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Transcending Academic Borders: A Defense of Collaboration Between Art and Science

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Transcending Academic Borders

A Defense of Collaboration Between Art and Science

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Preface

The aim of this project in its entirety was to explore different ideas about what the intersection of art and science might look like. These ideas, including my own, are presented in the following essay. In addition to the essay portion of this project, I've explored creative writing through poetry in attempts to immerse myself in both sides of this debate, as my academic history leans more towards the scientific realm. In the poems I've also tried to include bits of science through metaphorical language. The four works I have chosen to include follow the essay. Enjoy!

Art and science are often placed at polar ends of academia: one driven by emotion and the other by empirical facts. As human knowledge has progressed, individuals are specializing and becoming enveloped by one end or the other. This is quickly resulting in academic fragmentation, in which scholars (even those in similar fields) are unable to communicate their narrowly-scoped work. As the rift between these “two cultures” (a term coined by C.P. Snow) continues to grow, many have brought to light evidence of their relationship and arguments for their intersection. Is there something to gain from the intersection of these two cultures? Is their intersection even possible? I explore this discussion by analyzing the debate between naturalist E. O. Wilson, who argues for consilience of the two cultures, and novelist and poet Wendell Berry, who doesn’t outright disapprove of the possibility of intersection between the arts and the sciences, just the idea of consilience as put forth by Wilson. The way I see it, the separation of art and science has been artificially created. That said, I argue that collaboration between art and science is not only necessary for the pursuit of human knowledge, but possible given the common foundations of the two cultures, which I will demonstrate through shared themes of science and poetry.

Thoughts on Consilience

Wilson wrote *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*, as a defense of the intersection of the two cultures because as he asserts, “Only fluency across the boundaries [between natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities] will provide a clear view of the world as it really is, not as seen through the lens of ideologies and religious dogmas or commanded by myopic response to immediate need.” (Wilson, 13). Further, “The ongoing fragmentation of knowledge and resulting chaos in philosophy are not reflections of the real world but artifacts of scholarship.” (Wilson, 8). Wilson explains that the arts and sciences are not as different as many

would believe saying, “Scientific fact and art can never be translated one into the other. Such a response is indeed the conventional wisdom. But I believe it is wrong. The crucial link exists: The common property of science and art is the transmission of information, and in one sense the respective modes of transmission in science and art can be made logically equivalent.” (Wilson, 117). Wilson summarizes his stance:

Neither science nor the arts can be complete without combining their separate strengths. Science needs the intuition and metaphorical power of the arts, and the arts need the fresh blood of science. . . . The key to the exchange between them is . . . reinvigoration of interpretation with the knowledge of science and its proprietary sense of the future. Interpretation is the logical channel of consilient explanation between science and the arts. (Wilson, 211)

Here, Wilson proposes that art and science can be united through consilient explanation. Wilson chose the word “consilience” because the rarity of its use preserves its meaning. William Whewell’s original definition of consilience is a literal “‘jumping together’ of knowledge” (Wilson, 8). While I understand the attempt to choose a word with preserved meaning, I think Wilson’s use of the word is very ambiguous. Consilience, in the context Whewell used the word, was more definitive in its meaning than that of Wilson’s use; Whewell was referring to the importance of agreement between academic disciplines when working for a common goal. For instance, if an archaeologist dates a fossil based on strata, dating methods used by a chemist should also come to the same conclusion. Wilson’s use of consilience, however, is never explicitly defined. From what I can understand, Wilson uses the term to represent a methodological approach to problem solving. He states, “To dissect a phenomenon into its elements . . . is consilience by reduction. To reconstitute it, and especially to predict with

knowledge gained by reduction how nature assembled it in the first place, is consilience by synthesis.” (Wilson, 68). The former is to be seen as the use of scientific methodology and the latter both artistic and scientific.

If we apply Wilson’s two-step procedure to a molecular biology problem, for instance, to determine the structure of a protein you would begin by reducing that protein into an amino acid sequence. In the synthesis step, then, you reconstruct that amino acid sequence to see if the result is your protein of interest. When applying this procedure, we see that the scientific methodology must come first, and the artistic methodology is used to validate the scientific results. This immediately sets up a superiority complex surrounding science, but more on that later. According to Wilson, consilient explanation can be applied to all fields; he boldly asserts, “There is abundant evidence to support and none absolutely to refute the proposition that consilient explanations are congenial to the entirety of the great branches of learning.” (Wilson, 266).

Wilson puts forth big, ambitious ideas and they have gained a lot of attention. One critic from the Boston Review commented:

[T]he payoff from all this is potentially huge. Our fragmented intellectual landscape will meld into a single beautiful body of knowledge. More important, consilience might provide the sort of big-picture wisdom that's needed to save both liberal education and the planet. And, last, a consilient science might even bring absolute objective truth within human reach ... The great intellectual challenge facing us is therefore clear: building links between artificially disjointed disciplines. (Orr)

While Orr sees the potential of consilience and agrees that Wilson’s statement about academic fragmentation as a manmade construct is a wonderful piece of evidence to support collaboration

between art and science, he ultimately finds Wilson's proposals to be vague and inadequate. This opinion is shared by novelist and poet Wendell Berry, who wrote the essay *Life is a Miracle* in response to what he claims is the misguided nature of Wilson's *Consilience*. Berry too sees the problem with fragmentation amongst academic disciplines stating:

It is clearly bad for the sciences and the arts to be divided into 'two cultures.' It is bad for scientists to be working without a sense of obligation to cultural traditions. It is bad for artists and scholars in the humanities to be working without a sense of obligation to the world beyond the artifacts of cultures ... It is even worse that we are actually confronting, not just 'two cultures,' but a whole ragbag of disciplines and professions, each with its own jargon more or less unintelligible to the others, and all saying of the rest of the world, "That is not my field." (Berry, 93)

Berry doesn't reject the idea of intersection between arts and science, further stating "it probably is necessary that the arts and the sciences should cease to be 'two cultures' and become fully communicating, if not always fully cooperating, parts of one culture... I have, therefore, not the slightest inclination to disagree with Mr. Wilson's wish for a 'linkage of the arts and humanities.'" (Berry, 95). He does, however, disagree with the idea of consilience as it is outlined by Wilson. Berry summarizes his stance:

With his goal of 'consilience,' though I sympathize, I do not agree. ... I do not think it is possible because, as he defines it, it would impose the scientific methodology of reductionism upon cultural properties, such as religion and the arts, that are inherently alien to it, and that are often expressly resistant to reduction of any kind. (Berry, 95)

Berry adamantly disputes the application of reductionism to the arts that is implied by Wilson's consilient explanation. He states, "[Reductionism] is appropriately used as a way (one way) of understanding what is empirically known or empirically knowable. When it becomes merely an intellectual 'position' confronting what is not empirically known or knowable, then it becomes very quickly absurd, and also grossly desensitizing and false." (Berry, 38). Even in the light of science, reductionism has its limitations. Berry explains, "[R]eductionism also has one inherent limitation that is paramount, and that is abstraction: its tendency to allow the particular to be absorbed or obscured by the general." (Berry, 39). Returning to the protein structure example from earlier, even the consilient explanation used to understand the protein's structure is flawed in its lack of context. Within a system, proteins can differ in form and function. Different microenvironments of charge distribution are created depending on the surrounding molecules, which can drastically alter the interactions between the protein and the system. Therefore, a process that involves studying the protein when removed from its context is problematic. In light of the limitations of reductionism as the first step of consilient explanation, Berry asks, "Can science and the arts be 'linked' by 'a common groundwork of explanation'?" The answer depends upon the extent to which the arts are reducible to explanation." (Berry, 212).

Part of this idea that reductionism can and should be applied to the arts stems from Wilson's belief that an understanding of neural circuitry and how it constitutes consciousness is the key to finding objective truth in all academic disciplines and "a clear view of the world as it really is" (Wilson, 13). This implies that Wilson believes human behavior, including the creation and cultural importance of art, is entirely biologically derived. Throughout the book, Wilson oversimplifies the big questions being asked in different academic fields using the consilient explanation to solve them in a mere sentence or two: What is consciousness? [T]he

massive coupled aggregates of such participating circuits” (Wilson, 110). What is the mind? “The mind is a self-organizing republic of scenarios that individually germinate, grow, evolve, disappear, and occasionally linger to spawn additional thought and physical activity.” (Wilson, 110). What is emotion? “It is the modification of neural activity and animates and focuses mental activity.” (Wilson, 112). These dry views of consciousness lead to Wilson’s application of reductionism to the arts under the assumption that art can be objective. Wilson posits, “Art is the means by which people of similar cognition reach out to others in order to transmit feeling. But how can we know for sure that art communicates this way with accuracy, that people really, truly feel the same in the presence of art?” (Wilson, 117). He goes on to explain the possibility of examining patterns of the sensory and brain systems when feelings are evoked by art in search of “commonly shared feelings.” That is to say, two people who share similar experiences after reading a poem must have similar neural connections. There was a study done in 2011 which showed that people had an increase in blood flow to the pleasure centers of their brain comparable to that of seeing a loved one when shown a painting they like (Mendick). Still, Wilson’s idea of understanding neural connections to ensure a work of art is communicating with accuracy seems absurd to me. I’m not saying there isn’t value in comparing two different people’s perspectives, but when even one person’s perspective can change from their first to their second time experiencing the work, why would we assume there is an accurate/correct interpretation?

Berry uses the “Notice” at the beginning of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* to demonstrate this point: “Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.” Berry elaborates, “The motive, the moral, and the plot were not to be extracted

and studied piecemeal like the organs of a laboratory frog... The book is valuable because it is a story told, not a story explained.” (Berry, 116). That is to say, reducing the value of the story to a single set of lessons learned doesn’t do it justice. Each reader takes something different from the story; it’s intended to be a subjective experience.

I don’t think a singular, clear view of the world exists, and I fervently support a holistic view; one that incorporates the different branches of knowledge without exclusion. Rather than trying to construct a body of knowledge that exists independently from certain dogmas or ideologies and narrows the view of what is acceptable, I propose it would be more beneficial to expand that view, encapsulating a multitude of perspectives. It makes more sense to incorporate multiple viewpoints and ways of thought, utilizing each field’s differences as strengths while working toward common goals of contributing to the same body of knowledge.

Though Wilson tries to present consilience as a means to unify thought processes of science and art, it is heavily skewed toward the reductionist portion. Berry also points out that synthesis, as it is used by Wilson, is “invariably and inevitably less than the thing explained” (Berry, 40). He goes on, “The synthesizing and integrating scientist is only ordering and making sense of as much as he knows. [Wilson] is not making whole that which he has taken apart, and he should not claim credit for putting together what was already together.” (Berry, 40).

Ultimately, Berry concludes that, “Like a naïve politician, Mr. Wilson thinks he has found a way to reconcile two sides without realizing that his way is one of the sides.” (Berry, 99). I agree with Berry that Wilson’s idea of unifying disciplines with the same thought process is highly flawed, and to continue Berry’s politician metaphor, Wilson disguises his ruse with beautiful yet powerful language about unity of the two cultures: “There is only one way to unite the great branches of learning and end the culture wars. It is to view the boundary between the

scientific and literary cultures not as a territorial line but as a broad and mostly unexplored terrain awaiting cooperative entry from both sides.” (Wilson, 126). You can practically hear the overzealous crowd applauding his ingenuity and chanting his name. All of this being said, I feel Berry is rather pessimistic about the potential for collaboration between these cultures, so I applaud Wilson’s attempts to provide some form of remedy to the situation even if I don’t completely agree with his remedy.

Similar to the way Wilson impinges scientific protocol onto the arts, Western science as a whole has been encroaching on other disciplines in less than favorable ways, furthering the disconnect between art and science. As Berry explains:

In the universities, the scientists generally proceed from promotion to promotion from grant to grant, leaving few recorded moments of conscience or professional self-doubt; and the professors of the humanities seem for the most part merely to be abashed by the sciences, deferring to their certainties, adopting their values, admiring their wealth, and longing even to imitate their methodology and their jargon (Berry, 20-21).

Here Berry proposes that there is a shared belief that the empirical data provided by science is somehow superior to data from other fields. Academics in the non-scientific disciplines are being forced to write their proposals as if they have a concrete hypothesis, when such a thing doesn’t exist for many of them. I sympathize with the people funding research in that it is reassuring to have a sense of confidence in what they are putting their money into, but they need to recognize that not all fields can operate in this way, and that doesn’t diminish their importance. Additionally, this notion of the scientific fields being superior is working its way down to early education as schools are cutting art and band classes due to low funding and with the interest of improving standardized test scores. If we’re already starting streamlined

education at such a young age, this problem of fragmented knowledge will only get worse and worse with time ultimately hindering the pursuit of human knowledge. Therefore, I think it is necessary to bring attention to the shared qualities of the two cultures and how their intersection is beneficial to the individual as well as mankind as a whole.

Collaboration Instead of Unification

The continuation of this controversy, the way I see it, stems heavily from blurred definitions of what is science, what is art, and what would their intersection look like. The dichotomy exists because the two disciplines are believed to assume incompatible foundations of thought. Physicist Paul Dirac commented on the incompatibility of science and poetry saying, “In science, you want to say something nobody knew before in words everyone can understand. In poetry, you are bound to say something everyone knows already in words that no one can understand.” Many (including Berry, I would argue) see science as purely reductionism, that a complex question is answered by breaking down the phenomena to a fundamental level. One of the first lessons a student learns in any science class is the scientific method. This method starts simply with asking a question, then answering that question systematically. Much of what we consider science (physics, chemistry, biology) tends to do this via reductionism, but reductionism is not necessarily implicated in the process. I would argue that science has more to do with discovery and answering questions, than by necessarily reducing phenomena into something comparable to the smallest parts of a machine. In fact, with the overuse of reductionism comes ignorance of context, as previously mentioned in my protein structure example. Berry presented an interesting look at the historical significance of science saying, “‘Pure science’ did not permit the scientist to ask so crude and pragmatic a question as *why* this

or that truth was being pursued; it was just assumed, not only that to know the truth was good, but that, once the truth was discovered, it would somehow be used for good.” (Berry, 16).

The arts are often defined by personal expression, a creation that evokes an emotional response. Berry, again, calls out Wilson on this type of crude definition, saying:

[Wilson] is much mistaken, to begin with, in his wish to limit the arts to ‘expression of the human condition by mood and feeling’ and to ‘aesthetic and emotional response.’

The arts, of course, ‘express’ by their native means: words, colors, shapes, sounds, etc.

They also include knowledge. They can instruct. Literatures, at least, can convey facts, adduce evidence, and make arguments.” (Berry, 108)

I’m glad Berry points out that not all art is absent of empirical data. “The arts” really envelopes a slew of different fields: literature, painting, theatre, music, and so on. Art that doesn’t necessarily convey facts can still be seen as cultural experimentation. An artist creates some work (a poem, a sculpture, a song) without knowing how their audience will respond. You could almost envision an artist as a researcher testing what types of thoughts their work will spur in others. Art seems to embody more of what we are as subjective creatures, which is why it is not easy to define it concisely; we all have our own subjective interpretation of what art is. I think the fact that these “two cultures” are so difficult to define is indicative of the absurdity of their division.

English moral philosopher Mary Midgley explores the cause of this division in her book *Science and Poetry*. She believes that science has created a world of meaningless objects. The problem with this worldview, she claims, is that it “asks us to believe in a world of objects without subjects, and – since we ourselves are subjects, being asked to do the believing – that proposal makes no sense.” (Midgley, 12). Many great minds have acknowledged the falsehoods

many have implicated on how scientists and artists think. Jacob Bronowski wrote, “It is wrong to think of science as a mechanical record of facts, and it is wrong to think of the arts as remote and private fancies. What makes each human, what makes them universal is the stamp of the creative mind.” (Bronowski, 35). Einstein once said that no scientist thinks in equations (Infeld, 312). It is an all too common thought that science is strictly critical analyses, with no element of spontaneity or creativity. In the same way, many believe that “good art” is produced by a serendipitous moment of inspiration. Often times, however, these roles reverse. Many don’t consider that some of the most impactful scientific discoveries were accidents. For instance, the discovery of penicillin was due to Fleming neglecting to put his plates away before leaving on a vacation. He returned to his lab, and noticed that the mold that sprouted on his plates inhibited bacterial growth. On the other side of things, many artists routinely practice their work. Think of it this way; a basketball player practices her free throws everyday. In a game, her perfect shot can be attributed to the hours she put into rehearsing a perfect shot. Art is no different. If a painter practices painting everyday, he is practicing to achieve a perfect painting. With these many different ways of thought it fits, then, that they are all important and necessary to understand the complicated world in which we live. As Midgley states, “The one world contains, without anomaly, all these kinds of entity – electrons and elections, apples and colours, toothaches and money and dreams, because it can legitimately be analysed in all these different ways. The various explanations that we need therefore involve, quite democratically, all the various kinds of thought that are needed to deal with them.” (Midgley, 142).

Commonalities of the Two Cultures

In the previous paragraphs, I’ve illustrated some of the ways in which common views of science and art are not as clear-cut as one would believe. Humans like to label and categorize

things because it helps us understand them; this is a problem, however, because it creates territorial debates about issues that fall somewhere along the spectrum that exists between the categories. This is why I so appreciate Wilson's acknowledgement of the two cultures being artificially separated. I think this dichotomy breaks down when we recognize the similar foundations and similar goals that the arts and sciences share. With this in mind, I will explore this notion with two shared qualities of art and science: metaphor and the pursuit of truth. I've chosen the former as an example of common foundation and the latter as an intersecting goal of art and science.

In everything we experience we use metaphor to understand it. It's not always intentional, but we compare and contrast the things around us. Metaphorical language is particularly common in science and poetry. In science, especially when working with the things we cannot see, we use metaphorical language to explain their role or appearance. For instance, when an antibody binds to the surface component of a pathogen we say that it *recruits* macrophages to phagocytize the *invader*. The word "recruit" has this particular meaning of enlisting help, and the word "invader" has a negative connotation as someone who is uninvited and may even cause bodily harm. A different example of the importance of metaphor in science would be Dr. Kary Mullis's discovery of the DNA replication technique PCR. With PCR, scientists are able to artificially amplify the amount of DNA they have by subjecting the sample to cycles of heating and cooling. The idea came to Mullis as he was driving along a winding road, and he claimed to have almost seen DNA on the road winding and unwinding.

Metaphorical language is also a useful and essential tool for poets to express things in different lights. Take this excerpt from Pattiann Roger's "Design of Gongs":

The turning wind makes of every quaking

*poplar leaf a gong. What a constant
confetti of green percussion that ensemble
of summer aspen creates on the bluff.
Coyote-calls and barkings interstice,
wildly over-ride, merge and shake again
with their own gongs this whining
and weaving design of gongs.*

(Rogers, 96-97)

Here we see analogies between nature and percussion, a view of nature as an ensemble. It helps you feel the sounds of the gongs when using language like “whining and weaving”. I personally like the imagery that comes with the use of the word “confetti” to describe the leaves of the aspen. Metaphor is just one example of the shared foundations of science and art.

Moving now to the pursuit of truth (by this I mean what is culturally accepted and not necessarily empirical fact). In a debate about science and poetry, Midgley said, “Both poetry and science aim at truth in the sense in which on the motorway something says ‘to the North’.” She explained, “You don’t expect to get there, but you are going that way.” (The Institute of Art and Ideas). The poetic pursuit of truth exists just as much as the scientific (not to imply that they are actually separate truths). Poetry presents truths of the human condition. To demonstrate truth in poetry I’ll use an example from Heid Erdrich’s poem “Body Works”:

But never leave me, body.

I will not make you art.

Even now she pumps, spasms,

Pulps my dinner within her.

She works. Her blue fluids

Meaningless and messy

Illustrate nothing of her fine

compunction, her systole

and distally. She does it all

free and out of love for me.

Or so it seems.

...

Bodies work.

We're proof enough.

Or we should be.

(Heid Erdrich, 126-127)

The truth that I see in this poem is illustrating the problem of reducing our bodies to machines; to use Midgley's words, making an object out of something and removing the subject. The fact that the truth of poetry isn't necessarily empirical doesn't diminish the importance. Scientific truths (though some may deny this) are also held within a cultural understanding; if they weren't, we wouldn't see them shifting over time. Science is not independent of subjectivity. For instance, later in the Institute of Arts and Ideas debate, Ruth Padel (a BBC broadcaster on poetry) tells of Darwin's favorite book – Milton's *Paradise Lost* – which he brought with him on his famous journey on the Beagle. This book is thought to have influenced Darwin's development of the

theory natural selection and the *Origin of Species*. Ultimately, we cannot pretend to live independent of our subjectivity, and therefore, science and art become more connected when we admit that they are aiming at the same, culturally accepted truth.

I'd like to close with a quote from Midgley:

[O]ur situation is complex. But that complexity need not lead us into academic warfare about who owns the problem of consciousness. Such warfare is futile because this problem – or set of problems – is like the air, it encloses and concerns us all. Like many other topics it is complex enough to need intellectual co-operation between different kinds of thought ... They need to be co-operatively handled because they present problems calling for every sort of explanation.” (Midgley, 142-143)

The addition of new knowledge, the pursuit of truth, and the answers to questions that have baffled mankind from the beginning are the aim of both art and science. With their goals being shared, it only makes sense to work cooperatively rather than to continue down divergent paths. There's no simple solution to bridging the disconnect, or for that matter, one right way to do so, but with a greater understanding of their shared culture the intersection becomes much more within reach.

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Poetic Works

Reduce and Reduce

The endless curiosity is
What lies within?
In people, in animals, in earth
The heart beats, blood flows
What more?
Reduce and reduce

Cells carry oxygen
How perfect the structure of hemoglobin.
We're a walking conglomeration
Of molecules, atoms interacting
What more?
Reduce and reduce

I have internal thoughts.
Is it just me?
Are you a figment?
Neurons firing, memories stored
What more?
No lab rat will ever tell

Waves

A wave of ions surges through neurons
Tendons pull, and muscles flex and contract,
A finger puts pressure
On the right string, on the right fret
To play a note so perfect with the others.

The chord rings, a woman sings a song,
So tender the waves,
Displace the air
Creating vibrations in the ears
Of her babe.

On the drum a
Beat, beat, beat
Like waves on the sand
Rhythmically ringing in his ears.
The cries of the child begin to subside

The mesmerizing music plays
And to the lullaby
Soon his eyelids will dance
Along with delta waves
And dreams of playtime and laughter

His eyelids grow heavy,
He gently cries out in resistance,
But her voice is too soothing.
With one last reach
He waves goodnight

Inert Thoughts

I don't know why
The well is dry and

From the clock
A tick and tock with no

Element of surprise.
A periodic reprise of

Senseless noises
Senselessly reminding

Me of all the things I
Forgot to see when I

Floated away with
Helium dreams of

Leaving a life of
Chitter-chatter and

Pitter-pattering keys, but
Sometimes it seems the only

Relief is the buzz that
Comes from neon lights.

I know the solution
Isn't inside that place, but

what do you do when
the ideas are gone and

You've lost the train of thought.
Again. On the tracks it idles.

Remember even idols
like Superman face the bitter-taste

That kryptonite makes.
The problem is we all

Want change but still
We fear the strange and

All the xenophobia is just
Too much and even if I run

Ticks and tocks echo in
A toxic radon stopwatch

The poisonous gas of deadlines
Fills your lungs, depressing thoughts,

But inert these thoughts won't always be
A noble and relentless dream.

Antibody Envy

One more morn, my feet hit the floor.
Another unpromised day, still here,
hopeful to find what I've been meaning to look for.

48 years of work in store.
Everyday I wake in fear.
One more morn, my feet hit the floor.

Like an antibody I aimlessly explore
the places some far and some near,
hopeful to find what I've been meaning to look for.

I'll do it tomorrow, from my mouth the words pour.
It's an ephemeral life my dear.
One more morn, my feet hit the floor.

Again I'll float and search galore.
Somehow I'll know to adhere,
hopeful to find what I've been meaning to look for.

That one antibody may be here no more,
but the memory does not disappear.
One more morn, my feet hit the floor,
hopeful to find what I've been meaning to look for.