

Modern Poetry and Science

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 acts quite independently of our philosophy. Poets and scientists are not doctrinaires; they do not offer us a priori systems but proven facts. Results rather than hypotheses, works rather than ideas. The truths they seek are different but they employ similar methods to ascertain them. The rigorous procedures they follow are accompanied by the strictest objectivity, that is to say, a respect for the autonomy of the phenomenon being investigated. A poem and a scientific truth are something more than a theory or belief: they have withstood the acid of proof and the fire of criticism. Poems and scientific truths are something quite different from the ideas of poets and scientists. Artistic styles and the philosophy of science are transient things; works of art and the real truths of science are not.

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-

ess whereby the knowing subject is the object of knowledge. To see with our ears, to feel with our minds, to combine our powers and use them to the limit, to know a little more about ourselves and discover within us unknown realities: is that not the aim assigned to poetry by spirits as different as Coleridge, Baudelaire, and Apollinaire? I mention only a few names because I believe that there is little doubt in anyone's mind that this is one of the cardinal directions that has consistently been taken by poets and poetry from the beginning of the nineteenth century to our own time. And I might even add that the real modernity of poetry lies in its having won its autonomy. Poetry has ceased to be the servant of religion or philosophy; like science, it explores the universe on its own. And in this respect also there is a great similarity between certain poets and the scientists: they too have not hesitated to engage in dangerous experiments, at the risk of their lives or their spiritual wholeness, in order to explore forbidden zones.

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)

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YAASIT OCCASIONAL ESSAYS

(ISSN 1201-4133) Published 12 times a year.

\$25 for a 1-year subscription. Students and educators free.