The Wednesday



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

The Philosopher at War

It was recently the centenary of the end of the First World War. The war had a major impact on the world, not only on what happened at the time but for its disastrous consequences. The war that was meant to end all wars led, ironically, to endless wars. Practically, we still continuously living in the shadow of war. There are many aspects to war that are worthy of analysis, but in keeping with the character of The *Wednesday*, the cultural and philosophical aspects come to the fore. I will concentrate on the experience of philosophers in this war or war generally, and discuss the idea of hate.

The Scottish philosopher John Macmurray is unique in being a philosopher who in that war was actually on the front line, in the Royal army Medical Corps. He was injured, brought home and was awarded the Military Cross. Yet Macmurray who fought the Germans did not hate the Germans and could see through war and hate to a friendship and humanity, or what he later on called 'the form of the personal'. He was also fascinated by German philosophy and a good reader of his thought will see the close similarities between his thought and that of Fichte, especially in the idea of the primacy of practical reason (action) over theoretical reason. There are also the influences of Kant and Hegel, especially Hegel's idea of the 'I' and 'We' or 'Community'.

Of course, his religious upbringing influenced the development of these views, but it was on the philosophy front that his idea of the form of the personal became important because it opposed all the ideas that eliminate the individual. He objected to what he called the mathematical form and the mechanistic, causal forms of science because they didn't take subjectivity into account. But he also opposed what he called the 'form of the organic', such as in the totalitarian views of Fascism and Communism where the individual is subjugated to the general will. He insisted instead on the unity of the 'I' and 'You' (or a community) and the freedom of the individual. He also thought that morality requires freedom and freedom presupposes that the world is not all that there is, nor that it is already determined, as in the laws of physics. Morality requires a world in which we are free and able to add to the facts of the world. We add values that are brought about by our moral actions.

Macmurray said of his experience of the war that he didn't hate the Germans but when he was injured and brought to a hospital in the UK, he was horrified to find people around him who absolutely hated the Germans. This experience gave him a deep insight into human relationships and what it is to be human in the first place, into family life and also international relationships.

Nietzsche is another example of a philosopher who took part in the Franco-Prussian war. He served in the same capacity as Macmurray as a medical orderly and was injured and quitted the war quickly, but he never resented the French or hated them. He had a special fascination for them. He always compared French culture favourably to German culture. He thought the French had style in their culture and the Germans didn't. He also considered hate as a morality of the weak, those who philosophise from the standpoint of resentment. Hate and resentment are negative values that are damaging to one's character, and the community. They should not be justified under any circumstances.

The Editor

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Philosophy

Dasein and the Question of Being

Why does Heidegger in his *Being and Time* claim that the question of Being should be addressed through an analysis of Dasein? Is this claim justified? And if it is, how? The article below argues that the concept of Dasein is a fictional one and it is not enough to explain Being. Perhaps that is why Heidegger turned away from the analysis of Dasein as a means of understanding Being, and turned to poetry, language and art.

DAVID BURRIDGE

eidegger sets out to address what has been considered the most universal of concepts – that of *Being*. But he quickly identifies the difficulty of determining what is being, because all entities have being, and by examining an entity we are exploring its being.

We cannot treat Being as an entity in itself, it is not a particular genus or species. He poses the problem that to discover what Being is we need to be able to analyse what we are going to explore. In other words, we need to know what it is in order to discover what it is

Hegel defined Being as the 'indeterminate immediate' and we have an image of a thinker sitting beside a door waiting for Pure Being to appear, unanticipated because its purity involved presuppositionless thought and it would become nothing, therefore totally indefinable. In fairness to Hegel he was attempting to reconstruct metaphysics in the absence of God.

Heidegger wants to deal with the question not as an exploration of metaphysics but as a scientific enquiry: 'Science in general may be defined as the totality established through an interconnection of true propositions. This definition is not complete: we need to take into account 'ways in which man himself behaves, sciences have the manner of Being, which this entity – man himself – possesses. This entity we denote by the term "Dasein".' (*Being and Time*, *Section 4*, *P. 32*)

If there is a danger of circular reasoning when one explores the question of being and one needs to create *Being* in order to explore being, then it seems to be wholly logical to posit an entity in order to describe it. It would appear that Dasein is not to be explored as a metaphysical concept but as a scientifically deducible reality. However, in a later section 'How the Analytic of Dasein is to be distinguished from Anthropology, Psychology, and Biology', he appears to be rejecting any reasoning based on empirical evidence in favour of an ontological approach. 'In distinguishing the existential analytic from anthropology, psychology, and, biology, we shall confine ourselves to what is in principle the ontological question.' (Being and Time, Section 10, P. 71). In other words, back into the realms of metaphysics.

Later however, he envisages the ontological character Dasein, seizing hold of a *hammer-thing* to explore the primordial relationship and uncovering the manipulability (die Händlichkeit) of the hammer. (*Being and Time, section 6* - The Being of the entities encountered in the environment.)

Heidegger analyses Dasein as the essential being of man. Essence is described as that







Fromm

without which a thing could not exist (Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy). Heidegger wants this to be real and describes in detail the behaviour of Dasein, in a complex literary mode. For it to have any value what he is describing must either be an expression of the essential being of man or a description of the characteristic behaviour of man.

If one is going to make assertions about the being of man by making certain descriptions of behaviour, then that behaviour needs to be empirically researched. The way he deals with anxiety is a good example of this.

He distinguishes between direct fear and anxiety which suffuses being-in-the-world, 'for as a state of mind anxiousness is a basic kind of Being in the world'. He does not try to analyse what causes anxiety, but describes crudely a sense of uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) – not being at home.

A sense of angst can be a social worry about what is happening around us. It might be psycho-analytical, caused by old fears locked in our memories. It is not a natural state and needs to be addressed through empirical research, analysis and perhaps therapy. It is insufficient for a philosopher to claim anxiety is an essential element of Dasein. Then to hide behind incomprehensible verbiage 'the privation of a disclosedness which manifests itself phenomenally in the fact that Dasein's fleeing is a fleeing in the face of itself. That in the face of which Dasein flees, is precisely what Dasein comes up behind.'

It would appear that a sense of not being at home is inherent to Dasein and is ever-present whichever way it turns. Whether this is true or not of mankind needs to be reviewed against facts from the outer world. Perhaps this condition is what Fromm later depicted in his book *Fear of Freedom*. He distinguished between freedom from and freedom to. The former is typified by the existentialism of Sartre. Fromm argued that the process of becoming freed from authority leaves people with a feeling of hopelessness and they try to minimise the negative effects. This, he suggested, is what led many Germans to enthusiastically embrace Nazism.

The Philosopher Karl Jaspers (a contemporary of Heidegger), in his own work

Philosophy

Psychopathologie, criticises *Sein und Zeit* as a confused work:

'Notwithstanding the value of his concrete exposition, I consider this attempt in principle, the wrong way for philosophy. For it leads those who follow it not to philosophising but to the knowledge of a total conception of man's being. This structure of thought does not become an aid for the historically concrete existence of the individual (by way of enhancing and confirming the reliable practice of his life) but becomes instead another veil, which is the more fatal because precisely with sentences that come closest to Existence that real Existence is apt to be missed and become unserious.'

It is certainly true that Heidegger wants to deal comprehensively with all human characteristics as they apply to Dasein (curiosity, language, dying). I will deal with language as an example. He terms this 'das Gerede' or 'Idle Talk' (Being and Time, section 35, PP 211-214). It is immediately explained that this is not to convey anything negative about communication, but 'it signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of being of everyday understanding and interpreting...' He distinguishes between the communication of average understanding and primordial understanding, which means the full understanding of Dasein: 'Discourse which expresses itself is communication. Its tendency of being is aimed at bringing the hearer to participate in disclosed Being

Anomie or "normlessness" describes the breakdown of norms caused by the lack of shared, achievable goals and lack of socially approved means to achieve goals

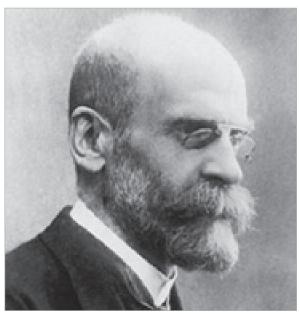
towards what is talked about in the discourse.' And 'Discourse, which belongs to the essential state of Dasein's Being and has a share in constituting Dasein's disclosedness, has the possibility of becoming idle talk' and when it does it closes off our understanding of Being in the World.

So there appear to be two levels of communication; average communication and that of a deeper level that enables us to understand the essential state of Dasein's being. He gives no examples of what these might be. We are left with the question: Is he trying to explain human communication as a whole or some specific higher discourse of the Dasein? If the former, then it is necessary to go to evidence. Of course, there are different levels of communication which we can all experience. Language is the means by which we convey thoughts from one mind to another. Words are conventions of meaning and they are not always sufficient to convey the full meaning of a particular thought.

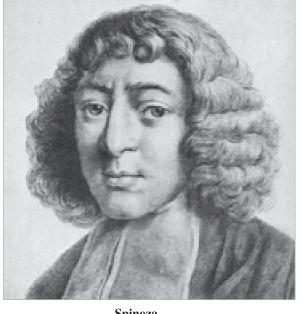
It might be argued that Heidegger does deal with Dasein and its interaction in society (*They*) when he says: 'The "they" is there alongside everywhere, but in such a manner that it has always stolen away whenever Dasein presses for a decision.' (*Being and Time section 27, P. 165*)

The language he uses clearly shows that his approach is to start Dasein as an external being, who then is thrown or falls into society, but always remains distinct from 'they'. Even when he describes an interaction it is like an outsider joining in.

'The particular Dasein in its everydayness is disburdened by the "they". Not only that; by thus disburdening it of its Being, the "they" accommodate Dasein if Dasein has any tendency to take things easily and make them easy. And because the "they" constantly accommodates the particular Dasein by







Spinoza

disburdening of its being, the "they" retains and enhances its stubborn dominion.' (Ibid.) So, we have a description of the 'they' as potentially something that suppresses Dasein. Human Beings are a species of social animals. We have the gift of self-consciousness and it is right that we should develop as individuals, but we do this through the 'we'. From the tiniest baby to the socially adjusting adult, our means of expression and development is through the 'we' (using the cultural legacy of the 'we'). Any philosophical consideration of the individual that begins, as Dasein does outside the 'we', is bound to construct a consciousness that is flawed. The human being is best understood by examining the culture that has shaped the self. To ignore this is pure ideology.

Heidegger tries to describe the interaction of Dasein through the use of technology. The hammer that is wielded is his crude example of the process of rational choosing. But what of the cultural complexity that has provided the tools; the interaction of human thoughts and ingenuity which has developed the skills that enable the individual to develop his own skills and thereby to work toward actualising himself?

In summary, Heidegger sets out to explore Being through the analysis of Dasein. Whilst he claims he is conducting an ontological analysis, his methodology seems to take the form of a description of a character called Dasein. Another way of seeing it is that he is trying to describe a higher self that may exist in humanity in general. Rather than posing this as Descartes or Spinoza would, he depicts Dasein in details, but the details can be disputed depending on one's own experience.

He shows the door to anthropology or psychology yet uses crude examples (e.g. the hammer) to show Dasein's engagement with the 'they'. I understand Jaspers comments: his concrete descriptions are the wrong way for philosophy. But equally it falls short of the social sciences because it ignores the empirical reality which would be explored by such thinkers as Fromm, Durkheim and Weber. (An example of a human anxiety formulated after reviewing empirical evidence is Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie – *Suicide*, 1897.)

To conclude: Dasein is a fiction created by Heidegger and as such any analysis of it cannot properly address the question of being.

The Solution

You want to find the mysterious house, enter the abandoned garden through a gap in the fence, wander around in the labyrinth to get into the centre like a thief who has stolen the light and is moving in the storm, in which we meet, greet, exchange dreams and hopes, and then hastily say goodbye to each other.

In the centre, where everything is detained, as love, everything ceases, achieved and fulfilled, a huge manifested growth or an overflowing wave past its possible horizons that grows incessantly, beyond the knowledge of having lost all senses, even the recognition of loss, all the time increasing further without memory. A cascade of endurance, a deluge of well-being, a cataract of unending existence collapses in its eye.

And if everything were just a question of access, a simple transfer, a small gesture, or the sudden idea on a forest path to find the needle in the haystack, an exit that can be opened with a secret key discovered deep in a hole, the solution to the charade leading you to the other side of the abyss, the reverse of the plot, before the inside-out fabric is worn?

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Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws

Philosophy

When Reality Remains at a Distance

Simplicity is considered a virtue in many fields, including epistemology, philosophy of science, theory, explanations, physics, politics and ordinary situations in life. But it also has its shortcomings and could lead to blindness towards many aspects of a situation. Perhaps it is similar to generalisation. Generalisation seems to obliterate differences and the particularity of a situation. Both may lead to one-sidedness and emphasising or a single factor and considering it to be the crucial truth, as has happened to many philosophical and economic theories. But can we live without simplicity?

LIVIO ROSSETTI

implicity is often welcome, and some treat it as an ideal, as a sort of goal to reach. Indeed, when Darwin came to elaborate the theory of natural selection, or Newton the theory of universal attraction, it was exciting for everyone to learn that the same explanation applies in the same manner to an innumerable number of phenomena, i.e. that their theories are really universal.

Resources visibly contributing to simplifying our life are equally welcome: just consider how many complications would interfere with our ordinary life if we could not trust our calendar, or the clock, or the meter, or the thermometer, or aspirin, or coins, or priests who are supposed to know what we must do and what is forbidden, or our parents when we are babies (or a useful son or daughter, when we are old), or an efficient computer or at least our notes (as long as we also have a pen or pencil) and so on.

And even logic shares this claim: to come to understand that if B follows from A, and C from B, then C follows from A almost as 2+2=4, all that too is a reassuring simplified schema. And if I come to understand that those Cyclops, friends of Polyphemus, have good reason to think (albeit wrongly) that it is ridiculous for him to ask for help if 'I am now blind because "No-one" has blinded me' (*Odyssey*. xi 407-12), I am glad to have understood the logic of a rather complex situation and, even more, to get a precise idea of the contradiction and its

immense power to generate insecurity, other than dissuade. *A fortiori*, I am happy if and when I come to understand that the enigma of the Sphinx concerns an elementary thing: the childhood, adulthood and old age of we humans who know the use of the walking stick. Not less reassuring is, after all, to be able to have precise ideas about the party and the candidate to vote for, and on this basis to presume that those who still hesitate 'did not understand'.

However, it is reassuring to be able to give a name to something, e.g. being able to specify that our sick child has a 'simple influenza', because the situation, although requiring attention, is not so worrisome even if I can ignore what is hidden behind the word 'flu'. More generally, books and professors, theories and treatises, or the decision to project on a screen something while speaking in public, also serve to simplify and facilitate the task of those who are there to learn and understand, and the great use made of these resources shows that they are generally welcome. Now a final note: simplification is strictly needed if we have to teach elementary school children and is therefore indisputably beneficial.

There are merits in simplicity, as can be seen from the image of Occam's 'mental' razor and his method and Descartes praise for 'clear and distinct ideas'. But simplification cannot be properly thought of as an epistemic ideal (or epistemic value, as Hilary Putnam put



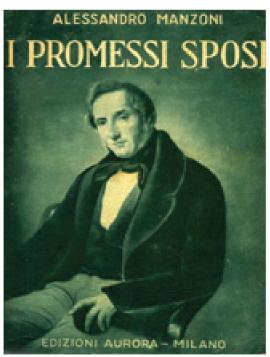
Newton

it), because simplifications have a worrying tendency to conceal what is simply left aside. Indeed, they can even support some forms of sclerosis of our minds: just think of the most demagogic slogans. In fact, linear and logical reasoning often ends up in communicating to us the tacit invitation not to take into account many other sides of the story and many possible objections. In Italy, for instance, the story of a character to be found in Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi*, Don Ferrante, is well known. He used to argue as follows (I paraphrase): 'A plague is not air, it is not water, it is not fire, it is not earth, and therefore cannot exist'. So, reassured, he had no precautions, fell ill and died of the plague.

As to physicists, it is well known that they accepted the theory of universal attraction, but not without asking why bodies attract each other, i.e. not without presuming that we understand very little until we are unable to account for this too. In the sciences of life, and to a greater degree in medicine, the study of the peculiarities of individual patients and single diseases is so necessary that no surgeon would be so simplistic

as to say, 'if this is appendicitis, I will act as stated in my treatise on general surgery, and I will be sure to solve the problem'. And again: just as photographs have the defect of concealing all the details that the photographer has preferred not to frame, so words are intrinsically unfit to mirror reality perfectly. Therefore, it is not true that we reach (or tell) the truth when there is a correspondence between words and things, because words inevitably introduce some tacit simplifications. Simplification has many counter-indications, some of which are serious.

But can we avoid simplifying? Certainly we cannot. The need to simplify is practically irresistible. We do our best to simplify by necessity, opportunity, and prudence, or in order to be able to communicate despite the difficulties, for example when we try to express ourselves in a language we do not know well. Moreover, it would be difficult to establish what a simplification consists of, or which are the criteria one should follow when trying to simplify. The art of simplifying is, and must be, a practical ability, an *empeiria*. Therefore simplification,

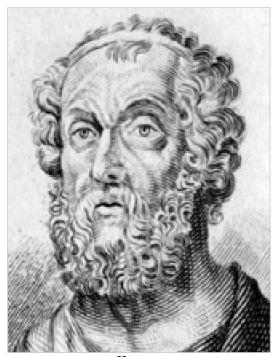


Promessi Sposi

even if it fulfils important functions and, in many cases, is strictly necessary, is not able to constitute an objective to be achieved, or even an epistemic ideal.

The case of reviewers is interesting. Anyone who reviews a novel or a film or a television program knows that she is trying to compile a short, interesting and intriguing text conceived of not only to give an idea of a very complex entity, but also to formulate or at least suggest an evaluation and give a clear impression of plausibility: a very complex hyper-simplification process. Historians, political scientists, sociologists and geographers are 'condemned' to simplify too much because it is from what they may not really know well enough that they do their best to extract plausible and clarifying conclusions. Besides, care in accounting for the most minute details wouldn't be a promising remedy. But, despite of this, their output may well prove competent, interesting, or even enlightening.

Let me consider, now, the chemist who declares 'this is salt' (meaning that it is kitchen salt). This way one fails to consider the residual impurities that are present in a spoonful of salt, as well



Homer

as to clarify that, unless proven otherwise, it should be a matter of minimal impurities and not a concern for the health of human beings. And finally let us consider logic: the formalization of deductive reasoning is certainly not useless, but has little to do with the truth, precisely because arguments are mounted on hyper-distilled notions behind which there is a much more complex reality. But until one has to do with so highly simplified elements, reality necessarily remains at a distance. Comparable is the case of calculation (one concentrates on something which is suitable to be calculated, and judged worth of the effort, but provided that all the rest is left aside).

In conclusion, simplification is an aspect of our world that is both important and resistant to generalizations: if we say it is useful, we can easily find clues to conclude that it is also harmful or at least dangerous; if we say that it gives rise to many inconveniences, we can easily find clues to reach the conclusion that, without simplifications, we would find life much worse. Simplicity and complexity are two sides of the same coin.

The Politics of Motherhood

Notes on the Wednesday Meeting Held on 14th of November 2018

DAVID CLOUGH

he group was visited by the Japanese philosopher Mao Naka. She is an Associate Professor at Kobe University (Japan). She is a specialist in the thought of Levinas. She did her postgraduate studies in France, but she is currently visiting Oxford. She presented to the group her paper *Reinterpretation of Motherhood: Separating it from Giving Birth* and had a good response and lots of discussion from the meeting.

Mao surveyed recent Feminist thinking on 'Motherhood', particularly the views of Adrienne Rich, Chodorow and Ruddick. She argued that there is no necessary conceptual connection between the idea of giving birth and motherhood. The connection between the two is patriarchal and oppressive. A woman could give birth to a child, but the child could be mothered by someone else inside or outside the family. They could be of either gender.

Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born* brought oppressive motherhood into question, calling it 'motherhood as institution'. The institution of motherhood is then imposed upon women by male-centred societies, restricting their choice to be a 'good' mother and subjugating them to men's control. But what is favourable motherhood for Rich? Is it nurture and effective adoption? What about communication in the womb as in say

Kristeva? Both Chodorow and Ruddick consider motherhood to varying extents and independently from feminine gender and having given birth to children.

The Separation of 'Giving Birth' and 'Being the Primary Parent' is looked at in Nancy Chodorow's *Reproduction of Mothering* where 'a mother' is above all 'a person who socializes and nurtures' a child or 'a primary parent or caretaker.' Chodorow thinks that the essentially patriarchal ascription of mothering to women can be changed. Then Sara Ruddick radicalized the separation between being a mother and giving birth further in her book *Mother Time*. She defined a mother concisely, as a person who engages in mothering. Mothers are defined by the maternal work they do. Is this a Marxist aiming to develop mother's choice, economic factors and mental health issues?

Mao also talked about the views of Levinas (the problem of the other) and Merleau-Ponty (embodiment). However, members of the group thought that these views didn't add much to the thesis of the paper. But they all agreed that the paper is very interesting and has the potential for practical applications. This is not surprising, considering that Mao Naka's proper field of research is practical ethics.







Mao Naka

11

Poetry

Swift in the Path-Lab



CHRIS NORRIS

Last week I saw a woman flayed, and you will hardly believe, how much it altered her person for the worse.

Jonathan Swift, A Tale of a Tub

The Beast and I were brought close together; and our Countenances diligently compared, both by the Master and Servant who thereupon repeated several Times the Word *Yahoo*. My horror and Astonishment are not to be described, when I observed, in this abominable Animal, a perfect human Figure.

Swift, Gulliver's Travels, Part IV, 'A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms'

Webster was much possessed by death And saw the skull beneath the skin; And breastless creatures under ground Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

T.S. Eliot, 'Whispers of Immortality'

Sometimes it's Swift's dark saying I rehearse,
Dear heart and, startled, apperceive
Not you but her displayed
Once more to my
Clinical gaze and blade,
Both practiced in the art to cleave
Soft flesh with neither lust nor love as nurse.

Is this the price for lifting Adam's curse,
This death-perfected view of Eve
So fetchingly purveyed
To my cold eye?
'I saw a woman flayed
Last week and you would scarce believe
How much it changed her person for the worse.'

■ The Wednesday

That's Swift, sex-crazed ascetic, out to verse
Us in harsh body-truths that we've
Half-known but mostly made
Haste to deny
Since sensibly afraid
That Brobdingnag will undeceive
Us by mere change of scale as dreams disperse.

And then there's Eliot, Swift's flesh-creeping peer,
Who suavely bids us peel the skin
Back from the skull and see,
Like Webster, what
Self-dupers we must be
If we're to stay safe-sealed within
The blissful ignorance we hold so dear.

You'll say, and rightly, that they're apt to veer
That way, those God-obsessed and sinFixated types who flee
Their mortal lot
By stressing things that we
Sturdier sorts take on the chin
Since no god-kink requires we leer or jeer.

Agreed: yet, love, the issue's not so clear
When I'm dissecting and begin
To track what seems to me
The counter-plot
Or reverse-action key
To stories that would have us win
Death-dividends this side of death's frontier.

Swift

13

Poetry



No doubt of it: my trade's a perfect gift
To the illusion-strippers whose
Intent's not to deprive
Us of all hope
In life but have us thrive
The more for seeing fit to bruise

That skin-deep dignity laid bare by Swift.

No trained pathologist will miss my drift,
Or none who sees beyond the ruse
That gives our senses five
A little scope
To have soul-stuff survive
Its science-trial despite the screws
Turned tight since soul-talk got short shrift.

Maybe it's hope of jumping that old rift
That bids the body-mystics choose
To turn around what I've
Said here and cope,
When spirit takes a dive,
By letting hints of soul infuse
Their talk and thus avoid the grave-yard shift.

That's why, perverse or not, each time I take
Scalpel in hand and first incise
That yielding flesh I think
Once more how frail
The hunch that has us link
Self's essence with whatever lies
Beyond the wielder's supple skill to break.

Eliot





Again, let Swift remind us: bellyache
Is beauty's lot, like ours, and ties
Fair Celia to the stink
Whose change of scale
Finds Lemuel on the brink
Of madness while a dread surmise
Has body far out-reach the spirit's stake.

Dark thoughts, I know, and apt to have us wake
In the small hours, me striving to disguise
Another truth you'd shrink
From still: Kleist's tale
Of dancer-limbs in sync
So finely that, to expert eyes,
The human turns machine for beauty's sake.

Note: This poem alludes chiefly to the works by Swift and Eliot cited in my epigraphs; also to Swift, 'The Lady's Dressing-Room', and Heinrich von Kleist, 'On the Puppet-Theatre'.

The Wednesday

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Poetic Reflections

Don't Tell Titus



(Saltaire 2012 world heritage site: Sir Titus Salt: 1803-1876)

Grime scoured, mill buffed to a postcard gleam, park returned to tidy walks, now clean hands nail-polish time.

No bolts of cloth barged down stream nor throb of of looms - it is all exported. Behind fine façade there's nowt to hear but soft talk and keyboard tap.

He buried hell where it belonged, flued the Bradford cough.
Eighteen years is all they had until he built them hope beyond the smoke and a sober Saturday night.

Down the road of wind screen smash, Sixties' buildings tremble cold. A crack-thin man slips to bargain-booze; a swallow of pepper is still preferred and cheaper hands sweat early death.

David Burridge

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