VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Buddhism and the Status of Fiction

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THE CONTEMPORARY WEST is curiously obsessed with the creation of models of the world, the game of inventing explanatory fictions. The *fonction fabulatrice* (Bergson's term) is generally assumed to be a vital and necessary item in the human equipment for survival. Perhaps the most radical version of such a critical need is the existential one, according to which, lacking a constitutive identity (a fixed ego sense), man invents himself from moment to moment and chooses in anguish amid the throng of possibilities. He is compelled to be free, condemned to be his own fabulist, like the spider spinning habitable patterns out of his own substance. As such a metaphor implies, in all his projections man encounters nothing but himself. It is at this point that a sophisticated modern insight touches the Buddha's "awakening." With exemplary clarity he too experienced the ultimate insubstantiality of all inventions of identity. To adapt his own metaphor he witnessed the collapse of the 'house of fiction' (*Dhammapada* 154). The most influential English exposition of a theory of fiction which is grounded in such assumptions is Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending*.[1] It is particularly congenial to the purpose of this short comparative exploration in its anti-historical thrust and in its conflation of fictions of all kinds, theological, scientific and literary. So that in this sense the abyss of historical accident which separates such a contemporary theory from the Buddha's own attitudes to man's need for fictions dissolves. We shall discover much common ground between the two as well as some spectacular divergencies. We can try to establish the common ground first of all.

In Professor Kermode's view the root of the *fonction fabulatrice* lies in simple "need," itself induced by the rudimentary biological anxiety of the organism enmeshed in a universe of contradictory (and presumably) painful sensations. To relieve this primitive tension man becomes his own artificer inventing

[1] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (London, 1967). Subsequent page references are to this edition.

fictions of survival with a higher degree of coherence and stability than the brute elements of reality seem to possess. Anxious for concords he projects such tentative versions of his own history on to the world to "humanise" it and to mask its threatening features with his own. This may be a purposive and aggressive strategy for confronting an alien reality (making sense of it) or a defensive one, keeping pain at bay by aesthetic withdrawals into the house of fiction (consolation). At any event it is imperative that the models themselves be constantly checked for their resilience and symptoms of obsolescence dutifully diagnosed. It is precisely these anticipations of rigidity and the need to adjust or replace the models in the interests of a shifting reality which generate the ceaseless play of consciousness, the construction of concepts and the endless procession of fictional forms (ch. II).

This bears more than a casual resemblance to the Buddhist theory of the formation of the skandhas, the psychological process through which we evolve models of the self and of the world. Here too our origins are (in Kermode's term) in "poverty," in a vacuum which we proceed to fill with the outlines of simple forms (rūpa). "We try to solidify or freeze" the experience of space and set boundaries to time. (I am making use of Chögyam Trungpa's exposition since it conveniently employs the language of modern fiction-theory to describe the evolution of a settled sense of identity.)[2] Out of this basic and biological experience of "aloneness" arises the activity of projection, the ceaseless effort of the mind to establish and confirm a "solid" world outside (sannā). The effect is, of course, to "humanise" the world, to burden it with our successive attempts to grasp it (making sense) or to retreat from it (consolation) or as Trungpa puts it to don "a suit of armour" and treat it with indifference (vedanā). All this is, as it were, the raw material of being, the crude substance which we proceed to mould into purposive patterns adapted to our will and needs. We transform the world into thought, or as Kermode describes it, "we submit the show of things to the desires of the mind" (p. 144) (sankhāra). With the fifth skandha (vinnāna) comes the full flowering of forms, the proliferation of fictions and fantasies, the creation of dynamic worlds which we inhabit if not with ease at least with the distraction of variable places. The whole elaborate artifice, Trungpa concludes, is no more than "an attempt on our part to shield ourselves from the truth of our insubstantiality."[3] It is at this point that Trungpa joins hands with modern theorists of fiction, those elegists of the lost powers of the imagination, which, as they see it, now invents forms only to convict them of falseness, and denies them validity except the dubious one of a temporary cover for nakedness. The "perpetual readiness to start projecting" is no more than a plug in the dyke of dissolving emptiness.

[2] Chögyam Trungpa, *The Myth of Freedom* (Berkeley, 1976), pp. 20–29.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

There is further common ground. Professor Kermode proposes that our attitude towards our man-made fictions should be one of "experimental assent." It would obviously be wrong, he suggests, to think of the death of King Lear as "true" (this would be to dogmatize the text and permit fiction, "the consciously false" to harden into myth, an inflexible construct to which we commit ourselves absolutely and through which we may disastrously attempt to live our lives). Rather we submit ourselves temporarily to its fictive powers, and through such an act of experimental submission allow them to transform us. If the experiment succeeds we change ourselves and by so doing "we have, in the best possible indirect way, changed the world" (pp. 39–40). The corollary is a critical alertness (what Kermode calls "clerkly scepticism"), a refusal to blind ourselves to the status of our fictions or to mistake our models for ultimate truth. Their genuine power lies rather in their "operational effectiveness," the incandescence through which they light up our lives after which they may well suffer the fate of other obsolescent schemata.

In all this there is a striking correspondence to the Buddha's attitude to all man-made systems, including his own. He proposed that his own formulations were "fictive" in precisely this way. He exercised a persistent "clerkly scepticism" in the face of his followers' urge to distort the *dhamma*, to transform an essentially experimental path into a rigid landscape of dogma, to mistake the pointing finger for the moon itself. The parable of the raft comes to mind straight away. The raft had its usefulness, and has proved its "operational effectiveness" by taking the man safely across the river. But its work done it would be foolish to cling to it as a mode of security or even to retain it. "Even so, monks, is the Parable of the Raft *dhamma* taught by me for crossing over, not for retaining."[4] But perhaps the *locus classicus* occurs in the Kālāma Sutta where the Kālāmas in a crisis of anxiety over doctrinal disputes approach the Buddha. His advice to them strikes a sophisticated balance between "clerkly scepticism" and conditional assent. The truth of verbal formulations should be tested on the grounds of their "effectiveness," their simple usefulness and their power to change lives:

> It is proper for you, Kālāmas, to doubt, to be uncertain; uncertainty has arisen in you about what is doubtful. Come, Kālāmas. Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing; nor upon tradition; nor upon rumour; nor upon what is in a scripture; nor upon surmise; nor upon an axiom; nor upon specious reasoning; nor upon a bias towards a notion that has been pondered over; nor upon another's seeming ability; nor upon the consideration, "The monk is our

[4] *The Middle Length Sayings* (Majjhima-Nikāya), trans. I. B. Horner (Pali Text Society, London, 1976), Vol. 1, pp. 173–74.

> teacher". . . . Kālāmas, when you yourselves know: "These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness," enter and abide in them.[5]

It would be as absurd to mistake the *dhamma* for ultimate reality as it would in a literary context to mistake *King Lear* for truth and attempt to regulate our lives by it. Both would exemplify the error of trying, in Kermode's phrase, "to live by that which was designed only to know by" (p. 112).

It is however with the question of the need for and the function of fiction that sharp divergencies appear. This is not wholly surprising. In line with most Western theorists of fiction, Professor Kermode takes for granted man's indispensible need for fictions, while at the same time recognising that Western ones are predominantly apocalyptic in type. In *mediis rebus* men urgently require to establish "fictive concords with origins and ends," to mould the past and future into hospitable shapes (ch. I). Such pattern making, as Kermode shows, is closely bound to a rectilinear view of history, dominated by the End, to a habit of prophecy and apocalyptic expectation. It is predominantly Western and Christian.[6] To elaborate fictions is to mitigate and subdue our terrors (especially in relation to the End) by charting their temporal forms and equiping them with human masks. The effect is to relieve anxiety and to console. The Buddha took another view.

This appears at its simplest in the fable of the man pierced by the arrow, suffering the apparently inexplicable pain of existence. The effect, as the Buddha narrates the tale, is to accelerate his fiction-making urge. The man emerges as a budding novelist, weaving explanations out of his pain, inventing puzzles and solutions, probing past and future, insisting on knowing who shot the arrow, the whys, whens and hows.[7] The analogy is with the perennial attempt to establish cosmological origins and ends, to employ our speculative powers as a salve for the wound of existence. The Buddha clearly recognises the connection between the elaboration of fictions and the search for consolation, but he denies their ultimate power to mitigate suffering. The fable suggests that they may even exacerbate it by trapping the man in a verbal maze and thus distracting him from the realities of his actual condition.

In fact the Buddha was habitually confronted with men who wished to make sense of the world and who demanded of him that he establish concords between human origins and ends. He presents us, for example, with the anguish of

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[5] Quoted from *The Middle Way* 53, No. 2 (Summer 1978), pp. 58–9.

[6] By contrast Buddhism seems to lack some of the prime ingredients of apocalyptic thinking: a fixed god-concept and an obsessive concern with origins and ends.

[7] *MLS*, Vol. 11, pp. 97–101.

the man obsessed with speculations about the past ("Now, was I in a past period? Now, was I not in a past period? Now, what was I in a past period? Now, how was I in a past period?" etc.); these, as the narrative indicates, quickly generate fresh anxieties and transform themselves into projections about the future ("Now, will I come to be in a future period? Now, will I not come to be in a future period? Now, how will I come to be in a future period?" etc.). The narrative also insists that it is precisely this wavering, this quest for reassurance which in fact never emerges, which induces present anxiety ("Now, what am I? Now, how am I?" etc.) and the need to relieve it by constructing an inner space, a house of fiction, a permanent self which can resist the depredations of time ("It is this self for me that is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, that will stand firm like unto the eternal.")[8] (This is remarkably close to the temporal territory which Kermode assigns to novels where in our endeavour to defeat pure successiveness we conspire with the author to enter a quasi-eternal dimension of time, which possesses an illusory stability that life itself lacks [p. 72]). The Buddha suggests that it is just this need to map out our territory and reinforce it with fictions which induces alienation and fear.

Professor Kermode's theories give primacy to our efforts to organise time into habitable patterns, to make pure duration endurable. There is the particular need to anaesthetize the persistent irruptions of anxiety about the End, "to humanise the common death" (p. 7). Yet what seems most valuable (and in the West most acceptable) in this kind of speculative activity is what the Buddha directly questions. Time and again he probes the origin and consequence of the assumption of such a need. The *Dhammapada* contains the simple injunction to "be free of the past, be free of things hereafter, be free of middle things" (348). This may be interpreted as the call to freedom from consolatory attachment to temporal fictions and to ingrained habits of prediction. (Lama Govinda notes that though the Buddha treated the past as "an unquestionable fact" and assigned significant ontological status to it, he refused to treat the future in the same manner, to predict its pattern or to indulge in prophecy.)[9] Put simply, metaphysical fictions are obstacles in the path of "realisation"; they intensify anxiety and the consequent need to establish a firm and rock-like foundation in the self, which the self does not possess. Such "speculative views" about origins and ends, in the Buddha's recognition, do "not conduce to turning away from, nor to dispassion, stopping, calming, superknowledge, awakening, nor to nibbāna. I, Vaccha, beholding that this is peril, thus do not approach

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[8] *MLS*, Vol. 1, pp. 10–11.

[9] Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness* (Winchester, 1977), p. 276.

any of these (speculative) views."[10] In the ultimate sense this involves the radical experiment of attempting to live without the protective masks and constructs of fiction and myth. The first fruit of such an experiment may be the intuition that a "hostile world" is a magnified image of our own desire; it is precisely the "rage for order" which generates a disordered universe. In this sense the assumption of an absolute need for fiction may be itself a dangerous fiction.

On the whole Western modes of fiction have been attempts to set verbal and symbolic limits to the mind's random activities. The thrust has been to construct, to integrate, to seal off recurring fissures. The Buddhist "experiment" takes the opposite direction. Its basis is not the erection of boundaries but their phasing out, their gradual dissolution. From this view the Buddha's own "awakening" appears as a massive shedding of limits, a reception into consciousness of the "non-human" recesses of time and space:

> Thus with the mind composed, quite purified, quite clarified, without blemish, without defilement, grown soft and workable, fixed, immovable, I directed my mind to the knowledge and recollection of former habitations: I remembered a variety of former habitations thus: one birth, two births . . . a hundred thousand births, and many an eon of integration and many an eon of disintegration and many an eon of integration-disintegration . . . ignorance was dispelled, knowledge arose, darkness was dispelled, light arose, even as I abided diligent, ardent, self-resolute.[11]

Thus the infinite eons are realised, not as inhospitable fictions, but as concordant with the nature of "Mind" itself. This is the unimaginable "now-event," the point at which the world ex-ists, cleansed of the imprint of man's own fictions, and experimental knowing yields to Being.

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[10] *MLS*, Vol. 11, p. 164.

[11] *MLS*, Vol. 1, p. 28.