

# The *Wednesday*

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## Editorial

### *Philosophy and Fashion*

It is interesting that fashion has made it into philosophy or philosophy has caught up with fashion. I know of at least one professor who gives talks and writes books and articles on the subject. It is part of making philosophy relevant to everyday life and also interesting in its own right. One could easily connect fashion with morality and aesthetics. The aesthetic aspect is shared universally but the moral one is more culturally and religiously specific.

However, this is not the issue here. The topic of this editorial is whether philosophy is a fashion that one can adopt and show off or more than that. To phrase it in better words, the question is whether philosophy can be classified as old or new, whether there is part of it that can be discarded because of the time factor or the cultural and geographical distance. Furthermore, the question could be stated as whether or not there is progress in philosophy or not. This last way of putting the question is more general than the fashion question. According to the fashion version, philosophy is a matter of taste and the latest ideas and models get preference.

There are two aspects to these questions, one aspect is methodological, the other is evaluative. For the methodological question, you need to answer the question in order to position your new philosophical approach. We will have more to say about this in the forthcoming issues but I could say for now that major philosophical trends judged philosophy as a single evolving enterprise, developing dialectically and moving from a partial view to a further partial but more adequate view, but keeping in view that philosophy is aiming at completion at some stage of its history. This is remarkably different from a second view which

takes philosophy as an accumulation of views that can be classified according to time and place in a more static way. This is the view most people have of philosophy. Philosophy for them is not going anywhere.

But the evaluative aspect is related to the value of truths uncovered and how they relate to the present moment. Are we supposed to talk about the latest ideas and books or are we to go back to old texts and ideas to search for new developments? But the question is also related to the value of philosophy itself. Are there philosophical truths to be taught to students of philosophy, as it is the case in science, or will philosophy be better off dissolving itself into other disciplines? The experience of the last century of philosophical thought shows that most new ideas came from sociology, literary theory and criticism, history and aesthetics. Science has also contributed its share of problems and ideas to philosophical debate but in a far less creative way than other fields of knowledge.

Due to a shortage of space, I will rush my answers for the moment but I will deal with them in more detailed ways in the future. I believe that philosophy is the product of the spirit and not of nature. This goes as well for art and all products of the spirit. I also believe that there is a sphere of the spirit that flows through history. Some might call it reason. Reason I believe is moving forward and only has temporary setbacks when it falls in errors and contradiction. But the backward movement is only a hiccup in the development of spirit (or reason) and it will march forward again. The question of the completion of reason and spirit or the never-ending quest is a separate but related question that is worth thinking about.

*The Editor*

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# Truth Is A Validation Of Experience – Nothing More

DAVID BURRIDGE

In this essay I want to explore the pragmatic definition of knowledge and truth. In his *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*, William James distinguishes the intellectual from the pragmatist's version of truth as follows:

The intellectual:

*But the great assumption of the intellectualists is that truth means essentially an inert static relation. When you have got your truth of anything there is an end to the matter.*

The pragmatist: Granting an idea or belief to be true it says "what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's life? How will the truth be realised? What experiences will be different from those which would obtain if the belief were false? What in short is the truth's cash value in experiential terms? (From William James's *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*)

The value of a true idea, for James, is in its consequences, we must constantly validate experience. He wrote: *the possession of true thoughts means everywhere the possession of invaluable instruments of action.*

Ideas can be evaluated, corroborated, and verified. The pragmatic is the one who verifies truth under particular circumstances:

*Far from being a blank command from out of the blue, or a stunt self-imposed by our intellect.*

Truth is reason based on a combination of experiences and the corroboration of the facts that present themselves. James refers to the process as: *connections and transitions that come to us point to point.* Truth is made and it

reflects how we think and act. It is engineered by an exchange of ideas:

*All human thinking gets discursified: we exchange ideas, we lend and borrow verifications, get them from one another by social interaction.*

This would of course only work if our beliefs are open to doubt and potential refashioning in the light of new ideas. Beliefs would need to be tentative, which of course they usually are not.

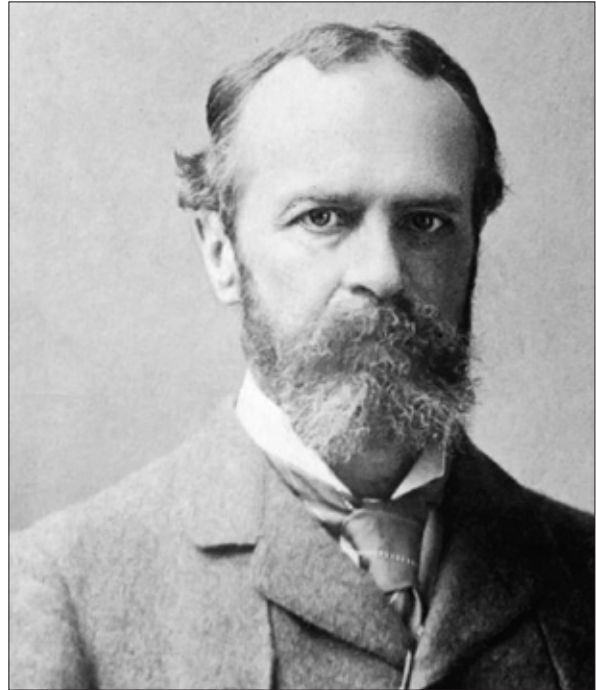
I want to explore the nature of these instruments a bit further.

## Moral Dimension

Knowledge is a combination of facts and beliefs. One might consider facts as all that is needed to establish true knowledge. But we need to consider the facts in the particular circumstances involved. Beliefs give us a motivational direction to test and validate the facts, and providing we are prepared to alter our beliefs in the light of what we learn then beliefs can help towards a better knowledge. But there is a need to consider where the beliefs come from, particularly when we are considering ethical truths. For example, we might start from a *categoric-imperative* that says it is wrong to lie, then find if we don't lie to a murderer, we are enabling him to achieve a worse evil. An imperative is categorical (for Kant) if it has not to do with the matter of the action and what is to result from it, but with the form and the principle from which the action itself follows, as he showed in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. This would mean that as far as moral truths are concerned, beliefs are pre-conceived and possibly driven by cultural values. This would



**Merleau-Ponty**



**William James**

mean that the cash value of our beliefs is pre-set by a higher market. The pragmatist would say in these particular circumstances it is right to lie if the outcome is to save the life of an innocent person. The validation of a particular true thought depends upon the verification of the circumstances that are before us.

James also argues for the importance of experience:

*Our experience meanwhile is shot through with regularities.*

So, the verification process takes into account what we have learnt from the past. Of course, the circumstances before us might lead us to a different assessment. He uses the example of a starving man in a forest coming across a cow-path, which he deduces might lead to a farmhouse and some food. This may be an individual conclusion, or it implies that our knowledge and therefore our path to the truth may be led by other people's experiences. Here we lean to the issue of testimony. Hume saw the importance of using other peoples'

experience. The reports of eye witnesses or spectators is of course to be used when they give testimonies that can be tested:

*There is no species of reasoning more common more useful, and even necessary for human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men and reports of eyewitnesses and spectators....(A Treatise of Human Nature)*

This in itself does not breach the principles of pragmatism, as testimony is a statement of truth which can be tested (in law for example, testimonies are tested through cross-examination). But if on the other hand, what people say is treated as authority simply because of the social authority of the teller, then the path to pragmatic truth is blocked

I must consider also in this essay the significance of cultural paradigms and dogmatic *truths*, where it might be argued that a sense of social certainty is good for humanity. The foundationalist might argue that what we know today is linked in a trail leading back to some fundamental premises. The problem here is

that the search for knowledge gets constrained and truth is locked out. There needs to be a continuing review of empirical states and the changes that occur. The pragmatist might observe social norms and their consequential outcomes and note that they indicate some knowledge about human behaviour. We don't have to be a religious person to recognise what extreme damage hard dogma does to peoples' lives.

### A Perception Problem

I will deal briefly with the perception problem, which in its extreme blocks off independent judgement – seeing everything according to prescribed patterns (*Gestalt*). In his work *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty argued that the individual's existence in the world is determined by the structure of perceptions that are unique to that individual. The empirical physical world is for him a perceptual construction. He draws on Gestalt ideas of pattern recognition. We don't look at atomic bits but look for formulations of perceptions to make sense of the world around us. This is the complete opposite to a pragmatic perception. Yes of course we don't make sense of things normally on a tabula rasa basis. We make sense of things using our memories of what we have learnt before, but this doesn't close down independent assessment. So far we have been basing our judgement of a particular moral paradigm and coming across evidence that undermines that paradigm, we have the ability to reason aside from previous perceptions. Indeed, questioning perceptions and beliefs and addressing new facts as a result is the pragmatic way of validating truth.

There is a criticism of Pragmatic Truth which was laid out by Bertrand Russell in his essay: *William James Conception of Truth*. He questions James's definition of Truth:

*A Truth is anything which it pays to believe... Hence the knowledge that a certain belief pays must be classed as knowledge of a sensible fact*

*or of a relation among purely mental facts ... We must suppose that this means that the consequences of entertaining a belief are better than those of rejecting it.*

Of course, this opens up the criticism that it pushes away any a-priori facts upon which beliefs might have been founded. It also may lead to a false truth. If I am living in a dictatorial regime it might make my life most successful if I am an obedient slave. Pragmatism might urge me to do so, but where do I find an inner truth which will lead me to protest and suffer certain death?. Of course Kant would argue that this demonstrates that moral truth is preconceived above the empirical world. We might have an intuition of what is right which may have been built up in our memories of past experiences. A person who has been brought up in a fair and loving environment will approach an ugly society with a perception shaped by her early experience and this might enable her to resist false testimonies. O'Brien in his *Introduction to Theory of Knowledge* argues that there is a certain interplay between perception, testimony and memory. Intellectually of course we are able to draw upon all of these.

Finally, I must return to my opening proposition: Truth is a validation of experience, nothing more. It might be argued by a Kantian that a Pragmatist could not know where to start with ethical truth if he didn't have access to some inner goodness. I have no problem with there being a sense of humanitarian concern or fairness, but to make an intuition come to life, we need to test it empirically, taking into account all the complexities of conflicting interests. This is how legal systems should operate, applying the tests of lawfulness and natural justice, just to ensure the detail is still on track. Never mind whose testimony is declared, promulgations are valueless, if they are not drawn from evidence and open to review in the light of experience. Facts must always be validated to discover truth rather than dogma.

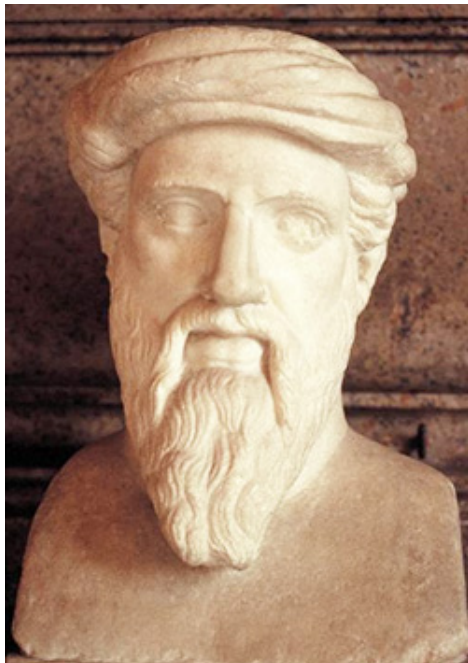
# Bodily Thought: Movement

PAUL COCKBURN

**A**s someone who has just broken his hip and is finding it difficult to move, I have been thinking about the philosophy of movement.

In fact, moving is religious! When the Christian evangelist St. Paul was in Athens, a group of Stoic and Epicurean philosophers were interested in his teachings and took him to the Areopagus, where he spoke to the people. In his speech he quotes from a Greek philosopher: ‘...God is not far from any of us. For in Him we live and *move* and have our being’. This is a quote from Epimenides, a famous Cretan philosopher and hero who lived in Knossos in Crete in the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. Moving is apparently right up there alongside life and existence!

The Ancient Greek atomists also emphasized movement. They thought that atoms have different sizes and shapes, and are immutable, and they move about in the ‘void’. Leucippus thought they whirl around and form clusters, perhaps somewhat similar to Descartes’ vortices. Living things are



Epimenides

also combinations of atoms, and Democritus thought that organs of the body could reproduce themselves by mean of seeds. We are born to move. Babies exercise their muscles, and learn to move in their environment, helped by their senses. Even when we are not moving, when we are stationary and asleep, the atoms and molecules of our bodies are moving. When we walk, the muscles in our legs force blood back up our veins to the heart, counteracting gravity. The heart is not strong enough to achieve this on its own.

Although atomism is generally thought of in a mechanical way in terms of the natural movement of atoms, corpuscularians in the 17<sup>th</sup> century such as Robert Boyle thought that the ingenious design of the eye had theological implications.

Perhaps a more startling idea is that matter is conscious. This seems to be one of the ideas Philip Pullman has in his popular modern fantasy series *His Dark Materials*. He writes about Dust. Dust is attracted to conscious beings and came into existence when living things became conscious of themselves. Dust sounds similar to the subtle aether that Sir Isaac Newton speculated permeated the universe. He wanted a mechanism by which the force of gravity could be transmitted over large distances. Newton had formulated the mathematical laws of gravity, which explained how planets orbit the earth, but he wanted a mechanism by which the force was transmitted.

It seems to be the case that there is another dimension to the movements of living things which is different to the movements of atoms. For animals and humans, the whole organism can move in a purposeful way. In sport we admire the achievements of athletes who can perform marvelous bodily skills in competitions. Humans undertake long and arduous journeys of discovery. Even in the mental realm, we talk of ‘moving on’ in terms of our opinions, they can become fixed and fossilised. Whether it is in the physical or the mental realm, let’s keep moving!

## The Necessary Angel: *The Poetry of Wallace Stevens*

*Notes on the Wednesday Meeting Held on 5<sup>th</sup> of February 2020*

RAHIM HASSAN

We recently had a review of our Wednesday meetings. One recommendation was that we should inject more poetry, literature and art in the meetings. We put that to work in this meeting which was dedicated to the poetry of the American poet and writer Wallace Stevens. Barbara Vellacott gave an excellent presentation which involved reading and commenting on his poetry before encouraging a debate on each poem or a section of a poem. Some historical and biographical notes were also added.

Wallace Stevens was born in 1879 and was educated at Harvard then went on to study law at New York before settling in business as an executive for an insurance company. He published a number of poetry collections, most memorably *Auroras of Autumn*. His collected Poems won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1955. He also had an interesting collection of essays called *The Necessary Angel* which emphasized the role of the imagination and had a strong engagement with many philosophical views of the imagination

and metaphysics. Wallace Stevens died in 1955. He was a contemporary of Eliot and considered a modernist poet. They both had great interest in philosophical themes in poetry. Stevens was a student of George Santayana and wrote a poem about him.

The meeting started by reading sections from *The Man with the Blue Guitar*:

*'The man bent over his guitar,  
A shearsman of sorts. The day was green.*

*They said, 'You have a blue guitar,  
You do not play things as they are.'*

*The man replied, 'Things as they are  
Are changed upon the blue guitar.'*

*And they said then, 'But play, you must,  
A tune beyond us, yet ourselves,*

*A tune upon the blue guitar  
Of things exactly as they are.'*

This was followed by a pause, questions and reflections before carrying on with other sections of the poem. The colours in the poem and their symbolism were discussed. Green was suggestive of the day, the blue is of the night. It was also suggested that light is when we are with others and blue when we are alone. Green also has a connection with nature, and blue is of the celestial and the beyond. It was also noted that throughout the poem Stevens plays on the Kantian distinction between the world of appearance (here: things as they are, as they seem to us) and the world in itself that can only be captured by the imagination and insight. The two aspects of the world come together in section XIV of the poem:



Wallace Stevens

*First one beam, then another, then  
A thousand are radiant in the sky.*

*Each is both star and orb; and day  
Is the riches of their atmosphere.*

*The sea appends its tattered hues.  
The shores are banks of muffling mist.*

*One says a German chandelier –  
A candle is enough to light the world.*

*It makes it clear. Even at noon  
It glistens in essential dark.*

*At night, it lights the fruit and wine,  
The book and bread, things as they are.*

*In a chiaroscuro where  
One sits and plays the blue guitar.*

The meeting also discussed his lines in section V of the same poem:

*The earth, for us, is flat and bare,  
There are no shadows. Poetry*

*Exceeding music must take the place  
Of empty heavens and its hymns,*

*Ourselves in poetry must take their place,  
Even in the chattering of your guitar.*

We wondered what is the relation between poetry and metaphysics? One interpretation was that poetry takes the place of metaphysics. This is not a bad interpretation given that Stevens thought the imagination and poetry were taking the place of conventional religion. We also debated the relation between poetry and music and the relation of both to language.

The more religiously oriented poem read in the meeting was *Sunday Morning*. He expressed his rejection of conventional religiosity in the forms in which it had been taught and practiced. In section II of the poem, he says:

*Why should she give her bounty to the dead?  
What is divinity if it can come  
Only in silent shadows and in dreams?*

*Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,  
In pungent fruit and bright, green wings, or else  
In any balm of beauty of the earth,  
Things to be cherished like the thought of  
heaven?*

*Divinity must live within herself:  
Passions of rain, or moods in falling snow;  
Grievings in loneliness, or unsubdued  
Elations when the forest blooms; gusty  
Emotions on wet roads on autumn nights;  
All pleasures and all pains, remembering  
The bough of summer and the winter branch.  
These are the measures destined for her soul.*

Does this amount to atheism? Some had the view that the poem as a whole has an atheistic take on religion and a denial of the resurrection. It was also said that other American poets of his generation were atheists. But this view was challenged by giving some details of his religious background (he came from a Lutheran family) and thought. He talked about the death of the gods, but said he was not an atheist but thought that God is within us and believed that poetry can replace religion. One has to remember that the language of poetry is not as precise as the language of science: it is expansive. Talk about 'darkness' or 'the nothing' can be seen as talk about the ineffable that could only be captured by the imagination. Perhaps he was looking for a place of rest for the soul and the mind by joining the idea of God and the imagination, as in his poem *Final Soliloquy of the interior Paramour*:

*We say God and the imagination are one...  
How high that highest candle lights the dark.*

*Out of this same light, out of the central mind,  
We make a dwelling in the evening air;  
In which being there together is enough.*

We also discussed his loneliness and his unhappy married life with regards to his poem *The Snow Man*. But my favourite lines come from his poem *Angel Surrounded by Paysans*:

*'Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,  
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,'*

I think this says it all for the poet and his message, a divine presence on earth.

## When We Are Living In The Void Of Heaven

(A Sonnet)

When we are living in the void of heaven,  
all definitions will have changed and died.  
There are no questions. What there once has been,  
is but a dream in an outlasting night.

We are the atoms gleaming throughout space  
along with stars, the moons and racing planets.  
There we belong without the need to place  
gods on pedestals or snatch worldly assets.

We float through strings of music in the ether,  
the vibrant tunes once having been ideas;  
those quests and aims that held mankind together,  
those meanings have now wholly disappeared.

8

We are the sound, before a voice has spoken,  
a thought asleep, before it has been woken.



*Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws*

## Poetry

### The Eliot File

Eliot

How unpleasant to meet Mr. Eliot!  
With his features of clerical cut,  
And his brow so grim  
And his mouth so prim . . .

I am an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist  
in literature and a royalist in politics.

Tradition . . . is of the blood, so to speak,  
rather than of the brain: it is the means by  
which the vitality of the past enriches the life  
of the present. In the cooperation of both is the  
reconciliation of thought and feeling.

T.S. Eliot

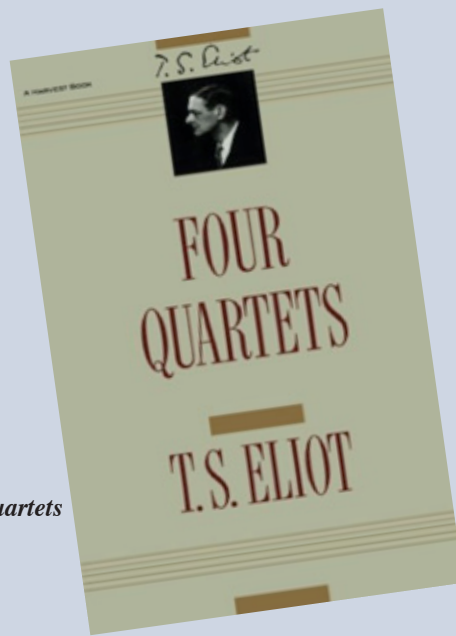
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CHRIS NORRIS

I've got a bone or two I'd like to pick  
With you, old Possum, though it's not your style,  
I know, to have things out so you'll be quick  
To change the subject, hedge, or run a mile  
From any critic ill-advised or thick  
Enough to open up the Eliot file  
And ask straight out: why's no-one called his bluff,  
This emperor guy parading in the buff?

*Four Quartets*



Let's take your big achievements one by one  
(No shortage), yet still keep in mind the kid  
Who blew the gaff and spoiled the people's fun  
Since he'd the confidence to lift the lid  
On certain stuff that, when all's said and done,  
Might be what emperor or poet hid  
In plain sight lest the plebs or readers twig  
How they'd been strung along by Mr Big.

Decoupling sound from sense is one technique  
You use, if that's the word – more like one way  
Of building up a symbolist mystique  
(Main sources: Baudelaire and Mallarmé)  
By which to make your purport so oblique  
That words commingle in the grey-on-grey,  
Sense languishes, and poetry pursues  
A sound-enchanted echolalic muse.

Let's not disparage that pitch-perfect ear  
Of yours, that singing line with dying fall,  
That mermaid-music from a distant sphere,  
Those long-suspended cadences, and all  
The quoted passages that tell us we're  
From now on, willingly or not, in thrall  
To one for whom 'tradition' signifies  
His own choice line-up for the 'classic' prize.



**Charles Maurras**

Yet, this much granted, still we might decline  
The proffered chance to take your guided tour  
Through literary precincts where the line  
Of classical descent is roughly your  
Own take on it, plus liberty to mine  
Those fragments ripped from context to ensure  
That sounds achieve most impact with least threat  
Of smart-ass readers playing hard-to-get.

The trouble is, you pushed that line so hard,  
That thing about the poem's near-complete  
Divorce from plain-prose reason, that we're barred,  
Us bother-headed types, from crying 'cheat'  
Or making extra-sure to stay on guard  
Against a creed that tells us we can eat  
The crumbled cake of sense but have it too  
By listening out for each acoustic cue.

The poet's task, you solemnly opined,  
Was not to simplify but to reflect  
Those novel complications that defined  
'Our present age'. Then we might re-connect  
With myths and modes of being that combined  
The long-fragmented shards of intellect  
And feeling in a synthesis unknown  
Since Shakespeare, Donne and Webster set the tone.



Eliot: The Waste Land

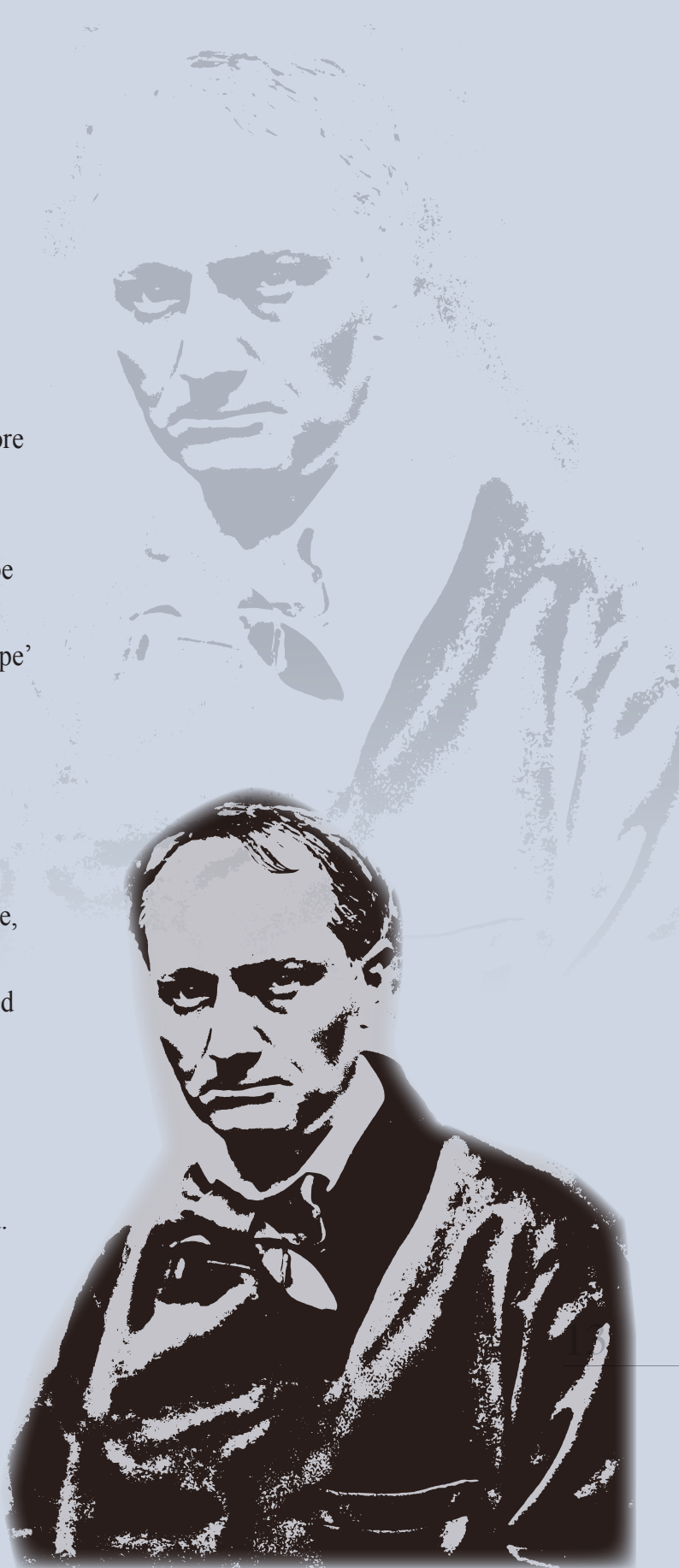
What drops clean out on your selective view  
Of your elective forbears is the fact,  
Quite simply, that they liked to think things through,  
To reason, argue, get their terms exact,  
Strike sparks off their conceits and not, like you,  
Have euphony make up for all that's lacked  
In just those conjoint qualities you prized  
In them: keen wit and feeling harmonised!

Forgive me this brusque missive if it seems  
A tad ungenerous, but you do strike me  
As having, maybe past your wildest dreams,  
So deftly fixed the major currency  
Of lit-crit talk, its regnant tone and themes,  
That only by lèse-majesté can we  
Unwilling acolytes break free of your  
Old claim to say which fragments we should shore

Against our ruin. Throwing off such rule,  
One might say, 'what forgiveness?', or what hope  
Of finding new direction out-of-school,  
Not envying 'this man's gifts and that man's scope'  
(Your words again!), but having to re-tool  
And seek our own revisionary trope  
By which to quiet that inner voice or quell  
The workings of that Eliotic spell.

'No issue here', they'll say: 'comes down to taste,  
To whether his verse-music stirs your soul  
Or falls on deaf ears'. Still you're not well-placed  
To side with them, considering the role  
It plays in smuggling ugly or debased  
Ideas and sentiments past the control  
Routinely exercised by minds not apt  
To flip when junk comes musically gift-wrapped.

No secret now, those muted racist slurs,  
Those far-right views, that proto-fascist rot  
You took from Maurras, and the beast that stirs  
In phrases collocating 'Jew' and 'squat',  
Anti-Semitic jibes ('money in furs'),  
Or worse: 'the Jew is underneath the lot',  
And all so expertly set up to prime  
Receptive brains by cadence, trope, and rhyme.



**Baudelaire**

## Poetry

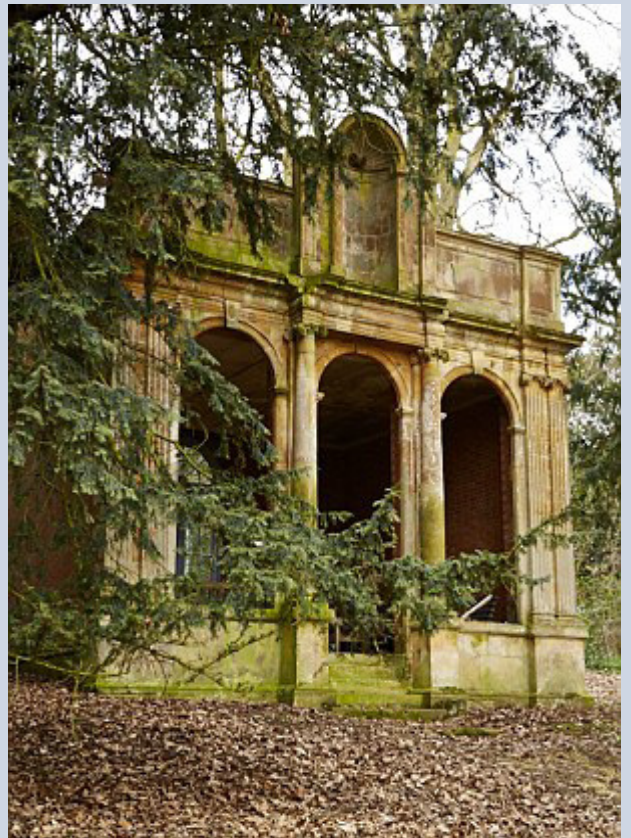
Donne



It's when *Melos* gets out of touch with *Nous*  
That trouble starts; when thinking takes a break  
That echo's empire threatens to cut loose,  
Cast rationality aside, and make  
The most of any chance for mind-abuse  
That junks prose sense for visceral impact's sake,  
Or counts mere intellect a world well lost  
When pure sound-sorcery defrays the cost.

That's how it was for you, we must allow:  
The poem as (your choice) a condensate  
Of having read Spinoza, and just now  
Picked up the smell of cooking, plus the state  
Of being in love – with no least notion how  
Such oddly mixed constituents might relate  
Beyond the utmost reach of human will  
Or conscious thought to guide for good or ill.

Then there's the *Four Quartets*, your master-plan  
For getting us ungodly types on board  
Your royalist, classicist, high-Anglican,  
Myth-saturated bid to strike a chord  
With readers whose long-range attention span  
Still leaves them over-willing to afford  
Soul-space, if no room in the active brain,  
For thoughts of that thought-tranquilizing strain.



*Four Quartets*: Burnt Norton



Mallarmé

Again, I'll not deny the thing has lines,  
Verse-paragraphs, whole stretches that rate high  
On any scale of value that confines  
Itself to judging poems mainly by  
The sorts of adjective applied to wines  
Like 'rich', 'intense', or 'soulful' (don't ask why!),  
While your choice tip-off to Dame Helen lets  
The pundits cite Beethoven's late quartets.

Again verse-music, but a different kind,  
A flagged-up yet subliminal appeal  
To works that keep your readers well in mind  
Of matters spiritual and bid them feel,  
Not think, their way till, sure enough, they find  
Your rapt devotions urging they should kneel  
At altars to a god as passing strange  
As any lined up on your shooting-range.<sup>1</sup>

So when you tell us jokily that you're  
'Unpleasant' or by no means nice to meet,  
Then – Mr. Eliot – we had best not score  
It up to mere mock-modesty but treat  
It as a brief permission to explore  
Things you were too repressed, or too discreet,  
To say except when given half a chance  
By twists of thinking, trope, or circumstance.

<sup>1</sup> See T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods: a primer of modern heresy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934)

## *The Wednesday*

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