

Barrow Hospital

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Speakers' Corner

In 1971 or thereabouts we set off to learn psychiatry. We were a group of six medical students who had travelled together through medical and surgical wards, theatres, clinics and laboratories. We had learnt the rudiments of anaesthesia. We had delivered babies. We had assisted at post-mortems. Now we had arrived at the designated mental hospital by means of a public service bus, boarding it at the central depot near the city Infirmary. The hospital was sited on a gentle rise in pleasant rolling English countryside.

I had never been inside a mental hospital before.

Several persons also travelling in the same bus were evidently patients' relatives. When the bus stopped at the gates, these relatives tramped silently up along the drive, each maintaining a certain distance from the others. I have since seen this meticulous maintenance of distance amongst relatives entering a prison gatehouse. There was something secretive about their walk; this paradoxically marked them out.

We students paused at the gates, arrested by a novel sight. The two gate-posts were tall stone structures, each with a large stone ball atop. Sitting on the right-hand (westernmost) gatepost, his rump on the ball, his feet on the square stone which supported the ball, was a man of about thirty. He was tall and thin; his calves, thighs and arms were little short of emaciated. He wore an old-fashioned, summer-weight, dark-checked suit and a rumpled white shirt without a collar. The relatives ignored him and continued their formation up the drive.

Well, the gatepost-man was arresting. We looked up at him. He apparently wished an audience — he spread his thin arms like an orator — and we briefly took the role he wished. Tall Martha crossed her arms and waited. We were quite naïve. In retrospect that was a fair position to have held. We looked up at him in silence.

'Do you understand Kant? Kant is the only philosopher since Plato to make clear sense,' he said, his voice precise and nasal. "'Of the crooked timber of humanity nothing straight was ever made.'"

I had honestly then never heard of Kant, but the seated man seemed to me to speak coherent truth.

I, hardly the spokesman of the group, put myself forward. 'That's interesting, Janus,' I said.

'I'm glad you find it so,' said the man on the gatepost, smiling at the pleasantry. He held up a slender finger. He had guessed a captive audience and he expounded further.

Well, it might have been nonsense; it might have been truth, but it wasn't closely argued. It was, as far as I could make out, a skein of thought that made little sense.

This was deeply disappointing to me. To be honest I had hoped — rebellious person that I was — to encounter a genius put away as a madman; and the man on the gatepost might have been that figure. But he wasn't.

I looked away at the fine stand of trees, and, beyond, at the hospital. It was not a Victorian asylum but a conglomeration of large, ornate villas designed for the treatment of mental illness as this was envisaged in the mid 1930's. At the centre of the complex was a squat semi-secure unit with locked wards.

The man on the gatepost, seeing that he had lost his audience, lost his voice also, and, his face in his hands, he lapsed into melancholia and became mute.

Nothing would shake him from this, and tears dropped from between his fingers. He would take no solace.

The gateposts were high: he must have reached his stance by climbing a yew-tree. It would have been a difficult if short climb. Later on I wondered why so poisonous a tree had been allowed to flourish in the grounds of a mental hospital. But no matter now.

'We must leave you and go on,' said Tall Martha, the natural leader of our group. Her voice was compassionate but incisive. 'We have our appointment with the Medical Director. We had better

not be late. I'm sorry.'

The man on the gatepost made no response: his hands obliterated his gaze: his attempt at communication had gone.

'I'm sorry,' said Tall Martha again. 'But you see how it is.'

We left him and walked on up the drive. Ahead of us a small detachment of the convoy of relatives was filing through a large double-door.

We followed them and approached the same door.

And apparently we had made our first mistake. Although it was the front door, unlocked and easily opened, there was no reception inside.

'Follow me,' said Tall Martha, looking round herself at the outside world as though reluctant to leave it. She had a very open manner and always revealed her emotions by her visible expression.

She pushed open the door. We entered, following her, taking in the vague — no, strong — institutional smell. There was no-one to guide us. There was a wide hardwood door on which was written *Balneotherapy*. Otherwise there were no signs. The hall was empty.

Except for a small, middle-aged man who was placed in no attitude of welcome, but who was wandering about looking at the ground. His dirty shirt was outside his flannel trousers. He had the appearance of someone reduced to counting his paces.

We approached him. He shook his head as Tall Martha spoke to him. He could not help us. He was mute. His hands hung inertly by his sides. His face was devoid of expression, but his eyes followed us.

Tall Martha looked back at us and drew down the corners of her mouth in an expression of irony.

The small man looked at us in a fashion that was neither friendly nor unfriendly, but curiously he seemed to have regard for our innocence. He was involved in himself — if he could be said to be involved in anything — but he silently attached himself to us as though he were a member of our group.

This I came to notice. We students were regarded as curiously innocent, and likeable, wholesome persons. Being innocent, we listened. We were nothing to do with the governing regime. People were often involved in themselves but at the same time wished for some reason to accompany us. So this man unspeakingly joined our group.

He said nothing, but he apparently wished to be with us, as did many of those we found.

Well, where were we to go? The six students? Who were we to find?

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There was nothing for us to do but to follow the line of the wide corridor. We soon came to a junction beneath a large skylight.

'Right or left, Martha?' asked Diana Rushfield, looking out of place in her long, pale, mint-green summer dress and her moderately high-heeled shoes. She raised her hands and adjusted her tortoiseshell Alice band.

'Damned if I know, Di,' murmured Tall Martha, looking one way and then the other down the perspective of the alternatives. 'But a choice must be made. Follow me.'

She took the right-hand corridor, followed by the rest of us, followed in turn by a number of people who seemed to wish to take our lead. Perhaps they thought we knew where we were going. Or perhaps they just wished to follow a group of people who appeared unanimous in their action.

We later found that we had taken the wrong entrance. At the present moment, not knowing this, we were lost inside the labyrinthine warren of a large facility. And so we found ourselves lost amongst the lost, talking without effect to the people we had found and collected and, in the process, we discovered our own disorientation. Not a bad beginning.

[This is a brief preview]

THE END