

The *Wednesday*



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group at Albion Beatnik - Oxford

Editorial

Descartes' Dreams

Dreams have been expelled from philosophical discourse at the present time, at least in analytical philosophy. They are considered the subject matter of psychology. But one may be surprised to know that modern philosophy started with dreams. In his book *Descartes*, Anthony Grayling reports that Descartes had three successive dreams in one night. He thought that his whole philosophy had been revealed to him that night. He felt so convinced by the dreams that he wrote them down and attempted an interpretation.

It was remarkable that these dreams followed each other on the same night despite a few interruptions. He saw himself buffeted by a strong wind and sought shelter in a chapel. He was presented with a melon from a far-off land by a stranger. In the second dream, he saw two books, one a dictionary, the other a poetry anthology. A stranger presented him with a poem, starting with 'Yes and No', which he recognised, and this stranger pointed out its place in the anthology. He also recited a poem by Ausonius that begins: 'What way shall I follow in life?' Descartes also saw in the anthology several portraits engraved in copperplate. The next day he visited an Italian painter and saw the same portraits. This was a confirmation for him of the prophetic nature of his dream and he felt the need to pay a homage at the shrine of *Notre Dame de Lorette* to thank God for all that had been revealed to him.

Baillet, the first biographer of Descartes, reports that Descartes '...judged that the dictionary could only mean all the sciences gathered together and that the anthology entitled *Corpus Poetarum* represented, in a more particular and distinct way, the union of Philosophy and Wisdom.' The poetry anthology was interpreted to represent Revelation and Enthusiasm. By 'Yes and No' he understood Truth and Falsehood

in human inquiry and science. Baillet adds that 'he was so bold as to believe that the Spirit of Truth has wished, by means of this dream, to open to him the treasures of all the sciences.' Leibniz was impressed by these dreams and took them seriously. The world then was less disenchanted than now.

But Grayling tries to undermine the power of these dreams. He gives a reductive account based on '...the advance of medical understanding in neurology.' He also sees in them the influence of the Rosicrucian's writings that Descartes, allegedly, was familiar with. Is he justified in his reductive account? This question has been partially answered in psychology. Freud gave a reductive account of dreams in general while Jung refused Freud's interpretation and thought that dreams have informative content that is not exhausted by neurological explanations. Of course, Jung was close to the spirit of German Idealism and Freud is associated himself with empirical science (but one needs to read Jung's memory of him).

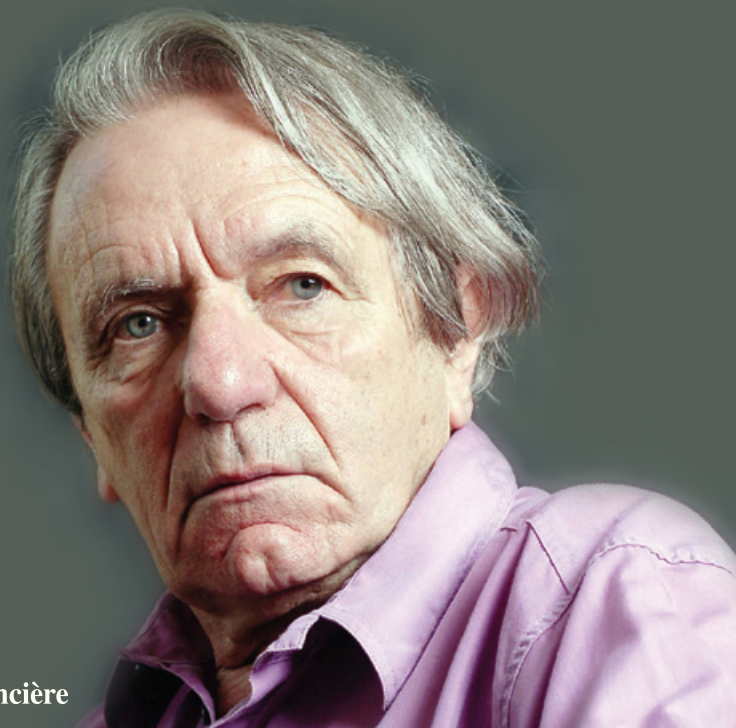
The point of all the above is to see how philosophy dealt with dreams. The German Romantics, and possibly Coleridge, thought that rationality has its limits and that dreams and folkloric tales show the power of the imagination beyond the limit that Kant gave it. Mystics have long observed that a withdrawal from the external senses opens new realms for the soul and is path to knowledge.

However, Descartes dreams show that reductive accounts don't explain our intuitive belief that some dreams are prophetic and have some knowledge content. Dreams are important part of our mental life and the failure to do justice to them may throw doubts on reductionist accounts of the mind in general.

The Editor

The Mystique Fable Of Rancière's

Rancière



When I first looked at Rancière he seemed to be writing about aesthetics rather than the politics of equality. As well as contrasting him with the seemingly less aesthetic older philosophy of Ricoeur, I was thinking of him as a kind of successor to other thinkers I was interested in like Benjamin, Arendt and Merleau-Ponty because they seemed more orientated towards aesthetic issues than Ricoeur was most of the time

But Rancière has also published a series of works probing the concepts of political discourse, such as ideology and proletariat. He was influenced by Althusser, especially when he wrote *The Philosopher and His Poor*, a book about the role of the poor in the intellectual lives of philosophers. He also wrote on democracy and education in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Below a review of his books in the context of French thought and beyond.

DAVID CLOUGH

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It's Michel de Certeau of course who wrote a book about a mystic fable. I have never read it but his *Practice of Everyday Life* book was some help in understanding the embodied motility of the flaneur. So why joke about Rancière's aesthetic politics being a kind of mystic fable? Whatever *The Method of Equality* (2016) actually says, it is the 2004 book on *Aesthetic Politics* that is still his most discussed on line, but most people seem a bit puzzled by it or critical. Yet there is no doubt also that an infectious enthusiasm or halo also surrounds

this thinker. Maybe Rancière is still more hard core in some ways, so most of us (if bourgeois readers) can't really understand him.

In the 1990s and earlier a host of Benjamin scholars, including Richard Wolin and Rainer Rochlitz etc wrote about aesthetic politics in Walter Benjamin. The Dutch Historiographer Frank Ankersmit wrote in the early nineties a book with this title. Then lastly Thomas Docherty, a literary critic, wrote an almost innocuous volume called *Aesthetic Democracy* which



Liberty Leading the People by Eugène Delacroix commemorates the Revolutions of 1830

looks more towards Agamben. So, when Rancière's best known short book appeared in 2004 on this, there is some hinterland elsewhere. And it was followed by two books, *Critique and Disclosure* by Nikolas Kompridis and the anthology edited by him *Philosophical Romanticism*. Recently Kompridis published another anthology on Aesthetic Politics, which made Rancière a dominating figure.

The Sensibilities of the Poor

Davide Panagia latest book is called *Rancière's Sentiments* which shows the transformative potential of the unauthorized sensibilities, words, and acts of those who 'have no part'. But are we almost back with the surrealists here? Rancière's work, Panagia demonstrates, lies in its ability to leave readers with a disjunctive sensibility of the world and what political thinking is and can be. We are on a beach, looking out to sea, on the shores of a new exciting aesthetic reading of politics. When Rancière publishes *On the Shores of Politics*, the title echoed, to me at least, Arendt's *Promise of Politics*. In Rancière's most striking historical work now styled *Proletarian Nights*, but previously published in English as *Nights of Labor*, Rancière dramatically reinterprets the Revolution of 1830, contending that workers were not rebelling against specific hardships and conditions but against

the unyielding predetermination of their lives. But as Jerome Braun's web comment points out Germans have not forgotten the years of poverty when they compared their society unfavourably with that of the French.

Repressed Voices

But if the issue is about repressed voices, how do we choose what to help come back? This raises the problem of nostalgia. Cultural nostalgia might be one obstacle to really getting to grips with Rancière, and while thinkers like Ankersmit and Ricoeur don't endorse it they probably admit more the role it plays in our vintage culture. But one imagines Rancière is not just nostalgic about it all. Bloch and Agnes Heller were quite hard on nostalgia as I remember and now thanks to Frank Ankersmit I need to consider Svetlana Boym on this subject. (See her *Nostalgia and Its Discontents* where Svetlana Boym's twentieth century began with utopia and ended with nostalgia.) Optimistic belief in the future became outmoded, while nostalgia, for better or worse, never went out of fashion, remaining uncannily contemporary.

Why did the 20th century start with techno-optimism yet turn so retro at its close? Will the 21st century be the same? And what does it all imply for Rancière's and other versions of the 19th century.

Of course, for Rancière it is not our choice at all anyway. My question is too top down, spoken from a successful current established order. Rancière seems to be against hierarchy, but it is precisely this that is his appeal. Furthermore, as Tanke puts it:

‘In *Disagreement*, Rancière analysed the aestheticity of politics, demonstrating how questions of political participation and activity involve prior decisions about what will be counted as speech and what construed only as noise.’

(Here the parallel with Alex Ross’s music book *The rest is Noise*, is perhaps all too painfully obvious). To speak of an aesthetics of politics is to express the idea that politics is first and foremost a struggle over who and what can be seen and heard.

Aesthetic Politics

I found two web (or on line) reviews of Rancière’s *Politics and Aesthetics* by Sean Sayers (at Kent University) and Ben Davies (of Artform). After that I read Joseph Tanke’s discussion of how Rancière tries to critique the dominance of Lyotard (and perhaps Derrida) in contemporary art criticism. This was a longer more complex article. Tanke I found out had also written on Foucault, but it was interesting that Foucault did not figure in his essay on Rancière. But even though Rancière thought Althusser too elitist, his critics, as already observed, still see some of that remaining in his own position which I probably still like at some level.

It is probably true, as Ben Davies thinks, that the *Politics and Aesthetics* book is a bit overhyped, but Sean Sayers builds on my own concerns around the dominance of Flaubert. But poor Jacques, is he being just misunderstood? Is he not continuing the radical tradition of Lefebvre and Althusser? Rancière is perhaps not still tinged with religion like Derrida, Ricoeur. De Certeau and Agamben are. Although I have seen volumes about Badiou, Zizek, Lyotard, Bourdieu and

Deleuze on their impact on theology I haven’t yet seen one on Rancière.

Rancière and Foucault

Where Foucault talks of power and bio politics, Rancière thinks he has a pure politics which evades his own concept of the police. The ‘political’ aspect and biopolitical ‘policing’ are then supposed to be unclear in Foucault. But what do these terms really mean? Todd May has a more anarchical themed treatment of both Foucault and Rancière. But how far are domination and oppression really related to an analysis of power relations if the existence of power by itself is no guarantee of oppression? Rather if domination is elastic, then its different appearances become irreducible to a specific, visible, easily identifiable form of domination and so on. And it is also true that some relationships of power are not so obviously oppressive. So, we should be careful about bandying such oppositions around.

Rancière and Post-Democracy

Is Rancière a fully paid up member of the post foundational post-democracy club? Oliver Marchart may or may not include Rancière in his list of post democratic thinkers, because maybe it too has some kind of old Marxist foundational longing in the minds of the proletariat, whose dreams and sentiments are still supposed to propel things much as is implied in the film version of Hugo’s novel.

In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Plato’s concern not to extend democracy too far, arises in Rancière’s discussion of philosophy and politics. Some see his own politics as still pretty left wing.

In Rancière the paradox of politics itself is that it lacks a foundation. Plato’s *polis* resisted the dumbing down of real equality as politics, he argues, begins when the *demos* (the ‘excessive’ or unrepresented part of society) seeks to disrupt the order of domination and distribution of goods ‘naturalized’ by its police and legal institutions.



Victor Hugo

The Haunted Image

Maybe *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* does prefigure the equality theme but it is also a bit like Millbank's use of Ivan Illich and his *De-schooling of Society* in that it can seem like some kind of a fools' charter where everyone simply educates themselves without experts. But although the night sweats of the proletariat (in *Proletarian Night Labours*) might be a different matter, Spiked Magazine complained that Rancière catalogues rather than analyses the consequences with his listings of worker-run newspapers, full of workers' poetry etc. But how do we view this class today? Another fairly early text the *Philosopher and His Poor*, from 1983 was translated in 2009 the same year that *Art and its Discontents* and *The Emancipated Spectator* appeared and these were the first Rancière books I tried to read, but his art critique does not really come easily to me.

The Emancipated Spectator had two chapters with particularly memorable titles. *The Pensive Image*, and *The Unacceptable (or Intolerable) Image*. I found myself unable to have such strong reactions though some of it reminded me of illustrations in Sebald's novels.

Rancière and his contemporaries

For Rancière, 'Politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it.' Some might see Rancière's work on (or critique of) democracy, to argue that democracy reveals the radically contingent context of political decision, a context prior to any determinate political regime.

I take Rancière to be radical, but what do I mean? Maybe I used to say this by associating Rancière and Badiou with unfinished dreams of 1968. But there was also the 19th century, its upheavals and its literature. I associate Rancière (b.1940) and Honneth (same age as Žižek b.1949) as still looking at the revolutionary potential of the 19th C.

Equality

For Rancière, the notion of 'equality' operates as a game of contestation based on 'misunderstanding' not Habermassian communication where the 'politics of truth' becomes the 'politics of appearances.' It is here that I am interested in the book *Disagreement or Recognition* where Rancière and Honneth discuss their somewhat different approaches. Honneth is following both Hegel and Habermas in his seminal *Struggle for Recognition*. We need to understand Rancière's view of the central concept of equality as less a demand, than a presupposition. But then this assumption might seem (and often it does) a contradiction given the kind of old fashioned struggle he still seems to be in. We'll say again that Rancière seems to be against hierarchy, but it is precisely this that is his appeal. It is so similar to *Les Misérables* in some ways, though he seems to prefer Flaubert to Hugo or Zola who seem more socialist to us now.

Reflections from Rancière: Five Villanelles



CHRIS NORRIS

A man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know. He cannot search for what he knows – since he knows it, there is no need to search – nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.

Plato, *Meno*

The master always keeps a piece of learning – that is to say, a piece of the student's ignorance – up his sleeve. I understood that, says the satisfied student. You think so, corrects the master. In fact, there's a difficulty here that I've been sparing you until now. We will explain it when we get to the corresponding lesson. What does this mean? asks the curious student. I could tell you, responds the master, but it would be premature: you wouldn't understand at all Thus, does the triumphant Achilles drag Hector's corpse, attached to his chariot, around the city of Troy.

Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation*



It's Meno's paradox I take to heart.
You taught me this yet proved your teaching vain.
If naught's foreknown how then can learning start?

It seems those plus-marks on my progress-chart
Were things that I forgot, then learned again.
It's Meno's paradox I take to heart.

Forgetting's a much underrated art,
Said Nietzsche, one that helps us to keep sane.
If all's foreknown how then can learning start?

Well-known to you but not to poor Descartes
Who thought all truths must show up sharp and plain.
It's Meno's paradox I take to heart.

You taught me: no thought-strategy so smart
It yields up truths fresh-minted in the brain.
If naught's foreknown how then can learning start?

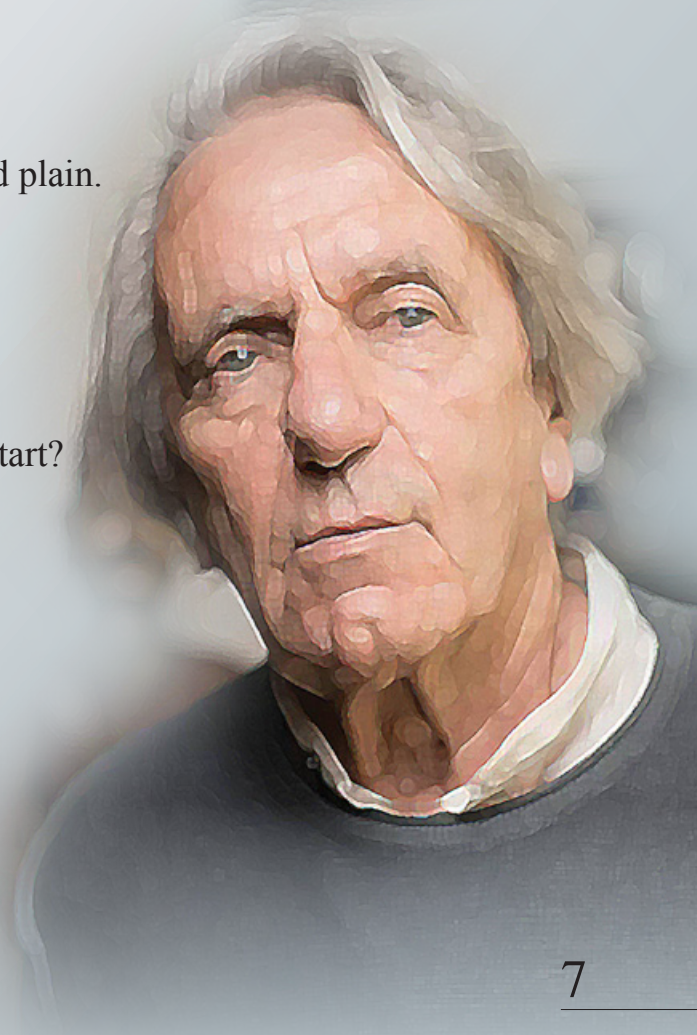
That's how my anamnesis plays its part
By setting your maieutic skills in train.
It's Meno's paradox I take to heart;
If all's foreknown how then can learning start?

* * * * *

Let's see that neither of us takes the lead.
Such pedagogy begs a modest air.
The *Meno* ploy's much likelier to succeed.

The ignorant schoolmaster finds his creed
In this shrewd maxim of Jacques Rancière:
Let's see that neither of us takes the lead.

Rancière



Poetry

The old-style pedagogues still say ‘Force-feed
The ignorami’, but those dotards err:
The *Meno* ploy’s much likelier to succeed.

It says we’ll both get more by heart once freed
From that old itch to hog the teacher’s share.
Let’s see that neither of us takes the lead.

It’s classroom inequalities that breed
The teacher’s rage and pupil’s vengeful prayer:
The *Meno* ploy’s much likelier to succeed.

Else they’d have recognised the mutual need
For ignorance between that mind-locked pair.
Let’s see that neither of us takes the lead;
The *Meno* ploy’s much likelier to succeed.

* * * * *

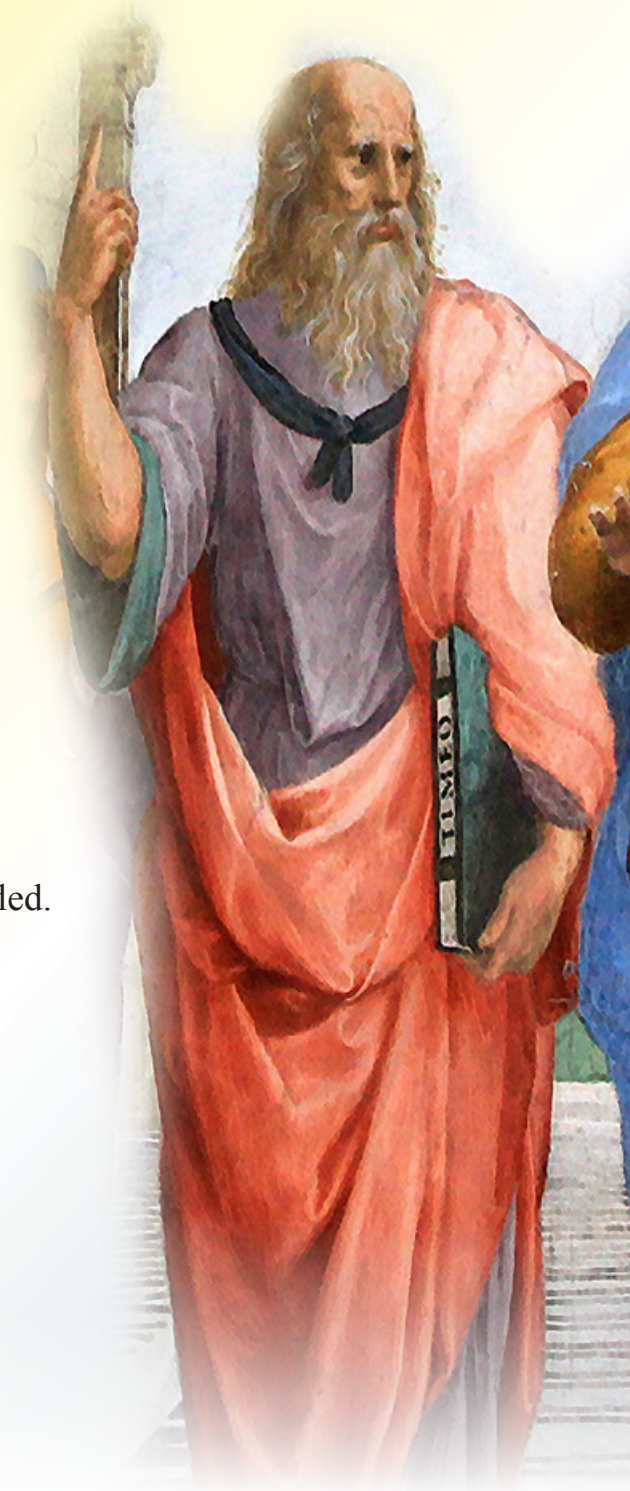
Unwise to think you’re holding all the keys.
That way, you’ll find they’ve jammed the lock and fled.
Make your best guide the *ieron* Socrates.

His wager was he’d lead them, by degrees,
To think ‘No telling lead from being led’.
Unwise to think you’re holding all the keys.

8

His way, I guess you’ll not do much to please
The ruling class (think hemlock!), but instead
Make your best guide the *ieron* Socrates.

Then it’s both parties feel the tightened squeeze
Of an elenchus, yet still think ahead:



Plato and Aristotle



Unwise to think you're holding all the keys.

Old pedagogues would have you on your knees,
Not thinking inch-by-inch along the thread.
Make your best guide the *eiron* Socrates.

The end's what neither party yet foresees,
Since each has no fixed aim to take as read.
Unwise to think you're holding all the keys;
Make your best guide the *eiron* Socrates.

* * * * *

Wise ignorance but not the holy fool.
Let folly not be praised for heaven's sake.
No yield from nescience except in school.

'Seek truths unthought-of' is the only rule.
Think dialectically where they're at stake.
Wise ignorance but not the holy fool.

Just ignorant full-stop, the teacher who'll
Tell pupils to enjoy a thinking-break:
No yield from nescience except in school.

Don't let Erasmus trick you: ridicule,
Not praise, should greet each sainted folly-fake.
Wise ignorance but not the holy fool.

He's much too single-track: thinking's a dual-
Drive vehicle so think which routes to take:
No yield from nescience except in school.

Poetry

The ignorant schoolmaster reckons you'll
Exceed all grade-predictions he could make.
Wise ignorance but not the holy fool;
No yield from nescience except in school.

* * * * *

His axiom: equal shares in mother-wit.
If things seem otherwise, ask yourself why,
Then get on terms and make the axiom fit.

Corollary: should circumstance permit,
Low-flying types would touch a common sky.
His axiom: equal shares in mother-wit.

Old pedagogues have arguments to pit
Against him, but he runs the same reply:
'Then get on terms and make the axiom fit'.

It just means trading in your teacher's kit
For one that does without the clever-guy.
His axiom: equal shares in mother-wit.

Perhaps by this we'll do our modest bit
To give the Rancièrè theory a good try,
Then get on terms and make the axiom fit.

Good chance us twin co-acolytes may quit
School finally with equal space to fly.
His axiom: equal shares in mother-wit;
Then get on terms make the axiom fit.

Descartes

The Truth of Poetry

Notes of the Wednesday Meeting 14th March 2018

PAUL COCKBURN

We started by talking about poetry and the origins of language. Barbara Vellacott spoke about the work of Owen Barfield, which deals with this subject. In his book 'Poetic Diction' Barfield questions the established view of the development of language. One theory might be that early human consciousness and language was mythical and poetic, and that as man evolved our language has become more precise and scientific. However, Barfield believes that human consciousness has evolved so that the poetic human imagination has continuously created and expanded language over time. The interweaving of rationality and imagination is complex. Early humans were more connected and united with nature in 'primal participation', but we now need to achieve 'final participation' with nature where our rational thinking is united with our intuitive and imaginative thinking.

How does poetry fit into such a schema? The poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge perhaps does; they talked together about the cardinal points of poetry being the truth of nature and the power of the imagination. Wallace Stevens is a poet who puts together different 'parts' of the world in an attempt to make it coherent. He speaks when writing of the sea of the 'rage for order' in his poem 'The Idea of Order at Key West'.

Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
The maker's rage to order words of the sea

Poetry now covers a wide spectrum, and much modern poetry seems very 'everyday'. Post-modern poetry is often depressing! In contrast



Wallace Stevens

poets such as Dylan Thomas are enjoyable to read. He seems 'superabundant' and seems to have roots in the Welsh bardic tradition. Perhaps there is a link between Thomas and Wallace Stevens as Thomas writes:

Do not go gentle into that good night
Rage, rage against the dying of the light

Philip Larkin was seen as sardonic and ironic.

Auden's poem in memory of W B Yeats was mentioned by David Clough, along with the poets Jabbes, Celan, Lowell and William Carlos Williams (who was pediatrician as well as a poet). Maybe poets can provide us with epiphanies in dark times and thus transfigure the everyday. Perhaps we are all artists.

‘As a watch in the night’

As if a trespasser arrived
at a room without sound,
with no moaning, but its absence,
the vague feeling of someone
sleeping or people
suddenly stop talking.

When he enters,
he finds no contours,
but feels they hurt
like long lost limbs that once were.
He seeks out the shadows
riddled by cobwebs.

There is no sound in the shadows,
just a cold hole, which pulls him in
beyond the ruins of silence,
a crooked wounding silence
in the remnants of a stricken night.



Poem and Painting by *Scharlie Meeuws*



He has to reach the table,
covered by blades of grass,
grass that is renewed in the morning
and fades and withers in the evening.

He knows he has to sweep it away,
each and every night,
sideways to the soundless currents
of its shifting reflection.
Each time he tries,
whatever his approach,
the night keeps dying,
as if it were human.

Exhibitions

'Living with Gods'

An exhibition at the British Museum

BARBARA VELLACOTT

If you are at all curious about, if not involved in the exploration of religious traditions, this exhibition is a must. But get there quickly because it ends on April 8!

It focuses not on *what* people from different traditions believe – a realm in which you can agree, disagree, think it's plausible or nonsense – but on *how* they believe, and on the physical, material and bodily means through which they experience and express beliefs. I give you two vignettes from the section on Light. There is a 14th century glass mosque lamp from Aleppo in Syria, on which is inscribed in lovely calligraphy these Quranic words:

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche within which is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass and the glass is like a shining star. Allah guides to his light whom he will.

There is also a contemporary bronze and glass sculpture by Preston Singletary portraying the Native American story of the Raven that brought light to the world. It has a mythic quality in contemporary design which repays contemplation.

Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Christian, Islamic and native traditions all have a place in the



Mosque lamp From Aleppo, Syria, c. 1300–1340.



The wheel of life. Tibet, 19th century



**The Resurrection and
Descent of the Holy Ghost.
Made in Swabia,
Bavaria, Germany,
15th century.**

exhibition. And there is unusual wisdom in the accompanying text, with occasional unexpected quotations from within those traditions. These words of the 4th century Christian theologian St Augustine of Hippo, for example, are on the wall in the section on ‘prayer as sound’.

God gave us music, that we may pray without words.

Recognition of contemporary life is present through, for example, the Lampedusa Cross by Syrian artist Issam Kourbaj in his poignant installation: ‘Dark Water, Burning World’ to express the grievous situation of refugees fleeing

to Italy from North Africa and the Middle East. The final graphic installation of the exhibition, by Robert Barry, 1970, is the following text on a white wall:

IT IS WHOLLY INDETERMINATE
IT HAS NO SPECIFIC TRAITS
IT IS ENTIRELY INEFFABLE
IT IS NEVER SEEN
IT IS NOT ACCESSIBLE

The exhibition is a kind of incarnation – beautiful, sometimes peculiar, sometimes amusing or jolly, often moving and always fascinating – of the human approach to the ineffable and unapproachable.

The Wednesday

Editor:

Dr. Rahim Hassan

Contact Us:

rahimhassan@hotmail.co.uk

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Contributors:

Barbara Vellacott

Paul Cockburn

Prof. Chris Norris

Prof. Nona M. Ferdon

Dianne Cockburn

David Solomonn

Fred Cousins

David Clough

Raymond Ellison

David Burridge

Ranjini Ghosh

Sara Berti

David Jones

Monika Filipek

Erica Warburton

Scharlie Meeuws

Dennis Harrison

Paul Enock

Mike England

Edward Greenwood

Mohamed Mustafa Kamal

Out Of Season



Like a leaf twisting on an empty branch,
or the brief spill of winter sun,
I know I haven't long.

I play with future plans, like borrowed toys
to be given back, quite soon.

Kindly genes stay the shrivel
Just for now.....
Then muscles sag and bones won't lift;
time measures steps still to stumble.

I ponder memory's open door.
pick stories from my musty stack.
Unfolding, then a match is struck,
hurt returns to quietly burn inside.

David Burridge