LITERATURE, EXACT AND BIOPHYSICAL SCIENCES

Isabel Capeloa Gil
Faculty of Human Sciences, Catholic University of Portugal

Keywords: Comparative literature, history of science, objectivity, subjectivity, conflicting paradigms, scientist

Contents
2. Debating the claim to truth: past to present trends
   2.1. Science in literature: from Sophia to the Two Cultures
   2.2. Science and literature as value-systems
3. Elective affinities: Literature and the sciences
   3.1. Writing science
4. Conclusion
Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

The notion of science and the scientific has been changing rapidly from the 18th century onwards, shifting from a model of integrated knowledge that comprehended both the so-called human as well as the exact sciences into a model of sedition, epitomized in the image of the two cultures. The article deals with the historical, cultural and epistemological background that has led to the concept of literature and science as separate star-crossed spheres and discusses models of interaction between the two. On a micro scale, the study then moves on to describe how literature integrates and discusses scientific discoveries and how the exact sciences draw on aesthetic energies to convey their discoveries and also use literary metaphors as rhetorical devices to explain their theories. Special attention is also devoted to the writer as scientist and to the scientist as a literary character. By viewing literature and science as value systems and, the article argues that there is a reciprocal illumination between the two fields that goes beyond ideological and professional arguments in favor of a separation of the spheres, and is deeply grounded on the fact that all science is practiced by embedded subjects, so that all science is indeed human science.

1. Science and Literature: theoretical debates

The star-crossed relation between Western arts and sciences, that came to be known as the “two cultures”, after C.P. Snow’s influential 1959 Rede Lecture, is neither new to the academia in the field of humanities nor to historians of science, but has in fact acquired a new momentum in the 20th century. The radical change in traditional ways of life brought about by the increasing presence of technology in the social tissue has displaced the debate from the academic milieu and renewed it with energies arising from the community’s awareness of the clash. For the sake of textual economy this article will use the term science to refer to a body of knowledge involving rigorous universal laws, modeled on mathematics, and particularly including the exact sciences,
mathematics, physics, astronomy, chemistry and engineering sciences, as well as the
natural sciences and sciences of the body, biology, medicine, genetics, gene technology,
as well as geology.
However, as late as the 19th century, science was still perceived as a variety of literature. In
fact, not only were Newton’s *Principia*, Benjamin Franklin’s *Electricity* and
Lavoisier’s treaty on Chemistry understood as both scientific and literary works, as the
scientist, under the denomination of the natural philosopher, was essentially perceived
to be a humanist. The noun scientist is reported to have been coined in 1833 by William
Whewell at a meeting of the British Society for the Advancement of Science from the
model of the term artist. Noted the absence of a fitting term to describe researchers of
natural phenomena, scientist was chosen as more representative over the current
expression natural philosopher, which was perceived as not sufficiently distinct from its
usage in philosophy. The trend to stress the separation between the arts and natural
science followed in the footsteps of the laws devised almost a century earlier by the
Enlightenment philosophers, namely their defense of a natural, enlightened and
objective science, unhindered by the shackles of tradition and not blinded by emotion.
Others still believed in the necessary articulation between the *belles lettres* and the new
scientific project and drew on the issue of morals to enhance their views. In the wake of
the Lisbon earthquake (1755) the Marquis de Condorcet argued that the harmonization
of the arts and the natural sciences would not only bring about global tolerance and a
stricter control of natural phenomena but also promote progress, justice and happiness.
That was also the point made by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his address to the Dijon
Academy (1750), entitled *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*, where he argued that the
natural sciences separated from the arts would not contribute to the moral advancement
of humanity. However, the cover of Denis Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*
(1751-1772), showing a female figure treading under the sun of reason is a remarkable
icon of the universal enlightenment project, and its institution of an objective natural
science.

Despite calls for a dialogical articulation and not less so because natural and exact
scientists, due to the incipient development of the mathematical language, still used the
same language as literature to put across their views (Michael Faraday, James Clerk
Maxwell, Charles Babbage, Luigi Galvani or Louis Pasteur) the gap was to be definitely
widened along the 19th and into the 20th century. A remarkable debate on the place of
science and literature within the canon of classical academic education ensued in the
1880’s between T. H. Huxley and Matthew Arnold. In the speech “Science and Culture”
given in 1880 at the Royal Academy, T. H. Huxley defended a revision of the
curriculum in favor of a predominance of scientific subjects against the ineffectual and
slight study of the *belles lettres*. Responding to Huxley, Matthew Arnold in the 1882
Cambridge Rede Lecture “Literature and Science” privileged the humanities, arguing in
favor of literature as the “large word” that could encompass the whole of the world and
engaging Newton, Euclid, Galileo and Darwin as rightful literary authors.

Another Cambridge debate in the 20th century would dress old arguments in new
clothes. In 1959, C. P. Snow, again in the Cambridge Rede Lecture, presented the view
that there is a “gulf of mutual incomprehension” between literary scholars and scientists,
caused by a flaw in education strategy that has prompted specialization at a far early
stage of the curriculum and led to a debasement of traditional liberal education.
Responding to Snow in 1962 F. R. Leavis criticized C. P. Snow’s appraisal in the Rede
Lecture, by branding it an intellectual embarrassment and considering Snow’s call for literary scholars to be acquainted with the Second Law of Thermodynamics and physicists with Shakespeare an example of academic dilettantism. Both this and later debates surrounding the relation between arts and sciences dwelt over the grounds of scientific knowledge. The epistemological claim to truth as the outcome of research resulting from measurement methods to test the validity or falsity of the hypothesis lay at the ground of a wider discussion which led to the questioning of the scientific nature of research within the humanities. Can there be an objective knowledge within the practice of research in the humanities? Can research be measured? Are relations of cause and effect pertinent to the study of literature as an object of science? Can the results of this practice lead to the discovery of universal laws? These questions that are pertinent to the paradigmatic definition of a field of study within instrumental science may be weighed differently in literary analysis. On the other hand, issues that are pivotal in contemporary research in the humanities, such as the question of power, identity or diversity are not to be slightly disregarded as subjective and thus outside the scope of real science, as the intervention of the researcher acquires new visibility within the practice of the exact sciences. As chemist Ilya Prigogine has stated, science too has moved from a world of certitude into a world of probability and reality has increasingly become a construct set by the observer (Prigogine, Stengers 14). The importance of the interaction between literature and science has been widely acknowledged and recognized in the most important associations of the field. “Science and Literature” is a an important sub-field within the activities of the ICLA (International Comparative Literature Association) and since 1939 there has been a discussion panel on this theme at the annual convention of the MLA (Modern Languages Association).

In fact, the debate that has became known within the English-speaking academic tradition as that between “sciences” and “humanities” refers indeed to a methodological distinction between “natural sciences” and “human sciences” (Geisteswissenschaften), defended by German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1900), who distinguished between the explanatory mode of the natural or exact sciences based on practices of measurement and addition, and the interpretative, i.e. hermeneutical, approach needed for human sciences, grounded on the notion of understanding.

Whilst the hermeneutical tradition lay its roots within the German academia, as epitomized in Emil Staiger’s dictum that the literary scientist (Literaturwissenschaftler) lacked either the sense for literature or for science (Staiger 60), both the new critics in the U.S. as the structuralists in Europe drew on the formalist tradition to uphold a form of empirical research focused on the material regularities of the text and on a problem solving outlook, thus trying to establish causal relations among the several dimensions of the literary system. Moreover, within the history of science in the 1960’s and particularly due to the work of Thomas Kuhn, knowledge was understood to be fundamentally scientific knowledge (Kuhn 9), i.e. submitting to the measurement and addition paradigm of the exact sciences. Drawing on this tradition, arguments have been made particularly within the scope of the empirical studies of literature in favor of a structural modeling of the field of research according to the paradigm of normal science. However, George S. Rousseau, in a 1978 article on “Literature and Science: The State of the Field”, published in the journal Isis, argued that researchers of literature and science were not able to formulate solid scientific questions and respond with adequate
theory, presenting structuralism as a strong theoretical backbone for further advancement (Schatzberg 18). Stating that scientific knowledge is acquired through methods that may be repeated, validated, falsified (K. Popper, Feyerabend) and tested, Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch have argued for their universal dimension, stating that scientific methods may be applied to all disciplines and under any cultural context (Fokkema, Ibsch 17). The methodological debate became more complex when Wolf Lepenies (1985) proposed the introduction of a third category, that of “social sciences” that would differ both from the natural and the human or cultural sciences and turn the two culture debate into a three-culture one. The epistemological assumptions at the base of each argument foreground a problem of quite a different nature, as Douwe Fokkema has argued (Fokkema 18), in that they justify a division of labour among the different branches of the university. The debate must therefore be perceived under a threefold perspective: epistemological (the questioning the paradigmatic dimensions of the different field of knowledge and the nature of knowledge itself), social (the impact of the theoretical discussion in the social structuring of the scientific community) and cultural (the way in which the two former reflect on the cultural identity of practitioners and impact their surroundings).

Despite the statements of dissent between the practice of the natural sciences and that of the humanities and coming both from the exact sciences arena (E. Schrödinger, T. Kuhn, A. Eddington) and the literary scholarship side (Leonard B. Mayer, George Levine, Odo Marquard, Emil Staiger), others have argued for the unalienable link between the two. Stemming from the notion that all knowledge is basically human-based, subjective and value-laden, philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1873) argued in “Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinne” that scientific knowledge depends on its empirical appropriation by the subject. Science without subjectivity thus becomes the “grave of perception”. The argument for a human-based knowledge and a human-dependent science was in fact already acknowledged by E. Kant in his first Critique when stating that only that which could be submitted to the a priori categories of knowledge, space and time, could truly be known. In the late 1950’s, Karl Popper moves further in this direction by arguing that all science is practiced by human beings laden with values, embedded in social communities and with different identities. Science is therefore a human practice so that foreclosing the claims to absolute objectivity and human distinction he argued that all science is human science.

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physics, the author argues that Structuralism disrupted the work of art as unity and substituted it by the text as a network of diversity relations, where the absolute categories of author, reader and critic are displaced and intermingled.]

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Biographical Sketch

Isabel Câpeia Gil is Professor of German and Comparative Culture at the Catholic University of Portugal and holds a Ph.D. from that same university. She is currently the Dean of the School of Human Sciences at the Catholic University of Portugal (Lisbon) and the Vice-President of the Portuguese German Studies Association. Her main research areas include intermedia studies (literature and dance), modern and postmodern drama, gender studies as well as representations of war in literature and film and her work has been published in *Orbis Litterarum, Dedalus, Runa* as well as *Colloquia Germanica* and *Mythe et Modernité*. She is the author of *Mythographies*. (Lisbon, 2004), and co-editor of *Landscapes of Memory. Envisaging the Past/Remembering the Future*, Lisbon 2004. Her current work reflects on representational strategies and she has recently published several articles on the physics and literature. She has been visiting Professor at the University of Wales (Lampeter), at the National University of Ireland (Galway), at the Universität des Saarlandes (Saarbrücken), at the University of Hamburg as well as at the Western Michigan University (USA).