21st-Century Theories of Literature: A Critical Reflection on an Interdisciplinary Event

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Abstract

The authors reflect upon the successes and difficulties of developing and running 21st-Century Theories of Literature: Essence, Fiction, and Value, an interdisciplinary conference held at the University of Warwick on 27-29 March 2014.

The aim of the conference was to encourage a more sustained focus on the overlap between two disciplines which, prima facie, have a lot in common: philosophical aesthetics (and in particular its literary branch, the philosophy of literature) and literary studies (of which literary theory may be considered a subdivision). Because both deal with literature and have an investment in the idea of theorisation, one might have thought that there was no need to encourage active dialogue and it would arise naturally from the needs of each field. However, in the current institutional state of affairs where philosophy departments and literature departments often have little overlap, 'aesthetics' and 'literary theory' are two very distinct entities, and interaction is underdeveloped even when room for it does exist. As such, we judged that there was a need for such a prompting. This piece presents the rationale for our conference, and describes its preparation, development and outcomes.[1]

Keywords

philosophy and literature; interdisciplinary; multidisciplinary; literary theory; aesthetics; conference

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The institutional split between theories of literature undertaken in literature departments and theories of literature undertaken in philosophy departments (henceforward, for ease of exposition, 'literary theory' and 'aesthetics') has not always been in place. There was a time, not so long ago, when aestheticians such as I.A. Richards and Monroe Beardsley had a major influence on literary studies, and literary critics like Cleanth Brooks and Northrop Frye dealt in aesthetics using (broadly) the same language and the same theoretical frames of reference as their contemporaries in philosophy departments. Today, however, 'literary' and 'philosophical' theories of literature tend to go their separate ways: literary theory and aesthetics are practiced in different departments, and their respective work is published in different journals, and disseminated in different conferences. Although individual scholars (including prominent figures such as Charles Altieri and Toril Moi) have crossed the boundary in their work, and some universities (including Warwick) and journals (such as *Philosophy and Literature*) have promoted collaboration between aestheticians and literary scholars, the general tendency in the two fields is to resist a synthesised approach.

Our conference aimed at establishing a more systematic dialogue between the two fields, and at opening up the possibility of a more widespread cross-fertilisation. We prompted participants to gauge the extent of their similarities and differences, locate any areas in which they could aid each other in approaching shared issues, and, more generally, turn that faraway hostile 'them' into an addressable 'you'. We attempted to facilitate this as much as possible in three main ways. Firstly, we selected topics broad enough to stimulate members from both fields: the 'essence' of literature (How do we define literature? What are the implications of trans-historical definitions of literary terms?), its 'value' (Ethical? Emotional? Cognitive?), and the nature of 'fiction' (What is the difference between 'real' and 'fictional' character? What establishes a text as 'fiction' as opposed to 'non-fiction'?). Secondly, we adopted an innovative format for the keynote sessions: the 'double key-note'. In each case, we contacted two established academics, one from each field, and prompted them to present talks on a shared topic and to respond to the other's talk, before taking questions from the floor. Thirdly, we had all the panels include a balance of philosophers and literary scholars. Twenty-six paper proposals were

selected from a pool of about a hundred, coming from academics both senior and junior from all over the world.

At the end of March, we welcomed eighty delegates from a variety of countries (including a number of Warwick-based academics who helped chair the sessions). The main part of the proceedings took place over two days, preceded by an evening welcome event, which included a reading from a poetry instillation by the *Exegesis* collective entitled 'The Wittgenstein Vector' – a nice way of bridging the two traditions. The proceedings were closed by a roundtable in which the keynote speakers and the other participants had the chance to talk more generally about interdisciplinary interaction.

Overall, the interaction at the conference was fruitful in many ways. However, it can be argued that we did not achieve the collaborative synthesis of knowledge that many recognise as necessary for true interdisciplinarity. Informal feedback forms and subsequent conversations suggest that many delegates felt their horizons had been broadened through interaction with speakers and topics from the 'other' field. For instance, Catherine Belsey commented in e-mail correspondence that the proceedings had created a productive Lyotardian differend (a conflict rendered unresolvable by the lack of a rule of judgment applicable to all parties involved) for many to sharpen their positions on. Greg Currie, also in e-mail correspondence, stated that he thought claims of his insensitivity to historical circumstance were inaccurate but it was now clear the topic needed addressing more thoroughly. Sergia Adamo related to us in conversation that she found the interaction useful in helping her formulate a clearer answer as to why the analytic aestheticians were wrong. She also commented: '[Literary theorists] rarely had an identity until this conference in my experience. We argue with each other at literary conferences, but here we were unified'. Indeed, feedback forms highlighted that various participants shared the sentiment that the conference interaction had served as a whetstone for previously held positions and a chance to re-avow disciplinary allegiance. However, as positive as these results may be, they suggest that proceedings fell short of active interdisciplinarity. They seem more like an upshot of what is commonly referred to in the literature on interdisciplinarity as '*multi*disciplinarity': two or more disciplines

coming together around a single topic or being considered together because of their topical proximity but without any productive integration of their components (Moran, 2002; Knight, *et al*., 2013). Interdisciplinarity, on the other hand, is seen as a 'partnership' of theories and techniques (Krimsky, 2000: 110) aimed at achieving a 'synthesis of disciplinary knowledge' (Knight *et al*., 2013: 144) for the sake of finding a solution or valuable insight into a topic too large or complex for a single discipline (Brewer, 1999; Moran, 2002).This article will not delve into the arguments concerning whether we should consider interdisciplinarity to be more valuable than multidisciplinarity or why interdisciplinarity may currently be viewed as such by many funding bodies. Instead, it will now reflect on our conference so as to answer the question, *if* interdisciplinarity is attempted at a conference then what issues need to be taken into account in order to facilitate it?

One reason for the conference's lack of interdisciplinary integration was the deeply ingrained traditional differences that exist not only between literary studies and philosophical aesthetics but also between analytic and continental philosophy. Methodologically speaking, literary theory normally takes the theoretical elements as ancillary to the readings which they inform; thus, theoretical frameworks are typically utilised in order to reach a reading of a particular literary work or of a larger corpus. Within the analytic vein of philosophy of literature, in turn, individual literary works normally serve as examples to illustrate or elucidate theoretical points that have a broader philosophical purchase. Rhetoric is another point of divergence. For one thing, literary theorists, who are typically influenced by the modes of argument developed in Continental philosophy, tend to use a denser language than aestheticians found in the Analytic school. The latter have more of an investment in the ideal of an orderly argument heavily anchored to a strong logical thread, whereas the former are more prone to the use of *excursus*. In fact, the differences between the various schools are immediately recognisable at most linguistic levels, from vocabulary to syntax to the patterns of use of tropes such as metaphor or ambiguity. During this conference, there simply wasn't enough time to carefully work through why each school does what they do and have them explain, in terms sympathetic to the other traditions, why their approach is valuable. As such, debate would often remain within a discipline or

interlocutors would find themselves talking past each other or at a terminological impasse.

The same time-restrictions applied to the problem of background reading. It is possible that researchers working in the different disciplines, and their subdivisions, may spend a large portion of their professional lives knowing of the works of the other traditions only through caricature, fading memories from undergraduate courses, or isolated reading experiences independent of their disciplinary context and history. It sometimes became all-too-apparent in our conference's proceedings that where a debate came to a standoff, the proponents of one discipline not only needed to say what they had read but they would have almost needed to deliver a crash course in what it is to be an acolyte of that discipline and have one's academic life infused with certain readings, theorists, and concerns in order to continue fruitful discussion. A conference does not usually have enough time for all participants to familiarise themselves with or be instructed in the necessary pre-requisite reading or academic style for a reconciliation constructive to interdisciplinary development.

Such issues were part of a larger feeling that both fields were, at times, not able to engage with each other *on the other's terms*. There were some papers and sessions that admirably attempted this and sometimes achieved it, at least in part. The interaction between Peter Lamarque and Catherine Belsey during the keynote session on 'fiction' was noted by many as moving towards this. The interdisciplinary success of their session can be attributed to their collaborative pre-conference communication, the fact that Belsey chose to structure her talk as a detailed response to Lamarque's latest book *The Opacity of Narrative*, and that Lamarque and Belsey attempted to articulate their respective positions in terms of the concept of 'opacity'. In other words, they used a terminology accessible to each other and the different disciplines, directly interacted and actively attempted to understand one another, and, whilst disagreeing, worked to minimize destructive misunderstandings.

In general, however, there is still a lot of work to be done before such results can be attained *en masse*. Firstly, as Lamarque highlighted in the final roundtable, the intersection between the various academic approaches to literature still needs to find or make more visible those that exemplify an interdisciplinary approach by taking the time to address and incorporate the kind of considerations this article has been discussing. These may also be the strong, perceptive critics from 'over the fence' who can translate the works from one side in a way meaningful to the other as well as translate their responses back. It is these scholars that can then supply the works that constitute a shared ground-zero from which to build. Secondly, there is a shift in academic mind-set needed for interdisciplinary work that some were clearly not used to. Often, for interdisciplinarity to work, all the participants need to 'act not as representatives of disciplines but represent themselves, their experiences, values and insights' (Gasper, 2001: 15). This is not to say that disciplinary allegiance does not bring with it a valuable sense of identity and passion based upon something vital about the way we assess and interpret the world. However, the bias and prejudice that accompanies disciplinary tribalism and training, and the normative assessment and ranking of disciplinary 'types' of knowledge that follows from this (for example, 'What I learn in literary studies is *more relevant* than philosophy' or 'The philosophical method leads to *deeper understanding* than literary analysis') continue to hinder interdisciplinarity. This is particularly visible in higher education where knowledge politics still play a large role (Becher *et al.*, 2001; Lélé *et al.*, 2005; Schmidt, 2007: 314) and the discipline remains in control of appeal and reputation (if not funding) and so 'will mostly play the violin even in interdisciplinary work' (Van Rann, 2000: 67).

Further attempts may reveal that interdisciplinarity is *not* the way forward for some of the themes of the conference. There is the possibility that the disciplines are simply engaged in distinct projects and that the qualities and important factors of literature may have already been divvied up so that once one has chosen a discipline the desired route to satisfactory answers has been discovered and there is no need for interdisciplinary interaction. On the other hand, it does not feel as though an interdisciplinary approach to these topics has been carried out with 'mutually accessible and acceptable intellectual frameworks' (Gasper, 2001: 20) and (as far as possible) discipline-free mindsets in

place. Without running a test case with ideal conditions, it seems premature to rule the approach out.

Practically, it may be concluded that in any area where there is a lack of exemplary translators, and given the time constraints of the format in general, conferences are more suited to multidisciplinarity rather than ambitious interdisciplinary forays. However, this means that more books, workshops, and university modules are needed to supply the focus and time needed to practice working as a discipline-free agent as well as unpack the different disciplines' approaches and pre-supposed knowledge. If a conference *is* going to attempt this though, the theme should be precise rather than broad to allow for more directed interaction, it should also include a highly targeted introductory talk to frame the proceedings, and there needs to be a heightened specificity in asking for papers and a ruthless rigour in selecting them. It is also important for disciplines and areas new to interdisciplinarity to consider how they frame the collaborative nature of an event as early as possible and to reflect both before and after proceedings on whether an interdisciplinary approach is even the appropriate one.

Ultimately, collaborative interdisciplinarity is almost impossible without a willingness to open oneself to and engage with projects and self-criticism couched in the other's terms. This conference may not have realised active interdisciplinarity on a large scale as its perceivable fruits were of the more multidisciplinary whetstone and allegiance variety, but, as one feedback form said, 'the conference showed me how relevantly young the discipline of Philosophy and Literature actually is. There's still a search for common ground between the two schools, and best practice in regards to combining the disciplines.' For many of the attendees, the no-man's land between the two disciplines is now starkly apparent. We hope that at least some will seek to cross it with the above in mind and find out whether there is a building ground for answers to the questions of literature's meaning, existence, and continuing value that are greater than the sum of their disciplinary parts.

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