

The Wednesday

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Weekly Magazine of the Wednesday Group - Oxford

Editorial

The Blurred Vision: Post-Modernism and the Eye

Philosophers have taken vision for granted for a long time, vision here meaning seeing directly. Plato thought all knowledge is probable unless it attains a level of seeing the truth (the Forms) directly. Knowledge is connected with seeing the Forms. The highest knowledge is attained by the philosopher because it is the task of the philosopher to contemplate the Forms. The very word 'theoria' means 'to look at attentively'.

Averroes, in his comparison of the ways of obtaining knowledge (through the senses, theology, mysticism and philosophy), privileged philosophical knowledge because it relies on true premises. But how do we come by such premises? Descartes, in the seventeenth century, took them to be those ideas that he could see clearly and distinctly. Perhaps he meant that the mind assents to them and recognises them as true. The eye of the mind was invoked. This may be the same eye that sees the Forms in Plato's scheme.

The Enlightenment used the metaphor of light to summarise its ideas. The metaphor has many connotations, and it is still popular. But with the counter-Enlightenment came the blurring of vision, especially with the post-modernist turn. Prior to that, the eye of the mind was taken to be disembodied (some call it 'transcendent' because it transcends the subject). But such a conception started to change with increasing suspicion of the eye and the introduction of the body in philosophy.

In his remarkable study, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Martin Jay traces the trajectory of the rise and fall of the eye and vision in philosophy.

What replaces vision? One answer is 'hearing'. The concept of hearing was proposed to challenge that of vision, which had been favoured since the

time of the Greeks. On the face of it, both seeing and hearing are similar metaphors. For example, an Enlightenment philosopher could say: 'I saw it in my mind's eye.' He could equally say: 'I listened to the voice of my conscience.' Notice here the move from epistemology to ethics.

Will hearing perform the same function as vision? I don't think the two are equal. Vision is an immediate seeing of the truth, but hearing is mediated. It is also relative to a language. The mediating factor is the understanding. In seeing an object, we are directly aware of it. But in hearing a sentence, we are summoned by the speaker to decipher his words, understand their meaning and act on such a summoning. To hear it and not answer it is not to hear it in the proper sense. Furthermore, to hear a sentence in a language you are not familiar with, it sounds just like a noise.

There is also the interfering of the will and desire in hearing that is not required in seeing. That is probably why those philosophers who prefer hearing to seeing take truth to be grounded in the body and social context. Part of this attack on vision and light is connected with the trend of dethroning metaphysics. Transcendence has been taken to mean the view from nowhere.

All this talk about hearing (or touching, which we have not discussed here), sounds like a new addition to philosophical discourse but I am not sure where it leads. It all depends on how we view and evaluation the Enlightenment. Does philosophy need absolute clarity, or does it benefit from ambiguity and darkness? Perhaps we need both. But will the dethroning of metaphysics mean the blurring of vision and the rejection of the concept of truth?

The Editor

Dynamic Thinking

Philosophical thinking is dominated by the subject-object model. This model is useful in science, but it doesn't capture the lived world outside science. Dynamic thinking is a different model that starts from the idea of a whole that includes the parts comprised within it. Below is a presentation of this view which takes knowledge to be a participation in a process of becoming.

WILLIAM BISHOP

In an interview the French philosopher, Michel Serres (1930-2019), said there are different ways of doing philosophy and that Plato was a literary philosopher, meaning that he presented a synthesis of the philosophy of his time rather than his own philosophy, therefore to uphold Platonism is to misunderstand Plato who tended to leave responses to questions open-ended. No doubt forceful arguments can be mustered against this view but it is interesting to consider the dialogues of Plato in this light. If Serres' view is the case, then Aristotle differs from Plato in taking a definite approach to knowledge as a natural scientist. Plato revels in varieties of points of view and approaches to knowledge (although Socrates seems to express an implicit view) while Aristotle systematizes knowledge in a unified way.

In his book, *Taking Appearances Seriously* (2012) Henri Bortoft proposed that Plato was unlikely to have been a Platonist, meaning that the dual world attributed to him is a misunderstanding, because for Plato the *idea* as *form* was a *potential* that could be *actualized* rather than a thing inhabiting a separate ideal world. Again such a view is contentious but worth considering for it is this split level (or duality) that could have encouraged Descartes in his dichotomy of mind and body, which in turn has led to object thinking where processes become reified into things, and things then become perceived as the only reality, which in turn allows for a technology of manipulation, leading on to an economy where *things* (and money as a thing) multiply at the expense of *being*. One thing does lead to another, and ways of thinking are of vital



Michel Serres



Henri Bortoft

importance since the kind of world we live in is largely a result of human thinking.

Bortoft suggests that Plato's main concern was not ideas as such but the single idea of the *One and the many*. This essentially means there is one idea from which everything else emerges. Hermeneutics supports this idea where meaning arises in the relationship of the whole to the parts where the parts are born from the whole and relate in an *intensive* (inner) way to the whole as opposed to parts which contribute to the whole in an external and separate, *extensive* way. Henri Bortoft also relates the McGilchrist divided brain (from *The Master and his Emissary*, 2010) to two different yet related means of cognition: the right hemisphere of the brain taking in the overall lived experience and the left hemisphere processing and re-presenting the experience: knowledge exists in the process of *becoming* that involves participation, and then what was livingly experienced is reified into a thing within a subject-object relationship.

The Cartesian-Lockean tradition

The Cartesian-Lockean tradition relies on cognition based on the separation between subject and object and it applies mathematical propositional logic to obtain 'truth' applicable within the scientific method. (Interestingly this method dispenses with sense impressions but accepts a metaphysical

dimension for the 'thing-in-itself', of which the subject can have no direct knowledge.) Admirable as this scientific method is, it can only gain *object knowledge* limited to the 'left brain' subject-object viewpoint and the limitations of a mathematical model. When such a scientific method is applied to life in general outside the sphere of science then problems arise because the method is not adequate for encompassing or grasping the living world of being. Here the thinking typified by the 'right brain' must come in. It is interesting, as Bortoft points out, that Aristotle made a distinction between *topos eidon* – the place where meaning appears, and *eidon eidon* – the very appearing of appearance. And it is worth bearing in mind that the language of Greece that he was employing emphasized the verb more than the noun, so that cognition tended to retain a dynamic, living sense.

It was not until the twentieth century when Martin Heidegger looked back to the question of *being*, an important concern of the ancient Greeks, that the counterbalancing cognition ('right brain') was introduced as a means of cognizing the living, coming-into-being world. The phenomenology particularly of Heidegger and the hermeneutics of his student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, could be described as 'standing back to gain experience as it was happening'. This involves participation in a coming-into-being in contrast to a spectator



Craig Holdrege



consciousness. As Henri Bortoft remarks, it is one of Heidegger's remarkable achievements to have rescued the world from the epistemological approach of the Cartesian tradition to bring it back into lived experience. That is to say, to move from the subject-object model for perception of physical objects to the idea of 'world' as lived experience. 'World' is that space of familiarity and recognition within which all the beings around us show themselves and *are* for us. The fact that man has a 'world' is due to language because we need concepts to recognize things and these are given by language. For Gadamer, language has no independent life apart from the world that comes to language within it. This is the language-world.

The traditional understanding of Platonism is of changeless Being, and Appearance as change without being. Difference is excluded from being and consequently from genuine knowledge, but if there can be difference within being this would be dynamic where something becomes different from itself while remaining the same – an intensive distinction of the One and the many. This is the dynamic ontology that emerged in phenomenology and hermeneutics in European philosophy during the twentieth century, which has not been sufficiently recognized. This involves a shift in attention from the already experienced into the experiencing of what is experienced. Such coming-to-be in language is different from the ideal of objective knowledge in science. It is a counterbalance to the dominance of 'object knowledge'.

World and language

Heidegger also presented the concept of a world as the reality in which one lives within a horizon of ideas given by language where the language and culture one is born into forms the horizon of one's world. Each language with its culture and attitude to the world relates in an intensive way to *language in itself* as a dynamic reality of *potential* where, like Proteus, the Greek sea god who could take any form while retaining his essential identity, the protean reality of language can spawn multiple languages from its living source.

Henri Bortoft stresses the need to understand the difference between language as *disclosure* and

language as *representation*. For him this is the difference between the view 'upstream' and the 'downstream' view. Disclosure is where meaning merges with understanding prior to the finished subject-object state where the thought becomes a word. Here attention is directed to the *event*, the happening of meaning. This is consciousness in a dynamic language-world: a living world which phenomenology investigates in its attempt to go 'upstream' towards the source of the coming-into-being. This is the world of the *active verb*, the world of potential, which is actualized as an event. From Heidegger's perspective this is the hermeneutic experience of language in *saying*, where meaning and language present themselves as an event. Such an understanding is not only of academic interest but is a vital type of cognition that empowers ecological thinking.

Living thinking

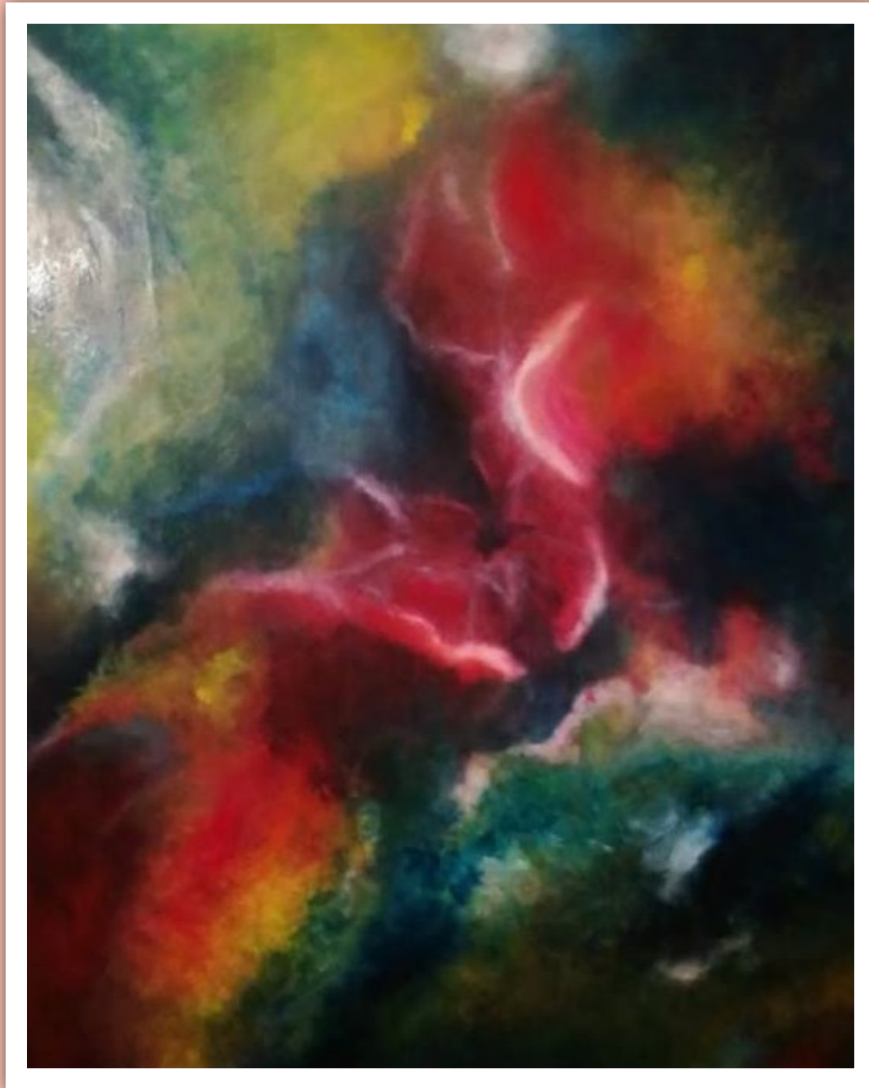
In his book, *Thinking like a Plant* (2013), Craig Holdrege suggests that mobile and dynamic thinking based on the way a plant grows (as a protean identity that metamorphoses and transforms itself) will be invaluable for the environmental movement and the philosophy of science and education. This is because the living 'energy' in nature is the same that powers living, dynamic thinking. Thinking, in this sense, has a relationship to phenomena.

Of course, such open and sensitive thinking like a living plant is in conflict with human nature's basic instincts of domination and aggression, but this form of cognition with its sensitivity to nature as a living whole is what needs to develop to counterbalance the 'modern scientific' approach to knowledge. The upstream dynamic view concerns wholeness and connectedness while the downstream view is that of separation between things. What we need is the meeting of the 'upstream' and 'downstream' in the middle and not dominance by one or the other. Physiologically the 'divided brain' is connected and functions as a *whole*, and our facility to know (to have cognition within physical incarnation) depends on this organic arrangement in our head (and body). But is the brain a mechanism that produces an epiphenomenon or is it a filter for a greater reality in which it is incorporated? That is the question to ponder.

‘A Crack in Reality’

(oil on canvas, 80cm x 100 cm)

By Dr. Alan Xuereb



What is reality? It may perhaps, be described as the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them. What if, our reality is just one of the infinite possibilities coexisting simultaneously? In Dublin in 1952, Erwin Schrödinger gave a lecture in which he jokingly warned his audience that what he was about to say might ‘seem lunatic’. He said that when his equations seemed to describe several different histories, these were ‘not alternatives, but all really happen simultaneously’.

What if we could connect to the other realities through some sort of fissure in our reality? How would that tear in the fabric of space-time appear to us? This oil painting is how I imagine that crack would appear to our human eyes.

Concepts and the World

Notes of Wednesday Meeting Held on 4th September 2019

PAUL COCKBURN

Rahim Hassan invited Chris Seddon to give a presentation on the following questions.

- What are concepts?
- How do we come by concepts?
- Are they part of the items in the world?
- Are they in the mind?
- Are they in a third realm?
- Why we are confused about concepts?
- How do they relate to words and language?
- Is the confusion about words or concepts?
- How are categorical mistakes related to concepts?

Chris Seddon responded with answers based on his previous articles in issues 93 through 95 of *The Wednesday* (a full text reflecting his answers will be published in a future issue).

According to Chris concepts are parts of descriptions of situations. Some members found it difficult to grasp this meaning of 'concept' as they felt that Chris generalised it and other terms such as 'vocabulary', 'situation', and 'description' to cover a large area so that they need to be understood in a wider way than they are normally used in ordinary conversation.

According to Chris the concept of a bike as in the statement 'this is a bike' is monadic because it requires one argument, 'this'; the concept of love as in 'Chris loves Dolly' is dyadic because it requires two arguments 'Chris' and 'Dolly'; and the concept of sitting between as in 'B is sitting between A and C' is a triadic concept because it requires three arguments. He said that the completed sentences are niladic because they describe situations without requiring any further arguments.

Chris claimed that language comprises signs linked to concepts in shared vocabulary and combined according to shared grammar, but only some concepts have a referent. He distinguished between a sign and the concept or concepts a person links to it. It was pointed out that when



Chris Seddon

reading a poem, the meaning often seems to be conveyed at an unconscious level. Even at this unconscious level however, Chris claimed that this process of combining concepts linked to signs within a grammatical structure still comes into play.

A question was asked about art. Artists bring something new to the world which is not just a situation. It was suggested that they are creative, and that what they produce cannot be reduced to facts and behaviour. They are working from the 'inside' of their heads outwards to produce a work of art, rather than taking something from the 'outside' world, or something already accepted, and then working on it 'inside'. Chris suggested that new concepts can be created by interaction with other language users and our environment – they do not necessarily need to be comprised of existing concepts.

It became clear from the discussion that our everyday thinking is open to a challenge from logical analysis. Many members felt that subjecting it to logical analysis does violence to ordinary (natural) language, however Chris denied this, instead arguing that logical analysis must grow beyond its roots in mathematics and take account of the way natural language normally works.

Blackwell's Honors Bryan Magee

PAUL COCKBURN

Last Saturday Blackwell's bookshop in Oxford hosted an event celebrating the life of Bryan Magee (1930- 2019). Three guest speakers Angie Hobbs, Henry Hardy and Timothy Williamson spoke about him.

In 1978 Magee presented a series on BBC television called 'Men of Ideas', in which he sat on a sofa and interviewed a number of philosophers, including Isaiah Berlin, Noam Chomsky and Iris Murdoch. In 1987 he presented a series on 'The Great Philosophers', talking about major figures, such as Plato, with leading scholars. These two series were of high quality and influential, fondly remembered by many. Magee was an excellent communicator of philosophical ideas and could get the best out of his interviewees. He did not script the programs in detail, but prepared very carefully for them.

Much of the discussion focused on how successful these TV programs were. People at the event found it hard to imagine that we could see two 'talking heads' on television now talking about philosophy on a sofa. Intellectual programs now have to follow a format – that of a game show, philosophy has to be discussed in a pub over a pint of beer. The BBC turned down a proposal Bryan Magee made

for a series on political philosophy. However, one young person observed that you can see all Magee's interviews on YouTube, along with many other philosophers talking and philosophizing. And the radio program 'In our Time' on the BBC Radio Four is still going after twenty years.

It was felt by many that Magee discussed the big philosophical questions. He was not an academic looking at abstract questions which have little importance except to a small group of philosophers. Others thought there was a role for technical philosophy, such as the study of logic. In technical journals, you have to quote a lot of secondary literature in order for your paper to be accepted. This could be to show you are taking all views into account: you should not be partisan and ignore the opinions of others.

Magee reacted against linguistic philosophy and logical positivism. In philosophical terms Magee was a fan of Popper and Schopenhauer. The event did not explore all the aspects of Magee's contribution to philosophy. Perhaps, more events are needed to commemorate his life and thought. A full day conference maybe more suitable to do justice to the man who contributed more than others to popularize philosophy.



Blackwell's
bookshop

Honey Comb

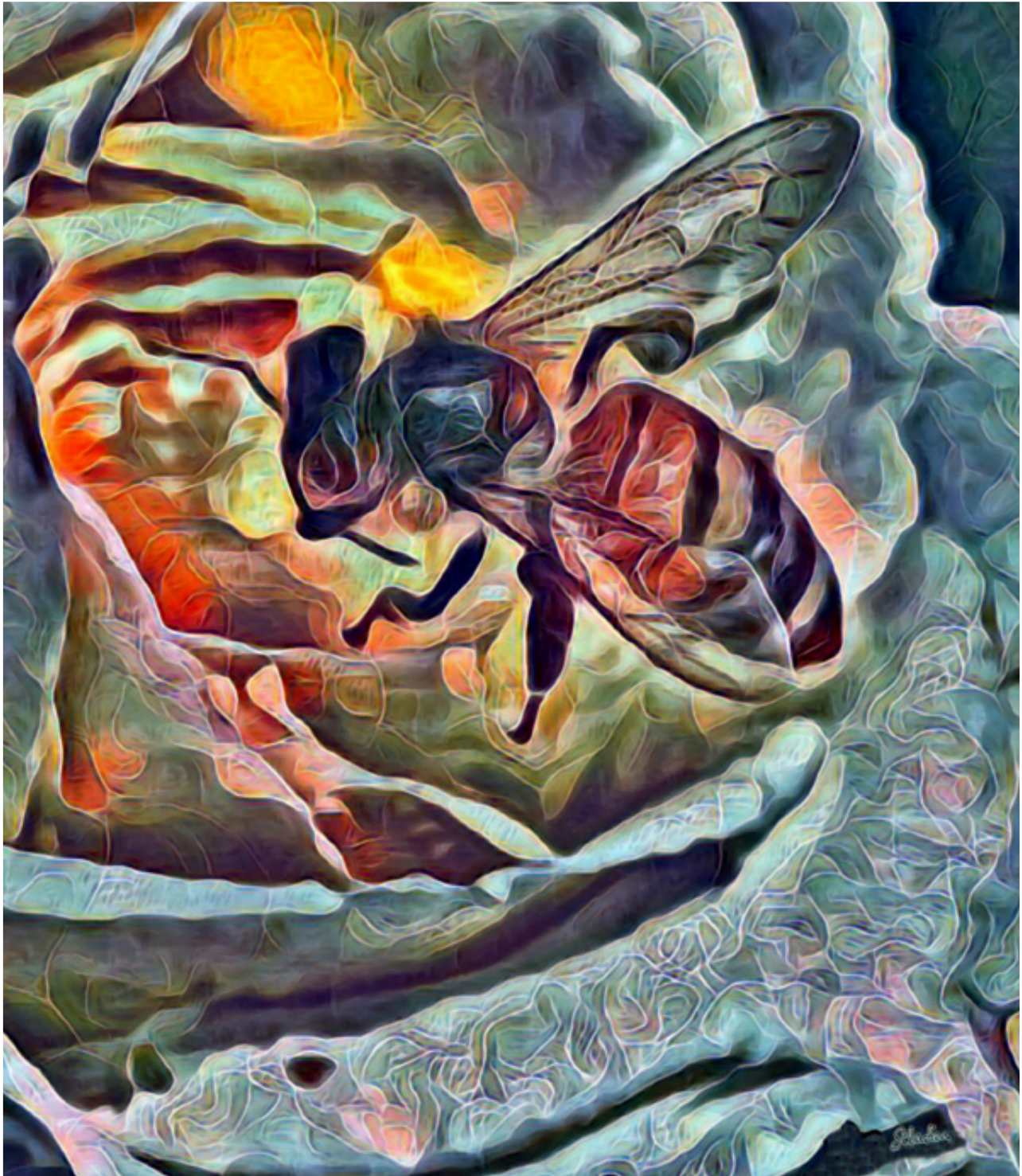
Move into the music of bees

in the honeycomb castle
humming
of shining chambers

do you hear echoes
of honey milk songs

Solomon sang it then
when you still were a dream
deep in space

drink the transformed
secret of lilies and roses



Poem and Artwork by Scharlie Meeuws

LOVE HATE

Love and Hate: a Fictive Meditation

Love and hate are intimately linked within the human brain, according to a study that has discovered the biological basis for the two most intense emotions. Scientists studying the physical nature of hate have found that some of the nervous circuits in the brain responsible for it are the same as those used during the feeling of romantic love, although love and hate appear to be polar opposites. The findings could explain why hate and romantic love can result in similar acts of extreme behaviour – both heroic and evil – said Professor Semir Zeki of University College London.

Steven Connor, *The Independent*, 29th October 2008

See how each line, each brushstroke, every last
Fine-detailed touch declares
It's love that led the painter's hand,
That tells the viewer there's
More to it than gets other paintings classed
'Great works' since this one bears,
If more than dutifully scanned,
A sense of showing unawares,
Technique aside, the truth of passions past

Yet living still. Nice if it's yours to tell,
That lovers' tale, that shtick
Of things unspoken, somehow shown,
But one we have to kick
Upstairs when their fine heaven turns to hell,
When love won't do the trick,
And now it's politics alone
That cuts you to the quick
Since that's where victims numberless atone



CHRIS NORRIS



Fragonard: Fountain of Love

For every artist lost to love's furor,
Its flat demand to tolerate
No passions but its own. That's why
I'd say the case for hate
Needs making, just to even up the score
In ways that compensate
For centuries when they got by,
Those darlings of the state
Who trilled and twittered on a love-theme more

Conducive to the public peace than those
Rough types who smelled a rat
In lyric's willingness to take
No part in stuff like that,
Mere 'party politics'. OK then, close
Your ears, shun every spat
Or latest left-wing bellyache
That calls your line of chat-
Up talk a well-worn trick to hold your nose

Poetry

At crimes of state and misdeeds ne'er so gross
While warbling on in praise
Of love. So you'll dilate on how
She beggars all the ways
That other poets choose to up the dose
Of opiate and erase
Our sense of the bad here-and-now
Where many count their days
By thinking: death or penury, how close?

Just fix your thoughts on that, and maybe you'll
Be minded to agree:
Hate's not so much the opposite
Of love, its contrary,
But more the form love takes when hate's the rule,
When loveless powers decree
That love of power's the one sort fit
To stock our treasury
With truths unknown in lyric's gentle school.



George Herbert



Swift



Oswald Mosley

Hate against hate: the finest of fine lines
The satirist can tread,
Yet calling for a gymnast's gift
If what all lovers dread,
The sideways topple, suddenly combines
With all that speeds the spread
Of that deep-laid and lengthening rift
That runs, as Karl Marx said,
From bed to boardroom could we read the signs.

It's Swift's point: how you'll do well to love John,
Peter, and Thomas, while
Detesting the professions, trades,
Or other mostly vile
Since special-interest groups that batten on
Some chiefly mercantile
Idea of man that self-degrades
To those who make their pile,
Then bid humanity be up and gone.

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That's why, just lately, every time I hear
The voice, or see the face,
Of some monster in office whose
Misdeeds have brought disgrace
To him and lives of suffering, death or fear
To millions then I trace
The lineaments that spell *j'accuse*
And that can find no place
For hate-directives less than crystal-clear.

Those lines, 'love to the loveless shown that they
Might lovely be', so true
To Herbert's kind and gentle muse,
May move us yet won't do
For these bad times when all such words convey
To us hard-heads is 'you
Soft-minded types will always lose
Out to us lot who skew
The love-makes-lovely doctrine round'. We say:

'It's hatred of what's hateful that you need,
That gives your fight fresh heart,
And not those kindlier thoughts that suit
Times when the painter's art,
Or poet's, found in love a sovereign creed
That hate now takes apart
To show how elements transmute
And love's contortions start
Far back, no happy ending guaranteed.'

It's touch-and-go each time the satirists
Defy the odds, decide
That love alone won't fix love's plight,
And – Juvenal their guide –
Adopt the cynic outlook that insists
Their probes have got inside
Love's darkest crevice, thrown new light
On hidden depths, and vied
For insight with the shrewest analysts.

Let painters paint their lovers lovely still,
 And poets raise the same
 Old hymns to love and beauty, though
 They'd best recall what came
 Of suchlike fine ideals and tests of skill
 When annexed to the game
 Of politics and so required to show,
 Beyond the tasteful frame,
 What came of her, which lover paid the bill.

Look at it this way and you'll maybe think
 Them right, those critics apt
 To cast the frame aside and stress
 What masks behind the rapt
 Devotions, or breaks surface in a blink
 To show how loves adapt
 And how the praise of loveliness
 Is all too often capped
 By harsher sounds from which its votaries shrink.

I see them, hear them, faces that conspire
 In waking nightmare threat,
 And feel, at times, my finger squeeze
 The trigger, press to set
 The pocketed grenade, or spark a fire
 To vanquish the as-yet
 Still embryonic coup that these
 New fascists hope to get
 Well up and running as the times grow dire.

It's satire that held out an exit-clause,
 Stood in for deeds undone,
 And helped me live with hates so deep
 They'd otherwise go un-
 Restrained by any act-arresting pause
 That changed assassin's gun
 For brush or pen and told me: keep
 In check those thoughts that run
 Ahead too hate-propelled to serve love's cause.

The Wednesday

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Website:

www.thewednesdayoxford.com

Published by:

The Wednesday Press, Oxford

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The Wednesday books:

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