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Interdisciplinarity: Narration And The Writing Of History

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Abstract

This paper is a modest attempt to throw light on one of the uses the interdisciplinarity approach is currently put to, compared to the more general, and I might add more traditional multidisciplinary conception of knowledge production. It appears that interdisciplinarity is presented as the panacea that is to cure the ills that are generated by the disciplinary division of knowledge; however it seems that the world has never been monodisciplinary. Interdisciplinarity, though no agreement has been reached about its exact definition, gives the impression of being a method of research that relies on the application of insights and methods from various disciplines so as to solve a specific problem. Alongside it lies the much larger idea of mutidisciplinarity. It involves –among other matters– on the one hand the contingent adoption of research methods from other disciplines, when a dead end is reached with one's own; on the other hand, and more fundamentally, the use of the different types of prose writing in various disciplines, allowing thus a more profound merging between them as will be illustrated by appropriation of narration in the writing of history.

Keywords: Knowledge production, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity, monodisciplinary

The idea that interdisciplinarity is not an artificial device but resides in 'the nature is of knowledge' is a commonly accepted view. Narrative discourse is commonly believed to be almost the exclusive type of development of literary discourse. However, as will be shown, history is a narrative account of what has happened in the past in the form of a story. This is the kind of interdisciplinarity that is the prevalent, ingrained one, and that complies with the idea that interdisciplinarity is the attribute of learning. Against it, a new form of interdisciplinary approach is currently used and seems to be exclusively confined to the circumstantial use of disciplinary knowledge to figure out given problems. However, whatever the approach is, it is not conceivable that disciplines exist in complete isolation.

Literature and history are commonly regarded as two different disciplines since literature is mainly related to fiction that is the telling of imaginary stories; whereas, history's chief task is viewed as exclusively devoted to the recording of true events that happened in the past. Such a circumscribed and clear cut distinction cannot withstand the fact that both fields are linked primarily because their existence depends on the use of language, and above all on one of the basic types of discourse namely narration and its corollary, imagination. In addition, since

both literature and history deal with man and society they are in a position to provide the opportunity to gain new insights into one another's central subjects. It is the narrative form that allows literature to throw light on historical events since as Plato asserted 'Poetry is truer than history'. Narration, as a type of discourse, is shared by the different fields of knowledge it is thus common to both literature and history. In literature, the narrative type of development is viewed as suitable for the telling of imaginary stories. So, the relationship between literature and narration has always been the center of heated debates, but narrative discourse in literature has never been put into question.

Yet, though the use of narrative discourse in the writing of history has enjoyed a long tradition, the association of narrative with fiction has given rise to fierce arguments among historians, philosophers and intellectuals involved in the writing of history. They questioned not only its relevancy, but also the functions of narrative in the writing of history. Louis Mink explains:

' We do have a dilemma about historical narrative: as historical it claims to represent, through its form, part of the complexity of the past, but as narrative it is the product of imaginative construction, which cannot defend its claim to truth by any accepted procedure of argument or authentication.' Mink Louis O. 'Narrative Form as Cognitive Instrument.' in *The Writing of History*. Ed. Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki. Wisconsin: Madison, 1978. P. 145

In fact, it must be noted that just like narration, imagination is not the exclusive attribute of any given field of knowledge as Thomas Brooks indicates : 'Fictionality is a component of scientific method: hypothesis is a fictional construct that awaits testing by experimentation. (p. 155) Still, the historical narrative and its fictitious dimension is the core of the concern the exponents of the transfer of the methods of natural sciences to the study of history. This school holds that the prerequisites for history to becoming a true science are the use of sciences laws, namely the application of causality to explain historical phenomena and the provision of room for the scientific ideals like objectivity and certainty to prevail.

Thus, the paramount interest of the scientifically oriented historians of the French Annals School and what became later known as New History is to set up a sharp distinction between history and fiction. As opponents of the narrativist approach, they disapprove of narrative they perceive as too 'literary', 'related to fiction' and thus 'unfit for history.' It is important to note that this line of thought had 'already been put forward in the 1940ies by Carl G. Hempel in his positivist analysis of historical knowledge, advocating the view that to become a 'respectable' science, history is to throw off ' its vague literary form'. This idea stands prominently in the opening chapter of his essay,' The Function of General Laws in History,

'It is rather a widely held opinion that history, in contradistinction to the so called physical sciences , is concerned with the description of particular events of the past rather than with the search of general laws which might govern these events... .. General laws have quite analogous functions in history and the natural sciences that they form an indispensable instrument of historical research, and that they even constitute the common basis of various procedures which are even considered as characteristic of the social as contradistinction to the natural sciences.' (p.35)

New History holds that narrative imposes on real events a coherence they do not have. This formal coherence, it is believed, does not correspond to the truthful representation of real life impeding thus history from becoming a true knowledge. To make true knowledge prevail, history needs to be cleansed from literary imagination. However, according to Hayden White, 'We experience the 'fictionalization' of history as an 'explanation' for the same reason that we experienced great fiction as an illumination of the world we inhabit along with the author.' (Tropics on Discourse, p. 98) Because New Historians see the 'social' as coterminous with the 'real', reality is thus viewed as independent of the historian narrative. This conception aimed at limiting the task of the historian to explaining historical facts as the scientist explains natural phenomena.

As a response to this somehow imposed interdisciplinarity representing a constraint for historical writing, Hayden White argues the following, 'In the historical studies the aim is to understand rather than explain. Historians in general do not claim to have discovered a law that would permit them to explain phenomena as scientists do in their explanation. Historians often claim to explain the matters of which they treat by providing their own understanding of them. The means by which this understanding is provided is interpretation. Narration is both the way in which a historical interpretation is achieved and the mode of discourse in which a successful understanding of matters historical is represented.' (The content of the Form, pp. 59-60).

According to Gerard Noirel, the New historians were unable to establish a historical method for what they labeled 'interdisciplinarity' because they considered history as 'the hub for all knowledge'. For Lucien Fèbre 'if the new history was the point of convergence for all knowledge, it was because it represented the culmination of the "human sciences". ... the other disciplines were merely able to clarify a single dimension of human existence, only history was able to restore it in its totality. (The Lessons of a Desillusion, p. 558) . Thus the interdisciplinary collaboration between New History and other disciplines was cut short because of the hierarchization of knowledge, and the 'distrust of theory ' by new historians. Many opponents of theoretical analyses, like C. O. Carbonel perceive the admission of philosophers in the field of history as 'outrageous imperialism' that destroyed and obscured history.

Despite the rejection of historical narrative and its corollary imagination, the narrative type of discourse seems inescapable in any account of the past, since historians write texts, narrativism stands as the most established theory of history. The origins of narrativism find their roots in nineteenth century historicism .Wilhem Von Humboldt claims on the one hand that history is the narration of what has happened, but at the same time he gives the power of intuition to the history writer so as to explain the past.

'One has... scarcely arrived at the skeleton of an event by the crude sorting out of what actually happened. What is so achieved is the necessary basis of history, its raw material, not history itself. The truth of any event is predicated on the addition ... of that invisible part of every fact, and it is this part, therefore, which the historian has to add... ..Differently from a poet, but in a similar way to him, he must work the collected fragments into a whole... ... For if the historian, as has been said, can only reveal the

truth of an event by presentation, by filling in and connecting the disjointed fragments of direct observation, he can do so, like the poet, only through his imagination.' (On the Historian task, p. 58).

Humboldt's stance about the use of narrative as a means to convey meaning through the historian narrative construct of facts is shared by various history theorists and philosophers among whom Louis Mink. The latter suggests that historians should aim at achieving the strictest coherence possible, so that what is disjointed in the past acquires unity in the historians' text. Mink further asserts in 'Narrative Form as Cognitive Instrument' that 'stories are not lived but told' and that 'life has no beginnings, middles and ends' he thus considers coherence not as an inherent feature of the past, but as the result of the historical narratives, that take the form of a story. The same idea is voiced by Paul Ricoeur in *Temps et récit* that narrative structure 'is an effect of poetic ordering'.

Through narration, history produces meaning out of the multiple information that is gathered about the past. Though the existence of the past, as well as the reality of fact cannot be denied, there is no possibility to have access to them. The past is thus construed and constructed from the evidence that is provided by the records or archive which are not 'the real past', but are only its discursive version. As Keith Jenkins states, 'Because of this imagined "fictive" element ... no history can be literally "factual", completely "found" or absolutely "true".' Keith, Jenkins. (On 'What is History? From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White). Therefore, narrative discourse can neither be reduced to a neutral means of representation of historical events endowing them with coherence, nor to a bare medium, without cognitive dimension, solely dedicated at achieving communication between the historian and his public. Hence, the relevance of Barthes view that narrative is what gives meaning to a list of recounted events.

There seems to be a paradox between the narrative writing of history and the objectivity claim made by almost all historians. This claim can be verified only if the historian makes a list of the facts related to the event object of his study. Because historical narrative is intrinsically interpretive and relies on inference, it cannot have any claim to absolute objectivity. Narrative interpretation and its attendant imagination are part and parcel of the issue being raised by the historian, of the specific ordering of facts, and the filling of the multiple worrying gaps so as to obtain a coherent, convincing and comprehensive whole which constitutes historical objectivity. This is how Robert Young sums up Foucault genealogy,

'... by asking a question, posing a problem, you set up a generality against which you constitute events and arrange them in a series. The construction of that generality does not pretend to be the only possible one – the same event could operate in all sorts of different ways in different series, temporalities, which would mean that, strictly speaking, it was no longer the same event, for it would have been dispersed in their different rarefactions. This is not to suggest that events cannot be said to occur straightforwardly in the real but rather that when set up in any series, narrative, or history they are constructed as such events retrospectively by the historian.' (White Mythologies.)

As mentioned earlier the use of narrative in the writing of history is no longer put into question. It is associated with the real, objectivity and truth and is now considered as a

paradigm of the representation of reality in the form of a story characterized by 'coherence' 'fullness' and 'closure'. In the Lectures on the Philosophy of History, Hegel argues that it is the state that has made historical discourse possible and he is echoed by Hayden White who shares the same view that

'... it is the need to rank events with respect to their significance for the culture or group that is writing its own history that makes a narrative representation of the real possible'.
(The content of the form, p.10)

In his thought provoking study of the historical narrative Hayden White, traces the evolution of historical discourse, he analyses the two prevailing approaches of recording events before narrative became the inescapable type of discourse in history writing. In the past there existed other ways of recording events namely the annals and the chronicle. The annals relied on a chronological ordering of events. The yearly dates of the calendar were filled with the events that happened that year. The list of the years is complete, since even the years when nothing happened are mentioned. God is believed to be behind the happening of events. Therefore, there is no human power or law. Therefore, there is no 'social center' no authority, no central subject that impels the annalist to grade events, and thus no incentive to build a narrative.

' For the annalist of Saint Gall[eighth, ninth, tenth centuries of the Christian era] there no need to claim the authority to narrate events... since there is no contest there nothing to narrativise no need for them to "speak" themselves or be represented as if they could "tell their own story". It is only necessary to record them in the order that they come to notice, for since there is no contest there is no story to tell.' Ibid. P. 19

The presence of a conflict was behind the need to write a narrative account in the form of a chronicle, chronologically organized- but failing to conform to the structure of a well made story-. What was at stake in the Richerus Chronicle [B.C.1000] provided by Hayden White, as an illustration, was the problem of authority which is itself the outcome of a conflict between two archbishops.

'We can legitimately suppose that his impulse to write a narrative was in some way connected to the desire on his part to represent an authority whose legitimacy hinged on the establishment of "facts" of a specifically historical order.' Ibid. P.19

The evolution of narrative in the writing of history displays the characteristics of creativity, openness and comprehensiveness thanks to its association with imagination it shares with literature. But the current interdisciplinarity approach is conceived as the most 'innovating', 'efficient' and all encompassing methodology to knowledge. Therefore, the absence of this method is presently believed to yield only 'incomplete' 'superficial' and 'restricted' knowledge. The reason is that the knowledge produced within the disciplines is regarded as 'fragmented lacking the capacity of providing the appropriate solutions to realistic problems' This view is conveyed in the definition provided by Brewer G.D. of the concept of interdisciplinarity and of the goals that are ascribed to :

'Interdisciplinarity generally refers to the appropriate combination of knowledge from many different specialities- especially as a means to shed new light on actual

problems.'In these efforts theories and tools have to be integrated to achieve broader understanding and to improve performance. ('The Challenges of Interdisciplinarity, pp. 331- 332)

The importance of disciplinary knowledge, or more precisely the one that is carried out within broad fields cannot be denied. The latter is necessary for the achievement of depth and expertise in a given field not only because of its specificity, but also because it offers specific methods, precise concepts as well as well defined references. Still disciplines are not self contained units for their object, especially in the humanities, overflows the imposed structure which could not contain their complexity and depth. This is how Adam Takacs explains the interrelated aspects of cognitive processes.

'It seems to me that if the attempt to classify Foucault's work from the standpoint of a particular discipline, be it philosophy or history, will inevitably lead to ambiguous consequences, then there is still a possibility of considering it from an interdisciplinary point of view. This would presuppose first of all a change in the order of reading that is to say, in trying to grasp the "meanings" of Foucault one should not so much be looking for one or more doctrinal elements in his thought as concentrating on the very practice of thinking he follows. (' On the Interdisciplinary Practice of Foucault's Work', p.871)

This idea is rightly emphasized by Elke Dunker: ' On the work floor, knowledge production has never been monodisciplinary; it has mobilised cognitive and technical resources across disciplines as they fitted.' ('Symbolic Communication in Multidisciplinary Cooperations, p. 349)

These views on interdisciplinarity are in complete compliance with Michael McKeon's assumption that the Enlightenment modern disciplinary division of knowledge, went hand in hand with the development of interdisciplinary strategies.

' When we read the documents of the Enlightenment division, we can see its historicity in the tendency of division to appear intertwined with a synthesizing counter- movement the famous Enlightenment projects in the division of knowledge often aimed, with greater or lesser explicitness, to provide thereby a new foundation for a unified scheme of knowledge ... I do want here to focus on the more intentional form of this phenomenon, in which the ambition to divide knowledge is accompanied by the will to set distinct realms of knowledge into significant relations; to argue their analogous, contiguous, or causal interconnections and to use one such a realm to disclose or contextualize some unexpected feature of another.' ('The Origins of Interdisciplinary Studies', p. 18)

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