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The Wednesday

Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

Late Thoughts

We are still celebrating The Wednesday getting to its hundredth issue last week. A few friends made a pun about getting to a hundred. Admittedly, most members of the Wednesday group and contributors to the magazine have passed the sixty years old mark. One distinguished exception is Ranjini Gosh who is going to university this year and we wish her every success. However, we all feel young in our hearts and we keep each other busy and in good humour with our lively discussion every week.

But if you are a philosopher there is more to old age than the leisurely time when you hit retirement. There is a sense of having walked a long road in the world of ideas and you are reviewing them in the hope of making sense of them or in the expectation of hitting on a new direction.

It is never too late to have a new vision, although you may run out of time. Avicenna, when he got to his fifties, decided Peripatetic philosophy was not for him, and that was similarly the case with St. Aquinas. Both did not have much time left to carry out their new vision. Nietzsche, just before his mental collapse, thought that he was going to embark on a new project. He called it 'The Revaluation of All Values'. But his illness got him first.

Some works are criticised for being the thoughts of old age. Kant's third critique is such a work but its value to aesthetics and the development of thought in German Idealism and Romanticism proved immense. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari: 'Kant's Critique of Judgment is an unrestrained work of old age, which his successors have still not caught up with: all the mind's faculties overcome their limits that Kant had so carefully laid down in the work of his prime.'

Deleuze and Guattari have their own reason for supporting a book written at an old age. They were writing their own last book What is Philosophy?. They believed that old age frees you from the inhibitions of a younger age. As they put it: 'There are times when old age produces not eternal youth but a sovereign freedom, a pure necessity in which one enjoys a moment of grace between life and death, and in which all the parts of the machine come together to send into the future a feature that cuts across all ages.' After a long life in philosophy, the thought that haunted them was the same as that which occupied Avicenna in old age: What is the meaning of the philosophical life after all?

Cicero defended old age by saying: 'Those who allege that old age is devoid of useful activity are like those who would say that the pilot does nothing in the sailing of his ship, because, while others are climbing the masts, or running about the gangways, or working at the pumps, he sits quietly in the stern and simply holds the tiller. He may not be doing what younger members of the crew are doing, but what he does is better and much more important. It is not by muscle, speed, or physical dexterity that great things are achieved, but by reflection, force of character, and judgment; in these qualities old age is usually not poorer, but is even richer.'

Whatever you think of philosophy and old age, I find Montaigne's aphorism close to my heart. He said: 'Take care that old age does not wrinkle your spirit even more than your face.' We have to keep a positive spirit in the face of physical decline. The group effect helps in being optimistic and creative, and so it should.

The Editor

The Two Cultures

The sixth century Christian Roman philosopher, Boethius, became known as the 'Schoolmaster of the West' because of the influence in the Middle Ages of his translations of Greek philosophy and other works including his final work, *The Consolation of Philosophy* that combined the philosophy of the ancient Greek and Roman world into a Theodicy, a justification of the ways of God to man.

WILLIAM BISHOP

Boethius' scholarship was deep, penetrating, and wide-ranging, and because of his penetration into the thought-world of Plato and Aristotle he expressed his intention to reconcile their differences. This intention was never realized because his life was cut short around the age of forty-six by his execution. The consolation for the West in this lies in the fact that the impending execution provided the space (imprisonment) and opportunity that might not otherwise have occurred for him to compile a synthesis of the philosophy he loved into a consolation for the injustices experienced in life. This work of consolation also included a guide for achieving happiness, which no doubt had personal significance to him at that point in his life.

It would be interesting to know why Boethius wanted to reconcile the ideas of Plato and Aristotle. We understand that Aristotle was a student in Plato's Academy for almost twenty years until Plato's death and that they had much in common but also had their differences. It is likely that Aristotle's essential divergence from Plato came after Plato's death when he developed his own analytical intellectual approach, rare at that time and possibly unique to Aristotle then. This analytical logic would have later been employed in his school, the Lyceum. Plato's philosophy was discursive and communicated through dialogue, which retained a living quality; it had a pictorial quality employing myth, metaphor and narrative in the manner of the humanities. Arguably over time these different approaches crystalized into what the novelist C.P. Snow, in a lecture in 1959 and a book, referred to as 'The Two Cultures'. Snow was referring to the humanities and the sciences, which then as now pursue different paths with a gulf between them.

Boethius must have intuitively felt the need to reconcile Plato with Aristotle because the differences between them could conceivably be seen to lead to different ways of understanding the world and some harmony between these very different modes of cognition would be beneficial. It may be that Boethius would have had an impossible task in his day had he undertaken this reconciliation, because it seems that time was needed for a process of development to take place before the fruit of the sciences could manifest in the sharply focused precision of material facts, and the humanities could further manifest their deep concern with human culture. With such clarification through the historical process it would then be possible to determine how to proceed with the reconciliation.

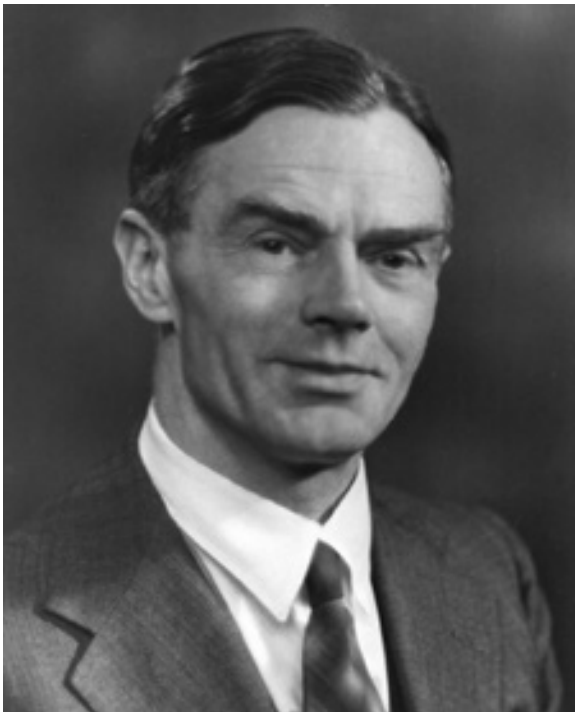
Assuming reconciliation to be profitable, one means towards this would be to inject some fundamental input from the humanities into the sciences to re-orientate them towards a holistic vision, instead of a vision of the

Boethius

separate parts that add up to a whole. But what has actually happened over the last century or so is that the scientific approach has imposed itself on the humanities, transferring to them its abstract intellectual methodology. In one sense this facilitates rapprochement but so far it has had the effect of conforming the humanities to the sciences. This development has been analogous to a takeover bid achieving a monopoly for the scientific intellectual approach based on a materialist foundation.

What a true reconciliation would do is combine the essential spirit of each so that the holism of the humanities combines with the analytical scientific approach to the parts. In such a combination, instead of the humanities being conformed to the sciences, the reality of the human being would be brought into the picture where what originated with Aristotle as analysis is supported by a spiritual cosmic vision deriving from the Pythagorean-Platonic stream; and to some extent this is already happening.

Such a reconciliation can also be envisaged in terms of Owen Barfield's '*Saving the Appearances*' where 'original participation' is followed by the intellectual distancing of 'analysis and idolatry' where appearances (or hypotheses) are taken to be reality, and then with the reintroduction of participation into this world of abstraction a new and advanced state of 'final participation' is arrived at that connects the observer-participant to the reality (or spirit) underlying appearances. In this respect Plato can be seen as the last representative of the old participatory order before it succumbed to the rise of reason, and Aristotle can be seen as the first Greek representative of a new form of consciousness characterized by logical reasoning. Plato's



Owen Barfield

pictorial consciousness representing the humanities then gives way to Aristotle's logic representing science. Historically this is the case. However, this development does not invalidate Plato's philosophical approach but does accentuate the difference between the two men.

But does this apparent split between the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle matter today? If it were a matter merely of philosophy in an academic sense this difference might pass unnoticed by the world going about its business, but ideas have an impact on the patterns of daily life and affect not only what people believe but on the way life is lived. So through historical development since ancient Greek times this original difference has emerged in Western civilization as a one-sided emphasis on each side. The one-sided direction taken by science and applied in technology has arguably led inevitably in the direction of many crises that we see in the world today including potential unsustainability of the planet and humanity. Some examples of this can be seen in climate change, exploitation of the earth's resources as material for technology and the creation of technology harmful to organic life.

What is needed is the presence of the human being in the calculations of the science-based world. That is to say the reconciliation of the humanities with science and technology. If there is no movement in this direction then the road ahead points to potential devastation. It was for this reason that, acquainted with both the humanities and the science of his day, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) thought that people within both streams, the Platonists and the Aristotelians (who customarily incarnated at separate times) would come together at the end of the twentieth century to resolve their differences and avert the dangers in the direction in which civilization was moving. If that meeting had been successfully accomplished civilised life might have been placed on a more optimistic trajectory instead of the current state of dangerous uncertainty. But, as was the experience of Boethius, the good has enemies and what may be made possible can be hindered. Boethius intuitively felt the need for reconciliation of the differences and so far history has confirmed his intuition by producing the evidence of this need in actual life.

Dr. Rudolf Steiner introduced a means of reconciling these two approaches to cognition. He called this methodology 'spiritual science'. This may sound like a contradiction in terms but the idea was to place the human being centrally within the world and in science. This is not the place to enter into details but such an approach would reconcile the humanities with science by broadening the preconceptions of science to take in the concerns of the humanities, human, cosmic and spiritual. From Steiner's point of view theory was of no use unless it was practiced, so spiritual science is not academic but a means of the practical use of cognition and perception as a

Rudolf Steiner

David Fidler

way to understand life and act in the world. Steiner saw this reconciliation as *vital* for the continuance and development of civilization, and it is now more urgent than ever.

The recent revival of interest in Pythagorean philosophy and its participatory knowledge, which fundamentally influenced Plato, provides another possible way for achieving reconciliation between science and the humanities. In Pythagoras' day the humanities, religion and science were unified within philosophy. A return to this type of unified knowledge in a developed form may yet be possible, where deadened knowledge is enlivened with soul, and the human soul reconciled with the World Soul in a living universe.

Examples of this approach can be seen in the 'New Alchemy' that works in partnership with the intelligence of nature using nature's design intelligence applied to human needs. A practical example would be the use of eco-machines (linked biological eco-systems) to purify toxic waste. This is the Pythagorean-Platonic approach that works in harmony with the World Soul that enlivens nature with its abundant fruition. In this worldview the universe is not static but evolutionary; it does not consist of pure spirit and dead matter but of multiple levels and is self-organizing and is not a machine but a community.

David Fideler's book, 'Restoring the Soul of the World' (2014), is an excellent introduction to this new paradigm, which amounts to a revival of the World Soul, so eloquently presented originally to us in the *Timaeus* by Plato. Bearing in mind the Aristotelian connection with alchemy, it could be that this new ecological alchemy is in effect a reconciliation between the civilising impulses provided by both Plato and Aristotle. Certainly a soulful participatory science is needed in a living universe.

The Search for a Totality

Some comments inspired by Jeanne Warren's article on the book *The Master and His Emissary*.

PAUL COCKBURN

One essential theme of Iain McGilchrist's book *The Master and His Emissary* is that the left side of the brain conducts detailed analysis in terms of breaking things down into parts, while the right side looks at the whole, it sees and seeks the whole rather than division.

To me a key passage in the book is about a bird feeding (Pages 25 and 26, The Master and His Emissary by Iain McGilchrist, New Expanded edition in paperback. Published by Yale University Press 2019). McGilchrist writes that a bird in order to satisfy its hunger will peck at a seed on the ground using its right eye, while at the same time the left eye will look out for any predators in the vicinity. The right eye (physically connected by nerves to the left hemisphere of the brain) is having to 'home in' onto the detailed speck (of a seed) on the ground while the left eye (connected to the right hemisphere of brain) is looking at the wider environment to see if there is danger anywhere in the area. This idea might be generalised to scientists, say, typically being more concerned with detailed analysis, while artists may be more concerned with how different individual parts fit together, and totality, the whole. We have to be careful about such simplistic generalisations though!

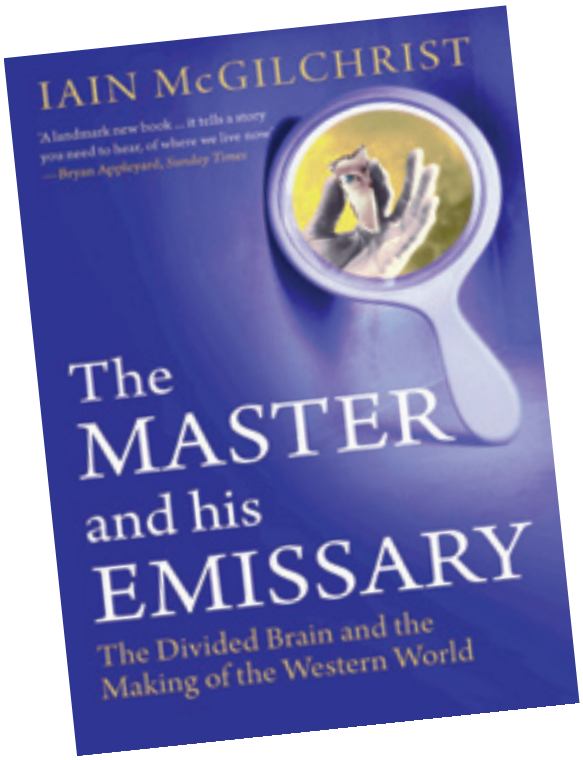
There are other metaphors we can use to describe this. Looking through a telescope or a microscope we are homing in on detail, magnifying a particular view. (Scientists say they will shortly be able to 'see' an atom!) Do the opposite and use a wide-

Chicken feeding

angle lens and we can see a 360-degree view with everything compressed into it. Philosophy is more like trying to capture the bigger picture and elucidate big ideas, but it can also be detailed as in the study of logic. Analytical philosophy is very different to Continental philosophy in these sort of terms!

Certainly, it can be argued that in the past philosophy has often sought to explain everything in terms of one 'grounding' principle, or at least individual philosophers have tried to do this. They seek unity by explaining everything in terms of one over-riding principle. So perhaps the impetus, the drive for philosophy for these philosophers is to seek unity and totality, to stretch a single concept as far as possible, but somehow they never achieve it. The totality is too diverse for one person to encompass it. How far can Iain McGilchrist's ideas be taken? One factor in their favour is that they are linked to behavioural and neurological evidence.

John Locke the English philosopher distinguished between primary and secondary qualities of objects. The secondary qualities depend in some way on us as observers, such as colour, but the primary qualities are not dependent on us. Kant thought the primary qualities of time and space were necessary for us to have perceptions at all. If we think about time, we can concentrate on the 'now', the current moment, but this neglects all the other 'nows', the ones in the past and the ones to come in the future. We can look at whole periods of time, for example a whole life, with it's own narrative story. This corresponds to a totality, a complete life, but our conscious experience is in fact always anchored in the 'now'. There is a parallel here to McGilchrist's views - any 'now' of our experience can be analysed in detail, or all the nows can be analysed together to form a 'total' story (which can have meaning, although some existentialists would deny this). A key component in processing all our 'nows' is memory: we cannot make sense of all our 'nows' without it. But there is also a selective process whereby we select what is meaningful: we value some moments as being particularly meaningful. In literature novels may be constructed in ways which treat time in a selective way, determined by an overall meaning.



Similarly with space: we can concentrate on one small part of space local to us (and we need to in order to survive!), or we can widen our horizons to include places far away, even the whole universe. We have to use our imagination and intuition to do this, and this also relates to McGilchrist's thesis. The imagination is perhaps searching for the whole which we cannot see in our sensory experience but which we know is there. There is a problem with the imagination in that we cannot verify it, we can create mythical creatures for instance in our minds which do not exist. Science is more concerned with what does exist, using falsification and verification to prove theories which work in the world. But science has to start from a theory which is first created imaginatively, and is then tested and proved experimentally. It is undoubtedly the case that linking neuroscience to human behaviour will continue to be an important area of study in the future. Iain McGilchrist's book is a key part of this study, reaching beyond neuroscience into other areas which are important, such as our human identity and the workings of our minds.

Joy of Missing Out

I don't need to go out doing things,
as the pace of it
puts demands on me
I will not meet.
I do not read the book
everyone talks about.
I do not watch the latest films
or box sets, nor do I go
to exhibitions or theatre plays.
No working out for me, filling diaries
or posting on social media,
for life is for living, as it is
passing us by.

I do the small things, enjoy
the pleasure of visiting garden centres,
walk the aisles among exotic flowers,
wander into DIY stores and look
at the power tools I never use,
the bird tables and fence panels
I never buy, the shrubs
I never plant.

I am content between
lawn-mowers and stackable storage boxes
rather than candles and incense
and make time at home,
where I sit in silence
and practice the art of doing nothing,
stare into space and let the hours run.
The interest lies
not in the difficulty of the doing

but the difficulty for the doer.
This is my vocation to do
what I cannot do.
Silence and I are close.
I know its eyes, mouth, its arms,
as it knows me, all my surface,
my edges and my levers.
I am not inclined to spend
energy on emotion, I just
am.

Poem and Artwork by *Scharlie Meeuws*

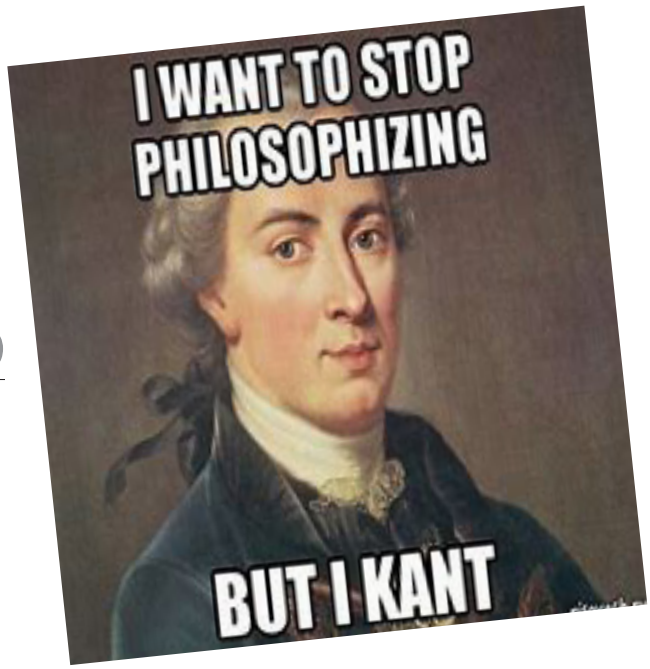
Humour for a Change!

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 12th June 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

We discussed in this meeting humour and laughter. Humour somehow breaks up our expectations – we are led down a 'story-path' which seems logical, but then in the 'punch-line' the whole story is turned upside-down, a new logic is established which we have to quickly appreciate. We laugh when we get the joke and re-interpret the whole story in an instant. There is spontaneity, surprise. Perhaps philosophy is too serious, it is certainly not fun in this way! Thinking too hard may not be good for us….

Laughter is a physical joyful action which has health benefits. It raises the energy in a room, as does music. You can go to laughter therapy, where a group of people just laugh together – even feigned laughter can get a group of people laughing. Laughter is infectious. It is linked to play. Other animals 'laugh'. An experimental study involving the tickling of rats concluded that the high-pitched sound they make when this was done was laughter! And some animals probably have a sense of humour.



Humour can defeat pomposity. It can be used to make a serious point. People tell jokes in the most dire circumstances, and it helps to cope with sadness. Working together with others we share 'in-jokes', and this reduces tension, enabling us to work together in a more relaxed way.

There can be a dark side to humour, as in satire taken too far, and in sarcasm and cynicism. It can be bitter and upsetting, aiming to hurt others, to get others to laugh at someone for instance.

The medieval court jester is an interesting character, someone who can criticize the king by means of a joke or unusual behaviour without being in danger of being on the receiving end of the king's anger. Humour is a great leveller, and can defuse potentially dangerous or frenetic situations where people take themselves too seriously.
We enjoyed a few jokes in the meeting. Here is a joke:

A boy was feeling very nervous about his first date, and so went to his father for advice. 'My son, there are three subjects that always work with girls: food, family, and philosophy'.
The boy picks up his date and they stare at each other for a long time. The boy's nervousness builds, but he then remembers his father's advice and asks the girl:
'Do you like potato pancakes?' 'No,' comes the answer, and the silence returns like a suffocating blanket.
'Do you have a brother?'
'No.'
After giving it some thought, the boy plays his last card: 'If you had a brother, would he like potato pancakes?'

Viewpoint

A moment to stop staring at your feet.
Look up, there is something to see.
Forget about the stumbles that have
been and gone, perhaps still to come.
Let Nature lift your gaze.

The butterfly dances for you,
the snake flashes its silver back,
Bluebells spark across the forest floor.
They'll soon be gone, and in this fading light
so will you.

Stop trudging like a forgotten soldier,
all those thoughts that bruised your head,
drop them like an old haversack.
Let them lie there, whilst you enjoy the view.
Make sense of what you can see.
That's all there is, for you to construe.

David Burridge

Adorno: Gaps

CHRIS **NORRIS**

Anyone who died old and in the consciousness of a seemingly blameless success, would secretly be the model schoolboy who reels off all life's stages without gaps or omissions, an invisible satchel on his back . . . . Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching.

Adorno, 'Gaps', in *Minima Moralia*

(Note: This is one of several attempts to translate some cryptic and dialectically wiredrawn passages from Adorno's *Minima Moralia* into something more like Bertolt Brecht's tough-minded, down-to-earth didactic style.)

One mark of a well-crafted text: the gaps.
'Leave no loose ends, let every link show plain':
A schoolboy rule, enforced lest they should lapse
From drilled routine to thought, the teacher's bane!

They're unmarked spaces on our mental maps,
Anomalies that tell us 'think again',
Or sudden jolts that caution us: perhaps
Our mental tracks are what derailed the train.

How often it's a trite conclusion caps
Some well-groomed passage eager to maintain
The rule: link up, avoid all booby-traps,
And keep those errant thoughts on a tight rein.

Totality's the monstrous beast that wraps
Its grubby paws around the teeming brain,
While thought disrupted fashions from the scraps
New linkages at each point in the chain.

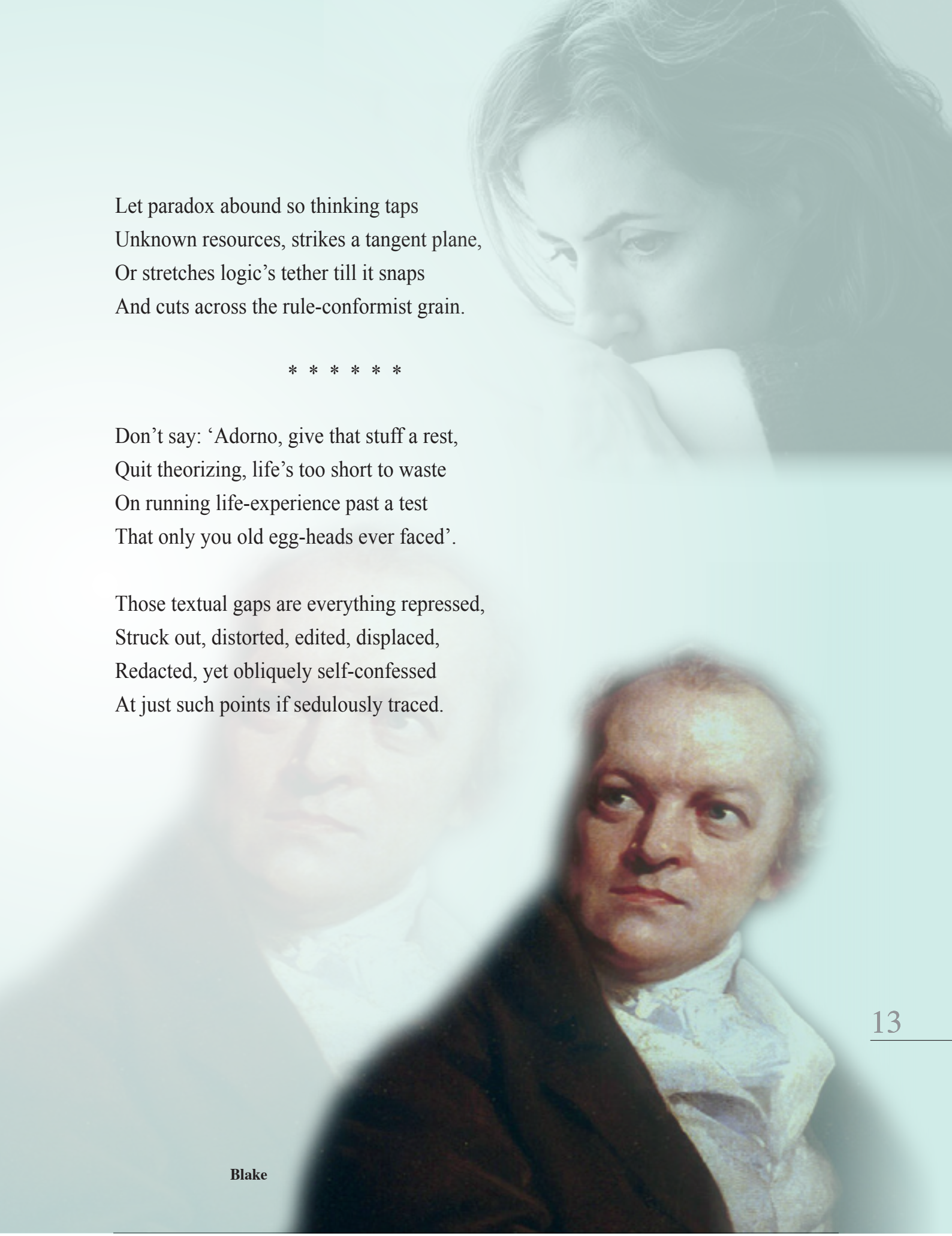
Adorno

Let paradox abound so thinking taps
Unknown resources, strikes a tangent plane,
Or stretches logic's tether till it snaps
And cuts across the rule-conformist grain.

* * * * * *

Don't say: 'Adorno, give that stuff a rest,
Quit theorizing, life's too short to waste
On running life-experience past a test
That only you old egg-heads ever faced'.

Those textual gaps are everything repressed,
Struck out, distorted, edited, displaced,
Redacted, yet obliquely self-confessed
At just such points if sedulously traced.



Blake

The true-confessors say: make a clean breast
Of everything, give auditors a taste
Of all you've been through, let us shrinks digest
The truth behind your psychic cut-and-paste!

Yet it's those shrinks, the 'get it off your chest-
Right-now' brigade, whose unrelenting haste
For closure shows how deeply they're distressed
By gaps of sense too large or oddly spaced.

For there's no life so uniformly blest,
Or cursed, that its five-act progression's graced
Like that of narcissists who manage best
With text and lifeline smoothly interlaced.

* * * * * *

Strict conscience says: that one maths-lesson missed
Through sleeping-in is one you won't get back
In a whole life spent pondering its gist,
So set the clock and cut yourself no slack!

Too true, yet time may teach the rigorist
How much may come of lives that veer and tack,
Or what life-lessons lie in some odd twist
Of truant wandering from a single track.

Your schoolboy who goes dully down his list
Of tick-box tasks may yet turn out to lack
The gap-strewn way around that yields a tryst
With truth down error's seeming cul-de-sac.

Blake's message: if the fool would but persist
In folly, then the error-toll might stack
Up high enough to vindicate the blissed-
Out sleeper, not the kid with books to pack.

Learn then from him the bad, recidivist
Schoolboy how those who take the teacher-flack
May earn, along with odd slaps on the wrist,
Some credit for their gap-diviner's knack.

The Wednesday

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The *Wednesday*

The Second Year

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