There is more than one similarity between modern poetry and science. Both are experiments, in the sense of "testing in a laboratory": an attempt is made to produce a certain phenomenon through the separation or combination of certain elements which the experimenter has either subjected to the pressure of some outward force or left to develop according to the laws of their own nature. This operation takes place in a closed space, in the most complete isolation possible. The poet deals with words as the scientist deals with cells, atoms, and other material particles: he extracts them from their natural medium, everyday language, isolates them in a sort of vacuum chamber, combines them or separates them; he observes and uses the properties of language as the scientific researcher observes and uses the properties of matter. The analogy might be carried further, but it is pointless to do so because the similarity lies not so much in the outward resemblances between verbal manipulations and laboratory testing as in the attitude toward the object.

As he writes, as he tests his ideas and his words, the poet does not know precisely what is going to happen. His attitude toward the poem is empirical. Unlike the religious believer, he is not attempting to confirm a revealed truth; unlike the mystic, he is not endeavoring to become one with a transcendent reality; unlike the ideologue, he is not trying to demonstrate a theory. The poet does not postulate or affirm anything a priori; he knows that what counts is not ideas but results, not intentions but works. Isn't this the same attitude as that of the scientist? Poetry and science do not imply a total rejection of prior conceptions and intuitions. But theories ("working hypotheses") are not what justify experiments; rather, the converse is true. Sometimes the "testing" produces results that are different from or entirely contrary to our expectations. The poet and the scientist do not find this difficult to accept; both are resigned to the fact that reality often defies our expectations. The poet and the scientist do not endeavor to become one with a transcendent reality; unlike the mystic, he is not attempting to confirm a revealed truth; unlike the religious believer, he is not endeavoring to become one with a transcendent reality; unlike the ideologue, he is not trying to demonstrate a theory.

Yet the similarities between science and poetry must not blind us to a crucial difference between them, one having to do with the subject of the experiment. The scientist is an observer, and plays no part, at least voluntarily, in the experiment. I say "voluntarily" because at times the observer inevitably becomes part of the phenomenon being observed. In the case of modern poetry, the subject of the experiment is the poet himself: he is both the observer and the phenomenon observed. His body and his psyche, his entire being, are the "field" in which all sorts of transformations take place. Modern poetry is an experimental proc-

Modern Poetry and Science

Poetry is a form of knowledge, of experimental knowledge.

© Octavio Paz (1914-1998)
1990 Nobel Laureate for Literature

Translated from the Spanish by Helen Lane

Authors are contributors to the career development Canadian International Youth Forums, also known as ScienceSpheres, and Members of the Advisory Council of the Public Awareness Education Programs.

Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC-DRHC) is a key partner in the YAASIT/SciberLink project.

CANADIAN INTERNATIONAL YOUTH LETTER
Public Awareness Education Programs of the Sciences & Humanities - Technology & Global Bioethics (PAEP) + Youth Association for the Advancement of Science, Innovation & Technology (YAASIT/SciberLink)
© H.F. Schweinsberg + paep@utm.utoronto.ca + www.paep.ca
Tel: 416-486-9333     Fax: 416-483-0002
Box 372, Station Q, 27 St. Clair Avenue East
Toronto ON CANADA M4T 2M5

YAASTIT OCCASIONAL ESSAYS
(ISN 1201-4133) Published 12 times a year.
$25 for a 1-year subscription. Students and educators free.