

BRAVE NEW WORLDS

THE PROFESSOR

ANNA KAVAN

CONSPECTUS of university town; early morning mist slowly clearing. The mist dispersal not mere evaporation, but a sort of gradual unswathing, very gentle and protracted tearing, rolling-up and discarding, as of webs or excessively fragile tissue paper, disclosing buildings in careful succession. This process, though necessarily long drawn out, progresses methodically with a certain businesslike efficiency, suggesting the unpacking and setting out by a practised hand of, say, a stock of valuable china.

View narrows to disclosure, from the ground upwards, of one particular tower. As mist-wrappings are removed, there appears, on a carved ledge, a row of plump pigeons fast asleep with their heads under their wings. Then, sighted up the shaft of the tower as if from its foot, the remote rococo summit, which in a second starts to revolve, discharges a musical-box carillon of tinkling notes which dance off, frisky white minims and semibreves, into the now blue sky. Back for a moment to the pigeons, untucking themselves, blinking, sleepily stretching their wings.

Now a switch-over to an outlying residential street of the same town. Ahead, set back from the road in its small flowerless lawn garden, a new white flat-roofed modern house, determinedly unembellished, simple rectangles superimposed like a construction of nursery building blocks. A path of concrete slabs leads to the front door which has a chromium ring, O-shaped, instead of a handle. Inside, in one of the bedrooms upstairs, is a child's cot, white, with bars at the sides: a painted cock decorates the headboard, an owl the foot. The occupant of the cot lies motionless under a puffed pale blue eiderdown. Across the floor, which is covered in some hygienic greyish composition of cork or rubber, comes a tall, brasslike woman of forty, her face somewhat like a photo of one of the lesser-known hostesses seen in society papers; looking like and dressed like a hybrid nurse and socialite; her plucked eyebrows very arched, her lips painted bright red; costumed as if for a cocktail party; wearing a mackintosh apron tied round her waist.

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In a series of brisk, efficient motions she approaches the cot; lets down the side (with harsh buzzsaw rasp); bends stiff from the waist, her tightly sheathed hind parts glossy in taut satin; turns back the eiderdown. With her hard hands she reaches inside the woollywhite, lambswool coverings (peeling them off as if they were wrappings of a parcel or a cocoon) and grasps firmly, and after a moment lifts out a manikin, adeptly supported by her large hands under buttocks and shoulderblades, dressed in grey-mottled and baggy tweeds: she sits on a chair; the manikin held on her knees and balancing there, limp dangling feet turned in like a ventriloquist's dummy. The woman zips open her diamanté-trimmed corsage and pulls out a long rubbery phallus-shaped nipple which she inserts in the dummy's mouth in the style of a petrol feed.

Shot of the little pursed rosebud mouth under shaved upper lip busily sucking away (with lip-smacking and belching accompaniment). The pose held in gruesome travesty of a madonna and child tableau. While this goes on the manikin visibly swelling, swelling, swelling, till at the end of the meal he is almost a full-sized man. The woman stands him on the floor while she tucks away the flaccid phallus-teat, zips up her dress, stands up.

Slight transitional pause. Next view is downwards from landing to hall (looking down steep-diving staircase), on the two fore-shortened figures, the man's egghead with incipient bald tonsure spot. The woman hustles him into professorial gown, jerks, tugs, pats, brushes him off, takes his hand, leads him out of the front door. Through this open door is seen a sliver of venomous green raffia stage grass.

Chug-chug sound of a child playing at cars; high-pitched tooting horn; the woman reappears in the doorway, watching departure; her watchfulness holds for a second. The woman turning, coming back inside; closing the door (the lock snicks shut), ripping loose apron strings. The apron falls on the floor. Denting it with her high heels she walks over it to the wall mirror, extracts a lipstick from gold mesh bag, starts to repaint her mouth. In the mirror, closeup of her enormously enlarged brilliant moist raw-red mouth.

Now a complete change of scene. The professor has reached the college and is lecturing to his class. He stands on a dais behind a desk on which is a carafe of water and a tin trumpet. He is not

quite tall enough for the height of the desk and so he stands on an old-fashioned church hassock with flaps at the ends. To his left, on the wall behind him, a large blackboard scrawled over with undecipherable words and symbols in coloured chalks. (Conceivably some of these might be semi-intelligible words related to escapism; and one or two of the scribbles could be kindergarden obscenities, faces, figures.) On the right a phenomenally tall blank frosted-glass window rises clear from the floor to the high domed ceiling. It holds its pair of stiff white fluted curtains rigidly to its sides in arms-downwards-stretch position. Semi-circular tiers of benches rising in front. The back of each bench forms a continuous curved shelf for the books of the row above. Only two tiers towards the centre are occupied. The students are masks: upper row masculine, feminine lower. Except for the sex differentiation, which appears mainly in the length and arrangement of the painted hair, all are identical, characterless, with wide round eyes of respectful admiration, adulation, attention. The masks supported on spinal columns of spiral wire: similar wires representing arms terminated by limp chamois glovehands half stuffed with cottonwool. The hands are laid flat on the book rests with books in between; all are motionless.

The professor's voice continues in steady and wordless booming punctuated by an occasional 'Now' or 'You see'. Sudden short tinny interjection of sound as he picks up toy trumpet and blows. Followed by immediate lifting and reaching out of curtain arms gliding smoothly over the rows of limp glovehands, touching off each hand in turn, retiring swiftly to the original attention posture at the window. There is a faint twanging noise of quivering wires while the gloves are left gangling in palsied mimicry of jittery handwriting and the professor takes a long drink of water.

A resumption of the professorial booming (for a very short period this time), with attention gradually concentrating on the curtains which appear to be holding themselves with watchdog vigilance at their window post. Climax comes with the curtains coiling, the curtain tentacles extending, delicately glissading along the mask rows, turning the masks to the blackboard (the professor chalks up o); masks ghostily twitching and trilling in twisted unison; the curtain arms coil high to the ceiling, weave there; then return to the window, to stiff and full arms' length

attention at each side of window, resume the same tense rigidity as before. As the wire vibration dies down, one after another, the masks topple, tumble, tip out of sight behind the benches. As the last one disappears the professor steps down from the hassock, from the dais, walks to the door of the lecture room.

Four seconds after he has gone out of the door the left curtain slowly draws itself across half the window. The right curtain slowly crosses to meet it.

A series of transient views tracks the professor's progress from lecture room to outer door of college. His black moth-gown seen fluttering down long perspective of shadowed, tunnel-like stone corridor; emerging into high groined and vaulted entrance hall, the grey stones of the floor with faint localized stippling of amethyst, topaz, ruby, light-spillings from stained-glass windows.

Numerous indistinct indications of other figures, gowned professors, student masks topping garments on coat-hangers, wires, hockey-sticks; all flickering spasmodically in different directions; all very indefinite, ephemeral.

Finally a static black-and-white punctuation mark shot: a heavy dark ancient door under gothic arch. An old man's gnarled, unsteady, veined hand with border of frayed shirt-cuff, wear-shined and threadbare porter's sleeve, draws back the bolts, turns key, loosens chains, with rusty rasping, jarring complaint of unoiled metal.

The door slowly opens.

First the pepper-and-salt trousers, then the whole of the professor, stepping out of the door, crossing empty and sunlit pavement in the cracks of which wild flowers, daisies, harebells, cowslips, primroses, are in bloom. A toy motor car, painted red, stands at the curb. The professor packs and stuffs and forces himself into it: settles his feet on the pedals: squeezes a captious toot out of the rubber hornbulb: vigorously pedals off. There is a squeaky noise from the chain driving the wide-spoked wheels. Short distance up street he signals with his left arm stiffly extended; turns left, disappears. The chain squeak briefly outlasts him.

Now the professor pedalling home through the quiet streets of the town: not a real life town, of course. The sunshine is filtered through pink gauze. Colleges, churches, museums, etc., like birthday cakes in the gauzy light, Cuckoos fly out of belfries and cupolas as the clocks strike,

The professor keeps on pedalling, passes the entrance to a street which is in shadow. Glimpse down this street, emphasizing its shadowed contrast to the rest of the town. About two hundred yards along it, facing another way, a mass of full-sized people crowds silently outside a municipal building, a town hall or a police station, very dark-looking, very ominous, introducing an abrupt note of alarm. The professor does not look. He keeps on pedalling.

The sunlit street ribbons on unbroken down a gentle slope with the white play-block house at the end of it. The car, without free-wheel, running faster and faster downhill; the professor's knees pistoning faster and faster, almost grazing his chin.

Inside the house the woman who appeared earlier on is playing mah-jong with three visitors. These people are seen only in profile and are feminine, bloodless; with long proboscis noses, like Javanese silhouettes stamped out of metal, very frigidly and ophidianly malignant. The mah-jong tiles forming the walls behind which they are sitting are covered with money symbols, deeds, bonds and various currencies; power symbols, sceptres, whips, bribes, reins: diapers, feeding bottles; phallic signs.

Rapid survey of this drawing room of a somewhat pretentious provincial would-be-modern intellectual. Smooth, pale, faintly glazed planes of walls, built-in furniture, unstained woods: squarish, low, upholstered couch; easy chairs covered in zebra-stripe fabric: the emasculate fireplace, without mantelpiece, without fire, meekly impounded by chaste light wood bands: wall alcoves, interiorly tinted, and displaying such objects as negro carvings and very consciously quaint period pieces, china dogs, red and blue glinting lustres, wax flowers under fragile cloches. Book shelves with volumes of philosophy, psychology, by the more superficial writers, *belles lettres*, a few novels, poems, a few literary quarterlies and art papers. There would be not more than three original paintings in pale frames on the walls: still life of the slick Slade student variety, or etiolated impressionist watercolour, or possibly smudged pastel portrait, or oil landscape in crude colour discords. There would probably be an absence of flowers in the room; perhaps a single white pottery jar of tall grasses or shell flowers.

This room the professor enters in his black gown; with light, short, tripping steps advances across the neutral carpet; pirouettes;

simpers and postures. He stands holding the pose, feet in the fifth position, skirts of his gown extended to fullest width and held between thumbs and forefingers, both little fingers curled and pointing archly.

In their alcoves the dangling glass lobes of the lustres begin to swing and oscillate gently, set up a faint tinkling applause.

Now a quick circling view of the whole prosperous enclosed room dithering faintly appreciative: into this circle, very complacent, the professor relaxes coyly from his pose: acknowledging the slight rustle of handclapping from the mah-jong players, he sits down in the exact centre of the couch.

The players rise from the table, group themselves round him. The visitors (always in profile) take positions on each side of him on the couch, the third sits on the floor at his feet. From attitudes of admiration their flat snake eyes are upon him in bitter hatred, contempt, or envy. His own woman is standing behind him, her face tiger-possessive, triumphant; she sets her fingers proprietorially on his head, absently twists his thin hair into kewpie tuft.

This tableau abruptly shattered by sudden rude surge of clamouring, knocking, at outer door of the house. With utmost possible effect of shock, enormous figures, in dark uniforms, bursting into the room, crowding in one after the other, surrounding the couch, brandishing, with threatening gestures, some object (document), manifesto, indictment, under the professor's nose.

He jumps up, astounded and outraged, thrusting the three visitors aside in rising (they collapse stiffly with metallic jingle and disappear); the woman behind the sofa gestures imperiously; calls out an unidentifiable order: she is at once submerged by the uniforms; seen struggling for a moment; disappears.

The professor is ringed, pressed on all sides by the massed uniforms, fear now coming out on his face like sweat. He glances round quickly, his face more and more afraid. He clutches his gown, pulls it higher and higher up round his shoulders, hunches his neck into it, muffles his head in its folds; and out of this hiding place yells shrilly some protest or appeal, indignation in the start of the sounds, panic towards the end.

Two huge uniformed arms are extended from each side simultaneously.

They take hold of the gown, twitch at it derisively, contemptuously snatch it away.

The manikin, exposed, cowers on the floor, grovels between them, his head with bald spot lolling limp on dummy stalkneck to the floor.

As the arms grapple him every ornament in the room sets up a thin mad screeching.

A china dog leaps frantically from its shelf and dives under the couch with reversed curlicue tail between its legs.

A glass goblet falls; heavy boots trample it to dust.

The boots and the forest of dark legs close in, amalgamate into black blob-blot. The blob bulges, spreads steadfastly up and over everything; blots out the room with a bulging and bursting of black bubble, inky cuttlefish ejaculation; and the brittle death trills still bleating. Blotchout.

WAY OUT IN THE CONTINUUM

MAURICE RICHARDSON

THIS is decapitated head No. 63, Universal Institute of Cerebral Physiology, electrotelepathcasting in all directions in space-time. For the benefit of you earth-dwellers and third dimensionals who think you are living in what you call the past, I will describe my day.

It is hour 1 of day 97 year 3946—by an odd little coincidence just 2,000 years after the outbreak of the First Great Atomic War, but don't let that worry you; it didn't last long and nobody won.

I repeat: it is hour 1 and the artificial blood supply apparatus to which I am attached is standing on its bench in the Lab overlooking The Park of Giant Vegetables. The blood pump has just switched over to 'day'; it's working beautifully smoothly, giving me what they call Mild Euphoria, a rich, vital, but not too stimulating, mixture. The Lab attendant in whose charge I am is filling in my morning reaction chart, and if I roll my eyes I can just catch sight of her profile. She is a pretty little thing, one of the latest products of the Interplanetary-Racial-Cross-Fertilization Institute. On the Earth side her ancestry shows Chinese, West African Negro, Cape Cod and Kentish Weald. The Neptunian comes out strong in her aquamarine skin—I always call her Bluey. From her Venusian mother she inherits the small