

I met a traveller from an antique land. I met a traveller  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone... Two  
us to discover  
It would be curious to discover, who it is to whom  
one writes in a diary. Possibly to some mysterious  
one's own identity... Bright st  
met a traveller from an antique land. I  
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone. Leadfast



# Romance or reason?

## *The romantic economist*

It may seem self evident that modern social sciences and the study of literature have little in common. Scholars of literature, after all, focus on the creation of illusion, the role of language and metaphor and the works of imagination, while social scientists engage in the empirical and rationalist study of systematic regularities in social behaviour. In *The Romantic Economist*, however, I argue that studies of literature and socio-economic behaviour have strong similarities, and that literary criticism and works of literature can be fruitful resources for economists and other social scientists.

Beatrice Webb – one of the founders of LSE – was clear that sociologists have much to learn from reading literature. In her autobiography, she argued that real insight into the workings of human nature only comes to those who possess the faculties of sympathy and ‘analytical imagination’, and to this end she acknowledged the important influence on her own thinking of the great poets and novelists. But why should sympathy and imagination be seen as key analytical tools? Is it not better to rely on dispassionate analysis of data and clear headed axiomatic reasoning to gain true insight into the economic and social affairs of humankind?

To understand Webb’s point, we need to remember a crucial distinction between the social and natural sciences: social (unlike natural) sciences interpret a pre-interpreted world. The behaviour studied by social scientists is already structured – to some extent at least – by the socially formed languages, norms and theories that individual actors have internalised. This means that we cannot fully explain socio-economic behaviour unless we learn to empathise with (the better to interpret) the mindsets and conceptual structures that influence beliefs and reasons for action. Without analytical imagination – the conscious effort and unconscious ability to place ourselves in the conceptual shoes of those whose behaviour we study – we are always liable to miss key aspects of human intentionality. For this reason alone, it is helpful for social scientists to be schooled in the disciplines of literature and modern languages as well as mathematics. A purely scientific training may not equip us with the required sensitivity and imaginative openness to varied ways of life, thought and feeling.

The literature of the Romantics contains a broader epistemological lesson for social scientists: it alerts us to the central role of imagination, theory and metaphor in structuring observation and analysis. The Romantics understood that we never have an unmediated and fully objective view of the world and that our minds do not merely passively record facts. Instead, as Wordsworth put it, we ‘half-create’ the world we see – by virtue of the metaphorical, conceptual and emotional colouring we contribute. Indeed, Coleridge argued that we must use theories and metaphors like lanterns to illuminate the chaos around us. Crucially, though, he also underlined that metaphors distort as well as focus our vision. From this it follows that scientists should be aware of the particular metaphors, models and concepts that structure their vision at any one time; and they can benefit from imaginatively experimenting with alternative ways of structuring experience. Theoretical and metaphorical dogmatism entails the very real risk that we may miss aspects of reality not illuminated by our favoured theory or metaphor.

Economists, in particular, need to deconstruct the metaphors and language that currently structure their science, in order to understand better the distortion as well as focus implied by their standard models. Economics is littered with metaphors drawn from mechanics and early physics – ‘equilibrium’, the ‘velocity’ of money, production ‘functions’ – and it is largely conceived in the language of mathematics. However fruitful this perspective is, it implies analytical losses as well as gains. For this reason, social scientists can often gain analytical leverage by experimenting with new models and metaphors – some of them drawn from literature.

In such ways, the tools of literary criticism and poetry are surprisingly relevant to the social scientist. For, rather than merely *imitating* reality, social scientists (like writers) have to *create* pictures of reality that are valuable to their favoured audiences. ■

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### Richard Bronk

is a visiting fellow in the European Institute, LSE, and author of *The Romantic Economist: imagination in economics* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

from an antique land. It would be curious to discover, who  
vast and trunkless legs of statues in a diary. Possibly to s  
Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art.  
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night...

Do the social sciences have anything to learn from literature? Economists, geographers and sociologists deal in hard facts and empirical data, using methods that mean their work can be measured, tested and challenged. So can writers, who deal in intuition, emotion and impression, reasonably expect their work to have any influence on social scientists? How much attention should modern day LSE (with its rich literary tradition) give to fiction, poetry, drama, biography and other forms of literature?

LSE's first Literary Festival, held on the weekend of 27 February to 1 March, brought together writers and experts from both fields to discuss where, and how, their work overlaps. Here, two LSE authors of books addressing these issues, consider the rivalries and sympathies between the two disciplines.

## Rationalising poetics

*The Romantic Economist* arrives at a propitious time: clearly, something must have been wrong with how the financial markets were being operated. How now to rebuild our economic theories? Bronk contends that economists have for too long been enamoured of a machine-like model of the world and the actors within it – an account both descriptively inaccurate and cognitively limiting, failing as it does to exploit what Coleridge called the 'living power and prime agent of all human perception': the human imagination. Economists ought instead to follow the lead of the literary people – more intuition, more going with our feelings.

The peculiar thing is that Bronk's call for a Romantic turn (a swoon?) in the social sciences comes as the literary community are making the most concerted effort in a long while to inject rigour and rationality into the study of fiction – a practice often attacked for relying too much on imagination.

Along with the Darwin anniversaries, this year also marks the 50th anniversary of CP Snow's 'Two Cultures' lecture. The division he drew was between the humanities and the sciences, and Snow had in mind – as the most representative of each party – the literary intellectuals on the one side and the physical scientists on the other. His complaint was that the literary intellectuals had for too long enjoyed a level of cultural esteem out of all proportion to their intellectual capacities and social utility. It was, he claimed, the (natural and social) scientists – with their rigorous, rational approach to the world – to whom we owed our intellectual respect and from whom we could expect working solutions to the world's problems.

The challenge drew a bitter response from England's premier literary intellectual, critic FR Leavis, who quite reasonably questioned the sciences' suitability as a foundation for culture, before moving on to a surprisingly unpleasant *ad hominem* attack on Snow's standing as a novelist who 'can't be said to know what a novel is'.

When Snow spoke in Cambridge in 1959, the literary intellectuals were top of the pile. But this status was to prove fragile, and the protective layer of high culture which had steadily accreted around literary study has now all but worn away – abraded by attacks from without and eroded from within by the discipline's decision to relinquish its role as cultural arbiter, at least in part because their claims to be entitled to such high

office were looking increasingly baseless. The urge to provide some objective measure of value has long been a grail for critics – Northrop Frye called it the 'donkey's carrot of literary criticism' – and recent years have seen a renewed effort to root and rationalise the western canon in something more substantial than taste and tradition. Of the many responses to Snow's debate, one of the more fruitful has been a sincere effort on behalf of some literary scholars to correct their lack of intellectual capital by adopting as much as possible the methodology of the sciences.

Recent years have witnessed repeated efforts from within literary study to 'scientise' and 'rationalise' the analysis and evaluation of texts. These vary from the cognitive and evolutionary psychological approaches taken by Darwinian literary critics such as Jonathan Gottschall and Joseph Carroll, to Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees* – a macro-criticism which imports the methods of the social sciences to better understand the interrelations of literary texts. In literary study, usually the least rational and most intuitive of the disciplines, rationality and rigour have never been so revered. But it could be that, once again, the literary intellectuals are dancing out of time.

For of course, there's another way to view this: literary critics' attempts to firm up their methods may merely reflect the current triumphal status of mechanistic rationality, and those within the discipline who are seeking to imitate in part or whole the methods of the hard sciences (a condition sometimes referred to as 'physics envy') are labouring under the same Enlightenment delusion as the economists – and thus in just as much need of Bronk's call for a return to Keats, and Shelley, and Byron, and what Wordsworth called the 'wiser Spirit' of imagination. ■

### Jon Adams

is a research officer on the 'How Well Do "Facts" Travel?' Leverhulme/ESRC project in the Department of Economic History at LSE and author of *Interference Patterns: literary study, scientific knowledge and disciplinary autonomy* (Bucknell University Press, 2007).

