

Daniel Aureliano Newman, “Narrative: Common Ground for Literature and Science.” *Configurations* 26.3 (Summer 2018): 277-82.

Increasing numbers of humanities scholars are pursuing interdisciplinary research. This tendency is due, in part, to the edification and broadening of intellectual horizons that such research brings to individual scholars. It is also, undoubtedly, owing to more ominous forces. University faculties and administrations, funding agencies, and governmental bodies often see this type of research as producing results more discernably relevant to the contemporary moment than the solitary, discipline-specific, and historically-oriented work to which humanities researchers are often thought to devote themselves. The interdisciplinary field of Literature and Science, in particular, allows humanities scholars to engage in exciting and novel research practices, and to show themselves as pertinent, broad-minded, and collaborative in their approaches, thus appeasing – for better or for worse – those who are suspicious or unsupportive of their practices. Scientists, on the other hand, tend not to see the benefits that Literature and Science might bring to their work and to their profession, or to imagine how the field could help convince detractors that their research is legitimate and significant. Consequently, in its current state, the field of Literature and Science is dominated by literary scholars and lacks a genuinely interdisciplinary culture.

Daniel Aurelio Newman, in his essay “Narrative: Common Ground for Literature and Science”, addresses the ways in which the field might attract more scientists and evolve into a more productively collaborative endeavour. Newman offers a balanced consideration of Literature and Science from the perspectives of both the humanities scholar and the scientist as he recognizes the ways these two figures have traditionally tended to misunderstand each other. His focus is more decidedly on scientists, and he elaborates on the reasons for which they do not participate in the field in large numbers. According to Newman, many scientists are guided, perhaps misleadingly, by a conception that humanities scholars tend to look at their work with suspicion, and even “demoniz[e]” or “discred[it]” them (278), and are perhaps dissuaded by the tendency to privilege the “‘Literature’ in ‘Literature and Science’” (277), or by the fact that humanities-based approaches dominate the field. Any interest or enthusiasm in the field tends to be overshadowed, according to Newman, by what scientists perceive as a partiality to work that is “*about science*”, rather than “*part of the scientific enterprise*” (277; emphasis in original). In other words, the research Literature and Science produces is often of no immediate professional benefit to scientists. In aligning themselves with academics working in the arts, scientists might worry that they would be perceived as irrelevant – a legitimate concern in the face of the growing social and political forces already critical of their work.

Newman suggests that the notion of “narrative” has the potential to produce more satisfying collaborations between scientists and humanities scholars. Narrative, he suggests, is something “concrete” that is already “embedded within the professional practices” of both disciplines (278). Many scientists recognize the value of storytelling in communicating information, but Newman promotes broader, less rigid approaches to narrative that emphasize looking beyond the simple form of a story. He stresses the worth of narratives within texts – what Hans U. Fuchs calls “narratives intrinsic to science” (279). In their studies of such “intrinsic narratives”, Newman suggests,

scientists could rely on the narrative methodologies of scholars in “literary studies, philosophy, and other fields” (280). Quoting Alirio Rosales, Newman writes that narratologists in the humanities have “already done some of this crucial work, identifying how narrative functions in scientific theories, protocols, and communications: ‘as argument’, as an ‘explanation’ and a ‘scaffold’ for new hypotheses, as an ‘integrative device’ linking discrete ‘mathematical components of theories’, as the underlying structure of experiments, and as a rhetorical tool” (280). Surely, scientists could draw on this work to further their research in ways that are professionally advantageous.

Newman’s concluding remarks reinforce the timeliness of his proposed fusion of literature and science. In the face of the rise of nationalism, climate-change denial, and other issues where simplistic narratives are put forth as truth, “countering them”, he writes, “will be easier if we can combine the literary tools of narrative theory and analysis with the scientific facts” (282). New approaches to narrative might allow for a more agreeable and mutually-productive convergence of scientists and humanities scholars; more rich, truly interdisciplinary projects; and a more robust, consolidated amalgamation of the humanities and the sciences – one that is better able to face and resist the increasing economic, political, and social attacks on them.

A consideration of Newman’s approach raises broad questions about how a model of Literature and Science designed around the notion of narrative might look. One wonders in what ways, exactly, this emphasis on narrative might – in addition to the innovations it will bring to scientific research – produce new and constructive literary approaches, beyond the already-familiar critical close readings of scientific discourse and explorations of scientific themes in literary texts. Newman makes brief reference to the ways some of the more distinctly technical scientific models might enrich studies of postclassical narratology and literary history (282). The specificities of such hopeful possibilities are not enlarged upon, and should, indeed, be pursued in the future work of Literature and Science scholars.

Newman’s essay begs the question of whether Literature and Science, in its attempts to produce more justly interdisciplinary work, might do well to look to the related, more developed – and perhaps more wholly collaborative – field of the Medical Humanities, in which we find the subfield of Literature and Medicine. Certainly, Literature and Medicine has its own limitations. In its pedagogical incarnations, its focus is often uni-directional, in the sense that it is now often understood that the study of literature can produce better doctors, whereas there is little consideration of how medical approaches might produce more sophisticated students of literature. The field of Literature and Science could take heed from this tendency in an attempt to avoid overemphasizing scientific benefits, and marginalizing literary scholars by viewing them as little more than a means to an end.

Literature and Medicine has nonetheless adopted successful approaches by which Literature and Science scholars might be guided. The field has already successfully implemented a model of collaboration that pivots around the notion of narrative and is, in fact, often labelled as “Narrative Medicine”. Literature and Medicine scholars provide a valuable model in their tendency to emphasize and appreciate the intrinsic worth of the humanities, and to look beyond the instant benefits a focus on literature bring them. They seem to hold a relatively virtuous belief that studying literature can help medical students understand individuals and their experiences more deeply and sympathetically, and thus form them into humane, caring, and proficient medical practitioners and researchers. Might we fruitfully approach the field of Literature and Science in a similar way? Could scientists perhaps turn to literary texts

and methodologies as a means of enriching their ethics and their humanity as researchers? Might this, in turn, lead to satisfying collaborative efforts in which the scientist and the humanities scholar each respect and maintain the integrity of the other's discipline?

Newman's emphasis on a respectful collaboration between the scientist and the humanities scholar is indeed important. "Each", he writes, should "keep the other honest in the responsible use of the other's field" (281). Certainly, much as humanities scholars could recognize more completely the worth of more objective, fact-based scientific methodologies, scientists could value literary approaches that do not privilege immediate outcomes, or social relevance. Together, these scholars could appreciate the process of scholarship as an endeavor whose importance lies as much in complex thought processes, intellectual exchange, creativity, artistic beauty, and scientific novelty as in tangible results. A failure to recognize these various complexities risks playing directly into the hands of economic forces that dismiss research projects of no obvious monetary worth, and that refuse to value the arts and sciences in and of themselves. Newman's attention to the importance of narrative to the field of Literature and Science implicitly alerts us to such a risk, while also presenting an innovative and constructive solution to the current misguided devaluations of the humanities and the sciences.

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