

Values of Science and Literature: A Critical Quest

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ABSTRACT: *Many scholars have sketched the science-literature dichotomy in relation to culture, time and the historical evolution of the relationship. This article looks into the values inherent in the science-literature dichotomy. "Values" is a term that brings to the fore 'philosophy' in its broadest sense. What is the philosophy appropriate to science and literature? This article is an attempt to appropriate the philosophy inherent in science and literature.*

KEYWORDS: *Literature, Philosophy, Science, Value*

A polarization has always existed between science and literature. Literature is at one pole- at the other the scientists. As such hostility has always existed between the scientist and the literary men. Each secretly believes that the other is 'silly' 'arrogant'. Now the occasion has come to look into the values inherent in both science and literature. In a broader viewpoint the term 'value' brings to the fore the term 'philosophy'. The philosophy of science has varied from time to time. To Newton science seemed to afford proof of the existence of God as the Almighty Law-giver. Newton only discovered the law of gravitation and whatever other natural laws God had ordained. Man was the "moral" centre of the universe. God's purposes were mainly concerned with the human race. But French philosophers of the enlightenment took a different view. Law did not imply a law-giver. This led to the denial of free-will, and a materialistic view of the world began. This developed a new humility that made man realize how inconsequential an episode was the history of the human race. Darwin's theory defied God and the humanity ceased to be the centre of the universe. This point of view was expressed by a little poem "The Infinite" by the Italian poet Leopardi.

Dear to me always was this lonely hill
And this hedge that excludes so large a part
Of the ultimate horizon from my view
But as I sit and gaze, my thought conceives
Interminable vastnesses of space
Beyond it, and unearthly silence,
And profoundest calm; whereat my heart almost
Becomes dismayed. And as I hear the wind
Blustering through these branches, I find myself
Comparing with this sound that infinite silence;
And then I call to mind eternity,
And the ages that are dead, and this that now
Is living and the noise of it. And so
In this immensity my thought sinks drowned.
And sweet it seems to shipwreck in this sea.[1]

This is an old-fashioned way of feeling. It is certainly true of science which in its beginning was due to

men who were in love with nature. They perceived the beauty of the stars and the sea, of the winds and the mountains. Milton's "Tuscan Artist", Galileo, must have conveyed such feelings when they met in Italy. Because the Galileo's of the world loved the grandeur of nature their thoughts dwelt upon them; they wished to understand them more intimately than mere outward contemplation made possible. "The world", said Herodotus, the Greek philosopher, "is an ever living fire, with measures kindling and measures going out". The Greek philosophers, from who came the first impulse to scientific knowledge, felt the strange beauty of the world almost like madness in the blood.

Put by the side of this the response of the poets to nature Wordsworth is the archetype. "Tintern Abbey lines" is very much to the point:

These beautiful forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye
But oft, in lonely rooms, and amid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even to my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration. [2]

The ecstasy of the philosopher-scientist becomes muted tranquility in the poet. In this distinction we notice a difference that deserves further probing.

Love of knowledge [common to science and poetry] to which the growth of science is due is itself the product of a twofold impulse. We may seek knowledge of an object because we love the object or we wish to have power over it. The former influence leads to the kind of knowledge that is contemplative, the latter to the kind that is practical. In the development of science the power impulse has increasingly prevailed over the love impulse. The power impulse is embodied in industrialism and in Governmental technique. It is also embodied in the philosophies known as pragmatism and instrumentalism. These philosophies hold that beliefs about any object are true only in so far as they enable us to manipulate it with advantage to ourselves. That is, 'truth' is a flexible term; it bends and bows to our will. Bacon tells us, "Certainly it is heaven on earth to move the mind in charity, rest in providence and turn upon the poles of truth".[3] Truth has many facets. Truth is valuable only if it is workable. Newton's laws are acceptable because they are found useful in making machines to work for us. This engenders the new philosophy of science, which is best expressed by Karl Marx in 1845, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*: "The question whether objective truth belongs to human thinking is not a question of theory, but a practical question. The truth, i.e., the reality and power, of thought must be demonstrated in practice. The contest as to reality or non-reality of a thought which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question... Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, but the real task is to *alter* it". Russell 98]. This philosophy has two aspects, one theoretical and the other ethical. The theory leads to utilitarianism and love of power. Anything is truthful if it can be utilized for our advantage. Truth is a variable commodity. What is important is our happiness. The other is love of power. If love of power dominates we arrive at the conclusion that what is important is not to understand the world but to change it. Power puts into the hands of politicians the power to tyranny and war. Of course science has had beneficial effects too – democracy, trade unionism, birth control, medicine, control of criminality, increase in education, increase in opportunity. We needn't lament over "mute inglorious Miltons", - though "our modern Miltons," alas remain inglorious, though not mute" says Russell in "The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell" with a glint in his eye. "Ours is not a poetic age." [4] This last statement tells us back from science to poetry. The philosopher Plato was one of the earliest enemies of poetry. He banished poets from his ideal kingdom, for poetry was untruthful, irrational and immoral; it weakened man's moral fibre and made them unusable as citizens. This was the beginning of the "moral centrality" of poetry as opposed to objective apprehension. Aristotle was scientific in his pursuit of logic, politics, ethics and physics, in his own way. In poetics he circumvented Plato and gave poetry an aesthetic habitation and a name. Poetry was knowledge in pursuit of pleasure and had no utilitarian motive. Still he spoke of the cathartic effect of tragedy. Horace combined Aristotle's 'delight' with Plato's 'instruction' to justify poetry. The Renaissance revived the moral centrality of poetry. So did neo classicism. Dr. Johnson said that the duty of a writer was to make the world better -almost anticipating Marx. Wordsworth was a nature-bound teacher. Shelley said, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world"[5]. Arnold spoke of poetry "as a criticism of life" [6], an application of ideas to the interpretation of life. Shaw said that he would not have written so much as a single sentence had it not been to change the world. And finally Trotsky, "Art is not a disembodied element feeding on itself, but a function of man inextricably tied to life and its environment"[7]. A grand galaxy of great men affirmed the moral centrality of poetry, which we do not associate with science. Science is morally neutral. Shakespeare's Hamlet is very scientific when he says, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so"[8]. Science changes the world unmindful of whether the world is good or evil.

Are poets, then, "ineffectual angels"? Some have thought of them as the 'shakers and makers of the world'. This is more rhetoric than reality. Of course, it could be argued that Shakespeare manipulated the Elizabethan audience by the power of words. The power exercised by him was not moral or political. His words sent down their tentacular roots into the subconscious minds of his audience and stirred up their awareness of being alive. It is through language that the dramatist exercises his power. Shakespeare knows that his sonnet has at best the power of a flower; the end effect is different; poetry is an expression of the joy of the soul which in sonnet 29 "Like to the lark at break of day, arising / from sullen earth, sings songs at heaven's gate".[9] The

power that brings down tyranny and war over us is that of science; Shakespeare's caution is, "It is good to have the strength of a giant / but tyrannous to use it like one".[9]

There is another aspect of the power that poetry can exercise over words. Hopkins's sonnet "Windhower" is worth quoting as a whole to demonstrate the kind of mastery that the poet can wield upon words. "I caught" is the opening assertion when the poet feels that the quintessential joy of the bird in flight is well within his grasp. A quick succession of images, words, alliteration, assonance combine to figure forth the "inscape" of the bird, which then is "instressed". "My heart in hiding stirred for a bird '[10] -the achieve of, the mastery of the thing] Poetic power is linguistic.

The power that poets wield over words is not always the same. The words can express powerlessness also. In "East Coker" T.S. Eliot is unsure of what he has done:

That was a way of putting it – not very satisfactory:
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle
It was not [to start again] what one had expected...
And the wisdom of the age? Had they deceived us
Or deceived themselves, the quiet voiced elders,
Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?. [11

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Earlier still in "Burnt Norton".

Words strain
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still"[12]

And Auden joins in with his own expression of poetry's powerlessness in "In Memory of W.B. Yeats". Yeats is the archetype of modern poetry:

You were silly like us.. Your gift survived it all,
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself, mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen; it survives
In the valley of its saying where executives
Would never want to tamper, it flows south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth[13]

Hopkins, Eliot and Auden seem to tell us that the world of poetry is limited to language; poetry is a language game. Then science has made a world of power that threatens to undo all. "In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark / And living nations wait / Each sequestered in his hate / Intellectual disgrace / Stares from every human face / And the seas of pity lie / Locked and frozen in every eye" [13] This is the world of science before which poetry dwindles into insignificance. In the world of action poetry has little chance. In the world of culture, in the realm of experience that we measure by time science and literature exist – though in uneasy relationship.

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