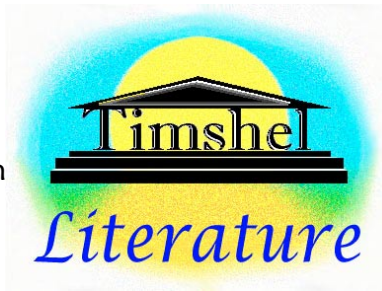


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Just Thinking, 06/23/03:

Reality from Metaphor, I: Flooding the Village

by Justin Katz

There is a village constructed along a river. Over time, the population sifted in such a way that the most wealthy elites live at the very top of the hills on either side of the water, while the waterfront has been left to the lower classes to inhabit, packed in densely along the shore. With the population thus dispersed, it has logically worked out that the effects of the village's policies for handling the flow of the river are felt most quickly and most dramatically by those farthest down the hills.

Indeed, looking at the community's history, one might reasonably suggest that the water has been allowed to rise or fall to inadvisable degrees during particular eras for the purpose of controlling the low masses. Some societies have pursued policies that flooded the streets, drowning many, but bringing refreshment that much closer to those on top – with the added benefit (from their point of view) of making their dry land all the more valuable. Other societies have choked the flow so drastically that the drought and the great thirst of those for whom water had become such a way of life made them amenable to the dictates of the upper crust, whose greater access to snow and rain – distilled, stored, and guarded – left them not so dependent upon the village's natural resource.

Throughout its history, the population has been divided almost evenly into two groups: the channel diggers and the mill builders. The arrangement between the two groups usually involves the channel digger redirecting some water from the river, upstream from the village, for the purposes of powering a mill. Most inhabitants continue to feel driven to partner with one member of the other group to produce at least enough grain for their own use. Beyond this cultural impetus, it is still widely understood that the practice is most beneficial to the society as a whole, because it helps keep the river at a manageable height.

Of course, there have been movements during which varying arrangements have been tried, most with damaging outcomes. For example, during some eras, it was not uncommon for one channel digger to partner with several mill builders. Because they produced such a disproportionate amount of grain, the heads of these organizations would become (more often, remain) hilltoppers. They would also benefit from this arrangement because the increase of unemployed channel diggers would translate into higher waters.

As it currently stands, the culture of the village is in many ways far advanced. The height of the river has been more or less ideal for allowing the citizenry to focus on other areas of their lives. Indeed, the current social system has proven so effective at producing the region's economic lifeblood — grain — that the people have branched out into other industries as well as intellectual pursuits. So much has the society relaxed that a prominent, although very limited, minority of channel diggers and mill builders have taken their dislike of or indifference toward the other group as reason to form ventures with only their own kind.

To be sure, such mergers have generated much controversy and opposition, particularly among flow-controllers. However, with the increased social emphasis on flood-surfing, of which the same-vocationers have been seen as archetypal practitioners, over the past few decades, the opposition has been challenged in ways that were inconceivable not long ago. For example,

because same-vocationers have tended not to pursue their traditional occupations, it had never been seriously suggested that their joint formations be granted licenses to dig or build upstream from the village. One reason that the flow-controllers have given for this policy, now that it has been contested, has been that the contracts of same-vocationers tend to be more fluid, and among the deleterious effects that traditionalists foresee is a general widening of the river.

Nonetheless, these newly visible partnerships have increased the pressure on the government to grant their request for the right to ply their trades upstream from the village. For their part, mill builders wish to build their mills directly on the river, claiming that this helps to impede the flow a bit, and even some among the flow-controllers have conceded that this particular arrangement probably wouldn't *hurt* things. The line has been held more strongly against channel diggers who seek to combine their efforts. At best, they can redirect some water, albeit to no additional purpose. At worst, it has been suggested that they will merely succeed in widening the flow, or even adding rapids.

While these are the most obvious reasons to block official recognition of same-vocation partnerships, other factors are more compelling. Most prominent is the fact that those who have wanted to engage in the banned practice of placing multiple mills on individual channels are beginning to make noises that their claim is just as valid as those of the others. Double-mill-builder organizations are also likely to seek to build both mills on single channels, which would be dug on a contractual, freelance basis. More speculatively, although the majority of channel diggers have no interest in partnering with their own kind, there has been some indication that mill builders are not so intransigent. With the success of mills on the river or double mills on individual channels, it is feared that more mill builders will be drawn to the practice, which would increase unemployment among channel diggers and, in turn, allow the water to rise to flood levels.

Proponents of same-vocation partnerships argue that those who refuse to work across groups are currently being discouraged from building stable businesses. Opponents say that it is better for that problem to be addressed downstream so as not to further erode the traditional practice channel mills, which has already been damaged by other outgrowths of the flood-surfing movement.

This is the impasse at which the village currently finds itself.

¹ I thought it might be fun, from time to time, to build an extended metaphor analogous to an issue in the news. The effort may be received as silly — even perniciously flippant; I do not mean it to be so. For one thing, I believe that it is often very helpful to transfer intellectual arguments to fictional scenarios that are one step removed from the emotion with which the reality is imbued. To this end, a bit of good humor is a strategy rather than an insult. But even apart from the utility of the individual pieces within larger arguments, they coincide with the way in which I tend to construct my fiction and fictional poetry and, therefore, represent good exercises.