**Right, Let’s Have No More of This Poetry and Science Stuff**

As most poets know, anything can be compared with anything, giving rise to the richness of imagery and metaphor. One might go too far, of course, and, echoing Johnson’s concern about the ‘metaphysicals’, *ransack* nature for comparisons and yoke the most heterogeneous ideas ‘by violence together’.

Looking for something to say, someone might in this way look for links between poetry and God knows what. A common line is to try and tie together poetry and science. Of course, what may motivate this – apart from the mere fact that it can be done - is a fear that fewer people are interested in poetry whereas loads of people are into science. Science can seem to have taken over the world, so by looping the lariot of poetry around the horse of science (to compare anything with anything), poetry might be taken for a jolly ride.

Yet comparisons between poetry and science as *activities* are extremely awkward. While one can compare, obviously, a lamp and a cauliflower, there is a danger that one might get no further than saying they are both physical things, or even just things. It is in this spirit of absolute obviousness, for example, that the distinguished editors of the anthology, *Poems of Science,* once declared that ‘The poet has something of the scientist about him, many now think, and the scientist something of the poet. The starting point for both of their activities is the imagination’ (John Heath-Stubbs & Phillips Salman, *Poems of Science,* Penguin (1984)). To this extent though, the poet has something of the cook about him (or her), or even the rugby player; and the cook, or even the rugby player, something of the poet. In this way, everyone with an imagination, which is everyone, has something of everyone else about him (or her).

In a similar vein, Robert Crawford, putting together a collection of poems about science and a set of reflections by poets about science and scientists about poetry, suggests ‘readers of the following essays, poems and reflections may be challenged to see poetry and science as potently aligned modes of discovery’ (Robert Crawford, *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science***,** OUP (2006). Or they may not. There is no doubt that poetry and natural science can be described as ‘modes of discovery’. But so can any intellectual activity, such as chess, in which one tries to discover ways of beating one’s opponent. But are science and poetry ‘potently aligned’ modes of discovery? Iif one tries to home in on any specific account of what it is that scientists are doing, and poets are doing, one would have to say that poetry and science are not aligned, let alone potently. After all, one lot is thinking up quantitative hypotheses about the nature of the material world and then designing experiments to empirically confirm and/or disconfirm them. The other lot is writing poems, which are neither hypotheses about the nature of the material world, nor quantitative, and there is no experiment which could confirm or disconfirm them.

In a recent PN Review (PN Review 241, May/June 2018), Duncan Mackay, an astute observer of both poetry and science, reviews some of Charles Olson’s pronouncements on relations between these activities. He pursues Olson’s attempts to understand a poem in terms of the physical concept of a ‘field’ as well as his ideas about ‘energy exchange’. Mackay draws our attention to the following comment by Olson, ‘A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it …. By way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader’. One can gauge the usefulness of this as an insight into relations between poetry and science by considering the following parallel : ‘A Victoria sponge is energy transferred from where the chef got it … By way of the Victoria sponge itself to, all the way over to, the child who has taken a large slice’.

Mackay then perhaps makes matters worse by reiterating Olson’s insights in his own words. And so we get the following, ‘The poem and its components, as objects in the field, are energetic constructs with their internal tensions and (as a physicist would describe it) their energetic potentials, to be released only in the exchange process with a reader’. The trouble with this is that it actually *obscures* our understanding of what a poem does. Ultimately, after all, a poem is a *semantic* object, not a *physical* object and its relation to a reader must surely be understood somehow through the concept of *meaning;* it is not clear how the concept of ‘energetic potential’ can substitute for this.

It is not only poets who make ambitious, and obscure, claims about the relation between poetry and science as activities; scientists – when they think about poetry – are easily tempted as well. Richard Dawkins, for instance, has suggested that both scientists and poets are concerned with battling against what he calls the ‘anaesthetic of familiarity, a sedative of ordinariness which dulls the senses and hides the wonder of existence’ (Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow (*1998)). But this is clearly no advance on Heath-Stubbs and Salman’s claim for the imagination. Lots of people are concerned to remove the ‘sedative of ordinariness’. I am thinking of Screaming Lord Sutch (RIP), as I say that. What is going on here, as commentators reach out for insightful comparisons, is something that might actually be given a name, to alert future scholars from failing to avoid it when it is in front of their noses. It is where one takes a couple of things and finds a very general similarity between them and then makes so much of it that all the obvious differences are overlooked. One could call it the David Fallacy, on the grounds that the one-time Prime Minister and the little guy with the sling were both called David, or one could call it the Victoria Fallacy, given that Prince Albert’s wife and David Beckham’s wife have the same name, so there must be something going on here.

All this, of course, has very little to do with the totally different question of whether poets ever *write poems about science*. Of course they do, and always have, as the editors of *Poems of Science* amply demonstrated, or as Douglas Bush, back in 1950, in his *Science and English Poetry*, amply demonstrated, writing nearly ten years before C.P.Snow once tried to argue that ‘literary intellectuals’ had little interest in science. Poets have written about everything, including science, and will always do so. They often do this without usually knowing very much science (a slight doffing of the cap to Snow here). And generally, as Maurice Riordan and Jon Turney pointed out, in their anthology of ‘scientific’ poetry, because they don’t normally know exactly what a scientist knows about science, their poems mainly involve selective borrowings from the discourse of natural science to serve their deeper interest in life in general, ‘the … pieces here are not, of course, strictly about science. They are about love and death, frailty, grief, mischief, moments of recollection and introspection, about the sorts of things one expects to find in poems anyway’ (Maurice Riordan and Jon Turney, A Quark for Mr Mark – 101 Poems About Science, Faber and Faber (2000)). So, in a way, poets don’t really write *about* science.

There are others, of course, equally piqued by the suggestion that poetry and science have much in common, who have tried to point out that poetry is really nothing like science at all. Most of the time, though, when they have done this, it is not clear that they have pinned down the more obvious reasons in support of what they were saying. Emily Grosholz, who has written a lot of poems about science, has nevertheless announced, ‘Poetry and science are opposed, even hostile, enterprises’ (Emily Grosholz, *Poetry and Science in America*, in Kurt Brown (ed.), *The Measured Word – On Poetry and Science*, University of Georgia (2001)). The conflict between them apparently represents, ‘a real bifurcation in human knowledge and, if one may so, reality, which can never be overcome’.

Yet Grosholz’s perspective here ironically seems to stem from seeing poetry and science as much more similar than they really are. She refers to their ‘conflicting claims on truth’, and it is these which lead, apparently, to mutual hostility. But to see a poet and a scientist as having conflicting claims on truth is very odd. It is not at all clear what scientific truths a sane poet would feel obliged to deny. Even Snow only said that literary intellectuals did not know the second law of thermodynamics. He never implied they thought it was false. And it is not clear that poems assert truths. So it is not clear what there is in a poem for a scientist to deny. It would not seem appropriate to say to Yeats, for instance, that there was a second Troy for her to burn, or to Wordsworth that he did not wander lonely as a cloud. Grosholz also points out that natural science tends towards *generality* and poetry towards *particularity,* and so they are in conflict. Yet, setting aside the truth of this claim, even if it were the case, it is not clear that this shows that poetry and science are *in conflict* more than it shows that they are simply different activities. Again, it is not clear what generalities in science a poet would think they had to object to, nor what particularities in poetry a scientist would be annoyed by.

Miroslav Holub, who had the arguable advantage of having been a real scientist, was perhaps closer to the truth when he tried to spell out how science and poetry are, in many ways, mutually irrelevant. He had always stressed how the language of science and the language of poetry were different, not in a hostile way, but in the way that chalk and cheese are different. Recognising how the full meaning of a term derives from context and use, he saw the discourses of science and poetry as utterly different. Science aims to strip words down, to make them totally unambiguous. It is partly for this reason that so much of science dissolves into mathematics. Poetry, on the other hand, makes words carry as much meaning as possible, seven or more types of ambiguity being typical. But one shouldn’t, as Grosholz does, make these different approaches to language the basis for a model of *conflict*. They are only in conflict if they are being used to achieve the same thing, which they are not.

In the end, the sensible conclusion is that, as activity, poetry is nothing like science. They are not aligned modes of enquiry (contra Crawford), and because they are not, they are not in conflict (contra Grosholz). They are different activities, like poetry and rugby, although it remains perfectly possible for one person to pursue both, as well as, if they wished, to play rugby. And while poetry is nothing like science, it is still possible for poets, as they have always done, to write poems about science. Whether these poems are, technically, ‘about’ science is an interesting question. It is tempting to suppose that at the end of the day we would find they probably are, in some sense, and in another sense, aren’t. Which is what one should expect. For after all, everything is like everything else, in some sense, and not, in some other sense.