Verse and universe

Giovanni Frazzetto

Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science

by Robert Crawford (ed)

Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK

234 pp, \$35/£20

ISBN 9780199258123

At first sight, you might think that *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science* is yet another conventional book on the interaction between science and the humanities. You might expect to read about

dichotomies, the 'two cultures' and the necessity to merge them—which might sound rhetorical and unsurprising to some, and challenging and futile to others. This is, in part, true. Readers will encounter the 'two cultures', and will find themselves in the discursive chasm between logic and reason on one side, and imagination and dreams on the other. However, *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science* defies convention, and has the potential to overcome initial prejudices and transcend old clichés.

The contents of the book represent an authentic and original experiment performed by scientists and poets who are involved in an ongoing project, funded by the SciArts programme of the Wellcome Trust and by the Arts Council of England. To participate in the endeavour, scientists and poets were required to discuss their respective work in person. Very often, the scientist would bring to the table a concept or an

object to which the poet then reacted with an *ad hoc* poem, although it often addressed the subject only tangentially—and sometimes all the better for it. After reading these poems, the scientists usually responded with short pieces of prose, which functioned as introductions to the poems themselves. As a result, *Contemporary Poetry and Contemporary Science* is primarily an anthology of unreleased poems inspired by branches of science ranging from immunology to neuroscience, palaeontology to ecology, and astrophysics to psychiatry. The original contributions, which constitute the core of the book, are sandwiched between deliberations from literary critics—the most demanding sections for non-experts in poetry criticism. These 19 chapters are prefaced by an introduction from the editor, Robert Crawford, who does a delightful job of opening the theme, and closed by an afterword from Dame Gillian Beer, a leading figure on the relationship between literature and science.

The originality of the book is found precisely in the special and balanced mix of commissioned verse and prose, which shows through its form—and through practice as well as reflection—that science and poetry can collaborate with productive results. Although none of the poems are simple versifications of scientific data—readers will not learn the nitty-gritty of quark physics or the action of neurotransmitters—not all contributions will reverberate through the universe like the immortal chant of a scientific theory. However, some elegantly capture the essence of what was behind their creation and would feature well as opening epigraphs in science textbooks, dissolving the difficult and detailed contents that follow.

No less revealing and intriguing are the considerations made in the book on the commonalities and divergences between the practices of science and poetry. One chapter will try to convince the reader that scientific thinking and poetic dreaming

have important differences or are even completely at loggerheads, while another will regard "science and poetry as aligned methods of discovery".

Perhaps one of the most appealing and reasonable insights on this issue is the adequate attribution to poets of the privileged capacity to "conjure moods in their work that are amongst the most subtle, yet profound expressions of human emotions that exist" and that science is unable to grasp. In an attempt to know ourselves and the world, "poetry restores to our investigations the intimacy they lack, when we think in terms of subject, object; of self and other." Of similar interest is the contrasted position of science and poetry with respect to the justification of an event. Science is besotted with prediction, whereas a sense of endless possibility empowers the imagination of poets. In science, the chance of an event happening again is credible on the grounds that it happened before under the same circumstances. Poetry does not impose limits on the circumstances of an occasion, but describes it each time in a new, fresh and surprising way. "...A successful poem brings about an animal comprehension rather than its theoretical explanation" and perhaps we should remain open to this type of perception.

There is a theory that for every event in the universe, an equal and opposite event also takes place. For every tree chopped down, another is planted. For every door that closes, a gate opens. Maybe at the very instant a scientist captures the world looking outward, finding reasons and excluding flaws, a poet is doing the opposite, making the vision private, inclusive and continuous.

Giovanni Frazzetto is a Branco Weiss Fellow at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory in Monterotondo, Italy, and at the BIOS Centre of the London School of Economics, UK.

E-mail: g.frazzetto@lse.ac.uk

doi:10.1038/sj.embor.7400925