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THE BRIGHT LIGHT OF SCIENCE AND THE DIM TRUTH OF ART

Some prominent scientists look forward to a time when science will explain everything and the humanities become redundant. This essay examines these claims and ways in which philosophers have responded to them. These responses often fail to acknowledge the pervasiveness of the scientific ambition that is at issue, and do not make use of the strongest counter-arguments, such as those concerning the fundamentally abstract and inaccessible nature of exhaustive scientific explanation. The essay points to a kind of doubling of scepticism in the most ambitious scientific claims, and their affinity with religious and Utopian projections. Instead of espousing an anti-science or relativist viewpoint, the essay claims that a routine dependence upon science is compatible with acknowledgement of the possibility of radical scepticism, and that we have a rational and even scientific need for the natural sciences to be supplemented by philosophy and literature (exemplified here by Keats's 'Ode to Psyche').

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I

Huge claims continue to be made for the reach and competence of the natural sciences – even more so in the last few years as a reaction to Intelligent Design and the perceived resurgence of religious modes of conceptualising the world. Prominent advocates of science in this context include Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Edward O. Wilson, to whom I shall return, but the argument of the Oxford chemist P. W. Atkins, in a 1995 anthology on 'the frontiers of scientific vision', is admirably succinct and bracing. Atkins claims 'that the omnicompetence of science, and in particular the simplicity its reductionist insight reveals, should be accepted as a working hypothesis until, if ever, it is proved inadequate' (1995: 132) – a hypothesis that states that science can in due course account for everything that is, was or will be in the Universe (or that might be proved to be beyond it), including all that seems specifically human and all that might once have been regarded as transcendent:

Science is slowly equipping itself to deal with aesthetic and religious experiences, and will be able to account for the perception of oneself as a distinct but responding entity. It will do so, I do not doubt, by showing that these characteristically human capacities, which we lump together for convenience of discourse as 'human spirit' or 'soul', are no more than psychological states of the brain. (1995: 129)

This brain, in the meantime, is in the unfortunate position of committing errors due to the incompleteness of the scientific project and, in the worst cases, to an indifference to scientific method. Artists, in this respect, can be grouped with fanatics and lunatics: some of the brain's 'failures lead to poetic expression, others to religious fervour, and some to undisguised madness. All of them, though, are an abnegation of the brain's true power of understanding, which is to be found only in scientific explanation' (1995: 130).

Atkins's claims are reminiscent of the less brash, more tactful Edward O. Wilson's concept of 'consilience', a progressive coming together of science and the humanities:

There has never been a better time for collaboration between scientists and philosophers, especially where they meet in the borderlands between biology, the social sciences, and the humanities. We are approaching a new age of synthesis, when the testing of consilience is the greatest of all intellectual challenges. Philosophy, the contemplation of the unknown, is a shrinking dominion. We have the common goal of turning as much philosophy as possible into science. (1999: 10)

For all his appearances of hospitality, and for all his knowledge and sympathetic appreciation of art and culture, it is clear that Wilson's project – humanity's project, as he would have it – is a gradual take-over by science of all other fields. When philosophy has become science, who would want to call themselves a philosopher? When there is no unknown, what is the point of any study that is not a reiteration of facts? Wilson does not see any imminent end to the scientific project – the field of the unknown is still vast – but, if we accept that this is the way that we are heading, then it is hard to see the kinds of expression that the 'shrinking' unknown fosters, and which tend to be prominent in the arts – doubt, ambiguity, hope, aspiration, disappointment, surprise, wonder, anger, partial and exclusive love – as other than the transient products of our newness. One day, when all the big problems have been solved, we will apparently be able to experience 'all the emotions [we] can bear, and all the shared adventure we might wish to enjoy,' by 'deciphering the hereditary orderliness that has borne our species through geological time and stamped it with the residues of deep history. Reason will be advanced to new levels, and emotions played in potentially infinite patterns' (1999: 46). And yet it is hard to see, in these circumstances, what anybody would be able to get really excited or upset about – in the way that might prompt them, say, to produce some literature. If our emotional life as it is now corresponds to the whole of music, then the human angels in Wilson's Utopia are playing wall-to-wall Mozart divertimenti. That in itself, however, does not mean that Wilson is wrong.

So, how do those disciplines that wish to take themselves seriously, but do not see themselves as stop-gaps before the natural sciences engulf their subject-matter and make it rigorous, factual and unambiguous, defend themselves? Usually by means of a variety of Two Cultures argument, where there are some things that science can and should do, and others that require a wholly different approach and are none the worse for that. Here, for example, is the philosopher Mary Midgley, reacting directly to Atkins:

Anyone who is tempted by this [omnicompetent scientific] project should try it out by translating some simple historical statement into the deeper, physical truths that are held to underlie it. What, for instance, about a factual sentence like 'George was allowed home from prison at last on Sunday'? How will the language of physics convey the meaning of 'Sunday'? or 'home' or 'allowed' or 'prison'? or 'at last'? or indeed 'George'? (There are no individuals in physics.) The meaning of all these terms concerns very complex, far-ranging systems of social relation, not the physical details of a particular case.

For a translation, all these social concepts would have to vanish and be represented by terms describing the interactions of groups of particles moved by various forces. The trouble with this new version is not, as Atkins says, that it is 'too cumbersome for everyday use', but that it does not begin to convey the meaning of what is said at all. The sentence as it stands does not refer only to the physical items involved. Indeed, most of the physical details are irrelevant to it. (It does not matter, for instance, where the prison is or by what transport or what route George came home.) What the sentence describes is a symbolic transaction

between an individual and a huge social background of penal justice, power structures, legislation, and human decisions. (1995: 138)

Midgley's most questionable assertions are tucked away in her parentheses. Concerning the location of the prison, for example, surely it might matter a great deal for the way we should take this sentence (and George's), whether the prison was in Dorset, Bangkok, Guantánamo Bay or an 'undisclosed location'? Midgley is in her own way the reducer here, substituting a 'symbolic transaction', according to a broad structuralist model, for the local circumstances, the 'physical details', of one individual. Conversely, who says that there are no individuals in physics? Surely physics can in principle accommodate the possibility of two differently equipped and configured specimens of the same animal species, just as it distinguishes between an atom of hydrogen and one of helium, or between Venus and Mars. We are talking, of course, about prodigiously different levels of complexity, but not a difference of principle. *Nothing* is irrelevant, if we are to fill in all of the causal links that proceed inexorably from the Big Bang to (amongst what looks like – but isn't – an infinity of other outcomes) George, his time in prison, his trip home and, not least, what all of this means, as meanings manifest themselves in the brains of George and all of those who have anything to do with him. *Nothing*. That is the upshot of Atkins's modest hypothesis: that science can be omniscient, that it can explain absolutely everything (on every level and including all individuals), provided that it has absolutely all of the data. The link between each datum and the next will be reduced to a supreme simplicity. But there will be an awful lot of links. Yes, the problem really is that Atkins's reduction is 'too cumbersome for everyday use' – except that this is a preposterous understatement.

Bernard Williams, in one of his last essays, tries to make a pragmatic distinction between the territories of science and the humanities, with the inauspicious political climate for the latter in mind. He claims, for example, that human cultural practices (let alone the behaviour of individuals) are not subsumable by science, because they are not directly determined by natural selection (which clearly makes sense, given the time-scales of evolution). It is a 'platitude', he says,

that it is not, in general, human cultural practices that are explained by natural selection, but rather the universal human characteristics of having cultural practices, and human beings' capacity to do so. It is precisely that fact that variations and developments in cultural practices are *not* determined at an evolutionary level that makes the human characteristic of living under culture such an extraordinary evolutionary success. (2006: 188)

Focusing on Darwinian evolution as though that were the whole of science, Williams implies that there is a large dimension of the human where science does not reach. But if we think again of the principle of scientific omniscience, instead of the current state of scientific semi-competence, then it is not clear that this need permanently be the case. The implication of arguments like those of Atkins and Wilson is that cultural variation arises from a combination of (i) natural selection (and biology in general) and (ii) interaction, at a given point in time, with specific, short-term environments and contexts. Humans are continuous with the rest of nature, and all of nature obeys the same laws. It should in principle be possible to trace the causal steps that led to a particular group of minds, in a particular time and place; it should also in principle be possible to trace the steps that gave that place, at that time, its characteristics; and, having achieved these feats, it should in principle be possible to demonstrate that the owners of those minds, in that place, at that time, had to think and act in just the way that they did, individually and as a 'culture'. The problem, once again, is that these calculations would be inconceivably complex. But Williams does not say this, and fails to make his case that certain things are essentially beyond science. It does not really help

that he elsewhere draws attention to the diachronic, ‘not notably vindicatory’ character of philosophy (2006: 190) – in other words, to the fact that philosophy’s present, unlike science’s, does not invalidate its past – as if the ways in which cultural practices and ideas develop and repeat themselves over time were not also part of the world, and potentially susceptible to analysis and explanation in causal, material terms.

If, indeed, there are things in the world that are *in principle* inexplicable and untraceable by science then it seems to me that we may have to wait for science itself to demonstrate this – if, for example, causality breaks down at quantum level. Otherwise, I am not sure that we have good grounds to doubt the applicability of science, in principle, in any specific areas – if, for example, we continue to be quite confident that dropped crockery will obey gravity, and whisky will make us drunk; unless, in other words, we opt for a radical scepticism.

Once again, however, there is a huge difference between ‘in principle’ and the actual state of affairs or indeed any state of affairs that seems at all feasible. People like Atkins and Wilson appear to think that the complexities – even in relation to human consciousness and culture – can gradually be made manageable by means of rational approximations, margins of error, more powerful computers, and comparable adjustments and improvements. But here they are really underestimating the complexity of the kinds of phenomena that the humanities address, not in principle but in reality; and here it may in fact be no shame to say that philosophy and other humanistic disciplines may indeed be a make-shift and a stop-gap, if the facts of the case, in scientific terms, are simply out of reach. So, philosophy is in that precise sense a human(istic) discipline – one that humans need, because of what we are, which is neither, in ourselves, omniscient nor omniscient. As much can be said for the arts, which join philosophy and overlap with it, in the human space which science cannot fill.

According to Atkins, in another moment of vigorous indictment of the arts, this time as servants of an even more pernicious system of delusion,

[t]he stifling grip of religion on Man’s mind stems partly from its early start, when, as our ancestors dropped from the trees they first sought explanations and solace; it also stems partly from religion’s control (for both benevolent and malevolent purposes) of the behaviour of individuals and societies, and it stems partly from its capture of the literature and the arts, which has given it a powerful imagery. Someone with a fresh mind, one not conditioned by upbringing and environment, would doubtless look at science and the powerful reductionism that it inspires as overwhelmingly the better mode of understanding the world, and would doubtless scorn religion as sentimental wishful thinking. Would not that same uncluttered mind also see the attempts to reconcile science and religion by disparaging the reduction of the complex to the simple as attempts guided by muddle-headed sentiment and intellectually dishonest emotion? (1995: 123)

Art, for Atkins, is the tool of religion; which is to say, of superstition. Others might say that religion is art that takes itself for science. Be that as it may, Atkins’s concept of the ‘fresh mind’ is interesting. Where is such an entity to be found? Nowhere. Atkins’s vision is precisely Utopian here, and it also shows omniscient science as a sort of double of scepticism. Scepticism appears to undermine the world that ‘we’ (or at least ‘I’) experience by casting doubt on a reality that has been supposed to underlie that experience, whereas Atkins’s science is a realm that we can talk about but cannot reach from within our experience (or subjectivity). Our own experience is devalued or jeopardised in both cases. It is fair enough for Atkins to deplore our reluctance to reduce the complex to the simple if, for example, we refuse to give credit to DNA-tests while continuing to take our medicine, but his own fanciful fable shows how far he is from appreciating what

complexity really means – and it need be no weakening of his status as a hard scientist if he should admit this – when it comes to minds.

Atkins's vision might in principle be realisable. An ultra-supercomputer of the future could conceivably tell you, 'this can be explained' or 'this is exactly why this had to be the case'. It might even be able to print out the explanation on enough sheets of A4 to reach the edge of the Universe. But when would you get around to reading it? How, indeed, could all of the conditions and variables that might be believed to determine the exact configuration even of one specific mind, here and now, be absorbed and processed by any other real person, 'scientist' or not? We cannot keep track of our own brains, let alone engulf another's and still have excess capacity to reflect upon what it is that we have swallowed. So, the notion of science's omniscience is not demonstrably false; it is simply located in an abstract space. And that – for reasons that might, in principle, be explained scientifically by the Omniscient (in this sense, Atkins is almost the servant of God) – is not where we are.

One last broadside from Atkins:

Religion is argument by sentiment. Most thinking people would probably agree that the physical laws are best discovered by experiment, not sentiment. However, there will be those who see 'sentiment' as an antenna that responds to the side of nature left in shadow by science's emotionless glare, and sees what science cannot see. Let me stress again that I do not consider that there is any corner of the real universe or the mental universe that is shielded from this glare, and that there is no aspect of understanding where sentiment is a better source of understanding than science. This is particularly so in our understanding of the origin of ourselves and the Universe, including without exception its matter, energy, opinions, and its morals. (1995: 130–1)

So, science is 'particularly' applicable to everything. One of the paradoxes of this kind of writing is that, in order to make their points, scientists like Atkins and Wilson have to step outside the discursive conventions of a scientific paper and deploy coloured, emotive, rhetorical, even artistic language. Atkins's 'glare', transforming both the real and the mental universe into solar systems, is a case in point.

Atkins's metaphor invites a salutary comparison with another writer whose claims are just as large, who in his own way shares Atkins's dissatisfaction with art, but whose glare is not the light of understanding but of the unknowable: Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas, the encounter with the other is not a learning opportunity, but a moment of absolute exposure:

As though placed under a blazing sun [*un soleil de plomb*]¹ that eradicates every shadowy corner in me, every residue of mystery, every mental reservation, every 'as for me...', hardening or relaxing of the plot of things by which escape would be possible, I am a testimony, or a trace, or the glory of the Infinite, breaking the bad silence which harbors Gyges's secrecy. There is extra-verting of the subject's inwardness; the subject becomes visible before becoming a seer! The Infinite is not 'in front of' me; I express it, but precisely by giving a sign of the giving of signs, of the 'for-the-other' in which I am dis-interested: here I am (*me voici*)! The accusative here is remarkable: here I am, under your eyes, at your service, your obedient servant. (1996: 146; 1992: 122–3)

For Atkins, in a curiously pre-Copernican way, Man the scientist becomes the all-seeing eye of the Universe: he is the subject; the universal nominative. For Levinas, an all-seeing God is inversely reconstituted through the dizzying sense of not seeing everything, of being a part of more than we

can understand, of arriving late in a system whose origin is beyond us but to which we are bound, that comes from being revealed to ourselves as the object, in the accusative position, experiencing a claim, suddenly lit up by the demanding light of the other. Picking up Levinas's allusion to Gyges (Plato's *Republic* 359d–360b), we might say that Atkins goes around with his Ring of Invisibility, supposing that he will be able to see everything, even the internal workings of the human, while in fact remaining invisible in his account of the Universe and to himself. For Levinas, the ability to see is preceded by the moment of being seen. For Atkins, the scientist can ultimately function as completely self-transparent, with no dimension that is not part of the wholly scrutable, reducible system of cause and effect, and thus (at least in Levinasian terms) no responsibility.

Levinas's work is worth pursuing further for the rich language it provides for the relationship between the known, the currently unknown, and the unknowable, in ways that are readily applicable to the problems raised in the conflicts between scientists and humanists. Here he discusses different kinds of 'trace', those left by causal interactions of physical objects, and the transcendent and infinitely enigmatic trace that arises from an encounter (if that is not too strong a word) with the Other, and with all that is not reducible (in his way of seeing things) to cause and effect, Western philosophy and science:

That which preserves the specific signifyingness of the trace in each trace of an empirical passage, over and above the sign it can become, is possible only through its situation in the trace of this transcendence. This position in a trace, which we have called *illeity*, does not begin in things, which by themselves do not leave traces but produce effects, that is, remain in the world. When a stone has scratched another stone, the scratch can, to be sure, be taken as a trace, but in fact without the man who held the stone this scratch is but an effect. It is as little a trace as the forest fire is a trace of the lightning. A cause and an effect, even separated by time, belong to the same world. Everything in things is exposed, even what is unknown in them. The traces that mark them are part of this plenitude of presence; their history is without a past. The trace qua trace does not simply lead to the past but is the very passing toward a past more remote than any past and any future which still are set in my time – the past of the Other in which eternity takes form, an absolute past which unites all times. (1996: 63; 1964: 155)

Apparently, what essentially distinguishes the true from the false kind of trace is *l'Autre* in the sense of another consciousness – which cannot be reached, understood, or seen from within. In principle, a strictly materialist account of what a human being consists of should be able to do away with all of this completely, relegating Levinas (with most other philosophy, but especially French), to the dustbin which will then contain history itself, to be picked over at whatever time the course of sub-atomic interactions dictates by those natural scientists whose specialism the development of ideas (and other transient human dysfunctions) has inevitably become. But there are good scientific reasons for saying, as I have tried to, that we are really not up to knowing one another exhaustively, and this makes Levinas's (admittedly culture-specific and quasi-religious) concept of alterity – enticing and confounding us, while it towers above – quite a good intimation of the way things really are, given the creatures that we are, and certainly no less fanciful than Atkins's or Wilson's millennial dreams of a time when all becomes clear: when I know who I am, and you are, and what it's all about.

One obstacle to scientific omnicompetence is thus demonstrable by science. If science follows its etymology and is a kind of knowledge, then it has to be knowable. And that, for actual beings – the only type of medium or carrier that is accessible – seems to be possible only in fragments. But there is also the problem for science that its findings, though wonderfully self-consistent for now,

may be absolutely groundless. Scepticism, in other words, as well as being a kind of double of the abstract ideal of science, is the ultimate, often but never-for-long ‘refuted’ counter and nemesis of science. As Levinas again has it,

To conceive the *otherwise than being* requires, perhaps, as much audacity as skepticism shows, when it does not hesitate to affirm the impossibility of statements while venturing to *realize* this impossibility by the very statement of this impossibility. If, after the innumerable ‘irrefutable’ refutations which logical thought sets against it, skepticism has the gall to return (and it always returns as the legitimate child of philosophy), it is because, in the contradiction which logic sees in it, the ‘at the same time’ of the contradictories is missing; because a secret dichotomy commands this ambiguous or enigmatic way of speaking; and because, in general, signification signifies beyond synchrony, beyond essence. (1996:114; 2006: 20)

Levinas seems to be saying here that classical refutations of scepticism fail because they take too much for granted. The sceptic’s proposition is absorbed into a structure of language and cognition where that proposition is already invalid. The sceptic’s impulse, however, reaches back or out (blindly) to a pre-original time or space (outside Being): it is in this sense diachronic. It finds doubt because it goes beyond the dominant philosophical tradition’s groundless self-possession, its sense of being in Being as it always is and was, an unchanging essence; its Job-like sense that all is self-consistent and fair, and should be explicable;² the sense that the rules currently in play are those that have always been in play, and that there could never have been any others. It is because we find ourselves ungrounded in this way, not in full self-possession, that we are not just ourselves but objects of a claim, born into a state of indefinable obligation and responsibility, and that therefore there comes to be an ethics worthy of the name.

Bernard Williams has a more pragmatic approach to the epistemological grounds of ethics. He questions the idea that ‘an absolute conception [*qua* the hard definitions of hard science] is the real thing’, because ‘we are left with the issue of how to make the best sense of ourselves and our activities, and that issue includes the question, indeed it focuses on the question, of how the humanities can help us in doing so’ (2006: 189). A key word here is *best*. This could be taken scientifically: the best (single) model of humanity is the one that leads to most quantifiable technical progress; more invention, less disease. This would lend itself to a utilitarian moral theory where science and philosophy really are co-dependent and continuous. But the notion of utility here is going to be culturally dependent and humanistic. It is based on the fact that humans want to survive and flourish, or are driven to it by their DNA, and yet the wanting, being something that manifests itself in the real space of human interactions, is going to vary from one time and place to another, even within one individual, even to the extent of different wants, preferences and priorities being impossibly superimposed on one another. In the view that Williams attributes approvingly to the ‘sound and humane’ Isaiah Berlin – and advances throughout his own work – ‘there is a plurality of values which can conflict with one another, and which are not reducible to one another; consequently, ... we cannot conceive of a situation in which it was true both that all value-conflict had been eliminated, and that there had been no loss of value on the way’ (1981: 71).

Williams, as I have argued, seems to underestimate the extent to which science might have the ambition to tell us exactly why we want to survive and flourish in the way that we do – indeed, in all the many ways that we do – and why, therefore, a particular set of utilitarian ethical rules might, in the last analysis, be chosen as giving the greatest satisfaction to the greatest number, for the greatest proportion of the time (as if that would be a static situation). Consequently, he does not feel the need to make any case (such as those that I have suggested might be made on the grounds of complexity or the non-grounds of scepticism) against this kind of absolute and micro-managing

scientific ambition. Nevertheless, with or without these arguments, both Williams and Levinas seem to be sure that there is an area above, beyond, or at least outside, the reach of science, where ethics exists. And in this respect some of the hardest of hard scientists would agree with them. 'If you wish ... to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good,' says Richard Dawkins, 'you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish' (1976: 3). Leaving aside the argument that higher level generosity and altruism might be naturally selected exactly because of the selfishness of the gene (which loves its momentary carrier no more than it loves anybody else), any exclusively scientific viewpoint, as it exists in anybody's head, will, as I have argued, be fragmentary and suspended over the possibility of radical doubt. Something needs to be superimposed, therefore, or inserted as a kind of glue between the fragments, if we want to go on functioning as humans. In the abstract and Utopian perspective this can be a notion of omnipotent divinity or, just as well, a conviction that science is omniscient and that it will develop itself, as more of the same, until a point of completion. In the meantime, as we are, the filler needs to be invented from our own meagre resources, choices have to be made, preferences have to be expressed, and we find ourselves among the arts and humanities.

This is not anti-science. Nor is it 'relativist'. A real, thoroughgoing relativist would have to be prepared to forgo all of the scientific assumptions of cause and effect that we make all of the time. The fact that so few of us are inclined to make that leap proves nothing. But we aren't. At least, I am not – on this occasion – as I demonstrate by saying 'we' (or indeed anything). Given that we are playing along, however, and choose not to dissent from the world as it is popularly maintained to be, it is all remarkably self-consistent in very many ways. And the rules of this game include science, whose basic methods and laws may indeed be applicable throughout. And yet, just as philosophy has for millennia had a lot to do with understanding one's ignorance, even so, science, situating the human as part of a much larger system, necessarily indicates limits to its own knowability. Science as a domain may perhaps have the potential to be all-encompassing. Science as something people do, as a 'competence', is simply not sufficient. Luckily, we have other resources.

II

One can do a lot with literature. To start with, literary texts, just like every other object, phenomenon or event in the Universe, are data (not just potentially, but necessarily) for the natural sciences. Literary texts are products of the species *Homo sapiens*, and can be studied for the information that they yield about its capabilities and how it uses them. In particular, being among the most complicated productions of the species, they seem certain to be able to tell us a lot about how its brain(s) work(s), perhaps even more than can be gleaned from dissection or scanning: this is what the field of cognitive poetics aspires to. Secondly (although, in a way, this is a subset of the above, insofar as all facts are grist to the sciences), literature can be used to do history. It provides us with information, directly or indirectly, more or less reliably, about the facts of the time in which it was written (the circumstances of *Homo sapiens* in that period, in that place), even if that time was this morning, and even if the facts in question do not stretch much further than the specific knowledge and experience of one human specimen, the author. This is the kind of work that most literary scholars do, most of the time. Thirdly (and, in a way, this is a subset of *both* of the above), literary texts can be studied for their specific properties as literature, as texts and as writing: these are the domains of linguistic analysis, prosody and narratology. Everything to be done with literature that is not adequately covered by one of the three foregoing categories, it seems to me, is philosophy; that is to say, it is predicated on that which is not reducible to science, on uncontainable complexity and doubt.

The philosopher Simon Critchley has recently written about the deep implications of the moments of ‘sudden rightness’ (which others might perhaps call defamiliarisation) in the poetry of Wallace Stevens:

Lurking behind this notion of sudden rightness is a deeper observation, I think: namely, that if one accepts that metaphysics as *scientia divina* is impossible, then it seems to me that metaphysical talk can only live on in the dark, in the form of certain remarks which light up and render suddenly perspicuous certain perplexities we might have. In this sense, the dark metaphysical talk of the poet can momentarily focus the bewilderment to which most of us are wedded, and which passes for our inner life. As Henry James remarks, ‘It seems probable that if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us.’ In such circumstances, rightness can only mean the felicity of hitting the right note, of saying something or telling a story that momentarily both harmonizes with our experience and submits that experience to what Wittgenstein would call ‘aspect change’ – a tune beyond us, yet ourselves. (2005: 40)

In moments such as these, it is not so much that a blurred picture becomes sharp; rather that we suddenly see the very blurredness of the picture sharply. In other words, poetry, on Critchley’s account, brings us back to the little that is ours: things as they are, and our inability to go beyond this. I see the table because I don’t see the particles and spaces of which it is composed; I see the table because I can’t manage the metaphysical ‘perplexities’ that complicate, undermine and multiply it. Clear perception is stupidity in this sense. *Percipere est non comprehendere*.

It is not just poetry. Other types of writing can have some of the same qualities. Even philosophy. Even popular, would-be omniscient science. We are all faced with the task of textually tying together our world; and all, therefore, forced to say more than we know. But poetry – especially Romantic poetry – often figures as the *reductio ad absurdum* of the wilfully unscientific, and I shall therefore end with some remarks on one of the most apparently fanciful productions of that traitor to a scientific education, John Keats – his ‘Ode to Psyche’:

O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
 By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
 And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
 Even into thine own soft-conched ear:
 Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
 The winged Psyche with awaken’d eyes?
 I wander’d in a forest thoughtlessly,
 And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
 Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side
 In deepest grass, beneath the whisp’ring roof
 Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
 A brooklet, scarce espied:

’Mid hush’d, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
 Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
 They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
 Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
 Their lips touch’d not, but had not bade adieu,
 As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,

And ready still past kisses to outnumber
 At tender eye-dawn of aureorean love:
 The winged boy I knew;
 But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
 His Psyche true!

O latest born and loveliest vision far
 Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!
 Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,
 Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;
 Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,
 Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
 Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
 Upon the midnight hours;
 No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
 From chain-swung censer teeming;
 No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
 Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
 Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
 When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
 Holy the air, the water, and the fire;
 Yet even in these days so far retir'd
 From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
 Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
 I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.
 So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
 Upon the midnight hours;
 Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
 From swung censer teeming;
 Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
 Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
 In some untrodden region of my mind,
 Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
 Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
 Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
 Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
 And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
 The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;
 And in the midst of this wide quietness
 A rosy sanctuary will I dress
 With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
 With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
 With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
 Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:

And there shall be for thee all soft delight
 That shadowy thought can win,
 A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
 To let the warm Love in!

(Keats, 2001: 278–80)

This poem, like so much of Keats's work, has seemed melodious fluff to many of its readers, from the earliest reviewers onwards. In fact, it offers the tension between a preposterously fanciful vision and a hard perception of the self – to the extent that he knows it.

Keats does not need Atkins or Wilson to tell him that he is a fantasist. From the start of this poem he emphasises the insubstantiality of his supposed addressee. The encounter related in the first stanza takes place in a scene of conventionalised pastoral bliss, and everybody involved in it is asleep. A sleeping or daydreaming poet stumbles upon two mythical individuals, themselves asleep, and then faints, apparently, into an even greater separation from the everyday, the half-rhyme between 'fainting with surprise' and 'half espied' (lines 8 and 12) suggesting a wilful drifting off from mundane existence, as in the temptation to 'leave the world unseen' through a surrender of consciousness and self-control in the 'Ode to a Nightingale' (Keats, 2001: 286). The poet's suggestion that he discloses Psyche's secrets only to her 'own soft-conched ear' (line 4) is, in a way, obviously deceiving – odes are not usually just for the ears of their addressees, and Keats has effectively betrayed Psyche as soon as his poem finds a human reader – but it is hard to imagine anyone being indignant about this, because Keats is demonstrably at play, and lets us know that he knows that he is invoking a being who does not exist. The transparent pretence of apologizing to Psyche for talking about her, if only to herself, conjures up an image of involution that seems to reflect back upon the poet, as though he were trying to convince himself of the substantiality of a scene that he has just concocted: the affected dereliction stands for the more real 'abnegation' – to quote Atkins – 'of the brain's true power' (1995: 130).

The fourth stanza tells us that Psyche has appeared too late for regular devotion. The period of credulity in which she would have been at home has gone. She is an anachronism, and Keats has already told us that he is drawn to her by a variety of nostalgia or 'remembrance dear' (line 2). No matter, the poet, by his 'own eyes inspired' (line 43), as if seeing himself see, or self-hypnotising, in another strange involution of a sense, will make her real: and, indeed, she comes momentarily to life (as we say, knowing that it isn't true) in the superbly evanescent vibration of efs and viewless wings at the poem's very climax of hallucinatory self-persuasion: 'thy lucent fans, / Fluttering among the faint Olympians' (lines 41–2).

This same process of recognizing a lack, and then moving immediately and wilfully to fill it, appears also in the poem's near repetition of six lines from the third stanza in the fourth (unique among Keats's odes). The devotees, the context, for this fantastical being do not exist. No matter: Keats invents them, in a further self-conscious involution. Just as the 'soft-conched' *ear* of Keats's self-sustaining, self-pleasing invention turns in on itself in the second stanza, just as he finds persuasion in his own *eyes* in the fourth, so now the pale *mouth* of the prophet (lines 35 and 49) circles round and meets itself in a kiss that fulfils (albeit with a shadow of ironic distance and the uncanny) the non-kiss of Cupid and Psyche in line 17 (not to mention, proleptically, line 17 of the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn').

After this, we can read the last stanza as sentimental antiquarianism if we wish to; that is certainly an aspect of the poem. But it is also about psyche as mind, about a poet using his 'working brain' (line 60), of which the three senses hitherto invoked have been metonyms, to build something substantial up from next to nothing. The landscape that Keats constructs for his diaphanous idol, with its 'branched thoughts' and 'wreath'd trellis' (lines 52 and 60), perhaps owes something to cerebral physiology (this was a poet, after all, who must have seen real brains). It certainly invokes

the emergence of a structure of consciousness, and with it, therefore, a theory of consciousness as a kind of self-persuasion, where thinking makes it so – even if the first stanza’s talk of dreaming and fainting, and the strange fever of the hot, pale prophet, might make the reader anticipate the moment that eventually comes in the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’: ‘the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf’ (Keats, 2001: 288). Keats penned this poem, after all, within a few days of ‘La belle dame sans merci’.

Thus, this poem, which at first appears whimsical and escapist, develops into something much more serious: a reflection on the mind making its own conditions, or even making itself. This development allows for a conclusion of great pathos, where the poet himself, after a fashion, becomes Psyche, a self-created soul, but also (more rationalistically) a receptive brain, awaiting the arrival of Eros, leaving a (mental) ‘casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in!’ (lines 66–7).

Many of Keats’s poems of this period are characterised by a venturing out that can only ever be temporary, a quest that is for its own sake and can never reach its goal. There is a powerful impulse to fashion something to believe in, undercut (most explicitly in the ‘Nightingale’ and the ‘Grecian Urn’) by scepticism, where we find ourselves teased ‘out of thought’ (Keats, 2001: 289). Keats shows, at times, not just a longing but also a kind of contempt for an anaesthetised state where philosophical problems (the relationship between truth and beauty, for example) are put aside as just too difficult, and we fall back into a blissful ignorance: the ‘happy, happy love’ of a ‘happy, happy dove’ (Keats, 2001: 289, 279). When the poet, ‘too happy in [the Nightingale’s] happiness’ longs to ‘fade away into the forest dim’ (Keats, 2001: 285, 286) it is as though he wishes to give himself over entirely to the organic self-creation of a mental landscape, much as he had sketched it at the end of ‘Psyche’, becoming part of nature, rather in the manner of Georges Bataille’s characterisation of the animal: living in the world ‘like water in water’ (1989: 19). Keats’s writings are, of course, full of images of human creative activity being grounded in physical nature, in animality or even in ‘lower’ organic forms: ‘if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree...’ (Keats, 2001: 380).

Living things that we are, we have to respire. And Keats’s poems are inhalation and exhalation, a mortal process. They breathe the air of all that isn’t known. By which I mean, that they are Keats’s way of filling the space of ‘shadowy thought’ (‘Psyche’, line 65), the space that science does not fill. In this sense, they are exemplary, and so is all of literature, insofar as it offers models for making sense of ourselves, and of the world, beyond the facts at our disposal and in default of the all-encompassing map of explanations that science might indeed be expected to provide, if only we were not part of the world but hovering above it: ‘as if the rose should pluck herself / Or the ripe plum finger its misty bloom’ (Keats, 2001: 281).

Describing his aims as a philosopher writing about poetry, Simon Critchley hastens to deny that he is ‘mining [Wallace] Stevens’s verse for philosophical puzzles and *aperçus* in pleasing poetic garb. ... It is not ... a question of paraphrasing obscure poetic rumination in clear philosophical prose, but rather of trying to point towards an experience of mind, language and things that is best articulated in poetic form’ (2005: 4). Keats had an analytical as well as an effusive brain, and my remarks on him may perhaps have suggested that he was, at times, a deliberate philosopher, as well as a poet. In fact, it can be hard to keep the two kinds of activity apart: that is, providing an intimation of what it is like to live with a philosophical problem (‘an experience of mind, language and things’) and the formulation of that experience *as* a problem. Philosophy takes over where science leaves off, and follows different rules. Insofar as it is not directly falsifiable, not merely a medium of convenience for physical facts, its mode of expression becomes significant (and, indeed, literary ambition and accomplishment are evident on Critchley’s every page). Literature and philosophy, the arts and the humanities, all partake of the same human

task of acting intellectually in the absence of the opportunity for once-and-for-all reduction and decision.

It is not logically inconsistent to attribute great power and value to the arts while believing that science, in principle, might be able to account for everything; while proceeding indeed as though science, such as it is, is thoroughly trustworthy; and while also reserving final judgement as to whether anything remotely like what seems to be going on actually is the case. The bubble in which science currently swims about as if it owns the place might pop at any moment. The arts and humanities do good, rational work in reminding us of this fact. In that sense, they are sometimes more scientific than science itself.

Notes

1. Mistranslated as 'leaden skies' in Levinas, 1996. I have modified the sentence accordingly.
2. For Job, see Levinas, 1996: 93; 1968: 504–5.

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