Jan D. Kucharzewski. Propositions about Life: Reengaging Literature and Science

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The Science and Literature juxtaposition has always been controversial and the academic discussions on the relationship between the two fields have often faced difficulties related with their incompatibility. However, this polarization has mostly been the result of comparing or contrasting literature and science in terms of discursive, ideological and/or hierarchical contexts rather than identifying the possibility of essential connections. In Propositions about Life: Reengaging Literature and Science, Jan D. Kucharzewski asserts one of his major aims as “understanding the passages that connect the human faculty for science to the human faculty for literature” (154).

As a point of departure for this endeavor, the first few chapters reevaluate the scope of both disciplines from a fresh and wider perspective. Initially, Kucharzewski deals with the presumed gap existing between the methodologies of natural sciences and humanities. The study develops through a dialectical examination regarding the historically constructed positions adhered to both disciplines in Great Britain and the United States of America since the early 1700s. According to Kucharzewski, during the Victorian era, the confrontation between science and literature was a topic integrated into educational reform policies and concerns. For instance, the famous “Huxley-Arnold” debate develops around the issue of educational reform in the nineteenth century United Kingdom. As an advocate of empiricism, Thomas Henry Huxley believed that the relation between natural laws and social conduct could not be metaphorical since the access to the material world.
is unmediated. As for Matthew Arnold’s transcendental conception, our knowledge about nature is symbolic and the internal “human nature” could not be understood in purely material terms. Kucharzewski uses this famous debate as a stimulus to some crucial questions such as how to integrate science to literature or whether science could connect with what it is to be human.

The methodological and epistemological dichotomy between literature and science is further investigated by the “Snow-Leavis” Controversy. In his Rede Lecture: “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution” (1959), C. P. Snow directs his criticism sharply to modernist literature for being too much an “individual experience” and disseminating an anti-scientific or anti-social climate. On the other hand, in his Richmond Lecture: “Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow” (1962), F. R. Leavis attempts to assert literature as a genuinely creative realm in which the human condition could be integrated into the vision of a future shaped by advanced technologies. Kucharzewski argues that Snow’s and Leavis’s ideas of culture and education are very different from each other. He criticizes Snow’s call for an intensified interdisciplinary communication for manifesting itself rather as a “paternal scientism” that dismisses the philosophical content of literature for the sake of political assumptions. Thus, the conflicting strategies in the Rede Lecture are presented not merely as the epitome of a specific national and historical context - i.e. the Industrial Revolution and its reception within literary culture - but also as a methodological fallacy of side taking in the literature-science juxtaposition. Similarly, Leavis’s lecture is handled more than as a disapproving response to Snow. For Kucharzewski, while seeming to reject science as a moral discourse and being critical of adhering science as a culture, Leavis can hardly be able to go further than locating his position on the opposing side of a ‘war-of-disciplines’ scale. Nevertheless, the Snow-Leavis Controversy is eventually framed as to heighten certain awareness of the methodological uncertainties and dichotomies within each discipline. By this way, the reader is gradually prepared to the pondering of reciprocal and interdependent models of relationship between science and literature.

Throughout the “Excluded Middles” section Kucharzewski evaluates mostly constructivist and realist approaches which suggest using the branch of natural sciences or literary studies to contribute to the formulation of a stable cultural foundation. While these approaches are pointed out as considerable answers in the reengagement of literature and science, they are also criticized for their general deficiencies. In this sense, the “Excluded Middles” section can be regarded as a quest for the detection of similar patterns in science and literature. It suggests that humanities and natural sciences are “isomorphic” to each other in terms of constructing structurally congruent models of the world by different means. With this approach, Kucharzewski also justifies his employment of “and” in “Literature and Science” of the title, which is often regarded as problematic either because it erases the value laden hierarchy between the two disciplines or because it does not take into account the once vehemently held challenges by constructivist approaches propagating science mostly as a cultural product. In this respect, the chapter develops the isomorphic idea to demonstrate that parallels between science and literature can be established without necessarily conflating the disciplines. Kucharzewski establishes convergences in between Niels Bohr, William James and Gertrude Stein to demonstrate implicit analogies between the realm of quantum physics and modernist aesthetics. Such a model of interaction suggests a possibility in which the
scientific and the literary enterprise could remain independent and autonomous activities.

5 The second half of Propositions about Life consists of three major chapters, all devoted to the literary work of Richard Powers. Hereafter, Kucharzewski extensively deals with Powers’s novels as innovative narrative expressions of how science and literature could actually coexist and inspire new visions such as alternative forms of existence as well as of identity and identification in today’s technologically advanced world. Powers’s fictions The Gold Bug Variations, Galatea 2.2, Gain, Plowing the Dark as well as his vision that “art and modern science can complement each other”(9) seem to provide the argument of this study almost with a concrete ground and a productive inspiration.

6 Including an interview with Powers at the end, the study pays homage to Powers as the book’s major inspiration. Kucharzewski’s affinity to the ways in which the novels of Richard Powers provide “propositions about life” can already be understood by readers who are familiar with the American writer’s work. Throughout these chapters, the book maintains a theoretical discourse of analysis that is analogous to Powers’s “dialogical” expression, according to which the American novelist applies a variety of narrative and fictional strategies in order to investigate “ethical and philosophical questions that science often raises but rarely asks.” However, sometimes the reader cannot distinguish where Kucharzewski synthesizes a variety of ideas originating from Powers himself and where the author advances his own theoretical deliberations about the novels.

7 Kucharzewski arranges the content of his book by carefully scanning a wide array of viewpoints and well-known names that have significantly contributed in this area of study. While there is abundance of research evidence attesting to relation of science and literature, one is surprised to find missing any of reference to Emile Zola and his essay “The Experimental Novel” as this is a one of the well-known examples of attempting to adapt the methods of experimental science to literature. Discussion of Zola’s manifesto of literary naturalism would, in my opinion, shed light to the author’s general argument and, in particular to the passages related with naturalism (pages 70-71 for instance). Conversely, Zola’s adaptation of Claude Bernard’s scientific method could have set an alternative example to those sections which are critical of the tendencies to apply scientific methodology to literature (pages 83-130 for instance).

8 Concluding, Propositions about Life: Reengaging Literature and Science is a wonderfully useful book for anyone who is interested in literature, philosophy, creative writing, science, cognition and consciousness. It is also an inspiring study for those who would like to transcend the traditional dichotomy between literature and/or science.

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