

Call for papers

Interdisciplinary Science Reviews (www.isr-journal.org)

“Poetries and sciences in the 21st Century”

This is to invite proposals for contributions to a themed issue of *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* on the topic of “Poetries and sciences in the 21st Century”, to be published as volume 37, number 2, June 2012.

Reference here to the present century is meant to imply that the relationship between poetry and science is historically contingent and that our current views of it are informed and challenged by those of the past. The intended aim of this issue, then, is not so much to say or even to sketch what we believe to be true as to question our views by considering where they come from, both in the present and in the past, and to speculate on what is to be done.

As a point of departure, consider the literary critic I. A. Richards’ *Poetries and Sciences*, a work whose writing and revisions span the middle half of the 20th Century. In his book, which bears the marks of considerable struggle and disagreement, Richards asked what poetry could be in a world deeply and broadly affected by technoscience. The revolution it has brought about, he argued, is “too drastic to be met by any such half-measures” as promotion of wonder in the marvels of nature (1970: 52-3). What could wonder be but an attitude of ignorance when these marvels have or are assumed to have lawlike explanation? Science has *neutralized* nature, he argued, and so deprived poetry of its original well-spring, “the Magical View of the world” (1970: 50). What could a poet say to those for whom making sense ultimately requires the radically plain style of scientific reasoning? His solution was to cut the language of imagination free from the language of belief, hence from epistemological certainty, implying our philosophical freedom to explore possible worlds.

Consider also the psychologist Jerome Bruner’s essay “Possible Castles”, in his *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986). Here Bruner argues that philosophical questioning of science (by Thomas Kuhn *et al.*) has reawakened the ancient, even tired question of the “two cultures” by revealing science itself to be historically contingent. In response to this reawakening he gives us two opposed trajectories for the sciences and the humanities. Both originate in curiosity and speculation about the world, but the one moves steadily away from ambiguity while the other moves toward increasing “the alternativeness of human possibility” (Bruner 1986: 53). He concludes his essay by quoting Aristotle on the poet’s function: “to describe not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen” (*Poetics* II.9). What matters to the poet, Bruner says, is verisimilitude to conceivable human experience. The poet’s job, we might say, is to expand what is conceivable by finding the right

words, whereas the scientist's is to extend what is explicable by equally audacious but differently directed acts of imagination.

Much closer to our time, enter into the debate physicist Robert B. Laughlin's declaration that as much in physics as in biology we have come out of the reductionism which defined science throughout the 20th Century (2005: 208) – and so created Richards' dilemma – into an Age of Emergence. If so, then the question to be rescued from the muddle of "two cultures" is truly vigorous and contemporary. Let us say that, to quote theoretical biologist Robert Rosen, we foreswear the crippling mental habit "of looking only downward toward subsystems, and never upward and outward" (2000: 2), which renders us unable to see emergent organizational principles, of poetry or of life itself. What then might poetry and science have to do with each other? What might that preeminent expression of technoscience, computing, have to say about poetry, and how might it go about the saying? How might our most adventurous theories of poetic discourse inform a computing that works "upward and outward" from its object of study?

Practical matters

All contributions will be peer-reviewed. Articles may contain black-and-white illustrations (for which authors should seek any necessary permissions). Articles should have a maximum length of 6000 words. For details about format see www.maney.co.uk/journals/notes/isr.

Schedule

July 2011: declare intention to contribute (title & abstract)

September 2011: submit first version

January 2012: reviewers' comments & decision returned to authors

March 2012: final version due to the publisher

June 2012: issue published as ISR 37.2

Please address all enquiries to the Editor.

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24 February 2010

Bruner, Jerome. 1986. "Possible Castles". In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. 44-54.

Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Laughlin, Robert B. 2005. *A Different Universe: Reinventing Physics from the Bottom Down*. New York: Basic Books.

Richards, I. A. 1970. *Poetries and Sciences: A Reissue of Science and Poetry (1926, 1935) with Commentary*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Rosen, Robert. 2000. *Essays on Life Itself*. Complexity in Ecological Systems Series. New York: Columbia University Press.