

The Dialogues of Ascetic and King

A king is a plenitude, an ascetic is nothing or wants to be nothing, and so people enjoy imagining a dialogue between these two archetypes. Here are a few examples, from Eastern and Western sources:

Tradition has it from Diogenes Laërtius that the philosopher Heraclitus was invited by Darius to visit his court. He refused with these words: "Heraclitus the Ephesian to King Darius, Son of Hystaspes: hail! All men are estranged from the truth and seek vainglory. As for myself, I flee the vanities of palaces and will not go to Persia, contenting myself with my inconsequentiality, which is sufficient for me."

In this letter—which is surely apocryphal, as there were eight centuries between the historian and the philosopher—there is, at first glance, nothing more than Heraclitus' independence or misanthropy; the resentful pleasure of snubbing the invitation of a king and, moreover, of a king who is a foreigner. But beneath the trivial surface beats a dark opposition of symbols, and the magic in which the zero, the ascetic, may in some way equal or surpass the infinite king.

This story is told in the ninth book of Diogenes Laërtius' *Lives of the Philosophers*. The sixth book has another version, from sources unknown, whose protagonists are Alexander and Diogenes the Cynic. The former had arrived in Corinth to lead the war against the Persians, and everyone had come out to see and welcome him.

Diogenes refused to leave his house, and there Alexander found him one morning, taking the sun. "Ask me for anything you'd like," said Alexander, and Diogenes, lying on the ground, asked him to move a little, so as not to block the light. This anecdote (repeated by Plutarch) puts the two speakers in opposition; in others there is a suggestion of a secret kinship. Alexander told his courtiers that had he not been Alexander, he would have liked to have been Diogenes; and the day one died in Babylonia, the other died in Corinth.

The third version of this eternal dialogue is the most extended: it takes up two volumes of the *Sacred Books of the East* series edited by Max Müller in Oxford. It is the *Milinda Pañha* (The Questions of Milinda), a novel of doctrinal intent, composed in the north of India at the beginning of our era. The Sanskrit original has been lost, and the English translation by Rhys Davids is from the Pali. Milinda, sweetened by Oriental pronunciation, is Menander, the Greek king of Bactriana who, a hundred years after the death of Alexander of Macedonia, brought his armies to the mouth of the Indus River. According to Plutarch, he governed wisely, and at his death, his ashes were divided among the cities of his kingdom.¹ Relics of the power he exerted, numismatic cases now hold over twenty different kinds of gold and bronze coins. On some, there is the image of a youth, on others that of an old man, and we may infer that his reign lasted many years. The inscriptions say "Menander the Just King," and on the obverse of the coins one finds a Minerva, a horse, a bull's head, a dolphin, a boar, an elephant, a palm branch, a wheel. The latter three figures are perhaps Buddhist.

In the *Milinda Pañha* we read that as the deep Ganges seeks the Ocean, which is even deeper, so Milinda the king sought out Nagasena, the bearer of the torch of Truth. Five hundred Greeks protected the King, who identified Nagasena in a crowd of ascetics by his leonine serenity ("*a guisa di león quando si posa*"). The King asked him his name. Nagasena replied that names are mere conventions that do not define permanent subjects. He explained that, as the King's chariot is neither the wheels nor the chassis, neither the axle, the shaft, nor the yoke, so man is not matter, form, perceptions, ideas, instinct, or consciousness. He is neither the combination of these parts nor does he exist apart from them . . . and he compared this to the flame of a lamp that burns every night and that endlessly both is and ceases to be. He spoke of reincarnation, of faith, of *karma* and *nirvana*, and after two days of discussion, or catechism, he converted the King, who put on the yellow robe of a Buddhist monk. That is the general plot of the *Questions of Milinda*, in which Albrecht Weber has perceived a deliberate imitation of the Platonic mode, a thesis rejected by Winternitz, who observes that the device of the dialogue is traditional in Indian letters, and that there is not the least trace of Hellenic culture in the *Questions*.²

Dressing himself as an ascetic, the King becomes indistinguishable

¹The same story is told of the Buddha, in the book of his *nirvana*.

²Similarly, Wells believed that the Book of Job, whose date is problematical, was influenced by Plato's dialogues.

from one, and he brings to mind another king of the Sanskrit era who left his palace to beg alms in the streets, and who said these dizzying words: "From now on I have no kingdom or my kingdom is limitless; from now on my body does not belong to me or the whole earth belongs to me."

Five hundred years went by, and mankind devised another version of the infinite dialogue, this time not in India, but in China.³ An emperor of the Han Dynasty dreamed that a man of gold flew into his room, and his ministers explained that he could only be the Buddha, who had achieved the Tao in Western lands. An emperor of the Liang Dynasty had protected that barbarian and his faith, and had founded temples and monasteries. The brahmin Boddhidharma, twenty-eighth patriarch of Indian Buddhism, had arrived (they say after three years of wandering) at his palace in Nanking, in the south. The Emperor enumerated all the pious works he had performed. Boddhidharma listened attentively, and then told him that all those monasteries and temples and copies of the sacred books were things of the world of appearances, which is a long dream, and thus were of no consequence. Good works, he said, can lead to good retributions, but never to *nirvana*, which is the absolute extinction of the will, not the consequence of an act. There is no sacred doctrine, because nothing is sacred or fundamental in an illusory world. Events and beings are momentary, and we can neither say whether they are or are not.

The Emperor then asked who was the man who had spoken in this manner, and Boddhidharma, loyal to his nihilism, replied:

"Nor do I know who I am."

These words resonated for a long time in Chinese memory. Written in the middle of the eighteenth century, the novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* has this curious passage:

He had been dreaming and then he woke up. He found himself in the ruins of a temple. On one side there was a beggar dressed in the robe of a Taoist monk. He was lame and was killing fleas. Hsiang-Lien asked him who he was and what place they were in. The monk answered:

"I don't know who I am, nor where we are. I only know that the road is long."

Hsiang-Lien understood. He cut off his hair with his sword and followed the stranger.

³I follow the text in Hackmann, *Chinesische Philosophie*, 1927, pp. 257 and 269.

In the stories I have mentioned, the ascetic and the king symbolize nothing and plentitude, zero and infinity. More extreme symbols of that contrast would be a god and a dead man, and their fusion would be more economical: a god that dies. Adonis wounded by the boar of the moon goddess, Osiris thrown by Set into the waters of the Nile, Tammuz carried off to the land from which he cannot return, are all famous examples of this fusion. No less poignant is this, which tells of the modest end of a god:

In the court of Olaf Tryggvason, who had been converted in England to the faith of Christ, an old man arrived one night, dressed in a dark cape and with the brim of his hat over his eyes. The King asked him if he knew how to do anything; the stranger answered that he knew how to play the harp and tell stories. He sang some ancient airs, told of Gudrun and Gunnar, and then spoke of the birth of Odin. He said that three Fates came, that the first two pronounced great happiness, but the third, in a rage, said, "You will not live longer than that candle burning by your side." His parents put the candle out so that Odin would not die with it. Olaf Tryggvason didn't believe the story; the stranger, insisting it was true, took out a candle and lit it. As the others watched it burn, he said it was late and that he had to leave. When the candle was consumed, they searched for him. A few steps from the King's house, Odin was lying dead.

Apart from their greater or lesser virtues, these texts, scattered in time and space, suggest the possibility of a morphology (to use Goethe's word) or science of the fundamental forms of literature. I have occasionally speculated in these pages that all metaphors are variants of a small number of archetypes; perhaps this proposition is also applicable to fables.

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