

The Wednesday



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

The Body as a Philosophical Question

We tend to take our bodies for granted but there are philosophical questions connected with the body: Is there a mind/body problem? Are we essentially a mind? Is the body a means of dividing this one mind into separate figures? What are the limits of the body? What does the thinking: a mind or a body? Does philosophy start with the mind or the body or is it a matter of preference? But are these the theoretical questions for the philosophy of mind or do they have relevance to lived reality?

We have been discussing these issues in our weekly meeting in regard of the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (more on him inside this issue). He discussed these questions to a great length in his book *Phenomenology of Perception*. But the question started with Descartes who has some prejudices against the body and the passions. Perhaps this is a philosophical prejudice that goes well back to Plato. But Descartes has more reasons of his own. He thought that the correctness of our thought is guaranteed by God, but our finite will leads us to mistakes. He also opted for a mathematical way of dealing with reality. Reality becomes a mathematical abstraction.

Edmond Husserl, founder of the phenomenological movement, thought the question goes back to the time of the Renaissance when philosophy joined the sciences and aimed for objective judgements that exclude value. The world became mathematicised and the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) was left behind. Value, meaning and all subjective points of view started to shrink or disappear from philosophical and scientific discourse. Husserl argued that scientific (and philosophical) judgments are made against a background of the life-world. The forgetting of the life-world created a distortion that leads to the neglect of how we actually live life as embodied subjects. He called for the suspension of the scientific (empirical) view and called for the return to things

themselves. His call was taken up by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in different directions, the first emphasising action or being-in-the world and the second trying to re-instate the body as a source of knowledge and perception.

But all phenomenology goes back to Kant. It was Kant who suggested that the world has two aspects to it. One aspect is the world in relation to us, as it appears to us, which he called phenomenal. The other is the world in itself which he called noumenal. But he thought the body was part of the objective world. He didn't take it as a living body. What he was interested in was the universality of moral judgment and he thought that to get to such judgement one had to be disinterested. One has to act morally for the sake of morality not for any bodily, physiological or psychological inclinations. His view was corrected by his contemporary younger philosopher, Fichte, who insisted in *The System of Ethics* that '...a condition for all morality is the preservation and maximal perfection of the body.' However, morality requires that we act freely and rationally and the body can only be developed to satisfy the moral end of self-sufficiency.

Re-instating the body in philosophy was a great move that restored the link between philosophy and the life-world. Phenomenology, for example, influenced literature, the novel in particular, and art. It produced amazing contemplations of reality as we find in Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* and in hermeneutics. It also influenced feminism, race and cultural studies generally.

Embodiment also has a political side to it, with the move from thinking to action, such as in Marxist philosophy. Generally, the philosophical question of the body proved its worth and perhaps needs more investigation.

The Editor

Reflectivity

Reflectivity is a term that is used by Jerrold Seigel in his excellent book *The Idea of the Self*. I would regard reflection as thinking beyond immediate reactions. It is about reasoning and that form of abstract thinking which we know as metaphysics, if indeed such a process of thinking is valid. In this article I want to generally consider reflectivity as an expression of self.

DAVID BURRIDGE

Seigel defines the self as follows:

'Reflectivity allows humans to address and to some degree deal with the tensions or conflicts between what biology demands and what cultural existence exposes or allows.

Below the threshold of consciousness, we make order out of the constant flow of perceptual experience.'

So, when we reflect we are of course dealing with our biological threats and appetites like any other animal species. But then we have a culture to reflect on, which determines relationships and the expression of our beliefs. But is that all? Is it the case that the process of reflection needs sensory triggers to shape our thinking or make it meaningful?

Descartes argued that there was a clear dualism, the body and the mind. Arguably then the mind could easily reflect on abstractions that had no empirical stimulus. Kant on the other hand accepted that our thinking was normally initiated by appearances. Kant states in the *Introduction to the Critique of Pure Reason*: 'There is no doubt whatever that all our cognitions begin with experience. For how should our faculty of knowledge be awakened into action...' (B1). But then for him reason

should transcend to a pure state. It is argued that reason is the faculty that lifts us beyond the state of being creatures. It enables us to reflect on and question all that appears in front of us. But does it go beyond that? Is there a mystical quality of goodness for example waiting outside our empirical world waiting to lift us to a higher order of thinking? It is tempting to sit and drift, but when we get back to the street we still have to make our way through crowds and traffic.

Clearly, we are shaped by our social environment. I believe there is a difference to accepting this fact on the one hand and being totally deterministic on the other. Whether we are following our animal instincts or conforming to social norms we have the ability to reflect on and question the morality of conforming to particular outcomes, to see if they are morally questionable.

The French philosopher Maine de Biran argued (writing at the beginning of the 19th Century):

'Beneath this outer man who feels, imagines, discourses, reasons, draws consequences from his premises, acts outside himself to satisfy passions or natural appetites, goes about the various tasks of society

behind this exterior man, as logical, moral ... there is an inner man who is a separate subject, accessible to his own apperception or intuition, and who carries in himself his own illumination, which is darkened rather than brightened by rays that come from outside.'

He was arguing that the inner self was completely free from the external forces but the light of reason is also blocked out. I would argue that there is of course a beast inside us alongside or integrated with a self that can through reflection seek a higher good than the base instincts of the ID.

In this respect I am alongside Kant. There is a fundamental value in us he called *GOODWILL*. However, there is a problem with his goodwill in that it is not created by reason. *We may have misunderstood the purpose of nature in assigning reason to our will as its governor.'* (Kant: *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals*)

Also: *'A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, because of its fitness to attain some propose end, but only because of its volition, that it is good in itself and, regarded for itself....'*

There is a quality of reflection for Kant which transcends the empirical world. This leads to his Categorical Imperative. We need to seek moral authority beyond any social authority and use this to define maxims that should be imposed on the empirical world rather than be in any way inspired by our experience of the world.

I have never found this an effective approach to morality. Yes of course we should take time out to calm our thoughts and lift our consciousness above the grasp of snarls of our grimy inner beast. Then when we have cleared our minds, focus firmly on goodwill as it can

be manifested in the empirical world. When



Maine de Biran

things seem to go wrong we strive for better outcomes inspired by the goodwill that floods our minds.

Reflectivity Beyond the Perceived Object

The next question for Reflectivity is how far can we realistically contemplate beyond the perceived object?

Consider a stone! Our first appreciation of this object is of course what we sense; the shape, size, colour etc. The effect on our senses, in *Humean* terms, is an impression. Hume accepted that we would use past experiences to make sense of the stone but that is all there is?

Let's imagine that whilst picking into our memories to find an understanding of the



Hume



Kant

shape and size of the stone, we come across memory recalling throwing a stone. This triggers a reflection on ethics. Under what circumstances is throwing this stone ethically acceptable? This way, we are extending the reflection because the answer to the question involves a clarity on the matters of goodwill, just action and humanitarianism.

There would also be a reflection on law. It would of course be a criminal offence to throw a stone at somebody, unless it can be shown to be an act of self-defence. Our reflection then moves away from sensory appearances to socially defined moral values. To go back to Biran, reflections are a tool in the *outer man's* hands. In fact, I am going to argue that Society is not necessarily a dark deterministic force. It has a structured set of values in the law, government and interpersonal relationships that have been developed over time with effort and sacrifice.

Reflectivity can only work if it enables us to lift up our eyes to the populated hills and search for good solutions for others and not

just for me. The inner man may be polishing the stone gleefully, considering who he can hurt. But that is when the super ego needs to step in and challenge his beastly instincts.

There are of course evils in society which need to be challenged. How do we determine what is right and wrong in society? By simply reflecting on the morality of the facts in front of us. It was for example reported recently in the Guardian that there is a growing number of primary school children who come to school dirty because their parents cannot afford to bath or buy the soap to wash them.

One of course must react angrily to this fact, but on reflection we must go further and consider how we reorganise the economy to remove the state of poverty that is growing in the UK. Reflectivity is at the heart of all our moral and philosophical thinking. But is it a question of just standing back and looking at empirical facts or can we meaningfully stand away from facts completely and reflect on abstractions such as Heidegger's Dasein? That is a question for another article.

Text and Photo by *William Bishop*



UPLIFTING THOUGHTS

*Cocooned in thought
I drift in air;
Through schools of thought
I stream my way,
Above the unthought world beneath,
Buoyant with self-supporting will.*

***The I is warmed by fire divine,
The heavenly host, invisible, attend;
My ethereal presence thinking loud –
A chord from the celestial sphere
Interpenetrates harmoniously.
Am I it, or is it I?
If that's a question,
There's no reply.***

*The cocoon disperses;
I drift to earth,
Material drawn by gravity.
I gasp for breath,
My breathing steadies –
My consciousness remains on ready.*

Merleau-Ponty:

Embodiment Habit and Perception

Merleau-Ponty



The question of embodiment was raised in our Wednesday debate in relation to gesture. Recent philosophers got interested in silent gesturing of the clown who has nothing to transcend, as in the writings of Peter Berger, and George Pattison. Wittgenstein saw gesture as silent action rather than contemplation in a religious sense as in DZ Phillips writings. So, what did the very incarnate and material Merleau-Ponty mean by primordial silence? Was this religious?

DAVID CLOUGH

6 **M**acDowell thinks speaking is necessary for conscious thought but Serres comments on the mouth too in *Positions*. Linguistic philosophy lacks a nose for this or taste. Laughter maybe underrated but these are more so in philosophy. All are about the mouth. It is the mouth and nose that are neglected. Silence on the other hand is almost impossible to achieve in the modern world of flightpaths, roads, digital attachments and, shortly, communication implants. Thinking, Serres says, should include silence as well as speech. The desert of his youth is a symbol of this. But communication theory also sees the isolated self as both mythic and abstract.

Merleau-Ponty and Religion

There is now horizontal rather than vertical transcendence. The Christian God, Merleau-Ponty says in *The Voices of Silence* essay in *Signs* is less concerned with the vertical of subordination. Maybe, but I don't really feel this myself. I would argue that Merleau-Ponty is just reflecting a mis-readings of Hegel in his time in France, mainly through Kojève. Unlike Levinas and Ricoeur, I don't think Merleau-Ponty is really writing theology in a rounded sense. He is not worrying about it the way they did. But his embodied view does have things to say as in Christopher Ben Simpson's recent book *Merleau-Ponty and Theology*.

Yes, there was Comte, and historians like Renan and Michelet. There were poets by the dozen and also novelists and some playwrights, but until Bergson the reputation of French Philosophy was not what it became in the 1960s to the 80s. Before Bergson, there was Maine de Biran and Ravaisson. In some ways, they anticipate where Merleau-Ponty and, following them, where more pragmatist thinkers like Hubert Dreyfus went. The Aristotelians are ontological about habit but Descartes and Kant introduced the problem of just pretending, mimicking or going through the motions, like Sartre's waiter, of some kind of mere instrumental inauthenticity which could be platonic. But Ravaisson, Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus wanted a more unified authentic habitual practice transferred to learned ones by eventually almost unconscious liberation. An accomplished way of being where sensibility is not fully passive and also action and perception are not completely passive, there is a pre-orientation of some kind.

The First Finished Book

When he died at 53 in 1961 Merleau-Ponty left us two finished books. The first was the 1942 *The Structure of Behaviour* which influenced Charles Taylor and perhaps Harry Frankfurt and maybe Taylor Carmen. Hugh J Silverman's *Inscriptions* and a similarly themed book by James Schmidt talked about the relation of phenomenology to Structuralism. Both books acknowledge that Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur were still trying to perform some kind of integration between Husserl and Hegel, whereas in the last thirty years most continental philosophers who have impacted US debates have done so through pragmatism instead of neat Hegelian approaches.

Merleau-Ponty could have three levels. Dreyfus and Todes argue for a pre-objective experience of the world, then handling the objects of the lifeworld in the ordinary world, and then the wholly objective non-perspectival science-like view. Interesting as this is, it is noted that this account does indeed offer only the prose of the world as its goal. But I am not ready to see Merleau-Ponty as flat as this especially because the bodily passions are being strongly promoted in a key way.

Taylor thinks he is being ontological more than

being just about epistemology. Also, his treatment of language offers a way forward perhaps. He distinguished spontaneous expression where emotion is unchecked as authentic 'speaking' speech and more socially formulated conventional speech like Lacan's American worker greetings as 'spoken' secondary expression.

Marcel was a link between Merleau-Ponty and Ricoeur, but Merleau-Ponty took the sense of mystery to be something confined to his body in the world. Judgement requires us to take a position aimed at knowing something at each moment. In intellectualisation (and in Dennett) complex judgement is singularly reduced back to a sensation.

In Christopher Ben Simpson's book *Merleau-Ponty and Theology*, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of ethics uses the perception of the other as a mutual or shared situation. Merleau-Ponty refers to Gestalt. Gestalt's are not necessarily Platonic. They are more like non-totalised incomplete partial clustering. But we can compare Merleau-Ponty's use of them to John Searle: Searle has a similar view of Gestalt awareness as the disposition of the brain to structure degenerate stimuli into certain structured forms.

Pierre Bourdieu elaborates a bit more about habitus as background. Is it like a skill to be learned? Not exactly. Bourdieu's habitus (its interaction with the social field) is not a conceptual capacity but a schematic bodily intelligence, a 'sub-reasonable' practical sense. Carmen says that Searle's background conceives or describes capacities or abilities underpinning mental life but unlike Merleau-Ponty, Taylor and Bourdieu, it is not connected to or does not contribute to intentionality.

It has no content. But Searle privileges the observer's point of view rather than the body's sense. In Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty perception and cognition are not just in the mind but a bodily background that situates thought. But phenomenology does not directly address the largely analytic discourse of the mind/body problem which is essentially a metaphysical question.



Saussure



Hubert Dreyfus

On the other hand, casting the French net further Gail Weiss's anthology *Intertwinings* implies that unlike Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty is a Saussurian. All great prose is a re-creation of the signifying instrument, manipulated according to a new syntax. Mere prosaic writing limits itself to using existing signs and conventions not the capturing of a meaning previously hidden or only implied in a way that is also now widely understandable. A communicative action of a particular kind to be elaborated towards sociology.

After the impressive *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty tries to pursue a line of research called *The Origin of Truth*. This is close to *The Prose of the World* text because it concerns literary language. Diana Coole insists that we need a return to the ontology of *Visible / Invisible* for true understanding. Perceptual faith rectifies the Cartesian. Keith Ansell-Pearson writes in *Germinal Life* that the later Merleau-Ponty is more resilient to Deleuze's charge of subjectivism as the real is made real over time through unpredictable affinities jostling with fixed habits such that a gestalt change occurs.

The Second Finished Book

The second finished book was the better known one. It is his *Phenomenology of Perception*. As pointed out there, it has some arresting if knotted

ideas. Instead of judging, the body is *set to see* more. We anticipate and are *set-to-explore*. This is older than intelligence and pre-conscious. Cezanne makes more visible how we see the world. The ship masts against the trees are looking like trees, the distant tree that looks like a man.

Merleau-Ponty compares his use of 'being' and 'having' with Marcel. For Marcel I have a house, a belonging in the weak sense, whereas being is an existential taking up, I am my body, I am my life. Merleau-Ponty makes this 'a having.' I have an idea, a desire, fears. But Merleau-Ponty's being is thus weaker than Marcel's being. The lived present holds a past and a future within its thickness.

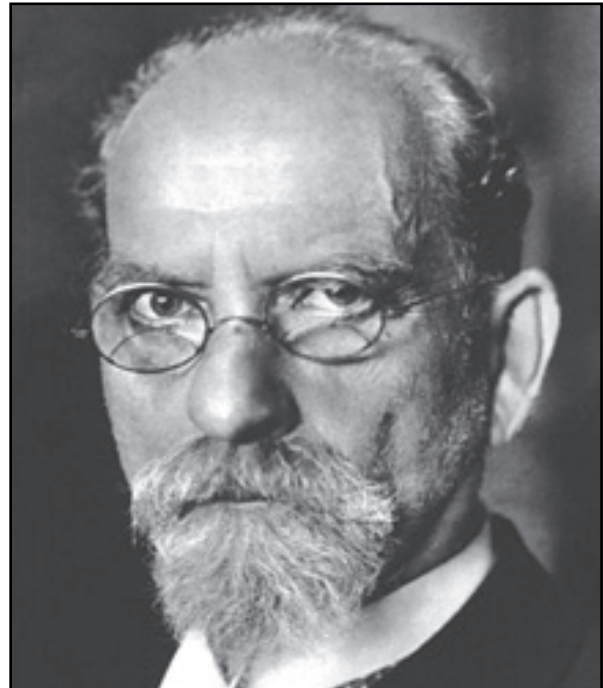
Gail Weiss dealt with Merleau-Ponty in her two books, *Refiguring the Ordinary* and *Intertwinings: Interdisciplinary Encounters with Merleau-Ponty*. The latter is an anthology she edited. Here we meet Merleau-Ponty's own Hegelian resolution: Embodiment as Inter-corporeality. In *Signs* Merleau-Ponty says that the relation of the philosopher to being is not the frontal one of the spectator but a more complicated one. It includes how gestures, perceptions, thought, memory, and language are seen as rays in the world rather than the Kantian synthesis towards the unity of apperception in which a closed system is implied. Weiss in her piece about teaching an old dog new

tricks wants to add an element from William James and Bourdieu's understanding of social class as an omnipresent horizon 'out of which our tastes, aptitudes, and habitual proclivities emerge.' She has again, as in the expanded chapter in *Refiguring the Ordinary*, pointed out the lack of individual agency in Bourdieu.

In her interview, Gail Weiss says: 'These are certainly debatable issues but I would have to say that Merleau-Ponty's most important contribution to Western philosophy is his ability to move beyond traditional ontological and metaphysical dualisms by offering us a phenomenologically compelling account of embodiment as always integrating mind and body, self and other, nature and culture, an account that continues to profoundly engage and influence a whole new generation of continental thinkers both within and outside of philosophy. Indeed, his work is still inspiring exciting new interdisciplinary research a hundred years after his birth.

The most important omissions in his work are, I believe, the ones that have been so ably identified by feminist and critical race theorists such as Judith Butler, Iris Young, and Frantz Fanon, namely, his failing to acknowledge, much less describe, the profound ways in which one's bodily existence can be severely diminished in meaning and value when one is perceived as being of the "wrong" (inferior) sex, and/or the "wrong" (inferior) race. He is actually better on class and disability issues than on race or gender. However, one of the positive results of this omission is that he has left the rest of us a lot of interesting work to do! I believe that doing it actually supports rather than works against Merleau-Ponty's own project insofar as we end up with a better understanding of how our bodies and identities are intersubjectively constituted and never just ours alone.'

Now this goes back to the 1940s background arguably. Phenomenology in both Husserl and Heidegger seemed to offer what these French thinkers really wanted, but the Hegelian master/slave dialectic and recognition, under the influence of Kojève, would also play a big and possibly unfortunate role, at least as has been understood by contemporary Hegel studies. There is also a question about the French reception of Heidegger



Husserl

and Hegel. Then there was Sartre's meeting with Raymond Aron in 1945 and the jibe about the phenomenology of a cocktail as Beauvoir recorded it. Where is the progressive or revolutionary politics in that?

Essay and Incomplete Texts

Merleau-Ponty attended some Sorbonne lectures Husserl gave but his lack of good German didn't help until he read Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences*. It was only reading this book that he (and other philosophers, including Ricoeur) really found what he was looking for. Merleau-Ponty was born in 1908 the same year as the composer Olivier Messiaen.

But where the composer lived to 1992 Merleau-Ponty died suddenly in 1961 of something akin to a brain haemorrhage. Merleau-Ponty remained on friendly terms with Lacan (no mean feat!) and was very close to both Sartre and de Beauvoir. As we will see a number of feminists take some inspiration from him. If Nietzsche and Merleau-Ponty stress a kind of maximal capability, others like Nussbaum and Ricoeur temper this with talk of fragility, vulnerability etc. Philosophy and theology become more aware of disability, and Merleau-Ponty did not anticipate this turn.

Sensuality

First
an alternative to words
of an infinite summer, journeys
and recreation
absorbed in just one pole
that stands
in a vast landscape

never showing directions, and we pass
in an instant, endlessly,
carefully and painfully.

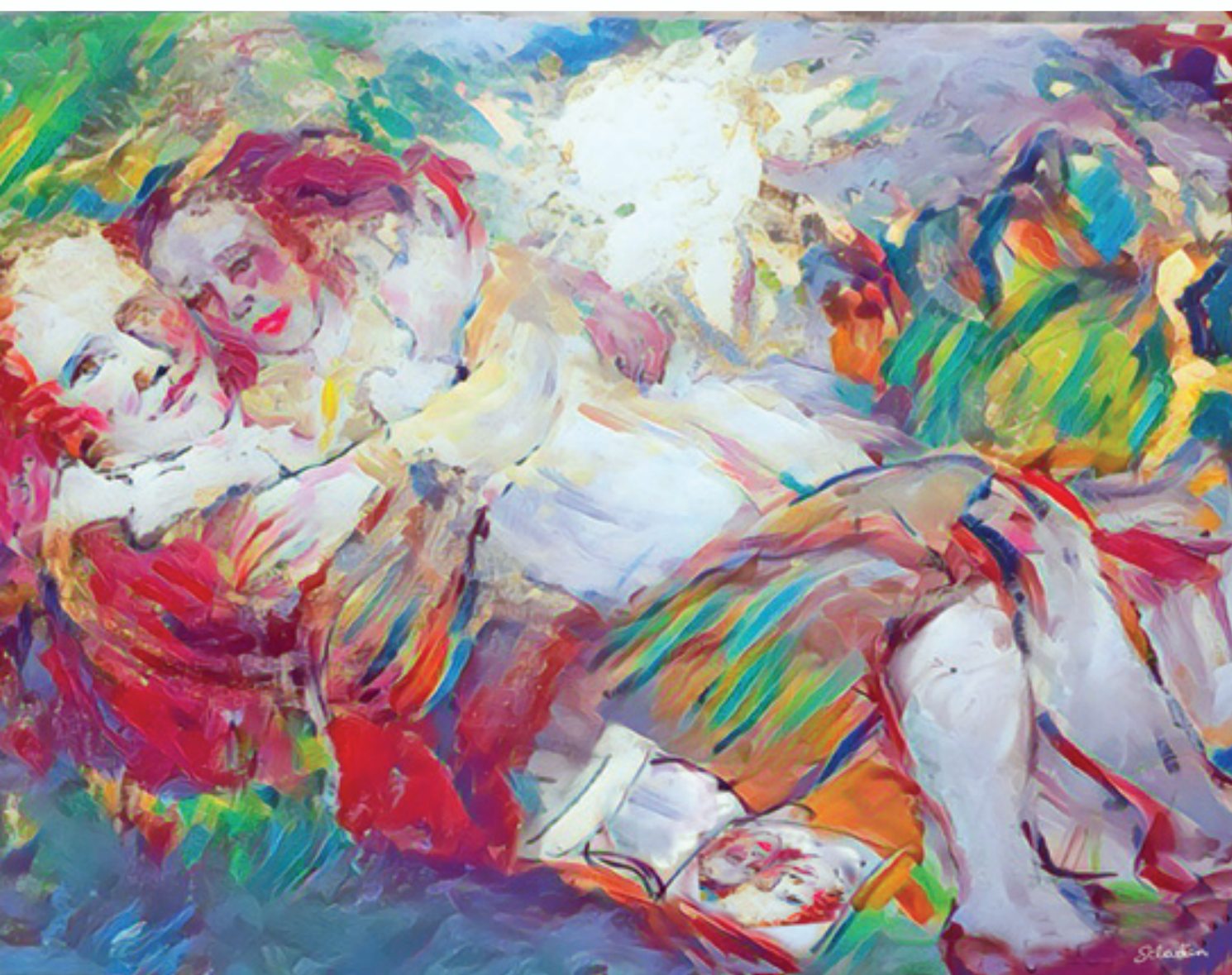
Later, in painstaking searches
inch by inch, surely, we move
around a melodious centre.

Is there a melody? Something dark
buzzes, or gnaws, or growls, even though
it does not ring,
it is meant for us,
as a steady wind vibrates, mysteriously,
needy, ardent and painful,
storming against walls.

It happens at the end,
high up, in a temple, wild
rampage, sacrilege, pillage,
atrocious looting,
beautiful service, abandon.

Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws







A Pantoum for Dr. Jekyll

CHRIS NORRIS

O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face,
it is on that of your new friend.

You must suffer me to go my own dark way.

It was for one minute that I saw him, but the hair stood upon my head like quills. Sir, if
that was my master, why had he a mask upon his face?

Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*

(*Note:* Pantoums have tended to become more complex over time as the form became more complex compared with the earliest examples in fifteenth-century Malay folk-poetry. Rhyme has tended to drop out in this process due to the problems of combining it with the pantoum's particular kind of repetitive structure. This poem uses a modified version of the form in order to accommodate its abab rhyme scheme.)

'No verse-form schizoid as the rhymed pantoum!
Mark how the self-divisions open wide!'
And you, shrink-prosodist: why thus presume?
Your serum's failed; see Jekyll turn to Hyde.

'Let my strict craft the needful check provide
On verse-forms schizoid as the rhymed pantoum.'
Oh you deceive yourself, my hapless guide,
My poor shrink-analyst: why thus presume?



‘For both of us this ample scheme finds room;
Let my strict craft the needful check provide!’
You still presume to tell what’s said by whom?
Oh, you deceive yourself, my hapless guide.

One form, one mind we’re somehow both inside;
For both of us this ample scheme finds room.
Poor fool: why think such hubris justified?
You still presume to tell what’s said by whom!

How then avert the threat that else must doom
This form, this mind we’re somehow both inside?
Call Jekyll: see your alter ego loom!
Poor fool, why think such hubris justified?

And should they fail, those serums I’ve applied,
How then can you avert that threatened doom?
Each stanza shows what cannot be denied
No verse-form schizoid as the rhymed pantoum.


Chorus

I danced all day again -
bendings of a semitone were enough -
those rocking rhythms
babies crow about
were all Brahms-plus
Strawberry Hill gothic.

In fact, first light was
so arranged, so well-composed,
I could explore the whole
palette of amazement
and skid untouched
past yesterday's snug dust.

Look! - the garden has
gone to blazes, red-faced
with excess or seasonal
bleeding – whichever,
I forget. Like a bird, I just
flip past clouds and such





no time for breath
in the laugh and throw of the thing -
you can see it in the spring
of a tiny speckled spider
or the rush and fling of a lamb.
Emotions are the devil to handle.

Erica Warburton

The Wednesday

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Website: Currently unavailable

Published by:

The Wednesday Press, Oxford

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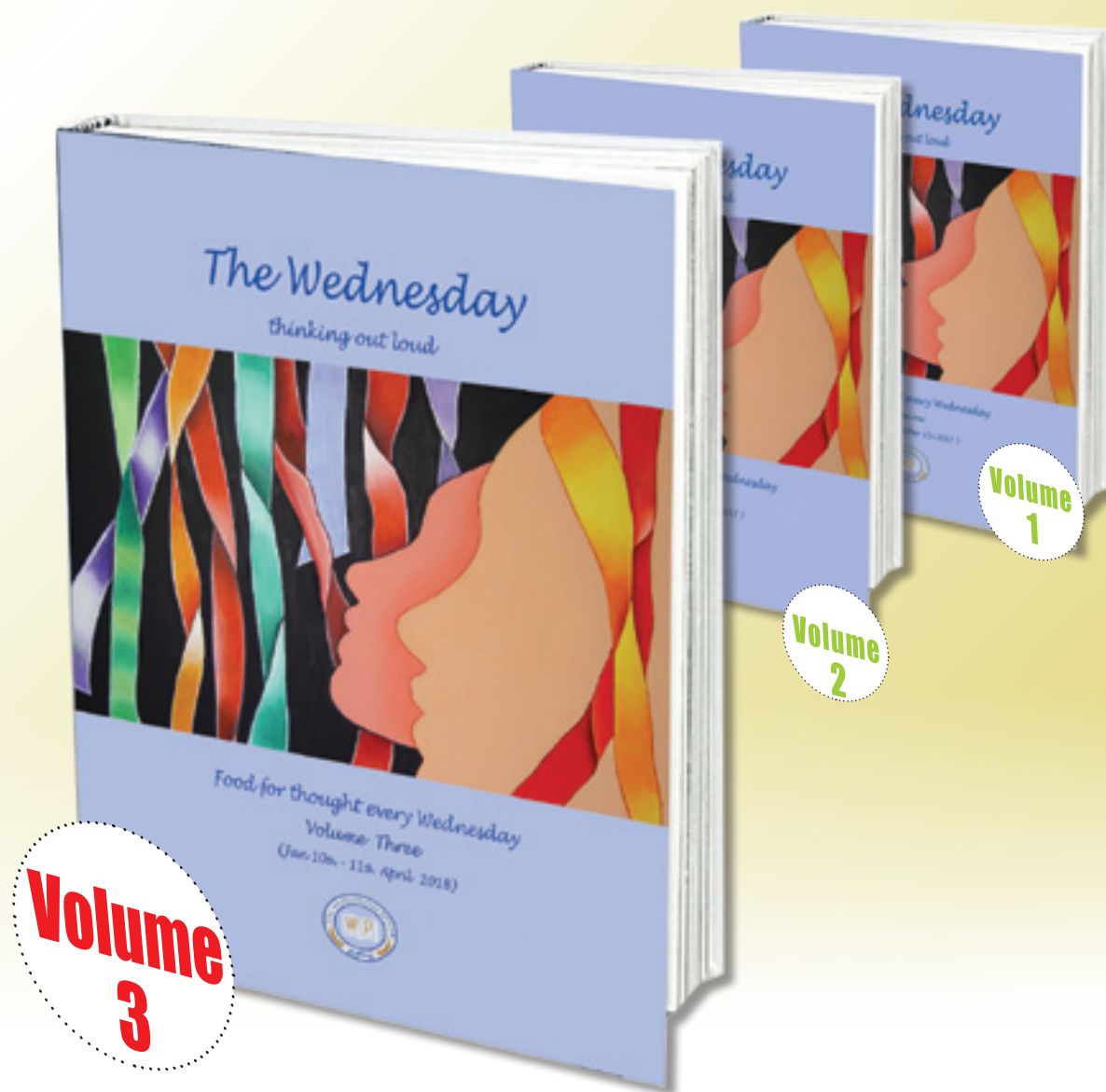
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