

*Theories and Methods: Literature, Science, and Medicine*  
*St. Deiniol's Library*

*Diary reflections*  
by Grace Farrington

**Monday, January 4, 2010**

Prior to this event we were given a large pack of reading material to serve as introductions to some of the topics that will be treated of in the different sessions. Already, at the end of the first day, we have been introduced to a lot of different ideas, particularly in the postgraduate presentations at the end of the day. I think what interests me is how at an event like this you can meet the people who are behind the ideas that they present. You have a sense of the very real/dynamic way in which people respond differently to and produce different ideas, owing to their individuality. At the same time there is the human anxiety of producing an argument in the context of an awareness of previous work in this interdiscipline, which has involved such questioning, debate and controversy. For instance, there is almost a fear of using the word "science" without something like a disclaimer. To a certain extent, perhaps each of us have to resolve these implications for ourselves, and as we do this, perhaps this will be a means of drawing out the formulation of LitSciMed that Sharon is looking to see develop.

On a more specific note, I enjoyed hearing more about Gladstone's library today from Dr Mark Llewellyn. It occurs to me that in the attempt to recover and catalogue the reading of one man, we see the haphazardness of reading. He was given many books that he didn't read. Some of those he did read are annotated in some detail, and some are not. I guess that in trying to determine how books accumulate to make a man who he is, the material reality of a book collection might belie the haphazardness of reading, and the difference between that which is noted and that which is absorbed without notice. As I understand it, Gladstone was intent on collecting in his library a certain systematically unified body of knowledge. I wonder how this compares with the body of knowledge that Gladstone assimilated and made his own.

**Tuesday, January 5, 2010**

In today's first session we were thinking about questions surrounding the terms mono-, inter-, and multi-disciplinarity. We talked about how inter-disciplinarity has become such a buzzword in academia. This caused to me wonder about the justifications for mono-disciplines, to wonder whether these can still exist and why academics/writers might have wanted to retain clear boundaries. In one of the English departments that I have studied within, the department appeared to have attempted to resist any structural change since its early inception. There was no opportunity to take extra modules from outside the department except in the case of languages (German), and Greek/Latin literature. Literary criticism was taught, but in general kept at a distance.

It was as though the department had decided what literature was, and what the study of it should be, and there was no need to consider anything much outside of this.

Does inter-disciplinarity in some sense pose a threat to what has gone before?

In this session we also discussed the particular 'concerns', 'methods' and 'vocabularies' of our discipline. In our group, looking at English literature, our list of concerns was very much longer than our list of methods or vocabularies. Perhaps it would be a fitting way of describing the study of English literature to say that is driven by 'concern', concerns about technical issues, representation, constructions, argument, even moral assessment/re-assessment. This 'concern' is what drives writing.

I have to say I was moved by the presentations this evening on race/genetics in literature and culture, and on representations of HIV/AIDS. It strikes me that beyond or beneath the rationality that might be associated with Western / twentieth-century civilisation, issues of prejudice, ignorance and disregard for fellow human beings are yet prevalent and do demand the insights that can be provided by literature and science.

### **Wednesday, January 6, 2010**

I found our review of writings on the subject of literature and science rather provoking today. In particular, Gillian Beer's language seemed within the couple of paragraphs that we looked at from her 'Translation or Transformation' essay to be heavily laden. The point that 'Scientific material does not have clear boundaries once it has entered literature' seems self-evident, but then seemed to become problematic with the recapitulative 'When concepts enter different genres they do not remain intact'. This not remaining intact does not in fact seem to worry Beer; rather she sees it as productive of possibility. Somehow I find Beer's language of change and altering disturbing though. Is the point then that science itself is situated within a larger evolutionary development, and that the unsettling nature of this description is indicative of this very process?

Beer goes on to treat of that which lies in wait within a text for 'the apt and inappropriate reader', 'the possibility of a vacillation of meaning, a chording of significance, that will break through generic constraints, whether the genre be that of poem, drama, novel, scientific paper.' Beer does not mind the presence of an inappropriate reader (indeed she encourages it), and yet my instinct is to want to avoid being this inappropriate reader. Perhaps this is to do with my general sense of needing to believe that reading can reveal something that is true, or at least a glimpse of it in passing. I'm not really sure what this truth is, or whether it is ever verifiable, but I think of it as a gut-level thing. So I do end up with Beer in that hope of the breakthrough of 'a chording of significance', and yet I hope that there is something more in it than inappropriacy.

### **Thursday, January 7, 2010**

Following on from yesterday, I was prompted today by the discussion in the context of Literary Darwinism of fiction and its non-reality. We would not say that any

fictional character has a real-life testable biology. Stating it in these terms reminded me that what we are dealing with in literature is fictions. And yet our identification with a character, narrator or speaker is real, an extension of our selves. This in-between space – is this perhaps where we can locate what we might think of more loosely as the power of literature? Reading becomes not just about “me”, and not just about whatever is in the text (if we are engaging with it). It is in the connection between the two, the connection that is facilitated by our concentration and attention, manifested in body language/position and an oriented mind.

To follow up another thought in relation to Gowan Dawson’s paper on the Victorian Richard Owen, the references to Owen’s reading in written accounts of the man seemed to suggest how reading fiction was of benefit to him (even a ‘restorative’) but at the same time could absorb him to rather an extreme degree. I suppose I’m aware that if we claim that reading literature could hold benefits to health, there are potential risks/dangers too, and that it will perhaps be worth giving room to this consideration within my thesis. I have spoken to one man with bi-polar disorder who told me that he had to stop reading literature because he would pick up a book and then get drawn into such a paranoid/obsessive/excited state that he wouldn’t be able to put it down until 10 or so hours later when he had finished the book. I suggest that the concept and structure of shared reading might be able to provide a compromised balance between the benefits of reading and its attendant concerns.