

# HARTS

# & Minds



Article © HARTS & Minds  
Image © Internet Archive Book Images

Science: A Narrative Theory

Ted Bonham

HARTS & Minds: The Journal of  
Humanities and Arts

Vol. 3, No. 1 (Issue 8, 2016)

## Science: A Narrative Theory

*Ted Bonham*

Every story must have a beginning. Or at least, we suppose, it must begin somewhere. Which is not to say that these are our beginnings. This is not, we think, our story, though it falls to us to speak it. And as start we've said it must, then it may as well with this – the hypnotic blue rumble of a Bunsen burner flame. Or rather, the words we have to describe it. Their implied heat.

Have you ever spent an hour or two in contemplation of what somebody somewhere once or twice called nature's television? Not us. Television is nature's television, all built up out of the more-or-less basic blocks of it. If you divide a still image into a collection of small coloured dots, your brain will reassemble the dots into a meaningful image. And that meaningful image, or rather that fiction of meaningful, is now, or might as well be that of lit Bunsen burner. Such an image is perhaps designed to conjure up more-or-less certain memories of your own school science laboratory. The disordered row of you perched up on stools arranged along the long wooden lab tables interspersed with gas taps and patterned with decades of graffiti. The Chemistry Club Choir chorusing those early days when an adolescent Science, like the rest of us, was only striving to be understood. Carving her name with a compass, paying extra attention to crafting the perfect S out of two sets of three parallel vertical lines, and four parallel lines each at 45-degree angles. The S is no S, it is the Kryptonian symbol for hope. It will be obsessively repeated on the covers of future exercise books. It is not, however, important for our current narrative. At least we don't think so. We don't think though, do we?

Where were we? The laboratory? Perhaps, perhaps. Or else in the space beneath the fridge that, with the right dishonesty, at least resembles what you remember as a science lesson. A cockroach skitters across the floor, away from the light. But what was the flame for? Just to lick at the air like that? Flickering. Beckoning? Fire is yang in character. Its motion is upwards and its energy expansive. Fire is the rapid oxidation of a material in the exothermic chemical process of combustion. Slower oxidative processes like rusting or digestion are not included by this definition. Fire is hot and bright and the hearth represents home. The sun is a flaming ball of fire and Icarus kept flapping his wings but soon realised that he had no feathers left and that he was only flapping his bare arms. Of course, the Wright Brothers realised what man really needs is a fixed wing. Aviation was initially very dangerous, there is plenty of documentary evidence of this. We are moths to a story, but that crash and burn is for another time.

Science closes the slot opening in the base of the Bunsen burner reducing the amount of airflow to the flame. The reduction of oxygen from its equimolar optimum results in a less complete combustion and a cooler reaction. The flame turns from blue to yellow and visually appears to lengthen, its movements growing more languid. The roar diminishes. Science stands up from her desk and walks over to the window to reflect on her pre-post-structuralist surroundings. She has always loved this impossibly future-proof Earth with its theories of abiogenesis. It is a place that encourages her tendency to feel falsifiable.

Some afternoons we feel as if we have had a couple of drinks with lunch. We do not eat lunch, nor drink. We do not feel. Science, in need of a pick me up, takes a nose full of amyl nitrite, a gift from her godfather Karl, and feels the hot rush of her mind. How many powerful people are against her? How many powerful people are against us? But people are short lived.

Look, Science can make something out in the distance, or rather someone. In the distance, but progressively less distant, is the figure of Civilisation approaching. Civilisation is a proud monster with ample hands and cataract eyes. Science has mixed feelings about her, but considers her a child and believes perhaps she can be moulded. Our mothers called us little monsters. Our mothers always told us that they must have broken the mould when they made

us. Alexander Fleming was a very untidy man. All mothers end up broken eventually. All breaks are most welcome in this workaholic culture. Our most cultured mould was our mothers. Alexander tells us we'll sleep well tonight.

Science hiccoughs. She can taste the mould she scraped from the bread that became the toast she had for breakfast. She glances at her own reflection who glances back. Why when she winks her right eye does her reflection wink her left eye? She has an admirable, brutal beauty, handsome eyes and endless tentacles. Why when she moves her left-most tentacle does everybody flinch? Her friends know her best. Her friends know nothing. It all comes down to where you stand on the epistemology debate. Epistemology was looking a little beaten up last time we saw him. He smells of feet. Science's friends see her as a thoughtful technology. Once, she even saved a fair priest that was stuck in his brain.

But not even an admirable person who once saved a priest is prepared for what Civilisation has in store today.

It is often said that cockroaches could survive a nuclear holocaust. We are unsure about the science behind this but we know who to ask. An observer's observation of the experiment can alter its findings. Who knows if our subject can even hear us. The moon shines like white mice, making Science arrogant. The moon does not indicate night, often the moon and the sun share a sky. We are unsure if Science can hear us. We will have to devise an experiment, or have her devise an experiment, but anyway we can see her arrogance in the straightness of her nose and back.

As Science steps outside and Civilisation comes closer she can see the faint smile on her face. Whose smile, on whose face? These kind of questions require pondering just as we realise that our story needs a little thickening out. A little flour in the sauce. We should not tell you this. It is not the done thing, but the thing is done. Do our bums look big in this?

"I am here because I want progress," Civilisation bellows, then checks herself and repeats it in a loving tone. "I am here because I want progress". Love is what Poetry calls lust. Civilisation slams her fist against Science's chest, with the force of nine thousand frogs. "I frigging love you, Science". Love is the glue that holds Society together.

Science looks back, even more arrogant, swaggering almost, whilst standing still. "Civilisation, we need more funding", she replies.

Civilisation snorts, she likes to pretend to be outraged, it is all a part of the process. A process is a series of steps taken to achieve a particular aim. Science and Civilisation love aims and objectives and outcomes, but most of all they love results. Results are what they use to work out their funding formulas. The formulas are spurious. The aim is to hold things together. To adapt but not so much as to give up a single iota of power. Power is provided by the good people at the power plant. People die. Plants grow out of the earth. Submitting them to extreme pressure after death helps them turn to delicious coal. The world is burning up. Remember that Bunsen burner flame? We are watching. There is only one way to test if the world is future-proof.

They look at each other, attentively, like two gentle guinea pigs replicating a very noble experiment. Aphex Twin's seminal 'Windowlicker' plays in the background and two deranged statisticians data-crunch to the beat. The millennium bugs out. We are safely over 1,000 words. The word count is unimportant, unless you're trying to make things add up.

Science regards Civilisation's ample thighs and penis envy. She holds out her tentacle. "Let's not fight", she whispers, gently, "please?".

Civilisation looks hopeful, her body blushing like a nuclear dawn. Science develops atomic theory. Then Civilisation comes inside for a nice drink of electricity. Perhaps Science follows her in, but you will have to finish the story for yourselves. Cockroaches have eaten the last few pages.

## Notes

This short story began with a plot generated by plot-generator.org.uk. Science is a thoughtful technology with endless tentacles.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Biography**

Ted Bonham is **James Horrocks**, a doctoral researcher in English (Creative Writing) at Birmingham City University. His research interests include the literary fragment, the appropriation of found texts, and the borderlands between fiction and autobiography. Find him @TedBonham.