

Modern Language Association

Defining Interdisciplinarity

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Source: *PMLA*, Vol. 111, No. 2 (Mar., 1996), pp. 271-282

Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463106>

Accessed: 10/02/2010 19:08

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FORTY-TWO readers of *PMLA* responded to a call for comments on the extent to which interdisciplinary goals in literary studies have been achieved. The statements are arranged in four sections: Defining Interdisciplinarity, The Role of Theory, Enumerating the Obstacles, and Perspectives from Particular Fields. Below is a list of contributors:

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Defining Interdisciplinarity

For at least two decades, “interdisciplinary” has ranked high among the accolades that educators accord their colleagues’ work. The term is both pervasive and seductive. Granting agencies frequently set aside special funds for interdisciplinary proposals, and college recruiters highlight interdisciplinary projects on their campuses in addressing high school prospects. After all, interdisciplinarity

suggests collegiality, flexibility, collaboration, and scholarly breadth—the academy’s equivalents to parenthood and apple pie.

Unfortunately, interdisciplinarity and its implied antithesis, (intra)disciplinarity, defy absolute definition as intellectual concepts; their meanings are at best provisional and institutionally dependent. In this respect, they resemble the fickle deictic modifiers *this* and *that*. A speaker who refers to a Rolls-Royce as *this fantastic car* while passing it in a parking lot will adjust after proceeding only a few spaces down the line—it is now *that fantastic car*. Analogously, scholars constantly adapt their definitions of interdisciplinarity to fit the various institutional contexts from which they speak.

As a graduate student in a department of linguistics in the 1970s, I regarded linguistics as an autonomous discipline. Wholly contained *subdisciplines* included phonology, syntax, and semantics; *interdisciplinary* work generally occupied “hyphenated” fields such as psycho-, neuro-, and sociolinguistics. Within this framework, I chose to pursue research in stylistics, which my advisers and I saw as an unhyphenated but nonetheless interdisciplinary area situated between linguistics and literary studies. True, stylistics could claim at least a fifty-year existence as an independent field of study, and it supported several specialist journals. But at that time there existed neither an active professional organization dedicated solely to stylistics nor departments or programs in stylistic studies, either of which might have served to legitimate the field as a discipline in its own right. (Today, of course, the emergence of the International Association for Literary Semantics and of academic programs such as the Programme in Literary Linguistics at the University of Strathclyde, in Scotland, might lead one to the opposite conclusion. This development alone demonstrates the highly provisional status of disciplinary designation.)

After taking my doctorate, I accepted an assistant professorship in an English department, where I was assigned to introductory linguistics courses virtually identical in content to those I had taught as a graduate assistant. Now, however, those courses functioned institutionally not as introductions for students embarking on a linguistics major but instead as electives that offered “an interdisciplinary perspective” to undergraduates committed for the most part to literary studies.

I then served for several years as director of the university’s Linguistics Studies Program, a unit classified as one of three interdisciplinary programs, the other two being Women’s Studies and Afro-American Studies. In this instance *interdisciplinary* acted merely as a synonym for *interdepartmental* (departmental status itself having been settled a priori).

Meanwhile I had gravitated to the MLA Division on Linguistic Approaches to Literature, one of thirteen subsumed under the broad banner of Interdisciplinary Approaches. The titles of some divisions in this group combine literature with other well-established disciplines—for example, Anthropological Approaches to Literature, Philosophical Approaches to Literature, and Psychological Approaches to Literature. The Divisions on Women’s Studies and on Ethnic Studies, by contrast, do not link paired disciplines in that way. Literature and Science and Literature and Other Arts both relate literary studies to “superdisciplines,” areas considerably wider than might usually qualify as disciplines. And Children’s Literature denotes a subdiscipline of literary study rather than an interdisciplinary field at all.

However, the apparently random assignments to this group turn out to have a perfectly cogent institutional basis. The MLA employs as the primary basis for classifying its eighty or so divisions either the language in which literary texts are written or, where that language is English, the nationality of their authors: the divisions on American literature form one group, followed alphabetically by those on English, French, German, Hispanic, and Italian literatures, and then by the group Other Languages and Literatures. A collection of divisions in Comparative Studies challenges the MLA’s primary classification by crossing language boundaries; another set covers work more usefully classified in terms of genre. And for topic areas that are nonliterary, the MLA offers divisions in Language Studies and in Teaching.

Given such an organizational grid, it is easy to see how Interdisciplinary Approaches should have come to encompass a miscellany of divisions that would otherwise have had no home. Even an area such as children’s literature—in which the basic materials and methods used differ very little from those appropriate to, say, study of the English Romantic period—becomes interdisciplinary by default when it fails to fit anywhere else in the MLA architecture.

The evidence is overwhelming, then, that interdisciplinarity constitutes not an inherent characteristic of an article, book, course, or research program but the byproduct of a highly contingent system of intellectual categorization whose form is dictated by locally specific institutional forces. This conclusion in turn entails a commitment to three partially overlapping principles. First, it suggests that the epithet *interdisciplinary* should be used neither to lionize colleagues nor to disparage them, neither to elevate their work nor to marginalize it. Scholarship may be praised for its originality, insight, coherence, or thoroughness, but interdisciplinarity does not belong on any such list of criteria. Second, scholars need con-

stantly to remind themselves of the permeability and fragility of the membranes that surround whatever discipline, subdiscipline, or interdisciplinary field they are working in, and they need to remain open to the possibility that new interests (their own or those of others) may distance them from colleagues in their field or bring them closer to those ostensibly outside it. Finally, as members of academic institutions (a department, a college, a faculty senate, the MLA itself), scholars should stay alert to the presuppositions that underlie each institution's demarcation of the disciplines, in order that, when necessary, they may defend the presuppositions or, perhaps, argue for revised, institutionally more appropriate definitions.

TIMOTHY R. AUSTIN
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In many ways the profession's sense of interdisciplinarity has not changed very much in recent years. In spite of or perhaps because of current practices in higher education, which emphasize the narrow specialization needed for disciplinary inquiry, the figure of the eclectic polymath as a model for interdisciplinarity is still predominant. The figure is dangerous because it inherently validates disciplinary boundaries and suggests that interdisciplinarity has more to do with capacity and retention than with synthesis and analysis.

As interdisciplinary fields such as those that combine literature and science (the area I know best, as coordinator of the Program in Science, Technology, and Culture at Georgia Institute of Technology) have grown, so has the dilemma of avoiding the reification of conventional boundaries while resisting the self-congratulatory tone of the polymath. Both tasks are difficult given the overwhelming influence of science and technology in social and academic discourse. It is hard to resist the impulse to use "interdisciplinarity" (now a buzzword across the curriculum) to reassert the importance of the humanities in universities increasingly driven by technical and vocational imperatives. No matter how well intentioned, this strategy is misguided not merely because it reinforces the hierarchy of disciplines but also because it implicitly suggests that interdisciplinary programs are important primarily because of the service role they play for more established programs in science and engineering.

Even the most well-intentioned colleagues imagine that literature-and-science programs are essentially elaborate forays into technical communication, with a minor dose of literary studies to give students the appropriate cultural veneer. The popular image of interdisciplinary programs thus often fails to encompass a full sense of what being interdisciplinary might actually mean.

The problem is partly taxonomic. "*Interdisciplinary*" suggests an almost mechanical linkage between disciplines, when in fact all the different modes of intellectual inquiry fit into a cultural matrix that isn't easily mapped. Needless to say, the forced nature of the copula in "literature and science" is no better. Other terms, like "*infradisciplinary*," begin to evoke the idea behind these programs more accurately, but ungainly neologisms often have few advocates. When my colleagues and I developed a degree program in science, technology, and culture, it met with some resistance because to colleagues in other departments the title words seemed too disparate to be linked. It has been our practice to describe the degree as "cultural studies of science and technology," a phrasing that seems more sensitive to the spirit of what we do than other terms.

The cultural studies of science and technology encompasses the idea that all forms of cultural expression influence and are influenced by the other forms. And while hardly a remarkable insight, the idea means comprehending science and technology, disciplines that have attempted to sustain the appearance of objectivity and disinterest. The ostensible neutrality of science was sustained by the encyclopedic notion of interdisciplinarity, which arranged knowledges neatly, distinctly, and—most important—separately on the plane of intellectual inquiry. Contemporary views of science and technology, shaped by Foucault, Geertz, Haraway, Latour, Fish, Beer, Hayles, Levine, Shapin, and Serres (to name a few), insist that everything about science and technology, down to its very methodologies, is subject to social and cultural influences.

The response to this emerging concept of interdisciplinarity has not always been pleasant. In *Higher Superstition*, for example, Paul Gross and Norman Levitt cantankerously defend the sanctity of science and technology from critical scrutiny that stems from any source but the discipline itself. Using the "social construction of science" as a universal bogeyman, they warn that unqualified barbarians are at the gates of science and that the sole aim of these "intruders" is vandalism and destruction. Yet if annihilation is on anyone's mind, it seems to be on the scientists'. Gross and Levitt indulge a fantasy that involves successfully replacing the faculty of a humanities department with autodidact (read polymath) scientists who could "patch together" a functional humanities department. It is difficult to imagine a more perverse or cynical view of interdisciplinarity; yet, as I have tried to suggest, the very limitation of the term enables so outrageous a claim. The barbarians to be feared are the dilettantes who can construe interdisciplinarity so simplistically.

That researchers should be rigorously committed to understanding the objects of their study is surely a cornerstone of good scholarship in any discipline. With growing frequency in the humanities, those objects have been and will be related to the branches of human inquiry called science. But science, like almost all subjects with intellectual appeal, is a multilayered system that can be approached in diverse ways; while one individual may be concerned with the practice of science, another may study the dissemination of knowledge, and yet others the invention of methodologies or the application and implementation of results. Cultural productions, whether scientific, technological, literary, or artistic, all emerge from environments that resist the scientifically useful but highly artificial notion of mutually exclusive categories. The project of the cultural studies of science is not to announce the arrival of interdisciplinarity; it is to help us find our way in a world that is always already interdisciplinary.

ALAN RAUCH
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It may be that God is in the grammar, as Nietzsche remarked, but with epistemology failing around us, we keep announcing a dissident writing beyond the certainties of the sententious, or a language of “performativity” that will outwit, baffle, or abolish the regulatory functions that work in the name of the law. The space in which this is to be accomplished is an affective “in-between,” where subversion is second nature and the model of insurgency is the diasporic agency of those who have suffered the depredations of history but managed—through the lore of displacement or fragmentation, its aporetic murmurs or marginal noise—to keep the struggle going and academics charged.

If there is “a mode of minimum rationality” whose versatility of articulation not only has survival power but also changes the subject of culture (Homi K. Bhabha, “Postcolonial Authority and Postmodern Guilt,” *Cultural Studies*, ed. Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler [Routledge, 1992] 57), it is not now and is not likely to be, in any foreseeable future, the heuristic mode of any scholarship, within the disciplines or across them. Nor will the “radical project” of cultural studies, infinitely extended through alien cultures but, like Einstein’s universe, curving back on itself, escape the positivism it deploras—canons of judgment, rules of evidence, and, despite postmodernism’s devastating critique of authority, the question of authority nevertheless. Whatever the apparently borderless energy acquired in passing from the insularity of the literary text through the political uncon-

scious to the prophetic voice of the wide world dreaming on things to come, the validation of knowledge—wherever it comes from, out of the library or off the streets—remains the principal issue of interdisciplinarity, as it was for Lévi-Strauss in “the science of the concrete.”

Asking who is doing the validating is sometimes as much an evasion of the issue as a definition of it, though sometimes too the insistence may come from an unaccredited source, as it did many years ago for me in an affective in-between, which remains in memory as a cautionary tale. My first degree was in chemical engineering, and my first book, on my work in the theater (in which I started a career while completing a doctorate in English and American literature), had a chapter entitled “Growing Up with Entropy”; the title crossed one of the gospels of the 1960s, Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd*, with an unresolved fascination for that rather distressing concept of the second law of thermodynamics. I had studied that law at a time when it was possible to solve all problems (at least on exams) with almost no theoretical understanding of what entropy was, though I had a premonition that it wasn’t very good. It wasn’t until I began to study literature and thought about Hamlet, Emma Bovary, the bald spot on Vronsky’s head, Bartleby the Scrivener, Didi and Gogo, or the Eliotic version of the Saussurian signifier, words slipping, sliding, and decaying with imprecision, that I grasped the idea of entropy as a measure of the *unavailable* energy of the universe, the increase of randomness causing a leak.

There was a moment, however, when I was rather chastened, and with an authority I’ve rarely encountered in an academic context. When he was a teenager, one of my sons had a friend named Charles, a buckle-and-leather type who might have been a Hell’s Angel but who later, as a National Merit Scholar, finished the entire chemistry curriculum at Stanford in his first year. Charles rather liked my thinking about scientific concepts in what he considered a “literary” way, but one time, as I pressed an issue with a metaphorical leap, the indulgence suddenly snapped: “You don’t know,” he said, “what the fuck you’re talking about.” And I suddenly knew I didn’t.

Vanity being what it is, that didn’t prevent me from thinking across borders, still growing up with entropy (but defined now, too, by information theory) as a measure of the uncertainty of knowledge. Sometimes, I think, we haven’t learned to live in doubt. While the Heideggerian notion of a boundary as a beyonding and not a customs barrier has been taken up by critical theorists, current debates still presume that passports need to be stamped and subject positions declared. The rites of passage across boundaries are not really settling for an in-between, where space and time cross with variable

knowledges and ideological differences—what is being settled on instead is a new set of categorical imperatives. I certainly won't tell Pat Buchanan, but this development puts a quite limiting damper on the debates, even when we're urged to teach them. And though over the entire spectrum of cultural studies all are urged to historicize, there is one dominant theorization of history, into which all the talk of *histories* is accommodated. The knowledge that seems to be falling between the cracks here remains with historians who are largely unread.

The legitimacy of crossing or hybridizing disciplines is not so much in question anymore but the claims being made in a crisis of authority with the rhetoric about subversions and transgressions while invisible power is laughing up its sleeve. Meanwhile, the "heat death" of entropy has taken another turn, a sort of clinamen in the void, into chaos theory, where the laws of physics are seen less as laws than as functional reductions that permit one to think about complex systems, like that of late capitalism, whose reality is neither a logic nor a law but rather an environmental totality of forces and tendencies only predictable within the shadowy limits of the indeterminacy principle. There is another lesson here for interdisciplinary studies. However programs are structured, allowing for the suffusion of disparate knowledge that is in some final analysis, as Wallace Stevens might say, the weather of itself, what is precipitated as weather (or not) may arise from incremental variants of the most unforeseeable kind, with chance having "the last featuring blow at events," as in the mat-weaving sequence of *Moby-Dick*. This is not to yield all of reality to the aleatoric, only to recognize that when inquiry moves from a subject position to an institutional or global scale—with shifting demographics, forced migrations, satellite transmission, and transnational finance, and where decolonization is matched by resurging nationalisms with obdurate histories—then the capacity to think about reality across disciplinary and cultural borders requires something less formulaic than the going historicism or the mantras on power arising from an overdose of Foucault. In this regard, in between, there is still a leak in the universe.

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A political analysis of disciplinary *and* interdisciplinary knowledge could not be more timely as the United States university undergoes profound changes in the 1990s. At the beginnings of the cold war era, linguistic, literary, and cultural instruction in American studies, area programs in Soviet studies, and Latin American studies emerged as part of an effort to foment both a new articu-

lation of American traditions and an understanding of the potential trouble spots for United States world dominance. The struggles of the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s also helped usher in interdisciplinary programs in women's studies, black studies, Chicano studies, and gay and lesbian studies. These fields introduced analytical categories such as gender, race, sexuality, imperialism, and colonialism that cut across the disciplines and enabled the discernment of objects whose formulation and study pointed to the political stakes of the epistemological enterprise.

Institutionalized in part as a form of crisis management by the government in the 1970s, these programs are now fending off the assault of the conservative turn in United States politics. Their predicament is compounded by the availability of new forms of inter- or transdisciplinarity, such as multicultural and cultural studies. With the waning of affirmative action and other Great Society programs, boards of trustees and university administrations can more easily justify cutting ethnic studies programs or folding them into cultural studies programs that presumably address issues of race and gender while enjoying wide popularity and a solid market share in journals, university press publications, and the media.

According to a recent report, area studies programs are also destined for cutbacks if not outright elimination now that the cold war that justified them has ended. Because they were seen as crucial to national security, even research that "had no identifiable relationship to cold war concerns" was supported (Stanley J. Heginbotham, "Rethinking International Scholarship," *Items* 48.2-3 [1994]: 33-40; 34). Funders now give priority to such issues as ethnic rivalries and the negotiation of diversity in civil society, the understanding of nationalisms and religious fundamentalisms, the transition to democracy, and other factors crucial to the development (or hindrance) of markets and market institutions (William H. Honan, "The Quadrangle Becomes a Globe," *New York Times* 6 Nov. 1994, sec. 4A: 14+). Culture and diversity are growing in popularity in the humanities and social sciences, not only because United States demographic trends require a rearticulation of national identity but also because social science and business programs are "focus[ing] scholarly attention on issues of ethnicity, religion, and language" (Heginbotham 37). A recent textbook on global marketing highlights the "cultural values that make [marketing techniques] useful in formulating strategic plans and programs in the global marketplace" (Richard L. Sandheusen, *Global Marketing* [Hauppauge: Barron's, 1994] 99). Drawing on a range of research into national and local cultures, this marketing approach attempts to approximate a "global cultural studies" (105).

The focus on the diversity of values in the global marketplace as a way of capturing and retaining an expanding range of consuming publics has affected trends in education and employment—not only the emergence of MBA and other training programs in global business but the transformations in the United States university system as a whole. That “American education needs to go global” means “internationalizing the curriculum” at home, particularly in elite institutions that will develop the expensive interdisciplinary programs to give their students a competitive advantage in the global marketplace. It also means that well-off foreign students will help maintain the financial health and influence of United States graduate programs at elite institutions (Honan 15).

Interdisciplinary programs at public colleges, while important for achieving understanding of a multicultural, multiracial society, will prepare students at best for jobs in the middle levels of the ever-growing service sector. The programs may also help trim the size of faculties as interdisciplinarity does double and even triple duty in satisfying culture, pluralism, diversity, humanities, and social science requirements. Thus, interdisciplinary programs may help the efforts of budget-cutting politicians who are brokering the business sector’s evasion of the public good. Indeed, the intersection of elite universities with the global marketplace—the president of one university is intent on making it a “center for worldwide conferences of university leaders” (15)—may be contributing to the underdevelopment of public higher education.

While interdisciplinary studies provides different ways of discerning objects of study and understanding how the disciplines are implicated in a politics of knowledge, it is important to keep in mind that all interdisciplinarity are not equal. So long as the term and the programs that go under it remain unexamined, the inequities that are already being instituted will receive the imprimatur of a justifiably sought-after recognition of diversity. The interests served by such programs need to be examined, no matter how pedagogically sound the programs are.

GEORGE YUDICE
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Interdisciplinary is a vexed term that absorbs contradictory attitudes and aspirations. For scholars indifferent or hostile to traditional organizations of inquiry, a better term might be *postdisciplinary* or *antidisciplinary*. For others, *interdisciplinary* denotes not a rebuke to established fields but a collaboration between them and an extension of their separate possibilities into new areas.

Paradoxically, those who undertake collaboration often face more difficulties than those who simply break with

established disciplines. The *and* in “psychoanalysis and literature,” “law and literature,” or “science and literature” signifies a goal difficult to define, much less achieve. Scholars in one field often confront the twin tendencies of their counterparts in the other field to trivialize their work and to idealize it. Psychoanalysts, for example, may reduce literary criticism to literary appreciation and exempt its practices from any need or desire to produce “scientific” (objective, reproducible, predictive, quantifiable) change, while simultaneously wondering at the subtleties of literary theory. Literary critics may dismiss the debate about the hermeneutic basis of psychoanalysis as irrelevant or obsolete, while idealizing the transformative cultural force of psychoanalytic theory. Rather than collaborate as equals, we too often appropriate the “other” discipline on our own terms, subjecting it to our needs and wishes. We distort it by investigating and using only those elements we choose and disregarding the field as a whole. As a result, our would-be collaborators in the discipline we find so alluring may dismiss us as ill informed. Psychoanalysts, for example, smile in bemusement when literary critics assume that psychoanalytic theory stopped with Freud (or Jung or Winnicott or Lacan). Literary critics smile when psychoanalysts assume that literary theory stopped with New Criticism.

Interdisciplinary work requires the investigator to honor the assumptions, the history, the methods, and the current multiplicity of each discipline. Literary critics often seem unaware of important conversations taking place among colleagues in other fields. They would do well to attend to those debates; they may find issues remarkably similar to those in their own field. Concern for “the subject” and “agency,” for example, is common to the work of feminist, queer, postcolonialist, new-historicist, and textual critics who are studying ways that representation is generated and positioned through sets of human relationships. It is also a major concern of such psychoanalytic theorists as Daniel Stern, who is testing psychoanalytic concepts through observations of infants and parents; Thomas Ogden, who is developing an important new “relational” paradigm of psychoanalysis; Stephen Mitchell, who is redefining the psychoanalytic situation as a meeting of the “multiple selves” of analyst and analysand; and Stanley J. Coen, who offers a relational theory of writing and reading. The new relational paradigm is a significant advance beyond the object-relations theory and the Lacanian linguistic theory still prominent in the work of many psychoanalytic literary critics. At the same time, however, literary critics have gone beyond most psychoanalytic theorists in understanding and explicating the implications of object-relations theory and Lacanian theory.

It is difficult to work at a comparable level of knowledge and sophistication in more than one field and to recognize possible intersections and parallels. Few members of one discipline systematically read and keep current, much less gain bona fides, in a second field. There are, of course, exceptions: Roy Schafer uses literary theory to explicate psychoanalytic theory; Meredith Skura traces the parallel developments of practices in literary criticism and clinical psychoanalysis in *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process*; and Patrick Mahony reads Freud's writings with careful attention to the psychic and rhetorical sources of their style. A number of literary critics since Norman Holland and Steven Marcus (including Skura and Mahony) have completed formal training in psychoanalysis, despite strong opposition from psychoanalysts who fear the trivialization of their field as just another kind of interpretation. Others, like me, have not completed such study but are fortunate to work with psychoanalysts who generously instruct literary critics in their discipline and welcome reciprocal comments on literary criticism. Many critics have been drawn to psychoanalytic methods and derive their claim to authority from their personal experience of psychoanalysis, but the expense of analysis and of psychoanalytic candidacy makes both kinds of training difficult for many scholars to undertake. I do not know of any psychoanalysts who have subsequently undertaken doctoral studies in literature, although the curriculum in several psychoanalytic institutes is being altered to include the perspectives of other disciplines. At the Seattle Institute for Psychoanalysis, for example, first-year candidates are asked in what ways they might consider an analysis and a text to be read. Interdisciplinary centers for research, like those at New York University, the University of Florida, and the State University of New York, Buffalo, facilitate ongoing work and communication through conferences, publications, and Internet bulletin boards. In other places, scholars rely on informal discussion groups and personal friendships. Most often, interdisciplinary courses are developed and taught within established departments. In such departments, interdisciplinary work may be regarded as a radical challenge, then accepted, then dismissed.

I believe that practitioners of every discipline live in the same moment and are moved to ask the same questions, albeit framed in their own vocabularies. Right now, a major concern in our society is violence, both public and private, rooted in a sense of lost relationships and lost agency. Not surprisingly, there has been a resurgence of interest among psychoanalysts here and in South America in the work of Melanie Klein, the preeminent psychoanalytic theorist of rage, hatred, and loss. Teachers, theorists, and critics of literature are also trying to

address these issues in classrooms and in research. Whether or not these two disciplines choose to collaborate, their common interests, hopes, and fears will be obvious to an observer a hundred years from now.

SARA VAN DEN BERG
University of Washington

In the prehistory of feminist cultural studies—by which I mean certain stunning intellectual moves that preceded the introduction of feminist work into the academy—there stand two monumental studies, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, both models of original inquiry into the female condition and of interdisciplinary approaches to that inquiry.

A work of imaginative literature, *A Room of One's Own* begins with the implied question, *What about women and fiction?* In order to get to her famous conclusion, at once material and cultural, that a woman needs five hundred pounds a year and a room of her own to write fiction, Woolf has to learn what amount to alien tongues, including the discourses of history, economics, and sociology. Beauvoir, also a woman of letters, examines texts from biology, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and fiction to articulate for the first time the theory now called the social construction of gender.

Although the ideological and institutional barriers these two women encountered were formidable, at least no department head told Woolf to keep off other disciplines' turf or that literary study could not accommodate her question, *Why are women poor?* No committee chair said to Beauvoir that the question whether one is born or becomes a woman is settled in the delivery room, not the philosopher's study.

By contrast, a feminist critic in the academy today attempting, however modestly, to follow the trails blazed by Woolf and Beauvoir runs headlong into the walls established by her own and other disciplines, each with its characteristic object of study, research methods, and discursive practices. Indeed, bringing feminist studies into the academy has entailed a confrontation with the traditional organization of knowledge into disciplines. "What is this?" I used to be asked about my early work. "It's not literature, it's—it's *sociology!*" And sociologists felt free to dismiss the same work as hopelessly tainted by belles lettres.

Nonetheless, the institutional barriers that determine whether it is possible for such work to be carried on at all are insignificant next to the barriers in my mind, echoing the internal voice that Woolf called the angel in the house and that she heard cautioning restraint in criticism of the patriarchy. The angel I hear—who sounds more like the

bank robot reciting my inadequate balance than any imaginable angel—scornfully inflates my attempts to use the insights of other disciplines into delusions of polymath grandeur. Scholarly integrity and the responsible care that it informs are useful and enabling qualities, but the fear that I can't possibly know anything about economics or government because a whole department in the next building *really* knows the subject is paralyzing and unproductive. What place does or can a discipline assign to the outsider's acquired fluency? And is there anything of value that the visitor from another field brings with her?

When I collaborated on a book about feminist scholarship with a historian, a specialist in comparative education, an anthropologist, and a philosopher, we all learned how ineradicably, despite our common commitment to interdisciplinary work, each of us had been marked by disciplinary experience (Ellen Carol DuBois, Gail Paradise Kelly, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, Carolyn W. Korsmeyer, and Lillian S. Robinson, *Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe* [Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1985]). Our fields had endowed us not only with a body of knowledge and its theoretical underpinnings but also with a characteristic mentality—perhaps even a *mentalité*. Thus I discovered in my early forties, after some years as a literary critic and theorist with a decided interdisciplinary bent, that I was a literary critic and theorist with an equally decided predilection for texts, discourses, metaphors, and tropes. Since I remain convinced that the central questions of feminist studies—Why are women poor? still resonates, for instance—require the insights of many disciplines, interdisciplinary collaboration offers an obvious solution. Indeed, collaborative work has become so important in feminist scholarship that the issue of collaboration itself has begun to be analyzed and theorized.

Despite the proliferation of collaborative efforts, academic practice continues to create obstacles by refusing to recognize egalitarian authorship, by *et-al.*-ing later-listed authors into oblivion, identifying joint authorship as joint editorship, and granting each author only a fraction of the credit or sometimes none at all (see Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "In Pursuit of Connection: Reflections on Collaborative Work," *American Anthropologist* 97 [1995]: 29, 32; Lillian S. Robinson, "The Practice of Theories: An Immodest Proposal," *Concerns* 24 [1994]: 14, 18). An institutional context that runs the gamut from incomprehension to hostility does little to foster collaborative work. But, once more, some of the greatest obstacles are internal, caused by the same disciplinary assumptions and biases that make collaboration necessary and desirable.

I am currently collaborating with the anthropologist Ryan Bishop on a study of international sex tourism entitled *Night Market: Thailand in Postcolonial Sexual Cartographies*. Jointly reviewing a book in the same field, we found that each of us unquestioningly assigned it to a genre that derived from our own disciplinary framework. Bishop read it as meta- if not subethnography, whereas I saw it as female confessional (see Ryan Bishop and Lillian S. Robinson, rev. of *Patpong Sisters: An American Woman's View of the Bangkok Sex World*, by Cleo Odzer, *Z Magazine* 8 [1995]: 68–70). Although both of us would identify our "real field" as cultural studies, we retained disciplinary reflexes. What saved us was precisely our location on "undisciplined" terrain. That and a shared postmodern preference for both-and over either-or solutions. This is decidedly not the usual role of postmodernism on the interdisciplinary scene. For those feminists whose theoretical model subsumes all the matters I want to explore by way of anthropology, economics, and political theory under the rubric of "discourse," literary studies is (always already) top discipline as well as master discourse. This self-confident procedure may be many things (the definition of a married couple as one person—the husband—comes to mind), but it is not interdisciplinarity.

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Are scholars and teachers in literary studies invested in interdisciplinary research? A glance at recent scholarship suggests "yes," inasmuch as we actively read historical documents alongside literary texts, apply our methods to a variety of cultural artifacts, and ponder—in contexts like this forum—the extradisciplinary effects of our interpretive practices. But the answer is surely "no" if being interdisciplinary means regularly examining the models and modes of discourse of another field. In fact, as our interests expand, we in literary studies become, if anything, more certain that textual facts and social acts yield best to our own analyses. This attitude is especially evident in my area of research (linguistics and literary criticism), but it also shapes recent pronouncements on history and anthropology. We are most insistent about our particular perspective with those fields that our expanding interests have brought closer to our own.

So to recast my initial question: Is borrowing from another field or extending the domain of a discipline the same thing as interdisciplinarity? I have already implied that often it is not. And yet certainty about one's own disciplinary goals is not wholly a bad thing. As Stanley Fish

once argued, disciplinary boundaries are necessary to ongoing research; otherwise one would not know where to begin, what to find, how to give evidence (“Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do,” *Profession* 89 [New York: MLA, 1989] 15–22). We are then living out the inevitable when our perspective on other disciplines is firmly rooted in our own. Certainly in (or near) my field, I would praise the local success of research in the “borrowing” mode, whether it develops or only suggests disciplinary connections: linguistics-influenced criticism, linguistic study of meter, narrative analysis, or pragmatic approaches to fictional convention. Though the interdisciplinary commitments represented here vary, such projects share discipline-specific goals that the outside field comes to serve.

But to celebrate disciplinary perspective is also to admit insularity. For the paradoxical, and also unattractive, effect of disciplinary focus is the developing hope, alternately idealistic and territorial, that literary studies will merge with neighboring disciplines or absorb them. How might we otherwise imagine interdisciplinary work? Most often and obviously our interdisciplinary projects borrow from nearby fields. But being interdisciplinary could also mean collaborating piecemeal among disciplines on some subsuming but partitioned project. More rarely, an interdisciplinary effort might generate across departments a cowritten paper addressing a question neither author can solve alone. Whatever the interdisciplinary mode or aim, we would expect such projects to work best when the goals of each discipline are compatible enough to focus research but enough at odds to stimulate new approaches to old problems. And we would assume that interdisciplinary training succeeds most when it finds institutional support.

A number of points relevant to literary studies follow from these simple observations. First, interdisciplinary collaboration is everywhere suspect but nowhere more than in literary studies, which barely credits coauthorship within departments. Second, collaborative partners and compatible projects are hard to find. Institutional factors are partly to blame, but arguments for interdisciplinarity, cast as “boundary breaking,” fail to serve us if they foster merely adversarial postures. We would converse with outside fields better—in order both to teach and to be taught—were we to live more comfortably with disciplinary difference. Finally, as we streamline graduate programs in response to economic pressures, students will find interdisciplinary work—the kind that seriously invests in two fields—increasingly difficult to do.

How important is it to maintain and extend interdisciplinary projects? I would not say that work that calls itself interdisciplinary is somehow superior to work that

does not. Nor can I claim that at present interdisciplinary interests enhance one’s professional profile. (As a psycholinguist once observed, everyone suspects you really belong in another department.) But graduate training in different disciplines is like experience with other cultures; nothing serves to illustrate the contingency of one’s methods and models so well as the shock of finding problems relocated and redefined. And I value the stimulating pressure of contrasting disciplinary points of view in professional life. Could I remake our professional world, I would ask first for more thought about early graduate specialization. Next I would wish us to ease disciplinary isolation—to accept a broader range of interdisciplinary efforts, to collaborate, and to arrange structured occasions for interdisciplinary debate. The rewards here are not momentous—simply an enhanced perspective on our own perspectives.

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In my fields of specialty, comparative literature, cinema, and performance, the use of methods from other disciplines, such as philosophy and psychoanalysis, has resulted in groundbreaking reconsiderations of the received genealogies of subjectivity, gender, sexuality, race, class, and culture. The general acceptance of the merits of interdisciplinary study is attested by the frequency with which national literature departments hire colleagues with interests and training in other fields: comparative literature, ethnic studies, philosophy, cinema, art, anthropology, et cetera. But such self-willed institutional cross-fertilization has resulted in the frequent erosion of the intellectual reciprocity that should motivate and legitimate interdisciplinary study. I am referring to a kind of interdisciplinary hegemony in which advocacy of one discipline remains suspiciously neglectful of the material and conceptual legacy of another.

In some cases, this neglect results from the pursuit of the modern at the expense of research and reflection on the ancient. Although this practice is certainly not novel to the history of the humanities, it works no better for new epistemologies than it did, say, for the new science that eventually returned to the reading of the ancients. In other cases, interdisciplinary hegemony results from the hallucinatory effects of exposure to new materials and methods that leave colleagues relatively indifferent to the disciplined pursuit of their doctoral subject and their pedagogy in, say, literary study. One bothersome feature of such headlong pursuit of the other (discipline or period) is the arbitrary bricolage of this or that from

one discipline to embellish another. Yet this mainly benign result may be symptomatic of more troubling methodological challenges facing the welcome rise of interdisciplinary pursuit.

The most serious challenge is the political temptation simply to abandon study of a particular discipline or historical literature in response to ideological biases that might have framed the discipline or literature in the past. It is true that consideration of the methodological roots of particular disciplines may involve prolonged analyses of frustrating matters that scholars might rather transcend, like the reliance of early modern theater and philosophy on figures of the “savage” or Freud’s phallogocentric affection for the trials of Oedipus. But at issue is whether historically laden disciplinary epistemologies and economies can be adapted to emergent social and political considerations. Conversely, is it intellectually prudent to assume that emergent fields have little to glean from the disciplinary methods and legacies now under suspicion?

For example, cinema studies, which is particularly interdisciplinary in practice, has witnessed a growing suspicion about psychoanalysis, one of the disciplines to which it has been theoretically indebted. Even scholars working outside this field have heard the call to dismiss psychoanalysis for favoring phantasmatic generality over historical particularity and for being historically hostile or indifferent to a wide range of identity positions, especially those with feminist, racial, queer, and postcolonial inflections. These criticisms derive from the understandable concern that specific film practices will be reduced to something like a master discourse of psychoanalysis. But they are also based on the questionable assumption that cinematic analysis can easily distinguish politics from fantasy, force from desire, and cinema from psychoanalysis. Even more problematic, these suspicions remain blind to the historical bases of interdisciplinarity itself. Is it even possible to dissociate clearly the historical development of the modern institutions of psychoanalysis and cinema? Haven’t both disciplines been complicitous in borrowing from each other to help map the modernist parameters of female and male subjectivity and sexuality? And haven’t related conceptualizations of perspective, hallucination, visualization, moving images, voice, and echo been crucial to both? For instance, contemporary cinema’s stilted portrayal of psychoanalysis (*Basic Instinct*, *Whispers in the Dark*, *Silence of the Lambs*, etc.) and recent psychoanalytic studies of transference (Pontalis, Green, Borch-Jacobsen, Kristeva, Žižek) reveal how cinematic flashback and hallucinatory projection are conjoined in the gendered representation and analysis of trauma.

Openness to interdisciplinary reciprocity can also work to the advantage of psychoanalysis, which all too frequently contrasts the pathos of the unresolved illnesses of its patients with the bathos of artistic creativity and sublimation. In making that contrast, the psychoanalyst remains indifferent to the psychosocial structures and traumas of cinematic and literary representation, visuality and textuality, to which Freud was drawn for guidance in understanding the enigmas of psychical presentation. Turning reciprocally to examples of the cinematic and literary matter of psychoanalysis would promote discussion of how creative fantasy often speaks on behalf of psychoanalysis. Such comparative study would consider how the illusions of fantasy (like those of literature and visual culture) serve as the partial support of psychoanalytic reality in lending structure to the aural and visual relations of analysis. While it may be difficult to recognize and to map the visual and aural registers of the psyche, it may be illuminating to situate them in analogous relation to the psychosexual mechanics of cinema and literature (which themselves are frequently compounded by reference to the theorizations of psychoanalysis and trauma).

Of course, the challenge and/or danger of focused interdisciplinary reciprocity is that such work may alter the foundational assumptions of the fields under consideration. But even when such welcome alterations result in the definition of evolving disciplinary practices, as with cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies, they will not maintain their efficacy without an active dialogue with the historical reevaluation of the disciplines from which they emerge. Finally, in response to the serious crises in staffing both traditional and emergent curricula, sensitivity to the intellectual benefits of reciprocity must involve a refusal to bend to economic and political pressures simply to trade one curriculum for another. The exciting pedagogical challenge of the twenty-first century will necessitate reliance on the principles of interdisciplinary and historical reciprocity in shaping the university curriculum of the future.

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To the extent that literary criticism has concerned itself with reference, it has had an interdisciplinary object. The many topics taken up by nineteenth-century British periodicals, for instance, as they invoke one subject (law, economics, religion) to explicate another (poetry, novel, romance) demonstrate the practical recognition of this point. The assumption that words *mean* is itself interdisciplinary. A reference to marriage in Shakespeare’s

sonnets draws its meaning from discourses of history, religion, and heterosexuality. "Marriage" is intelligible only through reference to other terms; the sliding of the chain of signification is not just the slippage between signifier and signified but also the meaning-producing movement that occurs *through* the frames of disciplinarity.

If, as Derrida argues, the law of genre requires its own contamination, the law of discipline equally depends on the unacknowledged permeability of its boundaries. Because disciplines are in continual transformation, it is inadequate, for example, to use a legal text such as Blackstone's *Commentaries* to gloss a reference in Byron's *Don Juan* to contract law, because the two texts were engaged in a wider political struggle over the meaning of public agreements; this struggle shaped, and continues to shape, law, literature, legal scholarship, and literary criticism. Alternatively, to understand the legal context for Shakespeare's *Othello* requires thinking about how criminal law has been shaped by readers—usually admirers—of Shakespeare (several Tennessee legal opinions in murder appeals quote Shakespeare to justify their narrative). This recursive dynamic marks the political and intellectual necessity of a historicizing interdisciplinarity that regards the construction and maintenance of the disciplines as part of the meanings of texts—even those texts that seem most comfortably nestled in the realm of the aesthetic.

Certain topics and questions are more visibly marked than others by the disciplinary wars that result in their current intelligibility. For example, the effort to analyze the representation of lesbianism is hampered by the dominance of one discourse—psychoanalysis—in the creation of the object of inquiry. This dominance gives rise to several strategies: to reconstitute the lesbian within the terms of psychoanalysis; to scuttle psychoanalysis altogether (but that leaves the history that gave rise to it intact); or to perform a genealogy of the diacritical formation of both psychoanalysis and lesbianism. But the point remains that the disciplinary boundary is as pronounced around the lesbian as it is around psychoanalysis. Or the invisibility of the object may be enacted by its dispersal across disciplines. The representation of the human body, for instance, has been parceled among literature, history, philosophy, the visual arts, and the sciences; in a sense, to refuse to engage with the body's interdisciplinarity is to reproduce its dismemberment.

Both of us—an early modern gender theorist and a British romanticist—are concerned about the specific conceptual boundaries we confront in our individual projects. One limit, however, circumscribes us both: the construction, reading, and utilization of evidence. As a scholar works in the interstices of history, science, law,

visual arts, and literature, evidentiary claims (as well as their dismissal) tend to police intellectual movement; this policing can take the form of reifying certain truth claims while not adequately problematizing the methodology that produced them. Recourse to "rules of evidence" fails to account for the extent to which the adjudication of claims is a disciplinary formation. Not only does each discipline construct its own criteria of proof, but what counts as proof is itself contested within, as well as across, disciplines. To understand this contest in historical terms is the crux of interdisciplinarity. Rather than use presumptive standards of admissibility to discredit speculative work, we need to ask how a matrix of evidence gains consensus, by means of which criteria of inclusion and exclusion. By what means is evidence read as symptomatic of an "event"? To the extent that the concept of evidence is a scientific or legal paradigm, how does evidence in those discourses depend on literary, historical, and religious presuppositions?

Pressuring the status of evidence by means of such a genealogy suggests the possibility of moving beyond current configurations of proof. It might be useful to supplant the epistemological privilege of evidence with that of the predictive hypothesis: If we hypothesize *X*, what do we bring to light that might otherwise have been occluded? Using predictive hypotheses provisionally is a tenuous, enabling form of scholarship that demands intellectual generosity. The payoff is the foregrounding of evidence as a circular, accretive construction contingent on historical selectivity and disciplinary criteria.

The existence of different paradigms of proof contributes to the lack of protocols for engaging in dialogue and to the difficulty of translating across disciplines. These paradigms in turn give rise to the illusion that while one's own field is fractured, contradictory, and riven, other fields are stable, coherent, and open to untroubled exportation. When we turn to an eighteenth-century legal text for a notion of marriage, for instance, and learn that it is an "economic union original to civil society" (*The Laws respecting Women*, 1777), we should not accept this definition as a gloss on the marriage plot or as a statement of the way things were or as an irrelevancy to the aesthetic expression of desire. Rather, we should explore as political conflict and rhetorical positioning the heteroglossic production of what marriage will, always provisionally and partially, have meant. Analogously, when we speak of interdisciplinarity in the present tense, we do so with little sense of how certain subjects remain inconceivable because of current disciplinary configurations. Highlighting how discourses and disciplines are produced as stable, resisting the practice of merely importing the findings of other domains in order to engage with and

critique their guiding terms, is a crucial challenge posed by interdisciplinarity today.

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Every discipline has rules and limitations of its own—certain ways of doing things, both for better and for worse. Interdisciplinary study works because people from one discipline are not routinely bound by the same assumptions as people from another. They do not necessarily share the same blind spots, focus on the same things, or think about problems in the same way. So, often, they can see through the assumptions that ground other disciplines so thoroughly that the assumptions have become invisible axioms. People from another discipline can understand problems—and, sometimes, reach solutions—in a new or cogent way. In other words, interdisciplinarity brings with it the benefits of defamiliarization. It can break through to powerful insights.

Interdisciplinary success stories abound. One is the reevaluation of Freudian theories that resulted from the perception of narrativity in Freud's case studies or, from a different angle, the perception of his vexed and illogical ideas about women, which are often the result of metaphoric thinking gone wild. Another is the broadening of art history from its traditional preoccupations with artistic genealogies and iconography to include issues like race and gender. A third is the arrival of poststructuralist relativism in anthropology.

Literary studies has played an important role in all these developments. It was unlikely, to give one example, that a trained psychologist would have thought about Freud as a storyteller or a master of metaphor; both perceptions were natural for literary critics. Interdisciplinarity has enhanced the power and prestige, not to mention the available subject matter, of my discipline—important benefits of interdisciplinary studies to members of the MLA.

Not all the gifts of interdisciplinarity are unambiguous, nor are all uniformly welcome. Some ethnographers, for example, don't want to hear how poststructuralism compromises the validity of their findings. They equate poststructuralism with self-consciousness or narcissism. It might be healthier for them to point out that ethnography has addressed the issue of cultural relativism for a long time, for example, in the work of Franz Boas. In fact, too few literary theorists have bothered to read foundational books in anthropology, which often address

problems of interpretation and cultural contact. It's arrogant for scholars in fields like postcolonial studies not to know and acknowledge landmark texts in anthropology that raise and illuminate key questions. Interdisciplinary scholars need to fill in gaps like these. In the same way, interdisciplinary critics in literature and theory departments need to learn more about statistical documentation, interviewing and sampling techniques, and fields that require special expertise, like math and music.

But there is no getting away from interdisciplinarity, even in the way people write. Many disciplines—ethnography, history, and literary criticism—are being affected by impulses toward narrative and memoir in scholarly writing. To some extent, such trends are a product of the prestige of literary studies. Most of all, perhaps, they are the result of an increased interest in crossover writing, not just among scholars but also among the university presses and trade houses that publish them. But such impulses partly derive from interdisciplinarity itself. When writing crosses disciplines, scholars cannot count on captive or built-in audiences. Prose has to be accessible to people who are not longtime specialists. Terms must be defined, however briefly, and references identified. Arguments must live and breathe, as well as have sufficient detail to satisfy experts.

Interdisciplinarity has no promises to keep and none to break. It is not a mantra or a magic potion. Work that cuts across areas of study is as good or as bad as the individual books and articles that do it. Certainly, working across disciplines is not the only or even always the best way to do scholarly work. Interdisciplinary approaches work best on problems that show up in more than one part of a culture. For that reason, the rise of interdisciplinarity, and its future, are tied to cultural studies and cultural criticism.

For readers of *PMLA*, who are trained in literary studies and love it, close reading is likely to be the basis for interdisciplinary work. Whatever kind of text they are working on—novel, poem, photograph, film, painting, ethnography, or psychological casebook—their skills as close readers are essential. Interdisciplinarity also requires research in a scrupulous number of primary and secondary texts or in archives. Still, the goal of such research should not be to re-create the specialist's training point by point. Indeed, that kind of re-creation can never be done by someone who comes to one field professionally after mastering another. But the exact replication of another discipline's point of view would defeat the main purposes of interdisciplinarity: defamiliarization, fresh insights, skills from one area of expertise enriching another and making up for another's limitations.

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