

# Tryphon

I

ANYONE PRINTING the papers of an ancestor judges his own blood. I am reviving the embers of James Buckingham Silk. I hope they won't prove him a posthumous fool, myself a renegade.

My great-great-great grandfather, James Buckingham Silk, of Vilna, visited the Levant in 1820 and again in 1842. He published in 1821 his *Travels in Palestine* through the countries of Gilead and Bashan, a notorious book during the winter of that year. After that he receded into the obscurity which, my grandfather once remarked, he entirely deserved. (From that judgment a grandson dissents.) Twenty years later he went back to the Levant, and in 1843 wrote his second book, *Tryphon The Giant In Jerusalem*, which recalls his meetings, that previous year, with people of note. It's a pity this manuscript was never published, and I propose to remedy this, if only because he included also communications of the poet Else Lasker-Schueler, who spent her last years in Jerusalem. If these extracts please, I will publish in its entirety *Tryphon The Giant In Jerusalem*. May my ancestor clamber from obscurity on the shoulders of that giant!

II

THEIR CHIEF PASTIMES are sherbet ... T and religion. Unlike the congeries of the Great Turk, these Sefardi wives are notable for continence. Sometimes they sigh towards the Dead Sea, where, their Rabbis feign, Madame Lot saltily shines. On clear days her mineral semblance is perceivable from Jerusalem. They regard her as the *Ur*-mother. . . .

Around Ramadhan, the Jerusalem Muslims assemble in the courtyard of Omar's mosque. They wear a plain muslin robe, and in this they pretend the motions of swimming. These mimed motions are laughable in the extreme for an Englishman, accustomed from youth to the licence of water. There is a kind of pathos in watching these natives of limestone, embedded like fossils in the region, rehearse gestures our children would flee at through their fingers. A fable concerning Muhammed explains this. When he arrived in Jerusalem he felt his extreme Dryness. He exclaimed he must first swim around Jerusalem before ascending from it. A River was provided and around this he swam, applauded by the townsfolk, who felt he was a Person of no common quality.

Another Myth associates the River around

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DENNIS SILK, who lives in Jerusalem, writes: Tryphon had obviously been waiting for some rich American collector. He was an engraving in a 17th-century continuation of Josephus. The book's price was marked in dollars. I looked at the engraving of this starry-headed, snake-fingered man, then put him back on his shelf. But he slipped out of the book and into the street. He solved several Jerusalem puzzles. Later I took another look at that engraving. I found I had added an *r* to his name. Formerly he had been the unlucky Egyptian devil, Typhon.

The German-Jewish poet, Else Lasker-Schueler, came to Jerusalem in the 1930s, and died there in 1945. She permanently haunts several Jerusalemites. The poet Amichai met her recently near the Central Bus Station. She was bobbing up and down, he held on hard to stop her flying off.

Jerusalem with the giant Tryphon.\* Tryphon was a Chimera who made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1837. Some say in 1839. In any case, all are agreed on his wonderful height, his sagacity, and his scaly skin which seemed more than human. Arriving at the town-centre, he set up a bench on which he placed the most diverse instruments. They included cogs of some great Machine, a human eye, a chameleon, and a skipping-rope, and kindness.

Tryphon also complained of the Dryness of the city, and he invented the River in which he daily refreshed his scales. Afterwards he would juggle with his instruments while the eye scrutinised him. Some termed him a common

## III

HERE IS Silk's second account of the Giant Tryphon.

...On this date Tryphon the Funambulist circumscribed Jerusalem on a skipping-rope suspended in mid-air. He pleased the air, to judge by an audible humming remarked on by the townsfolk below. He looked transparent: you could see the coursing of his honey-coloured blood, or sap. The Chameleon closely following him along the rope took on a very gratifying Honey-hue. His bench below, with its human eye which he left as a Janitor, or guard, vibrated throughout the ascension. The nearer citizens read an anxiety in the iris. On Tryphon's



Juggler, or Mountebank: others pronounced him a great Rabbi.

Around 1842 Tryphon as usual invented his River but on this occasion swam away with it, his scaly side burning the water as he fled. The eye swam steadily alongside him like a faithful Retainer. The townsfolk associate him with Tiche, or Fortune, the goddess of Aelia Capitolina. But this can scarcely be.

\*The "y" in Tryphon like a long "i" in Chimera.

§ I made a daguerrotype of Tryphon on this occasion. Exposure time was insufficient, and the Chameleon escapes the copper-plate. With his usual modesty he cannot be seen at the centre, top, although he conceals several inches of his master's hat.

descent I congratulated him heartily. It was a feat, I said, the greatest artists of Illusionism in Europe could scarcely emulate. Tryphon remarked only that it was not his dexterity of limb, however wonderful, but the spirit in him maintained him on his rope. I enquired for the Chameleon. When Tryphon laughingly raised his hat to salute me, I saw the modest beast had subdued itself to its master's hat-brim. §

## IV

SILK TRANSCRIBES an encounter, the following day, between Tryphon and a severe critic.

"If," the critic said, "you had walked two Inches above the ground, I could have ap-

plauded. But you show a certain Materialist bias in your choice of mid-air."

Tryphon was extremely discomposed, and the Chameleon lost his colour for some moments. "I see after all," said Tryphon, "that I was performing for Jerusalem. Had you made yourself known to me earlier, certainly I would have chosen those Inches."

"I fear you would have fallen," said his critic.

Tryphon and his Chameleon returned home in silence.

## V

**A**BOUT this time Silk received a communication from a Levant geographer, Cuthbert Halt, who had read "Tryphon The Giant" in manuscript.

*49 Ramban Street, Rehavia, Jerusalem  
11 March 1966*

*Dear Silk,*

I see you swallowed everything, you old gossip. I was here in 1836 and again in '38 but I recall no one by the name of Tryphon. Everyone met everyone in those days. I would have met him, I am sure. James Finn never mentioned him to me, and as you know, he cultivated a *very* strange set.

As for Muhammed: Did he swim around a river? Was there a river? No one mentioned it to me.

I suggest you are confusing Tryphon with the Baal Shem of Tiberias, who spent his nights on the mountain, howling, and his days crystal-gazing in the Tiberias market. Some say he howled because he saw the future. I do not know though I myself heard him howl in 1836. He moved me deeply. I howled with him. I suggest he is *your* man.

I enclose an extract from the predictions of the Baal Shem that he had printed in 1838.

I hope you don't take this letter amiss.

*Very truly yours,*

CUTHBERT HALT

## VI

**H**ALT HAD CUT OUT the first page of the Baal Shem's address to the citizens of Tiberias. I give it here in the exact form he communicated it to James Buckingham Silk.

## THE BAAL SHEM OF TIBERIAS

I ADDRESS YOU among thistles. I am a mouth in the thistle-field. There is no correspondence between the sky and your souls. You are market-

produce, manured, fostered, picked for death. I know the wicked carter. Shall I save you from his wheels and jolting?

You are so many cabbage-heads, carrot-tops, pleased to fill the superfluous basket. You are the false heart of the lettuce, cold and wet, not delicious. I have howled for you on my mountain.

The soul of God stared through the window. He knew where to find me in your house. I was lost like a house-dog, a cat. So I peeled the skin of walls. I know holes in mountains.

I am the Baal Shem of my mountain, its good name. I nursed it as I would a dead child, fed it my breath, and now it is a live soul. If I fetched it down like a beast, it would tell you how to grow. It gave me its skin, I gave it my breath. It is the house of soul. I sleep all night and watch the breath of the mountain going up, altar-smoke, to God. Sometimes I am confused, is my breath the mountain? I do not know.

There are very few souls that go up. There are very few souls that go up. You are house-souls, window-of-glass souls, packets of dead seed that have no buyers. Horses are the Solomons of your generation.

I saw a cartload of souls. The carter in triumph rode by. Roots in his produce, I heard you crying. You cried for someone to capture the carter and the scope of his reins.

## VII

## THE CHAMELEON'S MOUNTAIN-JOURNEY

THERE WERE NO PARTRIDGES or fine scents inside this mountain, you understand. I knew we were on an errand for Jerusalem. The way was in and on. The insides of this mountain stank of dead skin, we were walking through a tannery of stone. The walls were littered with old dreams of miners, scratched-out plans for seams. I wept at an old pick.

When we came to the decaying root of the mountain, Tryphon coiled himself round it. He was in labour. The root shook and I heard a drip from above.

I wanted to run away but I couldn't. The only colour to hide in was the pallor of Tryphon with his coils round that root. So I stayed there in the pallor of Tryphon.

## VIII

**I**N SPITE of Cuthbert Halt, James Buckingham Silk continued to observe what he wanted to observe in Jerusalem. Around this

time he struck up a friendship with Else Lasker-Schueler to whom he had been introduced by the Chameleon. She sent him the following letter.

*HaMa'lot Street, Jerusalem  
10 July 1940*

*Dear Friend,*

Again I am not well. The coalman has been walking on my head all day. I said to him, Why bring that sack of coal, it's summer, I know you believe in Berlin but it's summer. Come by yourself. Only, Knock gently. He laughed and ran very quickly away, and I have been looking at that coal ever since, considering that coal ever since.

Yesterday I walked around Jerusalem, thinking, as you must know, of many things. Some of them I have told you about: of the king's veins in rock, his neck rising from rock. Try to remember what I said, I don't have to repeat it so often. Then a boy from some ungentle place threw a stone at me. It reminded me of that door you slammed. It was an insulting stone, expertly aimed.

Dear friend, I know you are cleverer than I, more patient. You are not the great-niece of poverty. Come soon. Try your Jerusalem friend. She'll not quarrel.

ELSE LASKER-SCHUELER

### IX

THE CHAMELEON was incensed by Cuthbert Halt's letter to Silk, and also by a slighting remark of Halt's retailed to him, I hope not by my great-great-great grandfather. He sent Halt his appropriate reply.

THE CHAMELEON TO CUTHBERT HALT

*The Sanbe'ria Caves, Jerusalem  
18 March 1966*

*Sir,*

I am the one you termed the poor little animal of the mountebank. You live among books, I among colours. I have seen on your shelves—but I have not been seen on your shelves—the journeys of Burckhardt, of Melville, of Molyneux and Lynch. Sir, you should envy my long journeys with Tryphon.

I slept among Tryphon's coils and in the eternal 8 of his hat-brim. I am his little royal animal and I inform you, Sir, Tryphon is no fiction though you are. I merged with inferior hues till I found Tryphon. I have seen a window asking to be remembered by him, a cobblestone pleading for his regard. He was a card-

sharper also, and shuffled the streets of Jerusalem. But the final ace, the secret, he kept *up his sleeve*. That ace, that secret, he woke up with in the morning, and laughed at the stained look of some barn where he had slept.

I will conclude, Sir. You lie to the stones of the town. All your twos—eyes, ears, nostrils, hands and feet—are liars. You dissemble the town. Tryphon assembled it.

*I have the honour to remain, Sir,*

*Yours very cordially,*

THE POOR LITTLE ANIMAL OF THE  
MOUNTEBANK

### X

#### TRICKS OR TREATS

AN EYE OF Tryphon, an ear? The Chameleon offers him to the populace. The innocent snakes writhe away but they're caught. The town eats his brains. His hat floats down the river. Goodbye, everlasting 8. Yet Tryphon never hesitates on his trapeze, and the town is there because of the trapeze. It is lunch-time, and Tryphon is offered on a dish. The Chameleon walks round in subdued colours, bows. The sun-seed eaters of Zion Square try out the new taste. Yet it is a trick, a Tryphon trick. The funambulist is not opened by their teeth.

### XI

THE NORMALLY SEDATE Silk came increasingly to be influenced by the visionary conversation of Lasker-Schueler, of her companion and adviser the Chameleon, and by inscrutable Tryphon. About 1842 he became interested in the real measurements of a town, of those proportions which eternally elude your usual job-builder. He composed the following poem on the subject, which perhaps explains the rejection of his entire manuscript by a reasonably accommodating publisher.

#### MEASURING THE TOWN

It starts with water. You take a plumb-line to sound the water. From that the stone comes.

I heard them dropping the plumb-line in water, they were looking for the right place to build a wall, a town. A town-wall is built by music, by hope, by the plumb-line of poets.

Who were the builders, the fly-fishers casting their line in hope? I saw those heads close together, Tryphon and Lasker-Schueler talking under water. This is the geography of ocean, to

swim under the foundations of a town, to that place in the sea where the wall starts.

Where are the foundations of the foundations? In the sea-mind of poets. They say to the builder, to the king, Put up a wall here, the town there, they give them the measurements but not the reason for the measurements. Oh no, oh no, not the reason for the measurements. The builder looks at them and swallows the question, he has his chalk, his tape, they the shape they fetched out of the water. What can the king do?

I saw them swimming and thriving, the two sea-beasts, stroking the spirit-foundations of the town.

### XII

**B**UT James Buckingham Silk went no further with his manuscript. He suffered the contempt of that linked beast: Cuthbert Halt and the publisher. Here is his last look at Tryphon.

... That afternoon the juggler Tryphon maintained nine separate crystal balls in the air. They allowed the sun in a fashion not easily suffered. My wife laughed to observe the mouths and noses of the many, directed upward as if to eat, or sneeze, these crystals of Tryphon.

After some thirty minutes, and tiring of this royal Game, he set the crystals again on his

bench, and now they were no larger than my son's fistful of marbles. . . .

This modest and gifted Chimera soon after grew disaffected. He complained, to my wife, that he played for himself in the middle of a great crowd. He had straddled the town too long till he felt it in his most intimate Coil.

It was now he swam away on his River, leaving the town a Dry river-bed for its speculations.

### XIII

**M**Y ANCESTOR'S MANUSCRIPT ends with the only surviving poem of the Chameleon.

#### THE CHAMELEON'S FAREWELL TO TRYPHON

*"O I shall be as dead, mother,  
As the stones in the wall.  
O the stones in the street, mother,  
Shall mourn for me all."*

*Because there is no river in Jerusalem  
Do you think you are a mountain learning to  
swim?*

*You must swim past all the faces  
And laugh at flint.*

*The only bruising quarry is stone  
Wanting to be water.*

*The dead course of the wall knows you.  
Smile back at the handkerchiefs, swim  
Round the Turk-like wall of this town.  
The dry wave.*

Golo Mann

# Napoleon:

## A European Achievement?



WHEN I WAS a young student of history, the great drama lay only a little over a hundred years back. It seemed almost modern still, the beginning of one's own era. In the meantime almost half a century has been added, and a half century whose dimensions, quantities and velocities have driven the past deeper and deeper into the past. Moreover, these fifty years were not favourable to the concept of the "great man," because they produced so many great men, most of them of a revolting character. But by virtue of their trade all leaders of the people, all dictators and tyrants inevitably have something in common. Thus the nauseating impression left behind by the most recent was bound to rub off on to their predecessors. Nowadays we are more sensitive to the "*Faites fusiller . . .*" that strikes such an unpleasant note in Napoleon's orders of the day. We are more sensitive to the tricks of power, censorship, secret police, and propaganda; to the habit of simultaneously stirring up, fearing, and despising the masses; to the total lack of moderation that finally digs its own grave. Hence the myth has paled. In the 1920s day-dreaming youths could still identify

themselves with Napoleon—an echo of what Stendhal's Julien and Fabrice, Tolstoy's Prince Andrey and Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov had done before them. Today quite certainly no young person does so any more. Romantics and rebels choose other models. But anyone who seriously enters into these historical events, unprejudiced by what came later, will not so easily emerge again, in spite of everything.

If I were to say that the after-effects of Napoleon's work are still making themselves felt, that without him Europe would not be what it is, I should be uttering an historical platitude: the effects of the Reformation, of the *Imperium Romanum* are also still making themselves felt. It is impossible to imagine the closely woven fabric with any of its meshes missing. We must turn our attention to less general considerations. Without Napoleon there would be no *Préfets*, no *Recteurs d'Académie*, no *Inspecteurs Généraux*, in short the whole structure of the French State (which in our day is beginning to crumble) would not exist; without him there would be no *Regierungsbezirke* in Bavaria and probably no Provinces in Italy; without him it is conceivable that there would be no bureaucratized national States whatever in Central and Eastern Europe. This carries us into the area of speculation and in a double sense. Firstly, how can we know what might have been brought about after Napoleon and without him? And secondly the dividing lines between what was in the process of developing before him and what arose out of his rule become blurred—the dividing lines between the complexes "*Révolution*" and "*Empire*." Internally, Napoleon built on the *Conquête Jacobine*, externally on the militaristic policies of the *Comité du Salut Public* and the

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This past year has been, of course the bicentenary of Napoleon Bonaparte's birth. The present essay was translated by Michael Bullock. The three drawings are from Gilray's contemporary Napoleonic caricatures.