

Point of View By John Atherton

I believe the intellectual life of the whole of Western Society is increasingly being split into two polar groups. . . . Literary intellectuals at one pole—at the other scientists, and, as most representative, the physical scientists. Between the two, a gulf of mutual incomprehension—sometimes (particularly among the young) hostility and dislike, but most of all lack of understanding.

—C. P. SNOW

I AM JOTTING DOWN this account of my tragic life in the hope that it may serve as a warning to young scientists who may be exposed to similar temptation. I have very little time left to live. As I lie here in the aseptic white surroundings of the infirmary of the Nucleana Corrective Institute, I have much to regret. My exposure is already public; it is part of the official record. The sensational details of my downfall may be read by any who wish to search the files of the great metropolitan dailies. Yet these accounts do not stress the lesson to be learned from my fate. Those who have glibly dismissed me as a weakling or a traitor may themselves step blindly into the abyss that swallowed me.

My name is Joseph Priestly Galileo. From my earliest days, both by training and heredity, I have been destined to fill a responsible position in the scientific high command. My father, Aristotle Copernicus Galileo, was one of the most noted astronomers in the history of the University of Bunsenburg, and he confidently expected me to become a Marshall of Physics before I reached the age of 30. My mother, a brilliant and highly respected eugenicist, was devoted to me and always kept the little toy chest in my laboratory filled with electron microscopes, spectroscopes, and diffusion refractors. As I grew older, she persuaded my father to give me a fine cyclotron and a magnificent collection of 1,500 slides of meiosis.

Perhaps it was this unusual devotion of my mother that accounts for the filament of weakness in my character. Certainly she made my youth pleasant as well as promising. Whereas under my father's direction I studied nothing but mathematics, optics, nuclear physics, and thermodynamics, through my mother's influence my leisure hours were increasingly occupied with the gay banter of the dissecting rooms and the sophisticated badinage of the biochemists. I knew that my father was disturbed by the fast set in which I moved, but he refrained from rebuking me because of my mother's connections with the biologists.

I vividly recall an occasion when my parents, always so amicable, almost quarreled over my activities. It seemed a trifle at the time, but now, looking back, I can see its significance. I had dressed to go out for the evening—I was wearing a long silk chemist's gown and a pair of soft rubber gloves—and was about to step out the front door when I heard my father's brusque voice raised in the microfilm library. I paused to listen.

The Confessions of a Poetry Eater

"They were all watching that film on crystal formation, I tell you, boys and girls together, and some of them not much older than 15." At this point my mother broke in, speaking so softly that I couldn't hear her answer. Then, with marked anger and an uncharacteristic impatience, my father went on, "Yes, yes," he said, "that's all very well to say, Louise, but you must realize that portions of that film come dangerously close to art."

With a blush of guilt, partly from having eavesdropped and partly from the coarseness of my father's language, I went out the door to keep my appointment. I should have known that I was dabbling in pitch and that the stain would be permanent. But I was young and careless and proud.

I must rest my stylus now, while the nurse gives me an injection of logarithms. Perhaps then I will have enough strength to continue.

I FEEL STRONGER NOW, and calmer. And I will hasten to the most painful part of my story. It was in my 22nd year that the horrible incident occurred. I had spent an idle and debauched evening at the home of B, a brilliant but unsteady geneticist, several years my senior. We had been playing

three-dimensional chess, and the edge of our objectivity was somewhat blunted by the effects of formaldehyde cocktails. After dinner, B regaled me with some wild and scandalous talk of the state of affairs in mathematics. I can remember that we both laughed over the failure of some of the most respected men of the day to explain the steadily increasing number of illegitimate particles or even keep them in order.

Suddenly B remarked, "Joseph, have you ever seen a copy of T. H. Huxley's 'On a Piece of Chalk?' I happen to have an unexpurgated edition—rather rare, you know."

His conspiratorial manner should have put me on my guard. But, excited as I was by the looseness of our talk and the effect of the cocktails, I succumbed to his improper suggestion and agreed to read the essay. He took me back to his library, drew the curtains, and put a spool of film in the viewer. As the text unrolled before my eyes, I was shaken with sensations I had never known. This was my first taste of a work of deliberate art, and I felt an unreasoning delight—and an equally inexplicable fear.

Standing at my elbow like an evil genius, B smiled at my reaction. "You see, Joseph," he said, as the poison on the pages worked its way with me, "how can it be so bad if it gives so much delight? You must visit me more often. Perhaps," he lowered his voice and bent close to my ear, "perhaps I may let you read a novel."

When I drew back in alarm, he understood that he had gone too far. Pretending that it had all been an innocent lark, he flicked off the viewer and showed me to the door.

I returned home, disturbed and shaken by what I had seen. My mother was in her boudoir, preparing sections for the microscope. I told her where I had been and what I had seen. To this day, after all that has happened, I can still see the pallor of her face, still hear the concern in her voice.

"My boy," she said, when I had finished my shame-faced recital, "you must promise me never to visit B again. I should have suspected the danger in that house. The sensation you describe is the result of inhaling figurative language. That beast Huxley was addicted to it. Come. We must go at once to your father and tell him everything."

When he heard that I had sniffed the sulphur of metaphors, my father at once confined me to my laboratory with a copy of *Principia Mathematica*. But the damage had been done.

The very next day, trembling with desire, I slipped out of my laboratory window and hastened eagerly to B's home, where I continued my lessons in libertinism. From Huxley it was but a short step to the pseudoscientific stories of H. G. Wells, and, before the week was out, I had actually heard a few lines from Shakespeare on B's tape recorder. My parents, supposing that I was safely closeted with my digital computer, never suspected that their son was far along the fatal road to literary addiction. But the very success of my deception led to my discovery—I began to indulge at home.

One evening, about two weeks after my first evening at B's, my father came upstairs to call me for dinner. When there was no answer to his call, he broke open the locked door of my laboratory with a blow from his shoulder. He found me unconscious on the floor with a half-finished volume of *The Faerie Queene* lying open on the table. In a corner, partially concealed amid a heap of test tubes and neoprene stoppers, were a half dozen volumes of the Loeb Classical Library and a copy of *Pickwick Papers*.

Only my father's prompt action saved my life. At once he called the local branch of Literati Anonymous and informed them that his son was in a logophilic coma from an overdose of poetry and fiction. The

emergency squad arrived promptly, administered a heavy sedative of trigonometric functions, and pumped my brain. Only in deference to my father's reputation was the scandal kept from the press.

I was sent to a nursing home in Pasadena, close to the comforting and healing influences of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Here, under the skillful care of addiction specialists, I was placed on a carefully controlled regimen of withdrawal. Starting with a full canto of *Don Juan* on my first day, I was reduced to one epigram a day after two weeks. The process was painful, and the shameless craving of my corrupted mind for literature gnawed at me. But the doctors were capable and firm. Within a month I was pronounced cured and allowed to return home. But I knew that life could never be the same for me or for my parents.

As I look back on those climactic days, I wonder whether more sympathy and understanding might have saved me. But my mother, who blamed herself for my first introduction to art, was cold and distant. For his part, my father watched my every move with mounting suspicion.

The biology texts in my library had been replaced by solid works in quadratics and quantum physics. Even my chemical equipment had been taken away because my father felt that I might be led from organic chemistry back through biology to psychology, which was absolutely prohibited. I was watched openly, spied upon, and guarded like a prisoner in my own house. But the literary underworld never lets a victim escape, and I was ripe for its illicit overtures.

One evening in May, some six or seven months after my first treatment in Pasadena, I was walking home alone from a lecture on spiral *nebulae*. I was in an unusually excited state of mind. Lost in exhilarating cosmological speculations, I took a wrong turn and walked for seven or eight blocks before I realized that I was in an unfamiliar part of the city. I was about to retrace my steps when a gentle tug at my sleeve stopped me in midstride. As I turned around an insinuating voice whispered in my ear, "How about it, guv'nor, could you use a little Eliot?"

How my guilty heart leapt at those words! My deadly cravings returned with redoubled force—all thought of family, position, and devotion to physical science vanished in an instant. I followed the shabby tempter to his squalid lair. There, in a dingy upstairs room above a veterinary supply store, I lay for three days on an unmade cot and devoured volume after volume of Eliot, Yeats, and Pound, all brought to me by that fawning pimp, concealed in the wrappers of the *Lancet*. I was utterly lost.

I HAVE JUST BEEN GIVEN another injection of a sedative, and I feel that my end must be at hand. Thank heaven that I have retained the lucidity and the strength to finish these notes. The conclusion of my story, of course, is a matter of public record. The way my father's agents discovered me, the way they unearthed at the same time an insidious network of literary dens, pandering to the unnatural cravings of depraved scientists, has been sufficiently exploited in the supermarket tabloids. A clandestine press in Soho had been engaged in printing thousands of capsule volumes of *Pride and Prejudice*, and a highly placed Minister of Astrophysics confessed that he had been buying sonnets from a pusher for years. A cache of several thousand poems was discovered in an old trunk in his observatory.

As for me, my senses had been completely shattered by contemporary poetry. There is no known cure.

If my story can be a warning to susceptible scientists, I will rest more easily. Remember, not a scintilla of metaphor can be allowed to touch the minds of our youth. We must stamp out ruthlessly any trace of the terrible traffic in tropes. Alliteration! The horror, the horror! Nurse, please, a couplet, for I am fading fast. . . .

John Atherton is president emeritus of Pitzer College. This article is reprinted from Phi Delta Kappan with the author's permission. Copyright © 1986, John Atherton.