

# Interdisciplinarity in Literary Research: A Twenty-first Century Reality<sup>1</sup>

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Interdisciplinarity, which emerged as a research methodology in the early 1900's, had to wait until the early 2000's to receive recognition, though not a complete one. Indeed, the twenty-first century has proven to be the appropriate 'age' for the adoption of this method, all over the world, in different fields of study, including literary studies. This is due to many factors, the most important of which is the constant change to which our surrounding milieu is subject. Our academic and intellectual life is thus affected by this change, leading systematically to a change in our research methodologies. Therefore, given its diversified and rich character as well as its ability to bring cooperatively together different fields of study, interdisciplinarity in literary studies becomes a reality, even a necessity.

The focus of this paper will thus be on the *necessity* of this method for literary research and the fact that it is a *reality* in the current twenty-first century context because it is closely linked to the *historical* context. In other words, the present paper will try to cast light on the historical dimension of interdisciplinarity in literary research by stressing the relation between literature and history. It will also attempt to examine the advantages of interdisciplinarity, to investigate the existing obstacles to its 'full' and effective implementation in literary studies, and to give some perspectives, taking into account these obstacles, as to the future of this methodology.

Interdisciplinarity in Literary Research: History and Literature

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Disciplinarity, as a research method in different fields of study including literary studies, has proven to be quite incompatible with the current modern context for the mere reason that many researchers have grown aware of its flaws and limits as to its implementation in the academic context.

One of the major drawbacks of disciplinarity is that it leads to the production of a ‘subjective’ knowledge, that is, knowledge seen only and *exclusively* from *within* a certain discipline. The researcher is somewhat ‘short-sighted’ and, working within the confines of one particular area of study, he lacks scientific ‘open-mindedness’. This engenders a highly biased form of knowledge that cannot be fully and scientifically trusted. Describing the current state of literary studies as ‘bad’, Gottschall, as quoted by Easterlin, explains that the cause of this very situation is “the failure of literary scholars to produce ‘durable knowledge,’ a failure that (...) is a feature of schools and approaches that are in other respects mutually antagonistic (p.7).” (Easterlin, 2009: 230). In other words, schools separateness, or disciplinarity, in literary research leads to the failure of researchers to produce a scientifically tested and acknowledged knowledge. Along with this idea, Davidson and Goldberg, in ‘Interdisciplinarity-Creating Disciplines,’ state that in both the humanities and the social sciences ‘objects and methods of analysis were distinctly disciplinarily driven and far from universal (...).’ (Davidson, & Goldberg, 2009: 9804). Since these objects of analysis (including literary texts) and methods of analysis were disciplinary, and thus, not universal, one may be led to think that the knowledge resulting from such analyses would not be universal either. And generally, when knowledge lacks universality, it tends to be subjective because it is confined within the frame of a specific area of study. Easterlin (op.cit.) puts forward an example of a disciplinary literary study which is purely intrinsic, namely Formalism, and which leads to subjective knowledge since it ‘ironically exposed the difficulty of objective studies of the text by virtue of an inevitable emphasis on interpretation’. (Easterlin, 2009: 231).

This incompatibility of disciplinarity in literary (and other) studies with the current modern context was, however, made more acute by the various revolutions

our environment had witnessed and still is witnessing. In ‘Interdisciplinarity-Creating Disciplines,’ Davidson and Goldberg link these environmental transformations with the emergence of interdisciplinarity as an inevitable but also a good alternative to disciplinarity in America, by the mid-twentieth century, saying that ‘Intellectual diversification within and across the academy was boosted by the growing class, ethnic, racial, and gendered diversification of those entering at least the American university in the wake of World War II (...).’ (Davidson, & Goldberg, 2009: 9804). A little further in their article, they add that these changes led to ‘novel interests and demands for different knowledges and new forms of representation that cut across the traditional epistemological organization known as disciplines.’ (Ibid.) As suggested here by Davidson and Goldberg, this ‘rich mix’ (Ibid), or interdisciplinarity, is the direct and impulsive result of milieu transformations that led different researchers to see disciplines as complementary rather than independent, autonomous and isolated. Consequently, instead of focusing on an exclusive study of a literary text, for example, many researchers in literature attempt, though ‘timidly’, to contextualise this text after a growing awareness of the fact that it does not come from the void and that isolating it becomes quite an ‘old-fashioned’ method. In a way, putting the text into its context implies adapting one’s research method to its period of time since the context (civilisational and historical, broadly speaking) shapes the form and content of a literary product. It is true that clinging to an ‘out-dated’ research method in the twenty-first century being an era of technological progress, information and media development would seem rather ‘primitive.’ Interdisciplinarity emerges, therefore, as a necessity, a reality in the modern context, without which there would be very little or no progress at all.

One way of applying interdisciplinarity in literary studies is to adopt an eclectic approach to a literary text, combining both an *intrinsic* approach (a formal study of the text) and an *extrinsic* approach to it (relating the text to external factors of production), to use Wellek and Warren (1973)’s terms . Davis and Schleifer give a clear definition of an eclectic approach to literature saying that

‘literary studies is shaped by the relationship between the formal analyses of aesthetics and the historical analyses of the ‘contents’ –the politics, psychology, language, ideas, and more general ‘ethos’– that literary works represent.’ (Davis, & Schleifer, 1998:20). Among the points worth mentioning in this quote is the ‘historical’ dimension of the literary analysis on which Davis and Schleifer insist. In fact, within the general frame of history, there is politics, psychology, language, ideas and other elements. Therefore, if history encloses all these elements, any change in history will involve changes say in culture, sciences, society, politics and language. This reinforces the idea that combining disciplines like cultural studies, psychoanalysis, social criticism and Marxist criticism with literary studies becomes a must and a reality, especially knowing that history is, itself, in constant change and mutation.

There are, actually, many reasons for the necessity of interdisciplinarity – through the reference to and use of history– in literary research. One important cause is the very old and close relationship between the study of the text and both its contexts of production and interpretation (criticism, reading). Moran explains that even if this relation between the study of a literary text and the context is problematic and not that ‘authentic,’ or consistent, historical contextualisation in literary studies has not been achieved till very late, each of the literary studies and history ‘contains elements of the other: literary studies often draws on historical material, while everything, including literature, could be said to have a history.’ (Moran, 2002: 114). This old relationship between literary studies and history was, itself, engendered by a ‘remote’ awareness of the *close tie* between *literature* and *history*, or the text and context. This is perhaps the most significant reason why interdisciplinarity, mainly the use of history, is necessary in literary research.

The link between literature and history is, in fact, that of *reciprocity*. Each of them affects the other. On the one hand, literature is the ‘product’ of history, which means that history and the development of its events have a remarkable impact on literary texts. As mentioned earlier on in this paper, changes in history –including sciences (like psychology), society, culture and politics– lead to changes in literary

production, that is, history (or context) *shapes* literature (or the text). This has been confirmed by many scholars. Just like Easterlin, who says that a ‘cognitive product,’ or a literary text, is ‘shaped by sociocultural constraints that (...) change and exert differential pressures on the content and values of imaginative products over time’ (Easterlin, 2009: 232-33), Wellek and Warren claim that ‘All history, all environmental factors, can be argued to shape a work of art.’ (Wellek & Warren, 1973:73). Therefore, developments in politics, economy and society, for instance, are among the environmental factors that have a direct influence on literature. In his attempt to better illustrate this idea, Selden claims that some obvious economic, political and cultural changes such as the ‘introduction of commodity production, the invention of printing, photography or the silicon chip, the waning of ‘liberal’ ideas, and changes in cultural milieu and the writer’s relationship to production, are some of the historical conditions which radically affect the nature of art.’ (Selden, 1996: 402).

On the other hand, and given the mutual influence literature and history have on each other, literature also *shapes* history. Indeed, literature is not only the ‘product’ of history; it is the ‘mirror’ of history, the latter being represented and reflected in literary products. This idea has also been confirmed by many scholars. Mentioning Hegelian and Taine’s criticism, Wellek and Warren speak of the artist, and by extension the writer, as a *mediator* in the sense that he has as a mission to convey ‘historical and social truths’ (Wellek & Warren, 1973: 95) making thus of literature ‘the essence, the abridgement and summary of all history.’ (Ibid.) Literature becomes, consequently, the vehicle or the *means* by which history is transmitted since it represents ‘a privileged site where the most important social, psychological, and cultural forces combine and contend.’ (Davis & Schleifer, 1998:3)

The close tie between the text and the context can, in fact, be considered as more than just a mutually influential relation. They can be seen as two elements merging together into one entity, one element, for they are both in relation to *reality*. History is, itself, a reality while literature conveys this reality and so

becomes ‘a part of reality’ and ‘a reflection *on* it.’ (Webster, 1996:57). However, since the constant change in the historical-civilisational context inevitably leads to a change in the form and the value of literary products by influencing the writers and the literary critics, a change in the very knowledge produced by literary research is thus a logical consequence. This knowledge becomes the outcome of world mutations that literary researchers have to consider deeply and carefully. They have to adapt their research methodology to the demands of a new world which, in its turn, *determines* the methodology to be used. Interdisciplinarity emerges, therefore, as the appropriate twenty-first century method in literary research since it is the result of a multitude of historical changes, the most prominent of which is globalisation. In fact, globalisation, as the prevailing modern reality, involves more complex research methods, which would fit modern ‘problems,’ than disciplinarity. Seen from this angle, interdisciplinarity can be regarded as the spontaneous reaction born out of reality, which, according to Davidson and Goldberg (2009:7789) requires ‘multifaceted methodologies,’ ‘contact, flows of ideas, and cultural intersections’ since interdisciplinarity is ‘an intellectual by-product of globalization.’ (Ibid.) For instance, instead of leading a disciplinary research in literature involving the focus on a specific area of study, a modern literary researcher, given the richness of his current context and the great amount of choice in research methods he is confronted to, may make use of a variety of fields of study to undertake his own research. The use of history is one good example for it not only implies the civilisational context but it also involves the reference to psychology/psychoanalysis, social criticism, cultural criticism, Marxist criticism, ecocritical criticism, postcolonial criticism and feminist criticism. He can examine, for example, the extent to which the life (biography) of a writer played an important role in shaping his literary product as reflected in such elements as plot, literary devices, setting, themes and characters. The latter may also be analysed from a psychoanalytical point of view (the way the characters speak, think and act), a social point of view (their relationship with and behaviour vis-à-vis their surrounding milieu), and a cultural point of view (the extent to

which they can be the product of their own culture). A close analysis of themes and plot may reveal a direct link with some important elements as the writer's own beliefs, the dominant ideology of his time, and the historical context serving as a background for the production of his text. Finally, the use of history, as a 'global' reality, may prove to be quite interesting especially in literary works 'predisposed' to be historically analysed, i.e., containing such elements as religion or colonialism. A modern American literary text may be examined in the light of American history-civilisation (First settlers, Enlightenment, the Jacksonian era or the Jazz Age). Likewise, a post-colonial African literary work 'needs' to be analysed in the light of the continent's colonial-revolutionary past. As an example of this very point –taken from a personal doctoral research– I found it of utmost importance to relate literature to history to be able to fully grasp the writer's intentions, beliefs and viewpoints when writing his text. Indeed, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* are novels which can, to my mind, hardly be separated from the context in which they have been written – the modern American and African capitalist context– the mere reason being the rejection of the authors of the capitalist system as an economic and political system changing the society more for worse than for better.

Interdisciplinarity in literary research, as seen in the examples above mentioned, will help produce new forms of knowledge, knowledge that disciplinarity, with its rigid boundaries, would never have helped produce.

### **Advantages, Obstacles and Perspectives**

Interdisciplinarity, as a modern research method in literary studies, proves to be positive for many reasons, and efficient in many respects. One of the most significant advantages of interdisciplinarity is that it allows researchers to renew their conceptions of knowledge and methodology by putting into question some 'fixed' traditional ideas about literary research as well as to take into consideration important elements of other disciplines. If disciplinarity leads to a 'subjective' approach to literature, and thus to a 'subjective' knowledge produced out of this

research, interdisciplinarity favours ‘objectivity’ in literary studies. Instead of being ‘short-sighted,’ the researcher is more ‘open-minded’ thanks to the use of better tools or methods of knowledge analysis. Instead of being entangled in a circular approach leading nowhere but to a dead-end, the literary researcher is confronted to a variety of new ‘categories of analysis’ and new ‘horizons for understanding.’ Indeed, the human exchange, the cultural contact, and the varied methodologies interdisciplinarity appeals to engenders a shift in the axes of research in literature from restricted and constrained areas of study limited to specific areas to a wider range of novel and more interesting ‘terrains’ of analysis. This flexibility and curiosity characterising interdisciplinarity as well as its ‘dare’ to enhance more contact with other disciplines –breaking thus a traditional literary research based on rigidity and ‘incessant denial’ or refusal to take a step forward– gives birth not only to novel methodologies in literary research but also to a new knowledge originating from such methodologies. This knowledge, resulting from a method enclosing a vast array of disciplines, is broader than before, and becomes even *universal* for it no more concerns one delimited place since, to quote Davidson and Goldberg (op.cit.: 9805), ‘interdisciplinary objects of analysis in social, cultural, and humanistic thinking tend to be concerns identified as abundant in social and cultural life in various geopolitical sites.’ Finally, adding to the fact that it allows us to be up-to-date, academically speaking, since we adopt a new methodology in literary research fitting our current context (globalisation), interdisciplinarity offers us a new and wider range of critical feedback. As Webster rightly remarks, approaching literature ‘differently’ by adopting a ‘less familiar but arguably more productive relationship to all kinds of writing’ will make of us dynamic rather than ‘inactive or passive readers.’ (Webster, 1996: 111).

However, the complete implementation of interdisciplinarity in the academic context (and in literary research) has faced and is still facing many obstacles. The most important of these obstacles is the lack of ‘widespread acknowledgement’ and ‘institutional credit’ caused by a lack of awareness of the positive outcomes of varying methodologies and ‘reconciling’ disciplines in modern literary studies. In



addition, literature as a discipline has long been studied within a limited scope and put into a mould whose boundaries were so rigid that they excluded any possible ‘cooperation’ with other disciplines across its borders, and even made impossible the ‘intrusion’ of any (other) discipline alien to or unfamiliar with literature. Indeed, from the academic and pedagogical points of view, the distinct boundaries between departments in higher education/teaching are so firm that these departments become independent and autonomous, offering, therefore, very little chance, –if any at all, to undertake interdisciplinary *partnerships*. For example, despite the ‘timid’ efforts at combining history with literature in literary research, a full and true historical contextualisation of literary texts has not yet come into being owing to the fact that literature, itself, was seen as an autonomous institution, detached from all other external elements such as history. What makes the implementation of interdisciplinarity in literary studies even more difficult is that the clear division between departments delays the students’ and researchers’ awareness of the efficiency of cross-disciplinary studies. If students and researchers have *always* studied within a disciplinary frame excluding contact whatever its kind, how would they understand overnight the necessity of interdisciplinarity and its implications (or rather, pre-requisites) namely, the full grasp of both the current world (or history) with its complex problems, and the essence of all the other disciplines? It would surely be difficult for them to apply interdisciplinarity when, to quote Angers, ‘they have previously been trained within a particular discipline.’ (Angers, 1997:54; translated from French).

Some suggestions, even if very modest, emerge as possible remedies to the obstacles previously mentioned, and can be regarded as perspectives concerning the use of interdisciplinarity in literary research. First, a *shift* in the axes of literary studies from a confined and narrow area of study to a larger, ‘global’ and richer field, enlarging thus the boundaries of literary enquiry and analysis, and allowing new forms of knowledge, more universal, to emerge, would be necessary. Since rigidity ‘kills’ novelty and originality, flexibility in methodology fosters *dialogue* between disciplines, which, instead of traditionally resulting in biased knowledges,

produce an objective kind of knowledge born at intersections between these various disciplines. More efforts should be made, for example, to bring into harmony both literary studies and history focusing on deep cooperation rather than on surface contact, for the sake of an authentic and more consistent *contextualisation*. Breaking the ‘ice’ between departments would also facilitate the implementation of interdisciplinary studies from the pedagogical point of view. One way of encouraging work across departmental boundaries would be to organise interdisciplinary workshops involving, for instance, in the work of literary researchers of the Department of English other departments (with their researchers, their work and results) such as history, psychology, sociology, philosophy and the other foreign languages, creating, as a result, a web of inter-connected disciplines and fostering exchange within and across the humanities, producing heterogeneous knowledge. Last but not least, it would be important to integrate, academically speaking, interdisciplinarity to graduate (and why not also to undergraduate) literary studies as early as possible in order to allow young researchers to adapt to it and adopt it naturally and spontaneously as the only efficient and up-to-date research methodology fitting the world they live in and helping to solve its problems. This would help them leave their ‘ivory tower’ and be more open and tolerant to new diversified areas of research, which would consequently lead them to be more productive and original. Finally, the frequent organisation of Study Days –at departmental level– on interdisciplinarity would help develop student / researcher awareness of its importance in literary research.

## **Conclusion**

In its attempt to cast light on the necessity of applying interdisciplinarity in literary research (at university level), the present paper tries to incite young researchers (postgraduate students mainly) to look ahead instead of looking behind, putting aside all the preconceived ideas on the introduction of new methods in literary studies, which have favoured the establishment of traditional disciplinary methods of analysis for a long time. The young researchers need to be fully aware of the events of the world surrounding them and the changes affecting

it in order to be able to understand what interdisciplinary studies means. They have to understand the close relationship binding their objects of study (literary texts) and the modern historical context so that they can see that studying literature in isolation, especially as an autonomous entity detached from history, is similar to the study of a tree without a close study of its roots. Perhaps if such an awareness of the significance of cross-disciplinary studies comes to be generalised, and if the *quality* of knowledge becomes the real target of young researchers, the field of academic research methodologies will progress and will find better means of literary interpretation/analysis which would fit the current modern and changing historical context (cultural, social, economic and political), and respond to the needs of modern man. There will perhaps be even a sort of transcendentalism allowing researchers to reach that ideal approach to literary studies known as transdisciplinarity, which looks forward to creating a broad methodology that would be common to all disciplines. To conclude, the list of advantages, obstacles and solutions is not exhaustive but the latter depend on many factors in order to be efficiently realised in our Algerian higher education/university context, one of the most important being the financial and pedagogical means required to the fulfilment of this long-term *project*.

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<sup>1</sup> This conference paper was presented at the Study Day on 'Interdisciplinarity in English Post-graduate Research: Contributions and Perspectives,' organised by the Department of English, University of Algiers<sup>2</sup> at Bouzaréah, on June 09<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010, in the Campus Auditorium.