

The Poetics of Knowledge
University of Bern
5.11.-7.11.2015
(extended deadline)

confirmed keynote: Dr. John Holmes (University of Reading)

One very common narrative about Victorian Britain is that it was an age of ground-breaking scientific discoveries: Charles Lyell significantly extended the age of our planet; Charles Darwin forced a rethinking of the origins and development of life; Michael Faraday and James Maxwell Clark paved the way for modern physics; Non-Euclidean Geometry changed the way mathematicians measured and formalized the world; Charles Babbage and Ada Lovelace laid the foundation for computing. The list could be expanded at leisure, as scientists made and remade the various fields in which humans have tried to make sense of the natural world.

Both the individual discoveries and the underlying myth of scientific progress they allegedly add up to have repeatedly been analysed in narratological terms; Misia Landau (1984), and more recently David Amigoni and James Elwick (2011) have identified the narrative premises common to most scientific accounts of the past. Historians of science, Landau argues, are keen to speak about discoveries and innovations in the form of a meaningful sequence of origin, development and purpose, a structure of beginning, middle and end reminiscent of conventional narratological definitions of the plot in a work of fiction. Others, like Gillian Beer in her seminal study *Darwin's Plots* (2009), have pointed to the way in which scientists themselves clothe their discoveries in narrative garments and how the plots they develop are both influenced by narrative tradition and in turn find their way back into literary narratives.

With this conference we would like to explore an alternative perspective. Instead of concentrating on the narrative character of scientific discourse, we want to explore its poetic side. Our aim thereby is twofold. First, we want to look into the historical and philosophical reasons for the predisposition against non-narrative forms of scientific literature and investigate poetic structures and elements in earlier scientific as well as literary texts that run counter to this alleged predominance of narrative. Based on this, we want to explore nineteenth-century literary works which use scientific ideas and language in non-narrative, and in particular poetic, forms. Relevant questions in this context include, among others, whether there is a fundamental categorical difference between narrative and poetic explorations of science in literature, how the noticeable bias for the former reflects social, political, cultural and economic conditions of the time and whether gender becomes a relevant factor in the choice of poetic or narrative form.

To explore these and other related questions, we invite contributions which address the following topics:

- Literary Theory and Science: Narrative and poetic structures in scientific discourse and accounts of scientific discovery. A theoretical and analytical framework for the analysis of poetic texts dealing with scientific issues.

- Poetic Knowledge vs. Narrative Knowledge: Epistemological implications of poetic and narrative frameworks of knowledge, cognitive preconditions and consequences.
- Scientific Domains and Poetic Voices: Exemplary analyses of non-narrative works of literature engaging with the scientific discourse of the time.
- A Muted Tradition?: Examples of poetic texts addressing scientific issues prior to the nineteenth century.
- The Two Cultures: Accounts of the rivalling discourses of Science and the Humanities in the nineteenth century. Debates about their role in education and their respective cultural relevance.
- Gendered Forms?: The role of gender in establishing different forms of scientific discourse and literary engagements with science.

Abstracts (300-500 words) of 20-minute papers should be sent to irmtraud.huber@ens.unibe.ch or wolfgang.funk@engsem.uni-hannover.de by **13 April 2015**. Please include your name, academic title, affiliation, e-mail address as well as a short biographical note (100 words, approx.). We welcome contributions by junior researchers.

Finished papers will have to be submitted by 30 August 2015. Every presenter will further be asked to provide a brief response (5-7 min) to one paper by another participant.

There will be the possibility to organise child care if needed. Please get in touch with the organisers for more information if you would like to take advantage of this service.

If your home university does not cover your travel costs, you can apply for a contribution towards your expenses.

More information will be available in due time on <http://www.ens.unibe.ch>