

## **Gypsy Scholarship: Regenia Gagnier on the Perils and Opportunities of Interdisciplinary Study**

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In a critical climate in which scholars frequently assert that the best scholarship occurs at the intersection of the disciplines, that “knowledge is increasingly interdisciplinary” and that “boundary crossing has become a defining characteristic of the age,” it is crucial to take a step back and consider what is at really stake when our writing and teaching crosses outside the bounds of our chosen field.<sup>1</sup> Last August, Regenia Gagnier provided some helpful perspective on these concerns in a seminar on interdisciplinarity at the twenty-fifth annual Dickens Universe, where she observed that “Interdisciplinarity happens because you have a story you want to tell and you need to use more than one scholarly approach to help you tell that story.”<sup>2</sup> Gagnier, whose own work draws upon literature, political science and economics, suggested that interdisciplinary scholars can avoid a scattershot approach by focusing their inquiry on a sufficiently well-defined question or problem.

Scholars in the field of nineteenth-century studies, a time when “interdisciplinarity was actually *happening*, not just talked about,” have a particular advantage.<sup>3</sup> The nineteenth century featured remarkable collaborations between artists, scientists, novelists, psychologists, and other professionals whose work cohered around shared social, cultural, or aesthetic concerns. To name only two examples of such collaboration, the nineteenth-century spiritualist movement boasted adherents from diverse fields including classicists (Frederic Myers), novelists (George Eliot, Samuel Clemens), psychologists (William James, Pierre Janet), journalists (Harriet Martineau) as well as professional mediums, hypnotists, and other occultists of various stripes. Similarly, Freud’s invention of psychoanalysis around the *fin de siècle* found numerous literary echoes, first in the works of contemporary authors like Arthur Schnitzler and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and later in modernist writings by Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.<sup>4</sup> This by no means exhaustive list of Victorian interdisciplinary collaborations exemplifies how standardized educational systems and the relative absence of specialized professional jargon contributed to an open communication between the arts, the sciences, and the professions during the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

Another important nineteenth-century interdisciplinary phenomenon was the cultural philanthropy movement, which brought together aesthetes, reformers, artisans, Marxists, and socialites with the shared goal of helping Britain’s poor. This is the stimulating milieu examined in the opening segment of Regenia Gagnier article, “Cultural Philanthropy, Gypsies, and Interdisciplinary Scholars: The Dream of a Common Language,” a piece which provides an elegant model of top-flight scholarship at the crossroads of several fields. Here, Gagnier examines the inherent interdisciplinarity of Victorian cultural philanthropy, which involved “negotiation between ethics, our conduct towards others, and aesthetics.”<sup>6</sup> With numerous influences combining in one movement, it is no wonder that philanthropists often found themselves working at cross purposes. Philanthropic organizations like the Home Arts and Industries Association (HAIA) and the Kyrle put impoverished Britons to work on aesthetic projects, generating jobs and cultivating taste in members of the lower classes. Gagnier raises several important questions about the cultural relevance of such organizations:

What are [these philanthropists] making – people or products? If people, are they making other people or themselves? If other people, are they making them to be autonomous, free, ends in themselves, or means to one's own end, one's own reflected Glory? (1).

The answers to these questions varied as widely as the individual philanthropists themselves. While these volunteer reformers undoubtedly felt genuine altruistic sentiment towards the poor, they were also occasionally guilty of not “seeing them as ends in themselves but as means to their own splendid self-development” (20). Other critics of Victorian philanthropy alleged that these reformers were merely practicing a kind of “informal ethnography” for their own amusement, their good deeds providing an excuse to satisfy their lively curiosity about the lower classes (4).

Whatever their motives, Victorian philanthropists were a heterogeneous group of individuals who sought inspiration for their good works in surprisingly far-flung locales. In the second segment of her essay, “Gypsy Lorists: The Non-Christian Roots of Philanthropy,” Gagnier turns her attention to the life of Charles Godfrey Leland, amateur philologist, reformer and co-founder of the Home Arts and Industries Association. When HAIA became too bureaucratic for his taste, Leland left the organization to study Gypsies in Eastern Europe, finding in this outcast population a surprising model for successful philanthropy. Gypsy fortune-telling, Leland discovered, was “no more or less than ‘instinctive intuitive perception’ or sympathy with others, a highly developed skill in ‘reading’ other people” (7). These intuitive skills were also needed by philanthropists, who could potentially learn “the arts of successful philanthropy” from the Gypsy art of begging (8).

Gypsies had much more to offer Western cultures than the art of begging, however. For Leland, the Gypsy “represents imagination and sympathy, whole unfettered communicative interaction, [and] *knowledge before the rationalization of the disciplines*” (7; my italics). The Gypsies, whose labor, pleasure and leisure blurred together in ways that surprised and inspired Leland, became a symbol of interdisciplinarity that informed his future philanthropic projects. The Gypsies, whose language, Romany, was spoken in every country in Europe, also represented Leland's “dream of common languages” that could transcend cultures and disciplines (8).

This dream of a common language would no doubt appeal to contemporary interdisciplinary scholars, who must learn the highly specialized professional jargon of diverse fields in order to tell their stories. The potential for free, “unfettered communicative interaction” between the disciplines decreased sharply after the *fin de siècle*, as professions became increasingly specialized. Around the same time, Eugenicist movements in Europe drove the Gypsies towards extinction. In section three of her essay, “Philanthropy's Other: The Persecution of the Gypsies,” Gagnier implicitly links these seemingly unrelated developments, explaining that the Nazi persecution of the Gypsies was part of a larger European movement towards racial, linguistic and cultural homogeneity that decreased the possibility of cultural cross-fertilization:

The Celtic Twilight of the Scottish Highlands, the decline of the Welsh and Cornish languages and communities, and the Gypsies were part of a global demise of peoples who did not fit western notions of technological and economic development. (12)

As these peoples and languages disappeared, academic disciplines simultaneously became increasingly insular, “buil[d] up formidable detailed knowledges that we ignore or disrespect at our peril” (15). The end result of both developments was that Leland’s dream of a “common language” came to seem increasingly out of reach.

The fourth and final section of Gagnier’s essay, “Interdisciplinarity as Collectivity,” helpfully maps out how community formation plays a role in contemporary interdisciplinary research. For Gagnier, as for Leland or Matthew Arnold, the “The Scholar-Gypsy” becomes a powerful metaphor for interdisciplinarity: “Gypsies really were on to something that breaks down walls, boundaries, and institutional barriers” (15-16). The Gypsies’ itinerant lifestyle makes them ideal representatives of Gagnier’s concept of interdisciplinarity as collectivity. The interdisciplinary scholar, like the Gypsy, must be willing to be an intellectual nomad, forming and dissolving research communities as needed in order to address specific problems in contemporary culture. Gagnier suggests that the most effective interdisciplinary scholarship stems out of “shared commitment across the disciplines to understand real problems,” leading to the tentative community-forming that spawned movements like feminism, environmental studies, postcolonial studies, and Marxian studies, among others (16). Whereas modern life “fragments, atomises, or competes,” the Gypsy culture of interdisciplinary scholarship depends upon relationship building and open conversation across the disciplines (16).

However, as members of any interdisciplinary movement will tell you, factions inevitably form within such scholarly communities, and atomization and fragmentation of the group itself is a persistent threat. When interdisciplinary collaborations do succeed, Gagnier suggests, they do so in large part due to another Gypsy characteristic: empathy. The Gypsy scholar must “assume the empathetic skills of thinking *like* another discipline” and, on occasion, willfully suspend her own concepts of academic rigor out of respect for another discipline (17-18). Scholars who are unwilling to extend their imaginative empathy to encompass the attitudes, methods and standards of other disciplines risk becoming, in C.P. Snow’s words, “self-impovertished... ignorant specialists.”<sup>7</sup> On the other end of the spectrum is the empathetic Gypsy Scholar, whose process of learning to think like another discipline can involve re-evaluating her own perception of what counts as evidence as well as what constitutes as a legitimate scholarly argument. For while the physical and social sciences focus on the general and statistical, the arts and humanities incline towards the particular (16).

For all of Gagnier’s optimism about the future of interdisciplinary research, and the role of community-building within that research, her metaphor of the nomadic Scholar-Gypsy (whom the Nazis labeled “asocial”) implies the potential for loneliness inherent in such an itinerant lifestyle. The political marginality of the gypsy likewise evokes Gilles Deleuze’s and Félix Guattari’s conception of the “nomad sciences” as volatile configurations of knowledge existing outside (or in opposition to) state-sanction forms of knowledge.<sup>8</sup> As Julie Thompson Klein reminds us,

The majority of people engaged in interdisciplinary work lack a common identity ... as a result, they often find themselves homeless, in a state of social and intellectual marginality.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the current prestige of interdisciplinarity sometimes allows us to forget that working outside of or between established academic disciplines can be intellectually and politically isolating.

As Gagnier's work on Leland suggests, the Gypsy scholar must overcome this scholarly isolation by serving as a philologist and translator, helping disparate disciplines negotiate common linguistic territory. Leland's own ability to weave Eastern, non-Christian philosophies and practices into his philanthropic work with children in Philadelphia and rural workers in Britain serves as a signal instance of such ideological translation. To cite a contemporary academic example, I will briefly describe one of my own experiences researching issues at the crossroads of literary history and history of science. Last summer, I presented two versions of the same paper - a dissertation chapter on Dracula and cerebral automatism - before two different scholarly communities, one composed of literary scholars, the other composed of neuroscientists and historians.<sup>10</sup> While the literary audience encouraged me to discuss the figure of the automaton as metaphor, the scientists and historians of science wanted information about the neurological intricacies of Stoker's novel, along with biographical data proving Stoker's expertise in neurology. In the end, I wrote two presentations reporting the same findings, but written in different academic "languages" whose speakers valued distinctly different kinds of evidence and presentational styles. The experience taught me that *translation* is an essential part of interdisciplinary endeavor in an era when "we cannot individually go back to a common language before the rationalization of knowledge" (15).

Incidentally, I presented one of these two papers an hour after I attended Professor Gagnier's seminar on interdisciplinarity. Her remarks on the empathetic Gypsy Scholar resonated with me as I made the effort to present a primarily historical argument before an audience of literary scholars, the vast majority of whom were refreshingly open to such interdisciplinary exchange. The neuroscientists and historians at the other conference I attended likewise genuinely welcomed an application of scientific and historical methodologies to a literary text. It became clear to me that, in some respects, things have changed drastically since the mid-twentieth century, when Snow christened scientists and literary intellectuals "the 'two cultures'" who "had almost ceased to communicate at all."<sup>11</sup> Clearly, the lines of communication between the disciplines are more open now than they were then, even if the current scholarly climate does not permit the remarkable interdisciplinary collaborations possible during the nineteenth century.

As Gagnier reminds us, however, the current intellectual prestige of interdisciplinarity, and the accompanying institutional pressure on academics to collaborate with professionals in other fields, should not prevent us from questioning what "interdisciplinarity" really means, or from re-imagining what valuable interdisciplinary scholarship might entail. She clarifies the distinction between "interdisciplinary" scholarship, in which the contributions of each field, while distinct, are partially integrated, in contrast to "transdisciplinary" scholarship in which the disparate scholarly approaches have blended completely. Using Myra Strober's charming culinary metaphor (a refreshing contrast to the athletic, cartographic and geological metaphors employed by other critics of interdisciplinarity), Gagnier suggests transdisciplinary scholarship is like "a vegetable soup where the ingredients have all been put through a blender so that no particular vegetable is distinguishable" (18).<sup>12</sup> This vegetable metaphor delightfully underscores Gagnier's view that interdisciplinary study

ought to result from primarily *organic* impetus, that is, a spontaneously arising need to address problem whose solution requires collaboration across professions and academic disciplines, rather than from external or institutional pressure to follow a contemporary intellectual trend. For better or worse, she suggests, our institutions are creating interdisciplinary scholars. The questions we should ask now involve what we stand to gain and lose from their unique, multivalent approaches to academic inquiries.

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Thompson Klein, *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity, and Interdisciplinarity* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> This seminar took place on August 3, 2005 in Santa Cruz, California.

<sup>3</sup> Regenia Gagnier, seminar on interdisciplinary scholarship, the Dickens Universe, 3 August 2005, Santa Cruz, CA.

<sup>4</sup> These examples of Victorian interdisciplinarity and others can be found in the introduction to Mark Micale, ed., *The Mind of Modernism: Medicine, Psychology, and the Cultural Arts in Europe and America, 1880-1940* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2004), pp. 1-19.

<sup>5</sup> See Micale's introduction for elaboration of these points.

<sup>6</sup> Regenia Gagnier, "Cultural Philanthropy, Gypsies, and Interdisciplinary Scholars: The Dream of a Common Language", *Nineteen*, 1 (2005), p. 1. Further references to this source will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay.

<sup>7</sup> C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: and A Second Look* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1979), p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Treatise on Nomadology: - The War Machine," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), pp. 351-423.

<sup>9</sup> Julie Thompson Klein, *Interdisciplinarity: History, Theory, Practice* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1990), p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> A version of this piece, entitled "Cerebral Automatism, the Brain, and the Soul in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," will appear in *Journal of the History of the Neurosciences* in summer or fall 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Snow, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Compare Strober's culinary metaphor of interdisciplinarity to the geological metaphor employed by Micale, who likens the interactions between psychology and the arts at the *fin de siècle* to "seismic cultural plates continually scraping together" (p.17). By contrast, Klein employs cartographic metaphors to describe "territory disputes" between disciplines: "The question of knowledge space is not unlike the question of cartography, an analogy reinforced by the metaphor of mapping knowledge ... [in both cases] disputes over territorial lines inevitably arose" (Klein, *Crossing Boundaries*, p.3). Both of Micale and Klein's models emphasize conflict between fields, while Strober's vegetable metaphor holds forth the promise of partial or total integration of disparate academic practices.