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POSTDISCIPLINARITY

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As we all know, interdisciplinarity is a Good Thing. Yet I cannot help being sceptical about the way the term has been used in recent years. My scepticism is based on ten years' experience as member of an interdisciplinary discussion group in my university, comprising an astronomer, a chemist, a historian, a lawyer, a philosopher, a physicist, a surgeon, a theologian, and somebody in English. We have become friends, we have learnt to respect each others' views, but the experience has been sobering. The only areas where we could talk with each other have been epistemology, the history of science, and ethics. The experience has still been precious to me, partly because of sudden isolated insights (e.g., the surgeon and I noticing the striking similarities between a diagnosis and the interpretation of a poem), but mainly because it has taught me that the dream of universal knowledge, which is also the basis of humanism, is indeed a dream; and it may be a dangerous, imperialist one. Who has the power to define what is generally human?

Reviewing the arguments that have been presented during this conference, one thing has struck me in particular: how frequently modernity, how frequently 'the project of the enlightenment' has been mentioned, and how frequently the view was expressed that it may have come to an end. Yet it was entirely done in the discourse of modernity, which has, after all, produced the kind of knowledge characteristic also of the humanities. This creates a paradoxical situation, from which we may feel tempted to escape by denying that anything has really changed.

Interdisciplinarity is a case in point. It suggests that the same object of study may be viewed from different angles; and because there is an object, the results will be complementary. For the same reason the results will bring out clearly the characteristic features of the various approaches as they are typically called. If, however, we have learnt the lessons of structuralism and accept that each discipline constructs its objects in its specific manner, the situation is different. Various constructions will strengthen, undermine, and transfigure each other and lead to the shaping of new objects. This is the topic I should like to address.

The study of literature seems to be in a state of crisis. As it

has always been, some would argue, as this is the very condition for it to flourish. But the present state seems to be characterized by a certain weariness, a morning-after feeling <853> following a party full of heady (theoretical) talk and the self-reflexiveness that we have learned shows us a wan and bleary-eyed face in the mirror. Radical questions suggest themselves that concern the very nature of what we do, at least to some of us. We are looking for remedies. Interdisciplinarity seems to offer itself as a homeopathic drug of the kind we need, and as such it has become crucial to academic discourse. But perhaps we have woken up in a different place.

I am speaking as one who sees things from the perspective of English, and this will, of course, affect the way I perceive (or rather construct) them — things that I still hope may be useful beyond the range of my own discipline.

But *is* English a discipline? What is a discipline anyway? Is the collaboration between a physiological and an acoustic phonetician interdisciplinary, as it has been suggested to me? Can there be interdisciplinary disciplines?¹ Remarkably little theorizing has been done about such questions, and I can only sketch some problems and possibilities here. For the sake of conciseness I shall eventually concentrate on the argument of one book on literary and cultural studies, one that deals with the issue in a representative manner²; statements on other self-proclaimed “interdisciplinary disciplines” like American Studies, semiotics, or what has come to be called simply “theory” might have served as well.

Interdisciplinarity used to be fashionable and it seems to have become commonplace. When in the 1960's new universities were founded in Britain, interdisciplinarity was high on the agenda, and reflections of this can still be found in their prospectuses. I should like to quote some passages concerning the University of Sussex. The Vice-Chancellor, in the prospectus for “Undergraduate Entry 1993” writes about the founders: “They aimed to break down the barriers between subjects in order to emphasize the inter-disciplinary nature of knowledge.” (1). In the “Graduate Programmes in Arts and Social Studies 1991-1993” we read: “Sussex is an internationally recognized centre for work in that essentially interdisciplinary area known as literary theory', 'critical theory' or, often, simply 'theory'.” (9). In both cases interdisciplinarity seems to be considered something totalizing, even having essence. In other words, it is emphatically not the type of interdisciplinarity where specialists from different fields team up to solve a specific problem, e.g., in urban development, or in preparing a papyrus for exhibition.

On the other hand, a document of 1975 is rather defensive about course organization: “There was first of all no disposition to reject the desirability of a solid disciplinary core to the undergraduate course: It was ... accepted by all that it was the duty of a university to ensure that its studies involved exacting, disciplined work.” (Elkins 1; quotation from Daiches 18).

Interdisciplinarity here appears to be something slightly disreputable; only disciplines, it seems, can teach discipline. I shall return to the problem of definition.

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Where does this call for interdisciplinarity come from? There are several <854>> possible motivations. We can distinguish between holistic motivations and, in a deliberately sixty-ish phrase, anti-establishment ones. The holistic view, in turn, may be conservative or utopian. Conservative holistic interdisciplinarity (what a mouthful!) is a nostalgic appeal to a mythological time before the dissociation of disciplines, as it were, to a time when truth was universal, when the kind of specialization we are familiar with today did not yet exist. These atavistic dreams tend to have their clear limits, however. Not much thought is usually given to what English, for example, shares with other fields in the modern languages; and it is conveniently forgotten that the beginnings of English as a discipline were marked by acrimonious debate and dissension.

Utopian holistic interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, casts its glance forward into a world where division has been overcome, where borders have become flexible, where everything is part of a quasi-aquarian flow. We find this view, for example, in Betty Jean Craige's notion of holohumanities in her book *Reconnection* (1988). She proposes an attempt to overcome Cartesian dualism, on the basis of the awareness that all knowledge is socially constructed. This insight may be particularly obvious in literary studies, though people in the field were late in accepting this. Literary studies in her case acquires the status of a master- or metadiscipline.

Anti-establishment interdisciplinarity questions disciplines without really wanting to risk their disappearance. It is largely characteristic of the sixties. The system of disciplines is understood as hardened, as limiting perception, and in need of being shaken up. Often it is understood as representative of bourgeois institutions in general, which have to be overthrown. But the answers, as the programmatic statements about the new universities show, turned out to be remarkably cautious. Disciplines should be questioned, placed in context (in Schools, for example), but not lose their crucial roles. And they certainly have not done so in these universities.³

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What then is a discipline? The OED lists several meanings that are of interest in our context. One is “branch of instruction or education; a department of learning or knowledge; a science or art in its educational aspect” (2); another: “the order maintained and observed among pupils, or other persons under control or command, such as soldiers, sailors, the inmates of a

religious house, a prison, etc.” (5) The relationship between the “department of knowledge” and “the order maintained and observed among pupils, or other persons under control or command” constitutes “discipline” as it is of interest to us: It refers both to a body of knowledge and to the practice of a community which is characterized by authority.⁴

A definition of this kind is close to Thomas S. Kuhn's notions of the paradigm and of normal science, as introduced in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, <855> so close that Antony Easthope, whose book *Literary into Cultural Studies* I should like to single out as an example, uses Kuhn in his discussion of the possible transition from literary to cultural studies.

I cannot discuss here the reasons why Kuhn's model has been so influential in the humanities. Two factors have been crucial: It questions the notion of progress, and it does not seem to make a difference between the sciences and the humanities. It has not been generally accepted either, of course. Three points of criticism should be mentioned here: One concerns the vagueness of Kuhn's notions (How do, for example, traditions spring from examples? And how do these contribute to the shaping of a community?). Secondly, Kuhn's model does not really account for the co-existence of several scientific communities beside each other, and their interaction, precisely the collaboration across disciplinary borders. Finally, in Kuhn's scheme an essentially coherent community is revolutionized but does not break up⁵: i.e. Kuhn's model does not give an account of specialization.

Still, Kuhn seems to be useful in accounting for changes in disciplines. Easthope introduces him in the first paragraph of his book:

most of the time the scientific community sails along happily within a paradigm, a consensus about methods and ends. From time to time, however, new evidence or contradictions within the paradigm accumulate until the paradigm itself falls into doubt. At this point there is crisis, a return to 'first principles' and an intense interest in theory (for which there is no need while the paradigm rides high). Thereafter, a new paradigm is established, theoretical questions are put on the shelf and things return to normal.
(3)

Concerning literary studies, he announces two pages later: “I shall argue that the old paradigm has collapsed, that the moment of crisis symptomatically registered in concern with theory is now passing, and that a fresh paradigm has emerged, its status as such proven because we can more or less agree on its terms and use them” (5) — hence the title of his book *Literary into Cultural Studies*. A question that intrigues me here is: What does the “we” (in “we can more or less agree”) refer to? Is it, in terms of grammar, inclusive or exclusive? If the “we” were inclusive, the book need not have been written.

In his section on “Discipline and interdisciplinarity” (171-72) Easthope denies literary studies its claim of being of “a coherent, unified and *separated* discipline”. Cultural studies, on the other hand,

draws on a range of knowledges conventionally discriminated into disciplines: semiotics, structuralism, narratology, art history, sociology, historical materialism, conventional historiography, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction. It therefore threatens the fixity and homogeneity of subject position proffered in the conventional separation of autonomous and fragmentary knowledges within the human sciences, each constituted by their separated objects and procedures (172).

Cultural studies is therefore a “decentered paradigm” (171).

<856> It is not difficult to agree with such an analysis, even though one may have doubts about the status as disciplines of some of the knowledges listed here (psychoanalysis? deconstruction?) and about the absence of others (linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, cognitive science, psychology, etc.) — but these preferences and omissions are due to the institutional context of which Easthope is part.

The new paradigm is characterized by one thing in particular: “Nothing would discriminate the study of signifying practice from its parental discipline so much as this,... [A]t every point in that series of supposed immediacies [posited by literary studies] cultural studies insists on the materiality of the process of its own construction as a discourse of knowledge.” (174) What is described here as characteristic of the new paradigm, theoretical awareness of one's own doings, is, of course, precisely a characteristic of crisis in Kuhn's account. Normal science, as we have seen, is characterized by “a consensus about methods and ends” (Easthope 3).

Why should the use of Kuhn's model be at all attractive under these circumstances? Its attractiveness is precisely in the vagueness of terms that has been criticized. We should note that Easthope uses Kuhn's model to explain the transformation of one discipline into another rather than paradigm change within one discipline. More importantly, as we have seen, Kuhn's model does not allow for further institutional fragmentation into subcommunities and new, more narrow disciplines. It therefore implies that literary studies as a whole is transformed into cultural studies rather than fragmented into more narrow specializations.

But Kuhn's model is not simply imposed on a process; it is also modified in at least two respects. I have pointed out that the new discipline/paradigm of cultural studies, as described by Easthope, has all the characteristics of crisis in Kuhn. This first adaptation serves two interests: On the one hand, it caters for our — our? — postmodern incredulity towards meta-narratives⁶; in Kuhn's terms we might say that we are trying to extend the passage through crisis for as long as possible, institutionalizing

crisis, as it were. There is another, more important change, however. Kuhn's model does away with the notion of progress. In Easthope's account we move beyond the traditional notion of discipline. The new "discipline" can therefore be viewed in terms of progress.

Why does the overlapping, the imbrication of traditional and not so traditional disciplines have such an important role to play (see Easthope 129-30)? The overlapping knowledges (or disciplines) that go into the makeup of the new discipline make the transitions between paradigms and disciplines appear tidier than they might otherwise look. The history of science shows that the institution of new disciplines may be a messy process, depending on social factors (people who know each other), the creation of public symbols (slogans, canonical texts), around which people can gather, sheer coincidence (the book taken from the library shelf), etc⁷. Easthope's tidy account gives reassurance to those who have become <857>> restive and dissatisfied with what they have had, yet are fearful of something unexpectedly different. It allows for the complementarity (to some extent) of the familiar — familiar at least to those who are trying to found one kind of Cultural Studies. The first person plural mentioned earlier is therefore neither inclusive nor exclusive, but an attempt to create inclusiveness, inviting us to join a community, reassuring those who perceive a state of crisis and see the opportunity, even the necessity of radical thinking, as well as those who are yearning for the haven of a new traditional discipline (from which they can again happily set sail).

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I should like to end with three conclusions and four predictions. Firstly, interdisciplinarity as a programme of the kind discussed by Easthope serves the stability of institutions, the kind of stability threatened by both postmodern anxiety and playfulness. It is a totalizing gesture towards a single universal knowledge, even if this only consists in the claim that everything is constructed; and the notion of constructedness, after all, still gives full authority to human agency. Secondly, "interdisciplinarity", as a new form of collaboration, marks a moment of crisis, and is therefore only *a stage* in the development of new paradigms and disciplines. Thirdly, transformation without fragmentation cannot be taken for granted, because changes in the system of disciplines are not a tidy process. All these observations together suggest that "interdisciplinarity" of the kind discussed here should properly be called "post-disciplinarity", with all the reverberations that this prefix may produce.

Or "pre-disciplinarity", if Kuhn's meta-narrative is valid. Can we risk any predictions? My argument suggests the

following: Firstly, disciplines, like other institutions, have a tendency to persist; English, as we know it, will probably be among them. Secondly, disciplines atrophy. I think it was Jacob Burckhardt (a fellow Bâlois) who said that boredom was one of the moving forces of history; from what semioticians have told me, their discipline may be a case in point. Thirdly, disciplines become extinct for reasons outside them, for example, because they no longer get the support of those who might fund them. Finally, new disciplines come into existence *beside* the old ones, integrating, fusing, and transfiguring elements from them. Those practicing them will no longer feel the need of interdisciplinarity, but will sail along happily within their own paradigms.

NOTES

1. McCabe (1992) shows how English has been viewed as interdisciplinary, as cultural studies, since Arnold and Leavis.
2. In criticism interdisciplinarity' has become a common term. To quote just one example that is close to our interests: "Rhetorical inquiry, as it is thought and practiced today, <858>> occurs in an interdisciplinary matrix that touches on such fields as philosophy, linguistics, communication studies, psychoanalysis, cognitive science, sociology, anthropology, and political theory." (Bender and Wellbery viii).
3. It may be said that they are talking not about interdisciplinarity but cross-disciplinarity. One of the characteristics of the semantic field of disciplinarity is the number of terms used and the lack of a consensus on what exactly they mean: multidisciplinarity, crossdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, metadisciplinarity. For obvious reasons I do not want to enter the fray myself, but just note that they all are about the boundaries between disciplines and (partly) the crossing of these boundaries.
4. Note the terms associated with discipline: "principled", "systematic", "scrupulous", "stringent", "exacting", "demanding", "rigorous", etc. They have been particularly popular in an area that has successfully established itself as a discipline in recent years, literary theory.
5. More convincing accounts of such social processes have been offered in anthropology, e.g. by Victor Turner.
6. It may also be said to question, unintentionally, Kuhn's meta-narrative.
7. For an account of discipline along these lines, see Engler 1990, ch. 5.

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