

AN ARTICLE ON SCIENCE AND A LETTER
TO THE SCIENCE WRITER OF
LIFE INTERNATIONAL



Science is Where the Action is

Guest
 Column by Albert Rosenfeld
 LIFE Science Editor

I got a call recently from an old friend with whom I once shared young literary ambitions. He was astounded to hear that I am now, and have been for some years, a science editor. "Science! I mean - what are you doing way out there?"

"Out there," I explained, "is where the action is."

The answer was truthful, if a bit oversimple. I did come to science by way of literature, but my intention was merely to use science to help find my way back to literature on a new level. In the process, I ran into all this action, and I never left.

I relate this simply because I am convinced that creative literary types who are serious about their calling will have to come to science, where the action is, if they hope to stir up any real action where they are.

The beginnings of this viewpoint go back to a time just before World War II when I found myself growing discontented with the books I was reading. It seemed to me that none of the current writers whose work I admired the most had anything to say to me in the 20th Century. Nothing vital, at least. Sure, it was fine to read about how it was to go hunting with a really marvellous dog on a particular kind of sultry summer afternoon, or to examine the decaying psyche of someone's lesbian grandmother back on the old plantation. But I wanted something more.

Great writing in any age casts some illumination on the major contemporary dilemmas, whatever they happened to be. It seemed to me that our contemporary dilemmas were somehow intimately bound up with science and technology, whose profound impact I felt but did not begin to understand.

It wasn't that I sat down and mapped out an ambitious reading program to educate myself in the sciences. But to my own surprise I would find myself selecting from the library shelf a physics book. I would read as far as I could comfortably make it. Then stymied by my lack of mathematics, I would go get a couple of maths books and start on those. This sort of thing went on for a while in a desultory, unplanned fashion. Soon I forgot I was supposed to be using science simply as a means to understanding other things and began to be trapped by an intrinsic fascination with the subject matter of science itself. One friend has never quite got over the fact that I once wrote him from a foxhole in Italy asking him to send me a calculus text.

As a postwar college student I took extra science courses, though my major subject by then was history, and as a free-lance magazine journalist in the southwest covering an indiscriminate variety of topics I gravitated more and more toward science stories - atomic tests, rocket shoots, surgical feats, archaeological digs. I found crime, politics and disasters much less exciting than what I saw going on in the laboratory. And so today here I sit, full time, where the action is. More action - and in my view, action more crucial for the long pull - than anywhere else I know. More even than in race relations, more even than in Vietnam.

When I first began to feel uneasy about the impact of science, and about my ignorance of it, the time, remember, was before World War II - way back in the olden days, before fission and fusion had come into the world, before the first sputnik had gone into orbit, before we ever started worrying about being automated into obsolescence, before the recent revolutionary breakthroughs in biology and genetics. Now, in 1966, there is incomparably more reason for my conviction that writers who do not dig these goings-on will have very little to say to us in the years ahead.

Science has already transformed our physical environment quite radically and will do so even more as we learn to manipulate electrons, atoms and molecules in ever more sophisticated ways, as we extend our explorations into the bottoms of oceans and out to the stars and planets. But the most striking transformations will be in man himself. We will, before too much longer, be able to control our own physiology, including our brains; to reproduce without benefit of sex; to

to direct the heredity of individuals as well as the evolution of the race. It would be hard to exaggerate the sweeping nature of the implications for human societies and for fundamental human values - which is what literature is primarily about.

Some writers I do not know about may already be rising to the challenge. But my general impression is that the creative people have so far been copping out. Today's hero is the anti-hero, a character nobody cares about, moving through a world not worth living in. I am not saying this is not valid. But it is not enough. Because of its on-sidedness, the image of man it holds up is a lie.

Barbara Tuchman recently pointed out that man's image of himself has been horribly scarred "with the result that man, at this moment in history, may no longer believe in his capacity to be good." I tend to go along with my artist friend, Earl Hubbard, who has lately been saying that artists and writers must create a new image people can aspire to in the fantastic era of change and challenge ahead, an era where man will be free to choose his fate and his future.

To create this image, our creators will be hopelessly handicapped unless they are willing to accept and deal with science and its implications. Science has been roundly anathematized by art, but never dealt with. The challenge is to deal with it. I am not suggesting that all writers should turn to science fiction, that they should write about scientific subjects of feature scientists as their main characters, or acquire a glib acquaintance with scientific terminology. But I do suggest that writers accept and deal with science - not as a separate entity but as a permanent and powerful force that inescapably permeates our entire cultural atmosphere, affecting the everyday lives of all of us, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not.

The quality of our lives from now on will depend on science and the uses we make of it, for its advance will alter our concepts of life, death, individual identity, and every variety of human relationship. When I urge writers to deal with science, then, I am urging them to write their novels, their stories, their poems and their plays with a deep, abiding awareness of human lives being lived in this new context.

I was intrigued by this article and hoped that he will become interested in my work.

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Dear Mr. Rosenfeld,

As a long-time subscriber of TIME and LIFE I had many times the pleasure of reading your excellent science reports, and being a graduate in chemistry and physics I had the privilege to appreciate your competent and lucid explanations.

Most science reports today are about space spectaculars, nuclear frights, or advances in medicine which help a relatively small percentage of mankind. Nothing is reported about advances in mankind's most important field, a field which affects us more than anything else, given us untold blessings, but also untold man-made miseries and massacres.

I am speaking about the greatest human invention which decisively separates us from the animals: articulate language. This most important invention enables us to communicate and co-operate with our fellowmen. Alas, it enables also power-hungry wordmonger to separate us from our fellowmen, to fill us with hatred, until the cold war of words changes to a hot war of mass destruction. Above all, mankind is separated effectively by the thousands of languages and dialects that block effectively human understanding across the language barrier.

Somehow we have come to believe that nothing can be done to improve this sorry situation. Teaching foreign languages has proved a failure, and this includes Esperanto. Moreover up till now there was no simple system available to teach children and adults a simple semantics in order to make them aware of the pitfalls of vague and ambiguous words. We learn the 3 R's in school, but we are not taught the most important R, the Art of Reasoning. The few philosophy students are fed either a scholastic fossil, or a mathematical monstrosity, which cannot help to solve even their own problems in a logical way.

All these problems were recognised 300 years ago when John Locke wrote his "Essay concerning human Understanding". The great mathematician Leibnitz wrote an essay with the same title on a dialogue between himself and Locke. Leibnitz is now considered the greatest language planner who ever lived. He prophesied that one day a new medium will be invented, a simple Symbolis Universalis, a system of pictorial symbols which like $1 + 2 = 3$ can be read in all languages and which would also contain a simple semantics and logic

in much the same way as children have learned to realise that the statement $1 + 2 = 4$ contains a lie.

For 300 years Leibnitz' prophecy was considered impossible to realise. But now in our time Professor Oliver L. Reiser of the University of Pittsburgh told the American Association for the Advancement of Science:

"Bliss realised the ambition of the great mathematician Leibnitz." But learned men and laymen alike still believe that nothing can be done in the improvement of linguistic communication so that only those scholars took notice who have the vision to recognise a new idea which may change our lives.

But other men took also notice, the businessmen in the tourist and travel industry, in the railways, shipping and airlines, in the hotel organisations and other allied businesses. They realised that only Leibnitz' idea of simple pictorial symbols could be used in the airports and railways, and other places where international travellers come and go. They can read the pictorial symbols in any of their languages, in much the same way as pictorial symbols are already used on the highways of the world. But officials could only symbolize a few meanings, and moreover different organisations evolved different symbols for the same meaning. A new Babel was in the making.

There is only one solution available, my system of semantography, about 100 basic pictorial symbols which can be used in combination for any meaning needed in travel, communication, commerce, industry, and even science. I enclose

Semantography Series No. 243, the first 4 pages of the second edition of my work. You can ask for a review copy from one of the largest distributors of foreign books in the U.S.A. Just write to Mr. Wm.J.Mitchel, President
Acme Code Company Inc.

102 First Street, Hackensack, N.J. 07601

and he will despatch it to you immediately. In the meantime, I include herewith

Semantography Series No. 280, A sample tourist folder of Universal pictorial Blissymbols for the international traveller, and also

Semantography Series No. 303, To all Officers interested in the use of pictorial symbols.

When you have the review copy before you, please open at page 486 and see how I propose subcaptions in pictorial symbols under every caption and picture of LIFE INTERNATIONAL. See from the tourist folder how simple my symbols really are, and you can make experiments yourself to see that children pick up these symbols, and write sentences within the first hour.

All this seems to lead up to a plea to write a promotion report in LIFE. But you must realise that I am in my 70th year. I personally have spent all my time and all my savings on this idea, working on it for the last 25 years. I don't want to make a single penny. I want only that a distinguished science writer like you should report about it, so that young minds can take the idea up and make it a practical reality in the decades to come.

You may be interested to know that Margaret Mead and Rudolf Modley have already got permission to stage an exhibition in the LIFE-TIME exhibition rooms in which my work will be prominently featured. Also, the New York publishers Lothrop, Lee & Shepard are bringing out a book "Signs and Symbols around the World" in which my work will be prominently explained and promoted. Furthermore, investigations are starting to see whether my symbols can be used as universal subtitles under movies shown via the Comsat satellites to the whole world. And many more people are considering the use of my work.

It will surely come. And it would be a pity if another pictorial magazine should break the story. I think you are the man to bring this science report, and hence I am writing to you, promising you all support in this venture.

Hoping that all this will find your interest, I am awaiting your reply.

Sincerely yours,
C.K. Bliss, B.Sc.

And this was the result:

Dear Mr. Bliss:

Many thanks for writing to Mr. Rosenfeld about Semantography.

We're sorry to disappoint you, but the project you have in mind is not feasible for us.

Sincerely yours,
Roger Keith
for the Editors of Life.