Below is an article written by Mukherjee Sir recently published in the quadri-lingual JournalSurashtriya (March 2012 issue), edited by Dr. R.N. Kathad.

**Poetry Makes Nothing Happen**

-sanjay mukherjee

Associate Professor, Department of English & CLS,

Saurashtra University, Rajkot.

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives

In the valley of its saying where executives

Would never want to tamper; it flows south

From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,

Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,

A way of happening, a mouth.

-          W. H. Auden

It is evident, then, that there is a sort of education in which parents should train their sons, not as being useful or necessary, but because it is liberal or noble.

-      Aristotle[[1]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit" \l "_ftn1" \o ")

It seems that like much of western philosophy being a footnote to Plato, poetry (and in the larger context, literature) too, in the western thought, might be the same.[[2]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn2) It is interesting that Plato never posed an ontological question to poetry – which is more often than not the first philosophical question – but concerned himself extensively with its utility. The reason as to why this could be so most convincingly seems to be that Plato was already convinced about what poetry was and being sure that it was an ‘imitation of an imitation’ and hence of false and even harmful nature confidently moved on to the use of it and why it would have no place in his ideal republic. And since then, the role and function of literature for society has always been posed and debated more heatedly than the ontological question of what is literature, although sporadically this question is introspected upon, and in twentieth century itself attempts range from the cryptic like Ezra Pound’s “Literature is language charged with meaning.” (28) to the more probative like Shklovsky’s attempt to identify the literariness of literature thereby familiarizing all of us with the term *ostranenie*, to full-length what-is-literature chapter attempts by critics and theorists like Terry Eagleton and Jonathan Culler. The problem with this ontological question is that most often the discussion gets waylaid into what works should be considered as literature, or the discussion about the canon.

Plato’s questioning the utility of poetry can actually be seen as the first recorded duel between two modes of knowing the self and the world, an endeavour attempted by both literature and philosophy, i.e., the contest between the mythical and the rational modes of knowledge. And although the Greek society always drew inspiration from their poets like Hesiod and Homer who preceded Socrates and Plato by almost four hundred years, the decisive shift in knowledge from narrative to the discursive[[3]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit" \l "_ftn3" \o ") began with Plato burning his dithyrambs under the influence of his guru Socrates. Since then these two disciplines have always been in opposition to each other, the debate getting animated more or less in a continuous manner since the Renaissance when Stephen Gosson charged poets and players on stage in his *School of Abuse* (1579) of turning the minds of men effeminate and filling them up with lust which in turn triggered the first of a series of defences of (or apologies for) poetry, the notable among them being Philip Sidney’s[[4]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn4) (written 1580; published 1595) and Shelley’s[[5]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn5) (written 1821; published 1840 – his in response to Thomas Love Peacock’s *The Four Ages of Poetry*, 1820 wherein Peacock expressed the opinion that poetry deteriorated – thereby gradually becoming redundant – as  civilizations progressed), and also most recently Paul Fry’s full-length book *A Defense of Poetry: Reflections on the Occasion of Writing*(1995) wherein he reiterates that literature can be defined ontologically, and, notwithstanding pragmatist arguments still has a unique value which cannot be arrived at by merely studying its structure or identifying its functional purpose, but instead could be understood by suspending the established modes of knowledge (a Coleridgean echo of ‘the willing suspension of disbelief’)  leading to a pre-conceptual ‘ostensive moment’ “in which people and things are held in their nonsignifying opacity” (Wood 7) revealing existence simply for itself in a way probably best captured in a line by Wallace Stevens in his poem ‘The Emperor of Ice-cream’ : Let be be finale of seem.

**II**

By the nineteenth century however, with the industrial revolution becoming a definitive reality, another discipline was added to the poetry-philosophy debate, a discipline which would gradually relegate these two to merely as disciplines of *being* and claim for itself the more immediately exacting and impinging task of a discipline of *doing*. This was the discipline of science and its sway was so overwhelming that even those who strongly cautioned against its meddling influence like Wordsworth could not keep away from using the vocabulary of this discipline.[[6]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn6) Calling the popular notion that poetry and prose are antonyms as erroneous, he was one of the earliest to identify science as the actual contradistinction to poetry when he said in his “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*”: “Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science.” (Enright and Chickera 174) Eight decades later, and more than two decades after Darwin’s work *On the Origin of*Species had not only established science much over poetry and philosophy but successfully robbed many Christian believers of their faith[[7]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn7), Matthew Arnold, deliberately refusing to see its bleak future, attempted in a way to speak both for poetry and faith in Christianity as much as against science when he opened his essay “The Study of Poetry” with a tone of desperate prophesy:

‘The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. … Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry.’ … More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. (Enright and Chickera 260)

Twentieth century witnessed the completion of the scientific triumph with the poetic process or the process of artistic creation itself explained through a scientific analogy. T.S. Eliot in his most celebrated essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” likened the mind of a mature poet to a piece of Platinum which is the unmoved mover (strangely, a Shelleyean echo) catalyst in a chemical reaction leading to the production of Sulphuric Acid. Eliot here is refuting the Wordsworthian description of a poet as being ‘a more comprehensive soul’ who is “endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature” (Enright and Chickera 171) and such inherent bestowal that are far too abstract and complex to explain by an exact, well documented and empirically proven experiment in science. Interestingly, around the same time when Eliot surrendered poetry to science, I.A. Richards whose training was in both philosophy and psychology in *Science and Poetry* (1926), echoing Arnold, hoped that in an age ravaged by war, of dwindling faith and over-reliance on science, emotions aroused by poetry might do service for the lost ardour of religion.[[8]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn8) But, in a way, the science and poetry debate too can be traced in the western thought to as far as Plato who was so influenced by Pythagoras that he had inscribed on the gates of his Academy that no one should enter within without a knowledge of geometry. In the second half of the twentieth century, exactly one hundred years after *On the Origin of Species*, the opposition between *l’esprit de finesse* and *l’esprit de gèomètrie* (to borrow from Pascal)[[9]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn9) became within the western intellectual circle the long drawn ‘two cultures’ debate initiated by C.P. Snow and F.R. Leavis on the occasion of the former’s Rede Lecture at Cambridge in 1959 entitled “The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution” wherein Snow rued the fact that the irreconcilable differences between the Sciences and the Humanities bordering almost on hostility were not only becoming major hindrances to solving the world’s problems, but also amounted to a ‘sheer practical and intellectual and creative loss’. (Snow 19) Incidentally, Snow designated the representatives of the ‘two cultures’ as scientists and non-scientists and levelled three accusations against the latter; one, of donning the mantle of intellectuals exclusively; two, of behaving like the Luddites harking back to an impractical bygone era which science viewed as backward and non-progressive; and the third was against the authors’ airing ‘politically silly’ or ‘politically wicked’ thoughts through their works – Yeats, Pound and Wyndham Lewis were particularly cited – thereby bringing ‘Auschwitz that much nearer’. (Ibid., 15-17)

Arguably, this chasm between the ‘two cultures’ today has widened although it was then refuted strongly by F.R. Leavis who delivered his own Richmond Lecture at Downing College, Cambridge in 1962 entitled “Two Cultures? The Significance of C.P. Snow” arguing that there was, for a society, essentially one culture kept vibrant by a small minority[[10]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn10) wherein science had a very limited stake and that too only in the tangible domain of quantities and means. Of course, the irony in the twenty-first century is that even the discipline of science is facing its own crisis with very few people interested in pure or theoretical sciences, and there seems to be an irreversible craze in academia for the application oriented domains and vocational, job-oriented professional courses. In that sense, science too is suffering the same fate as that of literature with very little academic visibility, but paradoxically living a glamorous life in select festivals, book releases and such marketed events in few metropolises around the world with a quasi-page-three status billed by the media.[[11]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn11)

**III**

So, the issues regarding poetry (taking it to be a short-hand for literature), under the obtaining circumstances are academic (future of literary studies), but more seriously are cultural (value of poetry / literary representation), and if not ontological then certainly epistemological (what knowledge, if any is gained through literature). The future of literary studies automatically makes us throw a glance at the past. The institutional support for literature at a broad national level probably began in the post-Renaissance France in the year 1635 under King Louis XIII and the active stewardship of Cardinal Richelieu with the foundation of the Academie Francaise with the express purpose of making French the “most perfect of the modern” languages, to establish it as “not only elegant but even able to treat all arts and sciences” since these two disciplines were “the principal instruments of virtue”. (Reiss 70-96) It is interesting to note that arts and sciences are treated at par in the foundational objectives of the Academie, that by 1637 had an added responsibility (besides compiling a French dictionary and systematizing a normative grammar of French) of formulating the norms of French literature. Over the next century and half, with the rise of nationalism in the Enlightenment years in Europe, national literatures (as an emblem of national culture) began emerging in the European vernaculars with the term *Nationallitteratur* itself getting established in the 1770s in Germany. But a proper academic study of these literatures separately from the classics would have to wait for some more time in Europe. English Studies, as a subject was initiated only in 1828 with the establishment of a Chair of English Language and Literature at University College, London. Used throughout the nineteenth century as an aid in the colonization project, English started being taught at Oxford and Cambridge much later; Oxford instituting its Chair in 1904, and the Cambridge English Tripos – with which began, in the real sense, the modern English Studies – originated in 1917 when Hector Chadwick, the Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge realised that a new syllabus of English was imperative in the context of the radically different social circumstances during and after World War I. Helped in this pedagogic reform by Arthur Quiller-Couch, in March 1917 a new course in ‘English Literature, Life and Thought’ was passed with new recruits like I.A. Richards appointed as a lecturer who, drawing freely from other disciplines of knowledge, especially science, brought about a methodological shift in the teaching of English leading to a rigorous, text-centric, analytical mode of enquiry, a new style of literary criticism, itself known a few years later as New Criticism. Speaking about those tumultuous War years and the beginning of the new English Department in Cambridge, Francis Mulhern observed:

In the unstructured, indefinitely bounded space opened up by the Tripos reform, the contradictory social and cultural forces of the twenties met and mingled freely, giving rise to a debate of unprecedented breadth and vigour. ... the ideological and social diversification of the national intelligentsia reproduced itself in miniature in the composition of the post-War student generation. The intellectual cross-currents thus generated flowed strongly in every reach of the University, but in the new School of English where no stable institutional apparatus existed to stem or channel them, their power was especially great. (22-23)

If the beginning decades of the twentieth century saw the rise of the single language literature departments, today, almost one hundred years later when literature itself has lost its upper case status, is almost never spoken in the singular, and is almost getting subsumed under cultural studies; in a multicultural world, and in a historically-always multicultural India, the future of literature and of literature departments must be – if we are to avoid being painted in the monochromatically global hue – comparative, the death of this discipline having been announced notwithstanding by the influential critic Gayatri Chakraborty-Spivak in her thought provoking work *Death of A Discipline* but who, i think was speaking more in the way of the title of Dylan Thomas’s most famous anthology *Deaths and Entrances*, that the discipline of Comparative Literature, especially of the American type should be considered as dead, and it is time that this discipline is reborn in a new avatar. But the seed of this comparative thought, ideationally, goes as far back as Matthew Arnold and in academic-critical praxis, to I.A. Richards who always wanted literary study to be carried out within a cognate field of disciplines like philosophy, psychology, rhetoric, history etc. In our own time, Jonathan culler asserts that the ontology of literature does not bother literary theory much (although he himself devotes a chapter-long space in his brief work on literary theory on the ontology and cultural value of literature) because it tries to understand literature with the help of concepts borrowed from other disciplines like philosophy, psychology, history, political science etc., and such an interdisciplinary approach goes against the grain of a pure identity of literature, or, for that matter, any discipline of knowledge. So, both literature as well as its understanding / interpretation has meaning vis-a-vis other disciplines; conversely, the line of distinction between the literary and the non-literary has become very thin.

Coming to the question of value, it was again in the beginning decades of the twentieth century that the intellectual ratification of *value* to literature was effected although, since then, one of its fall-outs, the debate about the canon has often been acrimonious not to mention the oft-repeated question, especially in the last three decades, as to of what value is ultimately the value of literature. F.R. Leavis, a professed anti-theorist introduced the term value as a disciplinary focus within literary studies in Cambridge in the third decade of the twentieth century; and never defined explicitly what value meant, remaining always silent to criticisms of using subliminal code-words like ‘maturity’, ‘relevance’, ‘felt life’ etc. Leavis implied that values might be distilled either from the ‘picked experience’ of life through the ages, or most rewardingly, from great art that inevitably (although latently) engaged with life in the form of a question:

‘What for – what ultimately for?’ is implicitly asked in all the greatest art, from which we get not what we are likely to call an ‘answer’ but the confirmation of a felt significance; something that confirms our sense of life as more than a mere linear succession of days, a matter of time as measured by the clock – tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. (1973: 33)

But if ‘value’ goes undefined scientifically, it does not mean – provided science has a convincing definition of value – that the concept of value as given by science is inherently better than that experientially gleaned through life or obtained by reading and interpretation of literature. “As E.D. Hirsch painstakingly documented in *The Aims of Interpretation*, then in “Value and Knowledge in the Humanities,” despite the vaunted dissimilarities between humanistic and scientific inquiry, the cognitive elements in both are exactly the same in character.” (Swirski 19)

This brings us back to the old question posed since Platonic times, of (literary) value attached to truth or falsity. Metaphorically, or emblematically, poetic / literary value has often been estimated through icons like the mirror (‘literature reflects the society), the lamp (‘literature illumines the mind’), the crystal ball (‘literature is prophesy’), the receptacle (‘literature is the storehouse of language [at least]’), the bridge (‘literature – and translation of literature – connects people’), and the hammer (‘literature reforms or shapes the society’) to name a few. But in such discussions most often the value of literature is earmarked with the strength of its ability to assay or represent reality. Yet, credence is most universally given to realistic and more to naturalistic literature, and the problem starts when literature deliberately refuses to portray the real or even erases the real and replaces with the desired[[12]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn12); it is then that literature is accused at best of being figments of imagination, and at worst as bogus and neurotic. And poetry in this scheme of things is most accused (or accursed) because – still in the public domain – it is supposedly the most imaginative literary genre.

It seems that there can be no discussion about the value of literature with those who are avowedly assured that literature has no value[[13]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftn13) but those of us who are inside the discipline with the added responsibility of teaching the subject need to disseminate the fact with more conviction to the shaping minds that literature *does* have the wherewithal to work out criticism or theory differently, and often uncannily before its time: e.g., the apposition of the grand and the little narratives in Auden’s ‘Musee des Beaux Arts’ much before postmodernism announced the death of the grand narratives; or, puncturing the pomposity of historical and theological truths in *Moby Dick*much before New Historicism told us to listen to such truths with more than a pinch of salt. Although only certain kinds of truths are generally categorised as knowledge and things that impart knowledge are primarily considered valuable, we in literature must remain convinced that literature too *is* knowledge. Michael Wood raises this question ‘What does literature know?’  and links reading literature with tasting cuisine by citing Roland Barthes’ discovery that the Latin etymology for ‘knowledge’ and ‘savour’ is the same. (9) Like cuisine has a recipe but does not guarantee the same memorable taste every time, literature borrowing ingredients from the diversity and the myriad vicissitudes of life often does not guarantee the expected or anticipated knowledge. Thus,

literature is fiction in the fullest, most powerful sense when it sets out to encounter real knowledge along imaginary roads. The ‘usual securities’ are abandoned, and the roads cannot, outside of psychosis, lead directly back into the real. It’s important to remember, too, that just getting lost on the journey is always possible. But there are many ways of meeting knowledge, and many knowledges to meet. (190)

And, we in literature have nowhere to turn to but literature – whether through the works or through inter-disciplinary theory. This advice seems to be the central drift of two relatively recent works; one by Harold Bloom who opines that “The art of reading poetry is an authentic training in the augmentation of consciousness, perhaps the most authentic of healthy modes.” (29) and the other by Terry Eagleton who attempts to re-train twenty-first century readers how to read poetry and links the non-serious reading of literature to the death of criticism itself.

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[[1]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref1) *The Basic Works of Aristotle* edited by Richard McKeon (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), p. 1308. Another translation has the same Aristotelian thought as: “[T]here is a form of education which we must provide for our sons, not as being useful or essential but as elevated and worthy of free men.”

[[2]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref2) In 1929 Alfred North Whitehead in his work *Process and Reality* made this significant observation: “the safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.” (Quoted in Melchert 117)

[[3]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref3) This word in Philosophy means: proceeding by argument or reasoning rather than by intuition. (*The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2000.)

[[4]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref4) Sidney reiterates in this essay about poetry being the most ancient of all human learnings, and, like Aristotle hierarchizes poetry over history and even law, and then juxtaposes it with philosophy investing in the former the speciality through which it simplifies the obscurity of the latter and therefore attains the status of popular philosophy.

[[5]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref5) Wherein he equates poetry with all ‘forms of order and beauty’, an agent that ushers ‘a beneficial change in opinion or institution’, possessing almost the godlike quality of being an unmoved mover, calling poets ‘the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration’ and ‘the unacknowledged legislators of the word.’

[[6]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref6) At the very opening of his “Preface to *lyrical Ballads*” he mentions: “It was published, as an experiment, which, I hoped, might be of some use to ascertain, how far, by fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation, the sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be imparted, which a Poet may *rationally* endeavour to impart.” In the same essay Wordsworth was more specifically using the vocabulary of the rising discipline of Biology when he observed: “Why trouble yourself about the *species* till you have previously decided upon the *genus*? Why take pains to prove that an ape is not a Newton, when it is self-evident that he is not a man?” (emphasis added)

[[7]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref7) One is reminded of the famous 1860 Oxford ‘Evolution Debate’ (or, more correctly, the animated discussion which took place on the 30th June at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History) between Bishop Samuel Wilberforce and Thomas Henry Huxley which is often regarded as the first decisive intellectual win of science over religion. This debate took place just seven months after the publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

[[8]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref8) In almost a liturgical manner Richards even opined in *Science and Poetry* that “poetry is capable of saving us” (95) to which Eliot, reviewing the work in *The Dial* magazine in 1927 rebutted that it amounts to “saying the wall-paper will save us when the walls have crumbled.” (Asher 69)

[[9]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref9) Quoted by Lionel Trilling in his essay “The Meaning of a Literary Idea” written on the occasion of a conference on American Literature at the University of Rochester in February 1949.

[[10]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref10) This view was later dubbed as extremely exclusivist and even classist by cultural critics like Raymond Williams.

[[11]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref11) The recently concluded Jaipur Literature Festival in January 2011 dubbed as the fashion show of literature had sixty thousand plus visitors and by all reports has been seen as making a sound business sense.

[[12]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref12) A beautiful example is that of Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’ where he deliberately blanks out the actual abbey and its surroundings, ravaged by the ills of industrialization from his poem to be discovered much later by New Historicists and cultural critics in the 1980s.

[[13]](http://alumniengsu.wordpress.com/wp-admin/post.php?post=246&action=edit#_ftnref13) As a student of literature, i have often been stumped for a convincing answer to the question posed – often jocularly – by some of my own friends in other disciplines as to what qualitative difference does reading poetry bring to life.