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The Wednesday

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Editorial

The Necessity of Philosophy

It is not always obvious why we need philosophy. Lots of people ask, 'What is philosophy and what do philosophers do?' Sometime these questions catch philosophers off-guard. Simon Blackburn in his book *Think* says: 'I suspect that all philosophers and philosophy students share that moment of silent embarrassment when someone innocently asks us what do we do. I would prefer to introduce myself as doing conceptual engineering. For just as the engineer studies the structure of material things, so the philosopher studies the structure of thought.' He also adds: 'Our concepts or ideas form the mental housing in which we live. We may end up proud of the structures we have built. Or we may believe that they need dismantling and starting afresh.'

This conception of philosophy is closely related to Mary Midgley's analogy of philosophy and plumbing (see *The Essential Mary Midgley*). What Midgley had in mind is that both the philosopher and the plumber work in the background and only when the system malfunctions, either in the piping and structure or, in a culture, when it faces challenges and crises. 'When trouble arises, specialist skill is needed if there is to be any hope of locating it and putting it right.' But the natural tendency is to look for the causes of any trouble within a culture in external facts, rather than 'bending thought round to look critically at itself.'

Midgley thinks that philosophers should have the vision of poets, and the 'logical doggedness' of logicians, but that these two gifts are difficult to combine. She looks for such a visionary philosophy from Europe and the East. It can also come from other disciplines outside philosophy, such as sociology, literary theory, science fiction and the history of ideas. But she sees that the obstacle to this visionary philosophy is created by professional philosophers themselves – the ones who are busy with 'specialised thought'. One reason for this is that philosophers are conceiving their field, in the way science does, and then, there is the old quarrel between Plato and the poets.

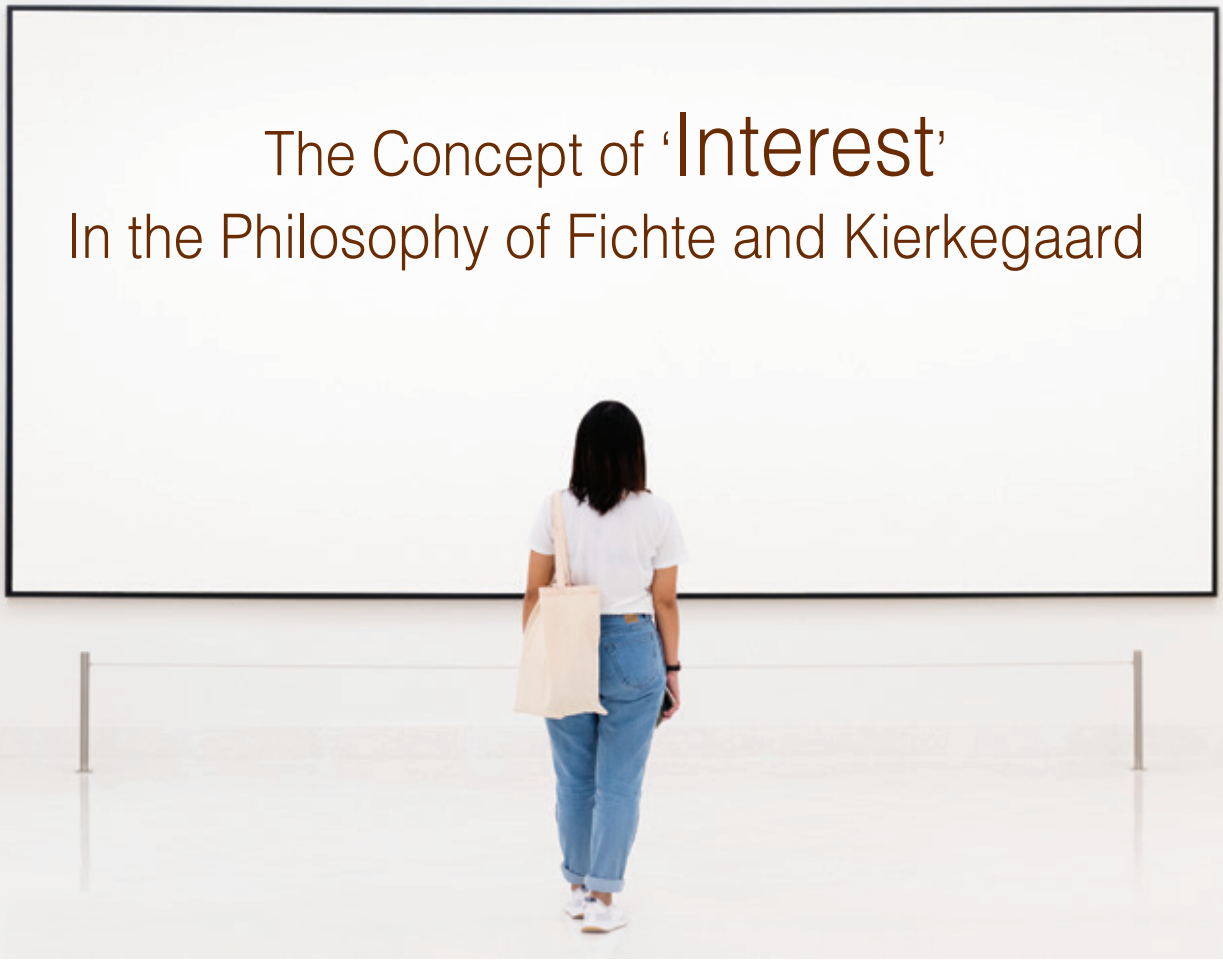
In a time of crisis, Midgley's message is most relevant. A crisis, which is more than the calculations of economics and games of politics, involves a conceptual confusion. It is of the essence of philosophy that it deals with concepts in the attempt to make them 'clear and distinct' in Descartes' phrase. Philosophers are well trained in conceptual analysis, but they also need vision: not lagging behind and letting thought start somewhere else before coming to the rescue as a plumber, but leading from the front, thinking for the future, as a good plumber may bring a clear and useful design to create something new.

However, most of such thinking has come from social sciences and literary theory. But even these disciplines have lost the vision they once had. Philosophy, then, has a mission and it needs a vision. 'Conceptual confusion is deadly, and a great deal of it afflicts our everyday life. It needs to be seen to, and if the professional philosophers don't look at it, there is no one else whose role it is to do so.'

I hope that this message of Midgley's will be emphasised in the planned celebration of the centenary of her birth in Conway Hall, London next weekend, and in Leech Hall, St John's College, Durham, the following week. Both celebrations are a good opportunity to re-read her work and apply it to current thinking. Her last book was called *What is philosophy for?*, a question that deserves a hard thinking about.

The Editor

The Concept of 'Interest' In the Philosophy of Fichte and Kierkegaard

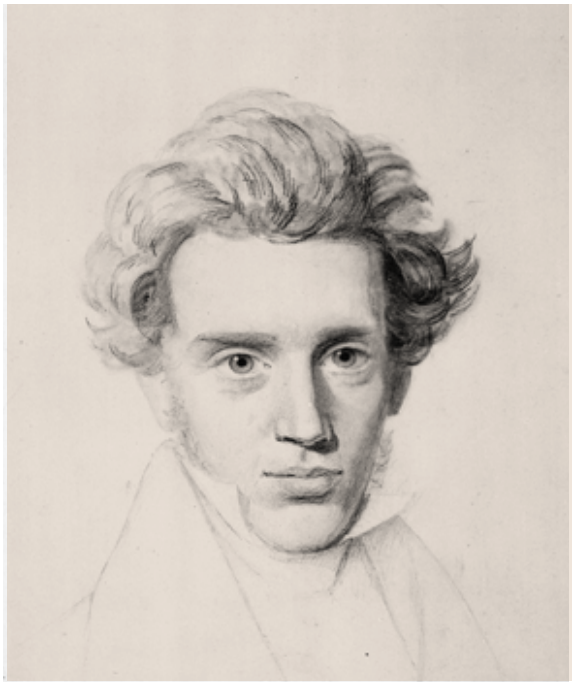


It often happens that terms which have become commonplaces in our everyday language and whose significance we do not think about when we use them, are in reality weakened versions of a more exact and primal philosophical use. This use is frequently more precise than in our normal expressions and has resonances which reveal various hidden layers of conflicts and ambiguities. Such ambiguities are often taken up and developed in different ways by philosophers who play on them for their own purposes. One concept of this kind is that of 'Interest'. Our everyday meaning of the word indicates something that is amusing, diverting, such as 'to be interested' in a particular hobby, or to be interested in how a story or real event might turn out. The article below discuss this concept in the philosophy of Fichte and Kierkegaard.

DAVID SOLOMON

In 1800 the German Idealist philosopher Fichte wrote a book called *The Vocation of Man*, one of his most popular and successful works, which was a philosophical autobiography, an account of his spiritual and intellectual development and a description of his attempts to find a meaning and direction to his life. Who was he really? What was his vocation? The book is divided into three parts, and describes a number of failed attempts to answer these questions. In the first part, called *Doubt,* he writes about his initial attachment to a monist (single principle) nature philosophy of the

Fichte



Kierkegaard

kind that had been put forward by Spinoza and that had been gaining ground in Germany among his contemporaries. This philosophy placed any individual as a determinate being in the universe just as other beings were. All individuals or species, whether rocks plants or humans, were linked by a chain of cause and effect comprising a single nature. Everything in nature was necessarily determined for the sake of the whole.

> *Nature strides through the endless series of its possible determinations without rest; and the alteration of these determinations is not lawless, but strictly lawful. What exists in nature is necessarily as it is, and it is simply impossible that it be any different. I enter into an unbroken chain of appearances, since each link is determined by the one preceding it and determines the one following it; I enter into a tight interconnection since from any given moment I could find all possible conditions of the universe by merely thinking about it. Backward, were I to explain that given moment; forward, were I to infer others from it; if backward, I would look for the causes through which alone it could become actual, and if forward, I would look for the consequences which it necessarily must have. In every part I receive the whole because every part is only what it is through the whole, and through that it is necessarily what it is.* **(Fichte, *The Vocation of Man, Book 1, Doubt)***

This philosophy appeared to satisfy Fichte, the narrator, intellectually, but left him agonised and divided because it left no room for himself as a free individual. If he was just a link in a chain, where was his own agency and freedom? How would he be able to act on the world, if he was no more than a spectator passively registering the representations of the universe that came to him from without? According to his account, at this stage of his development, Fichte the narrator was not able disprove the arguments in favour of this system, but he passionately rebels against it.

> *I want to love, I want to lose myself in **taking an interest**, I want to be glad and be sad. For me the highest object of **this interest**, is myself, and the only thing in me with which I can give it an ongoing content is my activity.* ***(Ibid.)***

And again:

> *No doubt it was love of this love, **interest in this interest,** which, at the time before I began*

> *the investigation that now confuses me and leads me to despair, moved me unconsciously to assume my own freedom and independence.* ***(Ibid.)***

His position here is a revolt rather than a disproof of the opposing deterministic system. He is trying to silence the voice within him arguing against him. This 'voice of realism', tells him that even when we think we are free agents, our consciousness or desire for this is no more than the expression of a necessary force of nature working within us. Nature alone contains an interest in its own preservation. A plant if it were conscious, would

> '*feel its drive to grow with interest and love within itself. Persuade it with reason that this drive can do nothing of itself, but that the measure of its expression is always determined by something outside it; it will perhaps talk even as you have just talked; it will behave in a way for which a plant may be forgiven, but which would not at all be seemly in you as a higher product of nature which thinks nature as a whole'*.

Fichte the narrator talks of 'taking an interest', in the sense of having a commitment to a particular version of himself, in his case to his own freedom and authenticity. This interest is a commitment which he wants to hold on to, here in the face of cool rational argument, a commitment which motivates him to find another philosophy to live by. He has a passionate desire to assert his own agency, the opposite voice stating that the only interest is that of nature itself in its inner drive.

The two words that Fichte uses for 'interest' in the original German are 'Teilnahme' (literally 'taking part', 'taking a share' in) and the more familiar 'Interesse'. Both words indicate something stronger than our everyday use. They suggest, 'having a commitment to something', 'having an investment in something', 'having a personal stake in something'. We speak in law of an interested party in law, having an interest in a business, and of course receiving interest for a loan. The German '*Interesse*' in particular contains the dual meaning of a personal commitment, and a financial stake.

In 1843, Soren Kierkegaard wrote his *Fear and Trembling* about faith unmediated by reason. The subject was the story in Genesis where Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son. The hidden allusion is to his relationship with Regine Olsen and his inscrutable (to outsiders) reason for breaking of their engagement. In the preface to the book, the pseudonymous author Johannes de Silentio takes the opportunity to mock Hegel's philosophy. In his system, especially in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel had described how by going through different stages of developments, of doubt, despair, and alienation, humanity can arrive at a point where all contradictions in existence can be resolved through being reconciled and preserved into an absolute whole. Kierkegaard throughout his work is derisive of the idea that by going through the steps, going through the motions, every facet of human experience including doubt and faith can find their place, as if one could 'gain a diploma in doubt' without having suffered the agonies and suffering that this entailed.

In the preface to *Fear and Trembling*, Johannes says with deep irony:

> *The present writer is nothing of a philosopher, he has not understood the System, does not know whether it actually exists, whether it is completed; already he has enough for his weak head in the thought of what a prodigious head everybody in our day must have, since everybody has such a prodigious thought. Even though one were capable of converting the whole content of faith into the form of a concept, it does not follow that one has adequately conceived faith and understands how one got into it, or how it got into one. The present writer is nothing of a philosopher; he is, poetice et eleganter, an amateur writer who neither writes the System nor promises of the System, who neither subscribes to the System nor ascribes anything to it….. I prostrate myself with the profoundest deference before every systematic "bag-peerer" at the custom house, protesting, "This is not the System, it has nothing whatever to do with the System."* ***I call down every blessing upon the System and upon the Danish shareholders in this omnibus*** *– for a tower it is hardly likely to*

Kierkegaard

*become. I wish them all and sundry good luck and all prosperity. (***Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling Preface)***

In the penultimate sentence of this passage the phrase 'Danish shareholders in this omnibus' is a translation of the Danish '*de danske* ***Interessenter i denne Omnibus'***. 'Interessenter' is connected to the German 'Interesse'. The reference to the 'omnibus' is to the totality of Hegel's system. But the 'omnibus' also alludes to a system of public transport (horsedrawn carriages) that had been established in Copenhagen a few years before *Fear and Trembling* was written. This must have been financed by the sale of shares to the public, hence the reference to the Danish shareholders. Kierkegaard is punning here on the two uses of the word "interest", as was latent in the German Interesse. What Johannes is saying is that the Danish followers of Hegel think that they have made some commitment or investment in his system, they think they have a passionate desire to confront and overcome doubt and despair. But all they have done is to become stakeholders in a pedestrian, bourgeois enterprise that is going to reap predictable returns. Their investment in Hegel is above all comfortable and reassuring. So far from experiencing and resolving doubt and despair they have done nothing but gone through the motions and expressed their complacency. This passage squares with Kierkegaard's recurring criticism of Hegel's system (or at least the Danish reception of Hegel) as being comfortable, unimaginative, middle of the road, unchallenging, and above all lacking passion. There is a further pun here on the word 'omnibus' which, besides referencing Hegel's system, and Copenhagen's public transport system, literally means 'for everyone'. Something that is for everyone negates the significance and uniqueness of the individual and absorbs him / her in a commonplace conformity and mediocrity.

Kierkegaard's use of '*Interest*' is quite different from that of Fichte: for the latter, the concept of Interest in *Book 1* of the *Vocation of Man* signifies his own passionate and agonised championing of human freedom and agency.

But ironically, Fichte and Kierkegaard were both in their different ways committing themselves to freedom and passion, in the face of something that they saw as threatening them. Fichte uses the concept of *Interest* to express his own revolt against a deterministic naturalism. German Idealism, as developed by Fichte and reaching full development in Hegel, aimed to incorporate the human drive to freedom and agency into a system. For Kierkegaard, this system had itself become a shackle preventing individuals from authentically confronting doubt and despair. People could think that they were going through the stages of the negative without really coming to terms with them. As a result, they were doing no more than justifying their complacent materialistic lives. For him the concept of *Interest* signified something totally opposite to what it did for Fichte, something he employed his brilliant irony to express.

Rudolf Steiner as a Spiritual Realist

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 21st August 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

We were pleased to welcome William Bishop, a contributor of many articles to *The Wednesday* magazine, to talk about cognition in relation to imagination, participation and theology, mainly concentrating on the work of Rudolf Steiner.

A baby can see, hear, touch etc. but her experience of consciousness is something undifferentiated. A baby hears and makes sounds, and eventually language gives her cognition and understanding. Imitation is a key factor in this development. Helen Keller (1880-1968), deaf and blind from an early age, felt she was 'at sea in a dense fog'. At the age of six her teacher spelt words onto her hand, but she did not understand that every object had a word associated with it until her teacher ran water over her hand and she could associate this feeling of water (which she could not see or hear) with the signs the teacher made on her hand. Her experience is a model which shows how language gives us the faculties of cognition and understanding. The nerve cells in our brains somehow become 'organized' to allow us to experience the world in what eventually becomes our consciousness and self-consciousness.

Rudolf Steiner was born in Austria in 1861. At the age of seven he had an experience where he believed he saw the spirit of an aunt asking for his help when neither he nor his family knew that she had just died. As a boy he studied geometry, and felt that he 'must speak of a spiritual world that is not seen' in the same way that geometrical theorems lie behind our experience of space. From the age of 18 - 22 he attended a technical college in Vienna and was encouraged by a mysterious person to penetrate the philosophy of Fichte and master modern scientific thinking as preparation for the right 'entry' to the spiritual realm.

As a young man he worked as the editor of a series of publications of Goethe's scientific work from the archives in Weimar, and additionally wrote books on Goethe's philosophy. He visited Friedrich Nietzsche, then in a catatonic state, and he wrote a book about the philosopher.

William talked about ethical individualism, the idea that our moral choices can be based on inspiration from the spirit. He also talked about Kali Yuga, an ancient Indian concept of long cycles of history (Steiner thought that the transition from a dark cycle to a new age of light began in 1899).

Steiner's philosophy is idealism in a modified form, drawing on Schelling in terms of the ideas of nature and evolution. On nature, Steiner sought a close symbiosis of humanity with nature. This idea links to Owen Barfield's ideas of man's original participation with and within nature, which has been broken apart by objectivist scientific thinking leading to our alienation from nature and natural processes. We need to 'rescue' lived experience in a phenomenological form. It also links to the ideas of Iain McGilchrist - we can speculate there are two parts to the brain, the right-hand side dealing with 'lived' experience, and the left-hand side dealing with a representation of this experience.

Steiner thought the mechanical world-view was too dominant in the thinking of his time. It does not apply to the organic world of plants and animals. We should be sensitive to living things, not treating them as just 'things'. We should turn towards the organic and ecological, our thinking should be 'alive'. A plant lives out a process, and we should try to emulate this in our thinking. Plato can be misinterpreted – he may have prioritized the single idea of the One from which the many emerge and relate. Appearances reveal the Form within them.

William Bishop

Mystics such as Plotinus tried to merge with 'The One' as a spiritual experience.

Steiner also engaged with the Akashic record, a compendium of history which includes all human emotions, events, thoughts, words and intents that have occurred or will occur in the past, present or future. An advanced clairvoyant could read these records.

Steiner's esoteric religious thinking led to the founding of the Anthroposophical Society in 1913. Judaism forbids images of God, and this led to a development in the evolution of consciousness of the abstract intellectual faculty. The Christ has to be seen as a powerful cosmic being that incarnated into the body of Jesus at the baptism by John the Baptist. Even with the powerfully developed body of Jesus it could not endure this 'energy' beyond three years. There is a Cosmic Wisdom and Life, which Christ embodied which can dwell in the human. All religions reflect this Cosmic Wisdom in some way.

In our discussion we tried to link Steiner's esoteric world-view with that of the Surrealists (discussed a few weeks ago). Both seem to lose the strict emphasis on the rational.

The subject-object split

Can we dissolve the subject-object split? Steiner's ideas about spiritual consciousness and knowledge seem to do this. One view was that we should concentrate on what is in front of us, not denigrate vision and fly off into unproven and imaginary spiritual worlds. Another view was that religion is all about power and the underlying basis of religion is the desire to dominate others. A possible answer to the latter view is that it could be true in many cases, however if spiritual knowledge is revealed to a person, they are not necessarily spiritually superior to others, they are merely the vessels through which a spiritual message is transmitted to others. We also talked about the imagination and memory. Experiences are not just recorded as memories: when we remember something, we re-create the event using our imagination. Steiner's view of the imagination as a powerful force is the first step to inspiration and intuition.

Steiner was not a mystic with his head in the clouds. He was, among other things, an artist and architect. After the First World War Steiner and his colleagues started many practical ventures in education, health, biodynamic agriculture and ethical banking. Many of these ventures are still carrying on.

Flowers

A transition sealed and bound to go,
like the withering of blooming flowers
scattered in the winds of afterglow.

And then death, this never-grasping
reason, grips us day by day and towers
in mind's fearful shadow-casting

during lifetime, when the flowers
flourish until their last hours
quiet and dignified uphold their head

and then fall without a heavy gesture,
thank the earth surrendering their treasure
in a calm farewell then join the dead.

Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws

Schooling For Life

CHRIS **NORRIS**

In a real sense, I ought to be able to deduce Fascism from the memories of my childhood. As a conqueror dispatches envoys to the remotest provinces, Fascism had sent its advance guard there long before it marched in: my schoolfellows . . . . Now that they, officials and recruits, have stepped visibly out of my dream and dispossessed me of my past life and my language, I no longer need to dream of them. In Fascism the nightmare of childhood has come true.

T.W. Adorno, 'The Bad Comrade', in *Minima Moralia*, trans. Jephcott

The horrors go far back, right back to school.
For years I dreamt of them, and now they're real
Once more; no Nazi commandant more cruel,
No psychic wound that time's so slow to heal.

Stage pogroms in your playground, that's the rule;
Start there, then make the adult victims squeal,
Or – failing that – inflict by ridicule
The sharpest mental torments they can feel.

I ran the action replay, spool by spool,
And told myself: no justice, no appeal
To some superior moral court where you'll
See them sent down to pay for your raw deal.

Fat chance: they're fish from the same stinking pool,
The kids, the squads, the guys who made you kneel
To their vile taunts, and you the victim who'll
Forever feel the twist of their iron heel.

Those classmates often had the sorts of name
That rang old Norse or Wagner – Horst, Siegfried,
Friedolin, Jürgen, Eckhardt – so you came
To feel your victim status god-decreed.

Always the underdog, the one to blame,
Whether for want of valued skills like speed,
Agility or strength (just choose your game)
Or being good at those things they've agreed

Are signs of decadence or marks of shame,
Like speaking well about the books you read,
Your love of music, or the way you frame
Long, complex sentences that far exceed

Their doltish grasp. Just ten years on, the same
Illiterate louts were those the Fuehrer freed
To drop such low-grade squabbles and now aim
At wholesale slaughter as their highest creed.

Some shrewder victim-types there were who tried
To get along by doing stuff to please
Teachers and parents, such as skills applied
To art or woodwork projects, though for these

Poor heirs of that old native German pride
In things well-made no stock of expertise
Could help to get their talents back onside
With boys who'd bash their brains out on a wheeze.

Another bunch would constantly deride
The teachers, interrupt each lesson, seize
Their chance to conjure chaos, then be spied
Carousing with those teachers, now at ease

With state authority since closely tied
To its brute exercise, to what decrees
Them its star students, henceforth qualified
To play Dionysius to their Damocles.

They step out daily now, from every raw-
Nerved childhood dream into the waking hell
Of life-in-exile, life that's all the more
Tormenting when you read the signs that tell

How home-grown US fascists know the score
And hang on, like my class-mates, till the spell
Of some mob-orator deprives all law
Save his and theirs of all power to compel

Where conscience fails. So nations stand in awe
Of fools whose reign of terror rose and fell
With each boy's passage through the class-room door
Or homeward journey signaled by the bell

New Nazism in America

That told us, falsely, how we might yet draw
Sufficient comfort from that prison-cell,
The bourgeois family, or just ignore
Those threats so long as our home life went well.

For if I've learned one lesson, taken in
From school-days down, it's not to fancy there's
Some world elsewhere, a realm of kith and kin,
Of restful sleep, a private realm one shares

With others likewise sheltered from life's twin
Afflictions, those 'political affairs'
That keep intruding and the 'world within'
That treats its dreamers to the worst nightmares

Of history relived. They'd best begin
By figuring out what happened unawares
And early on for us whose only sin
Was then to come of age when thinking bears

Such paralyzing strains, when any win
For prudence is a triumph that prepares
For moral infamy, and when the spin
On its dark tale is such that hope despairs.

An Agent's Description Of Home*

ALAN PRICE

The lift's operation is impeccable. In the event of a challenge, speak to the concierge. He's an obedient man, eager to please. Your apartment is perfectly secure and double glazed as thick as a bank-vault door though allowing a certain transparency. Noise has been replaced by the idea of noise. I'm confident you can prosper in this desolate yet picturesque part of the city.

The kitchen is alive with equipment, though unlikely to be used. For we ask you to continue eating out: fine cuisine will be served in our neighbouring hotel. But we've provided a freezer and microwave for the limited amusement of breakfast. And our air conditioning is perfectly pitched to erase all memory of those recent heat waves, so unpleasant for working.

We've endeavoured to give you a bed that will digitally massage your body before sleep takes you off. The execution of deep-sleeping is taken very seriously. It must be balanced with your deep-working. Our clients stay for a night or a weekend, resting content on specially scented pillows next to their i-phones and tablets. When suitably refreshed you will move on to meet further customers.

It's important to remember that no apartment is intended to be a fixed locatable spot but more a blurred snapshot or a smudged mark on a map. Our changeable rooms (like moveable feasts) are intended to deflect the homing instinct. Any thoughts about creating a domesticity styled to your own taste are to be avoided at all cost. You are here to be a light cloud passing through an otherwise clear blue sky.

Panic attacks, you say? Certainly, they can be accommodated. Our most driven workers ask us to remove all furniture and fittings, save for their bed. The more minimal the room, the less distraction: leaving the mind prepared to achieve its breaking point. A panic room can be arranged within twenty-four hours.

Three months rent is payable in advance, excluding the rare occasion when you invite a client to have drinks in the lounge. Then we charge for the entertaining of guests who must be vetted beforehand. They cannot stay overnight. Any prolonging of company is prohibited. That would be a patch of grey on your busy cloud.

For a more detailed description of the whole of the building, please consult our information pack. This is available in all the appropriate business languages. You may read it later. All that concerns us now is the signing of the contract. After careful examination the loyalty and acuity of your own work-site was found to be responsive to our blue sky. I trust that you will be productive and happily develop, with us.

***This is from a collection of short stories, by Alan Price called *The Iliterate Ghost* to be published by Eibonvale Press in Autumn 2019.**

Dark

Brondesbury and Kilburn High School for Girls, London, NW2

'The little coloured girl,' they said.
Did they notice how I paled?
My fifties blazer, tie, hat band,
gymslip, knickers were all coloured
with correctness. But they said
'Did you wear feathers in your hair
and live in trees?' and
'What did you eat? Bird's eggs?'
'Who taught you English?'

I remember dropping a tray.
And Daddy said, 'Never mind,
my girl! When we've our own place,
you can smash up all the crockery.'

Upstairs, behind drapes, I would
watch them playing in the street.
Until, with shy approaches, I stood
small behind the front yard gate.

Our own place set me back
upstairs. Brown dados, chipped
walls, cold floors. And Mummy
onioned in her kitchen always
needing me to carry things
down a lick of long brown lino
where a bare bulb hung, dead,
yet gripping its metal,
keeping dark about the step.

Erica Warburton

The Wednesday

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