INTRODUCTION

Before we go any further here, has it ever occurred to any of you that all of this is simply one grand misunderstanding? Since you’re not here to learn anything, but to be taught so you can pass these tests, knowledge has to be organized so that it can be taught, and it has to be reduced to information so it can be organized, do you follow that? In other words this leads you to assume that organization is an inherent property of the knowledge itself, and that disorder and chaos are simply irrelevant forces that threaten it from outside. In fact it’s exactly the opposite. Order is simply a thin, perilous condition we try to impose on the basic reality of chaos ... (Gaddis 1976: 20)

This book is about how we organize knowledge into disciplines, and then reorganize it into new configurations and alliances, or forms of ‘interdisciplinarity’, when these old ways of thinking have come to seem stale, irrelevant, inflexible or exclusory. ‘Interdisciplinarity’ has become a buzzword across many different academic subjects in recent years, but it is rarely interrogated in any great detail. As Alan Liu puts it, interdisciplinary study is ‘the most seriously underthought critical, pedagogical and institutional concept in the modern academy’ (Liu 1989: 743). This book aims to examine the ways in which interdisciplinarity has been variously defined, and the debates that have been conducted about its meaning, purpose and practical applications. Within this larger topic, it also has a more specific aim: to introduce students working within the field of literary studies to interdisciplinary perspectives from other fields such as cultural studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, history, geography and the sciences.

My main argument will be that we cannot understand interdisciplinarity without first examining the existing disciplines, since interdisciplinary approaches are always an engagement with them, and the modes of knowledge that they exclude by virtue of their separation from each other. The term ‘discipline’ has two principal modern usages: it refers to a particular branch of learning or body of knowledge, and to the maintenance of order and control amongst subordinated groups such as soldiers, prison inmates or school pupils, often through the threat of physical or other forms of punishment. Interestingly, these two usages converged in some of the earlier uses of the term, from the first half of the fifteenth century onwards. ‘Discipline’ in this context suggested a particular kind of moral training aimed at teaching proper conduct, order and self-control. In fact, the very notion of the term as a recognized mode of learning implies the establishment of hierarchy and the operation of power: it derives from the Latin, disciplina, which refers to the instruction of disciples by their elders, and it necessarily alludes to a specialized, valued knowledge which some people possess and others do not. As the OED points out, one of the earliest uses of the term in English to mean ‘a particular course of instruction to disciples’ was in relation to the ‘Discipline of the Secret’, a phrase used after the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century to describe the restrictive practices in the early Christian Church which taught the elements of the faith to converts while excluding them from heathens and the uninitiated. From the beginning, the term ‘discipline’ was caught up in questions about the relationship between knowledge and power.
When we use the word ‘interdisciplinary’, we are generally suggesting some kind of critical awareness of this relationship. As Roberta Frank argues:

‘Interdisciplinary’ has something to please everyone. Its base, discipline, is hoary and antiseptic; its prefix, inter, is hairy and friendly. Unlike fields, with their mud, cows, and corn, the Latinate discipline comes encased in stainless steel: it suggests something rigorous, aggressive, hazardous to master; Inter hints that knowledge is a warm, mutually developing, consultative thing.

(Frank 1988: 100)

According to this sense of the term, ‘interdisciplinarity’ provides a democratic, dynamic and co-operative alternative to the old-fashioned, inward-looking and cliquish nature of disciplines. And yet this straightforward interpretation begs a number of questions: how exactly does interdisciplinary research aspire to be ‘warm, mutually developing, consultative’? Can disciplinary divisions be so easily broken down or transcended? Is it not inevitable that there should be some means of ordering and structuring knowledge? In order to start exploring some of these questions, it might be helpful to begin by looking at the historical development of the academic disciplines.

THE RISE OF THE DISCIPLINES

The idea of shaping knowledge into disciplines can be traced as far back as Greek philosophy. Aristotle, for example, organized different subjects into a hierarchy, according to whether they were theoretical, practical or productive. The theoretical subjects were the highest form of knowledge, and comprised theology, mathematics and physics, in descending order of importance; the practical subjects included ethics and politics; and the productive subjects, which were the lowest in the hierarchy, included the fine arts, poetics and engineering (Aristotle 1947: I. 3–13, 293–9; II. 85–9). By constructing such a schema, Aristotle employed two guiding principles which have also been central to the subsequent development of the disciplines. First, he attempted to establish a clear hierarchy between the different academic subjects. Broadly speaking, the development of disciplines has not merely created self-contained bodies of knowledge, happy in their isolation; it has been accompanied by frequent attempts to assert the superiority of certain fields of learning over others. In particular, there has been a centuries-old debate about the relative merits of ‘useful’ areas of knowledge that set themselves limited aims but clearly achieve them; and more nebulously defined areas of knowledge that are more ambitious and wide-ranging but not so obviously ‘useful’. Aristotle clearly preferred speculative knowledge for its own sake, believing that ‘there is a kind of education in which parents should have their sons trained not because it is necessary, or because it is useful, but simply because it is liberal and something good in itself’ (Aristotle 1961: 337). Second, he recognized that the ordering of knowledge into disciplines was necessary but regrettable, and so he positioned philosophy as the universal field of inquiry which brought together all the different branches of learning, a notion of unity in difference which also influenced the formation of the disciplines within the modern university. As Aristotle’s system makes clear, anxieties about the harmful specialization of knowledge are as old as the scholarly disciplines themselves.

The classical divisions of knowledge proved remarkably resilient over the following centuries, but they were eventually transformed by market forces and institutional changes. The development and consolidation of disciplines in the modern era was fundamentally related to both the growth of universities and the increasing complexity of European societies. By the late Middle Ages, as
universities in cities like Salerno, Bologna, Paris, Oxford and Cambridge replaced the medieval schools or studia generalia, the term 'discipline' was being applied to professions such as medicine, law and theology because of the perceived need to relate education to specific economic, political and ecclesiastical ends (Klein 1990: 20). But there was still a powerful notion that disciplines were not an entirely positive development: until at least the end of the eighteenth century, university students tended to study a core curriculum of the liberal arts, divided into the trivium (logic, grammar, rhetoric) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music). They then went on to specialize in the faculties of medicine, law or theology, rather as American students today choose to ‘major’ in a subject. Disciplinary development was meant to occur within the overall framework of the university as a community of essentially like-minded scholars: indeed, the term ‘university’ derives from the Latin, universitas, meaning ‘universal’ or ‘whole’.

This sense of universality was threatened by the values of the Enlightenment, a European-wide intellectual movement which emerged in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and which sponsored revolutionary changes in art, science, politics and philosophy. Although Enlightenment thought was complex and heterogeneous, it is broadly true that philosophers at this time placed great emphasis on the progress of human knowledge through the powers of reason and rationality. This pursuit of reason was underpinned by the development of clearer procedures and methodologies within disciplines, and greater specialization of learning, changes that were most keenly felt in the sciences and mathematics. In this sense, Enlightenment thought overlapped with and drew on a ‘scientific revolution’ occurring in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, led by scientists such as Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton, which overturned the view of the natural order established by the ancient Greeks. The scientific revolution was based on two significant new notions: the view of nature as a well-ordered machine, reducible to a relatively small number of universal rules established by humans; and the development of an empirical method which aimed to deal with problems within specific parameters, based on new methods of induction and deduction to test hypotheses and new experimental apparatus, such as the thermometer, microscope and telescope.

The goal of a scientific discipline was therefore necessarily narrow: to establish the laws that explain natural phenomena within its own field, and thus to account for only a small part of reality. The huge advances in knowledge that the new sciences achieved as a result of limiting their concerns in this way represented a powerful argument in favour of disciplinarity, and the scientific model became extremely influential in the subsequent development of all the disciplines. These intellectual realignments can be seen as part of an overall Enlightenment project of ordering and classifying information. This project drew on earlier works that attempted ambitious taxonomies of knowledge, such as Matthias Martini’s Idea Methodica (1606) and Francis Bacon’s unfinished Instauratio Magna Scientiarum (The Great Restoration of Learning), a multivolume undertaking that aimed ‘to commence a total reconstruction of sciences, arts, and all human knowledge, raised upon the proper foundations’ (Bacon [1620] 1980: 2). Bacon’s desire to reorganize and consolidate the disciplines stemmed from his belief that science should be a collective project based on the orderly exchange of knowledge between scholars undertaking similar research, so that there would be no time-wasting replication of theories and discoveries.

The Enlightenment enterprise of codifying and categorizing knowledge is perhaps most evident in the development of the modern, native language (non-Latin) encyclopaedia in Europe in the eighteenth century. Drawing on the framework established by thinkers such as Martini and Bacon, works such as Ephraim Chambers’ Cyclopædia (1728), the first edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1768–71) and, most famously, the
French *L’Encyclopédie* (1751–80), edited by Denis Diderot, attempted to make sense of the bewildering array of new disciplines. In many ways, encyclopaedias were a typical product of Enlightenment thinking, in that they aimed to encompass the unity and interdependence of knowledge within a few volumes, while also cataloguing and systematizing it. The mathematician Jean d’Alembert’s introduction or *Discours préliminaire* to the first volume of *L’Encyclopédie* in 1751, for example, attempted a hugely ambitious survey of the different branches of learning, while also aiming to show how these branches formed part of a coherent overall structure.

The reconfiguration of the disciplines, and in particular the rapid development and success of the sciences, did not go unchallenged. The Italian thinker, Giambattista Vico, claimed that the ascendancy of science and mathematics had led to the neglect of a broad education in favour of specialist knowledge. If students were taught ‘the totality of sciences and arts,’ he argued, ‘they would not feel the impulse to step rashly into discussions while they are still in the process of learning; nor would they, with pedestrian slavishness, refuse to accept any viewpoint unless it has been sanctioned by a teacher’ (Vico [1709] 1965: 19). In *La Scienza Nuova* (*The New Science*, 1725), Vico claimed that knowledge is always constructed by humans rather than simply discovered in nature. He therefore argued that the ‘human sciences’ such as history, philosophy and law, which concern themselves with humans and society and can achieve knowledge and understanding ‘from within’, were superior to the ‘natural sciences’, which can only describe external phenomena in nature. Vico’s advocacy of interdisciplinary study connects with many other forms of interdisciplinarity discussed in this book, because it forms part of his critique of the new knowledge hierarchies which asserted the superiority of the sciences over the humanities disciplines. The reason for the success of the former has remained fairly consistent over the last few hundred years: it is that they are able to limit themselves to certain closely-defined fields and controlled situations, and thus produce apparently clearer, more rigorous and effective examples of ‘useful knowledge’. Interdisciplinary study within the humanities is often an attempt to challenge the pre-eminence of the sciences as a model for disciplinary development, based on the belief that they can obtain neutral, objective forms of knowledge within their own areas of inquiry.

Up until the nineteenth century, however, most scholarly efforts to determine the relationship between the disciplines took the Aristotelian view that philosophy both integrated and transcended more specialized forms of knowledge. As it has developed over the last few thousand years, philosophy has incorporated many different disciplines that have since become autonomous, such as psychology, sociology, science and mathematics. It remains an extremely wide-ranging and amorphous mode of thought which brings together disparate ideas and activities and which, rather than having a specific subject matter of its own, tends to produce a kind of metacommentary on the subject matter of other disciplines. This notion of philosophy as undisciplined knowledge is retained today in the name of the higher degree of Doctor of Philosophy (the Ph.D.), which is gained through the completion of a research dissertation in any subject. Although many thinkers from the seventeenth century onwards engaged in far-reaching attempts to reorganize knowledge, they still tended to base these classifications on a notion of philosophy as the universal science unifying the disciplines. One of the founders of the new scientific method, René Descartes, for example, argued in *The Principles of Philosophy* (1644) that ‘philosophy as a whole is like a tree whose roots are metaphysics, whose trunk is physics, and whose branches, which issue from this trunk, are all the other sciences’ (Descartes 1955: 211). Writing two hundred years later in his *Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830–42), Auguste Comte, who was instrumental in transferring the methods of the natural sciences to the social sciences, claimed that philosophy was still ‘sapientia humana
“[humane wisdom], at which all separate forms of knowledge are ultimately aiming’ (Cassirer 1950: 9).

This argument for the centrality of philosophy sees its most sustained justification in the work of the German thinker, Immanuel Kant. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Kant made a systematic effort to hierarchize the university’s disciplines and to show how this hierarchy reflected innate divisions in knowledge and the natural orderings of the human mind. He argued that the disciplines should thus be treated as discrete and self-contained:

> Every science is a system in its own right; ... we must ... set to work architectonically with it as a separate and independent building. We must treat it as a self-subsisting whole, and not as a wing or section of another building – although we may subsequently make a passage to and fro from one part to another. (Kant [1790] 1928: 31)

However, in his 1798 essay, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant argued that ‘reason’ functioned as an ultimate value which transcended disciplinary divisions, and that its natural home within the university was in the ‘lower’ faculty of philosophy. Unlike the three ‘higher’ faculties of theology, law, and medicine, philosophy had no specific content and did not depend for its existence on any higher authority, such as the Bible, legal statutes or medical scholarship. It could therefore ‘use its own judgement about what it teaches ... . Accordingly, the government reserves the right itself to sanction the teachings of the higher faculties, but those of the lower faculty it leaves up to the scholar’s reason.’ Kant thought it essential that there should be such a faculty that ‘having no commands to give, is free to evaluate everything, and concerns itself with the interest of the sciences, that is, with truth’ (Kant [1798] 1992: 27–9). This organization of the university into ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ faculties, and the privileging of philosophy as a contentless and unconstrained activity, allowed Kant to retain the ideal of unified knowledge within the reality of ever more specialized university faculties.

Kant’s ideas on the university influenced a succeeding generation of German philosophers, including Friedrich Schiller, Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Fichte. This group of scholars was instrumental in the formation of the secularized, state-controlled, research-oriented university in Prussia in the early nineteenth century, which became the prototype for the modern European and North American university. Schiller, in his inaugural lecture at the University of Jena (1789), laid the groundwork by promoting the notion of *Bildung*, a broad-based education that formed part of the general development of the student, as opposed to *Ausbildung*, which prepared them for a specific vocation. Humboldt, Fichte and others drew on these ideas and related them to the concept of *Wissenschaft*, a not easily translatable term which essentially refers to an all-round, humane education cultivating the whole personality, rather than just the mind, of the individual. The function of universities, according to Humboldt, was thus to ‘lay open the whole body of learning and expound both the principles and the foundations of all knowledge’ (Lyotard 1984: 33).

However, this ideal of a non-specialist education was almost immediately threatened by the separation of the sciences from other areas of knowledge in a university system that was increasingly well-organized and professionalized. Up until the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the word ‘science’ tended to be used interchangeably with ‘philosophy’, to mean all forms of knowledge rather than particular branches of it. From the 1830s onwards, however, the term ‘science’ started to refer specifically to the natural sciences and to be distinguished clearly from philosophy in both academic and general usage. The success of the sciences as self-contained bodies of knowledge within the university was demonstrated by the frequent calls for the social sciences, and even some of the humanities disciplines, to fashion themselves...
according to hard and rigorous scientific models. Comte, the originator of the term ‘sociology’ in the 1830s, argued that it was necessary to ‘complete the vast intellectual operation that was begun by Bacon, Descartes and Galileo’ by applying the scientific method to other areas of knowledge (Comte [1830–42] 1974: 39). He noted the problems caused by ‘the compartmentalising of intellectual labour’, and still held out the possibility of a general philosophy which would have ‘the aim of reducing the totality of acquired knowledge to one single body of homogeneous doctrine’ (51–2, 39). However, he also claimed that the individual sciences developed according to a logic of their own, and that intellectual divisions could be ‘extended with impunity as far as is necessary for the development of the various orders of knowledge’ (30). This belief, that the clearly defined methods and procedures of the sciences needed to be employed in the non-sciences, was a powerful factor in the development of new social science and humanities disciplines such as politics, economics, sociology, English and the modern languages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The proliferation of academic disciplines around this time raised concerns about over-specialization, particularly amongst philosophers with more speculative and far-reaching interests. The German thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche, was particularly aware of the ways in which these new configurations of knowledge were bound up with issues of power and self-interest. In his essay, ‘We Scholars’, he attacked the rise of the disciplines, which he saw as a particular product of the German-influenced research university, and which had led to the displacement of the philosopher by the scientific ‘scholar’:

The Declaration of Independence of the man of science, his emancipation from philosophy, is one of the more subtle after-effects of the democratic form and formlessness of life: the self-glorification and presumption of the scholar now stands everywhere in full bloom and in its finest springtime.

(Nietzsche [1886] 1990: 129)

He was particularly suspicious of the claim that the disciplines achieved disinterested knowledge by limiting the scale of their operations. For Nietzsche, the specialized scholar was concerned less with knowledge for its own sake than with climbing up the career ladder within an increasingly bureaucratized and professionalized society, with ‘that sunshine of a good name, that constant affirmation of his value and his utility with which his inner distrust, the dregs at the heart of all dependent men and herd animals, have again and again to be overcome’ (133). More specifically, Nietzsche lamented the decline of philosophy as an undisciplined activity. Although the real task of the philosopher was ‘to traverse the whole range of human values and value-feelings’, he was now becoming just another scientist, who ‘will let himself be stopped somewhere and “specialize”: so that he will never reach his proper height, the height from which he can survey, look around and look down’ (142, 131).

The Spanish philosopher, José Ortega y Gasset, writing in 1930, traced a similar narrative about the decline of all-embracing knowledge into narrow specialisms. He argued that, while in the past it was easy to distinguish between the learned and the ignorant, there was now a new category of the ‘learned ignoramus … a person who is ignorant, not in the fashion of the ignorant man, but with all the petulance of one who is learned in his own special line’ (Ortega [1932] 1957: 112). This new kind of scientist, fully in place by 1890, confined himself to one subject and dismissed any attempt to look beyond his specialized field as dilettantism (110). Like Nietzsche, Ortega saw the mediocrity and conformity enshrined in the new disciplines as the symptom of a more general phenomenon, the triumph of the masses in increasingly meritocratic Western capitalist societies. The advantage of philosophy as an
undisciplined activity, for Ortega, was that it could not be subsumed into the new bureaucratic systems, and that it ‘needs neither protection, attention nor sympathy from the masses. It maintains its character of complete inutility, and thereby frees itself from all subservience to the average man’ (86).

Despite this elitism, Nietzsche’s and Ortega’s arguments touch on significant issues about the development of the disciplines. As they point out, this development was not simply an organic consequence of advances in knowledge, but was also the product of institutional and societal factors, particularly the demand for specialists in a complex and technologically sophisticated society. One of the key elements of this new society was the division of labour within an increasingly professionalized bureaucracy. The success of the disciplines depended partly on their external recognition by government and business as a form of accreditation for future careers: two of their chief functions were to prepare people for professions that required particular kinds of expertise, and to give these new professions legitimacy and status by providing them with academic credentials.

Alongside these external influences, the nature of the university as a relatively closed institution contributed to the consolidation of the disciplines. The emergence of a new academic subject has always depended partly on internal factors: on elite universities recognizing it through the creation of separate departments, sufficient students and lecturers being recruited to study and teach it, learned societies and journals forming around it, and recognized career structures developing, usually based on the acquisition of a Ph.D. in that subject. Moreover, since disciplines were influenced by such institutional factors, they tended, like many institutions, to reproduce themselves and become self-perpetuating. By the early 1960s, B.R. Clark was describing the disciplines in anthropological terms, as separate tribes with different cultures and languages:

Men of the sociological tribe rarely visit the land of the physicists and have little idea what they do over there. If the sociologists were to step into the building occupied by the English department, they would encounter the cold stares if not the slingshots of the hostile natives ... the disciplines exist as separate estates, with distinctive subcultures.

(Becher 1989: 23)

Clark’s complaint remains a commonly voiced one: that once disciplines have established themselves, they develop vested interests, defend their territory and reinforce their exclusivity through particular types of discourse. The term ‘discourse’, a complex word that has been used in various ways within the humanities and social sciences, will recur in this book and should be preliminarily defined. It emerged in linguistics as a way of pointing to the notion of language as a collective process, constructed and constrained by social patterns or conventions. More generally, it has been used to refer to a mode of thought, cultural practice or institutional framework that makes sense of and structures the world, often from the partial perspective of a particular interest group. In Clark’s argument, disciplines are clearly discursive constructions in that their power arrangements permit certain ways of thinking and operating while excluding others.

DEFINING INTERDISCIPLINARITY

As I have suggested here, the critique of the academic disciplines as limited and confining is as long-standing as the disciplines themselves. Historically, this critique has often taken the form of referring back to an older, more unified form of knowledge, usually located in an undisciplined subject such as philosophy. The term ‘interdisciplinary’ emerged within the context of these anxieties about the decline of general forms of education,
being first used in the social sciences in the mid-1920s and becoming common currency across the social sciences and humanities in the period immediately after the Second World War (Frank 1988: 91, 95). However, one of the arguments of this book is that there are competing impulses behind the term. On the one hand, it forms part of this traditional search for a wide-ranging, total knowledge; on the other, it represents a more radical questioning of the nature of knowledge itself and our attempts to organize and communicate it. In this sense, interdisciplinarity interlocks with the concerns of epistemology – the study of knowledge – and tends to be centred around problems and issues that cannot be addressed or solved within the existing disciplines, rather than the quest for an all-inclusive synthesis.

As Geoffrey Bennington points out, ‘inter’ is an ambiguous prefix, which can mean forming a communication between and joining together, as in ‘international’ and ‘intercourse’, or separating and keeping apart, as in ‘interval’ and ‘intercalate’ (Bennington 1999: 104). This ambiguity is partly reflected in the slipperiness of the term, ‘interdisciplinary’. It can suggest forging connections across the different disciplines; but it can also mean establishing a kind of undisciplined space in the interstices between disciplines, or even attempting to transcend disciplinary boundaries altogether. The ambiguity of the term is partly why some critics have come up with other terms such as ‘post-disciplinary’, ‘anti-disciplinary’, and ‘trans-disciplinary’. Although these terms are often not defined closely and are sometimes used interchangeably, they all suggest that being interdisciplinary is not quite enough, that there is always another intellectual stage where disciplinary divisions can be more radically subverted or even erased. Rather than flitting between these different terms in this book, though, I want to suggest that the value of the term, ‘interdisciplinary’, lies in its flexibility and indeterminacy, and that there are potentially as many forms of interdisciplinarity as there are disciplines. In a sense, to suggest otherwise would be to ‘discipline’ it, to confine it within a set of theoretical and methodological orthodoxies. Within the broadest possible sense of the term, I take interdisciplinarity to mean any form of dialogue or interaction between two or more disciplines: the level, type, purpose and effect of this interaction remain to be examined.

However, it might be helpful to begin by distinguishing ‘interdisciplinary’ from ‘multidisciplinary’, words that, again rather confusingly, have sometimes been seen as synonymous. The latter term, though, tends to refer to the simple juxtaposition of two or more disciplines, as one finds on certain joint honours or combined arts degrees, or on individual courses that are team-taught by members of staff from different disciplines. Here the relationship between the disciplines is merely one of proximity; there is no real integration between them (Klein 1990: 56). By contrast, I want to suggest, along with Roland Barthes, that interdisciplinarity is always transformative in some way, producing new forms of knowledge in its engagement with discrete disciplines:

Interdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security; it begins effectively (as opposed to the mere expression of a pious wish) when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down ... in the interests of a new object and a new language neither of which has a place in the field of the sciences that were to be brought peacefully together, this unease in classification being precisely the point from which it is possible to diagnose a certain mutation.

(Barthes 1977: 155)

Barthes suggests that interdisciplinarity has the potential to do more than simply bring the different disciplines together. It can form part of a more general critique of academic specialization as a whole, and of the nature of the university as an institution that cuts itself off from the outside world in small enclaves of expertise. Interdisciplinary approaches often draw attention, either implicitly or explicitly, to the fact that what
is studied and taught within universities is always a political question.

As the composite nature of the term itself suggests, ‘interdisciplinarity’ assumes the existence and relative resilience of disciplines as modes of thought and institutional practices. This book will therefore be rooted in an awareness of the history, theory, methodology and subject matter of particular disciplines, and will aim to explore how exactly these disciplines are brought together, transformed or transcended in different forms of interdisciplinarity, and what new forms of knowledge are created by these interactions. In Chapter One, I examine the history of English as a discipline in order to show that it has always been driven by competing impulses: one that seeks to make it more of a ‘hard’ science by limiting its area of concern to a recognized phenomenon, ‘literature’; and another that aims to establish it as the interdisciplinary centre of the humanities, in place of older, humane subjects such as classics and philosophy. Chapter Two discusses the role of the new paradigm of cultural studies in redefining and expanding the notion of ‘culture’ as an object of academic study, and critically reflecting on the nature of disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge. Chapter Three examines ‘theory’ as undisciplined knowledge, and the productive engagement between literature, philosophy and psychoanalysis which has opened up interdisciplinary questions about language, subjectivity, gender, sexuality and the body. Chapter Four analyses recent developments at the intersection between literary studies and history as part of a longer narrative of the problematic relationship between the two disciplines. Chapter Five explores the attempts to establish links between science, geography and cultural criticism in relation to issues about the body, technology, space, mapping, genetics and the environment. Finally, the Conclusion looks at the problems and limitations of interdisciplinarity and the prospects for further interdisciplinary study in the humanities.

The topics considered in these individual chapters are not meant to be mutually exclusive: the intellectually promiscuous and interlocking nature of interdisciplinarity means that it can never finally be separated out and cordoned off. By organizing the discussion in this way, however, the book aims to provide an introduction to a range of approaches that will highlight the scope and potential for interdisciplinary study. If a university student today chose to sample a range of courses across the humanities and social sciences, they would probably be surprised at the amount of overlap between them, and the duplication of theories, conceptual frameworks, terminologies and texts. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has written, we are living in an age of ‘blurred genres’, a ‘jumbling of varieties of discourse’, within which disciplinary distinctions are increasingly hard to call (Geertz 1983: 20). This book is an attempt to cut through some of the confusion that this blurring of genres has inevitably engendered, while also valuing the necessarily diverse and complex nature of interdisciplinarity.