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Amis and guests talk science

Professor of Creative Writing Martin Amis confessed to expecting to learn more than he contributed when he was joined by philosopher John Gray and psychotherapist Adam Phillips to discuss literature and science on 1 December.

The evening event, in the University's Whitworth Hall, was chaired by Head of Public Engagement Teresa Anderson. After the introductions each panellist summarised their key thoughts on the subject, and the shifting roles of literature and science as ways of understanding the world.

According to Martin Amis the rise of science effectively "stopped literature looking up", as well as identifying man's true position in the universe and countering past assumptions about our centrality. We also now realise that we don't have the capacity to understand everything, and must therefore focus on understanding what it means to be human - on inner rather than outer reality; an objective reflected in much contemporary fiction.

Adam Phillips saw psychoanalysis as a discipline torn between literature's appreciation of specificity and singularity and science's desire for grand, comprehensive theory. The analyst must use theory, but only until confronted by its exceptions.

As a child of the 60s he was more interested in art than science, and a product of a post-war education which viewed doubt as a virtue. While stressing that science has of course led to huge improvement and progress, he felt that its authority in many areas has led to a situation where many view it as an ever-present parent, from whom they would like to escape.

In John Gray's view, "explaining things better" has been an intrinsic part of 'the human project' since Darwin. H.G. Wells was an early advocate of the latter's analysis of humans as animals, but initially believed in science's capacity to humanise other species and, indeed, "burn the animal out of humanity".

Yet his fictional vivisectionist Dr Moreau ultimately failed in his attempts to turn animals into humans, a reflection of Wells' own realisation that knowledge can only be used by humans 'as they are' and in pursuit of their own goals. This application of scientific knowledge to the pursuit of human dreams has often resulted in nightmares like genocide, war and environmental disaster, in practice.

As Amis pointed out, the distinguishing characteristic of the human animal has long been held to be our awareness of death - and this directly influences the creation of art as a bid for immortality. Phillips added that humans also uniquely wish to become better animals, and much of the knowledge we choose to accumulate aims to defy or improve upon our inherent animal nature.

Further referencing our understanding of the world around us, Amis turned to the topic of 'pseudo-science', which he believed had no obvious equivalent in literature. Phillips connected the "revolt against reason" the writer described to the rhetoric he and other novelists themselves employ - the "power of persuasion" which, in extreme cases, has prompted and claimed to justify all kinds of atrocity.

Perhaps literature's equivalent to pseudo-science then is propaganda. Phillips certainly felt that we would benefit from finding a new, more analytical approach to all types of reading, to avoid being "taken over by other people's ideas".

The discussion was then opened up to a lively series of questions from the audience, which included whether objective progress could be identified in literature as well as in science, why a distrust of some aspects of science prevails in society and whether science or art has been the more powerful "sword" of totalitarian regimes.

To listen to the debate online using Windows Media Player, please [click here](#). To download the debate to your computer as an MP3 file, please [click here](#).



L-R: John Gray, Martin Amis and Adam Phillips

noise

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Centre for New Writing, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK | [Contact details](#) | [Feedback](#)
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