Thinking across Disciplines. Interdisciplinarity as a Means of Identification in Jeffrey Eugenides' and Petru Popescu's Novels

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In this day and age, interdisciplinarity is almost mandatory in every scholarly field, not to mention in academic research. Even though, from a lexicological point of view, the term is self explanatory, every so often it can raise issues as regards procedures of usage, vantage points, common grounds or influences. This is especially suitable in the case of literature and literary criticism, because literature is, as Aldous Huxley so craftily pointed out, "every man's memory"; in other words, it is deeply personal, the reflection of humanity itself. Literature is more often than not unique, an expression of personal values and human nature; and as such, referring to literature in terms of "disciplines" and "interdisciplinarity" might sometimes appear rather peculiar. Interdisciplinarity and "interdisciplinary" are by definition related to affiliation, to surpassing the boundaries of a certain field and resorting to different schools of thought or trends. Although the term "interdisciplinarity" has been coined back in the twentieth century, it is still a quite modern take on research, in general. This particular trend is based on communication, inter-related fields of research and it creates the surroundings, as well as the basis for general knowledge. In other words, interdisciplinarity is a symbiosis of various scholarly, academic, faculty – branches that share knowledge and information in order to achieve a new, modern, and complex program of analysis and study.

What is more, interdisciplinarity or the study of different academic fields inter-relating, has become a field of research itself, its working and influence are constantly re-analyzed and it has become one of the most influential trends of thought in today's society. One of the positive effects of interdisciplinarity is unity; it creates a bond between, sometimes, apparently opposing domains and it broadens horizons of approaches, linking together the most miscellaneous academic disciplines. The term itself is a constant, as well as a variable at the same time but what is undeniable is the fact that it offers answers to complex questions. Beyond

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the shadow of a doubt, joined forces of knowledge are more likely to respond to the intricacies of today's questions. Nowadays, the perspective has changed from a circular one, where researchers, like experts in their fields, devoured all possible aspects within a research area, to a tubular, cylindrical perception, where academic investigators become experimenters with a piercing perspective that reaches across numerous disciplines.

It is by now comprehensible that "interdisciplinary" means blending together knowledge from different fields of research. Interdisciplinarians, nonetheless, have different opinions on the nature of interdisciplinarity: while some state that interdisciplinarity is represented by different disciplines interacting, others believe that the main aim should be integration. The latter also try to avoid the semantic elusiveness of the lexical meaning of the term. What is more, the term "disciplines" is replaced more and more by the word "inter-disciplines", thus underlining the proliferation of interdisciplinarity in the recent decades. Inter-disciplines are generally, or most commonly, natural and social sciences, where such fields like Medicine, Biology, Engineering, Economy, and so on, transcend into one another and complete meanings. The Humanities are maybe less associable to interdisciplinarity, but the fact is that today they are progressively associated to other fields of study, thus addressing more complex angles and outlooks. The fact is that humanities, like all the other fields, change with the passing of time and with the evolution of the human being and as such, its connections to other disciplines vary from one paradigm to another. In fact, humanities are beginning to build specifically interdisciplinary meanings and core questions. In order to conclude the introductory part of my paper, I will quote Klein and Newell (1997), who have offered a truly insightful definition of interdisciplinarity:

> Interdisciplinary studies are a process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession... and draws on disciplinary perspectives and integrates their insights through construction of a more comprehensive perspective (Klein, Newell 1997: 393–394).

One of the most common misconceptions which arise in the case of studies and research is related to Interdisciplinarity, Multidisciplinarity and Transdisciplinarity. All of these three branches possess a common root; they share a denominator, which is visible even from their designation. Nevertheless, there are significant dissimilarities that set them apart from one another: Transdisciplinarity deals with whatever exists between and beyond all disciplines, Interdisciplinarity integrates different disciplines in order to answer complex problems, and Multidisciplinarity deals with a certain subject from different points of view, without necessarily trying to bring the areas of analysis together. Interdisciplinarity is probably the most complex and, at the same time, the most fundamental of them all, as it incorporates the most basic elements: it cannot function devoid of the disciplines themselves. These basic disciplines have created the conditions and the starting point for proper analysis, further argumentation and new opinions. Interdisciplinary research could not function in the absence of the fundamental information and knowledge provided by the basic disciplines themselves; that is to say, fundamental disciplines are the epistemology of interdisciplinarity.

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When it comes to literature and comparative literature, to be more precise, interdisciplinarity may play an important role in reshaping traditional theoretic approaches, readings and literary criticism. Interdisciplinarity, no matter how ambiguous or open to interpretation this designation might be, has infiltrated itself more and more in the natural sciences, as well as in the social ones and in the Humanities. In his book entitled *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application,* Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek states the following with regard to the correlation between literature and Interdisciplinarity:

> The notion of interdisciplinarity contains two basic principles. First, it postulates that literature may (or should) be studied by attention to conceptually related fields such as history, psychology, or other areas of artistic expression such as film, music, the visual arts, etc. This view of interdisciplinarity has been traditionally advocated in Comparative Literature and thus I denote this approach as the "comparative principle" of Interdisciplinarity in literary study. Second, interdisciplinarity postulates the principle of method, that is, the application of theoretical frameworks and methodologies used in other disciplines for the acquisition of knowledge in the analysis of literature and/or the literary text or texts. The second basic principle shall be denoted therefore as the "principle of method". (de Zepetnek 1998: 79)

In what follows I would like to underline, through a very illustrative quotation, the path of Interdisciplinarity in literary studies, as well as one major downside:

> While the development of interdisciplinarity in literary study is a welcome development, many of these attempts lack a crucial component, that of a built-in operationality and functionality. For example, Christopher Johnson writes that "one of the results of the structuralist reorientation was the opening up of French philosophy to a greater degree of interdisciplinary exchange both within but also beyond the so-called *sciences humaines".* While this is a valid observation that may be understood as a generality in the humanities, neither Johnson's book nor his examples dealing with the notion – the discussion of deconstruction and Derrida's work – show signs of interdisciplinarity as an operational framework and methodology. (de Zepetnek 1998: 80)

The issue of a frame without content, a theoretical structure that lacks, at least in the beginning, applicability, was the case of many other literary or even scientific movements. Sometimes it is easier to outline the structure and draw a set of rules than to actually apply them and usefully set them to work. Christopher Johnson's observation holds true nonetheless, as it is a fact that Interdisciplinarity or such movements as deconstructivism have opened up what used to specialized domains of expertise to a much larger public.

When it comes to literature and authors, interdisciplinarity can confer new meanings to the text itself, it can open new ways of interpretation for the readership and, most importantly, it is the expression of an innovative approach to writing from the author's side. Thompson Klein pinpoints the following goals of interdisciplinarity: "to answer complex questions; to address broad issues; to explore disciplinary and professional relations; to solve problems that are beyond the scope of any one discipline; to achieve unity of knowledge, whether on a limited or grand

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scale." (Klein 1990: 187) Answering to complex questions is not accidentally the first feature that Klein identifies. What is more, this characteristic is fundamental to literature and literary studies as well – literature is one of the most stable pillars when attempting to answer fundamental questions about existence, human nature, historical points of vantage, social manners, and many more. Thompson Klein also outlines the mechanism by which these objectives can be achieved:

> Defining the problem (question, topic, issue); Determining all knowledge needs, including appropriate disciplinary representatives and consultants, as well as relevant models, traditions, and the secondary literature; Developing an integrative framework and appropriate questions to be investigated; Specifying particular studies to be undertaken; Engaging in "role negotiation" (in team-work); Gathering all current knowledge and searching for new information; Resolving disciplinary conflicts by working toward a common vocabulary and focusing on reciprocal learning in team-work; Building and maintaining communication through integrative techniques. (Klein 1990: 188)

Now I would like to identify traces of interdisciplinarity, as well as some of the objectives outlined by Klein, in Jeffrey Eugenides' and Petru Popescu's literature. Although the writers may seem different at a first glance, they are surprisingly similar, not only due to their trans-national, multi-national identities – which are reflected in their writings but also due to the hints of interdisciplinarity present in some of the authors' pieces of writing. Related to the topic of Interdisciplinarity-literature-culture, Schmidt pointed out the following:

> The study of literature operates structurally in an interdisciplinary mode, similar to all other social sciences. For this reason, the study of literature should consciously embrace interdisciplinarity in a functional mode, similar to all other sciences. For this reason, the study of literature should consciously embrace interdisciplinarity in a functional mode as its own chance of development. In other words, the study of literature should attempt to become consciously and strategically – what it already is implicitly – namely an operationally interdisciplinary social science. (Schmidt 1993: 7)

That is to say, literature should become more functional and less abstract, closer to sciences, more operational and less open to interpretation and, as a result, literature should be interconnected to other fields of study. An example of literature highly engaged in the connection to history and social sciences is Petru Popescu's work, especially his early novels (*Dulce ca mierea e glonţul patriei; Prins; Supleantul)* which are deeply influenced by the cultural, social, political and historical surroundings of communist Romania. Petru Popescu, the Romanian born American author has always been a powerful promoter of the Romanian political and social realities in America, as well as an advocate of the American way of thinking in Romania. His novels are the reflection of these realities and of his personal experience with the totalitarian regime. The autobiographical character of his novels and the honesty with which he exposes certain political realities transform his fiction into an excellent example of interdisciplinary literature. What is more, and here I reach my point on self-discovery and re-identification, the autobiographical style of his literature, the naturalness that characterizes Popescu's depiction of the political conditions of austerity and lack of freedom, the visible

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connection between fiction and social reality – which the author himself has admitted on numerous occasions, prove that Petru Popescu's novels are, in part, the result of a harmonious functioning of diverse spheres of knowledge.

The second author – whose relation with Interdisciplinarity I would like to explore briefly in my paper – is Jeffrey Eugenides, author of the renowned novels *The Virgin Suicides*, *Middlesex,* and *The Marriage Plot.* It is by now comprehensible that the phenomenon of interdisciplinarity is ubiquitous and polymorphous, especially when it comes to literature and writing. Eugenides is one who has confronted himself many a time with the process of literary creation, writing, imagination and has stated that writing is a liberating act, which opens ways towards impersonal but specific knowledge. Isn't this precisely the core objective of interdisciplinarity – creating a new kind of general knowledge, unlocking doors towards an unambiguous, all-encompassing data-base?

Eugenides' best-seller, *Middlesex,* is an eloquent example of interdisciplinary change, in the sense that it has been both an influential factor and an influenced element in the fields of Literature and Biology. This novel has mingled together such areas of interest like Biology, the study of Human genome, Anthropology (the History of Ideas) or nationality, identity and national identity. Sharon Preves stated the following in her study about the contributing factors to the changes that take place within the fields of Biomedicine and Intersexual Identities: "Consideration must be given to the impact of small-scale social movements and social support networks as vital agents of social change" (Preves 2002: 547). Indeed, nowadays, the media has a greater impact on society than ever before. But Jeffrey Eugenides' novel show that literature is a very powerful constituent of Interdisciplinarity – its topic, defining and redefining identity through sexuality – has had a great impact on the readership, thus, it has created social change. It might seem rather unusual that such a far-fetching, loose, liberal and undulating field as literature could possibly influence one of the strictest areas of research (Biology and Medicine). Nonetheless, the novel *Middlesex* has opened numerous constructive debates in society, has opened minds and, first and foremost, has brought forth all the different sides of gender identity: distress, powerlessness and fear, on the one hand; liberation, freedom and inner peace, on the other hand. Literature can indeed influence the popular way of life and is, in its turn, deeply influenced by other categories of research. The point made by Jeffrey Eugenides in his novel is that, in our modern era, the physiological paradigm is still severely influenced by sexual preconceptions that still represent a cause for differentiation and judgement. In other words, sexuality and sexual identity are still a leitmotiv in the social construction of "Otherness".

Jeffrey Eugenides' novels *Middlesex* and *The Marriage Plot* show that the social and the literary do work together on interdisciplinary grounds, actually, to such an extent, that in his literary works, fiction influences society and vice-versa. The clichés regarding sexual identity are rearranged and the barriers between "us" and "the others" are blurred through mutual understanding, social dialogue, biological insight, in other words, through interdisciplinarity. In conclusion, interdisciplinarity truly is a means of identification, be it of the self or of "the other". Petru Popescu and Jeffrey Eugenides might be different in style and approach, but

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both have been deeply influenced by interdisciplinary approaches, be it from a socio-historical perspective or a biomedical one. Both authors have had a great influence on mental structures in society and on social archetypes and both their works have turned out to be tools of identification, by means of inter- and cross-disciplinary outlooks.

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The aim of the present paper is to identify the main traces of Interdisciplinarity in some of the most significant novels of Jeffrey Eugenides and Petru Popescu, as well as to draw a comparison between the two authors. It is known for a fact that almost every academic discipline relies on, or is, to say the least, connected to another one. The case of Literature is all the more so interesting as it has become more and more open to Interdisciplinarity in the last decades. Both literary creation itself and literary criticism can be approached from a variety of academic disciplinary angles and it is no wonder that poems, novels or plays can be interpreted in terms of mathematical or religious terms. In this sense, I will focus on the elements of Interdisciplinarity in a couple of novels of the two authors, trying to compare the two in terms of technique, style, common ground and differences.

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