

Science, humanities and meaning

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In his extraordinary meditation on language and meaning, *Real Presences*, the literary critic George Steiner asks what happens when people are ‘face to face with the presence of offered meaning which we call a text.’ His answer is couched in terms of ‘welcoming the stranger’, of the ‘discipline of courtesy’ (the *cortesia* of ‘the etiquette books of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment’), of the encounter that follows the ‘gamble of welcome’ when we respond to a stranger knocking at the door:

The numinous intimations which relate hospitality to religious feelings in countless cultures and societies ... [help] us to understand the experiencing of created form. ... Where the poem, where the verbal construct is concerned, the opening of the door, the practices of courtesy ... are those of lexical-grammatical-formal study. ... Lexical *cortesia*, the first step in philology, is that which makes us dwellers in the great dictionaries ... The second stage of philological reception demands an exact sensitivity to syntax, to the grammars which are the sinew of articulate form. ... The third level of the experiencing of form, as philology seeks adequate response, is that of the semantic. ... [The term] denotes the executive passage of means [lexicon and grammar] into meaning.

Steiner’s suggestive metaphor of literary *cortesia* offers a starting point for understanding the relation between science and the humanities. To me, science is men and women extending the *cortesia* of welcome to the presence of offered meaning which we call the material universe. Importantly, since the seventeenth century, scientists have self-consciously confined their explorations to the ‘philological’ and ‘grammatical’ levels, and deliberately eschewed ‘the ... passage of means into meaning’. This tactic has served the sciences well in terms of technical progress: we now understand the lexicon and grammar of the material universe very much better than our seventeenth century predecessors ever dreamt of. But the self-imposed abstinence from *meaning* for the better part of three centuries has led borne strange fruit: many scientists now openly question the meaningfulness of meaning in the name of their science; notoriously, the Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg suggests that the more we understand the universe, the more it seems pointless; others exuberantly proclaim the scientific takeover of meaning discourse, claiming to see ‘the face of God’ or to construct a ‘physics of immortality’. But such discourse is not science: no study of the lexicon and grammar of the universe in itself can tell us about its semantics. There is, of course, nothing wrong in scientists seeking to move from ‘means into meaning’; but we must be aware that we are amateurs – our community has deliberately avoided ‘meaning’ for three centuries.

The arts and humanities at their best represent a collective conversation about meaningfulness. Thus, as Gadamer and others have insisted, hermeneutics – the art of ‘experiencing created form’ – is of the essence. Scholars in these disciplines are exegetes of the ‘offered meaning’ in texts, music, dance, painting and various *objects d’art*, rituals, etc. Interestingly, this list used to include also animals and plants and stars: to the medieval imagination, the hermeneutics of the book of God’s works is an integrated part of the total human task of interpretation; natural philosophy was a prolegomenon to theology. Since the disintegration of the medieval world view, however, the non-human material universe increasingly faded from the horizon of the arts and humanities, and became the exclusive domain of the sciences. The escalating technicality of the ‘philological’ and ‘grammatical’ understanding generated by the sciences helps to seal this division. At the same time, rapid scientific progress made possible by the eschewal of meaning lures some in the arts and humanities into mimicry – replacing conversation with ‘research’, and becoming hesitant in the passage from means into meaning.

It seems to me that the re-invention of a hermeneutics of nature, with humanity a part of it (and not as disembodied ‘minds’ contemplating it), and taking with utter seriousness the painstaking ‘philological’ and ‘grammatical’ work of scientists, is an urgent task facing the arts and humanities. This is no time to be timid.