

The *Wednesday*



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

The Wednesday at One Hundred

It is an achievement of *The Wednesday* that it has made it to its first centenary issue. It was a dream that became a reality. The dream started to form in my mind two years ago, while enjoying a holiday in Wales. I did not have high hopes, but I thought I should make a start. The inspiration came to me from reading about Coleridge's magazine *The Friend*. I thought our Wednesday group deserved their own magazine to record their journey in the world of ideas, art and literature. We meet every Wednesday and hence the name. I wrote in the editorial of the experimental issue 'Why *The Wednesday*?':

'The Wednesday is intended as a record for all time of our thoughts arising from the meetings. There are excellent ideas discussed every week in our meetings but the direction of talk changes constantly and does not give enough time to consider them fully. But if we have them noted, then we can carry on the debate. *The Wednesday* will be the right platform for such ideas.'

The experimental issue was called a 'Newsletter' and it had twelve pages. But from issue one, a decision was made to call it a 'magazine' of sixteen pages and make it weekly. It was an exciting move and with the help and encouragement of the group and friends, writers, poets and artists, the project moved on.

I wrote in the editorial of the first issue that we did not have a manifesto or a declaration in terms of changing thinking and the world. But it soon became clear that we had to face established views and entrenched positions regarding the type and style of philosophy and its relationship to art and literature. The place of the imagination and creativity was

highly recommended and insisted on by members of the group. A multiplicity of views in the cultural sphere was needed. It was also suggested we need to go beyond the academic limits of philosophy. There are many ways of doing philosophy, such as analytical, continental, medieval, Eastern philosophies and many more. There are different shades within each of these schools. It is good to be open-minded and to welcome a variety of thought.

My vision of the magazine is that it will be broad-minded and open to all sources of creativity, such as poetry and art as well as philosophy. I also wrote in the editorial of the first issue: 'We have created a cultural space to sow the seeds of new thoughts and I hope we'll all till the land.' I think that the cultural sphere needs more space for thinking and creating. If *The Wednesday* has achieved this, it is a worthwhile project.

If the magazine is a success, it is a credit to the philosophers, writers, poets and artists who contribute to it weekly. If it is not, it is still a credit to them for trying so hard for so long. I am grateful to them all. My editorial board managed to produce the magazine without failing or delay for the last hundred weeks. It is amazing and I am grateful to them. I am also grateful for the proprietors of Albion-Beatnik Bookstore and Opera Café for hosting our Wednesday meetings. Visitors to the group's Wednesday meetings will be impressed by the room that is set aside for us every week and the sign at the door which says: '*The Wednesday* Philosophers' Cave'. I also receive e-mails of appreciation every week from loyal readers. I am grateful for all of the encouragement and support.

The Editor

Why I do Philosophy

This article celebrates the one-hundredth edition of *The Wednesday* with a collection of quotations as a testament of gratitude to philosophers throughout history and a personal journey inspired by philosophy as the love of wisdom.

CHRIS SEDDON

My Interest In Philosophy

In 1976 a school friend suggested that instead of studying music at university I study philosophy, so that my arguments would not be so irrational. I fell in love with logic at first sight but my love of wisdom more generally was a seed underground for many years, until by 1996 I had received in sufficient abundance the gift of desperation resulting from the emotional consequences of my addictive behaviour. I was forced to admit that I was insane, that I needed help, and that others might help me. As a life-long atheist I began to pray, and to look for ways of understanding spiritual language, rather than ways to scorn it.

I learnt that I needed fellowship to accomplish the deep underlying mental, emotional, and spiritual growth that was required to sustain freedom from harmful behaviour. Having found that support through a Christian religious fellowship and a Twelve-Step recovery fellowship, I decided to extend the idea by seeking fellowship for my musical and philosophical life too. I joined the Oxford Philosophical Society in August 2016 and through that discovered the discussion group meeting on the second Friday of each month at Rewley House and, in April 2018, the group meeting at the Opera Cafe every Wednesday afternoon. I am grateful for all those who established and continue to support these groups and this magazine.

I am learning to love and respect all parts of myself in communion with others through worship, music, discussion, and mutual

support. For me, philosophy is the love of wisdom, and wisdom means living a life of integrity, in line with my true values.

Illustrative Quotations

The following rag-bag of quotes is in chronological order. Some are closer to my heart than others, but each is chosen to illustrate not only my personal interests, but also the diversity and unity of philosophy over the millennia.

“A man’s heart plans his way but Yahweh guides his steps.”

Solomon *Proverbs 16:9*

“They fashioned a tomb for you, holy and high one,

Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies. But you are not dead: you live and abide forever,

For in you we live and move and have our being.”

Epimenides *Cretica* quoted by Isho’dad of Merv

“One who knows others is perceptive

One who knows himself is enlightened

One who conquers others has power

One who conquers himself is powerful”

Lao Tzu *Tao Te Ching 33*

“I’m not born a wise man. I’m merely one in love with ancient studies and work very hard to learn from them.”

Confucius *Aphorisms translated by Lin Yutang*



Chris Seddon

“The wisest of men is he who has realized ... that in respect of wisdom he is really worthless’ ... so long as I draw breath and have my faculties, I will never stop practising philosophy ... Are you not ashamed that you give your attention to acquiring as much money as possible, and reputation, and honour, but give no attention nor thought to truth and understanding and the perfection of your soul? ... life without this sort of examination is not worth living”

Plato *Apology of Socrates* pages 23,29,38

“I hate and I love. Do you want me to explain myself? I can’t, but I feel it and it’s excruciating.”

Catullus *Poems* LXXXV Oxford University Press 1958

“One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ‘Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?’ Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Matthew 22:35-40

“Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: ‘Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands... ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’”

Luke *The Acts of the Apostles* 17:22-28

“The strongest argument proves nothing so long as the conclusions are not verified by experience. Experimental science is the queen of sciences, and the goal of all speculation.”

Bacon *Opus Tertium*

“Thou art more lovely and more temperate”

Shakespeare *Sonnets* 18

“when I came into the silent assemblies of God’s people, I felt a secret power among them, which touched my heart, and as I gave way unto it, I found the evil weakening in me, and the good raised up”

Barclay *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* Proposition XI Section VII

“Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of

the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.”

Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Section III

“we need merely to compare the culture of reason that is set on the course of a secure science with reason’s unfounded groping and frivolous wandering about without critique... and ... above all ... when we take account of the way criticism puts an end for all future time to objections against morality and religion in a Socratic way, namely by the clearest proof of the ignorance of the opponent ... it is the first and most important occupation of philosophy to deprive dialectic once and for all of all disadvantageous influence, by blocking off the source of the errors ... the speculative philosopher ... remains the exclusive trustee of a science that is useful to the public even without their knowledge, namely the critique of reason”

Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, preface to the second edition xxxi-xxxiv translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W Wood

“One has a right to philosophy (taking the word in its greatest sense) only by virtue of one’s breeding; one’s ancestors, one’s ‘blood,’ decides this, too. Many generations must have worked on the origin of a philosopher; each one of his virtues must have been separately earned, cared for, passed on, and embodied.”

Nietzsche *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by Marianne Cowan p. 139

“My purpose is to exhibit philosophy as an integral part of social and political life... Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of

tradition or that of revelation.”

Russell *History of Western Philosophy* Preface and Introduction

“Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”

Wittgenstein *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* proposition 7

“Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves.”

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services *Alcoholics Anonymous* chapter 5 step 4

“man must create his own essence: it is in throwing himself into the world, suffering there, struggling there, that he gradually defines himself.”

Sartre *Characterisations of Existentialism*

“What is your aim in philosophy? To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle.”

Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* paragraph 309

“All philosophy must start from the dubious and often pernicious views of uncritical common sense. Its aim is to reach enlightened, critical, common sense: to reach a view nearer to the truth, and with a less pernicious influence on human life.”

Popper *How I See Philosophy* in *Philosophy in Britain* edited by S. G. Shanker

“Could I talk when I was a baby?”

“No, babies have to learn to talk by listening.”

“Then how did you know my name?”

Robin Seddon

“Where was I before I was born?”

“Well, part of you was in Daddy and part of you was in Mummy, and then we put you together, like a jigsaw.”

“Did you look at the lid?”

Francesca Seddon

'The Origin 1'

By Mike England



(Courtesy of The Dragon Gallery, Petworth, West Sussex)

On Compromise In A Feverish Time

EDWARD GREENWOOD

In this feverish time of the debate about Brexit, the question of when to compromise and of the nature of compromise itself could not be more topical and important. John Morley's essay *On Compromise* is a superb and sadly neglected work on the issue. After his master John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* it is perhaps the most important piece of political reflection in the nineteenth century, but much less well known. Morley was a classic nineteenth century liberal, sceptical about state intervention in industry (which kept him apart from Socialism) and yet with a concern for the social and educational improvement of the people. His short book is written in the plain unpretentious style of the Victorians, so unlike that of many modern and post modern commentators, particularly the French ones.

The latter have departed in this from the great French writers of the Enlightenment, Voltaire, Diderot and Rousseau, whom Morley greatly admired, and on whom he wrote excellent monographs.

Morley was deeply influenced by the French Enlightenment. In the latter part of his life he was, unlike Diderot and Rousseau, a practicing politician as well as a man of letters. He had an excellent knowledge of the French Revolution, about which he wrote several essays, including a fine study of Robespierre. He was the general editor of the English Men Of Letters series to which he contributed an admiring and admirable study of Burke. However, he thought that there had been too strong a reaction against 'the French school of Revolution' in the early



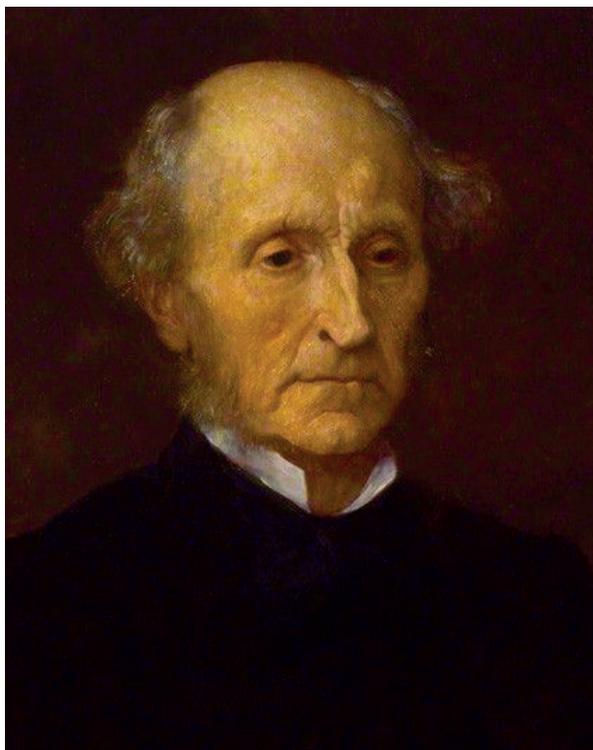
John Morley

Victorian period, a reaction to which Thomas Carlyle had contributed. This reaction had made people sceptical of social reforms, and so set reforms back.

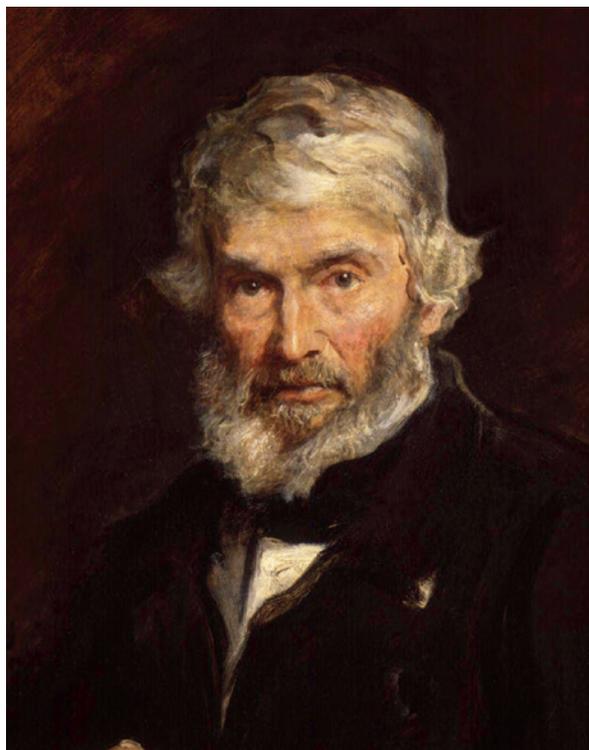
His notion of compromise by no means implied that disputants should water down their deeply held convictions. As he showed in his study of Voltaire, that great rationalist was a man of convictions. True compromise does not involve the wishy-washy doctrine that 'everything is both true and false at the same time.' Morley would have agreed with Nietzsche's splendid remark about 'having the courage for an attack on one's own convictions', for if our convictions will not stand the test of rational criticism then we should abandon them. The erroneous convictions of religious persecutors, like those who broke the Protestant Calas on the wheel, were what Voltaire attacked.

Morley in his *Recollections* gives a brief portrait

of his father, a surgeon in the Lancashire cotton mill town of Blackburn where he grew up. Morley acknowledges his father made personal sacrifices to send him to Clifton College and then to Lincoln College, Oxford. His father practiced strict Sabbatarianism. He had moved up socially from Methodism to Anglicanism. He fed on a 'literary diet that neither enlightened the head nor melted heart and temper.' In *On Compromise* chapter four, 'Religious Conformity' Morley touchingly evokes the notion of compromise on the question of religious dissension between parents and sons. He writes: 'a parent has a claim on us which no other person in the world can have, and a man's self-respect ought scarce to be injured if he finds himself shrinking from playing the apostle to his own father and mother.' In not playing the apostle of unbelief to his generous and loving, if strict, father, Morley's feeling for compromise led him not to take the attitude of George Eliot to her Anglican father, or Nietzsche's attitude



John Stuart Mill



Thomas Carlyle

to his pious Lutheran mother, attitudes which caused their parents much pain. Morley also handles delicately the problem of the unbelieving husband and religious wife, a particularly delicate problem in a more patriarchal age. He held the reasonable view that ‘because a woman cannot be happy without a religion’ it does not follow that therefore ‘she cannot be happy unless her husband is of the same religion.’ The unbeliever must not bow to respectability, but the unbeliever must also remember that: ‘The prate of new-born scepticism may be as tiresome as the cant of grey orthodoxy.’ Discord of temperament is more likely to be troublesome to a marriage than difference of opinion.

Morley’s *On Compromise* also has many wise things to say about politics, things which are particularly apt at the present time of constitutional crisis. He sees the cabinet government and party system of his time as having come about as the result of a process of rational historical development. Politics should be conducted, not on principles of abstract right such as a Rawls might conceive, but ‘on principles of utility and experience.’ We must recognize that humanity acts from motives relative to its interests and not on metaphysical ideas, and that impersonal ‘economic and material conditions’ have an influence on decision making. Economic as well as moral causes, for example, lay behind the abolition of slavery, an institution not widely questioned until the Enlightenment. Morley is aware that ‘What may be called the House of Commons view of life’ may be ‘excellent in its place, but apt to be blighting and dwarfing out of it.’ But that does not detract from parliament’s vital importance for the nation. Morley’s dislike of Rousseau’s cult of feeling, and his distrust of a populism which appeals to it rather than settling questions by rational debate among those educated for it by history and experience, led him to see there was no place for referenda and plebiscites to settle complex questions in our constitution. To resort to referenda would be an

abandonment of political responsibility. In the 1910 constitutional crisis between the House of Commons and the House of Lords in 1910 over the 1909 budget he was scathing about the idea of resorting to a referendum. In his *Recollections* he wrote: ‘Was the Mother of Parliaments to slay offspring of such world wide renown by the foreign device of special Referendum as any vital disputes arose, away from Parliament and above it? What could compensate for the change from an elastic system of legal powers and practices consecrated by custom, to the rigidity of a written constitution?’ He continued: ‘One of the thousand advantages of the party system is that it reduces the capricious element.’ Morley saw that if a party goes to pieces, as has happened over Brexit, the country is in ‘very real peril.’ He knew how easily altercation can replace serious contribution to a debate, even in parliament itself, let alone in the country at large. At the same time Morley agreed enough with Rousseau to see the importance of the people and that ‘the higher and middling orders’ had prejudices of their own to deaden their perception of that important fact.

It is now universally agreed that the outbreak of war in 1914 was the greatest catastrophe for Europe and the world, leading to untold death and suffering and to the twin tyrannies of Communism and Fascism. It is to Morley’s eternal credit that he held out against two such powerful persuaders as Lloyd George and Winston Churchill and resigned from the cabinet rather than vote to enter the war. How prescient he was! Here quite rightly he felt was an issue on which no compromise was possible. In him the ‘lamp of loyalty to Reason’ he refers to in the conclusion of the Introduction to his *Recollections* was never dimmed. The present feverish political and social atmosphere show how wise he was to see a referendum as a simple binary choice about a complex matter is liable to make the very possibility of the compromise he so prized being achieved very remote.

A Letter of Solidarity: Philosophy outside the regimented order

LIVIO ROSSETTI

‘Dear Rahim,

What I can submit on the occasion of the one hundredth issue of *The Wednesday* is a remark about how philosophy is presently discovering a global or comprehensive alternative to its academic turn. We all know perfectly well that philosophy is being considered since decades a specialization, an area of competition where not by chance it happens that specialists and would-be specialists undergo a severe classification spanning from undergraduate to holder of an endowed chair, and where the analogy with the steps of a military career is simply impressive.

Well, your fine creature, *The Wednesday*, calls itself out of a similar scheme despite being established in a temple of ‘militarized’ philosophy, Oxford. One argument to welcome your choice is that I may be the most abortive human being, or be expected to go to the primary school in the village where I live, but because of my family, which is almost inexistent, I often fail to go to school, or worse. Despite all that, no celebrated ox-cam philosopher is, nor Hegel or Kant, Aristotle or Plato are, entitled to tell me how to think and how to behave. No, the privilege of drawing a conclusion and taking a decision rests with each of us at almost every age. And this is more that telling that I’m a cane, but a cane that thinks, since the celebrated holder of an endowed chair in philosophy can lose patience with me (sure that she can!), but ultimately she has to ask me what I want to do and why, and wait for my answer. Or eventually beat me, imprison me, kill me. Or try to captivate me.

For philosophy may well be something one studies, but hardly something you can *teach*. At the best, you may launch one or more ideas, and try to ensure that these ideas are intelligible and meaningful for me. Then it is up to me to remain amazed or indifferent, to feel a stimulation to comment with



Livio Rossetti

a ‘But then...?’ or just to begin doing no matter what, while ostensibly ignoring you and your ideas. And may well be entitled to react this way, esp. if I am a baby, or a prisoner, or just a person unable to understand your language. Much better if you look for a totally different approach and try to surprise me in some way.

My conclusion is that especially if you are high in the hierarchy, to the point that even well-established philosophers gather to hear you, you have a vital need to be able to be considered an interesting person on the part of ordinary or very ordinary people too. Remember Hector putting aside his spectacular helmet in face of which the fearful little Astyanax was beginning to cry.

Now, at least in my opinion *The Wednesday* is making steps in precisely this direction, which is still foreign to so many professional philosophers. And I can only welcome all that.

Livio’

The Wednesday:

Live philosophical issues with relevant background in the history of ideas

CHRIS NORRIS*

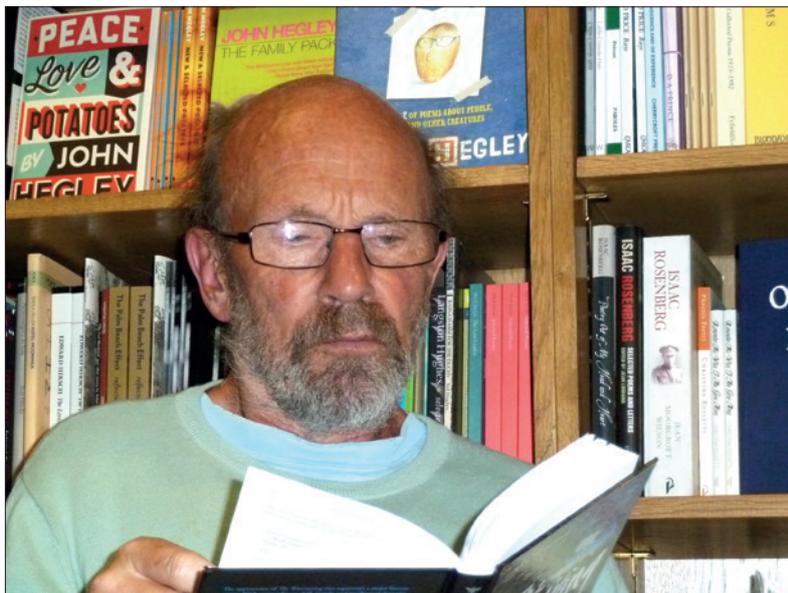
I first heard of The Wednesday when Rahim put out a brief prospectus and call for contributions on PHILOS-L, the philosophers' online site. Here was something different and very welcome, I thought: a weekly magazine (really? so much work!), written and produced by Rahim with Wendy and a small group of like-minded friends (wonderful!), and devoted to philosophy, poetry, and the history of ideas (what a great find!). At that stage, two years back, I was making the not always easy transition from a lifetime of university teaching to retirement, and also – in tandem – from 'straight' academic philosophy to writing poems and verse-essays on mostly philosophical themes. In addition, and far from incidentally, I moved from Cardiff to Swansea and married my wife Valerie just a few months later. So The Wednesday turned up as a marvellous discovery and its advent remains a kind of way-marker in my switch to what feels like a whole new life.

Since then the weekly arrival of a print copy has

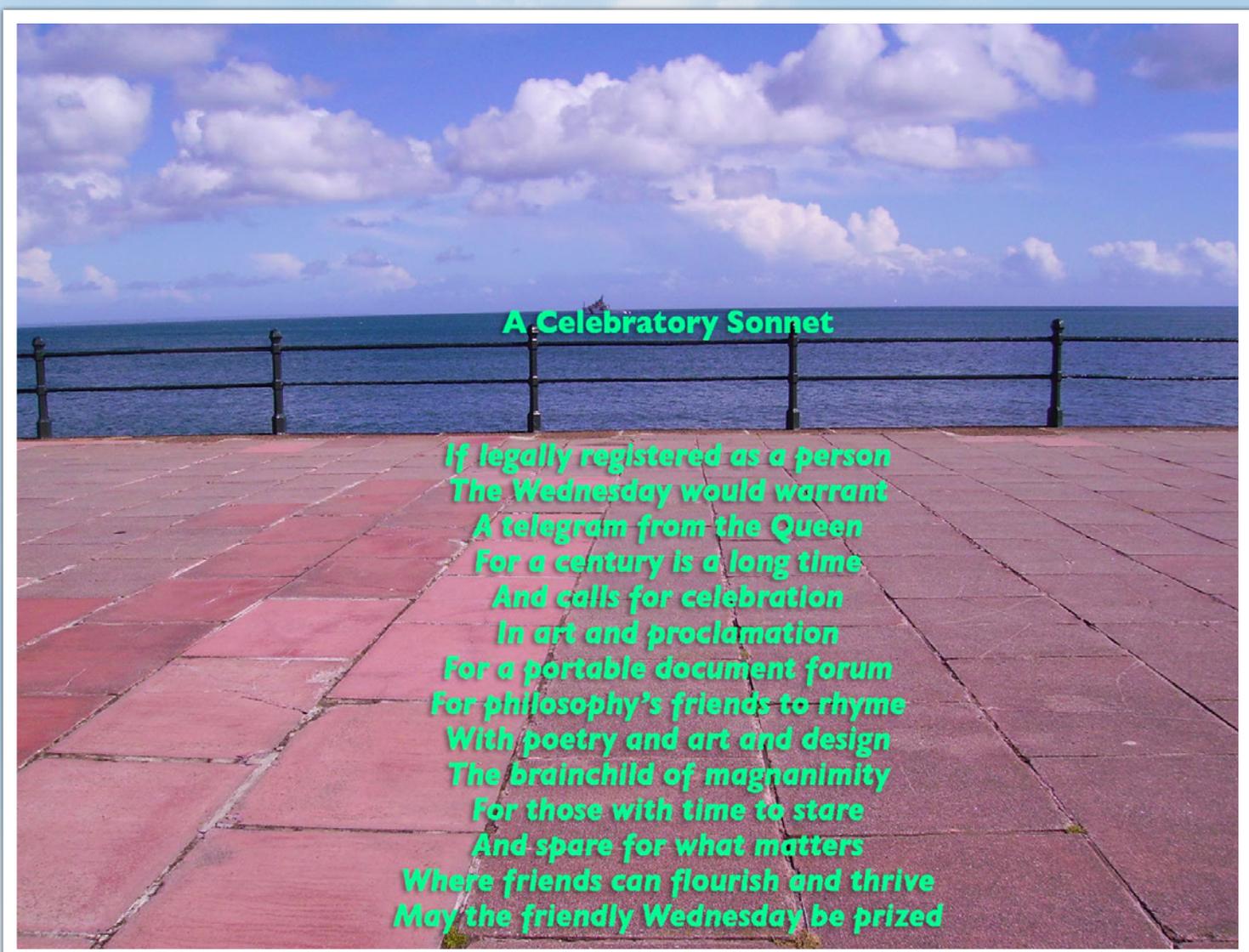
likewise offered a rhythmic counterpoint to my regular periods of sitting down to mull over new ideas for poems. I very much doubt whether I'd have taken that turn from academic work to poetry – or taken it in such a decisive fashion – had it not been for Rahim's great encouragement and willingness to print pieces of a highly challenging and speculative character well beyond the scope of most poetry journals. That's one of the really good things about *The Wednesday*: its refusal to follow the current trend toward intensive specialisation or the strict beating of bounds between disciplines like philosophy and poetry. Another is its relatively informal, courteous and agreeably easy-going ethos, combined – I should add – with wide scholarship and a willingness (all too rare in present-day academic discourse) to integrate discussion of 'live' philosophical issues with their relevant background in the history of ideas.

Then there's the artwork, those splendid graphics, somehow researched and produced to such high professional standards week in and week out.

It's a fantastic achievement for Rahim, Wendy and their team, all of whose names I should have liked to include were it not for the fear of leaving someone out. From the two of us, Val and me: many congratulations on a dream come true through what must have been a period of heroic labours. We look forward to seeing you all again at the coming celebratory event.



Chris Norris reading his poetry in a Wednesday event



A Celebratory Sonnet

**If legally registered as a person
The Wednesday would warrant
A telegram from the Queen
For a century is a long time
And calls for celebration
In art and proclamation
For a portable document forum
For philosophy's friends to rhyme
With poetry and art and design
The brainchild of magnanimity
For those with time to stare
And spare for what matters
Where friends can flourish and thrive
May the friendly Wednesday be prized**

Philosopher Citizens and the Common Good

I live in the small quiet German village of Tawern, twenty minutes or so away from the city of Trier. Founded by the Celts in the late-4th century BC and known as *Treuorum*, Trier was later conquered by the Romans in the late-1st century BC and was renamed *Augusta Treverorum*. This city, the oldest in Germany, was once the capital of that glorious empire, at the time of Constantine the Great. Trier is also the birthplace of a heavyweight of political philosophy: Karl Marx.

Given this historical background, it then appears not so surprising, that Tawern, being a municipality in the Trier-Saarburg district, participates in its 100 kid-strong kindergarten in a children's parliament. Indeed, it is at this tender age that some concepts have to be taught in order to have adults who can push forward our our human civilisation. At this age they learn to listen to others and to express their opinion, rationally. Perhaps, at this age their opinions are about their meals, their toys and their friends, but in the future that will not change so much, since it will be about the cost of living, the products they buy and the rest of their community. Indeed, at this age they already start thinking about the common good. At this age they may be already paving the way to become philosopher citizens.

DR. ALAN XUEREB

What is the Common Good?

John Finnis has revived natural law theory in modern times by offering a scholarly analysis of naturalist concerns within the spectrum of natural rights. According to Finnis, his nine 'basic requirements of practical reasonableness', and his seven 'basic forms of human flourishing' taken together may constitute the universal and immutable 'principles of natural law'. Together, they are clear enough to prevent most forms of injustice. It is these basic goods and methodological requirements that give rise to several *exceptionless* obligations with correlative *exceptionless* natural (human) rights. For Finnis justice and common good are aspects of each other. In his conception of justice both distributive and corrective justice are to be seen as two aspects of the same thing i.e. the fostering of the common good in a society. This in effect requires the participation of all individuals in the basic values according to a coherent life plan and

in conformity with other requirements of practical reasonableness. (See Finnis, John, (1980) *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.)

Following from this general view the common good of a community may be accomplished through the proper and reasonable implementation of a just political set-up based on subsidiarity ensuring, positively and/or negatively, a set of conditions which enables individuals in that particular community to achieve their individual all-round flourishing through their participation in all the irreducible human values. By so doing contribute to the general state of affairs that may be called the community's wellbeing. This includes the flourishing of other individuals who may not necessarily contribute to this common well-being in the same manner as themselves, as to the means, quality and/or quantity of their contributions.



Children's Parliament: A scene from the film *Lord of the Flies*

This general common good description:

(i) Is valid cross-culturally and shall act as a temporal beacon for any future human civilisation/s, whatever the technological advancements and global political set-up.

(ii) All common goods, including scientific and cultural achievements, have to be assessed through, and contained in, this common good vision. If one loses sight of this vision, progress may well turn against any civilisation possessing these achievements. A community losing sight of the common good of 'the common goods' would be counterproductive and therefore defeating its own purpose.

As a result of the arguments contained in first and second premises all common goods are to be put to the appropriate use of the common good. The common good potential is in all human beings, who shall be the ultimate beneficial owners of and have access to all the common goods. The common good is the good in all human beings whilst the common goods are the goods that ought to be enjoyed by all human beings.

Democracy as a Just Set-Up

It so appears that democracy is the just political set-up chosen by Western civilisation. However, this description of the

common good does not rule completely out any other just governing set-up.

Moreover, justice implies three main elements: *debitum* (*what is owed to others*), other-directedness and equality. At this time in political philosophy, at least in that available to us, there appears no 'just set-up' providing the same stability and freedom to choose the common good of one's community and allowing the choice to change that same common good, other than democracy.

A benevolent dictator may provide the same benefits and way of life like any sound democracy but can never claim to be a just political set-up. This is impossible for two reasons:

(i) Because a dictator even if he would be a philosopher-king, can never claim to have been enthroned legitimately unless through some exceptional move some democracy decides to enthrone a Cincinnatus-style dictator; and,

(ii) since as already pointed out justice requires the freedom to change those conditions. If one then cannot have philosopher kings without contravening this 'just political set-up' requirement one has to turn to the other component of the equation, **and that would be, the citizens.**

The other element necessary according to this description of the common good, is that of subsidiarity. There is academic doubt whether this is a *sine qua non* requirement. However, I feel this is quite a necessary requirement, nowadays, in a world full of nationalistic and populist resurrections. Subsidiarity offers the possibility of taking decisions at the lower community level and thus bringing the common good of that community closer to the people of that grouping may decentralise power enough in order to keep the unity and stability of larger countries, like Germany, France and even Britain.

Why Philosopher Citizens?

As direct or indirect consequence of these arguments, the ‘formation’ of wise citizens educated to choose wise representatives, and to change them if they deem it fit is becoming more indispensable for the achievement of the common good.

Socrates argued at his trial that a democracy such as Athens is particularly in need of someone critical and controversial, like himself I would add. Plato, in *The Republic*,

describes how a democracy is unlikely to be a stable political solution, since it offers freedom but neglects the demands of proper statecraft. Plato predicted an almost certain collapse of democracy and decline into tyranny. The question arises: Why does democracy involve a neglect of statecraft? Plato argues that in a system where political power (*cratos*) lies in the hands of the people (*demos*) it is not guaranteed, in fact is unlikely, that those best equipped to rule will get a chance to manage public affairs. Instead the loudest voices will dominate. Irrational and ill-motivated decisions will be made and the complex arena of politics which is in need of careful ordering and management will turn into a foolish spectacle.

To make this plausible, Plato illustrates his account with the ship analogy. Plato invites us to imagine a sea voyage on which all that are travelling feel entitled to claim the helm. Though the captain is a good navigator he is not good at convincing the others that he is, and those who shout the loudest and make the most confident claims, though they know nothing of the skills of navigation, will get



The death of Socrates

a go. Discipline and order go overboard and what results is a kind of drunken pleasure cruise rather than a rational, well-organised journey from A to B. The incompleteness of this analogy does not rule out some of its issues that are still present in western politics, like demagoguery pushing populism to power all around the globe.

Are the 'people' really as incompetent at political decision-making as Plato fears? The death of Socrates seems to confirm it in Plato's view, yet it is not clear what being good at politics means. Is statecraft really a skill like navigation; a skill which requires an expert in the field to execute it? The State does not have a 'destination' that is pre-programmed. The aims of the state are not (and should not be) exhaustible. The common good of the state is that of its community, of everyone living in that specific group, and it is not definite, or finite. It evolves. If a certain level of thinking skills is not achieved one is unable to plan his/her own life coherently. One is also more susceptible to succumb to sophistic demagoguery if one is socially or economically vulnerable. When a society reaches this level it may indicate partial/total failure and collapse of the educational system of that community. When demagoguery and/or the power of incumbency become more successful than the will of the 'people' then democracy fails, proportionately to how successful demagoguery and/or the power of incumbency are.

Is democracy coming full circle or not?

Democracy has come full circle in the sense that after two millennia it still fails to answer properly the same old questions Socrates and Plato used to ask. It has come full circle since it is plagued by the same inadequacies. The reason is appallingly obvious. All human activity is just that, human.

Socrates was not elitist in the normal sense.

He did not believe that a narrow few should only ever vote. He did, however, insist that only those who had thought about issues rationally and deeply should be allowed to vote.

Perhaps, Western modern democracy has forgotten the distinction between an intellectual democracy and a democracy by birth right, allowing universal suffrage, without connecting it to wisdom. Democracy has linked the right to vote to a stage of development and Socrates knew exactly where that would lead to - a system the Athenians feared above all, demagoguery.

Ancient Athens had painful experience of demagogues, for example, the shady figure of Alcibiades. Socrates knew how easily people seeking election could exploit a person's desire for easy answers. Perhaps, Western civilisation has forgotten all about Socrates' salient warnings against democracy. It preferred to think of democracy as an undisputable good - rather than a process that is only ever as effective (even if it is not so efficient at times) as the education system that surrounds it. As a result, Western liberal democracies may have elected many demagogues, and very few politicians.

This is the collective challenge of modern citizens, as it was for ancient Athens, and to philosophers: to foster and encourage more of their fellow citizens to critically think and involve themselves in politics to become *philosopher* citizens (Finnis, *ibid*, p.103) and then choose rationally and wisely *philosopher* representatives in parliament. After all the common good is the coordination of the individual good with the good of that community.

This critical thinking ought to start first and foremost with our children, through encouraging them to 'ask a good question'!

Epilogue

**Ariadne was asleep at the time
Theseus left Naxos.
When she awoke
she saw his sails retreating
on a compliant sea.**

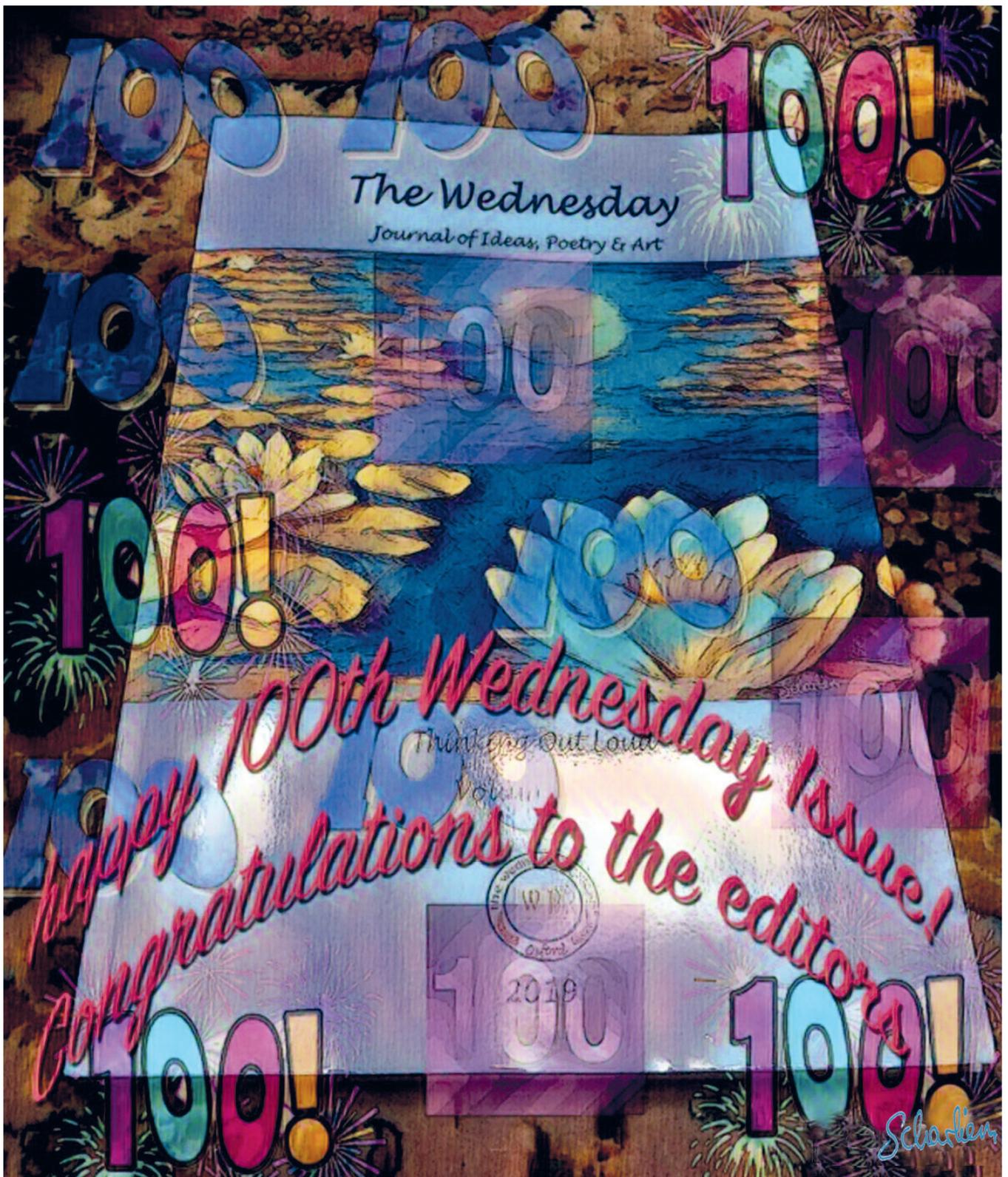
**And we keep repeating the legend,
coming back to the same
questions, rendering the same
difficult surfaces
without turning them
into anything. Life is so stacked
with Titian blue, it is hard to
get a view; and even
the brushwork sets out to deceive.**

**So here we are, trying again
to share our history,
and you say it isn't enough!
With wounds so unquiet, when
will I ever turn back from the sea?**

Erica Warburton

Ariadne





Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*

Memories Of The Wednesday Group

DENNIS HARRISON

I collected often my pizza from the ice cream joint in Little Clarendon Street and there they were, huddled in conspiratorial debate. I knew some of the faces. Ray the Trot, who pretends to be so pointlessly far to the left that his glasses fall off every time he turns right in the street; Fred the philosophical builder, who wields a trowel as Aristotle might; David, who sprinkles panoramic bon mot into his speech as though vinegar on a plate of fish and chips; the other David, a poet desperate to find an appropriate rhyme for phenomenology; Rahim, who I felt always I had let down in some way because he emits such warm civility and charm that I felt pliant; others were tall or short, dishevelled or smart; few women attended, but I guess that football, Facebook browsing and philosophy are mostly male preserves, at least in

Oxford on a midweek afternoon: I write of the Wednesday Group.

The rumour is that the group forced the pizza trade in Jericho to bottom out, so the venue went under and closed; I hazard that this motley assembly, when they ventured to meet next in the Albion Beatnik Bookstore, could well be a reason behind that shop's demise. Perhaps the group is a barometer of retail economics. But if my trade declined, my enthusiasm for their presence certainly did not, for they were a most delightful gathering, a joy to host.

The bookstore was first and foremost a vehicle for others to ride, and it worked best when it was participative. It was Robert Putnam's theories of social capital in action, though it was never



Dennis talking to Paul and Dianne Cockburn

a hippy commune. The Wednesday Group, fortunately, did not include hippies and its members understood that the shop had a personality to which each could contribute. So the group's humour and zest shone, it was resourceful and open minded, and it curated several fabulous poetry readings with Chris Norris, a generous and humble man, qualities the group shares. And this leads to the nub of the Wednesday Group. Philosophy can be a supercilious beast, discussed by teenagers with acne, but, once short trousers are discarded it is so often left to heavyweight intellectuals with their footnoted tones. Yet this group defies this: it presents philosophy unabashedly for all-comers. The wonderful magazine it produces weekly has articles written by earnest members, and, side by side, snug and dovetailed, are pieces by learned, professional folk. The hack and doyen feast together.

One of the shop's afterlife murmurs of which I am most proud is the magazine that Rahim started on behalf of the group, *The Wednesday*, and its growing strength. Rahim is a Fleet Street impresario manqué. He negotiates Conrad Black's criminality and Robert Maxwell's bluster with the principled voice of Harold Evans, Cecil King's hypochondria, and, occasionally I am sure, Rupert Murdoch's manipulative mendacity; at all times, though, Lord Beaverbrook's tyrannical kindness. If there was reluctance felt by some at the magazine's birth, Rahim will have assuaged all fears. His is the most wonderful of creations. It's benevolent, too, for without the calls for creativity that it demands, the Wednesday Group might otherwise be mugging old ladies in the street.



A Wednesday meeting at Albion-Beatnik Bookstore

The Wednesday

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David Burridge