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# Notes on the Role of the Arts in a Technocratic Culture

An Argument for a Poetry and Literature of Political Integrity

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*Abstract: This is an inquiry into the role of the arts, specifically poetry, in Western culture. I contend that contrary to our apparent tacit understanding of Western arts as a political counter-force to technocracy, they share with the sciences a fundamental philosophical value: empiricism—which at the very least constrains its role as gadfly and at worst condemns the arts to technocratic abettors. But I argue that a study of the historical roots of empiricism, revealing how much it owes to radical skepticism, could help show artists and writers, as well as scientists, how to retain their integrity as speculators as opposed to technocrats, leaving open the option of true political dissent. I explore what further qualities might characterize that truly counter-technocratic art, but I argue that, given our current intellectual climate of rationalism, that option may be an aporia, an irresolvable paradox.*

Keywords: -

## What is Western Culture's Attitude toward Science and Technology as Compared to the Arts and Literature, and how does a Study of Empiricism help us determine the Relationship between these Two Cultural Constituencies?

**O**NE MIGHT THINK that a culture with deep religious sentiments but nonetheless committed to a separation of church and state, at least outside its rhetoric, would value a secular constituency that is potentially spiritual, the arts, and that that culture would take advantage of its opportunity to support that spiritualism. But the budget in 2003 for the National Endowment for the Arts was a mere 121 million. The numerical discrepancy between what the U.S. government spends on technology related constituencies and what it spends on the arts is unfathomable, and this is a comparison that is not taking into account any of the military budget, which is between 18 and 49% of the entire government budget, depending on how you categorize certain military-related allocations.<sup>1</sup> Our national budget reveals a “bottom-line” value that many of us without any evidence at all would assume is true: that our culture is fundamentally and profoundly technocratic.

In spite of this faith in technology and technocracy, the majority of our culture appears to appreciate artists, when they think of us at all, perhaps precisely because they believe we resist technocracy. Art appears to do so aesthetically of

course, but most importantly politically. Although we artists will find little financial support from our government, we seem to represent in the public's mind a kind of gatekeeper of the soul and as such a stronghold against a runaway force that many suspect is destroying our humanity. But is it possible that artists share with technocrats an underlying philosophy that runs deeper than the scientific method that distinguishes them? Are the arts any more immune from technocracy than any other constituency in our culture? I would argue that what artists and scientists share that ultimately makes them cohorts is the epistemology of empiricism.

## What is the Relationship between Rationalism, Technology, Technocracy, and Empiricism?

We can address this question by defining our terms. **Rationalism:** A view that an appeal to reason and experience rather than to the non-rational (as emotion, intuition, faith, revelation, or authority) is to be employed as the fundamental criterion in the solution of problems and the attainment of truth. Loosely, rationalism may signify confidence in the intelligible, orderly character of the world and in the mind's ability to discern such order.

**Technocracy:** A society only loosely controlled by social custom and moral or religious tradition and driven by the impulse to invent. Neil Postman dates the birth of Western technocracy at 1776, the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. An “unseen hand” (God? Human nature?) is thought,

<sup>1</sup> Some independent organizations, for instance, include in the military slice of the pie allocations the White House puts in Health and Human Services or Social Security.



according to Smith, to eliminate the incompetent and reward those who produce cheaply and well the goods that people want, and the primary definition of mankind in a technocracy is as producers and consumers (Postman, 40).

**Technopoly** (a term closely related and perhaps synonymous with Jacques Ellul's term *Technique*): A rationalistic ideology in which the primary, if not the only, goal of human labor and thought is efficiency; that technical calculation is in all respects superior to human judgment; that in fact human judgment cannot be trusted, because it is plagued by laxity, ambiguity, and unnecessary complexity; that subjectivity is an obstacle to clear thinking; that what cannot be measured either does not exist or is of no value; that knowledge is defined almost exclusively as cumulative and quantitative; and that the affairs of citizens are best guided and conducted by experts (51). Although technopoly is a state of culture, Jacques Ellul analyzes it primarily as a state of mind. By *technique*, Ellul means far more than machine technology. He's referring to any complex of standardized means for attaining a predetermined result. Thus, it converts spontaneous and unreflective behavior into behavior that is deliberate and rationalized (Merton, *iv*).

Rationalism's manifestations are much more pervasive than mere technology. Technocratic thinking (Ellul's *technique*) manifests most conspicuously in the faith in specialties or experts, and this faith has been supported by a long-standing habit of expecting and receiving impressive technological and scientific results from specialists, which results reaffirm our faith in specialists and thus, in turn, in technocratic thinking. The latter faith—technocratic thinking at large—we are only dimly conscious of. The former—the faith in specialists—we are more conscious of since we make decisions by it daily: If I need my car repaired, I don't call a dentist; if my tooth hurts, I don't ask a car mechanic what to do about it. We rarely question our faith in specialists, and even more rarely do we question our faith in technocracy. So there is a kind of circular effect by which the constituencies of technology and science on the one hand and technocracy and rationalism on the other support and reinforce one another—the former being the material manifestations of the latter.

**Empiricism's history, its role in technocracy, and common notions among scientists concerning it?** Empiricism is the philosophy of knowledge that holds that sense impressions (i.e., experiences) are the primary source of knowledge. It is the foundational epistemology of the scientific method. Francis Bacon (1561-1626) invented modern empiricism and when we study Bacon we see that he was a radical skeptic about the connection

between perception and reality. One critique of Bacon's philosophy is that it was designed for his own social and political self-advancement. Bacon was certainly a social climber, but it's hard to ignore as a major factor for the birth of his epistemological project a few factors preceding and contemporary with his lifetime.

### **Five Sociological Factors that Influenced Bacon to Write *Novus Organon***

--Humanism, a new sense of man's Possibilities ("What a piece of work is man," Hamlet, 1600), brought on to a large extent by new technologies (telescope, compass, gunpowder) and Explosion of Knowledge Gathering

--exasperation with church's hypocrisies (clergy selling "salvation" packets), an exasperation climaxing in 1517 with the Martin Luther's Reformation. The church no longer seen as center of authority; man could appeal directly to God and to his own reason

--new cosmological findings: these findings cast doubt on old way of thinking; a determination not to be fooled again

--world explorations exposing cultural relativism, as well as imposing radical economic and social disruptions in Europe--brutal living conditions: plagues, short life expectancy, frustration with inability to improve conditions

I want to focus briefly on the last of these. Following is a timeline of a few health disasters of Europe in the 250 years prior to Bacon's birth and following through to the date of his death:

- 1332: bubonic plague originates in India
- 1347: Black Death devastates Europe, killing a third of England's population and in the next four years 75 million.
- 1495: syphilis epidemic spreads from Naples all over Europe through French soldiers
- 1497: severe famine in Florence
- 1528: severe outbreaks of plague in England
- 1557: flu epidemic all over Europe
- 1561: **Francis Bacon born**
- 1567: estimated 2 million Indians die in S. America of typhoid fever
- 1569: 40,000 inhabitants of Lisbon die in carbuncular fever epidemic
- 1575: outbreaks of plague in Sicily, spreading through Italy up to Milan
- 1592: plague kills 15,000 people in London
- 1599: outbreak of plague in Spain
- 1601: many German brothels closed to stop spread of venereal disease
- 1603: heavy outbreak of plague in England

1620: **Bacon publishes** *Instauratio magna: novum organum scientiarum*  
 1626: **Bacon dies**

According to Bacon, empiricism would affirm us as a knowledge gathering force free from institutional corruption; it would free us from the confines of our fallible perceptions; and *it would improve human conditions*. But Bacon gave himself no reason to believe empiricism would free us from uncertainty. Here are the rhetoric philosophers Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg arguing this point:

Bacon hoped that his taxonomy of philosophy and science would foster vigorous empirical study, but he warned against narrow empiricism or what would later be called positivism, an uncritical acceptance of the idea that sense perceptions constitute reality. He urged instead a critical epistemology, which he developed in several ways....

Bacon's second contribution to epistemology is his observation that perception is not infallible, nor are mental operations neutral. In his analysis of false ideas... he maintains that reason and the senses are warped by common preconceptions, personal predilections, the ambiguities of language, and the misrepresentations of philosophical systems. There may be objective truth in the world, but knowing is subjective. Bacon proposes no strict method for overcoming the perversions of the Idols... (Bizzell and Herzberg, 737).

The third Idol mentioned above—the ambiguities of language—Bacon the rhetorician paid particular attention to. Here again are Bizzell and Herzberg on Bacon's views on the relationship between rhetoric and scientific "truth":

His style has its own particular complexities, though the common view for many years was that his supposed plainness was deliberately suited to the development of science. Scientific style, as we now freely admit, is hardly non-rhetorical, and so Bacon need not be seen as rhetoric's enemy. Bacon's apothegms and aphorisms are not plain but cryptic (as historian of science James Stephens argues), impressing the images of scientific knowledge only upon those superior minds that can penetrate the code. Moreover, framing thought in aphoristic sentences is not just a way of conveying the

ideas effectively to the target audience; it actually affects the content of the ideas. Literary historian Lisa Jardine maintains that Bacon recognizes the heuristic quality of the writing process itself. Bacon's many collections of "colors and antitheses," "apothegms," "formulae," "sentences," and other commonplaces are intended not for mere decoration but as a means of investigating how our knowledge can be formulated in effective language, in discourse that shapes our beliefs and actions (738-9).

We can detect in his writing that he suspected that empiricism is logically a self-supporting epistemology, a defect we can suppose he was willing to overlook because of the promises held out by the new method of establishing knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently many contemporary scientists consider themselves "radical skeptics." They believe that, to use a metaphor by the popular science writer Chet Raymo, we are surrounded by a vast "sea" of unknowns, accepting that as committed as we are to the search for objective knowledge we will never entirely chart that sea. Thus, according to Raymo, scientists are "radical skeptics" in that they believe that they can never know all of nature's principles. But ironically none of these so-called skeptics ascribes to a skepticism nearly as radical as the original modern empiricists. Contemporary scientists may call themselves radical skeptics, but their skepticism is only within the context of a devoted empiricism. They are not skeptical of the knowledge they do establish; they are only skeptical that that knowledge does not encompass all that can be known. This is a position that would be absurd to Bacon and David Hume, for they came to consider empiricism as, though worthwhile as a weapon against misery, an intellectually hopeless safeguard against uncertainty. Bacon, and later Hume, had no delusions that it offered a haven from ignorance of the world as it really is.

### David Hume (1711-1776)

The most value a writer can glean from studying empiricism and its roots, I argue, is in the understanding, which that study will provide, that empiricism is inherently flawed. Bacon seemed to assume it is, but the flaw was first fully explained in detail some 160 years later ironically in the writings of its most ardent defender, the Enlightenment philosopher David Hume. Hume's inquiry into the

<sup>2</sup> Using this approach—historicizing a philosopher's motives to inform his philosophy—we could argue that the primary reason for Derrida's radical skepticism is no less noble than Bacon's, but that Derrida merely lived at the opposite end of empiricism's history and had witnessed the horrors of its dogma and thus his lesson is more cautionary than hopeful. The technologically impressive efficiency of the gas chambers of World War II represent the dead end of empiricism, and Derrida, who witnessed Nazi occupation in France, emphasizes its unstable foundations precisely to expose the dangers of unselfconsciously embracing it.

“source of understanding” begins by touting sense impressions as the sole reliable source of all knowledge that is not merely tautological (such as basic principles of mathematics and geometry). He then recognizes that these sense impressions are the sole source of our assumptions concerning cause and effect, which in turn produce all our reasonings. From this recognition comes the conclusion that the logical foundation for our reasonings is circular: our assumption that causes are causes is based merely on experience itself, the source of which by definition is, according to empiricism, sense impressions. We think that something is a fact simply because we assume that that fact is caused by a previous fact, and we make that assumption only because we commonly witness some things or events appearing to be caused by other things or events. There is no logical reason, Hume argued, to assume that an event or thing is caused by another event or thing; all we have to go on is experience itself.

### **Empiricist Elements in the Arts, Specifically in Poetry**

We don't often examine whether the arts are in reality politically subversive. We simply assume they are. I believe we avoid that inquiry because 1) we tend to associate empiricism exclusively with the scientific method and 2) we have inherited and internalized the Romantic image of the artist as rebel against the status quo, as anti-technocratic visionaries: what cultural image of the artist is more iconic than that of the poet composing poems while sitting at his desk and staring out the window at clouds or birds, or, even better, lying under a large oak tree overlooking a raging sea, scribbling away on a pad or composing lines in his head, pausing only long enough to stare out at those tumultuous green-blue swells? And what is more jarring to us than an image of that poet composing while sitting at a cubicle, cutting and pasting on a laptop?

But as the reigning epistemology in our culture, empiricism controls the attitudes and behaviors not only of the majority of our culture, but, I argue, of us artists as well. I will focus my analysis on poetry because poetry represents what is commonly held to be the art that is most immune to technocracy in that it is least affected by the market. If it can be shown that poetry is technocratic, then we can assume that *all* the arts are.

The most obvious symptom of this virus is negative—that is, in the form of a repression. Not coincidentally, this virus was transmitted by the New Critics who, to spread the metaphor, had been working in the sick ward: In the early to middle 20<sup>th</sup> century they were trying to establish literary criticism as a science. This repression came in the form of an

aversion to definitions of literature that included overtly political or sexual material. True art, the art of genius, the New Critics argued, is timeless, not bound by the limits of political skirmishes contemporary with it; it is bound only by the limits of its own form found in such abstract elements as tension, irony, and ambiguity. But as literature became less repressed, technocracy's influence shifted to a more “positive” effect, which, as Michel Foucault teaches us, is a much more effective force for hegemony than repression. That is, rather than *discouraging* poets and artists from engaging in behavior the technocracy deems subversive, New Criticism *encouraged* them to engage in elements technocracy approved. For example, since empiricism holds that our sense impressions are the foundation for all thought, poets and critics defined poetry as essentially imagistic. The contemporary theorist Peter Barry has articulated this empiricist bias in literary criticism in his list of the elements of liberal humanist assumptions of literature that “constitute this ‘distilled essence’ of the subject, that is, the corpus of attitudes, assumptions, and ideas which we pick up, probably unawares...”

The job of criticism is to interpret the text, to mediate between it and the reader. A theoretical account of the nature of reading, or of literature in general, isn't useful in criticism, and will simply, if attempted, encumber critics with ‘preconceived ideas,’ which will get between them and the text. Perhaps in this phrase ‘preconceived ideas’ we get another glimpse into the nature of the pervasive distrust of ideas within liberal humanism, for there seems to be the notion that somehow *all* ideas are ‘preconceived’, in the sense that they will come between the reader and text if given half the chance. There is, in fact, the clear mark here of what is called ‘English empiricism’, which can be defined as a determination to trust only what is made evident to the senses or experience directly. Ultimately this attitude goes back at least to the philosophy of John Locke (1632-1704), which gives a philosophical expression to it. His book *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) argues that ideas are formed when direct sense impressions from the world are imprinted on the mind. The mind then assembles these, so giving rise to the process of thinking. Locke rejected introspective speculation as a source of valid knowledge and insisted on the need for direct experience and evidence of things. Traditional English studies, we might say, has always been Lockean in this sense (Barry, 20).

Although Barry's analysis is of the philosophical assumptions of the critic, I would argue that it is just as applicable to those of the writer. To emend Barry's opening sentence to apply his insight to my argument, it is the job of the *writer*, and perhaps most applicably to the poet, to interpret the text, to mediate between it and the reader. Examples of this humanist bias are found wherever it is claimed that poetry represents some natural function of the body, for example in the recurring theory in prosody that the iamb in English literature gives us pleasure because it mimics the sound of the human heartbeat. The poet's job, according to this empiricist theory, is to interpret his or her heartbeat for the reader with such "natural" skill as to make the reader feel the *te dum te dum te dum* in his or her ear. If the writing gets too theoretical, too "textual," then it becomes something else, either theory, philosophy, criticism, rhetoric, or exposition, but not literature. So says the literary empiricist.

Thus the influences of empiricism may not be conspicuously political; rather, they may manifest in aesthetic, formal, or compositional choices we make when we write, but those influences reinforce the dominant epistemology, which re-influences our artists to uphold the political hegemony of technocracy. This is a Foucauldian critique of mine, since it claims that the "source" of the influence is *both* political and philosophical, that indeed there may be no distinction between the two because the roots of them both help form a vast network of power. It also owes something to Stephen Greenblatt's claim, borrowed from deconstruction, that although any self-fashioning will bear "the imprint of the stance it consciously seeks to assume, it also winds up, against its will, exhibiting traits of the stance from which it vigorously attempts to disassociate" (Spikes, 99). Art is made of the very stuff it purportedly critiques.

### **The Typical Misguided view of Poetry's role in Technocracy and Wordsworth's Contribution to Romantic Poetry's Empiricism**

Most philosophers today agree that no one has convincingly answered Hume's critique of empiricism. Thus if one is inclined to reject technocracy, then the understanding of the inherent flaws of empiricism could inspire him or her to do so. And according to a commonly held view of intellectual history, that reaction seems to have had a historical precedent in the Romantics.

Even as astute a social critic as Neil Postman believes that Romanticism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and into the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a significant counter-response

to rationalism and the tyranny of empirical epistemology that underwrites it.

By 1850, the machine-tool industry was developed—machines to make machines. And beginning in the 1860s, especially in America, a collective fervor for invention took hold of the masses. . . . Alfred North Whitehead summed it up best when he remarked that the greatest invention of the nineteenth century was the idea of invention itself. . . . It also came to be believed that the engine of technological progress worked most efficiently when people were conceived of not as children of God or even as citizens but as consumers—that is to say, as markets.

Not everyone agreed, of course, especially with the last notion. In England, William Bake wrote of the "dark Satanic mills" which stripped men of their souls. Matthew Arnold warned that "faith in machinery" was mankind's greatest menace. Carlyle, Ruskin, and William Morris railed against the spiritual degradation brought by industrial progress (Postman, 42-43).

Romanticism is still often viewed as a counter to technocracy. Here is Martha Nussbaum in her 2004 book *Poetic Justice*, using as an example the Romantic novelist Charles Dickens to make her impassioned argument for literature's role in developing our social conscience, specifically to fight against a utilitarian philosophy she sees permeating today's policy makers:

As I read [Dickens's *Hard Times*], I notice that Gradgrind economics [utilitarianism] has an even greater hold over the political and intellectual life of my society than it did over the society known to Dickens's characters, or to the narrating voice in his novel. I notice that the type of cost-benefit analysis favored by economics has become so familiar in public policy that it is taken for granted; at the same time, public servants are less and less likely to be readers of literature, where they would discover a more complex vision of human life (Nussbaum, 8).

Perhaps Dickens's story-telling will raise the consciousnesses of our policy makers, but the epistemological roots of Romanticism reveal that it was meant not to counter rationalism but, rather, to *support* it: Wordsworth himself saw poetry as the humanist hand-maiden of science, as we see here in this quote from *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*:

If the labors of men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which

we habitually receive, the poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself (Wordsworth, 658).

And what exactly are the technical poetics with which the Romantic poet is to effect his project? Primarily it is by indulging the writer's and reader's thirst for the pleasures of the senses. I concede that Wordsworth spins this principle to include a moral sensibility, but never, I would add, at the expense of the senses:

The objects of the Poet's thoughts are every where; though the eyes and sense of man are, it is true, his favorite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings. ...the Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner. But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men. And with what are they connected? Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sun-shine, with the revolutions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentments, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. These, and the like, are the sensations and objects which the Poet describes, as they are the sensations of other men, and the objects which interest them. The Poet thinks and feels in the spirit of the passions of men. How, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly (659)?

As revealed here, Wordsworth is an Enlightenment thinker supplementing and pursuing Enlightenment's rationalist project—he is not, as the common perception of him goes and as was taught in English survey courses when I was an undergraduate, a radical revolutionary opposing the Enlightenment's dehumanizing technology.

And here I must emphasize once more Wordsworth's vision that poetry should distinguish itself from the sciences *merely* in form: for him, poetry should be the "impassioned expression which

is in the countenance of all Science." Here's the passage in which that quote appears:

The Man of Science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science (658).

Romanticism would soon be marginalized, but how soon? Is it possible that, as structuralism teaches us, alternative ideologies exist merely to support the dominant one, much as categories of mental illness support and define our concepts of mental health? If so, could Romanticism have been a stillborn movement, its very existence signaling the death of its own cause? I will argue that it was.

### **When did Empiricism become Transparent, and what are Scientists' Perspective of this Historical Development as Opposed to that of Philosophers?**

Wordsworth's *Preface* was published in 1802. If it is true that the original modern empiricists were radical skeptics, then when did science lose that skepticism? When did it become an epistemology unchallenged by speculation? When the father of modern geology, William Smith, was denied membership in the newly-formed, largely aristocratic Geological Society of London primarily because he was not a member of their social class, the year was 1808. In 1831, at the age of 62 and still not a member of the society, and never having been invited to be, and in spite of having been lowborn, provincial, and a convicted debtor, he was awarded the first Wollaston prize by the Society. So between 1808 and 1831, a person's socio-economic status became irrelevant in his standing as a scientist. It could be argued that it was sometime during those twenty-three years that science's epistemology became transparent.

A colleague and I were discussing this question recently and speculated that politically speaking we may mark the date at 1811, the year King George III was committed. As my colleague remarked, "You don't have to cut off the King's head when you can convince everyone that it doesn't work." To which I might add, "You don't have to convince anyone that doctors are Kings when the King himself bows down to them." This conjectured date is close to the year we use to mark the beginning of the literary

Romantic age (1798), which fact manifests the phenomenon found frequently in history, an ideology's utter victory being signaled by the rise of its detractors, whose very existences denote that victory and the hopelessness of the counter-movement's cause.

And by 1811 that ideology had reached its zenith and begun its plateau. Rationalism had won and Romanticism as a viable alternative was its last victim. But it didn't take long for writers, most notably John Keats, to discover what had died, which was any hope of a sense of connection to the world outside ourselves. A phenomenon referred to as romantic irony set in. After Hume, Immanuel Kant between 1780 and 1797 published a series of critiques of rationalism that appeared to save the Enlightenment project from ruin. We might call Kant a Romantic philosopher because he argued that the way we apply our knowledge when we think is, as the contemporary philosopher Neil Turnbull writes, "more like an autonomous use of the imagination than accounting, reckoning, or other forms of actuarial thinking" (Turnbull, 35). Kant's position came to be known as transcendental idealism, the metaphysical idea that the world is real at the level of appearances but a creation of the mind. But for Kant this capacity to create our reality, within the confines of space and time that is, gives us the freedom to be moral. This development marks a significant point in intellectual history when morality is said to originate not in God but in human consciousness. Kant meant his metaphysics to be the philosophical foundation for Rousseau's challenge to humanity, some thirty years earlier, to claim his right to be free of the chains of social institutions in their various forms. We see Kant's idealism and its connection to his moral philosophy appearing often in Wordsworth's poetry, for example in "Tintern Abbey" in the following lines:

Therefore am I still  
 A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
 And mountains; and of all that we behold  
 From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
 Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,  
 And what perceive, well pleased to recognise  
 In nature and the language of the sense  
 The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
 The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
 Of all my moral being.

The "anchor" Wordsworth is referring to is the sublime in nature to which our consciousness is connected. But even some early Romantics understood that this sublime being, by definition unknowable, ultimately alienates us from ourselves: the more awareness we gain of it the more distant we grow from it. The more the individual's creative

imagination moves into the foreground of the writing process, the more self-conscious writing becomes. Kant's idealism ultimately separates us from the nature we yearn to identify with. We are thus *fragmented*, sundered from nature, each other, and even ourselves. Dreary, melancholy solipsism becomes the best possible outcome. This is Romantic irony.

It is no wonder science turned away from its speculative roots and unselfconsciously adopted empiricism. As long as science denies its roots of radical skepticism, rationalism appears to offer a viable alternative to this endless melancholy and dread. Nonetheless, that dreary conclusion played itself out in at least a hundred years of European and American poetry, if not two hundred years and right up to the present day. And where in poetry it does *not* manifest in Romantic irony, we see, most notably in Walt Whitman, that it joins the technocrats in adopting science as the greatest methodology for attaining truth.

### **True Literary and Philosophical Counter-Responses to the Invisibility of Empiricism and to the Beginning of Technocracy, and what Might Characterize a true Counter-Response in Poetry**

Literature reacted to Hume's skepticism and Kant's idealism in a variety of ways. But most adopted, with varying levels of awareness, the fundamental tenets of empiricism.

Our earliest models of true counters to technocracy are probably in the works of Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche. But it was Nietzsche's apothegmatic critiques of rationalism that serve for us most conspicuously as a point of departure. Derrida, in his famous essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the discourse of the Human Sciences," refers to Nietzsche, along with Freud and Heidegger, as standing for the first modern "events" or "ruptures" disrupting rationalism:

Nevertheless, if we wished to choose several "names," as indications only, and to recall those authors in whose discourse this occurrence has kept most closely to its most radical formulation, we doubtless would have to cite the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, the critique of the concepts of Being and truth, for which were substituted the concepts of play, interpretation, and sign (sign without present truth); the Freudian critique of self-presence, that is, the critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity and of self-proximity or self-possession; and, more radically, the

Heideggerian destruction of metaphysics, of onto-theology, of the determination of Being as presence (Derrida, 1118).

Later in this essay, we see his articulation of the catch-22 these ruptures create, which is the impossibility of using rationalist discourse to subvert itself:

But all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a kind of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language—no syntax and no lexicon—which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce no single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest (1118).

Derrida is addressing here the question one could turn on the very inquiry in these pages. If I believe that postmodern discourse is a possible alternative (though it must be added that by its very nature it refuses to see itself as such), then why am I in this very inquiry so traditionally rhetorical? There may be no argument against this critique, other than to concede (?) confess (?) retort (?) that rationalism has co-opted the rules of discourse.

This phenomenon concerning the difficulty of articulating genuinely new ideas is noted by the social philosopher of science Michael Polanyi, most recently explicated in Steven Shapin's exhaustive critique of scientific epistemological individualism in his book *The Social History of Truth*. Here is Shapin quoting, and commenting on, Polanyi:

"The overwhelming proportion of our factual beliefs continue therefore to be held at second hand through trusting others." Scientists, like the laity, hold the bulk of their knowledge, so to speak, by courtesy. The learner "must believe before he can know." Trusting is a form of faith indispensable to the holding and growth of scientific knowledge: it is "a passionate pouring of oneself into untried forms of existence." Trust is a creative as well as a conservative force in science. Since each acceptance of authoritative knowledge at the same time modifies existing usage, trusting is an unending means for the extension and modification of knowledge. And even the most radical forms of scientific skepticism operate "by partial submission to an existing consensus: for the

revolutionary must speak in terms that people can understand" (Polyani, 207-08; Shapin, 26).

If we take 1811 as the date of the disappearance of science's epistemology, then by the first world war technocracy was about 100 years old. With remarkable insight, Sara Danius, in her 1995 book *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics*, has described how modernist writers, specifically Mann, Proust, and Joyce reacted in their writing to this 100 year old development. She argues that they made technology a constitutive component of their aesthetic, that a more informed interpretation of modernist aesthetics than the traditional one would reveal that technology (and technocratic thinking, I would add) was not an external force that modernists reacted to. "It is a mistake to assume, for example, that the interest in subjective time that makes itself felt in Bergson, Proust, Woolf, and other thinkers and writers in the modernist period is to be theorized as mere *reaction* against public or homogenous time." Rather, technology provided a "different matrix of perceptual possibilities, ...hence also a new signifying system, ...mediated by the Western ideology of progress" (Danius, 125). By early 20<sup>th</sup> century technology had simply become so pervasive that it no longer provided an "other" context of perception. It had become the *only* context of perception, even in literature.

### More Recent Literary Responses

A mid-20<sup>th</sup> century method employed to carry out this task of responding to the development of technology's role in our lives, and one that certainly represents an anti-technocratic perspective if not an altogether anti-rationalist one, was conducted by the so-called New York poets—John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler. Inspired by Rimbaud's poetic, which Marjorie Perloff refers to as the poetics of indeterminacy, the approach these poets exploit doesn't deny reflection; rather, it merely emphasizes the extemporaneity of it, so the poem can then be its own act, its own experience, unmediated by a past or a future, recognizing all the while the impossibility of its own project, but nonetheless embracing, lamenting, rejoicing in it. The method of composition exploits the process by which composition occurs, to assert that knowledge is something other than calculative and cumulative. It attempts to *enact* experience rather than interpret or measure it. Here is David Lehman's description of the movement, in his book *The Last Avant-Garde*:

Where much of the mainstream poetry of the era [1950's] was singularly joyless, the New York poets were animated by delight as well as self-delight and by their commitment to the

cadences of idioms of the American vernacular. Their own sense of the seriousness demanded that they not appear to take themselves too seriously, and they felt that the comic spirit and the prankish *blague* had their place in poetry. Poetry for them was not testimony, not therapy, not an assertion of the will to change, but was itself a way of life, a way of confronting experience and giving it value. On New Year's Day 1952 O'Hara and Ashbery attended a concert of John Cage's "Music of Changes," which turned out to be a pivotal event. Cage made them realize that chance could be the determining element in a work of art. You could capitalize on what life threw your way and incorporate the inevitable interruptions—a phone call, a news bulletin—into your tableau, since that after all was the way life happens. Life was full of incongruities and charmed coincidences, and poetry could be the same; poetry was not a criticism of life, not a record of experience but the experience itself, and if they succeeded the poets could rescue poetry from the powers that be: the stuffed shirts "with their eyes on the myth / And the Missus and midterms," as Koch put it in "Fresh Air," a rant that had the force of a poetic manifesto in 1955 (Lehman, 338-339).

So perhaps the most attractive position to take in this context is that of Postmodernists and Poststructuralists. These writers and intellectuals critique empiricism by denying the dichotomies that form the foundation of the rationalist/counter-rationalist dialectic; indeed, their project is to reveal that *all* dichotomies are bogus by virtue of being linguistically or semiotically unstable. One might argue therefore, from this perspective, that empiricism has merely lulled us into believing that it controls our thinking when in reality *we* are the ones who control our thinking and all we have to do to wield that control is reject the dichotomies upon which empiricism's ideology is founded. Thus the postmodern writer's job is to expose this delusion and show these inherent instabilities in all meaning. But of course the concept inherent in the "we" in the last sentence, whom that sentence claims has the real power over "our" thoughts, is unstable as well. I believe Derrida would argue that although the "we" is unstable the project nonetheless "constructively deconstructs" by exposing the ways of perceiving that had previously been given privileged status.

There are lots of examples of writing in contemporary American poetry and fiction that come as close to representing an anti-rationalist perspective as we can imagine, and we can imagine that position precisely because these examples exist: they have been done, so we have a sense of what that position

looks, sounds, and feels like. If this is a paradox of the anti-rationalist, so be it: anti-rationalists like paradoxes, such as Lao Tzu's "The Tao that can be named is not the Tao" or "The sage contends with no one, and thus no one can contend with her." Anti-rationalist literature usually crosses conventional genre boundaries, so we will most likely see them consciously doing so, with, say, paintings with words in them, or "narrative" films with documentary-like footage, or real documentaries, or poetry that is neither lyrical nor narrative, but perhaps expository, or as expository as it is imagistic. From these examples and our own experiences we can probably imagine more examples of these "non-types" of "writing" or "art": Falling architecture; visual music; non-political manifestos; unambitious mission statements, etc.

### **Problems with Poststructuralism and other Possible Reasons we Reject it as a Weapon against Technocracy**

The problem with this approach, of course, as its critics point out, is that communication becomes so vulnerable to the confines of self-analysis that as a signifying apparatus it derails itself. It stops functioning as a means of communication. But in spite of its risks, one might think it would be more readily embraced given our experience of rationalism's "conclusions" in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century carnage. What might be the real reasons we resist Derrida's alternative and are so enamored by technocracy that we overlook those consequences we witnessed ourselves? As one might suspect, this is a difficult question to answer. If you believe Nietzsche, our attraction to technocratic thinking is that it can easily be used to support the master/slave structure inherent in all civilizations and in all our psyches: a few want to rule and the rest want the security that they think being ruled gives them, and technology efficaciously supplies these desires. Foucault likewise suggests that technocracy helps us express our tribal impulses. He speaks to this in an interview in which the context is how one might resist the political hegemony we're caught in:

As soon as one endeavors to detach power with its techniques and procedures from the form of law within which it has been theoretically confined up until now, one is driven to ask this basic question: isn't power simply a form of warlike domination? Shouldn't one therefore conceive all problems of power in terms of relations of war? Isn't power a sort of generalized war which assumes at particular moments the forms of peace and the State?

Peace would then be a form of war, and the State a means of waging it (Foucault, 1141).

As Foucault's interviewer points out, this position is a reversal of Clausewitz's famous dictum that war is a continuation of politics by other means; for Foucault all politics are a waging of war by other means. I would add that to support Foucault's insight we don't need to restrict our evidence to recent U.S. foreign policy, nor even to the history of U.S. foreign policy, nor to the history of all European foreign policy. In fact, in the course of gathering the statistics I use in the opening of this essay, I saw that the *more* overwhelming point the research reveals is the remarkable size of U.S. military budget.

In this context we are seeing the flip side of my thesis. Yes, poetry and the arts are in reality impotent against technology because they are founded on the epistemology of empiricism; *and in fact* they are a very aspect of that ideology that is being, *and has always been*, enlisted to perpetuate it precisely because of its power to influence. While that propagandistic role of the arts can be a depressing thought for us writers or artists who consider ourselves resisters of the status quo, it can also leave one feeling hopeful that precisely because of its power literature can be a conduit for resistance to that ideology. Foucault articulated this hope:

The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses—or what's in their

heads—but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth.

It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and culture, within which it operates at the present time. The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself. Hence the importance of Nietzsche (Foucault, 1145).

### **Are my Misgivings about Technocracy Misplaced? Why not Embrace Rationalism--Why Resist it at All?**

My suspicions about the real role the arts are playing in our culture may merely be rooted in my fear that rapid advancements in technology are clouding our vision of ourselves as humans, and that the modern technological militarism that technocracy engenders and that is terrorizing us in unprecedented ways could be averted by embracing the uncertainty that lies at the root of all knowledge. I may merely be responding to the fear that the arrogance we assume when we are in the driver's seat—literally and figuratively—corrupts our own best intentions to be human, robbing us of any semblance of a life worth living. And I may be conflating that fear with a resistance or questioning of technocratic thinking at large. If that is true, it would certainly make my concerns much simpler to address. I could show that my fears about technology are justified, which would be easy given the available evidence, and then simply argue for caution. But I suspect the problem is much deeper.

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Cory Brown, born in 1956, grew up in a small town in Oklahoma, USA, raising cattle. He studied literature and philosophy as an undergraduate at Oklahoma State University and Oklahoma University. In 1982 he began graduate study in literature and poetry writing at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, studying with Archie Ammons and Robert Morgan. He began teaching at Ithaca College in Ithaca in 1990 and now teaches poetry writing, literary theory, and philosophy there.



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