

The *Wednesday*

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Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford



Editorial

A Space for Philosophy

Philosophy, as I said in last month's editorial, is not to be measured by its results as is the way of practical science. But this seems to have run into difficulties with the generally held idea that philosophy should be relevant to life and 'everydayness'. It became clear to me afterwards that a concern for the world is part of creativity itself. If a new thought can be represented as a new-born child, it is important that we care about the world that the child comes into, as much as the fact that a child is a new beginning. However, I want to emphasise the independent, free space of thinking philosophically. I also want to emphasise the need to go beyond the opposition between creativity, or the new-born thought, and the external world. There is a need to reach a synthesis between the two on the terms of philosophy itself. The aim is to give an absolute independence and freedom to thought in a philosophical space.

The philosophical space is a meeting point of the ideal (conceptual realm) and the world, that is the object of the concept. It is the meeting place of the ideal (thinking) and the real (the world). However, this might be slightly misleading because the ideal is real in its own right. Thinking has its own reality and consistency. This might be independent of the thinker, time and place.

I will borrow two terms that Deleuze is fond of mentioning and explaining, to highlight my point. There is the geographical reference of 'territorial' and 'de-territorialising'. Ideas are territorialised to the extent that they are contextualised within their local environment socially and politically and perhaps get compromised by it. De-territorialisation is a rupture with the local environment and going beyond the given social and political environment. It can be approximated by the idea of falling under authority (territorialised) and breaking away from

external authority (de-territorialised). Philosophy, understood as a creative process, is always in the business of creating its own authority and extending its freedom and outlook beyond the given environment (territory) its subject inhabits. The local environment is a contingent fact about the philosopher but not about his philosophy. If we don't accept this, we might fall into a sort of determinism, social or historical, that renders philosophy, and thought generally, unable to break with tradition or a given society at a given time. In other words, philosophy may fall a victim to the herd mentality.

The philosophical space is the interstice between the pre-conceptual and the unconceptualized in thought. It is the space between what has not been formed, as undefined thought, and the objectified, commodified opinion available for public consumption. An idea shows up in the philosophical space. Undetermined at first, it gradually takes on some defining characteristics and when fully formed is delivered into the world. It is new at the beginning, but then gets accommodated in the mind of its readers by adjustment and comparison with what has been already known and accepted. It becomes marketable through the media and the socio-political environment. The idea by then has lost the power of being a shocking new one and becomes hackneyed. It becomes reconciled with its environment and has lost the marks of creativity. It has been fully territorialised. But philosophy will not give up and tries to free itself from these shackles and fights back to get its freedom and creativity. This is the task of de-territorialisation. This is the resistance of thought to domestication and involves a return to the creative space. In the words of Deleuze 'to create is to resist'.

The Editor

Reports of the Wednesday Meetings Held During December

Written by RAHIM HASSAN

On Friendship

Notes of The Wednesday Meeting Held on 2nd December

The meeting for this week had a personal touch to it. Edward Greenwood talked on friendship. This meeting was dedicated to the memory of our late friend and member of *The Wednesday Group*, Ray Ellison. Ray died of heart attack on the second of December last year. He was a gentle person with a constant smile who almost always brought a box of dates to the meeting. We all miss him.

Edward presented a survey of writings on friendship from the Greek era. Plato devoted his dialogues in the *Lysis* to the topic of friendship and also the *Symposium*. The Greek verb to love is *philein* and in the *Symposium* Diotima wants Love directed to Wisdom (*Sophia*) hence the word '*Philosophia*', the love of Wisdom. Plato's dialogues give us excellent examples of philosophizing together and in the *Crito* Socrates even shows his friends how a philosopher should die.

The Roman Cicero discussed friendship in a dialogue called *On Friendship* but it is more historical and anecdotal than philosophical. Montaigne wrote an essay 'On Friendship'. He thought that friendship has a spiritual element. Shakespeare, who had read Montaigne, treats of both love and friendship in his sonnets. For Pascal, in his *Pensées*, human beings are prone to self-love. He famously maintains that we do not love persons for themselves, but for some quality they have, beauty say. The corollary was that once the quality which arouses our love is gone the love finds no self to love. Each self is just the sum of its qualities. The poet Yeats expressed a similar idea.

Edward also mentioned La Rochefoucauld in his *Maximes*, with his famous remark that there is something in the misfortunes of our friends which is not displeasing to us. The English writers of the 18th century from Swift and Pope through to Dr Johnson and Boswell and Jane Austen were very preoccupied with friendship as an important part of sociability.

In the 19th century, we find friendships very important for Nietzsche. His first close friendship was with a fellow philologist, Rohde. He became a friend of the Wagners in the 1860's but they fell out over the Bayreuth festival. Nietzsche had a close friendship with Jonathan



Raymond Ellison

Rée and Lou Andreas Salome but there was rivalry and betrayal. He also formed friendships with others, such as the historian Burckhardt, the musician Koselitz and the writer Malwida Von Meysenbug. His closest friend was, however, the critical historian of Christianity Franz Overbeck who took care of him when he had a mental collapse. Nietzsche left an important note on star friendship in aphorism 279 of book four of *The Gay Science*.

In the twentieth century G E Moore's book on morality *Principia Ethica* claimed friendship and the contemplation of art works were the ultimate goods in life. However, Edward found Jacques Derrida's book *The Politics of Friendship* not helpful on this topic. By way of contrast Peter Hacker has given a magisterial survey of the history of love and friendship in his book *The Passions.: A Study Of Human Nature*. Hacker presented an interesting discussion of the differences between love and friendship. You can choose a friend, but you cannot choose to fall in love at first sight.

An example of group friendship that was mentioned but not explored is the German Romantics who created the term *Symphilosophie* (or philosophizing together). Another example is the Young Hegelians who filled the gap between Hegel and Marx.

Macmurray's Hope for a Better World

Notes of The Wednesday Meeting Held on 9th December

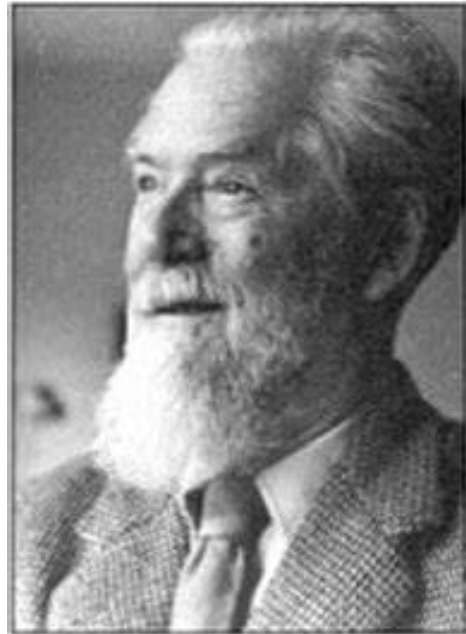
The philosopher John Macmurray has been unfairly neglected. Jeanne Warren is an authority on the philosophy of Macmurray and she has dedicated a lot of her time and energy towards generating interest in his philosophy. She has contributed many articles, talks and courses on different aspects of Macmurray's thought. Her talk to *The Wednesday* group was 'Macmurray's Philosophy: Understanding the world in order to live better in it.' It concerned what Macmurray calls the 'Form of the Personal', i.e. persons in their direct dealing and concern for each other.

John Macmurray (1891-1976) is an original thinker, in the post-Kantian tradition. He has been called a 'Personalist'. He has few followers in philosophy; but influenced some trends in education, psychology, politics, and religion. He left a long list of books which included *The Self as Agent* (1957) and *Persons in Relation* (1961). His views on how to treat others were formed in a religious upbringing, and thinking about 'how to live' came naturally to him. He was anti-Communist, and against Fascism and Nationalism. For him, the world was increasingly inter-connected, in economic terms and other ways, necessitating cooperation.

Philosophy, he thought, had elevated the theoretical over the practical. A new 'Copernican Revolution' is needed, *thinking from the standpoint of action*: His main idea is to philosophise from the 'I do' standpoint and not from the 'I think'. This is, incidentally, also Fichte's modification of the Kantian system.

Macmurray insisted on what he called the 'Form of the Personal', as against both the 'Form of the Mathematical' (or mechanical) and the 'Form of the Organic'. The last is good for understanding nature but not persons and the second does not leave room for individuality. Persons act in the world with conscious intention. Action involves thinking and feeling: *feeling* discerns goals and *thinking* gives us the means of reaching them. Another way of stating this, according to Jeanne, is that feeling determines values, thinking determines facts.

Persons depend on relationships with other persons to develop into mature individuals. The basic unit is not the 'I' or the 'We' but the 'You-and-I'. Jeanne made the point clear by saying that 'Persons are in *mutual*



Macmurray

relations with other persons; we expect persons to respond to us. This is in contrast with objects: we do not expect objects to respond to us, we adapt to them. Contrast this with the human personal relationship to other animals, we do not expect a mutual relationship, though it can be a partial one. Contrast with systems, we as persons do not expect systems to respond to us, we adapt to them.'

Macmurray once wrote: 'The functional is *for* the personal, the personal is *through* the functional'. But what we see nowadays in practice is the domination of the functional over the personal. The mechanical is also overtaking the personal in the name of efficiency and functionality. The balance needs to be addressed and Macmurray's thoughts in this regard are a good guide.

Paul Cockburn added in the discussion that Macmurray writes about three psychological 'dispositions' which tie into our morality. They are derived from our childhood experiences. The three dispositions are contemplative (passive), pragmatic (aggressive) and community (love). Macmurray believes these three 'dispositions' form the basis of society, they are derived from our childhood and family experiences, and are manifest in society.

The Hunger for the Common Good

Notes of The Wednesday Meeting Held on 16th December

The speaker on this occasion was Dr. Alan Xuereb. Alan is a lawyer and a politician, as well as being a philosopher and artist. Some of his paintings have been published in *The Wednesday*. He gave a talk based on his recently published book *Reflections on the Common Good*. His interest in the subject goes back to his university days. He was influenced by the work of John M. Finnis, especially his book *Natural Law and Natural Rights*.

He started by making the distinction between the 'common good' and the 'common goods'. By the latter, he means what individuals take to be their good or what is materially good for them. The former is a moral concept, and it is connected with the community. The common good is more of a range concept. Alan said that it is like a scale on a ruler. Different communities move towards or away from the common good according to the measures they take. The common good implies coordination between individual well-being and the well-being of the community.

So the common good of human civilisation is not the same as its common goods. The common good is something inherent and intrinsic to human nature itself, whilst the common goods are those goods that a community decides ought to pertain to it. The common goods may well serve the common good, but these concepts are not identical. The common good may

be accomplished through the proper implementation of a just and legitimate political set-up based on a set of conditions which enables individuals to achieve their individual all-round flourishing, through their participation and enjoyment of the common goods, and by contributing towards the wellbeing of the community.

He mentioned two important points: first the common good is cross-cultural and includes future human civilisations. Second, all common goods, including scientific and cultural achievements, have to be assessed through, and contained in, this common good vision. If one loses sight of this vision, progress may well turn against any civilisation possessing these achievements.

Alan said that there are different approaches to the common good and he is following the approach of Finnis. According to this approach, the common good is the fulfilled life by the fullest participation in the seven basic values: Life, knowledge, friendship, play, aesthetic experience, practical reasonableness and religion. The well-being of the individual is achieved through participation in these seven basic human values, and the same applies to the community.

Alan gave many examples of how to make this a political programme, by implementing the basic values of life mentioned above, such as environmental policy, the health and protection of life (including unborn children), improving and extending education systems, preserving the value of truth, teaching critical thinking, protecting minorities (including immigrants), promoting voluntary work, providing social welfare which is impartial, efficient, effective, the indomitable functioning of state institutions, operating the economy, and the value of aesthetic experience in the artistic and cultural fields, including theatre, music and literature. Of course, these are just examples and are by no means exhaustive.

Alan called for an increase in political participation, especially voting in elections. He noted that there is now an apathy towards voting in elections. More care and participation might be encouraged by critical thinking and educating children from a young age. Teaching the Socratic method might also help.



John M. Finnis

Definitions and Their Logical Structure

Notes of The Wednesday Meeting Held on 24th December

How does language work? And how do we get to meanings? Definitions are one way we specify what we communicate to each other. Every time we make an utterance, we may use definitions. We rely in this on having a common vocabulary and a shared way of life. We use words and words express concepts, which in turn may refer to facts. Definitions help in narrowing the applicable concepts so that we can specify what is meant. But are our ordinary definitions efficient or are they faulty? Chris Seddon gave The Wednesday meeting a talk on the 'Structure of Definitions'.

In ordinary language, preceding definitions may be implicitly included as generalised antecedents for the sentence - as if every sentence were implicitly preceded by the required definitions. In rigorously defined artificial language such definitions are explicitly referenced.

But the approach that Chris Seddon followed comes in a form of a definition: 'A definition is anything which limits the effective instances of a term by antecedent conditions in the form of an identity with generalised parameters.'

What is meant by 'an identity with generalised parameters'? A parameter of a definition is a variable relative to which the term may be defined. The identity in question is one between a concept associated with

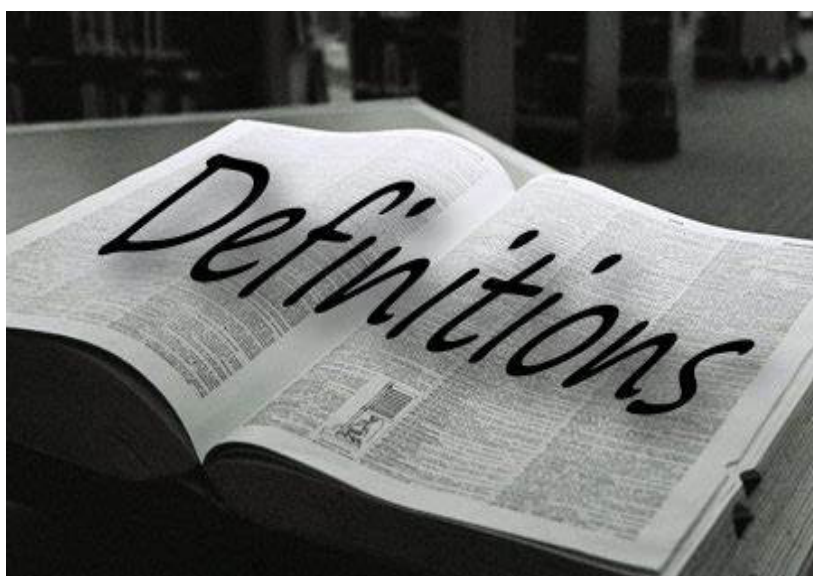
any instance of the term to be defined in combination with certain instances of its parameters, and a concept associated with any instances of previously understood terms in combination with any of the same instances of those parameters.

The basis of language, according to Chris, are beliefs and intentions. The task of conceptual thought is to express referential concepts. Beliefs have contents, they are about something. If the belief is correct, then it refers to a fact. If not, then the denial of the belief refers to a fact. Another way of looking at what concepts an agent has is by looking at their actions and attributing to them intentions and beliefs. By doing so, we are already attributing conceptual thought - even though the agent may not themselves reflect on their own thoughts, or express them in language.

Concepts have multi-connections with other concepts. It is by these connections that we have a finished description or reference. But concepts are prone to vagueness. Terms express a range of concepts. They are vague. To limit vagueness in expressions, conditions are placed on terms. Both explicit definitions and existing vocabulary help restrict the concepts which are expressed.

Meaninglessness, Chris said, 'is another form of vagueness. In practice this means that the use of any undefined form will express everything, which will result in a contradiction. Thus, the use of an undefined form will simply render the use trivially false, rather than undermine the integrity of the language specification.'

The meeting on this occasion was interactive. The speaker stopped at each stage of his argument to discuss with the participants. Most of the discussion went towards defending natural languages, with examples and standard arguments in the philosophy of language. Consequently, as anticipated, Chris did not say all that he has to say, and we look forward to hearing the development of these thoughts in his forthcoming talks to the group.



The Nature of the Poetic Imagination

- as the poets themselves know it

Notes of The Wednesday Meeting Held on 30th December

I am pleased to say that *The Wednesday* meetings ended up the year on a high note with a talk on 'The Nature of Poetic Imagination – as the poet themselves know it'. Barbara Vellacott gave a very interesting presentation on the poetic imagination through poetry and poetic experience. This is a good complement to the year long debate on philosophy and abstract ideas that we have had in our meetings. Poems by four poets from different times were selected. They were Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas, Wallace Stevens and Czeslaw Milosz.

Barbara started with a quote from Milosz. He said: 'Poetry is philosophy's ally in the service of the good.' Philosophy comes from the rational mind, but where does poetry come from? This question is a mystery from antiquity to the present moment. The Muses were considered the source of poetry by the Greek. They enchant the poet and through him his audience. The muses here exemplify an external force that gets hold of the poet. Poets themselves said so. It was also assumed that poetic inspiration is associated with madness. Shakespeare in *Midsummer Night's Dream* says:

'Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.'

Coleridge talked about the imagination as a primal power, a reflection of the Divine creativity within the human being. It is the energy that creates art and thoughts. Wallace Stevens said:

'... Evening, when the measure skips a beat
And then another, one by one, and all
To a seething minor swiftly modulate.
Bare night is best. Bare earth is best. Bare, bare,
Except for our own houses, huddled low
Beneath the arches and their spangled air,
Beneath the rhapsodies of fire and fire,
Where the voice that is in us makes a true response,
Where the voice that is great within us rises up,
As we stand gazing at the rounded moon.'
Stevens belongs to the modern period when the idea of the external force was 'translocated' to the 'self' (as Ted Hughes describes it) 'albeit a self that remains a measureless if not infinite question mark'. The imagination is experienced as an interior force.

The poem 'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower' by Dylan Thomas was read and commented on. The poem embodies the 'vitalism' or a driving life-force through nature and through us. This force also includes death.

'The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.'

More than one poem by the poet Milosz was read. The most relevant one is his 'Ars Poetica?':

'In the very essence of poetry there is something indecent:
a thing is brought forth which we didn't know we had in us,
so we blink our eyes, as if a tiger had sprung out
and stood in the light, lashing his tail.'

Other more contemporary poets like Jane Hirshfield and Seamus Heaney were also quoted on the subject of 'where does the poem come from?' They all seemed to echo in various ways the early 19th century poet Keats's 'negative capability' – the utter receptiveness of the poet to whatever is given, with no interference from the reasoning mind or ego.



The Muses

On the Common Good: Thinking globally

PAUL COCKBURN

One way of defining ‘the common good’ is that the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ should live harmoniously together. We live in community and we need to get on with each other. Another way of expressing this is to say that there should be harmony between individuals and society. However, the individual self is formed by many factors, including family relationships and societal relationships.

Alan Xuereb, in a recent talk to *The Wednesday* group (reported inside this issue), used the words ‘common’ and ‘collective’ and these two words open up so many meanings and connotations. In life, there are many collectives. Our human body is a collective that is made up of atoms, organs, and mind collected into a unity that is the human person. (This applies also to animals who have different body types to us and a different collective make-up in this sense).

Over our history, humans have collected together more and more in cities and towns. The basic unit is one person. Relationships are key to the person, and the pair-bond with one other person is the basic relationship. There are many of these pair-bonds, the most influential in terms of our development being within the family, which is a small collective of persons. Each person, and each family, is unique.

The next step is society - beyond the family there are many societal groups. The groups are many and varied, but we eventually get to nations and states which contain our cultural identity. The nation state also owes its origin to controlling a particular bit of defined physical space on the global map and a common culture and language.

Alan’s common goods were the attainment of values involving

friendship, knowledge and aesthetic experience. These goods will improve societies, but these societies will be rooted in the national states. This is a problem as in the last hundred years or so the main problems in the world have been global, with two World Wars and numerous other wars. The rise of individual nation states means global problems such as climate change, pollution, and the lack of biological diversity have not been taken seriously. These problems clearly need to be tackled in a global way. When was the last time we heard about the United Nations?

We can now connect easily to others on the other side of the planet, and also travel has increased. We truly live in a global village, where the Coronavirus can bring all the nations of the world to their knees. The sharing of knowledge by scientists internationally in order to make vaccines against the virus has been truly inspiring. Will the vaccine be available for poorer countries? This sharing of common goods needs to expand and take the place of populist nationalism which is breaking out all over the world. This is the true common good which is the sharing of knowledge, friendship, etc. that must be a global good. Common goods can be shared within nations to improve societies, but this will not enable global leaders to emerge. Think global and make global connections to solve global problems!



Will the vaccine be available for poor countries?

Four Philosophical Poems

Suspended Disbelief

I know you know -
There is a ruse that leaves no clues,
A rare embrace that is complete,
And perfectly discrete,
And a touch too close, for comfort -
I love your stockinged feet.

To Hume It May Concern – A Missing Shade of Blue (En Vogue)

There are girls who beguile
In single file,
So that blind hacks might see
And all others agree:
There is an art that conceals that is true.
But, hand on hip, what do they see?
A missing shade of blue? . . . Maybe.

Existence Precedes Essence

When I was young
I would wander through woods,
Drinking black water from crannies in trees,
Seeking a lodestone or a unicorn's horn
Or an old story that had yet to be told,
Of how my adventures began.

An Anarchist's Liferaft

An anarchist's liferaft is a good place to be,
Comparatively –
For no one lives only
For an obituary –
But until we are dead
Our story's unsaid –
So we row by the stars
For the shore.

Stephen Leach





Picnic at The White Horse

Cut into the smooth hillside turf
a big-eyed beast stretches across,
elongated and abstract, a modern design,
fertility symbol, or a sacred icon?
We lie, covered in sunburn,
our picnic of warm street tastes
in paper.

She likes the colourful kites
swaying in the uplift,
I marvel about the dramatic gully and deep
bowl curving in sculptural lines
to where the ground drops further
towards a small outcrop, an upturned bowl.

I had known about Dragon Hill,
where St George slew the dying beast,
its blood poisoned the ground for ever.
We stroll under the solitary Fairy tree,
smell the winds, trace ladybirds along
the leaf-veins.

Above us a series of bumps,
the 'pillow mounds', from the Bronze Age.
A sheep, suddenly planted, stands,
ready to sprint away any second -
We are being watched as by the spirits
of monks from the long-gone Abingdon Abbey.

Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*

Buckling

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!

Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Windhover'

All my undertakings miscarry: I am like a straining eunuch. I wish then for death: yet if I died now I should die imperfect, no master of myself, and that is the worst failure of all. O my God, look down on me.

Hopkins, 'Retreat Notes', January 1st 1889

Buckle admits of two tenses and two meanings; 'they do buckle here', or 'come, and buckle yourself here'; *buckle* like a military belt, for the discipline of heroic action, and *buckle* like a bicycle wheel, 'make useless, distorted, and incapable of its natural motion'. *Here* may mean 'in the case of the bird', or 'in the case of the Jesuit'; *then* 'when you have become like the bird', or 'when you have become like the Jesuit'. *Chevalier* personifies either physical or spiritual activity; Christ riding to Jerusalem, or the cavalryman ready for the charge; Pegasus, or the Windhover.

William Empson *Seven Types of Ambiguity*

One daily tortures the poor Christ anew
(On every planet moderately true)

Empson, 'Earth Has Shrunk in the Wash'



CHRIS NORRIS

Immortal diamond! So your poems came
Up glinting, spade-struck, levered from the grip
Of God knows what malaise it was let rip
That psychic strife, that tumult of self-blame
So suited to their purpose, those who'd claim
Your soul for Christ at all costs, have you whip
The poem-devil out, bid authorship
A penitent's farewell, and fix your aim
On faith and works. How else but through the stress
Of passion thwarted, instinct blocked at source,
Or the curse heard each time instructors bless
Your spiritual advance – how else then force
The run of words to yield the soul redress
By verse fresh-sprung from rhythm's vaulting-horse?

Let's not blame Bridges if he couldn't guess
What those stretched feet were doing, what strange course
You'd taken, or the covert way remorse
At your perceived backsliding might express
Itself in rebel metrics, doing less
To still the restive soul by sharp divorce
From sensuous appetite than to endorse
That craving through the very restlessness
Of senses held in check. How think to tame
A spirit spurred by every bid to slip
The iambic pulse, by every tongue of flame
Flashed out at daybreak, and by every trip,
Guilt-fed or nature-primed, that broke the frame
Set up for soaring souls with wings to clip.

Gerald Manley Hopkins



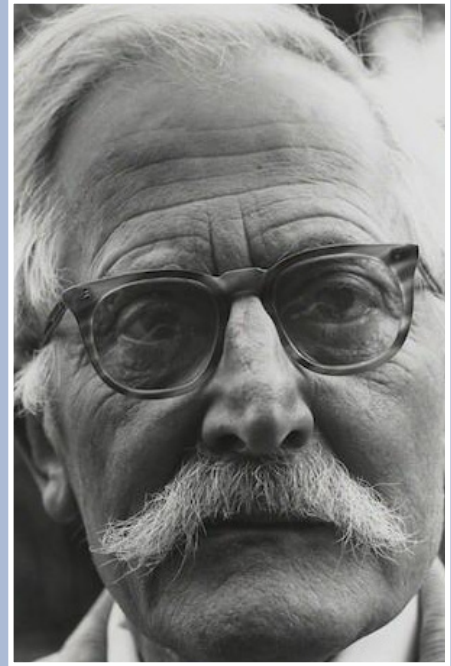
'Woman in the Morning Mist' by Friedrich

'Octave for nature, beauty and the call
Of all things dappled, counter, strange, or spare,
While sestet for the sequent call to prayer,
The novice priest new-dedicating all
Those first fine raptures in a Saul-to-Paul
(Though form-accustomed) *volta* placed just where
The sonnet can look back at nature's share
In spirit's Spring yet see its coming Fall
In every quivering leaf.' So they opine,
The commentators, though you'd surely set
Them right on that: no turning-point, no line
To slip across from octave to sestet,
When soul's and nature's languages combine
As letters drawn from God's own alphabet.

How not hurrah their harvesting, their fine-
Drawn instresses and inscapes, all that met
Your eye made wondrous, diamond-bright. And yet,
The life-facts known, who'll not then think the shine
Too harshly rubbed, the Scotist form divine
Beset by Thomist scruples, and regret
Your psychomachia even as we let
Those keen-eyed kennings swiftly undermine
That sense of wrong. No wonder should it 'gall,
Gash gold-vermillion', like your hang-in-air
Windhover, wings outstretched to soar, then stall
And swoop on you, its victim hunkered there,
The stricken Christ caught helplessly in thrall
To God's dark purpose and his own despair.

**A prickly issue: how we like to read
Of conflicts, turmoil, madness, all that went
To put us Hopkins-lovers on the scent
Of human sacrifice, yet how we need
To screen it out at just the point where we'd
Be happier if the critics could invent
Some method that might tell us what he meant
Without our having poet-victim bleed
To death before our eyes. Poor Gerard, it's
Your life they've been so anxious to recite
Like a Greek chorus, showing how it fits
Your 'themes' and 'imagery' but not the blight
Of sheer abandonment that often hits
Those cries sent up from depths of darkest night.**

**Happy indeed the critic who acquits
Himself of all complicity despite
A hawk's-eye view of things that might invite
The charge of relishing the savage bits,
Or torture-worship (verbal thumbscrew-kits
To meet all needs), or whistling from its height
The raptor earth-ward aimed in lethal flight,
Locked dead on target in a strife that pits
'Buckler' against 'buckled'. Though you plead
For our close-reading, still the years you spent
As willing prey to a God-awful creed
Require at least that we not rest content
With glosses on the glories we should heed
And so ignore that grim life-testament.**



Empson

Poetry

**‘Batter my heart, three personed God!’: so said
The poet Donne, like you tormented by
Religious doubts and fears yet apt to try
Them out in public, have his conscience read
From lurid scene to scene, and let the dread
Of error and damnation not deny
Him room to get a histrionic high
Off lying in his shroud and playing dead
For godly shock effect. No hellfire-hot
Grand Guignol stuff for you, no great display
Of sinner-saint conversion on the spot,
Just those dark stations of the cross that they,
Your spiritual directors, chose to plot
Lest nature summon and your heart obey.**

**Yet we your closest readers, might we not
Then find ourselves in league with those whose way
To conquering souls deployed that whole array
Of finely-honed techniques for finding what
Best served their purpose, showed the sins that squat
On virtuous souls, then let the priests allay
Their consciences by counting everyday
Life-pains and sorrows something to be got
Well over with their aid? Too soon we shed,
Like your confessors, the connatural tie
Of body-soul and lifeworld that’s deep-bred
In your taut rhyme and scansion, felt to lie
Beyond technique and so ensure we’re led
To sense, feel, grasp what your words signify.**



Donne





St. Thomas Aquinas

Yet always there's some turn of metaphor,
Some figural device we might enlist
To mask the terror, hide the zealot's fist
In a glossator's glove, and thus restore
The civil codes of poetry once more
Though predator and prey, like catechist
And novice, stay on target for the tryst
Assigned when living flesh took carnivore
Religion to its heart. See how they screw
Down hard on you, those ministers of fate:
Your parents mortified, the Oxford crew
Suspicious, friends like Bridges apt to slate
Your verse-craft – all who took the falcon's view,
Fast closing in on every fragile trait.

A heart in hiding: no re-casting you
In Donne's role, you so anxious to negate
That restive will, to quell that constant state
Of soul-disquietude they put you through
And keep the conflict strictly *entre vous*,
You and your God, though critics tend to rate
Life-crises by how well they correlate
With all those anvil-hammered poems do
To give that passion voice. It's left to your
Less text-fixated readers to insist
We not join the inquisitors, ignore
The mute appeal, note every striking twist
Of word or phrase yet opt to close the door
On truths too harsh to bear a saving gist.

The Wednesday

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Full Moon

A Full Moon at Dawn of a New Day, a New Year and A New Decade...

Photo and contemplation by Virginia Khuri

