

DAVID HERD

Prose

*(the making of the hut)*

I have, of late, been fingering the spirit. All this talking, setting the record straight, has slowly taken its toll. The analogy – if I might be permitted one – is with a ball in a ball bearing. I have a mind to incompleteness. What I'm driving at is 'play'. And this surprises me, this latitude, for are there not yet important facts to be nailed down: the final exposure of George, the ultimate, and inevitable treachery of 'K'? And I can hardly deny the urgency, the LED shows 87:42, which means, what with eating and sleeping, somewhere considerably below 50. There is much still to relate, much information still to organize - and how sweet the impulse, in the face of it, to make hay.

I'm half-inclined to put this down to Satie, who can, of course, be the most congenial of companions. (I have tried listening to The Charlatans but increasingly I can't find the mood.) I am more convinced than ever that Satie's 'Gymnopédies' are the measure of his own duplicity, the little embellishments he presented his wife after visits to his mistress, sophisticated departures from a squalid truth. Except that to my knowledge Satie never committed any crime, and so was never himself driven to an act of closure – for which read disclosure, for which read setting the record straight. No, all Satie was ever guilty of was a little light-fingered deviation, from which followed an ornamentation that became a way of life. It's right there, in the notation, in his unsustainable little episodes – Satie was one of the world's more accomplished liars.

I remember, once, my daughter was bought a scooter, and for months afterwards she would scoot her way to school, and when, on Saturday afternoons, we would visit the playground, she would scoot away proudly in and out among her friends. They all had scooters too, they were a most amenable *melée* – for which read an orchestrated loosening of the parental grip. Until gradually the front wheel started to loosen, which is by no means to re-state the previous analogy. I decline to comment on the day I left. I wasn't a good father, but somehow with even the least responsive parent there develops a bond, a strand of infantile affection. I decided I would drive north for a couple of hours, dump the car and catch a train back. I figured this would be sufficient to shake the authorities off.

And so it has turned out. A single swerve and the whole apparatus is thrown in the wrong direction. Not that I am fooling myself - even the most cumbersome of operations can settle on the truth. I take precautions when I go out in daylight, and of course the longer I stay the greater the likelihood of recognition. Only the other day, for instance, one of the men building up the beach defences took it upon himself to say 'Hello'. He must have seen me around. They work with the tides, so that sometimes it disrupts my sleeping. He was friendly enough, and meant, I'm sure, very little by it. I remarked that they seemed to be doing a very valuable job. (That's Satie of course, and his instinct for susceptibility.) He said the system was good for anything, except an improbably large wave. 'Like a Tsunami?' I offered. 'Like a Tsunami.' he smiled. 'So you should be ok for a while, tucked away there in your hut.' Momentarily I was thrown into a rage. The thought flared that maybe now I would have to kill him, but I quickly put this down to watching too much television. I told him I only used the hut occasionally, as and when I couldn't get off to sleep. He looked at me quizzically as if to ask whether there was something on my mind. I looked back that he might like to drop the 'I-can-be-your-therapist' shtick, because frankly it didn't suit the hard-hat, and anyway didn't he have gravel or something equally stony to shift. We parted on what seemed to be perfectly amicable terms. After that I didn't venture out for a while - except very early to pick up supplies of seaweed. It seemed reasonable to assume the man was taking no more than a passing interest. That night on the television a woman made suggestive remarks about a pig.

As for latitude, in that respect I surprise myself. I never had myself down as much of a talker. What I have learned is that the more one talks the wider the groove gets. My name is Stephen Kemp. I have to make a confession, and what my confession has made for is an inclination to confess. Everything: seaweed, exchanges with passing strangers; the way grass grows through in tufts between the stones at the top of the beach; oyster catchers, plovers, the lonely estuarial weather; the party afterwards, the removal to the hut. Which I had made good before my departure - I had always fancied a seaside bolt-hole. The sheer intoxication as the news came through. 'Comrades!' Kennedy stood on a table. 'I have to make an announcement. This evening the capital witnessed the enactment of an ideal.'

And maybe it had, though as I set it all down I become less certain. Talking, I have found, has produced holes and gaps. You might call it 'play', the gradual working loose of a mechanism. And that's not a metaphor, that's a matter of fact. A fact of talking, against a background of early Twentieth-Century Piano music. Only this time last week a man walked past the front of my hut, turned and walked back again, hovering at the door for a moment. The door was open; I had no choice but to let him in. He sat down on the chair, admiring the tape-recorder. He ran his finger along the buttons. 'I used to have one of

those'. He picked up one of my books: *The Collected Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. He turned to the essay marked 'Prudence' which he started reading with a guffaw. After a while he put the book down and wandered over to the window. 'Trouble with the neighbours?' 'Not so as you would notice.' He made himself comfortable again, this time putting his feet up on the table. He was smart in his dark suit, and I found him a not altogether disagreeable presence. But this was my hut, fuck it, and he had no business hanging about.

'Sir,' I said to him, 'if I knew who you were or where your intention lay, I should certainly considering inviting you to rest up and join me in a cup of tea; but you step in here unannounced, walking wet sand in off the beach, and smelling, if I might say so, like you haven't seen a bar of soap in several days. And while I like to think of myself as an hospitable person, bitter experience has taught be me otherwise. If somebody has sent you, somebody who has interest in my whereabouts, perhaps you could kindly tell me what they want.'

He sat in silence through my speech. I noticed he had holes in the soles of his shoes, and that running the length of his trouser was an almost indiscernible pinstripe. If he had shaved it was only very roughly. He was wearing a battered leather belt. He spat on the floor and then peered at it, clearly fascinated with the projected substance. And as he peered the small parcel of mucous started drawing dust into itself. I peered at it with him, until he started pushing at it with the end of his stick, as if he were contemplating spelling something, writing something on the floor of my dwelling. Disgusted I looked through the door of the hut across the sea-defences. At which point he upped and left, and as he walked away I heard him muttering. A nearby seagull swooped down on to an overflowing bin. He waved his stick but the seagull was undeterred. He bellowed windward. His words blew back at him: 'Prose, sir, prose!'

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