid it, sometimes an article on the BBC’s website appears on what is called my “feed” – surely a revealing term if ever there was one. I am treated like a pig at the informational (and advertising) trough. But what I read is still my choice.



My attention was caught recently by the following headline: “Walkers forced to trespass onto open access countryside”.

This was most curious. Were walkers being held at bayonet-point, or threatened with dire punishment, unless they trespassed?

No, they were not. Instead, in order to reach open access countryside, they had to walk across private property to be able to reach it. This is not the same as being forced to trespass, however; after all, they could choose not to walk on open access countryside. They might prefer that to trespassing.

I do not enter into the question of whether it is better to trespass and walk on open countryside, than not to trespass and therefore not to walk on open access countryside. No doubt more than one answer could be given to that question. I object only to the BBC's wording.

It gives the impression that the poor walkers have no choice, that they are, as it were, all Luthers at Worms: here they walk, they can do no other. I am reminded of the conversation I had with a recidivist burglar when I was a doctor working in a prison. I asked him why he continued to burgle. "I'm a burglar," he said. "Burgling's what I do." You might as well ask an earthworm why it burrows in the earth.

The BBC's headline was symptomatic of the attitude of a superior class that divides people into those who, like themselves, choose to act, and those who are forced to act; that is to say the human automata of this world. The latter, of course, need the former to redeem them, to make their lives whole.

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