

Call for papers

Interdisciplinary Science Reviews (www.isr-journal.org)

“Poetries and Sciences in the 21st Century”

This is to invite proposals for contributions to a themed issue of *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews* on the topic of “Poetries and Sciences in the 21st Century”, to be published as volume 39, number 1, March 2014.

Reference here to the present century is meant to imply that the relationship between poetry and science is historically contingent and that our current views of it are informed and challenged by those of the past. The intended aim of this issue is not so much to sketch what we believe to be true but to question our views by considering where they have come from and to speculate on what is to be done through an examination of the interactions between poetry and science.

As a point of departure, consider the literary critic I.A. Richards’ *Poetries and Sciences*, a work whose writing and revisions span the middle half of the 20th century. Richards asked what poetry could become in a world deeply and broadly affected by technoscience, arguing that the revolution it has brought about is “too drastic to be met by any such half-measures” as promotion of wonder at the marvels of nature (1970: 52-3). What could wonder be but an attitude of ignorance when these marvels have, or are assumed to have, lawlike explanations? Science has *neutralised* nature, he argued, and so deprived poetry of its original well-spring: “the magical view of the world” (1970: 50). What could a poet say to those for whom making sense ultimately requires the radically plain style of scientific reasoning? Richards’ solution was to cut the language of the imagination free from the language of belief, hence from epistemological certainty, implying our philosophical freedom to explore possible worlds.

Consider also the psychologist Jerome Bruner’s essay “Possible Castles”, from his *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986). Here Bruner argues that philosophical questioning of science (by Thomas Kuhn *et al.*) has reawakened the ancient, even tired question of the “two cultures” by revealing science to be historically contingent. In response to this reawakening he gives us two opposed trajectories for the sciences and the humanities, both originating in curiosity and speculation about the world, but one moving steadily away from ambiguity while the other moves towards increasing “the alternativeness of human possibility” (Bruner 1986: 53). He concludes by quoting Aristotle on the poet’s function: “to describe not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen” (*Poetics* II.9). What matters to the poet, Bruner says, is verisimilitude to conceivable human experience.

The poet's job, we might say, is to expand what is conceivable by finding the best words, whereas the scientist's is to extend what is explicable by equally audacious, but differently directed, acts of the imagination.

Much closer to our time, physicist Robert B. Laughlin declares that, as much in physics as in biology, we have come out of the reductionism which defined science throughout the 20th century (2005: 208) – and so created Richard's dilemma – into an Age of Emergence. If so, then the question to be rescued from the muddle of "two cultures" is truly vigorous and contemporary. Let us say that, to quote theoretical biologist Robert Rosen, we foreswear the crippling mental habit of "looking only downward toward subsystems, and never upward and outward" (2000: 2), which renders us unable to see emergent organizational principles, of poetry or life itself. What then might poetry and science have to do with each other? What might that pre-eminent expression of technoscience, computing, have to say about poetry and how might it go about saying it? How might our most adventurous theories of poetic discourse inform a computing that works "upward and outward" from its object of study?

Practical Matters

In the first instance we request abstracts of up to 500 words, highlighting the key areas of interest and possible direction of your contribution.

Articles should have a maximum length of 6000 words.

All contributions will be peer-reviewed.

Articles may contain black and white illustrations (for which authors should seek the necessary permissions).

The theme of this issue is open to interpretation and we welcome a variety of submissions. In particular, though, we aim to publish one article which considers Richards' *Poetries and Sciences* in context with his career (including his involvement with the Macy Conference of 1951) as a way of revisiting Richards' interactions with the topic and comparing them with those of contemporary poets and literary critics.

For details on format see www.maney.co.uk/journals/notes/isr

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September 2011

Schedule

06/2012	Declare intention to contribute (title and abstract)
12/2012	Secure commitment to submit article
06/2013	Submit first version
09/2013	Reviewers' comments and decisions back to authors
12/2013	Final materials due to the publisher
03/2014	Publication (vol 39.1)

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Works Cited

- Bruner, Jerome. 1986. "Possible Castles". In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. 44-54. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Laughlin, Robert B. 2005. *A Different Universe: Reinventing Physics from the Bottom Down*. New York: Basic Books.
- Richards, I.A. 1970. *Poetries and Sciences: A Reissue of Science and Poetry (1926, 1935) with Commentary*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rosen, Robert. 2000. *Essays on Life Itself*. Complexity in Ecological Systems Series. New York: Columbia University Press.