

Appointment in Samarra II.

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While dealing with 'Fate, Oracles and Death' philosopher Simon Blackburn in his book *Think* refers to an Iraqi fable, 'Death in Samarkand.' This fable was originally 'Appointment in Samarra' as narrated by Somerset Maugham in a telling and brief short story. How can 'Appointment in Samarra' (Appointment hereinafter) become 'Death in Samarkand' (Death hereinafter) is the burden of this article which also seeks to understand the philosophical implications of 'lazy sophism' elaborated by the philosopher in the same chapter. Blackburn narrates the fable through a Sufi saint. It is well known that Sufism originated in Iraq and Turkey echoing Islamic mysticism but it thrived in Afghanistan. It is also well known that Sufi saints have been the vanguard of the civilian army closely following Islamic warriors to perform 'miracles' and pave the way for proselytization of infidels. While doing so, they have drawn from the local lore so that the work of God they set out to do becomes that much easier. Significantly, the Central Asian city of Samarkand is almost equidistant between the Arab world and Afghanistan.

Maugham's 'Appointment' goes somewhat like this: There is a merchant in Baghdad who sends his servant to buy provisions from the market. The servant soon returns trembling with fear and says: 'Master as I was going with the jostling crowds in the market, there was a push from behind. I turned and saw a woman. She was death. Now master, give me your horse I shall go to Samarra and save myself.' The master gave him his horse. The servant climbed it and dug his spurs in its flanks, and as fast as the horse could run he went. In the evening the Master went to the market and asked the woman: 'Why did you threaten my servant?' She said, 'I was surprised to see him in Baghdad, for I have an appointment with him in Samarra.' Hence 'Appointment.'

This has been transformed into ‘Death in Samarkand’ over the years and this is attributable to both *historicism* and the distortions that invariably creep in while retelling a fable (this brand of historicism may be defined as the change in the original, brought about to suit the needs of the current colony in focus). Notice the shift in the colony from Russia’s underbelly to Iraq, to Afghanistan, and then back again! However, this is in no way attributing motives to either Somerset Maugham or Simon Blackburn, only that they have picked up a fable honed to perfection at different points of time. Who honed it to perfection is a different story.

‘Death,’ as narrated by Blackburn begins: ‘the disciple of Baghdad was sitting in an inn one day when he heard two figures talking. He realized that one of them was the Angel of Death.

The terrified disciple concealed himself until the two had left. To escape death, he hired the fastest horse he could, and made day and night to the far distant desert city of Samarkand. Meanwhile, Death met the disciple’s teacher, and they talked of this and that. ‘And where is your disciple, so and so?’ asked Death.

‘I suppose he is at home, where he should be, studying,’ said the Sufi.

‘That is surprising,’ said Death, ‘for here he is on my list and I have to collect him tomorrow, in Samarkand, of all places.’

As for historicism, the more the fable circulated the more the distortions took place. The conversion of a merchant in Baghdad to a Sufi saint happens because of necessity felt by someone to slot the fable to suit realistic and instant needs. In the process, religious connotations have crept in, pressed on by Crusades, obfuscating what was originally a secular fable that sought purely to deal with the curse of determinism on mankind. But fate, in today’s world cannot but be communalized, because of growing fundamentalism, either defensive or offensive, all round. ‘Fate’ is also an empirical method deployed to show how and why a certain people are condemned, owing to their own beliefs, their own lore, and in short, their own karma. At least for

credibility's sake, it has to be demonstrated that if the tale is in Iraq the religion has to be Islam, forgetting the fact that the godforsaken country happens to be a more progressive state than the rest of the Arab world. (It is nobody's case whether, *ipso facto*, Iraq should be spared the repeated calls of the Angel of Death). If it is Islam it has to be a milder version such as Sufism since the latter alone delves in subjects other than those prescribed by the Book. And if it has to be Sufism, the servant cannot possibly turn towards Mecca but has to ride towards Afghanistan. On the way, out of fatigue or whatever, he may settle down in Samarkand awaiting fate to overtake him. Besides, Samarkand is better known as the land of Taimur (his descendant, Babur, was the founder of the Mughal dynasty in India), celebrated by Christopher Marlowe, than sleepy Samarra that has lost its importance in the folds of time. Of course, for the nonce, none of the cities in Iraq can afford to sleep inasmuch as the modern-day Crusaders are willing to put the teeming cities to sleep by taking the daylights out of them.

Witness the modern phraseology that the tale *Death In Samarkand* uses: 'I suppose he is at home, where he should be studying,' said the Sufi. 'That is surprising,' said Death, 'for he is on my list and I have to collect him tomorrow, in Samarkand, of all places.' Home points to a *madrassa* where Islamic disciples study, and where some, in the name of religion take to martial arts and account for the lost lives of innocent people, and for the latter category – for which the gory 'List' and 'collect' are watchwords. These are certainly interpolations to signify the 'operators' who work under Arabic legends such as Al-Qaida. The effort in the altered fable has been to typify it as religious and paradoxically modernize it. That the distortion has been carried out in the West is also clear considering the use of certain signifiers such as 'inn', whereas in the Islamic world there have been serais for travelers where they could rest their camels, apart from themselves. Also, 'they talked of this and that' is almost verging on the talk about the weather, which is patently English. The same follows for 'so-and-so,' which is derogatory enough for the disciple who is going to die in any case.

This leaves us with fate, which is the common factor in *Appointment* and *Death*. Both the merchant's servant and Sufi's disciple meet with the same fate, notwithstanding interpretations of the text as to how they could have escaped death (Blackburn suggests that they can escape death by chanting a mantra (which is Eastern in origin) as one of the possibilities) since either way in the crossroads of destiny, be it Samarra or Samarkand, they will meet with death. So they are one in death. Epistemology may run over time and over space also!

Still the epistemological possibilities could be explored further to keep the servant alive till such a time as he dies a natural death. Space could come to his rescue. Had the servant remained in Baghdad without borrowing his master's horse, or hired the fastest horse for that matter, would he have escaped the inevitable by not going to Samarra? Also, if the disciple had not been on the way to Samarkand, at the first hint of trouble by dint of native wisdom, would he have lived longer? The Angel's aura is very much there in Baghdad foreclosing all options for the servant and forcing him to gallop to his death. Having taken the servant in her talons, the angel simply playfully releases him to set him on his way, so she may catch him when the time is ripe. That is how the birds of prey maul their meal, releasing them only to catch them again before the kill. So is the case of the servant. Whichever road he takes – Samarra, Samarkand or Timbuctoo.

Man is transitory, but the Angel is eternal: Organic (physical) change is temporary and chemical change is permanent, so is the spirit that is not subject to physical laws. So man cannot be eternal, whereas spirit is.

Before recounting the fable, Blackburn asks: 'And if determinism is true, isn't the future fixed already...?' Not quite, in terms of entelechy, at the point of sepulcher, man becomes a scalar, and for him, vis-à-vis the many, the time machine is unidirectional. It can only go backwards into the past. Man has eyes in the front of his face, but he can see only surroundings within the radius. The illusory horizon is the limit to his vision. Therefore, man can only reflect. For, no man has returned with a

postscript! There's no 'foreflection' for him. 'Proflection' is equally cumbersome. Projection does not serve the purpose. Nothing serves the purpose because nothing tangible can be seen or perceived beyond the barrier of death. Like King Lear says: 'Nothing comes out of nothing.' Language limits itself as much as thought that has to have some solid term to go to the next tangible term and the next till it comes to the crossroads of life and death, where Ockham's sharpest razor applies. Eternity is not for man, but it may be for mankind, subject to physical laws.

You cannot signify beyond language. Language and thinking are co-terminus. Knowledge is limited to matters that are worldly and outwardly where man or his thought has gone before. The netherworld is closed bar speculation. And speculation may be stretched to Dante's hell and such other scenarios that poets have sung about. Even this speculation constitutes 'views from nowhen' which is also synthetic.

As it happens, 'nowhen' is a wonderful conception of Blackburn's that implies both time and space. It is particularly useful when terms such as fate put up insurmountable and impenetrable barriers. *Nowhen* perhaps reaches space where even Angels fear to tread, including the Angel of Death. *Nowhen* is knowledge for man, independent of Gods. It is a parallel heaven, and binary to it. *Nowhen* exists or does not exist inasmuch as heaven is there or not there.

That being the idea, could the merchant's servant have saved his skin in the face of Angel of Death by any means? Assuming fate is determined, fixed, mapped out from above, in which the active agent has no say, what are the means available to the servant? The *mullah* is perhaps one answer. Because if he has enough money, instead of chanting the infidel 'Om' while preparing for the last journey, he could go to the nearest corporate hospital and put himself on artificial respiration. So long as the black boxes of involuntary life-giving oxygen pump gas into him by expanding and contracting, and as long as the underwriters to his medical expenses could afford, he would live, even if brain dead. The vegetable state is as good as matter. Sans senses, and therefore the mind, human is matter. Therefore, mind separates human and

matter. Since mind is the exponential factor in the evolution, it too is governed by organic laws. Mind is after all the culmination of the senses coming together and giving their respective might to the organic whole. But mind cannot be isolated. As it is part and parcel of the body, it goes with man. The only part of the mind that can possibly be isolated is the sense of vision. And the eye may have age independent of the body and mind. Hence eye transplants. The eye so transplanted too has age, even if it lives on its own under certain conditions. But the finality is inevitable.

Thus the proposition: Life has meaning only in the mind. Mind is co-terminus with life. Therefore, life is meaningful mind. In the final analysis, beyond a point, life is soul-less. Philosopher Blackburn represents the 'lazy sophism' as follows:

The future will be what it will be. Its events are already in time's womb.
So, do nothing.

And he gives the alternative:

The future will be what it will be. Its events are already in time's womb.
So, get cracking.

Que sera sera... The ontological man has been caught in the cleft-stick. Taking the Iraqi parable further, what were the options before the Baghdad merchant's servant or, for that matter, Saddam Hussein himself? There is always *deja vu* about Iraq, its people and its leaders themselves, for they constitute one of the oldest if not the oldest civilization. They seem to suffer from the fascinating death-wish unlike the other peoples. The Sufi wisdom has been for real. Should Saddam have given himself up after allowing the United Nations inspectors to scour the country, not finding a shred of evidence and becoming the scourge? Should Saddam have signed a peace treaty with Russia embedding a secret clause that would have been a deterrent to any take-over of his godforsaken land? Should Saddam have fought bravely throwing all his forces into action and all the force at his command into the fray? Events were already in time's womb post-1991. What, therefore, did Saddam wait for? Strangely, Saddam,

as the fountainhead of his bedeviled country's native wisdom, turns out an optimist even in the face of the mocking Angel of Death.

Had they mounted the horses and given the charge, would they perhaps have delayed the horses of time, to get that much leeway, to get that much respite, to get that much room to maneuver? Dr Faustus, too, was helpless because the horses of time wait for no tide and they are relentless in their march to light up minds. The Iraqis knew the end result beforehand – that the result would have been the same whether they cracked the whip or did nothing.

For Saddam, the appointment in Samarra II is apt. Samarra is equidistant to his place of birth, Tikrit, and the throne (Baghdad). In the event he stayed put and was caught in his estate. How deterministic can determinism be!

As for Saddam, so for others, the future is in the womb of time. That is a certainty. So time is deterministic. When a period of time and a geographic space are determined to be irreducible, the people habiting therein are reducible to common values, beliefs and so on and, therefore, a psyche. The psyche is no *tabula rasa* for time-tested structures have gone into its making. For the very reason, the psyche cannot be so easily influenced one way or the other. The Iraqi psyche has been centred on Samarra, among other things, and determined to entertain periodic appointments with it. For Saddam the appointment was a-coming. The Iraqi mind weighed the pros and cons – to get cracking or do nothing. It tried both in half measures. Either way the result is overwhelming and determined. The oracle's pronouncement has begun to sink in. The only difference is it is not Delphian but Texan and hence sticky and oily. As fate and oracles have been arrayed against them, the Iraqis are destined to suffer some kind of death following their Appointment in Samarra II.