

The Islanders

The ordinary man repents his sins:
the elect repent of their heedlessness.

(Dhu'l-Nun Misri)

MOST FABLES CONTAIN at least some truth, and they often enable people to absorb ideas which the ordinary patterns of their thinking would prevent them from digesting. Fables have therefore been used, not least by the Sufi teachers, to present a picture of life more in harmony with their feelings than is possible by means of intellectual exercises.

Here is a Sufic fable about the human situation, summarised and adapted, as must always be, suitably to the time in which it is presented. Ordinary 'entertainment' fables are considered by Sufi authors to be a degenerated or inferior form of art.

Once upon a time there lived an ideal community in a far-off land. Its members had no fears as we now know them. Instead of uncertainty and vacillation, they had purposefulness and a fuller means of expressing themselves. Although there were none of the stresses and tensions which mankind now considers essential to its progress, their lives were richer, because other, better elements replaced these things. Theirs, therefore, was a slightly different mode of existence. We could almost say that our present perceptions are a crude, makeshift version of the real ones which this community possessed.

They had real lives, not semi-lives.

We can call them the El Ar people.

They had a leader, who discovered that their country was to become uninhabitable for a period of, shall we say, twenty thousand years. He planned their escape, realising that their descendants would be able to return home successfully, only after many trials.

He found for them a place of refuge, an island whose features were only roughly similar to those of the original homeland. Because of the difference in climate and situation, the immigrants had to undergo a transformation. This made them more physically and mentally adapted to the new circumstances; coarse perceptions, for instance, were substituted for finer ones, as when the hand of the manual labourer becomes toughened in response to the needs of his calling.

In order to reduce the pain which a comparison between the old and new states would bring, they were made to forget the past almost entirely. Only the most shadowy recollection of it remained, yet it was sufficient to be awakened when the time came.

The system was very complicated, but well arranged. The organs by means of which the people survived on the island were also made the organs of enjoyment, physical and mental. The organs which were really constructive in the old homeland were placed in a special form of abeyance, and linked with the shadowy memory, in preparation for its eventual activation.

Slowly and painfully the immigrants settled down, adjusting themselves to the local conditions. The resources of the island were such that, coupled with effort and a certain form of guidance, people would be able to escape to a further island, on the way back to their original home. This was the first of a succession of islands upon which gradual acclimatisation took place.

The responsibility of this 'evolution' was vested in those individuals who could sustain it. These were necessarily only a few, because for the mass of the people the effort of keeping both sets of knowledge in their consciousness was virtually impossible. One of them seemed to conflict with the other one. Certain specialists guarded the 'special science'.

This 'secret', the method of effecting the transition, was nothing more or less than the knowledge of maritime skills and their application. The escape needed an instructor, raw materials, people, effort and understanding. Given these, people could learn to swim, and also to build ships.

The people who were originally in charge of the escape operations made it clear to everyone that a certain preparation was necessary before anyone could learn to swim or even take part in building a ship. For a time the process continued satisfactorily.

Then a man who had been found, for the time being, lacking in the necessary qualities rebelled against this order and managed to develop a masterly idea. He had observed that the effort to escape placed a heavy and often seemingly unwelcome burden upon the people. At the same time they were disposed to believe things which they were told about the escape operation. He realised that he could acquire power, and also revenge himself upon those who had undervalued him, as he thought, by a simple exploitation of these two sets of facts.

He would merely offer to take away the burden, by affirming that there was no burden.

He made this announcement:

'There is no need for man to integrate his mind and train it in the way which has been described to you. The human mind is already a stable and continuous, consistent thing. You have been told that you have to become a craftsman in order to build a ship. I say, not only do you not need to be a

craftsman — you do not need a ship at all! An islander needs only to observe a few simple rules to survive and remain integrated into society. By the exercise of common sense, born into everyone, he can attain anything upon this island, our home, the common property and heritage of all!

The tonguester, having gained a great deal of interest among the people, now ‘proved’ his message by saying:

‘If there is any reality in ships and swimming, show us ships which have made the journey, and swimmers who have come back!’

This was a challenge to the instructors which they could not meet. It was based upon an assumption of which the bemused herd could not now see the fallacy. You see, ships never returned from the other land. Swimmers, when they did come back, had undergone a fresh adaptation which made them invisible to the crowd.

The mob pressed for demonstrative proof.

‘Shipbuilding,’ said the escapers, in an attempt to reason with the revolt, ‘is an art and a craft. The learning and the exercise of this lore depends upon special techniques. These together make up a total activity, which cannot be examined piecemeal, as you demand. This activity has an impalpable element, called *baraka*, from which the word “barque” — a ship — is derived. This word means “the Subtlety”, and it cannot be shown to you.’

‘Art, craft, total, *baraka*, nonsense!’ shouted the revolutionaries.

And so they hanged as many shipbuilding craftsmen as they could find.

The new gospel was welcomed on all sides as one of liberation. Man had discovered that he was already mature! He felt, for the time at least, as if he had been released from responsibility.

Most other ways of thinking were soon swamped by the simplicity and comfort of the revolutionary concept. Soon it was considered to be a basic fact which had never been challenged by any rational person. Rational, of course, meant anyone who harmonised with the general theory itself, upon which society was now based.

Ideas which opposed the new one were easily called irrational. Anything irrational was bad. Thereafter, even if he had doubts, the individual had to suppress them or divert them, because he must at all costs be thought rational.

It was not very difficult to be rational. One had only to adhere to the values of society. Further, evidence of the truth of rationality abounded — providing that one did not think beyond the life of the island.

Society had now temporarily equilibrated itself within the island, and seemed to provide a plausible completeness, if viewed by means of itself. It was based upon reason plus emotion, making both seem plausible. Cannibalism, for instance, was permitted on rational grounds. The human body was found to be edible. Edibility was a characteristic of food. Therefore the human body was food. In order to compensate for the shortcomings of this reasoning, a makeshift was arranged. Cannibalism was controlled, in the interests of society. Compromise was the trademark of temporary balance. Every now and again someone pointed out a new compromise, and the struggle between reason, ambition and community produced some fresh social norm.

Since the skills of boatbuilding had no obvious application within this society, the effort could easily be considered absurd. Boats were not needed — there was nowhere to go. The consequences of certain assumptions can be made to ‘prove’ those assumptions. This is what is called pseudocertainty, the substitute for real certainty. It is what we deal in every

day, when we assume that we will live another day. But our islanders applied it to everything.

Two entries in the great *Island Universal Encyclopaedia* show us how the process worked. Distilling their wisdom from the only mental nutrition available to them, the island's savants produced, in all honesty, this kind of truth:

SHIP: *Displeasing*. An imaginary vehicle in which impostors and deceivers have claimed it possible to 'cross the water', now scientifically established as an absurdity. No materials impermeable to water are known on the Island, from which such a 'ship' might be constructed, quite apart from the question of there being a destination beyond the Island. Preaching 'shipbuilding' is a major crime under Law XVII of the Penal Code, subsection J, *The Protection of the Credulous*. SHIPBUILDING MANIA is an extreme form of mental escapism, a symptom of maladjustment. All citizens are under a constitutional obligation to notify the health authorities if they suspect the existence of this tragic condition in any individual.

See: *Swimming*; *Mental aberrations*; *Crime (Major)*.

Readings: Smith, J., *Why 'Ships' Cannot be Built*, Island University Monograph No. 1151.

SWIMMING: *Unpleasant*. Supposedly a method of propelling the body through water without drowning, generally for the purpose of 'reaching a place outside the Island'. The 'student' of this unpleasant art had to submit himself to a grotesque ritual. In the first lesson, he had to prostrate himself on the ground, and move his arms and legs in response to the commands of an 'instructor'. The

entire concept is based upon the desire of the self-styled 'instructors' to dominate the credulous in barbaric times. More recently the cult has taken the form of epidemic mania.

See: *Ship; Heresies; Pseudoarts*.

Readings: Brown, W., *The Great 'Swimming' Madness*, 7 vols, Institute of Social Lucidity.

The words 'displeasing' and 'unpleasant' were used on the island to indicate anything which conflicted with the new gospel, which was itself known as 'Please'. The idea behind this was that people would now please themselves, within the general need to please the State. The State was taken to mean all the people.

It is hardly surprising that from quite early times the very thought of leaving the island filled most people with terror. Similarly, very real fear is to be seen in long-term prisoners who are about to be released. 'Outside' the place of captivity is a vague, unknown, threatening world.

The island was not a prison. But it was a cage with invisible bars, more effective than obvious ones ever could be.

The insular society became more and more complex, and we can look at only a few of its outstanding features. Its literature was a rich one. In addition to cultural compositions there were numerous books which explained the values and achievements of the nation. There was also a system of allegorical fiction which portrayed how terrible life might have been, had society not arranged itself in the present reassuring pattern.

From time to time instructors tried to help the whole community to escape. Captains sacrificed themselves for the re-establishment of a climate in which the now concealed shipbuilders could continue their work. All these efforts were interpreted by historians and sociologists with reference to

conditions on the island, without thought for any contact outside this closed society. Plausible explanations of almost anything were comparatively easy to produce. No principle of ethics was involved, because scholars continued to study with genuine dedication what seemed to be true. ‘What *more* can we do?’ they asked, implying by the word ‘more’ that the alternative might be an effort of quantity. Or they asked each other, ‘What *else* can we do?’ assuming that the answer might be in ‘else’ — something different. Their real problem was that they assumed themselves able to formulate the questions, and ignored the fact that the questions were every bit as important as the answers.

Of course the islanders had plenty of scope for thought and action within their own small domain. The variations of ideas and differences of opinion gave the impression of freedom of thought. Thought was encouraged, providing that it was not ‘absurd’.

Freedom of speech was allowed. It was of little use without the development of understanding, which was not pursued.

The work and the emphasis of the navigators had to take on different aspects in accordance with the changes in the community. This made their reality even more baffling to the students who tried to follow them from the island point of view.

Amid all the confusion, even the capacity to remember the possibility of escape could at times become an obstacle. The stirring consciousness of escape potential was not very discriminating. More often than not the eager would-be escapers settled for any kind of substitute. A vague concept of navigation cannot become useful without orientation. Even the most eager potential shipbuilders had been trained to believe that they already had that orientation. They were already mature. They hated anyone who pointed out that they might need a preparation.

Bizarre versions of swimming or shipbuilding often crowded out possibilities of real progress. Very much to blame were the advocates of pseudo-swimming or allegorical ships, mere hucksters, who offered lessons to those as yet too weak to swim, or passages on ships which they could not build.

The needs of the society had originally made necessary certain forms of efficiency and thinking which developed into what was known as science. This admirable approach, so essential in the fields where it had an application, finally outran its real meaning. The approach called 'scientific', soon after the 'Please' revolution, became stretched until it covered all manner of ideas. Eventually things which could not be brought within its bounds became known as 'unscientific', another convenient synonym for 'bad'. Words were unknowingly taken prisoner and then automatically enslaved.

In the absence of a suitable attitude, like people who, thrown upon their own resources in a waiting room, feverishly read magazines, the islanders absorbed themselves in finding substitutes for the fulfilment which was the original (and indeed the final) purpose of this community's exile.

Some were able to divert their attention more or less successfully into mainly emotional commitments. There were different ranges of emotion, but no adequate scale for measuring them. All emotion was considered to be 'deep' or 'profound' — at any rate more profound than non-emotion. Emotion, which was seen to move people to the most extreme physical and mental acts known, was automatically termed 'deep'.

The majority of people set themselves targets, or allowed others to set them for them. They might pursue one cult after another, or money, or social prominence. Some worshipped some things and felt themselves superior to all the rest. Some,

by repudiating what they thought worship was, thought that they had no idols, and could therefore safely sneer at all the rest.

As the centuries passed, the island was littered with the debris of these cults. Worse than ordinary debris, it was self-perpetuating. Well-meaning and other people combined the cults and recombined them, and they spread anew. For the amateur and intellectual, this constituted a mine of academic or 'initiatory' material, giving a comforting sense of variety.

Magnificent facilities for the indulging of limited 'satisfactions' proliferated. Palaces and monuments, museums and universities, institutes of learning, theatres and sports stadiums almost filled the island. The people naturally prided themselves on these endowments, many of which they considered to be linked in a general way with ultimate truth, though exactly how this was so escaped almost all of them.

Shipbuilding was connected with some dimensions of this activity, but in a way unknown to almost everyone.

Clandestinely the ships raised their sails, the swimmers continued to teach swimming...

The conditions on the island did not entirely fill these dedicated people with dismay. After all, they too had originated in the very same community, and had indissoluble bonds with it, and with its destiny.

But they very often had to preserve themselves from the attentions of their fellow citizens. Some 'normal' islanders tried to save them from themselves. Others tried to kill them, for an equally sublime reason. Some even sought their help eagerly, but could not find them.

All these reactions to the existence of the swimmers were the result of the same cause, filtered through different kinds of minds. This cause was that hardly anyone now knew what

a swimmer really was, what he was doing, or where he could be found.

As the life of the island became more and more civilised, a strange but logical industry grew up. It was devoted to ascribing doubts to the validity of the system under which society lived. It succeeded in absorbing doubts about social values by laughing at them or satirising them. The activity could wear a sad or happy face, but it really became a repetitious ritual. A potentially valuable industry, it was often prevented from exercising its really creative function.

People felt that, having allowed their doubts to have temporary expression, they would in some way assuage them, exorcise them, almost propitiate them. Satire passed for meaningful allegory; allegory was accepted but not digested. Plays, books, films, poems, lampoons were the usual media for this development, though there was a strong section of it in more academic fields. For many islanders it seemed more emancipated, more modern or progressive, to follow this cult rather than older ones.

Here and there a candidate still presented himself to a swimming instructor, to make his bargain. Usually what amounted to a stereotyped conversation took place.

‘I want to learn to swim.’

‘Do you want to make a bargain about it?’

‘No. I only have to take my ton of cabbage.’

‘What cabbage?’

‘The food which I will need on the other island.’

‘There is better food there.’

‘I don’t know what you mean. I cannot be sure. I must take my cabbage.’

‘You cannot swim, for one thing, with a ton of cabbage.’

‘Then I cannot go. You call it a load. I call it my essential nutrition.’

‘Suppose, as an allegory, we say not “cabbage”, but “assumptions”, or “destructive ideas”?’

‘I am going to take my cabbage to some instructor who understands my needs.’

This book is about some of the swimmers and builders of ships, and also about some of the others who tried to follow them, with more or less success. The fable is not ended, because there are still people on the island.

The Sufis use various ciphers to convey their meaning. Rearrange the name of the original community — El Ar — to spell ‘Real’. Perhaps you had already noticed that the name adopted by the revolutionaries — ‘Please’ — rearranges to form the word ‘Asleep’.