What does Michael Clune argue about the disciplinary identity of the study of literature and its interdisciplinary links with other disciplines? How do the arguments agree with your own experience of studying literatures written in English or working with the English language?

What Does Literary Studies Know?

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THE STUDY OF LITERATURE occupies an uneasy place in the modern research university. First, there are problems delimiting the object of study. What counts as literature? What kinds of imaginative works contain the qualities that will repay intensive study? However one answers this question, it opens into an even deeper problem. Literary works are made of words; those words can refer to the entire spectrum of human experience. Literature refuses to respect the division of knowledge according to disciplines. A biologist will investigate a snake’s digestion, not its status as a symbol for duplicity. A sociologist examines one aspect of money; an economist or a historian illuminates other aspects. But a poem by Emily Dickinson or a novel by Ralph Ellison might traverse the objects of a half-dozen disciplines within a few lines.

This feature of literature invests its academic study with a characteristic and cyclical oscillation between anxiety and aggression, humility and hubris. English professors must circumscribe their objects and methods tightly enough to count as practitioners of a discernible discipline, offering students identifiable content and skills. Yet they must not betray literature’s vital tendency to tangle or unify modes of thought and knowledge that the order of the university keeps separate. The modes of interpretation that successively dominated the first two thirds of the 20th century — philology and new critical formalism — sought to discipline literary reference by confining attention to, respectively, literary and linguistic history or the internal formal dynamics of the artifact. The modes that dominated the last third of that century moved in the other direction, seeking in post-disciplinary theories like deconstruction or Marxism a kind of thought adequate to accompany literature in its flight beyond intellectual boundaries. Today the pendulum is swinging again, with a resurgent formalism struggling against new or revitalized theoretical tendencies — environmentalism, cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, speculative realism.

Jonathan Kramnick’s *Paper Minds: Literature and the Ecology of Consciousness* mounts a nuanced and persuasive account of how literary studies might thread the needle by both insisting on its disciplinary identity and modeling ways literature professors might bring literary insights into contact with the discoveries of other fields. While much of the book demonstrates his method by applying it to encounters between philosophy of mind and literature, he begins more generally, by criticizing the forms “anti-disciplinary thinking” has recently taken. Kramnick describes several flavors of hostility to the autonomy and integrity of the discipline, from the scientific reductionism that subordinates literary study to evolutionary psychology, to the historical reductionism that by uncovering the discipline’s origins seeks to debunk it.

Kramnick defines a discipline as “a body of skills, methods, and norms able to sustain internal discussions and do explanatory work in a manner subject to its own consensus acts of judgment.” He
argues that the different disciplines respond to a world that “does not have a single order.” While people entertain hopes of reducing literature to biology, or biology to physics, or physics to math, such reductions remain both theoretically and practically elusive. We might feel that a universe governed by a single order is more elegant than one with many orders. But as Sabine Hossenfelder recently argued in her book *Lost in Math: How Beauty Leads Physics Astray*, with respect to the disciplinary crisis in physics, our aesthetic preference for an elegant, parsimonious simplicity is often at odds with our experience and knowledge.

This doesn’t, of course, mean that disciplines shouldn’t seek the illumination offered by other fields. It just means that we should be suspicious when the call to interdisciplinary work is motivated by contempt for or disbelief in disciplinary knowledge. Perhaps in a corporation dedicated to profit there are good reasons for ejecting the marketing people and the sales people from their respective silos. But if our goal is to understand the world, we should approach the methods and norms the various fields have evolved in grappling with their objects of study with care. Not all boundaries are oppressive.

Kramnick makes his case for literary studies’ disciplinary authority most powerfully through demonstration — by creating persuasive, revelatory interpretations of literary works that show the distinctive quality of literary knowledge. He then brings the fruit of his close readings into dialogue with other fields in a way that maintains the integrity of each discipline. After an introductory section laying out the theoretical case for disciplinary reading, he proceeds in a series of chapters to examine how literature represents the mind. Each chapter pairs a set of literary works with a set of cognitive science texts. He never simply applies the cognitive science to the literature — which he would call scientific reductionism — nor does he resolve scientific dilemmas by literary means — which we might call humanistic reductionism. Rather, he investigates how philosophy of mind and cognitive science articulate a particular mental problem, and then shows how certain formal features of specific literary works respond to the same problem. His conclusions will seem modest to those accustomed to the sweeping claims of discipline-transcending thinkers, like deconstructive claims about how all language works, or Foucauldian claims about the nature of power. But these chapters will inspire those seeking a lucid and persuasive answer to the question: what does literary studies know?

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Kramnick displays his disciplinary expertise in delineating writers’ formal experiments; he displays his interdisciplinary integrity by making limited and plausible claims about how these experiments relate to philosophical and neuroscientific debates. A compelling example comes in his discussion of how the 18th-century descriptive poetry of John Dyer and James Thomson fuses visual perception with bodily movement. He shows how this model was out of step with contemporary philosophical understandings of perception, but bears a resemblance with later models more attuned to how movement and sight interact. But where other critics would be content with this observation, Kramnick offers a detailed account of why “formal theory of perceptual presence lagged behind its literary antecedents.” Writers’ and artists’ close attention to recreating the perception of nature for an audience — a basic demand of their craft — allowed them to detect dynamics invisible to the dualist dogmatism of the philosophers.

In similarly accomplished chapters, *Paper Minds* shows how Defoe’s adoption of a “handsome” aesthetic both comports with and adds to Gibson’s 20th-century theory of affordances. A third shows how in Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* “prepositions flatten experience to shape,” preparing the way for curious transactions between art-making and enactive theories of embodied consciousness. Kramnick’s practical
criticism stands as the best rejoinder to those who believe that the discipline of literary criticism must either confine itself to a narrow formalism with no contact with the wider intellectual world, or embrace a no-holds-barred faux interdisciplinarity.

Nevertheless, I find myself in partial dissent from some of the claims in Paper Minds’s initial, theoretical section. Kramnick seeks to defend literary studies against the charge — made by Marjorie Levinson in an influential PMLA article — that form, one of our key terms, is overly fuzzy. He argues that we are not unusual among disciplines in leaving a central concept somewhat nebulous. But as I will briefly show, the fuzziness of form is unique to literary studies, and is grounded in our discipline’s unusual and defining fusion of explanation and evaluation.

A chapter titled “Form and Explanation,” co-authored with Anahid Nersessian, discusses the diversity of accounts of form in contemporary criticism. Literary studies, like all disciplines, engages in explanation. “Form explains everything” in the field, in the sense that it serves as the key term through which various explanations of literary works are carried out. “Explanations are inquiry relative,” he and Nersessian write; thus when Cleanth Brooks uses form in the sense of wholeness, and Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus discuss form in the sense of surface qualities not necessarily unified across a work, they actually aren’t disagreeing about what form means. Contradictory ideas about form “do not undermine form’s conceptual credibility.” Instead, Kramnick and Nersessian argue, “[t]hey clarify something about literary studies: namely, that its methodological character depends on its tolerance for [...] concepts whose meaning is keyed to their use in a specific context.”

While, like Kramnick and Nersessian, I welcome the recent emphasis on form and the aesthetic as symptomatic of a return to solid disciplinary practice, I’m a little skeptical about this view of how disciplines work. Kramnick and Nersessian point to biology’s use of the term “species” or philosophy’s use of the term “consciousness” as examples of terms that — like form in literary studies — experts use to mean different things in different explanatory contexts, without worrying too much about aligning their definitions.

But to anyone who has followed the debates about consciousness, nothing is more common than experts’ insistence that the authors of a given article have a limited understanding of the term. The term “phenomenal consciousness,” which Kramnick himself adopts later in the book, was invented precisely to distinguish it from the senses of consciousness at stake in references to conceptual thought or agency. If diverse or contradictory ideas about the meaning of “consciousness” weren’t a disciplinary problem, there would have been no need to invent “phenomenal consciousness” to clarify things.

I don’t believe most disciplines’ key terms manifest the fuzziness that characterizes “form” in literary studies. I think this fuzziness points to something distinctive about our discipline, something Kramnick and Nersessian neglect when they argue that the work of the discipline is “explanation.” Much of the work of literary studies consists of aesthetic judgment. When Brooks uses form in the sense of wholeness, or Best and Marcus use form in the sense of surface pleasures, they aren’t just explaining how form works in certain texts. They are making judgments about what they value.

Kramnick’s own book — at certain key moments — exemplifies the benignly circular relation that obtains between judgment and explanation in our field. He argues that we should resist the management-style “reduction [of literary study] to problem solving or challenge addressing” because “considering artworks as significant in their own right often means spelling out the open-ended or
It is true that many of the works that populate our syllabi deal richly in ambiguity, paradox, and mystery, and therefore our methods tend not to force rigid solutions to problems. Yet surely not all literary works manifest this capacity to “keep questions open.” One leaves all too many books with one’s preconceptions serenely untroubled. And there are many examples of didactic literature that regard openness with respect to moral, aesthetic, or political questions as something like a sin. If the literature we tend to study keeps questions open, this is in part because we value works that do this. All disciplines explain; explanation in literary studies is fused with aesthetic evaluation.

But for many reasons, ranging from the widespread belief that aesthetic judgments are as narrowly subjective as consumer preferences, to the fear of coming across as “elitist” — the field has grown uncomfortable with the language of evaluation. So our arguments often take a curiously fuzzy shape. When we argue about the meaning of form, we’re usually arguing about the value of particular kinds of work. And sometimes the best way to make an evaluation stick is to present it as an explanation. The later chapters of *Paper Minds*, in which Kramnick demonstrates why and how form matters in Robinson, Cavendish, or Defoe, are brilliant examples of the peculiar fusion of judgment and explanation characteristic of our discipline. In this, I think his critical practice is somewhat in advance of the theory laid out in the opening chapters.

For a number of years, and in venues ranging from *Critical Inquiry* to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Jonathan Kramnick has been at the forefront of efforts to defend literary studies against the many attacks it faces in the context of a neoliberal university focused on workforce development. With *Paper Minds*, he undertakes a profound and searching defense and description of a field that has sometimes seemed impossibly undisciplined. His theoretical arguments for the importance of disciplinary thinking are persuasive, though I think he underemphasizes the unique qualities of literary studies by avoiding the difficult but crucial topic of judgment. Yet in its exemplification of how literary knowledge emerges from close reading and attains definition through rigorous comparison with the discoveries of other fields, *Paper Minds* is essential. If I had to pick one recent book to recommend to someone curious about what good work in literary studies looks like, I would pick this.