

The Wednesday

www.thewednesdayoxford.com

Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford



Editorial

An Absolute Beginning

Is it possible to have an absolute beginning in philosophy, literature or art? What does it mean to have an absolute beginning? Is it the same in these diverse fields? Has it ever happened? Is it the same as the shift in a paradigm that is behind scientific revolutions? Very little has been done to answer these questions. I know of two books that dealt with this matter: Edward Said's book *Beginnings: Intention and Method* and Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*. Both books are very detailed and hard to follow. But I will try a new look at the idea of a 'beginning'.

It may be easier to speak about beginning without the adjective 'absolute'. A beginning may represent a break with a world-view, a method, a style, a language, but when it happens it changes the way things are thought or done for ever. Take for example, Descartes' *Meditations*. It has not only put everything in doubt but also challenged inherited ways of thinking about the self, the world and God. It represented a break with the old Aristotelian arguments for all these themes. If we add his mathematical thinking, we may credit him with a mechanical rather than organic conception of the world. But was his attempt an absolute beginning?

There were predecessors to Descartes' thought. For example, al-Ghazali in his biography talked about his doubt method and how he found his way to certainty. He also had a version of the ontological argument for the existence of God. Both ideas were in Descartes' thinking. But this does not deny the originality of Descartes and the development of his argument.

However, the question of absolute beginning goes beyond historical details to what philosophers call 'presuppositions'. Deleuze in his book *Difference and Repetition* objects to Descartes' absolute beginning. Descartes assumed that his readers knew what was the 'I' of 'I think, therefore I am'. He raises the same

objection to Hegel's presuppositionless philosophy. Hegel starts from the concept of 'pure being' and assumes that his readers know what he means by it. The same could be said of Fichte's Absolute I, or Schelling's concept of Indifference. One could say that this is a minimum assumption to get the system of thinking working.

It is interesting that most pertinent examples of absolute beginnings come from system-builders, particularly from speculative philosophy, because they were related to visions. Because a vision is comprehensive, it will have wide repercussions in metaphysics, epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. But other examples come from others who were not system-builders. Plato, for example, joined all the above branches together and added the values of the good, the true and the beautiful into the Forms. Nietzsche, who is against both system-builders and Plato brought all these values from the world of Forms to our world. However, I maintain that both Plato and Nietzsche had a vision which was more than just an insight into a particular matter.

When a philosopher is in possession of a vision he is in this virgin land which some mystics call 'the land of truth'. It is an absolute beginning that will challenge ordinary concepts and language itself. No wonder then that several philosophers, theologians and mystics gave up writing once they reached this point. Others struggled with language, trying sometimes to make concepts mean the opposite of their ordinary sense. Nietzsche called himself an immoralist, yet his biography shows that he was more decent than a lot of moralist philosophers. The truth is that he was venturing into a new philosophical land which needed a new language. This also applies to speculative philosophy and many visionary absolute beginning philosophers.

The Editor

Trinity And Society: A Response To A Cultural Crisis

The spiritual and cultural deterioration during two centuries of materialism had dissolved the foundations of morality. The three spheres of society; spiritual, legal state and economics, that have developed independently over time are now working in an inharmonious way. Observing the social chaos that resulted when political states became economic communities, Rudolf Steiner saw that superficial alterations in the economic system within a nation state could not solve the underlying problems in society since this was a spiritual-cultural matter. He called for a spiritual renewal.

WILLIAM BISHOP

When philosophy was the love of wisdom, individuals such as Pythagoras and Plato were not only concerned with how society was organized and governed but they practiced what they preached: Pythagoras in community leadership and Plato with practical advice on leadership in Syracuse. As the newly developing faculty of intellectual thinking found expression in Greek philosophy, Aristotle virtually personified this in his investigation of a wide range of arts and sciences. At that time arguably intellectual activity was facilitated by the organization of society in a relatively small city-state like Athens; and Plato's *Republic* contains one of the earliest reasoned considerations of society. Plato argued that the state originates from mutual need and for mutual benefit and then a relation is established between the type of state and the type of person that thrives in it.

Plato identified four political systems as well as an ideal republic ruled by a Philosopher-king assisted by Guardians. The intention behind such a political community was to promote the well-being of all citizens and foster a sense of community where no group would have advantage over others and every member of the community would lead a worthwhile life. Such an *ideal* state is patterned on the unity of the Platonic *Forms* (spiritual archetypes) where each *Form* relates to others and to the central form of the *Good* that binds all together. Another model for this might have been the city of Croton in southern Italy at the time when Pythagoras participated in its government as

philosopher-ruler.

In *The Seventh Letter* Plato writes:

'Finally I came to the conclusion that all existing states are badly governed, and that their constitutions were incapable of reform without drastic treatment, and a great deal of good luck. I was forced, in fact, to the belief that the only way of finding justice for society or for the individual lay in true philosophy, and that mankind will have no respite from trouble until either real philosophers gain political power or politicians become by some miracle true philosophers.'

Through an historical process we have arrived to date at a world comprised largely of nation-states with complex power relations both within and between nations. Then there are international institutions, which seek super-state or global status. Interaction between nation-states and the effects of globalization (trade and policies) has so far been to unsettle the status and structure of the nation-state. The problem this has exposed is the basic question of identity and purpose. Is humanity a mass, which by certain structuring of society can be utilized for the purposes of a dominant few, or by contrast is the world populated by individuals who are perfectly capable of self-organization in the sense of Peter Kropotkin's social anarchism?

Evolutionary Views

Well an evolutionary view of the cosmos expresses the idea that everything that has life can contribute



Rudolf Steiner



John Milton

to the evolution of the whole, and individuals should have the opportunity to contribute their unique talents to society and fulfil their lives. St. Augustine (354–430) held such an evolutionary view, interpreting the second account of the creation in *Genesis* (the biblical creation story) as a second phase where living things, animals and humans were created with developmental potential.

Indeed the Alexandrian empiricist philosopher John Philoponus (490–570) also believed in an evolving cosmos. His commentary on the Bible story of creation: *On the Creation of the World*, speaks of God making a whole, a unity of heaven and earth, from a single substance possessing *life* together with *laws* that make it capable of transformation and development from a state of chaos to an organized universe. The corollary of this view is the need for a corresponding form of society to facilitate the evolution of the individual. The poet, John Milton (1608–1674) also held an evolutionary view of the cosmos and this became reflected in the conflict between Parliamentarians and a rigid hierarchical government led by a king and aristocracy. This eventually led to civil war in England. Citizens' views were polarized between

maintaining a state that fixed people firmly in their place or enabled them to become *free agents* with a voice in the process of government.

Aware of disquieting symptoms in the early years of the 20th century, the polymath Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) recognized that by the beginning of the 21st century a crisis would be reached where Europe would witness either the destruction of its civilization or the beginning of a stage of renewal. Steiner's diagnosis was that the spiritual and cultural deterioration during two centuries of materialism had dissolved the foundations for morality. His remedy was a complete (though gradually introduced) transformation of the structure of society. Interestingly this view finds confirmation in a preface to *Economics after Capitalism*, where David Bollier remarks that although our mainstream institutions are loath to admit it we are in the midst of a civilizational crisis (2015). Additionally the book's author, Derek Wall, asserts that a revolution is needed that is a basic and essential change in the structure of our society. This may well be true but otherwise what options are there to avoid either dominance within an oligarchy, or reduction of the human spirit in subjection to a totalitarian regime?



The catastrophe of the First World War

Arguably the evolution of consciousness has advanced to the point where the desire for freedom of the human spirit is a priority and where the *free individual spirit* deserves a supportive social environment. Historically, early empires like Assyria and Egypt were *theocracies* where spiritual authority governed society. This was the phase of the *transcendent spirit* and was the right arrangement for the state of consciousness of the time. This was followed by the *political state* (serving the soul), as in the Roman Republic. Here law and rights governed the *spiritual-cultural* sphere and the *economy*. The third phase (prioritizing the body) has resulted in *economics* dominating *culture* and *politics*. This phase emerged in Europe in the late 18th century with the development of machine production and imperialism and remains dominant today.

argued that the dominance of economics over culture and the legal state has caused the unequal and challenging state we now find ourselves in.

The *spiritual-cultural sphere* demands liberation from external determining forces for it needs its own autonomy, yet to achieve this it needs support from society as a whole: from the *economic* and the *legal-rights* domain. But how can this be achieved? By reorganizing the structure of society to provide autonomy for the separate spheres while allowing interrelationship within the supportive framework of society. This is exactly what Rudolf Steiner proposed as a means of reconstruction for Europe after the devastation of the First World War. The reasons given for such a drastic reorganization were that the soul subconsciously desires social well-being, but with the rise of capitalism and a materialistic scientific worldview a supportive spiritual mood has ebbed away and an abstract intellectual life has depleted the life of the soul.

In Steiner's view a healthy human society will be created in our era when body, soul and spirit are externalized in society as *culture*, *politics*, and the *economy* in a rightly related way, because chaos arises when any single sphere dominates the others. The famous cry of the French Revolution of 1789 was '*liberty, equality and fraternity*', but things

The Power of Three

According to Rudolf Steiner, the three spheres of society that have developed independently over time now work side by side in an inharmonious way: *theocracy*, the *legal state*, and the *economy*. Society will not be reformed merely from the economic sphere because this sector needs to be informed by *justice* and the *spiritual-cultural* sphere, and for this to happen the three spheres need to relate in a healthy way. It can be convincingly



The French Revolution

didn't work out that way. Today bundling these values together is a recipe for disaster, yet when they apply to their appropriate domain this can achieve overall harmony. The blending of spheres of activity highlights the need for a threefold arrangement to represent individually *body*, *soul* and *spirit*, which are grounded in the *limbs and metabolism*, *rhythmic system* and *head* – a trinity where three inform one. Although the human being is a combination of each of these, they have their own autonomy and interdependence within the whole. It is their cooperative combination that constitutes the human being. Wholeness seeks the right balance in their relationship to each other, and a threefold arrangement of society separates and yet interrelates these spheres that have developed in sequence over time. Another way of expressing this is to contrast the flatness of blended quantity in two dimensions with the quality of three-dimensional unity where the three have autonomy while constituting the unity of society, which is maintained through intercommunication.

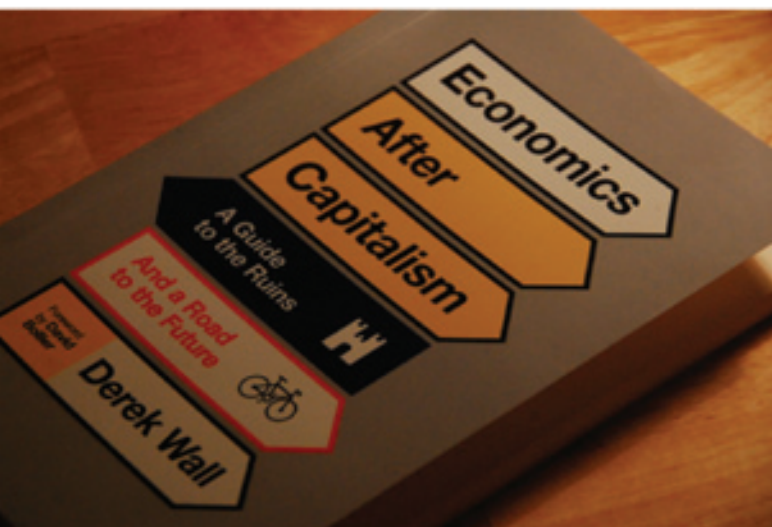
The point of such a radical reorganization is to avoid dominance of one sphere over another to the detriment of society as a whole. Each of the three spheres is a field of activity with its own character; with *freedom* in the cultural field, *justice* in the legal sphere, and *mutuality* in the economy. A long-term

strategy would be to develop this threefold social organism in regions where it is viable with a view to it spreading by example when results are shown to be positive.

In presenting the threefold social organism Steiner emphasized that he was not trying to present a utopia, since he had observed how social theories developed by the intellect of a single person failed to match the *actual* social reality. His proposal, *rooted in the spiritual reality*, was intended to engage with the living and shifting *social reality*. He stressed that *The Threefold Social Order* (1919), is a book not for the theorist but for the *heart* and the *will* to put into practice. This was also published in an English edition in 1920 as *The Threefold State*.

Also this threefold idea is not ideological but human-centred, seeking a structure for society that can best nurture and help the human to thrive. Its vision is of a society open to creative intuition and directed towards the good, which for Plato, meant living a virtuous life that liberates happiness, or in Aristotle's term, leads to *eudaimonia* as flourishing in one's life.

Steiner also formulated a social ethic: '*The healthy social life is found when in the mirror of each human soul the whole community finds its*



Economics After Capitalism

reflection and when in the community the virtue of each one is living'. If families, communities, organizations and societies were organized so that each individual is supported to develop mind, heart and spirit in freedom and is able to experience equality in the area of rights and offer their labour to others through meaningful work, then the virtue of each one truly lives.

Observing the social chaos that resulted when political states became economic communities, Rudolf Steiner saw that superficial alterations in the economic system within a nation state could not solve the underlying problems in society since this was a spiritual-cultural matter. It must be emphasized that that is the reason why spiritual-cultural activity needs its autonomy so that it can operate according to its own needs, free from regulation from the legal-state and the economic sphere. This spiritual-cultural sphere is characterized by everything based on the natural, physical and spiritual aptitudes of each person, with education as a priority.

From the perspective of history, if Germany had adopted this threefold social organism instead of maintaining its form as an empire, according to Steiner, the catastrophe of the First World War could have been avoided. *But* even when the social threefold idea was proposed to the authorities in Austria and Germany during the war years, the inertia of old forms from the past prevented its

acceptance even *though the times demanded it*. Experiencing this lack of response, Steiner spoke of a window of opportunity opening for a few years in a hundred years hence – which brings us to the interesting crises we are experiencing in these early years of the third millennium!

Moral Impotence

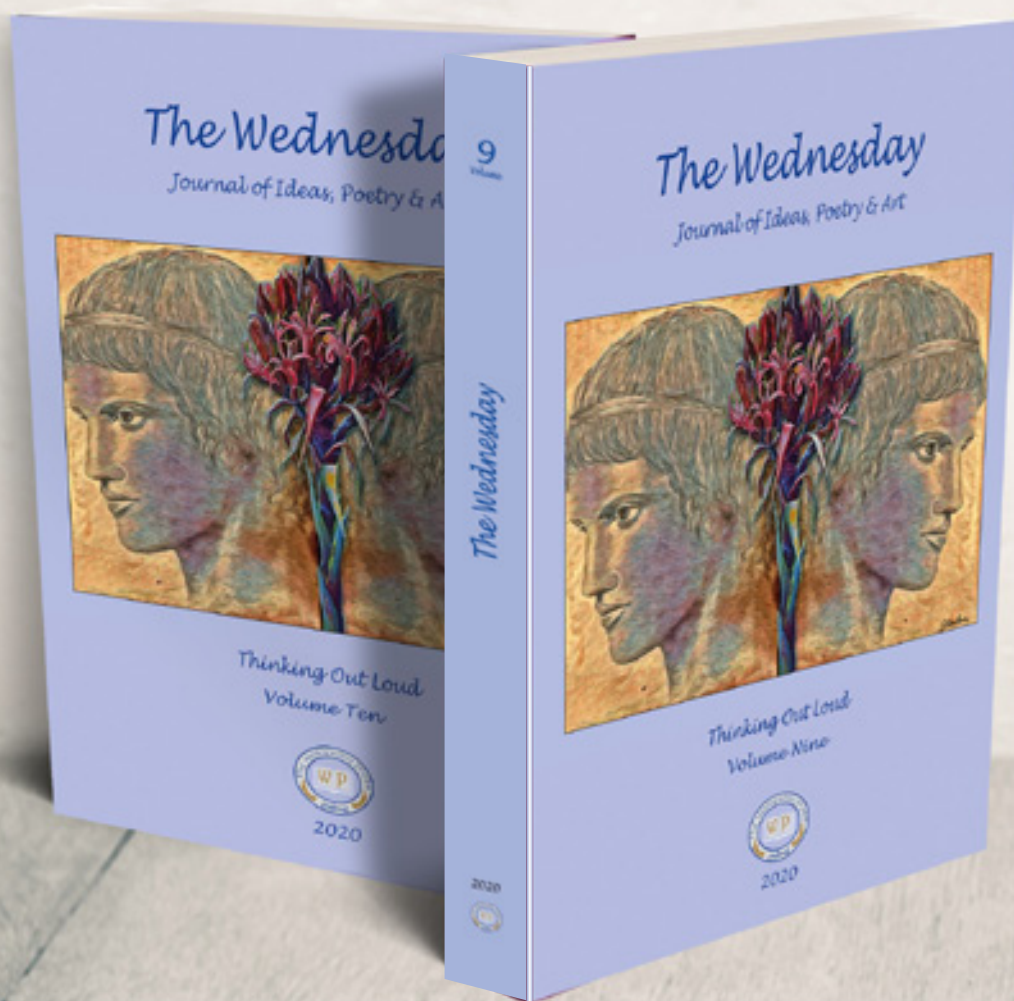
Steiner realized that society had become *ill* due to the *impotence of spiritual life* and saw that guidelines for recovery of a sick social organism could be found in bringing *spiritual life* back into the practical working of society. He recognized that the progressive need today is for *individuals* who identify with *mankind* rather than with a *nation state*. Such universalism can be seen from a Western perspective as Christ-inspired toward *freedom*, in contrast to the Father's patriarchal (and national) leadership relevant to times when the blood-tie dominated.

Rudolf Steiner was deeply rooted in the humanities, science and the arts and his 'Wisdom of the Human Being' claims to be an inclusive knowledge of man as the microcosm of the living cosmos. With his deep understanding of the *origin, destiny and destination of humanity* and concern for the dangers facing humanity, he provided numerous suggestions for developments in various fields including education, agriculture, medicine and science, but not least, for the *social organism*. The purpose of the movement he found himself in the midst of was nothing less than the renewal of civilization in its thoughts and feelings in art, religion, science, and education. Clearly he saw the *threefold social organism* as an instinctive demand of the modern person to find the *human* reflected in the *social structure*. For him this was not a matter of dividing up society into three, but of freeing the three relevant spheres to do what they are intended to do, thus enabling the individual person today to participate in all three spheres of this *living social organism*. This *Threefold Commonwealth*, drawing upon *moral intuition*, gives access to our common resources and promotes unity within a commonwealth. This may sound like utopia, but who knows what the future holds! We can only be sure that the future rapidly becomes the present and then the past. History and evolution intertwine.

The *Wednesday*

www.thewednesdayoxford.com

Volume Nine & Ten Coming Out Soon



STARTING A THIRD YEAR

Survivance: Derrida

(Part I)

The trace I leave to me means at once my death, to come or already come, and the hope that it will survive me. It is not an ambition of immortality; it is fundamental. I leave here a bit of paper, I leave, I die; it is impossible to exit this structure; it is the unchanging form of my life. Every time I let something go, I live my death in writing.

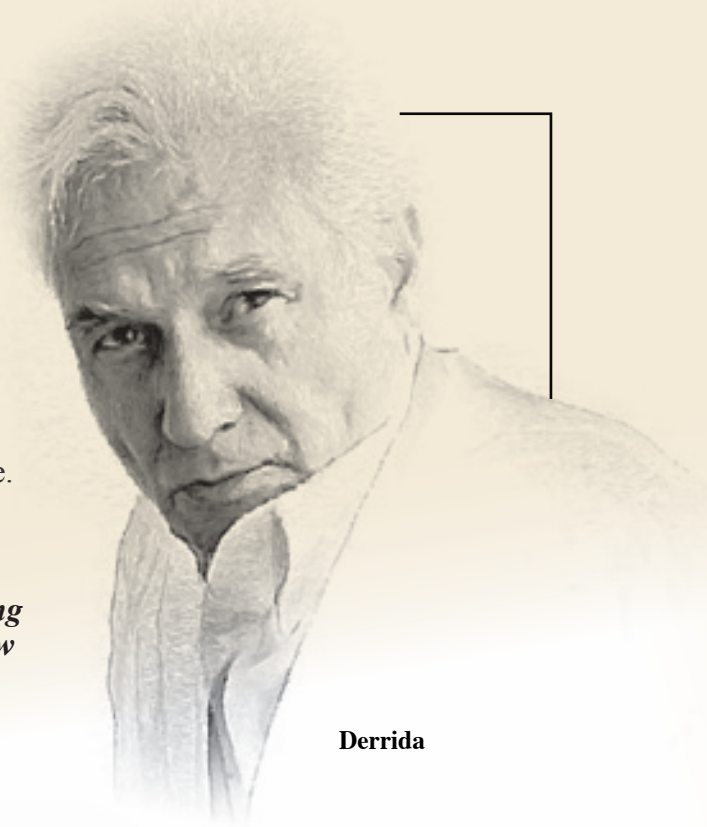
Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live, Finally: the last interview*

We are given over to absolute solitude. No one can speak with us and no one can speak for us; we must take it upon ourselves, each of us must take it upon himself.

Derrida, *The Gift of Death*

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its laws and rules are not, however, harboured in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception

Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*



Derrida



CHRIS NORRIS

'Nostalgie': don't count it one of those,
Let's say, non-trivial puns my groupies raise
Into a full-scale project while my foes,

The 'serious' types, deplore the French malaise
That has this joker playing fast and loose
With 'ordinary language', or the ways

In which their text-book rules of language-use
Run into just the problems that those rules
Were set up to conceal. Else they'll produce

Such threats to order in the various schools
Of logico-linguistic rectitude
That naught will serve to sink the ship of fools

Named 'deconstruction', one entirely crewed
(They'd have us think) by sophists, muddle-heads,
And all the monstrous, thought-perverting brood

Of reason's enemies.

But losing threads,
Forgetting what I said just minutes back
Is one big problem with these powerful meds

They've got me on, these latest drugs that stack
The odds against survival not so high,
Or leave me less aware of them for lack

Of focus or attention. It was my
'Nostalgie' that sent me off on that
Brief thought-detour, my wish to overfly

Once more those scenes and seascapes, marveling at
How swiftly I'm transported back in time
To what I'd call my 'native habitat'

Were it not for the constant sense that I'm
Forever on the move, in transit, caught
Mid-flight while scurrying between one crime-

Scene and the next, at home in every port
And none, a dweller in the space between
The cities, conferences, schools of thought,

The books, the people, and the might-have-been
As well as actual life-events that loom
In near-death retrospect. Too peregrine,



Perhaps, for my own good yet gave me room
To see all round and, sometimes, just beyond
The unexamined truths that we assume

Hold *a priori* since they correspond
To laws of thought indelibly hard-wired
In every mind that's subject to the bond

Of language, truth and logic.
Yet I tired,
Eventually, as aspects of my cure
Seemed worse than the disease and so required

That any final *journée de retour*
Au pays natal be played out in a space
Where history yields to memory while the lure

Of childhood scenes or youthful days of grace
No longer means one more exhausting trip
By land and sea, too much for me to face

These days. So it's another Proustian dip
Into that wondrous yet deceptive zone
Of *temps perdu* where memory tends to skip

The awkward bits, the ones that you'd disown,
Or all the painful episodes that came
Of my Algerian 'background', one I'd grown

To think exerted no compelling claim
On me as writer-thinker, yet which forced
My thinking way outside the standard frame

When friends or colleagues volubly endorsed
One side or other of the war and then,
Like friends of couples bitterly divorced,

Seemed to find fault with what they thought my Zen-
Like failure, or refusal, to declare
Just where I stood on independence when

The chips were down.
God knows I'd had my share
Of friendships strained or broken, even threats
Of violence, for my choosing not to square

With either side, not merely hedging bets
But trying to talk down those over-sold
On any nationalist politics that lets



The Algerian War



Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein

[illegible]

VALUES NEW

Deconstructing a text

p. 129 08/01/2020 The Wednesday ■

Deconstructing a text

Poetry

‘Nothing outside the text’, or – lest I give
My old antagonists a chance to bend
The gist – ‘no outside-text’, no life to live,

No memory, no world to comprehend,
No British-style empiricist appeal
To sense-experience, and no way to lend

The past some meaning. In each case we deal
With one chief form that proto-writing takes,
Whether it’s geo-science sets a seal

On our best knowledge, geometry that makes
Of writing or text-analogues its sole
Means of transmission, or – and here the stakes

Go high for old-school Freudians – the whole
Topology that tries to do without
That magic writing pad, that *sous-parole*

Of texts where nothing's finally rubbed out,
Where all's conserved in depthless palimpsest,
And no Cartesian cogito brings doubt

To a premeditated end.
The rest
Is what you’ll read in any bluffer’s guide,
Whether they treat my writings as a test

Of truth itself or want them certified,
In fatwa style, as certain to betray
Weak souls to sin’s embrace. So woe betide

The reader rash enough to disobey
Authority’s strict ruling and to read
Those texts of mine where mischief (so they say)

Has free rein to corrupt the youth and lead
Impressionable types to think they’ve found
Dubieties of sense that far exceed

The grasp of any reasoning held sound
By classical logicians. Thus the great
Philosophers who vainly seek to ground

Their thought on rules of rational debate
Are close-read solely with a view to what
Perplexities their writings generate,



Derrida

What aporetic twists of logic blot
Their copy-book, or what strange demons haunt
Those texts so deconstructionists can spot

Their opening and see a way to taunt
The master-thinker with some errant trope
Revealed and used unblushingly to vaunt

The ephebe's skills. 'Just give them enough rope
And then they'll hang themselves!', or so it goes,
The standard push-back line of those who hope

To show that mine's the wily sophist's pose
In a new form, another bid to cut
Philosophy back down to size and close

All thought-theatres where the sage could strut
His intellectual stuff while other sorts,
Less prone to such grandstanding, either shut

Their ears or entertained subversive thoughts
Of reason's overthrow.

 All this they said
Of me and my 'disciples' in the courts

Of orthodox opinion, duly spread
By indolent philosophers or fools
And charlatans, old scholiasts who'll tread

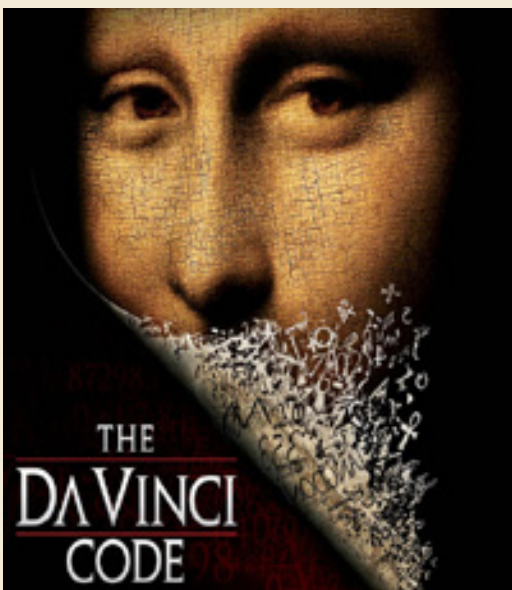
The old well-trodden path though all the rules
Have subtly changed, though there's no last recourse
To sheer self-evidence, and though the schools

No longer press their doctrine with the force
That comes of textual warrant even when
They instance revelation as the source

Of their best insights. For it's only then
That they find out where doctrine's limits lie,
Where thought confronts the textual *clinamen*,

The swerve of sense that's indicated by
A rift between authorial intent
(Or overt gist) and what they signify,

Those errant tropes that say: whatever went
Sans dire, struck you interpreters as plain
Good sense, self-rated as self-evident,



Homer

Da Vinci Code

Poetry

Must now be reconsidered, read again
With a shrewd eye to senses that may prove
Too much for readers anxious to maintain

The standard view. When writing jumps the groove
Of habitude then either they react
With some well-practised stock defensive move

To head the challenge off, or think they've cracked
A deconstructive nut that guarantees
Their reading strategies will soon extract

A transcendental signified and squeeze
Those unresolved aporias till the text
Yields its Da Vinci code. This then they'll seize

Upon and duly run with for the next
Few dozen passages that can be made,
Each time, to leave the other lot perplexed

And their lot all the better placed to trade
Up tenure-wise.

Forgive me: didn't wish
These parting thoughts to sound like a parade

Of old complaints or final chance to dish
The dirt on those, my dedicated few,
Who've had their fill of taunts like 'gibberish',

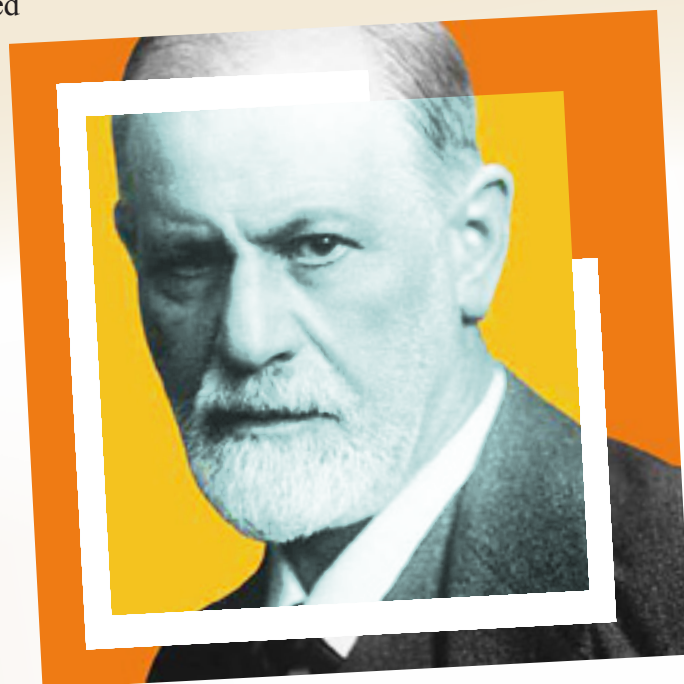
'Sheer nonsense', 'sophistry', and all the slew
Of mindless jibes and jabs that they saw fit
To send our way, that self-appointed crew

Of academic watchdogs who'd commit
The grossest libel rather than devote
Their precious time or pennyworth of wit

To seeking out and reading what I wrote
Instead of spouting third-hand press reports
Like those put out to swing the Cambridge vote

Way back in '92. Well, 'takes all sorts
To make a world', as Wittgenstein's supposed
To have placed top amongst the wisest thoughts

In all folk-wisdom, so if Homer dozed
Once in a while then why blame those who took
Time off when reading me, or simply closed



Freud

Their minds to any passage that might look
Too complex or demanding at first glance,
And better skimmed or skipped in case it shook

Their preconceptions.

‘Just a merry dance
He’s leading you’, the pundits all opine,
Not wondering if, by some unlikely chance,

Their never having read a word of mine
Might leave them less than well-equipped to speak
With such authority. *Tant pis*: their line

Of talk’s encouraged mainly by a clique
Made up of ‘common readers’ long averse
To reading, tabloid journalists who seek

To boost their readership, and – even worse –
Rogue academics anxious not to yield
Their cherished spot so willing to rehearse

Whatever tale best helps them clear the field
Of bother-headed sorts with new ideas
That, soon enough, may see those upstarts wield

The power they once enjoyed. But as it nears
So quickly, day by day, the death prepared
For, written of, or mused upon for years

In ways sometimes elliptical yet shared
At least with certain readers, this all seems
Like *vita ante acta*. Once I cared

About such things, not long ago the themes
Of raw polemics, but now left behind
For my loyal exegetes or PR teams

To deal with in whatever way they find
The fittest or, as nowadays I’d urge
My partisans, the way that best combined

The wish that ancient quarrels not emerge
Afresh with keeping up a watching brief
For gross misreadings of the type that verge

On downright travesty.

The Wednesday

Editor: Dr. Rahim Hassan

Contact Us:

rahimhassan@hotmail.co.uk

Copyright © Rahim Hassan

Website:

www.thewednesdayoxford.com

Published by:

The Wednesday Press, Oxford

Editorial Board

Barbara Vellacott

Paul Cockburn

Chris Seddon

Correspondences & buying The *Wednesday* books:

c/o The Secretary,
12, Yarnells Hill,
Oxford, OX2 9BD

*We have published eight
cumulative volumes of the
weekly issues. To obtain
your copy of anyone of the
cumulative volumes, please
send a signed cheque with your
name and address on the back
£15 for each volume
inside the UK*

*or £18 for readers
outside the UK:*

*Please make your cheque out to
‘The *Wednesday Magazine*’*

**or pay Online
ccount Number:**
24042417

Sorting Code:
09-01-29

When You Speak...



When you speak words to one who's died
Your words fall on the empty air,
She is no longer at your side,
She is no longer anywhere.

And yet somehow her presence still
Surrounds the ambient atmosphere,
Though she is gone, your stubborn will
Persists in thinking she is near.

As though still moulded by her view
The things she used to look upon
Still reflect her back to you,
It seems she is not wholly gone.

As looking at her photograph,
Things seem just as they were before,
Once more you seem to hear her laugh,
You see her lovely face once more.

But feebler though and fainter yet
When Time has had its silent ways,
Even so you will not quite forget
The joy she brought in vanished days.

And so you battle that old foe
Time with its dial or hour glass,
Until at last you too must go
Where Time itself has ceased to pass.

Edward Greenwood