The Teaching Story

Observations on the Folklore
of Our “Modern” Thought

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***The Teaching Story*: Idries Shah**

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Front page image: A scene from the play "*Cotton 56, Polyester 84*".
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There is no nation, no community, without its stories. Children are brought up on fairy tales, cults and religions depend upon them for moral instruction: they are used for entertainment and for training. They are usually catalogued as myths, as humorous tales, as semi-historical fact, and so on, in accordance with what people believe to be their origin and function.

But what a story can be used for is often what it was originally intended to be used for. The fables of all nations provide a really remarkable example of this, because, if you can understand them at a technical level, they provide the most striking evidence of the persistence of a consistent teaching, preserved sometimes through mere repetition, yet handed down and prized simply because they give a stimulus to the imagination or entertainment for the people at large.

There are very few people nowadays who are able to make the necessary use of stories. Those who know about the higher level of being represented by stories can learn something from them, but very little. Those who can experience this level can teach the use of stories. But first of all we must allow the working hypothesis that there may be such a level operative in stories. We must approach them from the point of view that they may on that level be documents of technical value: an ancient yet still irreplaceable method of arranging and transmitting a knowledge which can not be put in any other way.

In this sense such stories (because *all* stories are not technical literature), such stories may be regarded as part of a curriculum,

and as valid a representation of fact as, for instance, any mathematical formula or scientific textbook.

Like any scientific textbook or mathematical formula, however, stories depend for their higher power upon someone to understand them at the higher level, someone who can establish their validity in a course of study, people who are prepared to study and use them, and so on.

At this point we can see quite easily that our conditioning (which trains us to use stories for amusement purposes) is generally in itself sufficient to prevent us from making any serious study of stories as a vehicle for higher teaching. This tendency, the human tendency to regard anything as of use to man on a lower level than it could operate, runs through much of our studies, and has to be marked well.

Yet traditions about stories do in fact linger here and there. People say that certain stories, if repeated, will provide some sort of "good luck"; or that tales have meanings which have been forgotten, and the like. But what would be called in contemporary speech the "security aspect" of stories is almost complete in the case of the genre which we call "teaching-stories" because of another factor.

This factor is the operation of the law that a story, like a scientific industrial formula, say, can have its developmental or teaching effect only upon a person correctly prepared for its understanding. This is why we must use stories in a manner which will enable us to harvest their value for us in a given situation.

There is another problem which has to be appreciated when dealing with stories. Unlike scientific formulae, they have a whole

series of developmental effects. In accordance with the degree of preparation of an individual and a group, so will the successive "layers" of the story become apparent. Outside of a proper school where the method and content of stories is understood, there is almost no chance of an arbitrary study of stories yielding much.

But we have to go back to an even earlier stage in order to ground ourselves, prepare ourselves, for the value of the story. This is the stage at which we can familiarise ourselves with the story and regard it as a consistent and productive parallel or allegory of certain states of mind. Its symbols are the characters in the story. The way in which they move conveys to the mind the way in which the human mind can work. In grasping this in terms of men and women, animals and places, movement and manipulation of a tale, we can put ourselves into a relationship with the higher faculties possible to the mind, by working on a lower level, the level of visualisation.

Let us examine a story or two from the foregoing points of view. First, take a story of the Elephant in the Dark.* This has actually been published as a children's book. It appears in the books of Rumi and Sanai. We have made it the subject of a commercial film, *The Dermis Probe*. This story, on the lowest possible level, makes fun of the scientists and academics who try to explain things through the evidence which they can evaluate, and none other. In another direction, on the same level, it is humorous in as much as it makes us laugh at the stupidity of people who work on such little evidence. As a philosophical teaching it says that man is blind and is trying to assess something too great for assessment by means of inadequate tools. In the religious field it says that God is everywhere and everything, and man gives different names to what seem to him to be separate things, but which are in fact only parts

of some greater whole which he cannot perceive because "he is blind" or "there is no light."

** A number of blind people, or sighted people in a dark house, grope and find an elephant. Each touches only a part; each gives to his friends outside a different account of what he has experienced. Some think that it was a fan (the ears of the animal); another takes the legs for pillars; a third the tail for a rope, and so on.*

The interpretations are far and high as anyone can go. Because of this, people address themselves to this story in one or more of these interpretations. They then accept or reject them. Now they can feel happy; they have arrived at an opinion about the matter. According to their conditioning they produce the answer. Now look at their answers. Some will say that this is a fascinating and touching allegory of the presence of God. Others will say that it is showing people how stupid mankind can be. Some say it is anti-scholastic. Others that it is just a tale copied by Rumi from Sanai - and so on. Because none of these people can taste an inner content, none will even begin to imagine that one exists. As I say these words the ordinary mind will easily be able to dispose of them by thinking that this is just someone who has provided a sophisticated explanation for something which cannot be checked.

But we are not here to justify ourselves. We are here to open the door of the mind to the possibility that stories might be technical documents. We are here to say that there is a method of making use of these documents. Especially we are here to say that the most ancient and most important knowledge available to man is in part contained in these documents. And that this form, however primitive or old-fashioned it may seem, is in fact almost the only form in which certain teachings can be captured, preserved and

transmitted. And, too, that these stories are conscious works of art, devised by people who knew exactly what they were doing, for the use of other people who knew exactly what could be done with them.

It may take a conventional thinker some time to understand that if he is looking for truth and a hidden teaching, it may be concealed in a form which would be the last, perhaps, which he would consider to be applicable to his search.

But, in order to possess himself of this knowledge, he must take it from where it *really* is, not from where he imagines it might be.

There is plenty of evidence of the working of this method, that of the story deliberately concocted and passed down, in all cultures. We do not have to confine ourselves to Eastern fables. But it is in stories of Eastern origin that we find the most complete and least deteriorated forms of the tradition. We therefore start with them. They lead us, naturally, to the significant documents in the Western and other branches of the tradition.

In approaching the study of stories, then, we have to make sure that we reclaim the information that stories contain, shall we say, a message. In this sense we are like people whose technology has fallen into disuse, rediscovering the devices used by our ancestors as we become fitted for it. Then we have to realise that we have to familiarise ourselves with certain stories, so that we can hold them in our minds, like memorizing a formula. In this use, the teaching story resembles the mnemonic or formula which we trot out to help us calculate something: like saying: “one kilo equals 2.2 pounds in weight”; or even “thirty days hath September.”

Now we have to realise that, since we are dealing with a form of knowledge which is specific in as much as ii is planned to act in a certain way under certain conditions, those conditions must be present if we are to be able to use the story coherently. By coherently I mean here, if the story is to be the guide whereby we work through the various stages of consciousness open to us.

This means that we must not only get to know certain tales; we must study them, or even just familiarise ourselves with them, in a certain order. This idea tends to find opposition among literate people who are accustomed to doing their own reading, having been led to believe that the more you read the more likely you are to know more. But this quantitative approach is absurd when you are dealing with specific material. If you went to the British Museum library and decided to read everything in it in order to educate yourself, you would not get very far. It is only the ignorant, even in the formal sense, who cannot understand the need for particular kinds of specialisation. This is well exemplified by the club porter who once said to me, in all seriousness "You are a college man, Sir, please explain football pool permutations to me."

It is in order to get some possibility of right study that I continually say things like "Let us get down out of the trees and start to build."

So far, however, we have not been saying much more than this:

1. A special, effective and surpassingly important teaching is contained in certain materials. In this case the materials are stories.

2. We must accept the possibility before we can begin to approach the study of this knowledge.

3. Having accepted, even as a working hypothesis, the foregoing contentions, we have to set about the study in an efficient manner. In the case of the tales, the efficient manner means to approach the right stories, in the right manner, under the right conditions.

Failure to adhere to these principles will make it impossible for us to function on the high level needed. If, for example, we settle for merely knowing a lot of stories, we may become mere raconteurs or consumers. If we settle for the moral or social teaching of the story, we simply duplicate the activities of people working in that domain. If we compare stories to try to see where the higher level is, we will not find it, because we do not know unless guided which are the ones to compare with each other, under what conditions, what to look for, whether we can perceive the secret content, in what order to approach the matter.

So the story remains a tool as much as anything else. Only the expert can use the tool, or produce anything worthwhile with it.

Having heard and accepted the above assertions, people always feel impatience. They want to get on with the job. But, not knowing that "everything takes a minimum time," or at any rate not applying this fact, they destroy the possibility of progress in a real sense.

Having established in a certain order the above facts, we have to follow through with a curriculum of study which will enable us to profit by the existence of this wonderful range of material. If you start to study what you take to be teaching-stories indiscriminately, you are more than likely to get only a small result, even with the facts already set out. Why is this?

Not only because you do not know the conditions under which the study must take place, but because the conditions themselves contain requirements of self-collection which seem to have no relationship to the necessities for familiarising oneself with a literary form.

We must, therefore, work on the mind to enable it to make use of the story, as well as presenting it with the story. This "work" on the mind is correctly possible only in the living situation, when certain people are grouped together in a certain manner, and develop a certain form of rapport. This, and no other, is the purpose of having meetings at which people are physically present.

If read hurriedly, or with one or other of the customary biases which are common among intellectuals but not other kinds of thinkers, the foregoing two paragraphs will be supposed to contain exclusivistic claims which are not in fact there.

This is itself one of the interesting - and encouraging - symptoms of the present phase of human intellectual folklore. If a tendency can readily be seen manifesting itself, whether in physics, scholasticism or metaphysics, one may be approaching its solution. What is this tendency?

The tendency is to demand a justification of what are taken to be certain claims *in the language in which the demand is made*. My stressing, for instance, that meetings at which people are present who have been grouped in a certain manner, may easily (and incorrectly) be supposed to state that the kind of learning to which I am referring can take place in no other manner. The intention of the paragraph, however, was simply to refer to one concrete manner in which what I have called "a living situation" can come about. A meeting of a number of people in a room is the only form of such a

situation familiar to any extent to an average reader of such materials as this.

I have used the word "folklore" to refer to a state of mind of modern man closely similar to that of less developed communities. But there is a great difference between the two folklores. In what we regard as ingenuous folklore, the individual may believe that certain objects have magical or special characteristics, and he is more or less aware of what these are claimed to be.

In modern man's folklore, he believes that certain contentions must be absurd, and holds on to other assumptions, without being aware that he is doing so. He is motivated, in fact, by almost completely hidden prejudices.

To illustrate the working of such preconceptions, it is often necessary to provide a "shock" stimulus.

Such a stimulus occurs both in the present series of contentions about the teaching-story (because, and only because, certain information about it is lost to the community being addressed) and exists equally strongly within the frameworks of such stories themselves, when one can view them in a structural manner.

This train of thought itself produces an illustration of the relative fragmentation of contemporary minds. Here it is:

Although it is a matter of the everyday experience of almost everyone on this planet, irrespective of his stage of culture or his community, that anyone thing may have a multiplicity of uses, functions and meanings, man does not apply this experience to cases which - for some occult reason - he regards as insusceptible to such attention. In other words, a person may admit that an

orange has colour, aroma, food value, shape, texture and so on; and he will readily concede that an orange may be many different things according to what function is desired, observed or being fulfilled. But if you venture to suggest that, say, a story has an equal range of possible functions, his folkloric evaluating mechanism will make him say: "No, a story is for entertainment," or else something almost as Byzantine: "Yes, of course. Now, are you talking about the psychological, social, anthropological or philosophical uses?"

Nobody has told him that there are, or might be, categories of effective function of a story in ranges which he has not yet experienced, perhaps not yet heard of, perhaps even cannot perceive or even coherently discuss, until a certain basic information process has taken place in his mind.

And to this kind of statement the answer is pat and hard to combat. It is: "You are trying to be clever." This, you may recall is only the "yaa-boo" reaction of the schoolchild who has come up against something which it cannot, at least at that moment, rationalise away or fully understand.