

25 – *Turning circle*

Locked in the bus with Big Len, the instructor, I realise that claustrophobia is not just physical; you can feel claustrophobic in someone else's presence, the rigid confines of whose personality enclose you in a terrifyingly small space, starving you of breath and vision. In this way, people can sentence you to imprisonment with their view of you, of the world. Such a man is Big Len. It is not the mingling of his cheap aftershave and stale breath that constrict me; rather it is the fact that here is a fellow-convict in the prison of circumstance in whom I cannot confide one iota of angst, since he refuses even to realise he's in gaol; indeed, he loves serving a life sentence. Today, not wholly without irony, he is teaching me how to go round in circles.

'You see those traffic cones up ahead? They're not traffic cones, are they?' – Big Len is evidently a great fan of the rhetorical question.

'Aren't they?'

'No, they're not; they're people; in fact it's a bus stop full of people queuing for the bus behind you!

'Don't start turning left-hand down until your bus is at least half way past it, otherwise you'll hit the cones and when you hit the cones you won't just be knocking down cones, will you?'

No, I will be knocking down a bus queue; we get the point, which is not to say we can manoeuvre the bus equally easily.

There is an act of faith in driving a bus, an unconscious investment of belief in the laws of physics, the truths of mathematical geometry. It's not that, as you go left hand down at a T-junction, you think 'the square on the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides; it's more that the intuitive genius of your physicality spot-checks the distances, angles and shapes involved in a corner and then calculates the equation, instantly and mysteriously coming up with the right answer so that the bus turns correctly without killing a bus queue – or not, as the case may be.

‘There now, the back end of your bus has just clipped three cones and what’ve you done? You’ve killed fifteen people, haven’t you?’

I have.

‘And how do you feel about that?’

Surprisingly OK actually. As I see the cone-people sprawling fatally injured across the tarmac I realise how disconnected I am with my current circumstance. And those cone-people probably had it coming anyway; who knows what they got up to in their private lives? No, two or three cone-people more or less will not adversely affect the progress of our beleaguered species. Then the instructor’s voice breaks back into my Hitlerian worldview.

‘I’ll tell you how you feel: you feel devastated. You go home but you cannot sleep; they tell you it was just an accident but you cannot forgive yourself.

‘One small mistake, one small error of judgement and you’ve not only killed fifteen people at a bus-stop you’ve affected the lives of all their relations – all those children you’ve left parentless; all those mums and dads whose kids you’ve just run over: for that you will never be able to forgive yourself, will you?’

No, I will not. I suddenly have a profound respect for cone-people the world over; these little orange-skinned, pointy-headed souls who have revealed my closet racism I now embrace with a contrition and compunction worthy of an eremite experiencing an epiphany.

‘This is what driving a bus is all about!’ sermonizes the instructor.

‘You’re not just delivering people to their destinations, you’re their guardian, the custodian of their safety. Whilst they’re on board your bus you are responsible for their lives – or deaths!’

Suddenly I see that I am no longer a trainee bus-driver learning how to transport passengers from A to B, but a Charon ferrying the souls of

the dead to their appropriate destinations in the underworld of circumstance.

No way did it state this on the job spec. At no point did I see the requirement ‘Must be prepared to assume the mythical proportions of a minor classical icon serving a major pagan god...’

The body is deeply mysterious: it shares intimate connections with the mind – no doubt even is the mind - but in material form.... Anyway, the fact is that over the first few weeks of driver training my body adapts to the bus’s monstrous new proportions and perspectives; strangely, inexplicably my body begins to adopt the larger turning circle life has suddenly demanded of it. As if by magic I stop murdering cone-people at bus-stops; concomitantly, their relations cease to blame me: at night in dreams I no longer have to explain to grieving cone-mums and cone-dads how a moment of over-steering madness has taken their little cone-lings from them forever. I approach the T-junctions of life with a new-found expertise: I believe in my body’s geometrical acumen: it is a prophet in the laws of maths and physics whose linear prognostications I gradually learn to trust implicitly. I am indeed Charon: in my mind I do indeed suavely steer the souls of unsuspecting passengers to peaceful destinations.

Actually, learning to steer the bus in training at the depot, it strikes me that human personality has a turning circle as large as a double-decker bus; this is why you need other people to give you a certain amount of space in life. Our vices and virtues are unwieldy and to avoid collisions we must obey a psychological highway code every bit as pedantic as the actual one that confronts me on my driver training course. This highway code is, in fact, what we call ‘morality’: that little book of rules and regulations that enable us to manoeuvre round each other reasonably efficiently without killing ourselves or others in the process of travelling the A to B map of our desires.

Friendships thus constitute the various qualities of roads on which we travel: some, you don’t need transport for; in fact you delight in dispensing with mechanics of any kind insofar as the friendship is the destination and there is thus nowhere to travel to. Such friendships are as easy and amiable as Parisian boulevards: you link arms and time

disappears in an intoxicating haze of stylish conversation and perfumed emotions. Other friendships may, of course, be tight and twisting mountain passes, ironically full of impasses and fraught with negotiations; still others are quiet country lanes where nothing much is achieved and hours pass in a wholly personable pastoral kind of a way, though they leave you longing for the city at the end of the day; still others are just dead ends: you try and find a way out of them, but left or right you just end up having to turn around and admit defeat.

If my metaphors trespass on a certain triteness here it is because I am trying to make sense of the circumstance that appears to have forced me to learn to drive a double-decker bus – and I have found, predictably enough, that transport metaphors come in handy. They bring our imaginative journey in line with the physical one by revealing their shared elements. When, for example, a lover says to you: ‘I need time, a bit of space’, they are being both literal and metaphorical. What sort of space do they need? Answer: one that doesn’t have you in it; one that is, however, large or small, thus both materially and psychologically liberating; delivering them, as it does, of your presence in any way, shape or form.

Yes, we are all practised in the art of turning circles.