

Unsettling Knowledge: A Poetry/Science Dialogue

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Next

It's not easy not to drown in
the same question twice.

Step lightly
against it, boulder to

shoulder, slide out,
slip down.

What bears
repeating is the way

the handlebars' streamers
went wild in the wind,

rounding the corner
where the hydrant
sprayed its slick
across the sky.

Sans teeth, sans eyes—
What was the question,

and who was it for?
The generic white vase

with its purple lip
pressed against the bookcase?

What contains is contained
in a matter of moments

only to be dispersed
like milkweed vessels

in a manner of vestibules.
Nanoseconds foretell

another black hole
where the newly disappeared
reassemble their luxuries
by the airport van.

Such stock in
securities as we

exchange, begin to
displace us (baryons, mesons,

hyperons, quarks), I meant
to say use, unmentionable

values, dementias,
forms, multi-

mensions to come
beyond particles, waves.

In *Writing and Revising the Disciplines*, a collection of essays on writing and disciplinary in the sciences, social sciences, and the humanities, I asked nine distinguished Cornell colleagues to situate their current disciplinary writing practices in relation to field-specific continuities and shifts over the course of their respective careers. Extending this collaborative investigation to the area of poetry, the discipline (or as I prefer to think of it the "anti-discipline") at the core of my own academic career, the present article features the trans-disciplinary reflections of Roald Hoffmann (a Nobel chemist, poet, and contributor to *Writing and Revising the Disciplines*), and Alice Fulton, (a MacArthur prize-winning poet whose work

has been strongly influenced by chaos and complexity theory), concerning poetry's relation to scientific inquiry.

While the stock of science, both literally and figuratively in the increasingly corporate university as in the culture at large, continues its inexorable rise, the fortunes of poetry have longed seemed continually in question. While poetry was for Ezra Pound the quintessence of literature and thus "news that STAYS news,"¹ it was for Charles Baudelaire a half-century earlier, as he suggests in the prose poem "Le joujou du pauvre" ("The Poor Child's Toy"), a kind of luxury object or toy of privilege?² (Pound 29; Baudelaire 304-305). Where W. C. Williams famously observed (but on what "evidence"?) that although "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / men [presumably women too?] die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there" ("Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"), W. H. Auden declared, no less famously, that poetry "makes nothing happen" (Williams 318; Auden 52). Culturally coded both within and beyond the academy as antithetical to each other, if not mutually exclusive, poetry and science have come to be perceived in our time (though this perception needs historicizing and complicating, to say the least) as occupying extreme positions along a continuum of so-called "subjective" and "objective," "personal" and "impersonal," "soft" and "hard" modes of inquiry. Indeed, when it comes to poetry, even the term "inquiry" itself tends to give way—as in the newly adopted categories of Cornell's recently revised distribution requirements—to the "expressive." To address concretely this perceived oxymoronic relation and explore what investments and issues may be at stake in their own diverse practices, I asked professors Hoffmann and Fulton to reflect on writing, science, poetry, and their respective locations within the academy by focusing on an exemplary poem or two (or excerpts of selected poems) in which the relation between poetry and science is at issue in their own work. In initiating the exchange, I suggested the following questions, intended not as a template or sequence of response, but as a generative frame:

What do you hope to accomplish in writing poetry, both for yourselves and for your readers? With the rise of Creative Writing as a specialized discipline within the academy over the past several decades, how are we to understand poetry's place within the broader curriculum? What is its received or ideally imagined location in relation to other genres, discourses, and disciplines, as also to the culture at large beyond the uni-

versity? What questions do scientific inquiry pose for poetry in the present context? Are these questions appreciably different now than they were at the beginning of your careers? If so, how? How have your fields evolved over time, and how have the cultural roles of science and poetry changed, if at all over the course of your career? As deconstruction has made us all aware, the positioning of two terms in relation to each other tends to imply a hierarchical relation. In thinking what is called "science" (but we might think here of the more inclusive German term, *Wissenschaft*) and what is called "poetry" together, are we necessarily involved in privileging one over the other? Does science have anything yet to learn from poetry, or is poetry in an unavoidably subservient relation to science, in a certain sense "mute," unable to speak back to it? Bearing in mind the cross-disciplinary scientific/poetic practices of a figure like Goethe, to take one conspicuous example, or more recently the preoccupations of a figure such as Martin Heidegger with questions of writing, disciplinary, science, philosophy, language, poetry, instrumentality, and cultural usefulness, how would you respond to Heidegger's question: "What are poets for?" ("Wozu Dichter?"). Has the answer to this question changed in the half-century since he asked it, in the two centuries since Hölderlin provided for Heidegger an exemplary instance? How would you see your own poetic practice, your own diverse practices of writing and/as cognition, as also the ways these practices have been disciplinarily and institutionally inflected by your positions as teachers in particular fields ("Chemistry," "Creative Writing") within the university? What kinds of response to your work do you find most gratifying, or perhaps most disappointing? What does poetry have to say to science and vice-versa? What kinds of conversation and exchange, what kinds of purposes and audiences, do you understand yourselves to be participating in and contributing to in writing poetry informed by questions of science?

As is clear from the differing stances of my two Cornell colleagues in relation to these and related questions, the stakes involved in foregrounding relations among poetry, poetics, and disciplinary are likely to depend to a significant degree on disciplinary location. From my perspective as a comparatist specializing in modern and contemporary poetry, Associate Dean and Director of Writing Programs in Cornell's College of Arts and Sciences, and Director of the Knight Institute for Writing in the Disciplines, as well as a writer of poetry, my

