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The Rhetoric of Interdisciplinarity

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Is English a discipline? What does it comprise? What is a discipline anyway? Is the collaboration between a physiological and an acoustic phonetician interdisciplinary, as it has been suggested to me? Can a discipline be interdisciplinary? Even though the notion of interdisciplinarity is frequently used, and usually in a thoroughly positive sense--it is a Good Thing--, remarkably little theorizing has been done about it. I cannot possibly do much to remedy this in my paper, not only because it is not my topic, but also because the issue is too large and too complex for me to deal with. I am imposing a further restriction on my argument. For the sake of conciseness I shall eventually concentrate on one example, Antony Easthope's account of cultural studies in his recent book Literary into Cultural Studies, for its use of Kuhn's notion of the paradigm in the discussion of discipline formation. I admire this book both for its postulates and the clarity of their presentation. I am using it as an example because Easthope's use of the term interdisciplinarity is representative of many contemporary critics.[1] I might as well have chosen statements on- other self-proclaimed "inter-disciplinary disciplines" like American Studies, semiotics, or what has come to be called simply "theory" (to this I shall return briefly in a moment). I should also add that my paper has some loose end, some of which at least are deliberate, and may lead to discussion.

Interdisciplinarity used to be fashionable and it seems to have become commonplace. In England, in the white heat of something or other in the 1960's, when new universities like Sussex and East Anglia were founded, interdisciplinarity was high on the agenda, and reflections of this can still be found in the prospectuses published by these universities, even though the word itself may have acquired have a sixty-ish ring in this context.

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[1] In criticism 'interdisciplinarity' has become common term. To quote just one example that is close to our interests: "Rhetorical inquiry, as it is thought and practiced today, 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).

I should like to quote three passages, from pamphlets concerning the University of Sussex [2] the university where interdisciplinarity was probably taken most seriously. There the Vice- Chancellor, in the prospectus for <u>Undergraduate Entry 1993</u> writes about the founders: "They aimed to break down the barriers between subjects in order to emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of knowledge." (1). If we consult the <u>Graduate Programmes in Arts and Social Studies 1991-1993</u> of the same university we find another interesting reference: "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. [3] On the other hand, interdisciplinarity seems to have been perceived as something slightly disreputable by some. In a document of 1975, we read 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; quot. from Daiches 18). Only disciplines, it seems, can teach discipline.

Where does this call for interdisciplinarity come from? There are several possible motivations, which I should like to group as follows. 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 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 that we are familiar with today did not yet exist, a time, when literary studies and linguistics, for example, still were one. Typically, these atavistic dreams tend to have their clear limits, however. Not much thought is

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[2] In the <u>Undergraduate Prospectus 1992 Entry</u> of Keele, the Vice-Chancellor puts things cautiously: "The wide 'choice of combinations of subjects which students can take is proving more and more valuable in the modern world, because so many jobs are in themselves multidisciplinary." (3) This looks like a weary disavowal of an ambitious programme; any old European university, where students must study more than one subject, offers the same.

[3] 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.

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 were characterized by dissension between the (German) philological tradition, and one that we, for lack of a better word, might call a moral one; in England they were represented by English at Oxford and Cambridge. It has become possible to appeal to such a dream-time because the beginnings of English have just moved out of personal memory.[4] Moreover, in many universities, where there is a strong philological tradition or where English is taught as a foreign language, literary studies and the linguistics of a specific language are taught in the same departments.

Utopian holistic interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, we find, for example, in Betty Jean Cage's notion of holohumanities in her book <u>Reconnection</u> (1988). She proposes an attempt to over- come Cartesian dualism, on the basis of the awareness that all knowledge is socially constructed, an insight that 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.

What we find in the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity of the sixties is largely anti-establishment. The system of disciplines is understood as hardened, as limiting people's perceptions, as an illustration of the Caesarian <u>divide et impera,</u> and in need of being shaken up. Or 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. Asa Briggs, the first vice-chancellor of Sussex, speaks of the core and the context (61). Disciplines should be questioned, placed in context (in Schools, for example), but not lose their crucial roles. And the have not done so in these universities.

It may be said that they are talking not about interdisciplinarity but cross-disciplinarity. Cross-disciplinarily? 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 should mean: multidisciplinarity, crossdisciplinarity,

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[4] Where the beginnings of English <u>are</u> discussed it is usually done polemically. I am thinking of books like Doyle 1989.

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 boundaries.

What then is a discipline? The OED lists as the fifth meaning: "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." (I shall not pursue the Foucaultian lead that offers itself here). In more general terms, it refers to what is pertaining to a disciple; as such it is antithetical to doctrine which pertains to the property of the doctor or teacher. Doctrine is more concerned with abstract theory, discipline more with practice or exercise. The second meaning indicated is "A branch of instruction or education; a department of learning or knowledge; a science or art in its educational aspect". The relationship between the "department of knowledge" and "the order maintained and observed among pupils, or other persons under control or command". This constitutes "discipline" as it is of interest to us: It refers both to a body of knowledge and how it is passed on. But we still have not learned much about how disciplines are formed.

Definitions of discipline usually work with three notions separately or in combination: A discipline presupposes a shared object of study, a shared practice, and the notion of a scholarly/scientific community. This notion of discipline is obviously close to Kuhn's notions of the paradigm, and of 'normal science as used in The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Kuhn defines paradigm as "some accepted examples of actual scientific practice--examples which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together--provide models from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research" (10). The study of paradigms prepares student for membership in a particular scientific community (11). Normal science is science that accepts a paradigm unreflectively.

I cannot summarize here the reasons why Kuhn's model has been so influential. Among people in the humanities two factors have certainly be important, that it questions the notion of progress, and that it does not seem to make a difference between the sciences and the humanities; in addition, the constant, almost ritual repetition has made it popular--not what has happened to the term paradigm in everyday

discourse. I cannot summarize either the extended debate on Kuhn's model. Four points of criticism I should like to mention: Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers (both scientists) in Order out of Chaos (1981, 1986) insist that Kuhn's account is partial and historically localized. It applies best to those fields where research and teaching are closely associated-- essentially at the university since the nineteenth century (278). Whereas this account may present a problem in the hard sciences, it supports the applicability of Kuhn for the humanities, which have precisely this kind of history.[5] Secondly, we should note 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? Thirdly, a more serious point: Kuhn's model does not really account for the co-existence of several 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 up:[6] i.e. Kuhn's model does not give an account of specialization.

Still, judging by his popularity, Kuhn seems to be useful in accounting for changes in disciplines. In his book Literary into Cultural Studies, for example, Antony Easthope introduces Kuhn's model of scientific revolution in his first paragraph:

> 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.

Interestingly, he says little about the scientific community, apparently taking it for granted. Instead he focuses on the relationship between those practicing science and the object of their studies. Concerning literary studies, he announces two pages later: "I shall argue that the old paradigm has collapsed, that the

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[5] Stanley Cavell appears in the Acknowledgements of Kuhn's book.

[6] Accounts of such social processes more convincingly dealt with in anthropology, e.g. by Victor Turner, in Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors (1974)

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 <u>Literary into Cultural Studies.</u> 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? I have no problem feeling included; but if the 'we' were inclusive, the book need not have been written.

The most interesting moment for our purpose comes on' p. 171/72, in a section entitled "Discipline and interdisciplinarity" Antony Easthope denies literary studies its claim of being of "a coherent, unified and <u>separated</u> 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).[7]

In other words, cultural studies is a "decentered paradigm" (171).

I agree with this analysis, even though I have my doubts about the status as disciplines of some of the knowledges listed here (psychoanalysis? Deconstruction?) and about the absence of others (anthropology, cognitive science, psychology, etc.). 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 precisely a characteristic of crisis An Kuhn's account. Normal

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[7] Again, communities are not mentioned.

science, as we have seen, is characterized by "a consensus about methods and ends" (3), which allows it to sail along happily.

Why should we then use Kuhn's model at all under these circumstances? This question leads us back to the rhetoric of inter- disciplinarity. Its attractiveness is precisely in the vagueness of terms that has been criticized; this makes adaptation easy. We should note here that Kuhn explains paradigm change within one discipline, e.g. physics or chemistry, not, as Easthope does, the transformation of one discipline into another. More importantly, Kuhn's model does not allow for further institutional fragmentation into sub-communities and new, more narrow disciplines. Instead, it implies that in the institutional framework of the university, where literary studies is practiced, there is trans- formation rather than fragmentation.

Why is Kuhn adapted? I have pointed out that the new discipline/paradigm has all the characteristics of crisis. It remains aware of its constructedness--which is in direct contradiction to Kuhn's account of normal science. This notion can serve two interests: On the one hand, it caters for our--our?-postmodern incredulity towards meta-narratives; in Kuhn's terms we might say that we are trying to extend the crisis for as long as possible, institutionalizing crisis, as it were. There is another, more important perspective, however. Kuhn's model does away with the notion of progress (we just move on, focusing on different phenomena, reconstructing the past in the light of the new paradigm, and thereby also losing the explanatory power of the old one[8]). In Easthope's account we move beyond the traditional notion of discipline. It becomes possible to see the new discipline in terms of progress, as it moves to a higher, a metalevel.

Why does the overlapping, the imbrication of traditional and not so traditional disciplines play such an important role (see 129-30)? The overlapping knowledges (or disciplines) that go into the makeup of the new discipline make the transition between paradigms and disciplines tidier than it might otherwise look--as such it gives reassurance to those who have become restive and dissatisfied, yet are fearful of something radically different. Easthope's account allows for the complementarity (to some extent) of

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[8] Kuhn's account of the role of textbooks in science is particularly instructive here.

the familiar--familiar at least to those who are trying to found Cultural Studies. The first person plural mentioned earlier is therefore neither inclusive nor exclusive, but an attempt to create inclusiveness, inviting us to join, 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 discipline from which they can again set out and sail along happily, without leaving the traditional institutional framework of the university.

In conclusion I should perhaps make explicit some of the doubts and convictions that underlie my argument. I should like to mention three. The first is that "interdisciplinarity", as a new form of collaboration, is a sign of crisis, and marks a stage in the development of new disciplines. The second is that trans- formation without fragmentation must remain wishful thinking; in any case, changes in the system of disciplines are not a tidy process. The third is that the social dimension is most important in the definition of disciplines; people gather around certain canonical texts, certain methodological procedures etc., which imposes on them the obligation to reply when addressed by others.

Finally (and in need of further elaboration), institutions, also the university, have a tendency to do everything that helps them maintain stability (and the study of literature as a university discipline started essentially as a modernist pro- ject). This stability is threatened by the postmodern condition. Interdisciplinarity of the kind discussed here must be viewed as a totalizing gesture, even if it only consists in the claim that we should all be aware of the disciplines' constructedness. As such there is something nostalgic about it, the dream of a single, universal knowledge.

What we have is not interdisciplinarity but postdisciplinarity.

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