

Dancing Visions

Ian Hamilton Finlay's Early Writing

IN 1996 POLYGON, then still part of Edinburgh University Press, published *The Dancers Inherit the Party* & *Glasgow Beasts, an a Burd*. This featured what one might call the 'pre-concrete' poetry of Ian Hamilton Finlay, and brought together for the first time poems from two sources: the short sequence written in Glasgow demotic, *Glasgow beasts, an a burd haw, an inseks, an, aw, a fush*, first published in 1961 by Finlay's own Wild Flounder Press, a whimsical maritime title for the precursor to the long-running Wild Hawthorn Press; and poems from a larger collection, *The Dancers Inherit the Party*, first published in 1960. The work was popular at the time: *Glasgow Beasts* ran to five editions, and *The Dancers* to three, although the success of the latter was marred by a legal dispute with Fulcrum Press, which incorrectly titled their third expanded edition as a first edition, which led to the book being withdrawn from sale. Both sequences remained unavailable, other than odd poems published in anthologies, until the 1996 edition.

This was edited by his son, Alec Finlay. Picking up from the 1960s, the new volume sold out, and after Polygon had been bought by Birlinn in 2002, its new owners expressed an interest in reprinting the collection. Alec was now involved in his own publishing and art projects, and asked if I might be interested in taking the project on. By that time we had known each other for over a decade, and worked together for several years, mainly on the pocketbooks series. We first met at the Graeme Murray Gallery in the early 1990s, where I then worked organising exhibitions, at a time when Murray was the main Scottish outlet for Finlay's printed work, already extensive and burgeoning still. In quieter moments I would leaf through the prints in the plan chest, or browse the huge array of booklets and cards in an upright cabinet, amazed at the quantity, amazed at the fact that this was just a part of Finlay's output, which also encompassed the garden he and Sue Finlay created at Little Sparta, as well as art exhibitions and installations around the world.

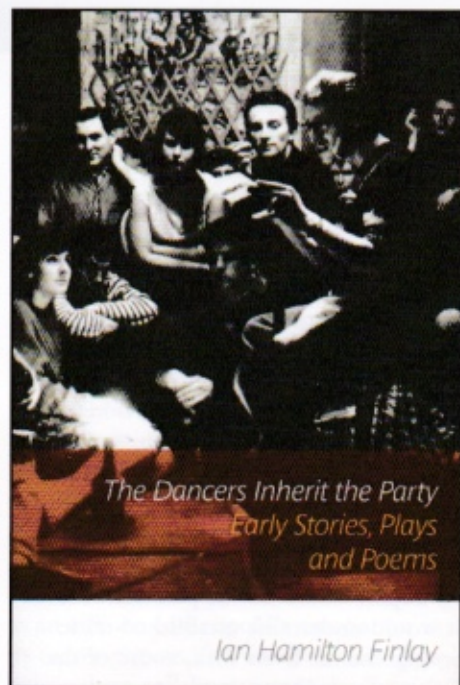
For the new edition, Alec expressed the hope that it might be expanded, not

Ken Cockburn

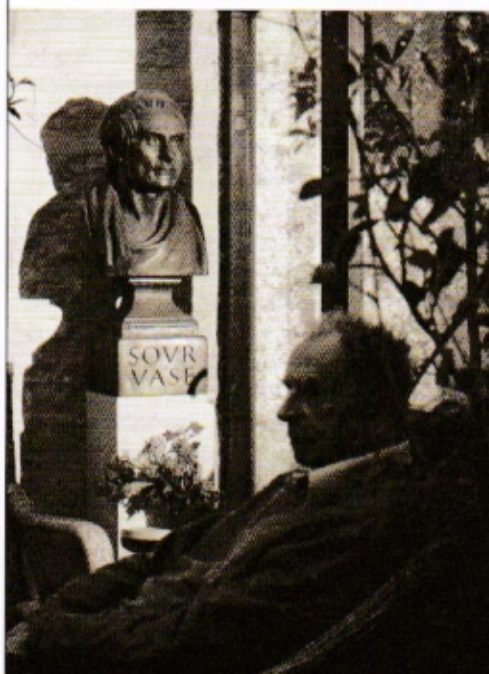
This year marks the eightieth birthday of Ian Hamilton Finlay. An artist of international stature, Finlay has worked in many different media but is perhaps best known for the creation of Little Sparta, his garden in the Pentland Hills near Edinburgh. A unique synergy of poetry, sculpture and garden design, it is one of Europe's most important contemporary art works. Some of Finlay's work was recently on show at the Library in *Of Conceits and Collaborators*, an exhibition curated by Tom Bee.

Here, poet and editor Ken Cockburn reflects on bringing into being a new edition of *The Dancers Inherit the Party*, a collection of Finlay's early writing, in an article that incorporates material written by Lili Fraser.

forwards into the late Sixties and early Seventies, but backwards into the Fifties. His father's work from his concrete poetry period was well known, as was his transition from concrete to the making of Little Sparta. But the period before this, when he was writing stories and plays, had been little explored. I had come across occasional short stories by Finlay in anthologies from the 1970s, 'The Money' and 'A Broken Engagement', and a couple were reprinted in Yves Abrioux's essential overview, *Ian Hamilton Finlay: A Visual Primer*. I had also come across the play 'Walking Through Seaweed', again in an old anthology, and was intrigued to know more. By this time I was working for the Scottish Poetry Library, as was Lili Fraser who also had a foot in the Birlinn/Polygon door, and it was agreed that the new edition would be published



The Dancers Inherit the Party, Polygon, 2004. A collection of Ian Hamilton Finlay's early writings, edited and with an introduction by Ken Cockburn.



Portrait of Ian Hamilton Finlay beside a bust of Rousseau from *The Philosopher's Garden*, a collection of photographs by Robin Gillanders, National Galleries of Scotland, 2004. *Little Sparta* (GMP.1998.4.1) with photographs by Robin Gillanders and detached sentences by Finlay appeared in 1998; most of the edition was destroyed in a flood.

GLASGOW BEASTS, AN A BURD

BY IAN HAMILTON FINLAY

HAW, AN INSEKS, AN, AW, A FUSH

PAPERCUTS JOHN PICKING PETE MCGINN

Glasgow beasts, an a burd haw, an inseks, an, aw, a fush, with papercuts by John Picking and Pete McGinn. Wild Flounder Press, 1961. (IHF.s.6(10))

by Polygon in association with the SPL, with myself as editor and Liliias as researcher.

It was Liliias who dug in the Library. Her initial point of reference was *The Sea-Bed and other stories*, which Finlay had published himself in 1958. Getting hold of a copy of this was not straightforward, and she was unsure if its unavailability was due to its rarity, fragility or the fact that, in the months when we wanted to look at it, it was being recatalogued to incorporate it as part of the IHF collection, and was lurking in various special collection cupboards for processing. Once accessed, however, it was found to include a helpful list of newspapers and periodicals where the stories had previously appeared. In addition, pointers from Alec, provided in conversations face-to-face and electronically, provided some invaluable shortcuts to undiscovered country.

Liliias started with the Accessions Draft Index, picking out files that would definitely or possibly have material covering the dates we were looking at. She used a range of resources: newspaper indexes, online catalogue searches, other online databases available via the Library's website, the newspaper microfilm viewer-cum-printer, as well as books, journals, manuscripts and letters. (In the course of my own reading, I wanted at one point to refer to the 1996 edition of *The Dancers Inherit the Party*. Much of Finlay's printed work is produced in finely printed, small editions, and unsurprisingly can only be consulted in the North Reading Room; but I was

surprised to find that, presumably on the strength of this output, even this trade paperback was also considered special enough to be delivered and consulted there!) Liliias also used the advice of the librarians, initially to help pick her way through the Draft Accession Index, and subsequently for ideas on how to unearth further material. At that stage she was keeping an eye out for play, story or article manuscripts and individual poems, but more realistically she was seeking biographical information, texts which might shed light on Finlay's literary and artistic development, and suggestions as to where published but uncollected material might be located.

The fullest letters were those to Derek Stanford and J.F. Hendry. Finlay met Stanford during his National Service. They corresponded from about 1946 to 1956, and then there was a long gap before they made contact again in around 1967. The letters from Finlay to Stanford from the late Sixties are particularly interesting, as he recaps for Stanford his development over the years they have been out of touch. He emphasises continuity rather than change, despite the stylistic changes, and resents being pigeonholed: 'I find it a wee bit disconcerting when I am typecast as *A concrete poet*'. Stanford's *Inside the Forties: Literary Memoirs, 1937-57* (1977) provides lively insights into Finlay's life and interests during that decade, when he knew MacDiarmid, briefly attended Glasgow School of Art, undertook his National Service and began to write and paint. J.F. Hendry (1912-86) was a writer some thirteen years older than Finlay, associated, like Norman MacCaig, Dylan Thomas, and W.S. Graham (whom Finlay also knew) with the Apocalyptic school of the 1940s



POOR OLD TIRED HORSE

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The Wild Hawthorn Press, and the poetry magazine *Poor.Old.Tired.Horse* (IHF.m.15), were launched in 1961, the latter in collaboration with Jessie McGuffie. Contributors included Edwin Morgan, George Mackay Brown and Richard Demarco.

which, although now remembered with little affection, provided a springboard for the very disparate aesthetics of these and other poets. Hendry is an undeservedly neglected figure today: although his memoirs and a work on Rilke remain available, his poetry, beyond a selection featured by Andrew Crozier in the anthology *Conductors of Chaos*, edited by Iain Sinclair in 1996, has long been out of print, and has attracted little critical attention. The range of Finlay's contacts is further extended in a letter to Hendry c.1957, by which time Finlay was living in Edinburgh, undergoing analysis: 'Muriel Spark came to see me. I liked her a lot. [...] She showed me a proof of her new novel, about *her* nervous breakdown.'

Gleaning information from the early letters was not always a straightforward task. Those which were handwritten tended to be on odd scraps of paper and undated, although occasionally the scraps happen to be torn-up envelopes, which show by their previous postmark the earliest date the letter could have been written. The way in which Finlay used whatever paper he could readily obtain, such as old envelopes or the fly-leaves from books, brings home in an immediate way his poverty at the time, and the fact that he was writing literally in order to live. Use of a typewriter – that engine of concrete poetry – signalled letters written after the dates we were interested in.



Loch View, Little Sparta.
Photograph: David Paterson.

L'Île des Peupliers.
Photograph: David Paterson.

The letters and accessions also yielded the *ms*s of 'Autobahn Aesthetic', a short essay about Finlay's experience of post-war Germany, part of which is reprinted in the Introduction to the new edition, and which heralds Finlay's later conflation of modern warfare and classical themes; and 'Jimmy', a very short story about a shepherd. They also contained references to stories accepted by the *Glasgow Herald* and by magazines, as well as to some plays. The plays, apart

from those already published, remained difficult to track down. There are references to productions of, for example, *The Displaced Milkmaid*, *The Family Gathering* and *Peasants*, but most such manuscripts have yet to surface, although Lesley Lendrum, a friend and collaborator from the early Sixties, provided two unpublished playscripts, one of which, 'The Wild Dogs in Winter', is included in the new edition. One of the most detailed references to an otherwise as yet unrecovered play comes in a letter of June 1956 to Derek Stanford:

I love [drama] – but not this three-act,

one-set business. I like the simple, dramatic, symbolistic form. For instance, my wee, last one-act play has what I [think] a nice plot. Three old, mad women are boarded out in a private house, as is the custom in this country when they are considered to be harmless [...] anyway, these three old ladies, being shut in this one room, are hard put to it to pass the time, so, chiefly, they quarrel. Only, as they have nothing but each her own bed and chair, they can't even find something to quarrel about. So they quarrel about Christmas – when it is, because they each remember from 'before' only one thing about Christmas day. One remembers it has to do with *snow*, so she often has a Christmas day – once she had fifteen all in a row! Another, who is very fat, remembers it has to do with *food*, and the third, who is the lowest of the low, remembers only it was a day when everyone made a special effort to be nice. The 'food' one has a Christmas whenever the asylum inspector, an old, sour man, comes, as that day the woman of the house serves up a proper meal. [The play begins on a snowy morning, moves to a good lunch for the inspector's visit, then a new and nice inspector comes and when they insist on wishing him a happy Christmas he is touched and wishes them a happy Christmas back, so completing the conditions for Christmas for all three.] Simple, but for me, real drama, and I regret that the church isn't to my plays as the C.P. *would be* if I wrote to the party line.

Lilias also used the Library's resources to check the online Scottish Theatre Archive, which provided information on three broadcast versions of texts by Finlay: the plays 'The Estate Hunters' from 1956, 'Walking through Seaweed' from 1961, and the story 'The Old Man and the Trout' from 1974.

The surprise for Lilias and myself was the number of short stories she managed to unearth. After she had started to look through issues of the *Scottish Angler* on Alec Finlay's advice, and then stumbled across a few more stories by accident, she tried more methodical ways of flushing them out: the Library's indexes of the *Glasgow Herald*, as well as of the *Scotsman* and the *TLS*, were a useful shortcut to locating entries. Twenty-one story titles were noted from the *Glasgow Herald* index, exciting finds as each new volume of the index revealed more.

The *Scottish Angler* was worth viewing for all relevant years (1950–54). As an outlet for the stories this title is somewhat unexpected, and it is odd to see them next to advice on fly-tying. The surprise is lessened when one realises that

the magazine was edited by the poet R. Crombie Saunders (1912–91), who had edited MacDiarmid's *Selected Poems* of 1944. All the stories directly concern fish and fishing, which Finlay greatly enjoyed at the time, and it quickly becomes clear that they hold many of the themes that develop through his career. In a letter of c. 1948 to Derek Stanford he writes, 'I had a fine day at the fishing yesterday (I find angling conducive to clear thoughts).' By late 1955 he had amassed quite a number of such stories, as he wrote to J.F. Hendry, 'I write mostly fishing stories, but they are not what you might imagine [...] I am finishing a book of them. I hope to get it published. *The Blue-Suited Fisherman* it's called.' In fact when Finlay did publish his stories in *The Sea-Bed* in 1958, only three of the fishing stories were included; of the others, some have rural settings, and some deal more directly with issues of making art, for which fishing had been a metaphor. The fishing theme has remained important to Finlay throughout his career, and many of his best known 'concrete' works have fishing as their theme, albeit now sea-fishing, a more collective and commercial activity compared to the individual amateur angler of the earlier short stories. When asked to make a work for the new Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh, which opened in 1999, he designed a tapestry featuring the poem 'Green Waters', written about 1965, which describes a voyage purely by selecting the names of Scottish fishing-boats.

At some points Lilius was led astray by references to 'Ian Finlay', a journalist and critic who specialised in Scottish culture and art. This may have been why Finlay decided to use 'Hamilton' in order to distinguish himself professionally and aesthetically. For the *Glasgow Herald* stories, he opts for 'Ian H. Finlay'. Having read his namesake's newly-published *Art in Scotland*, he wrote in 1948 to Derek Stanford, 'Northern Romanticism seems to me a highly dangerous generalisation and it leads to all sorts of contradictions [...] I.F. comes near to using my own phrase of "East Coast Classicism"! The similarity of their names nonetheless continued to cause confusion down the decades: the index to one of the volumes of the MacDiarmid 2000 series lists 'Finlay, Ian Hamilton', but a check of the pages listed yields as many references to the cultural historian as to the writer and artist.

Despite Lilius's best efforts, it seems likely that there are other previously published but uncollected stories which have eluded our grasp. *The Sea-Bed* lists in its Acknowledgements the *Saltire*

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An iconic image from the collection of Tom Bee, typographer, one of Ian Hamilton Finlay's collaborators.

Below: Poem by Ian Hamilton Finlay. Typography by Tom Bee.

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Review, as well as two German newspapers which presumably published translations of certain stories, though there is no information as to which, or by whom the translations were made. Finlay mentions in a letter of December 1955 to J.F. Hendry that 'Forward used to print stories of mine before they got a new editor... and a German magazine has just taken one'. *Forward* was a periodical published in Glasgow continuously between 1906 and 1960. Other stories are mentioned by name in the letters, for example 'The Christmas Tree', but where

or whether they were published remains unclear.

If the stories and the poems in the new edition of *Dancers* open up aspects of Finlay's work which have been previously unknown, the poems have been more available to readers in recent times, though there are some new discoveries. Alec mentioned a very early poem published in 1946 in *Poetry Quarterly*, then edited by Alex Comfort who later made his name with *The Joy of Sex*. Dedicated to Derek Stanford, it is a rigorously formal sonnet, which we decided to omit as a piece of juvenilia. The uncollected poems come mostly from a 1962 issue of *Origin*, founded in 1951 at Black Mountain College and edited by Cid Corman, who from 1962 until his recent death lived in Japan. Corman prefaced his generous selection of Finlay's poems with a letter from the poet, and many of the poems contain short notes from Finlay as to Scottish words or references. Like the Glaswegian demotic of *Glasgow Beasts*, or the gentle Orcadian of the 'Orkney Lyrics' included in *The Dancers*, it is a spoken rather than synthetic or literary Scots, though here less localised. These poems have been out of print since their first appearance over forty years ago. The other uncollected poem is also a fishing poem, halfway between the individual river-fishing of the stories, and the sea-fishing boats of the concrete poems, first published in *Lines Review* in 1961, and reprinted in the magazine's fortieth anniversary edition in 1992. 'Fishing from the back of Rousay' has a sea-setting, and the violence of the sea is powerfully evoked, but the poet remains on shore, viewing the drama around him. It is only when he finds a means of casting off and setting sail, when the boats, as in 'Green Waters', are actually out on the waves, that Finlay finds his artistic sea-legs.

Note on sources

The Ian Hamilton Finlay special collection consists of about three hundred printed items, examples of his concrete poetry and book art productions from his own presses; all are prefixed IHF. Finlay's correspondence with Derek Stanford is listed at Acc.6589 and Acc.6533, while his correspondence with J.F. Hendry is Acc.10806. A book called *Of Conceits and Collaborations* is now in preparation by Tom Bee. In September there will be an exhibition of photographs by Robin Gillanders from *The Philosopher's Garden* at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

Landscape With Trout

Ian Hamilton Finlay

The old pair who let the cottage were not, as I first thought, man and wife: they were brother and sister, and after thirty years in this part of Fife they still retained traces of their native accent – a soft stratum of Lancashire coming through the hard, borrowed, sing-song of the Scots North-East.

She was frail and bird-like, with a pale drained face, and she sat in the kitchen, polished and hung with faded water-colours in dustless gilt frames – gifts from artists who had been her summer visitors at dates inscribed neatly in the corners of foregrounds.

He, an old man of over 60, suffered badly from rheumatism; and when he came fishing with me he used the awkward tactics dictated by the rusty hinges of his limbs. He preferred to sit on the bench and talk, his back to the honeysuckle bushes, and his voice rambling on and on. What he talked about is beyond remembering but the method of utterance – its soothing, anaesthetic quality – is vivid still.

The stream was a few hundred yards from the cottage – a few minutes' walk down the road, blue and sticky in the summer heat. One took one's rod, ready-assembled from the old shed where the tiles leaked sunlight on to cobwebbed brass. Then, on the way to the water, one passed the large brick house of the old lady who distributed fishing permits – a house which offered a life of seclusion, behind ivy-covered windows, in rooms bulging with massive stained furniture which was reflected in mirrors tarnished by damp.

Red and Yellow

At the grey stone bridge one turned off melting tar and found a way down to the narrow passageway between the edge of the cornfield and the stream's lush banks. The banks, thick with a growth of some weed like a wild variety of garden rhubarb, made a six-foot strip of unkempt wilderness in a landscape where everything else had been tidied and pruned and trained to produce the maximum edible wealth. A little less than waist-high, this wild-growing weed, varied by wild flowers, made excellent cover for a kneeling angler.

Writing about one's past encounters with landscapes or with trout is an attempt to reach back through the soft blur of nostalgia to actualities of water and stone. Looking back to that Fife landscape I have a vivid impression of its rich red-and-yellow pastorality, but it is more difficult to dig down to its constituent causes – red-tiled roofs set in yellow cornfields; red poppies too, among the yellow wheat.

The stream also, shared in this fat prodigality; it was a stream and not a burn,

because a burn is thin and brown and fast, and this water was crystal-clear and slow-moving. And beyond the imitation rhubarb-weed one could see the red-tiled floor of the hollow mill and the bright yellow horizon dotted with blue-green clumps of trees. No pines here! – the nearest thing to an image of the desert was the monkey-puzzle tree in the expensive clipped garden of someone retired.

The trout were all fat and sleek, and in the shallower reaches there were shoals of silver minnows which fled from one's shadow into brown crevices in the crumbled bank, or out to mid-stream, silver flickers in the trailing green weed.

A Notable Pool

The only taint of error in this tributary of the Eden was a dull red dye which came down the water daily, and punctually, at four o'clock. I never discovered what factory it was which opened its sluices and discharged this stuff into the crystal water. But their daily dose of industrialism had no apparent effect on the trout beyond that of driving them temporarily off the feed – an hour of fasting, one felt, they could well afford.

They were rich relatives, these trout, of poor starved cousins in far-off mountain torrents: the two types were of the same family but as unlike each other as a New York millionaire and a blubber-eating Eskimo.

Behind the cottage was the cottage-garden: red currant bushes, vegetables, rusted wireless-mast, and the hen-coop, which had its tarred back turned to a field of corn. If one went down through the garden and across the field one could take in an extra arc of the river, and fish it down to, and under, the bridge. There was a notable pool down there, long, flat, and shallow-seeming, its smooth surface scored by the trailing twigs of a twisted willow tree.

I remember a summer evening by this pool when, in the grey-dark, I watched an unknown angler take two lovely trout from its deceptive depths. Then he wrapped the fish carefully in a clean white handkerchief, and we walked together up the edge of the cornfield till we came to his motor bicycle parked by the hedge. He at any rate thought this stretch worth while, and I heard him start the raucous engine and begin his trip back to a town 30 miles away. In the course of a month's steady angling he and a farm-hand who was whiling away his evening with a fly were the only fellow-anglers I met.

One pool I recall in particular – the corner-pool which ended the favoured stretch. This pool, open on the one hand to the sun-drenched landscape, was shadowed on the other by a bank of dense trees. The water was deep, but it sloped up to a shore of sun-dried pebbles, and beyond the pebbles was more of that rhubarb-like weed. Across the top of the pool ran a rusting cattle-fence, a possible snag if a hooked fish had run that way.

But the pool's charm lay in its unusual

colouring – its shade of a dark brown which could be traced to a drain, emptying out its contents continually like a never-ending stream of tea poured from a rusted, almost grass-hidden spout. Since then, I have spent some time in a country cottage where the taps poured forth this same brew – where the bath-water threatened to dye one yellow, and the water's iron-content settled and lay like unmelted sugar, thick and unwholesome at the bottom of one's cup. But the taste was not of sugar: it was dreadfully bitter, as our always half-drained tea-cups showed.

This single drain, emerging from its tunnel of matted grasses, and injecting its trickle of brown dye into the slow-moving stream, was sufficient to colour the whole pool, and to colour one's appreciation of it besides. Brown water is natural to the mountains and, at least for the imagination, it has the colour and the taste of solitary moors.

But this water was soiled by iron and not by peat: and it gave the pool a character which was uniquely its own. One was not surprised to find that, by the time it had entered the next pool, the river reasserted its crystal self. And from then on its colour affirmed that this single iron deposit was indeed unique.

Revisited

Approaching the pool carefully, and gently parting the stalks of the undergrowth, one could stare down into autumn-coloured water illuminated and made mysterious by shafts of sun which had found a way down through the branches of trees. More, it was possible to see the inhabitants of the pool poised in these oblong sunshafts, no less open to inspection than stuffed trout in showcases but alive and balancing on undulating fins.

One could watch the slow, rolling movement with which a fish picked a struggling fly from the surface, or the sidling motion which took it over to some microscopic particle of food. Then, if a worm was cast over, and if luck held, a fish would turn with it and swim down into opaque shadows, and the next time one fished there another trout would have swum up and claimed that place.

Vividly I can recall this brown-stained pool, but I cannot analyse its fascination, or decide why brown water should be more compelling than clear.

I went back to the stream two years ago, only to find that the corner pool had vanished because a tree had fallen obliquely across it, and the branches had choked up with stones and silt. It was a hot summer day, and the drain, too, had ceased to trickle; and the friend who was with me raked the water coldly with a pair of binoculars and complained that, when he tried to cast, the line always cracked behind him like a whip.

Going back up the road we passed the once-rented cottage: but there was no smoke coming from the chimney, and I hesitated and walked by without knocking at the door.