

Historicism, Science and the Dangers of Being Useful

Sally Shuttleworth

For he to whom the present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives.

(Oscar Wilde, "Mr Pater's Last Volume")

Oscar Wilde is perhaps an unlikely figure with which to open a discussion of historicism, but he captures succinctly the importance of historical modes of understanding, not merely for their own sake, but for living in the here and now. Wilde offers a helpful corrective to the presentism of our own culture, in which 'historicism,' as the OED notes, is often used as a pejorative term, suggesting an approach weighed down by the baggage of the past, and an inability to respond flexibly to the delights and challenges of the fast-changing contemporary world. In Wilde's view, such flexibility and depth of engagement can only be attained through historically informed modes of understanding.

In what appears to be an almost global phenomenon, Humanities scholars are currently being exhorted to change their ways, and to make themselves useful. Social Scientists produce reams of empirical data relating to contemporary issues to justify their existence, but what do the Humanities do? One clear way in which we can make ourselves useful, it is suggested, is by working directly with scientists. For academics in the field of literature and science, this appears on the face of it an attractive proposition, replicating in our own practice the interdisciplinary engagement we track with such enthusiasm in earlier eras. My concern lies, however, in the question of whether in following this path we will necessarily find ourselves loosening our own historical roots, adopting styles of work which tend to side-line historically informed modes of understanding.

Over the last thirty years we have seen a wonderful blossoming of literature and science studies, with works, for example, by Gillian Beer in the UK and George Levine in the US offering richly historical and finely nuanced readings of both literary and scientific texts, tracing the forms of interaction between literary and scientific practice. It is noticeable, however, that in literature and science studies there is a considerable divergence between the representative professional bodies in the US and the UK in terms of their practices and sense of mission. The Society for Literature, Science and the Arts (or SLSA), which was founded in the US in the late 1980s, states on its website that it:

Welcomes colleagues in the sciences, engineering, technology, computer science, medicine, the social sciences, the humanities, the arts, and independent scholars and artists. SLSA members share an interest in problems of science and representation, and in the cultural and social dimensions of science, technology and medicine.

The ordering, which was no doubt much debated, is telling. The sciences are welcomed first, with the humanities and arts figuring way down the list, very much as handmaidens to the sciences. Although "representation" is mentioned, there is no reference to historical study, or indeed literature. By contrast, the more recently founded British Society for Literature and Science (BSLS) defines itself on its website as "a scholarly society which promotes interdisciplinary research into the relationships of science and literature in all periods." Science and literature are given equal billing, and that reference to "all periods" suggests a real engagement with historical analysis.

There has of course been much excellent historical work on the interactions of literature and science in the US, but the ethos of the SLSA and its journal, *Configurations*, has been more focused on analysis of the rhetoric and practice of contemporary science. One possible reason for this disparity between the two countries lies in the prevalence in the US of writing programmes, with courses often designed specifically for science majors; *Configurations* itself was originally based at Georgia Institute of Technology. Such institutional structures generate their own forms of scholarship. Although the broad curriculum of US universities generally offers a much healthier interdisciplinary range than we manage in the UK, there remains the danger that literature departments could be demoted to service industries for the sciences. Given the encouragement to scientists to participate in SLSA it would be interesting to discover what proportion of members are directly involved in science, and whether current work on the interface of rhetoric and science has had an impact on scientific practice.

There are three recognisable areas at present where literary scholars seek to engage directly with contemporary scientific and medical practice: medical humanities; literary Darwinism; and neuroscientific approaches to literature. The first is well established in the US, where graduate-only medical training and a broad undergraduate curriculum have opened up spaces for literature in the pre-training of medics. In the UK, under the stimulus of Wellcome Trust funding, the area is developing rapidly, but there are grave dangers here of tokenism, and of literature being mined as source material with little attention paid to literary texture or historical context. Literary Darwinism has made great claims for itself and attracted commensurate attention (see the ongoing debate stemming from Jonathan Kramnick's article in *Critical Inquiry*).¹ In its cruder forms it offers the paradoxical construction of a form of analysis which adopts an historical structure of explanation, but then drains out all understanding of historical specificity. More interesting is the engagement with neuroscience, which is fulfilling nineteenth-century dreams of tracing the cerebral localisation of functions. It is clear (at least to humanities scholars) that neuroscience has a lot to gain from the humanities: the data on neural processes of language can be illuminated by an understanding of the structures of language offered by linguistics, or theories of mind and consciousness offered by philosophy. It is less clear that the gains are fully reciprocal, and that we are now, for example, in a position to gain a fuller understanding of a complex literary text from tracing the neural processes of reading. Science can be seductive, but, as Steven Rose has been warning from within the neuroscience camp, it can also be hubristic and reductionist. Part of our role as humanities scholars must be to bridge the gap between the physiological and the social, and to highlight the importance of social, cultural and historical complexity.

In thinking about the ways in which literature and science might develop as a field it is instructive to look at the recent positioning of History of Science as a

discipline. With all the concern shown by recent governments for the Public Understanding of Science, one might, naively, expect that money would have flowed to departments dedicated to studying the history and philosophy of science. In reality, we find that those units are small, often under threat. It is symptomatic of the problem that when the media want a commentator on famous scientists, or scientific developments in the past, they invariably turn to a scientist, who can often have but a hazy understanding of the development of his own discipline. Interestingly, the study of literature and science seems to have escaped some of the distrust and hostility levelled at the history of science, since the study of scientific texts alongside those of literature can be seen to enhance the cultural authority and prestige of science.

Discussions of theoretical models for the study of literature and science have encompassed one culture, the two cultures, and the third culture, with ingenious variations. Despite this mathematical promiscuity, it is no doubt the case that all current practitioners in the UK would subscribe to some form of model of reciprocal interaction between the fields. Such theoretical allegiance is probably more based on wishful thinking than actual practice, however, since in so many studies it is medicine or science which emerges as the dominant partner. The difficulty of finding incontrovertible cases where literature has influenced the development of medicine or science grows as the sciences themselves become more specialised, in both form and language. It is also undoubtedly easier in the human sciences. Although I did not set out to find it, I was gratified to discover, in my work on ideas of child development, that literature did indeed play a leading role in the formation of the sciences of both the psychology and psychiatry of childhood (*The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science and Medicine 1840-1900*). The new ways of thinking about the child mind opened up by the great novels of child development of the nineteenth century laid the ground for the emergence of these sciences. *Dombey and Son* supplied the defining case study of educational overpressure for more than seventy years, whilst *The Mill on the Floss* was a foundational text for one of the first books on child psychiatry.

Whilst working on the book I was constantly struck by the parallels with contemporary society, and also the general historical amnesia which seems to prevail currently. I was working on cases of child suicide, or children who murdered in the nineteenth century, whilst newspaper headlines screamed out that our society was witnessing such problems for the first time. Even more telling were the parallels between nineteenth-century and current discussions of educational pressures on the young. Such a sense of immediacy creates its own challenges, particularly in a culture in which we are all being enjoined to engage in outreach and to ensure our work exerts impact on social policy. To write a book which focused only on the parallels, however, would be to lose the very sense of historical depth and texture which gave meaning to the work. In the end I alluded to parallels, but did not elaborate, leaving readers to pursue their own connections. Perhaps the best way through this professional impasse is to produce two forms of work – the historical monograph itself, and more popular spin offs, designed for a wider audience – but such additional activity will carry personal costs.

There are purists in our profession who argue strongly against any suggestion that historical research should be used to inform our understanding of the present. This is to take the argument against utility too far. I would argue, conversely, that we need constantly to draw on historical understanding to inform and extend contemporary responses and debate. Current discussions of biological determinism, for example, are extraordinarily limited when compared to the depth and richness of

discussion in the work of J. S. Mill, or the subtle analyses of George Eliot. As literary scholars, we can bring valuable new dimensions to discussions of contemporary science. Following in the footsteps of the writers we study, we should be prepared to work across the disciplines, and engage with contemporary science and medicine. Yet, if our primary research is historical, such engagement, and other forms of 'outreach,' will usually require additional strands of labour. The challenge we face is to maintain and enhance the value accorded to historically based research, whilst also ensuring our voices are heard within contemporary debates.

Notes

1. The debate has been continued through the year, with a range of responses in the most recent issue (38:2).

Works Cited

- The British Society for Literature and Science*. n.d. Web. 20 Dec. 2012.
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