

The *Wednesday*



Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

From Idealism to Materialism

We discussed in the last issue the move from the disembodied subject to the embodied subject. This move came about with phenomenology. But there were two moves prior to that; one move was the naturalism of Nietzsche, the other was the materialism of Marx. The first puts the emphasis on the body, almost completely, the other takes it out of the subject of Idealism and plants it in material reality and considers the human reality as derived from the material condition of a particular society and age or existence generally.

David Lepold, in his book *The Young Karl Marx*, explored the intensive engagement of Marx with German philosophy and with the Idealism of Hegel in particular. What matters for us in this engagement is Marx's rejection of two aspects of Hegel's categories: their a priori character and the fact that they govern the actual world. For Marx, the opposite is true: Hegel's categories are obtained by 'the transformation of the empirical into the speculative.' Marx thought that his task was the 'transformation' of 'the speculative into the empirical'. This change of the categories from the theoretical, idealistic to the empirical finds a range of applications in the writing of Marx and Engels as is obvious in the Marxist materialistic theory of history and the theory of ideology.

Marx wrote extensive notes as a critique of Hegel. Both Kant and Hegel were interested in the limits and development of reason. Marx and Engels thought the opposite. Marx, later on, wrote in *Das Kapital* that:

'My dialectic method is, in its foundation, not only different from the Hegelian but exactly opposite to it. For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of 'the Idea', is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance

of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected by in the mind of man and translated into forms of thought.

Engels also wrote in his book *Ludwig Feuerbach*:

'Hegel's dialectic was put on its head; or rather, from its head, on which it was standing, it was put on its feet'.

What Marx did was to externalise reason but not the way of Objective Idealism of Hegel. He moved into Historical Materialism. Capitalism, for him, had distorted values, family structure and the subject (the worker) who became extension of the machine. But he viewed history objectively as a class struggle, a constant conflict of oppositions and contradictions that would lead to a communist revolution. However, the laws of history are not quite objective. They have a subjective element, which can be called class consciousness and political activism of the proletariat. But the body now is no more than a tool in the deadly struggle that will open a new horizon. The individual also submerged into the collective. The emphasis is on acting in the world, not contemplating it.

Marx was close to the spirit of the German philosophy of Hegel and the post-Hegelians. He was also close to other traditions, such as the Romantic heritage. The Romantic influence is clear in Marx's remarks about the idea of human flourishing. But Marx moved from the subject in the Idealist conception to that of a class. What is left out is the subject as free from the objective 'historical' condition. We also lost the interiority of the subject. This has left a vacuum that needs to be filled. Novalis said once, if you take out the idea of a god, the emptiness will be filled by all sort of ghosts.

The Editor

Calvino, Fellini And Making Images

It's now over thirty years since Italo Calvino died. He was a novelist, short story writer and essayist of the first rank. His work could be described as intellectual fantasy. But Calvino was never an orthodox fantasy writer - more a philosophical fabulist of playful, witty and profoundly eloquent propositions. He wrote about, and re-wrote, the myths we employ that attempt to explain an absurdly paradoxical universe.

ALAN PRICE

Calvino began with realistic novels like *The Path to the Nest of Spiders* (about wartime Italian partisan life). Finding it difficult to remain a realist he wrote *The Cloven Viscount* (about a 17th century viscount cloven in two by a cannonball). He also produced short story collections of a neo-realist tone, *Adam, One*

Afternoon and *Difficult Loves*. But his fictional trajectory became fantasy with such works as *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, *Invisible Cities* and *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. His last two books were the remarkable novel *Mr. Palomar* (about a man trying to name and explain all the encountered things that make up his world) and *Six Memos for a Millennium* (a collection of six lectures).

In the 4th Memo, of *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (written in 1985, published posthumously, in English in 1992) and titled *Visibility* Calvino's concern is with the creation of images and the imaginative process. In a fascinating paragraph he turns from literature to the cinema.

'In the cinema the image we see on screen has also passed through the stage of a written text, has been "visualised" in the mind of the director, then physically reconstructed on the set, and finally fixed in the frames of the film itself. A film is therefore the outcome of a succession of phases, both material and otherwise, in the course of which the images acquire form. During this process, the "mental cinema" of the imagination has a function no less important than that of the actual creation of the sequences as they will be recorded by the camera and then put together on the moviola. This mental cinema is always at work in each one of us, and it always has been, even before the invention of the cinema. Nor does it ever

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Calvino



Fellini

stop projecting images before our mind's eye.'

In Calvino's posthumously published book *The Road to San Giovanni* is the essay *A Cinema-Goers Autobiography* that mentions Fellini. Films mattered to the very young Calvino during the years between 1936 and the war, the years of his adolescence. For him it was a time when the cinema became a world for him.

'A different world from the one around me, but my feeling was that only what I saw on the screen possessed the properties required of a world, the fullness, the necessity, the coherence, while away from the screen were only heterogeneous elements lumped together at random, the materials of a life, mine, which seemed to me utterly formless.'

American cinema appealed most to Calvino. He did not love Italian films but sometimes admired and appreciated them. However, the director he felt an affinity with, because of his form of film-autobiography, was Fellini. Fellini was similar to Calvino in the sense that he was an artist who went from realism (*The White Sheik*, *I Vitteloni*) through

to a sort of post-neo-realism bordering on fantasy (*Il Bidone*, *Cabiria* and *La Strada*) paused at the satire of *La Dolce Vita* and then dived into the fabulous and fantastic (*8½*, *Juliet of the Spirits* and so on). Even late, 'straight' films like *Amarcord*, *Satyricon* and *Casanova* are coloured by Fellini's need to delve into his unconscious for dramatic imagery.

Calvino's youthful pleasure at watching movies created a distancing effect. As an adult this continued to fascinate him (Though as far as I know he never wrote any specific film criticism.)

'That is, either I go looking for old films that tell me about my own pre-history, or those that are so new as perhaps to suggest what the world will be like after me.'

And it was the old and new American films, in preference to Italian cinema that engaged him.

'...always that novelty has to do with the highways, the drugstores, young faces or old, the way one moves through spaces, the way one passes one's life.'

Yet the aesthetic distance that captivated Calvino, and also myself, was once provided by Classical Hollywood Cinema of the 1940s and 50s—a form that placed characters, in a scene, within a meaningful context. Here a density of action, throughout the frame, sometimes irrespective of cutting and camera movement, and sometimes accompanying it, conveyed though its ‘choreographing’ of actors, a rich dramatic texture. Such staging in depth, or the long take, permitted a great deal of information about character motivation. Anthony Mann’s *Man of the West* contains a fight scene that irrespective of its revenge and humiliation is directed with an acute sense of moral probity. It has a physically determined outcome – a winner or a loser. But the stronger point is our moral attitude to the conflict itself. We are kept at an aesthetic distance. The images are being used, like the best fiction, to show but not tell. The director is non-judgemental. The audience brings its own interpretation.

‘But it isn’t distance that the cinema gives us now: it is the irreversible impression that everything is nearby, is hemming us in, is on top of us.’

That’s Calvino talking not just about eighties cinema but Fellini’s films getting ever closer and closer. I think Calvino’s remarks can be applicable for a lot of contemporary Hollywood cinema that is over-emphatic and over the top. Often a self-conscious cinema obsessed by the toys of film technology. Of course, Fellini’s own progress appears to be a journey towards a narcissistic closeness, not driven by technology, but a hellish need to caricature his established *mise en scene*. For Hollywood and Fellini this has meant an alarming terrible drift away from a meaningful context.

‘Thus, Fellini can go far indeed along the road of visual repugnance, but along that of moral repugnance he stops short, he recuperates the monstrous into the human, into the indulgent complicity of the flesh. Both the well-fed province and the movie-making world of Rome are circles of hell, but at the same time enjoyable lands of Cockaigne as well. That is why Fellini manages to disturb us to the core: because he forces us to admit that what we would most like to distance ourselves from is what is intrinsically close to us.’

I’d agree with Calvino that Fellini does stop short of moral repugnance. But my problem is a bombardment of style, an aesthetic repulsion, that distances me too much from Fellini’s characters, so I no longer care about their fate. I would love to be shaken to the core by most of that late Fellini output, but I just recoil (the dark *Satyricon* and even darker *Casanova* being notable exceptions to his self-indulgence.)

‘The cinema of distance which nourished our youth is turned forever on its head in the cinema of absolute proximity.’

So, does Calvino’s “absolute proximity” or closeness mean a philosophical negation of cinema? On the level of spectacle, it can be an experience that’s pushed into the spectator’s face: roller coaster ride of emotion that robs cinema of its power of pictorial composition, nuanced acting, subtle direction and narrative force. This new sentimentality, coupled with old dystopian attitudes, can dominate much of commercial filmmaking and even dilute independent and art-house cinema.

I don’t have to speak of the new Star Wars or Bond film. That they are regarded as major cinema events is depressing enough. But that a semi-independent film like Iñárritu’s *Birdman* can be so critically lauded. *Birdman*’s Broadway actors, in and out of rehearsing a play, based on a short story by Raymond Carver, self-indulgently moan about their lot. So much so that it just about sinks a film, admittedly displaying a long take technical bravura, but also a predictable ‘magic realism.’ *Birdman*’s effects and the other two films CGI almost obliterate any intelligent distance, so it feels like a manipulative circus. You get closer and closer to the circus performers and whether they pull off their masks or not, you enjoy them less and less. The circus, both as real event or metaphor, was a childhood memory that Fellini incorporated into his films with great charm. But soon after his masterpiece *8½* becoming so mockingly close-up and grotesque that you wanted to push away the irritating clowns!

And what of Calvino who also got very (but not over) close-up with *Mr. Palomar*? Here I feel he successfully wrote a wise and very entertaining



La Strada

post-modernist novel (as did Georges Perec with his *Life: A User's Manual*) without closing down our interest in the structure of his personal world. And without making a case for some dry theory of what a novel might be. Calvino's *Mr. Palomar* searches for a close understanding, a meaningful proximity to images and ideas. Yet Calvino maintains a distance because you can't grasp everything, shouldn't feel the need to show it all and anyway you can't because you are mortal.

"This is how birds think, or at least this is how Mr. Palomar thinks, imagining himself a bird." It is only after you have come to know the surface of things," he concludes," that you venture to seek what is underneath. But the surface is inexhaustible."

"If time has to end, it can be described, instant by instant" Palomar thinks, "and each instant, when described, expands so that its end can no longer be seen." He decides that he will set

himself to describing every instant of his life, and until he has described them all he will no longer think of being dead. At that moment he dies.'

You could describe Fellini, as Calvino does in *The Road to San Giovanni*, as an anti -intellectual film director: an artist who kept himself cunningly childlike and open to an unlimited multiplicity of images. And that his unconscious fantasies got the better of him. Calvino appears to be the disciplined intellectual who understood his limits responsibly. He probed and played with a limited literary freedom, approximating mainly older and more rigorous cinematic filmmaking of contemplation (Mostly European, but not always) and charged craftsmanship (Usually American and British) that managed to suggest, rather than forcibly throw at us, much to ruminate on. Making profound images was both their business. Yet being carelessly imagistic, as some indiscriminate reflex action, needs to be avoided.

Beyond Intellectualism and Empiricism

Reading Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*

This is an introduction to the second of three books written by Merleau-Ponty in which he joined scientific theory (psychology) to philosophy in order to question the limitations of traditional empiricism and intellectualism. It is in my view an important step into the real world. This article should be treated as a first step not just to reading *Phenomenology of Perception*, but also considering where should philosophy be taking us today, (if anywhere at all!)

DAVID BURRIDGE

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 - 1961) argues that the sensation as a unit of experience is inadequate because our senses are subject to perceptual interpretation. Of course, this is common sense even at a purely physical level. An object seen at a distance will appear differently on our retinas than an object close-up. But there is a more complex perceptual interpretation which is defined by the Gestalt theories. We make sense of things by identifying patterns (principles of grouping: proximity, similarity, closure, good continuation, common fate, good form). The mind is automatically searching sensation for meaning. This of course does not physically convert sensation but offers an explanation as to how the units might be linked together. This does not mean that the individual cannot analyse the grouping into individual units of sensation. To shape sensations into collections is an intellectual process. It may be that the grouping of the sensations is a natural reality or just a subject's tentative proposition.

'Association: What happens when a collection of qualities is apprehended as a figure in the background? Seeing a figure – simultaneously experiencing all the atomic sensations which go to form it.... the whole collection becomes a vision.'

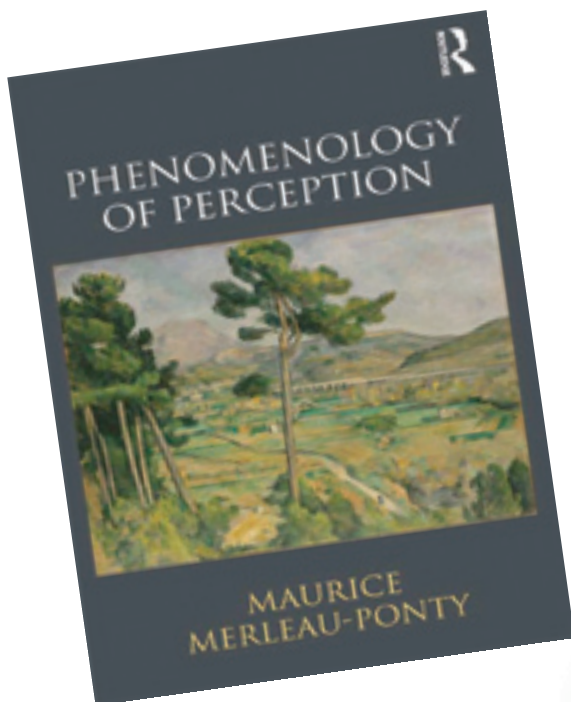
He says when we observe an object which has shape, edges and colour we are not observing the elements that make up the object but the association. A pragmatist observing things is not looking at

atomic images but the pattern of a collection which is shaped by thoughts through mental association. When we perceive orders we are drawing on early associations of similar objects. They can only be indissolubly associated and everywhere substituted for each other. If I am looking at a mountain I am in fact not just taking in the visual sensation of that mountain, but I am transferring into my image previous mountain experiences. Gestalt theory deals with 'Good Form' which comes about through preceding perception. This then is thoroughly cross-checked to deliver an image to the real world.

The contribution of memory; to perceive is to remember. But what we remember must not be a vague collection but must exactly cohere with sensation otherwise the result would always be bordering on illusion. Of course, there will be times when we allow illusion for the sensation to conform to our beliefs.

To perceive is not to experience a host of impressions accompanied by memories capable of clinching them; it is to see, standing forth from a cluster of data, an immanent significance without which no appeal is possible.

In other words, to make sense of the present sensation we analyse and pick out elements that make sense of the present image. This is not just a question of cold fact that would be the view of the empiricist who seeks objectivity. But there is also the memory of emotion and culture to be drawn into our perception.



Phenomenology of Perception

...the empiricist can always build up, with psychic atoms – but it is a kind of mental blindness ...On the other hand reflection embraces empiricism's subordinate truth and assigns it to its place...

Merleau-Ponty is criticising empiricism not because it seeks facts, but because it does not draw into judgement all the human values that clarify for us our understanding. He then turns his intention to the *intellectualists (rationalists)*.

How a perception awakens attention, then how attention develops and enriches it.

Intellectualism: I am conscious that through attention I shall come by the truth of the object.

The problem Merleau-Ponty sees with intellectualists is that they fail to see what we must be ignorant of to achieve clarity and sense. If any belief will be acceptable then attention will be confused. He sees attention as a constructive tool: 'To pay attention is not merely to further elucidate pre-existing data, it is to bring about a new articulation...' What we have previously known.

The miracle of consciousness consists in its bringing to light, through attention, phenomena which re-establish the unity of the object in a new dimension at the very moment when they destroy it.

Judgement is often introduced as what sensation lacks to make perception possible.



Descartes

Blind intuition leads to empty concept. Which is a damning judgement of pure intellectualism.

In moving towards judgement he is setting aside visual impression and therefore judgement is an illusion which we construct with layers of impressions. The mind runs across isolated impressions and gradually discovers the meaning of the whole. This is an encapsulation of Gestalt theory. But judgement is there to ensure that everything is given meaning, regardless of any authentic meaning.

It is important to understand here that Merleau-Ponty is referring to judgement as the methodology of intellectualist philosophers, who are concerned to explore principles with reason devoid of any empirical reality. The exercise of judgement in a legal system addresses both facts and principles. If a principle cannot be illustrated with particular empirical scenarios then the validity of the principle is open to question.

Perception is just that act which creates at a stroke, along with the cluster of data, the meaning which unites them – indeed which not only discovers the meaning which they have, but moreover sees to it that they have a meaning.

This is an interesting idea because it tells us that it is a human tendency to find meaning regardless of evidence. Even if that meaning has been shaped by belief? Merleau-Ponty does concede that his

criticisms ‘are only valid in the first stages of analytical reflection.’ Characteristically inductive reason might begin with a proposition which has to be tested with facts or has been composed from simple common sense. Interpretation is a starting point and ‘pure sensation – is the last effect of knowledge...’ Merleau-Ponty is seeking to establish a new form of phenomenology and to do this he must deal with the intellectualism of Descartes: the Cogito.

Descartes lets us know that by the word ‘judgement’ he is thinking of the constitution of a meaning for the thing perceived which is not prior to the perception itself and which seems to emanate from it...When Descartes says that the understanding knows itself incapable of knowing the union of soul and body and leaves this knowledge for life to achieve - reflection on an unreflective experience.

The problem for Merleau-Ponty is not just that sensed things are governed by perceptual patterns, but the ‘I’ is also a perception. When Descartes announced ‘I think therefore I am’, he was seeking to commence thinking from an assured position. He was also convinced that there was an assured truth out there created by a loving God. Merleau-Ponty was struggling with the weakness of the mind.

Absolute Thought is no clearer to me than my own finite mind, since it is through the latter I perceive the former.

It is important not just to understand what I perceive, but how I perceive things. This leads him to the ‘sense experience’. There is a difference between observing something as a mere spectacle and the

quality of a spectacle within its context.

The light of a candle changes its appearance for a child when, after a burn, it stops attracting the child’s hand and becomes repulsive.

Phenomena appear in acts of consciousness, objects of systematic reflection and analysis. So ‘sensation’ and ‘judgement’ which were in turn the tools of empiricists and intellectuals, need to be interpreted through consciousness to achieve quality perception. This leads Merleau-Ponty towards a ‘phenomenal field’ where perception leads towards: *Truth in itself.*

This phenomenal field is not an ‘inner world’, the phenomenon is not a state of consciousness, or mental fact and the experience of phenomena is not an act of introspection or an intuition in the Bergson sense.

There is for Merleau-Ponty a scientific structure to all perceptions: by taking the Gestalt as the theme of his reflection the psychologist is analysing the spatial and qualitative values of sensations. The Gestalt effect is the capability of the brain to generate whole forms, particularly with respect to the visual recognition of global figures. (For example, proximity, similarity, closure, good continuation). We are not just focusing on what we sense but how we intellectually link them to other sensations we have had. If I see lots of birds flying in the same direction, I draw the conclusion that this is a flock seeking perhaps to scare away a predator. It is important to recognise that Merleau-Ponty is not just promulgating Gestalt psychology. He is seeking a new basis for philosophical thinking – an *impregnable cogito*. This is achieved by not only reflecting on an object but also on the thinker: ‘it lies in the perpetual beginning of reflection, at the point where an individual life begins to reflect on itself.’ If I choose to reflect on an ethical question, I need not only to consider the issues concerning the ethics, but also why is it significant to me and anyone else. I wish to argue that *Phenomenology of Perception* is an important step in modern philosophy. In this short article I am merely dipping into a great work. I intend to follow up with articles to further explore where Merleau-Ponty takes the ‘cogito’ and the ideal of freedom.

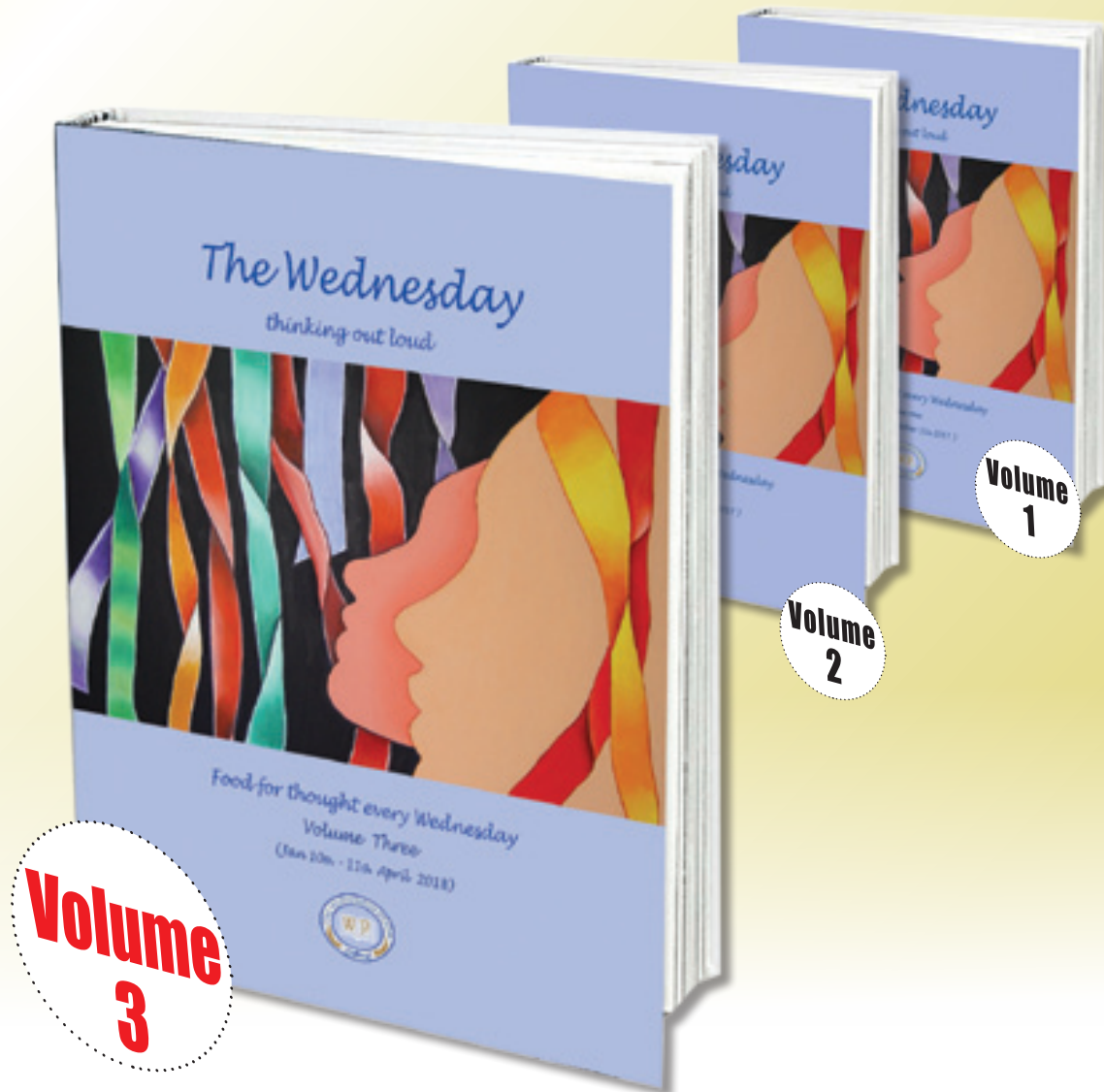


The Gestalt

The *Wednesday*

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There is Something in Me

There is something in me
that just forbids one truth only,
for as we know from the ancients,
two-headed Janus,
God of the future and the past,
is at home in parallel universes
with as many truths as stars.

Where he steps in, he steps out.
He changes from vision to vision,
lives in sunlight and moonlight
and in beginnings and endings.

There is something in me
that does not forbid the wind.
When I am touched by something invisible
I hear a sound open my inept soul
and feel lifted by wings.



Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*



Nine Times Over



CHRIS NORRIS

They want me to write differently.
Certainly I could, but I must not. God
has chosen me from thousands and given
me, of all people, this talent. It is to Him
that I must give account. How then would
I stand there before Almighty God, if I
followed the others and not Him?

Anton Bruckner

'The same work nine times over', so it goes,
Their quip as I set out on Number Nine.
It's not for them but God that I compose.

Why critics mock their length God only knows;
They're in the Schubert Great C Major line.
'The same work nine times over', so it goes.

Eleven some say, but they're embryos,
That early pair, oblations He'd decline:
It's not for them but God that I compose.



Anton Bruckner

There's Double-Zero, Zero, then it shows,
That long rededication, mine to Thine.
'The same work nine times over', so it goes.

If, work to work, symphonic structure grows
More complex and extended, that's a sign
It's not for them but God that I compose.

How else, I ask, should these mere notes disclose
To some few souls a glimpse of the divine?
'The same work nine times over', so it goes.

The epic spans are simply what it owes
To His behest, this latest work of mine.
It's not for them but God that I compose.

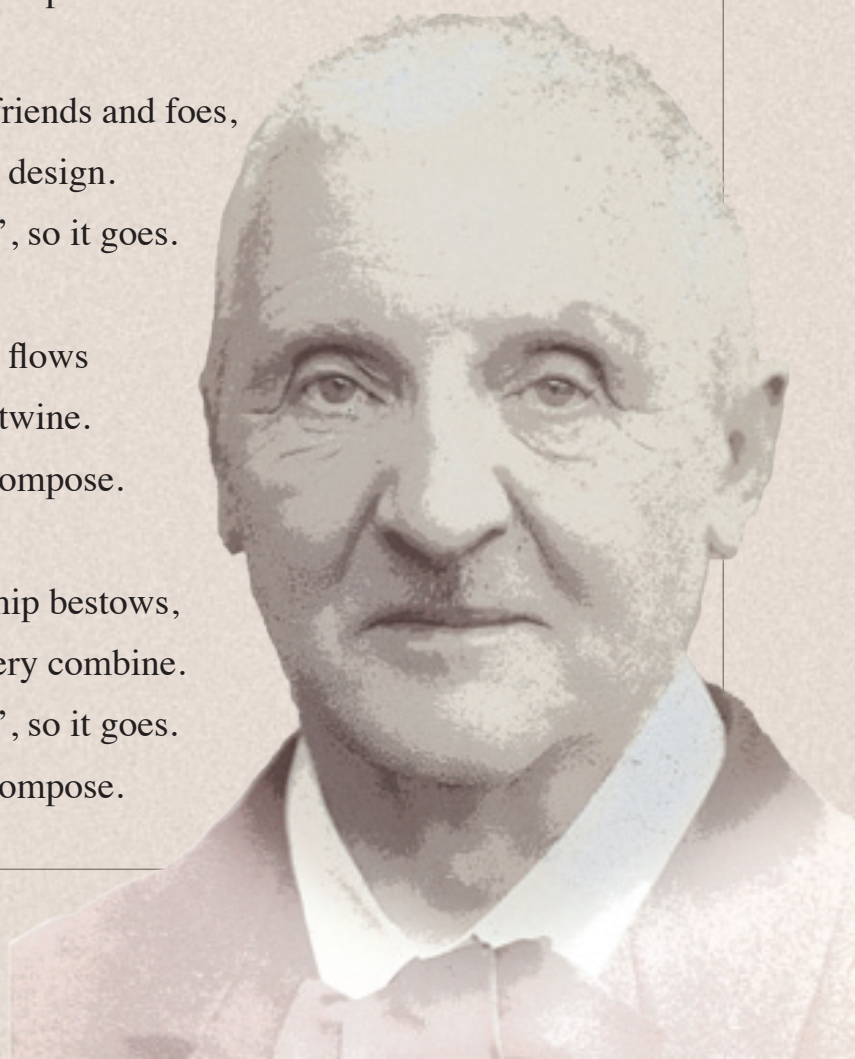
The strict fugue-lessons were one way I chose
To serve Him, oftentimes though I'd repine:
'The same work nine times over', so it goes.

Then there was having students strike out those
Repeats whose role I couldn't quite define.
It's not for them but God that I compose.

They count me simple-minded, friends and foes,
Or apt to take my own for God's design.
'The same work nine times over', so it goes.

Yet strongly now His inspiration flows
As counterpoint and motifs intertwine.
It's not for them but God that I compose.

For that's what long apprenticeship bestows,
This state where grace and mastery combine.
'The same work nine times over', so it goes.
It's not for them but God that I compose.



Getting real

*Notes on the Wednesday Meeting
Held on 25th of July*

PAUL COCKBURN

We started the meeting by discussing the question: what is reality? One view is that there are two aspects to reality: the physical and factual world, and the world of lived experience, of social reality. Within the latter there are opinions, concepts, and lots of social influences from my upbringing, my family etc. We can combine the two aspects of reality by looking at a physical object, say a glass on a table which is used to hold a drink. This is a physical object on the table. By using the word 'glass' in the way we do, we encompass all that involves: the glass has to be a certain shape to enable us to hold it, when we drink, we may clink our glasses together and say 'cheers'. So, we can add a social context to a physical object such as a glass, and this is just as real as the physical and material glass.

We moved on to discuss the word 'real' as in 'get real'. What relevance does philosophy have to the problems that really matter and concern us in the world? One important problem in the world today is immigration and the treatment of minorities in society. One of our number had just read a novel which dealt with the treatment of Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbour by the Japanese in the Second World War. They were considered to be the 'enemy within' America and were herded into primitive camps, despite many of their men volunteering to fight the Japanese in the war in the Pacific Ocean. Philosophy does have some relevance here, in terms of existentialism and the concept of the 'other'. There is an ethical stance that says the rights of minorities must be protected. It may also be held that immigrants enrich the communities in which they live, societies can get stale and need 'fresh air' to revive and enliven them! There is also the opposite tendency where immigrants are scapegoated as being responsible for some societal problems.

The Wednesday

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Anam Cara, Epilogue



soul-friend,
when you have heard that this
tired body has returned
to the quiet earth,

no call for grief,
but read again my poems
and keep their joy,

like birdsongs
in the dusk before the night's
long stillness,

hold unto them
as tokens of a love
that is forever yours.

Edmund Burke