

Not A Manifesto

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A tall man, draped in a white lab coat, leans pensively over a row of bubbling beakers. He lifts his chin to peer out through square-rimmed glasses, then shifts his eyes down to a clipboard in order to make a careful note with his freshly-sharpened pencil. He is detached, objective, scientific. The details of his personal life are discarded as soon as he places his neatly-polished shoe on the floor of his pristine laboratory. The paragon of objectivity and truth, he seems to fit neatly into a pre-labeled box from which we can extrapolate everything we need to know about his beliefs and values.

While the physical details of this man may be hyperbolic and oversimplified, our attitudes toward his profession are often just as shortsightedly narrow. Science enjoys an exalted status in our objectivity-obsessed Western culture, but science is a human endeavor; any set of data, no matter how rigorously obtained, will always issue from the necessarily limited human interpretation of that data. While science attempts to order a seemingly chaotic and random world, it can also overlook some of the necessary contradictions and uncertainties that make our existence dynamic, challenging. Every method of thinking must be challenged and examined, especially those that claim to be objective. Nothing exists in a vacuum, and even the conclusions of science are wrapped up in the social context from which they emerge.

In “Women’s Brains,” Stephen Jay Gould asserts that “(...numbers, by themselves, specify nothing. All depends on what you do with them)” (306). In his essay, Gould challenges the ideas of the 19th century anthropometrist Paul Broca who attempted to prove that women had smaller brains than men and were therefore intellectually inferior. Here, where Gould places his primary claim between parentheses, his rhetoric reflects and expresses his fundamental argument. This construction does not imply that the words in parenthesis are only tangentially related to the rest of the essay, but it challenges the reader’s initial assumptions, directly stating the larger ideas implied throughout the rest of the essay. Gould subtly illustrates that beneath the surface of what we take to be the given (the actual argument against Broca’s

claim throughout the body of the essay), there are often larger ideas at work. What appears to be an incidental aside actually contains the key for understanding Gould's idea, that "(...science is an inferential exercise)" (306).

But it fails to follow that no truth can ever be ascertained, or that all scientific ventures are futile and hopelessly biased; yet questions concerning any sort of influential public thinking also raise questions about access and power. Who generates these numbers; what do the numbers claim to stand for, from whose perspective are the data interpreted? The academy's hallowed halls are theoretically available to all those with the requisite intellectual abilities, though systems of oppression often supersede such egalitarian goals, and the institutions that codify power tend to maintain and justify its established balance.

If Gould's argument seems to center on an outdated way of thinking that most modern people would instantly dismiss, the implications of his challenge extend far beyond the anthropometrists of the nineteenth century. He meticulously deconstructs the work of Broca, using markedly scientific diction ("I used multiple regression, a technique that allowed me to assess simultaneously the influence of height and age upon brain size") and structure to challenge the pseudo-science of Broca and his followers (308). Gould not only reassesses Broca's conclusions, but also performs his own calculations, disproving Broca's claims not from an obvious sociological perspective, but from the bottom up, using Broca's own words against him.

Gould had "reexamined Broca's data...and [found] his numbers sound but his interpretation ill-founded, to say the least" (308). When the "social role of Broca and his school" is taken into consideration, the implications of Broca's thinking extend far beyond a self-serving scientist using weakly misread numbers to support his own prejudiced views (309). While the way in which Broca conceived women was clearly problematic, the shortcomings of his method are much more fundamental.

Broca was not only prejudiced against women, but he existed in a realm that believed in "a general theory that supported contemporary social distinctions as biologically ordained" (309). Gould first uses science to deconstruct a specific scientific argument, leaving the assumptions of the school of thought that he questions to stand for larger societal problems. He challenges not only the specifics of Broca's assertion, but the entire method of thinking that attempts to explain away whole groups of people based on a coincidence of shared biology. Gould convinces the reader not only of the falsity of Broca's claim, but also that "the whole enterprise of setting a biological value upon a group" is "irrelevant and highly injurious" (310). Humans are neces-

sarily too complicated to be effaced by a set of numbers, and any attempt to do so will reflect the mainstream sociological ideas, the goals of those already in power. Broca was a male living in a patriarchal society, and his conclusions, as well as the very questions he was asking, presupposed a system in which men are privileged over women.

While science may provide us with a very specific type of knowledge useful in certain specific contexts, what are alternative methods of exploring the problems and ambiguities of human existence, what is another means by which we can attempt to explain and understand our world and how we function within it? In "The Semiotics of Sex" Jeanette Winterson suggests that "it is the poet who goes further than any human scientist," and while the two fields undoubtedly exist in separate realms, operate under different methods and assumptions, they are not diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive (649). Because art does not attempt directly to solve human problems, perhaps it can only complicate them further, and these complications can be a springboard for more interrogation, for deeper exploration. Even institutions and methods that are sometimes extremely useful can be limiting. When we confront such difficulties the most fruitful ideas and ways of looking at the world can emerge. For change cannot happen without struggle, and it is often within the realm of art that rich struggles emerge that provide a space in which to challenge what appears simply to be the case.

Though the roles of subject and object are fairly rigorously established in the scientific world, their distinctions are defied in the realm of art, where viewers can avoid "putting subjective concerns in between themselves and the work" (646). While background and desire shape the way we see the world, true art transcends the mere coincidences of subjective experience, as an art object has the potential to transform itself into a dynamic creature, forcing us to view the world in new ways. Winterson observes that we are often eager to force "the work back into autobiography as a way of trying to contain it," while ironically dismissing the influence of personal prejudices in the scientific world (644). Since "art occupies ground unconquered by social niceties," it is a means of coaxing us out of the easily comfortable terrain of our immediate knowledge and experience (645). Art resists being labeled and tucked away for the same reason that individuals resist being classified by biology: both are usefully complex. Science and art propose different ways of coping with that complexity, but in order for both to be useful, they must counter "the dominant model," deepen our understanding and questioning of the world instead of simplifying it (646).

Gould and Winterson show us how a simple concept or symbol cannot be made to stand for the whole. While metaphor and symbols may be extremely useful at times, a piece of art or an individual cannot be relegated to only one aspect of all that it encompasses. Although the fact of Winterson's lesbianism certainly influences her art, she cannot be fully understood on the basis of her sexuality alone. She is "a writer who happens to love women. [She is] not a lesbian who happens to write" (643). The value of women cannot be expressed by the alleged size of their brains, and Winterson's art cannot be fully explained by the word "queer." When we attempt to describe complicated subjects and objects in this manner, what tends to be retained are the simplifications that support socially-constructed hierarchies. If Winterson's work is viewed as only being relevant in the context of her lesbianism, it loses its power. When the queer element is taken to stand for the whole, it devalues the work of queer artists (thereby upholding the notion that the work of queers is less valuable than that of heterosexuals) and also undermines the potential of the particular art object.

Winterson insists that art is necessarily more intricate than the individual artist, just as Gould insists that women are more elaborate than Broca would have liked to believe. The very structure of Gould's essay speaks to this claim, the bookends of George Eliot's quotes serving as concrete proof of the genius and ability of women in intellectual pursuits. Similarly, Winterson's essay often rhapsodizes, a living, breathing example of the "energetic space that begets energetic space" (648). She does not simply question the "dominant model" in intellectual terms, but actively opposes that model in her own creative work.

Indeed, Winterson suggests that art can serve as the abstract space in which "traditional" thinking can be challenged, subverted. Yet what are some of the concrete consequences of Broca's way of thinking, particularly when it often seems that those with the most regressive and prejudiced ideas are the most influential agents of public policy? How can defiance of the dominant paradigm translate to real social change which not only questions authority but actively undermines it?

Religion is one of the most pervasive manifestations of this approach to thinking that both Gould and Winterson impugn. While attitudes regarding faith vary tremendously among specific religions, regions, and personalities, many experience religion as a means of identifying the individual solely within the context of the group. Many religions claim to provide a blanket strategy for salvation, happiness, eternal life, but can formulaic thinking accurately account for the variation in human experience and temperament? In

Civilization and Its Discontents, Sigmund Freud argues that religion is an easy way out for those not equipped to deal with the realities of human existence.

Freud's problematic sexual politics aside, I think he does, at least in this arena, contest thinking that treats all members of a certain group (in this case, humanity) as though they were identical. He declares that the problem with religion is that "it imposes equally on everyone its own path to the acquisition of happiness and protection from suffering" (36). Religion attempts to treat human beings as though they could all be comprehended in identical terms, but "even religion cannot keep its promise" (36). It is no small coincidence that religion has often been the means by which traditional modes of thought are upheld and centuries-old oppressions justified.

So how can these socially entrenched oppressions be overcome, and what is the role of our linguistic attitudes toward them? If words as signs cannot sum up the whole of our human selves, can we develop a collective vocabulary through which we can explore our current social and individual situations? While some concepts and definitions will forever elude us, we are not entirely prevented from thinking well about ourselves and others.

In India, there are distinct terms commonly used to discuss power. "*Sakar*" describes the government, "*public*" describes the people, and, as Arundhati Roy explains, they are understood as existing in separate linguistic and philosophical realms (6). Roy explains such a phenomenon as the result of India's struggle for freedom being "by no means revolutionary;" it reflects a specific way of thinking about power and autonomy (6). And while "there's an old Hindi film song that goes *yeh public hai, yeh sab jaanti hai* (the public, she knows it all)," the linguistic distinction between government and people illustrates an established way of thinking that seeks to separate those in power from those over whom they exercise that control (8).

Perhaps it is here that the effort to separate individuals from the words and concepts that supposedly define them can be most useful. When individuals start to view themselves as the creators of real personal and political change, rather than simply as the *public*, separate from the *sakar* that governs them, the hierarchies and social structures that Gould and Winterson question may finally begin to disintegrate. If women, queers, poor Indians, everybody who has been defined by one biological aspect of her identity, could resist those simple labels and, instead, investigate an all-encompassing vocabulary or means of thinking that allows for contradiction and difficulty as necessary, beneficial, perhaps we could reconceive power and imagine an autonomy that allows an "energetic space" for all people to probe identity and exist-

tence as they see fit. In that way, we would beget more than the “data” that seem to stand for us.

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