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## Literary Studies as a Science: New Opportunities, Old Hazards

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### I

In the *Politics of Nature* Bruno Latour observes that if his analyses seem inaccessible, it is only so because they are banal.<sup>1</sup> What I will attempt to say here might leave a similar impression. Perhaps, it is even this impression that should be considered the main subject of my interest. At least to the extent to which it might seem unavoidable.

### II

It is also warranted to say that what I have in mind is the relativization – or maybe rather radicalization – of the standpoint expressed in the title. Radicalized it would read the following way: our thinking about our own discipline as science opens up only opportunities and does not carry any threats; maybe except one – it will, in all probability, not succeed.

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1 “Like all results that we shall try to obtain, this one is extravagant only in appearance. Only its banality makes it difficult.” Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature. How to Bring the Sciences Into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004), 50.

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The threat of failure is a direct consequence of the circumstances we currently find ourselves in. This is how they can be described in the broadest of terms: degradation of literary theory within the discipline of philology, dismissal of literary studies within the humanities, expulsion of the humanities from the field of science. And further: ignoring literature in the life of societies, of universities in economic policy, and of science in building financial systems. Still, this is putting things mildly. Someone less even-tempered would point to the fact that we are dealing here with something worse than degradation, that is, with growing indifference or failure to remember, or, to be precise: with forgetting what exactly was forgotten. This is the fruit not of ignorance but of deliberate political choice, which would rather minimize the consequences of the ongoing neglect in administering certain spheres by “reforming” whole other, “easier,” areas (those politically less risky), then try to get at the root of the problem. In the Polish case the lack of reform of the labor market – to give one example, because this is not a singular interdependency – results in the “reforms” of the system of higher education.

So, how should we respond to this? Usually we repeat the same old mantra (though in new wording), for example after Martha C. Nussbaum, that the humanities are indispensable, because “searching critical thought, daring imagination, empathetic understanding of human experiences of many different kinds, and understanding of the complexity of the world we live in,” are their very core.<sup>2</sup> It is evident that what we are dealing with here is at best a form of self-consolation, that is, using the language of the humanities to convince the representatives of the humanities about the vitality of the humanities, or, in the language of those more inclined towards hard science: a general theory of the essentiality of the nonessential.<sup>3</sup>

Another of our responses comes in the form of pathos-filled disputes on the responsibility towards the work of art, its privileged position, the need for unconditional openness, and so forth. And all would be well and good, if it were not for the context. When it becomes clear, it unmasks those arguments as a quite desperate attempt to compensate or repress the dawning realization of the loss of influence on the functioning of art in the public sphere – and of our own presence within it.

Still another response is the opposite of the above, and therefore it performs the same function: we respond to the loss of influence with a powerful

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2 Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit. Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2016), 7.

3 Nussbaum chooses, nonetheless, the prudent and reasoned approach: she does not confront the two types of science with each other, but rather attempts to soften the differences between them.

need of engagement and belonging, which brings short-lived satisfaction and long-lasting disenchantment as in this case – just as in the previous two – it soon becomes apparent that the role we aspire to is better and more effectively played by someone else: either the therapeutic industry, religious organizations, or political activists. But let us consider this: in each case we are dealing with the instrumentalization of our own endeavors but still we resist thinking about ourselves as scientists; though – in my opinion – this kind of thinking would be much more adaptive and effective in the current surroundings than any of the three mentioned above.

Even so, the most striking thing is something entirely different: encouragement to describe ourselves as scientist is viewed as the hallmark of conservatism and an unfortunate attempt to return to something long-compromised. This is a curious change, because if my description of our response to the crisis of humanities holds true, then it is undoubtedly this response itself, in each of its three embodiments, that is truly conservative or even old-fashioned. It is so because it does not offer the chance of emancipation by turning our actions into responses to events that are taking place elsewhere. Nonetheless, such a chance presents itself, at least when we view as socially relevant the difference between acknowledging the humanities as non-science and rising from this position against the progress of technical science, and considering the humanities as the inheritor of what could be named non-positivist scientific tradition – and defending from this position oneself, the university, and knowledge as such against neoliberal ideology. In this optimistic strain, it would truly be worthwhile – as the title of this paper suggests – to discuss the opportunities and threats of framing literary studies as science. Though, from a realist perspective, the self-definition of literary scholar as scientist will probably not become an appealing proposition for one simple reason: we need immediate salvation, and therefore we will not even try to rescue ourselves.

In short, this is a tale of how the banal becomes the immensely difficult.

### III

The story of how the difficult becomes banal, is much more complicated. In essence, it is a long history of all that has happened during the positivist turn and after it. From a certain point of view – from the point of view of the stance of the humanities towards science – this turn is still ongoing, or maybe even it still lies before us, even though it seemingly already occurred (another meaningful regressively-progressive distortion). A lot will of course hinge upon our understanding of this turn. Whether as a defensive action, and in this sense conservative, because it rejects positivism in its entirety; as an attempt to work out disciplinary independence on the basis of some non-positivist

scientific model (Wilhelm Dilthey, but also of course Edmund Husserl, would belong here); or as a project of abolishing the unbearable division into two separate worlds, two sciences, and two methods – that is, as a search for an all-encompassing language. Commenting upon this distinction, I would summarize it this way: the first leads nowhere; the second, if it is to escape changing into positivism, must turn into the third; and the third must encompass the second, because otherwise it will unnoticeably become the first.

The anti-positivist turn as quest for an all-encompassing language, and the division of reality into that which corresponds with science and that corresponding with the humanities as the deepest of grievances... This way of thinking starts with Dilthey and runs to Latour (both of whom assiduously battle duality). In saying so, I somewhat follow Andrew Bowie, who in his book on German philosophy from Romanticism to Critical Theory notices (after Karl-Otto Apel) that Dilthey's enduring achievement is not limited to the introduction of the distinction between understanding and explanation, but also encompasses the comprehension that "both natural sciences and *Geisteswissenschaften* depend upon 'the unity of the claim to truth and the possibility of its realization in argumentative discourse,' and not, therefore, upon one particular kind of assumption about the objects of science, or one kind of method."<sup>4</sup> Of course, for a contemporary reader of the *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften*, Dilthey's very strong desire for emancipation obscures such fragments as the one from the fourth chapter of the first volume ("Die Übersichten über die Geisteswissenschaften"), where Dilthey calls the sciences of the mind the other (it would perhaps be better if he would have said – the second) side of the "intellectual globe" (*andere Hälfte des globus intellectualis*).<sup>5</sup> Because he clearly refers here to its completeness. Of course, opponents of understanding literary studies as science (and therefore oftentimes also foes of science as such) underline the futility of Dilthey's attempts, but from the point of view of the current argument an accurate understanding of his ambitions is more important than the dissection of his failures.

It is no different with Wilhelm Windelband. The motive for his rejection of the Diltheyan classification of sciences and for replacing it with the *Gesetzeswissenschaften–Ereigniswissenschaften* division, was the safeguarding of the unity of the human experience (the nomothetic–idiographic distinction is a formal and not material one, nonetheless). In his distinguished lecture from 1894, Windelband turns to the example of explosion to illustrate his point: it

4 See Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory. The Philosophy of German Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), 152.

5 Wilhelm Dilthey, *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften. Versuch einer Grundlegung für das Studium der Gesellschaft und ihrer Geschichte* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990), vol. 1, 21.

belongs to our one common universe and not to one of two worlds – still it can be, and oftentimes is, researched through two different methods.<sup>6</sup>

There is still Heinrich Rickert to consider. In *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft*, in the foreword to the sixth and seventh printing of his book (1926), he reminds the reader that – contrary to numerous opinions – he does not set two different worlds against each other. The division into generalizing and individuating methods, which he uses, is not the “absolute contradiction but a relative distinction.” The heart of the matter is that “all scientific work lies somewhere between the two. Those who do not see this, do not understand my argument,” says Rickert.<sup>7</sup> Anton C. Zijderveld goes on to add: “Rickert would not have been in favor of the idea of ‘two cultures’ as was pictured in the famous, often quoted (and wrongly applied) essay by C. P. Snow. Dilthey, and maybe also Windelband, would in all probability have less problems with this dichotomy.”<sup>8</sup> I would add that these are still merely differences of degree.

All in all, it is certainly worthwhile to recall C. P. Snow at this time, as the debate that he initiated nearly sixty years ago is still alive today.<sup>9</sup> It can be thought of as a continuation of the quarrels from the era of the anti-positivist breakthrough. It might also be understood – more so in the British context – as the extension of the conflict between Romanticism and utilitarianism. Still, the best way to think of it is probably as a discussion about the cultural consequences of modernization, with which the controversy over that which Snow called the “scientific revolution” and what he dubbed as “traditional culture” is entangled.<sup>10</sup> On the base of this differentiation, Snow has accused

6 Wilhelm Windelband, *Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft* (Strasbourg: J. H. Ed. Heitz [Heitz & Mündel], 1904), 24–25. He goes on to add that even though the two methods of investigation are legitimate, they in no way justify each other.

7 And he emphasizes this by spacing out the words. See *Kulturwissenschaft und Naturwissenschaft. Sechste un siebente durchgesehene und ergänzte Auflage* (Tübingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1926), viii. Here he comments upon his previous book *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftlichen Begriffsbildung, Eine logische Einleitung in die historischen Wissenschaften* (Freiburg: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1896), where he argues that he is required to seek a course between the Charybdis of the careless noises produced by those who shun philosophy and the Scylla of the expanding specialist class of industrial workers.

8 I am quoting his very interesting book: Anton C. Zijderveld, *Rickert's Relevance. The Ontological Nature and Epistemological Functions of Values* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 251.

9 See Guy Ortolano, *The Two Cultures Controversy: Science, Literature and Cultural Politics in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).

10 Many commentators pointed out that this opposition is, to put it mildly, improperly scaled – and it is so on both sides. That the scientific revolution spoken of here is in fact

the proponents of the latter position of refusing to participate in the great work undertaken by the proponents of the former, calling them “spontaneous luddites.”<sup>11</sup> It was this very accusation that has sparked the heated and once prominent denunciation of Snow by F. R. Leavis.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as Stefan Collini points out in the introduction to Snow’s book, the dispute around the relationship of science and literature ought not treat both these realities as calcified in some final form at one point of their existence, or as unalterable substances – which is a snub directed at Snow’s preconceptions – but it also shows us (and this seems more important) that “‘science’ is merely one set of cultural activities among others,”<sup>13</sup> and that we should not fool ourselves that there is any position that we could take, which would allow us to remain beyond its reach. In turn, when commenting upon Leavis’s lectures, Collini adds that despite common opinion we will not find here a discussion of “science versus the humanities, or of the priority of one over the other.” Here the point of departure is rather the question of Luddism as the method used to “castigate anyone who appears to express the slightest reservation about economic growth as a self-sufficient social ideal.”<sup>14</sup> In short, instead of pitting the two cultures against each other, we should be more focused on understanding

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a technocratic revolution and a market-orientated commercialization of science, and not science as such – and that traditional culture is merely a derogatory label given to those remnants that oppose, cannot be, or are simply not worth being priced. David Edgerton writes interestingly about the significance of Snow’s work in the article “C. P. Snow as Anti-historian of British Science: Revisiting the Technocratic Moment, 1959– 1964.” He notes that Snow is, according to Leavis, “a vulgar technocrat.” See Edgerton, “C. P. Snow as Anti-historian of British Science: Revisiting the Technocratic Moment, 1959–1964,” *History of Science: An Annual Review of Literature, Research and Teaching* 43 (2) (2005): 191.

- 11 “If we forget the scientific culture, then the rest of the western intellectuals have never tried, wanted, or been able to understand the industrial revolution, much less accept it. Intellectuals, in particular literary intellectuals, are natural Luddites.” – C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*, introd. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 22. As Collini points out – let us make this clear – to better understand this quarrel we need to turn to H. G. Wells and to his belief in the promise of civilizational and cultural transformation through science: Snow revered Wells and Leavis detested him.
- 12 F. R. Leavis, *Two Cultures? The Significance of C. P. Snow*, introd. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013).
- 13 Snow, *The Two Cultures?*, xlix.
- 14 Leavis, *Two Cultures?*, 33. Ian MacKillop says something similar, as he considers it a mistake to depict the conflict between Snow and Leavis as a conflict between science and literature. For him it was a dispute over history, which Leavis became increasingly interested in during the 1960s. See Ian MacKillop, *F. R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 325.

science as a form of culture. It is not upholding or negating of the higher epistemological status of science, but closing the divide, rejecting it, abolishing it through search for common ground, or by expanding the number of intersecting categories – this is where our interests lie, that is, the interests of culture and society subjected to neoliberal oppression. Nonetheless, as it turns out, it is still possible to look at things from a different standpoint, and in the discussions centering on the “Snowian disjunction,” to borrow Pynchon’s term, such ideas as these often surface: culture is a fluctuating form of life and science is a struggle for universal knowledge, and therefore for something unchangeable. This directly results in placing science beyond the realm of culture.

Let us now take a leap (if a leap it is) into quite contemporary times. Michał P. Markowski repeatedly declared himself in the 2013 book *Polityka wrażliwości* [Politics of sensitivity] an enemy not only of understanding of literary studies as science, but of science as such. Painting the scientist as an anti-humanist is the fundamental device of his rhetoric. Markowski said that: “the anti-humanist [...] wants to strip human understanding of what is most human – that is, uncertainty, wandering, ephemerality – and substitute it with the inhuman: certainty, obviousness, irreversibility.”<sup>15</sup> In a review of Markowski’s work, Adam Lipszyc expressed his agreement with “the praise of the humanities as a completely unscientific, but absolutely indispensable space for the development of human sensitivity both on the individual and social level.”<sup>16</sup> All, or nearly all, of the remaining arguments that Markowski makes, he criticizes severely. The consensus of these two, truly formidable, scholars on the topic of science, when they disagree on all other matters, is truly puzzling. It seems to say something important about contemporary Polish literary studies.<sup>17</sup>

#### IV

The observation made by Latour, which opens this essay, might be seen as a form of discursive violence – and not without reason: different things seem banal to different people, and professing banality can be an all too easy scheme for gaining some advantage. Hence, let me quickly explain that what

15 Michał Paweł Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości Wprowadzenie do humanistyki* [Politics of sensitivity: An introduction to humanities] (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 92.

16 Adam Lipszyc, “Dekonstrukcja uniwersytetu” [Deconstruction of the university], accessed February 14, 2017, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artykul/5026-dekonstrukcja-uniwersytetu.html>.

17 For more, see my review of Markowski’s book: Andrzej Skrendo, “Wyprowadzenie z humanistyki” [An exit from the humanities], *Wielkość*, 1 (2014): 91–101.

I am saying here is a proposition of a certain self-description in the sense given to this notion by Niklas Luhmann (two seminal books by Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* and *Theory of Society*, end with a chapter of that name). The idea of self-description is the ultimate consequence in the process of thinking about what I have called the all-encompassing language or the language of unity: it is, all in all, a unity of difference.

Old European philosophy, as Luhmann calls it, relied upon two-valued logic – Luhmann, in turn, relies on the concept of autology. As he sees it, every system constitutes itself through the differentiation between the system and the environment. It is, nonetheless, a differentiation of the system itself: systems are operationally closed and autopoietic. Each system operates like a brain, within a network of recursive references (Luhmann does not draw a distinction between the macro and micro levels). As a whole, society is unobservable and any differentiation is merely coincidental. Knowledge is the outcome of the observation of observers, that is of introducing difference into differentiation according to the *re-entry* mechanism borrowed by Luhmann from Spencer Brown. This mechanism was characterised by Detlef Krause as: “reuse/repetition of differentiation within differentiation, or: another entry of differentiation into itself, or: self-enabling of differentiation as differentiation, or: another entry of form into form. In any case, as a form of paradox.”<sup>18</sup> A paradox, we read further on, is not some *Nebenmeinung*, but “a general notion for something that simultaneously is and is not binding. In a more logically inclined language: paradox is something truthful because / even though it is not true. To be more precise: a system asserts its own existence, or: a system is itself, which means: A because A. Something is true because it is true.”<sup>19</sup> And, of course, the other way around. In *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* Luhmann himself asserts that: “an observation of observations ought to attach special significance to the kinds of differentiations made by the observing observer. It is a question of what he sees through his differentiations and what is obscured by them. This is about paying attention to the blind spot of the used differentiation, to the unity of difference as a condition of the possibility for its own observation.”<sup>20</sup>

This, of course, in no way entails that the world does not exist, but only points to the fact that to observe difference one requires some preceding

18 Detlef Krause, *Luhmann Lexikon: Eine Einführung in das Gesamtwerk von Niklas Luhmann* (Stuttgart: Lucius and Lucius, 2001), 191.

19 *Ibid.*, 183.

20 Niklas Luhmann, *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1992), 718.



differentiation; that is, that an observation must be supplemented by another observation – it is to observe observers observing those who observe (which I currently attempt to do).<sup>21</sup>

More or less the same ideas could be rendered in the language of Ludwik Fleck, Thomas S. Kuhn, or Humberto Maturana (who understands science as an adaptive biological behaviour of the human organism). Expressed by Kuhn it would sound like this: science is performed in a paradigmatic way, that is by scientists who share common characteristics because they are connected to one another. They solve serious problems – that is those which they can solve, considering other ones to be non-questions. A paradigm does not delineate the field of research, but the method of its conduct; we apprehend it not as systematic knowledge, but as practice. Therefore, to be a scientist is to “acquire theory, methods, and standards together, usually in an inextricable mixture”<sup>22</sup>; though it should be added that there are many more elements within that mixture (values, convictions, interests, emotions) that cannot be easily filtered from it.<sup>23</sup>

What are (or can be) the consequences of all of this for us? I will enumerate them below:

1. Science is a form of social practice; science is not beyond culture. Excluding science from culture excludes only the one professing

21 Niklas Luhmann explains in *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 302: “observation and description presuppose a difference between the observer/describer and his object, whereas the intent of *self-description* is to negate precisely this difference.” In another context (“The Cognitive Program of Constructivism and a Reality that Remains Unknown,” in *Selforganization. Portrait of a Scientific Revolution*, ed. Wolfgang Krohn, Günter Küppers and Helga Nowotny [Dordrecht: Springer-Science+Business Media, 1990], 67), he will add that what occurs here is a de-ontologization of reality, which “does not mean that the external world is being called into question but only the simple distinction being / non-being which ontology had applied to it.” All this could also be simply restated this way: “there is indeed an external reality, but there is really no need to make a big fuss about it.” (Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 38).

22 Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 109.

23 James A. Marcum (in the book *Thomas Kuhn’s Revolution. An Historical Philosophy of Science* [London: Continuum, 2005], 57) describes the quintessence of Kuhn’s revolution in simple terms: production instead of the product; not the work, but the process; a verb in place of the noun. It is from this series of transpositions that, to use Luhmann’s idiom, autology emerges as a peculiar method of legitimizing scientific inquiry. By the way, if we agree that a similar discovery (a similar series of transpositions) was made by twentieth-century art, which is nowadays a widely accepted view, then we will notice a compelling affinity between art and science – one with consequences whose magnitude should not be underappreciated.

the exclusion. We can assume, after Knorr-Cetina, that contemporary culture is epistemic in character, that it is a knowledge-related culture. It consists of “amalgams of arrangements and mechanisms – bonded through affinity, necessity, and historical coincidence – which, in a given field, make up how we know that we know. Epistemic cultures are cultures that create and warrant knowledge, and the premier knowledge institution throughout the world is, still, science.”<sup>24</sup> It is on the grounds of culture, I would add, that we should discuss science – as well as their interrelations. Moreover, we should do so not only with the awareness of the fact that we have our own objections to overcome in this regard (rooted in the repetition of certain Heideggerian clichés such as “science does not think”), but most of all the objections of the representatives of the so-called hard sciences.

2. Branches of science are distributed across a uniform epistemological space, transitions between them are seamless, and there are no differences between them based on their stance towards so-called reality or their assigned spheres of study. There is no unified science nor a single theoretical language, but a multitude of them – as well as the kinships and affinities within the bounds of this multitude. Science is not a hierarchical system of knowledge but rather consists of nodes of practices, interests, beliefs, and so forth. At the same time, we must realize that the benefits of multilingualism are not absolute but relative – namely, they are limited by the possibility of translation and comparability of the results achieved within individual scientific idioms.
3. It is necessary to resist – on one’s own terms and grounds – the advancement of technoscience and neoliberal ideology, which became the bedrock of government policy directed at science and the institutions of higher learning. It is not the defence of humanities from science, but the safeguarding of science from the neoliberal agenda at universities and from technoscience – whose measure is not the freedom of scientific research, but immediate applicability that is forced by market competition – that are endeavours truly worth participating in.

In short, it is as it has always been: the fight must be carried out on two fronts. First, against certain forms of the familiar tradition (or merely ways of understanding it), which drag us down, and, second, against adverse developmental

<sup>24</sup> Karin Knorr Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999), 1.

tendencies in the socio-economic sphere (which knock us off our course). These are, clearly, not the only sources of malaise, but I will not venture beyond them in this essay.

## V

I have previously said that I encourage a certain form of self-description. Though I might as well say, after Ludwik Fleck, that my hope is for us to become a “thought collective.” It comes to life, as Fleck says, “wherever two or more people are actually exchanging thoughts. [...] a stimulating conversation between two persons soon creates a condition in which each utters thoughts he would not been able to produce either by himself or in a different company. A special mood arises, which could not otherwise affect either partner of the conversation but almost always returns whenever these persons meet again.”<sup>25</sup> In the meantime – the end.

*Translated by Rafał Pawluk*

## Abstract

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*Literary Studies as a Science: New Opportunities, Old Hazards*

Skrendo explores the scientific status of research in the humanities. Looking at the problem from a historical perspective, he reaches back to the anti-positivist turn and argues that the transformation that began at that time was about finding a common ground for all sciences. From a theoretical perspective, Skrendo’s argument draws on constructivist approaches, broadly understood, from Fleck and Kuhn to Luhmann and Latour. These researchers help us develop non-positivist approaches to the humanities’ scientific assumptions and goals.

## Keywords

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science, anti-positivist turn, constructivism

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<sup>25</sup> Ludwik Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, ed. Thaddeus J. Trenn and Robert K. Merton, trans. Fred Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn, introd. Thomas S. Kuhn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 44.