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Disciplined Interdisciplinarity

I first met Dorota Filipczak in St. Chad's College in the University of Durham in 1989. She was a young visiting scholar at the University and came to see me because she had been told that I had an interest in the field of literature and theology. I was frankly rather surprised that she had chosen to come and talk to me. Durham had a distinguished department of English Literature where she might have sought help more naturally, and I was struggling on the lower rungs of the academic ladder, suspended uncomfortably between two departments, English Literature and Theology, and deeply uncertain of my place in the scholarly community. I did not fit into any of the categories that would assure you a permanent post in the university. In the Theology Department there were systematic theologians, church historians (ancient, medieval, modern), biblical scholars (Hebrew Bible and New Testament), and so on. In English the division of professional labor was largely on historical lines—eighteenth century, nineteenth century, twentieth century, and that new phenomenon of "literary theory." Each had their professional specialists. Sometimes the word "interdisciplinary" was heard, but uttered without conviction and no-one really knew what it meant. I would be asked to give the occasional class on Milton or Blake and the Bible, and there was an idea that Melville's *Moby Dick* might somehow be "religious," but generally my two departments kept themselves well apart and it seemed unlikely that there was much of a career to be made in my "interdisciplinary" endeavors in literature and theology.

Still, this situation seemed odd to me as everyone knew that English literature was not only saturated in the Bible (usually the King James Version as an acknowledged "literary" masterpiece) but struggled with deeply "theological" problems—in writers from John Donne and George Herbert

to Samuel Taylor Coleridge and James Joyce. (Joyce, of course, is not "English" but the discipline of English literature has always had a habit of expanding its boundaries to extend its empire.) The Bible, and indeed the Anglican Book of Common Prayer (in its 1559 form), were everywhere in the plays of Shakespeare. But the professionalism of the academy in the study of English literature (in those days in England still overshadowed by rather old-fashioned English Marxist criticism from Raymond Williams and others) somehow suppressed this—as indeed, the literary glories of the biblical texts were to a large extent ignored by theologians.[1]

In 1989, exactly the same year as my first meeting with Dorota (and a deeply fruitful meeting it proved to be), the American scholar Stanley Fish, who was simultaneously a professor of English and professor of law at Duke University, North Carolina, wrote a startling essay entitled "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do" (reprinted in Fish 231–42). The title is deliberately dislocated. For my part, I *was* being interdisciplinary, but I found it very hard to *do* it in a university setting. Fish's argument rests upon the nature of "professionalism" in today's higher education system. I was, of course, being dangerously "anti-professional," taking a stand that was, according to Fish, "an indictment of the narrowly special interests that stake out a field of enquiry and then colonize it with a view toward nothing more than serving their own selfish interests" (231). Fish's point is that the "profession" will repeatedly draw up new disciplinary lines to sustain its professionalism, and those who blur or attempt to merge those lines will ultimately find themselves excluded from research programs and eventually teaching in jobs they are offered according to a certain particular notion of expertise. Of course, as Fish goes on to say, such a system will eventually turn in on itself, speaking a technical language (or various languages with respect to philosophy, theology, literary studies and so on) that is understood only by those within the sacred circle of the narrow discipline. Such a system is thus prone to manipulation by whoever is funding it, from either public or private resources—and this is quite clearly what is happening to most of our universities, whether private or state financed. But as Shoshana Felman once observed, such a form of knowledge is "a knowledge which does not know what it knows, and thus is not in possession of itself" (qtd. in Fish 235). Stanley Fish ends his article with the gloomy conclusion that the professionalized academic mind is essentially closed, heedless of the claims of such larger things as liberation, freedom, openness in our world (242).

[1] I am well aware that I am simplifying a complex picture for both theology and English literature, but I stand by the general tenor of what I have said here, bearing in mind that this was of a time now more than thirty years ago.

As Fish was delivering this sad indictment to the Modern Language Association of America, whose annual congress attracts in excess of ten thousand "professional" delegates, let us now return to Dorota as she introduced herself to me in St. Chad's College, Durham in 1989. I was then principal of the college which had begun life as a training institution for priests in the Church of England. By the 1980s it was fully integrated into the university, with students from all faculties and departments, though its theological origins were still very apparent. I knew nothing about Poland or Polish universities, and Dorota, for her part, was entirely new to the University of Durham. What we had in common were three things: a love of literature, an interest in religion, and a passion for poetry, though as for the last, Dorota herself was a poet and I was most certainly not.

Perhaps our common interests, and our differences, are best illustrated in the characters of two journals, *Literature and Theology*, of which I was the founding editor in 1987 and with which Dorota had a long connection, and her own, more recent journal, *Text Matters*. Both are deeply "interdisciplinary": now let us take them in turn.

On the inside cover of the early issues of *Literature and Theology* that journal is described, more than somewhat pedantically, as being

> concerned with interdisciplinary study of serious interest to both theologians and to students of literature. It should exist within the creative tension between two disciplines and not become simply either a journal of theology, or a journal of literary studies. . . Of mutual interest, for example, are narrative, the historical context of literature, the nature of myth, the study of language and semiotics, the art of translation and hermeneutics. (*Literature and Theology*)

It speaks very much of its time, before the cultural tidal wave of postmodernism had fully broken upon us, and it was certainly lacking in much gender awareness. All of the early editors of *L&T* were men, and almost all of the contributors to the early issues were men also. But the disturbances under the surface and its beginning at a time of unease in the intellectual community may be illustrated by two of its early articles written by leading intellectual figures of the day, Nathan A. Scott Jr. and George Steiner.

Scott was then the formidable doyen of the study of literature and religion in the United States. In his article entitled "On the Teaching of Literature in an Age of Carnival," Scott wrote, with his ineradicable nostalgia for past cultural unities and his manifold cultural assumptions:

> So I say that, in Bakhtin's sense of the term, ours seems now to be an age of carnival, for the myriad disjunctions that fractionalize and disunite cultural discourse in our period make all our forums a scene of babel. What is clear beyond question is the extreme unlikelihood that the people of the West shall ever again be presented with any great, overarching *speculum mentis* that subdues all the entanglements of modern

> intellectual life and integrates the various fields of culture, assigning each to its proper place within the terms of some magnificently comprehensive map of the human universe. (126)

For Scott, the times are out of joint, and nothing, it seems, can recover the lost unity which, for him, seems to suggest only the ancient idea of Christendom binding all together in one vision.

Three years later, in 1990, in vol. 4 of the journal, George Steiner, with similar assertiveness, wrote "A Note on Absolute Tragedy." His vision is more complex but no less disparaging of contemporary culture:

> It is foolish to prophesy (the ontological freedom of art is always that of the unexpected). But one's intuition is that if representative tragic forms are to arise, they will do so from some unsparing humiliation inside theology itself, from some naked acquiescence in defeat. There are motions of spirit of precisely this tenor in Kierkegaard, in Karl Barth's 1919 commentary on *Romans*. The blandness, the indifference now prevalent may be broken . . . But even if this were to happen, the correlative fictions would not, one senses, be those of absolute tragedy or of high melodrama. They would be nearer to some exercise in nocturnal slap-stick, as befits an after-word and a time of epilogue. (156)

The end time then is just to be a joke? Both Scott and Steiner could be intimidating and both preached, in different ways, in a somewhat apocalyptic tone of the end of culture, in the spirit of W. B. Yeats in "The Second Coming": "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (211). I have reached the age when I have a degree of sympathy with them, though for very different reasons: and I am not so entirely without hope.

But now let us turn to the first issue of Dorota's journal *Text Matters* in 2011. To start with, the majority of contributors here are women, beginning with the Oxford feminist philosopher of religion, Pamela Sue Anderson, and Dorota herself, both of whom have sadly been taken from us. Dorota begins her first editorial with these words: "Marked with dual identity, the first issue of *TM* seeks to primarily engage in the relationship between women and authority, vested in literary and philosophical texts. The collection brings together the voices of philosophers, theologians, writers and literary scholars" (6).

The tone of *Text Matters*' self-presentation is far less coldly academic and far more warmly conversational than that of *Literature and Theology*. According to its current self-description, "[*TM*] seeks to engage in contemporary debates in the humanities by inviting contributions from literary and cultural studies intersecting with literary theory, gender studies, history, philosophy and religion ("About the Journal"). This reflects the breadth and vitality of Dorota herself, for whom academic work was never simply a "professional" matter. It was far more than that, being an

acknowledgment that the life of the intellect does indeed "matter" in our world, and is mixed up with everything else.

I was honoured to be a contributor to that first issue of *Text Matters*, and towards the end of my essay entitled "The Artist and Religion in the Contemporary World," I wrote these words:

> Throughout the ages of Christianity in the West the Christian church has been one of the greatest of patrons of the arts. But it has also too often patronized the artist whose greatest works have frequently been too edgy, too difficult, too impossible for the church to tolerate. (225)

Over the centuries, interdisciplinarity has been problematic long before the modern university developed its own professional problems. Human life has been compartmentalized and fragmented, not least when it comes to the matter of religion. The Church and its doctrines have too often been wary of artists and poets who are "different," "critical"—and the loss for everyone has been inestimable.

Text Matters, then, represents a considerable interdisciplinary advance over our struggles in the early issues of *Literature and Theology*, although as initiatives, each of their own time, they have a great deal in common. I know, to my own cost, that Fish was essentially correct in his analysis of interdisciplinarity, but in the university the battle against the narrowly defined limits of "professionalism" must continue to be fought, and it is a battle that lies at the very heart of our humanity. I do not for one moment wish to imply that we abandon a thoroughly rigorous and professional approach to our training and practice as intellectuals. But our context must be far wider than the competitive definitions of working within academic disciplines, too often virtually isolated in separate departments in our universities and colleges. In her opening words of the Editorial to that first issue of *Text Matters*, to which I have already referred, Dorota firmly stamps her broad, humane and bold concerns upon the journal which was "to primarily engage in the relationship between women and authority, vested in literary and philosophical texts" (6). The texts we work with are the context and what matters is to explore and unpick the relationships between them.

Such a task is not easy. It took us many years of working on the journal *Literature and Theology* to move into the broader country that *Text Matters*, founded a quarter of a century later, inhabits. Even now the odds are weighted against us. We need to look back a little into the history of the European university. Almost ninety years after the founding of the new University of Berlin by Baron Wilhelm von Humboldt, at the behest of Frederick William III, Hermann Usener wrote, in 1888, of the "*gletscherwall*,"

the "glacial rampart" set up between biblical studies and the study of other literatures, both ancient and modern, in the modern university (qtd. in Prickett 1). And if biblical studies particularly suffers from isolation, then in the modern university it is not alone in this. Philosophers, literary critics, theologians, sociologists and others live behind their own fiercely defended ramparts, often employing arcane vocabularies that are meaningful only to those within the discipline.

But now I return to a later meeting with Dorota, though it was a meeting through words. I was teaching for a while in South Africa when I read her work on the Canadian writer Malcolm Lowry whose works happen to have long been favorites of mine. It struck me that Lowry was an odd novelist for a young Polish woman to be writing on, but over the years it has come to make sense to me and says a great deal about the genius of literature as it weaves together sometimes obscure patterns in our complex world.

Malcolm Lowry was a rebel. Born in 1909 and educated at an English public school, he spent a year at sea on a freighter before university at Oxford, and the result of his sea-faring was his first novel *Ultramarine* (1933). Lowry lived a wandering life, much of it spent in a squatter's hut near Vancouver in British Columbia during the years of the Second World War, where he wrote his one great masterpiece, *Under the Volcano* (1947). He died in England in 1957 at the age of forty-eight. *Under the Volcano*, like all his fictional work, is saturated in the Bible and is one of the very few great tragedies of twentieth-century literature. Lowry's biographer, Douglas Day, in the Preface to the unfinished novel *Dark as the Grave Wherein my Friend is Laid* (1968), sums up beautifully the contradictions of the man:

> A man sly and deceptive, yet shy and ingenuous; a drunk of gargantuan proportions, yet a man who seems never to have let go an almost preternatural degree of self-awareness . . . a great liar (or more charitably, inventor of autobiographical fictions), but—in his writing especially—one of the most painfully honest men who ever lived. A great trial to all his friends; but a man of such charm that someone once said of him: "Just one look at the old bastard makes me happy for a week." (v)

Lowry's greatest fictional character, Geoffrey Firmin, the ex-consul of *Under the Volcano*, is doomed to struggle with a world he can never understand. A running motif of the novel is re-tellings of the parable of the Good Samaritan—a story of an unexpectedly good man who rescues the poor man lying in the road. For Geoffrey, though, it never works. With all his good intentions, the man dies before he can be rescued, or he (this time the victim) leaps up and refuses the offered help. Why does the biblical narrative never work for Geoffrey? He is, of course, to a large degree a self-portrait of Lowry—"one of the most painfully honest men who ever lived." His corpus of work is slight, much being left in disorgan-

ized note form when he died, and his last posthumously published work was painstakingly reconstructed by his wife Margerie Bonner Lowry and published as *October Ferry to Gabriola* (1971). In Lowry's own words, "it deals with the theme of eviction" (n.pag.), the banishment from Eden experienced by the central character, Ethan Llewellyn, weighted down with the burden of guilt, yet etched with hope. The final chapter is entitled "*Uberimae Fides*":

> Ethan turned straight round, looking ahead. There was another point ahead, with yet another lighthouse on it and beyond that lay Gabriola still in sunlight. It was too far to distinguish any details, but there appeared to be two high hills, with a valley between in the center. And all the hope of his heart flowed out to it. (326)

Why have I given so much focus to the work of Malcolm Lowry? There are two reasons. The first is Dorota's remarkable perception in her reading of Lowry's writings, and her capacity to enter into the soul of this troubled man for whom the world was finally too much. The second reason follows on from the first. Lowry could never have flourished in the divided, categorized professionalism of modern academic life. Interdisciplinarity, understood even in its most joyous, carnivalesque sense, was for him impossible. For his genius was to see and feel all things *together*, and together they were too much for him. And yet his literature embraced a profound romanticism that celebrates the unity of all things, and an equally profound sadness that knows how almost impossible that unity is.

Still, the true intellectual pursues that unity. Dorota's career as a poet and an academic represents a dismissal of that very rigidity in the academic structural system that militates against the genuine, perhaps impossible interdisciplinarity that acknowledges the unity of all things. What she stood for are what Stanley Fish celebrates as the "claims of liberation, freedom, openness" (242) that must lie at the heart of all properly moral intellectual endeavor. To begin with, she was truly international in her concerns, and noted for her work, not only in literature and poetry but also in the feminist philosophy of religion. Academic rigor did not stifle her creativity, for she was the author of seven volumes of poetry. She was also a translator.

What I am arguing for here is essentially within the tradition of one of the great nineteenth-century Christian writers on the nature of the university. In 1852, John Henry Newman published a work entitled *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, with a revised edition published in 1859. In the field of what he called "liberal knowledge," Newman proposed two fundamental principles. First that "all knowledge is a whole" and second that the pursuit of such knowledge is an end in itself (80).

Again, it is a vision of unity. Here is a glimpse of Newman's vision of "universal learning" contrasting with the current tendency in universities to reduce the range of subjects taught, not least in the field of the humanities (Newman's gendered language is retained):

> It is a great point then to enlarge the range of studies which a university professes, even for the sake of the students; and though they cannot pursue every subject that is open to them, they will be the gainers by living among those and under those who represent the whole circle. This I conceive to be the advantage of a seat of universal learning, considered as a place of education. . . A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom; or what in a former discourse I have ventured to call a philosophical habit. This then I would assign as the special fruit of the education furnished at a university, as contrasted with other places of teaching or modes of teaching. (82)

Newman then proceeds to ask the question of such learning and such knowledge, "What is the *use* of it?" Proper knowledge is indeed to be sought as an end in itself and for its own good, but this is not to deny that it also has "a very tangible, real, and sufficient end, though the end cannot be divided from that knowledge itself" (83). In short, it is concerned with that which lies at the very heart of our humanity—of our being human. Through such education we may draw closer to a "humane" society, one that is built upon a vision of the universal and the inclusive, rather than the limited and the exclusive. It therefore forms the engine room of our fight against all that belittles and divides our humanity—racism, sexism, petty nationalism and so on.

Many years ago my dear friend Mark Ledbetter and I edited a book of essays of our teacher and friend, the late Robert Detweiler of Emory University, Atlanta. It was entitled *In Good Company* (1994), words drawn from a poem by the English poet C. Day-Lewis: "Go mad in good company, find a good country, / Make a clean sweep or make a good end" (qtd. in Jasper and Ledbetter xv).

The book ended with an interview with Robert, reflecting on his lifetime spent teaching in universities in the United States and in Europe. He was very clear that we are concerned with a profoundly *moral* project:

> If we spent some of the energy we put into our research for publication on developing ways of moral teaching—and gave this kind of effort the prestige that we now give to research and publication—we might have the start of a responsible higher education system. (Greene 447)

Robert concluded the interview with the observation that what dissatisfied him most about his long career in universities was this: "I am least happy

about the fact that after my three decades in higher education our society appears to be in worse shape than ever. I take this personally" (448). Said with a smile, it was meant seriously. Now that my turn has come to reflect back on a long teaching career, I know exactly what Robert meant, and that is the reason why the fight should never be given up.

And so back to Dorota. Neither Robert Detweiler, nor I, nor Dorota, were trained in the arts of "interdisciplinarity." Each of us has had, in Robert's words, to develop our own expertise, and for each of us that is somewhat different. Part of the reason is that our academic and intellectual life must be led, in the first instance, by our cultural circumstances. For four years, between 1951 and 1955, Robert Detweiler worked with the rehabilitation of refugees in different parts of Germany. It is nearly impossible for me to appreciate Dorota's early years in Communist Poland, her relationship with the church, her engagement with Polish cinema, her work on feminist philosophy of religion. And yet somehow true interdisciplinarity draws people together. I do not mean the artificial phenomenon that Stanley Fish rightly dismisses. But by way of illustration, I draw to a conclusion in this essay with some reflections on a conference that Dorota organized under the auspices of the Department of British Literature and Culture of the University of Lodz in April 1998.

The title of the conference, and the book that followed it and which Dorota edited, was *Dissolving the Boundaries*, and it was indeed apt. It was not a large gathering but we traveled to Poland from the United Kingdom, Australia, Hong Kong and Japan. It was certainly a global gathering. Dorota wrote in the Introduction:

> It is particularly significant that the conference with such a meaningful title was organized in Poland almost a decade after the collapse of the oppressive communist régime in our country. At the same time the activities involved in the publication of this volume occurred literally at the turn of the millennium. Thus the articles that might be called the closing statements are also the opening ones, the end of one millennium being conflated with the beginning of another. (3)

For my paper at the conference I borrowed a term from an old essay by Jacques Derrida, published in *Diacritics* in 1983. Derrida wrote of a "professor at large" in Paris who used to be called "*un ubiquitiste*" and the term "ubiquity" was adopted by Dorota to describe the task of the conference as "a mediator witnessing and acknowledging the collapse of disciplinary boundaries" (Introduction 3).

There we were in one great discussion for two or three days—theologians, biblical critics, philosophers of religion, literary critics—crossing and dissolving boundaries and yet each bringing something particular, some proper sense of "discipline" to the conversation in an exercise of

disciplined interdisciplinarity. The resultant dialogue was described by Dorota as "a powerful message of encouragement for all the ubiquitists who dissolve the boundaries and 'venture to name' the liminal unnameable qualities" (Introduction 3). I suspect that this is something that has to be learned afresh in every generation, and to each the formal structures of the academy are invariably unsympathetic. The real work of interdisciplinarity will probably always begin, and end, in friendships that themselves dissolve boundaries and sustain us more than any formal honors or prizes. This essay has been partly of a personal nature, remembering, as so many do with me, my friend who is sadly no longer with us. But it has, I hope, made a serious point in the reminder that interdisciplinarity is so very hard to do—and must be done afresh in new and daring ways time and time again. In that task Dorota was a leader and a colleague nonpareil.

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