

Sascha Bru, Ben De Bruyn & Michel Delville (eds.), *Literature Now: Key Terms and Methods for Literary History*

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(eds.), *Literature Now: Key Terms and Methods for
Literary History*.
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Literature Now aims to take stock of literary studies today through a discussion of nineteen key terms used in literary scholarship. It discusses their past and present meanings, their uses in a variety of domains including media history, narratology, genre studies, animal studies, and eco-criticism, and their potential future impact. For the editors, our current moment (the ‘now’ in the title) is full of history as literary scholars focus on a variety of contextual approaches, trace networks, and uncover layers of ‘deep’ time. “Today”, they note, “we are all literary historians” (1). A critical review of key terms is essential and timely, according to Bru, De Bruyn & Delville, since these continue to be the building blocks of our critical practice, “a verbal laboratory” rather than a mere lexicon (3). The question that this volume addresses is not, as some may think, how present-day literature operates, a question that is addressed by Amy Hungerford in her forthcoming book *Making Literature Now* (Stanford University Press, 2016), but rather how we think of, and above all, practice literary studies. One answer to this question is through literary history.

Rather than providing a clear-cut definition of what literary history entails, the editors allow the essays in this collection to speak for themselves. Some favour a chronological approach (e.g. David Ayers’ discussion of ‘politics’), while others use a more thematic approach (e.g. David Glover’s treatment of ‘popular’). In many of the essays, the conception of time and history is precisely what is being questioned: do we conceive of time as linear and progressive or do we adopt a messier, entangled approach? Moreover, as the contributions to this volume demonstrate, writing literary history does not exclude (close) reading. Theoretical points are illustrated by particular texts. In addition, some authors show how terms can be used as heuristic devices to interpret literature. In his essay on the archive, Ed Folsom, for instance, traces the evolution from the archive to the database and uses ‘database’ as a metaphor to describe Walt Whitman’s poetics: “Whitman formed entire lines as they would eventually appear in print, but then he treated each line like a separate data entry, a unit available to him for endless re-ordering, as if his lines of poetry were portable and interchangeable” (33). Here, we see the laboratory at work: more than tracing the history and development of a particular critical term, Folsom uses it creatively to make sense of literary texts.

Literature Now is divided into four parts. The first part ‘Channels’ considers the ways in which we encounter literature. It includes the terms ‘archive’, ‘book’, ‘medium’, and ‘translation’. What connects these essays is a focus not only on the material text but also on the transition from paper to digital means. The first three essays refer to the work of N. Katherine Hayles on the digital humanities, while the fourth calls for a systemic rather than an author-based approach to translation. The second part is devoted to ‘Subjects/Objects’. It treats the terms ‘subjects’, ‘senses’, ‘animals’, ‘objects’, and ‘politics’. The essays in this section are particularly wide-ranging, drawing on philosophy, ethics, theory of mind, gastroesthetics, and biopolitics.

In many cases, they deal with the posthuman and include notions of scale, as illustrated by the chapter on 'objects'. Part Three focuses on 'Temporalities'. It examines the categories of 'time', 'invention', 'event', 'generation', and 'period'. Here, too, the notion of scale plays an important role: event is negotiated against period, singularity against communality, progress against process. These essays, perhaps more than the others, question what it means to write literary *history*. Part Four zooms in on 'Aesthetics'. It analyses and revitalizes the concepts of 'beauty', 'mimesis', 'style', 'popular', and 'genre'. The essays in this part refer to new aestheticism and new formalism. They explore the relation between form and content, and trace an evolution from personal to impersonal and communal aesthetics. Contemporary literature, they suggest, aims at creating communities that transgress traditional boundaries, including those of class and genre.

As this brief summary indicates, there is more than meets the eye to this exceptionally wide-ranging and up-to-date volume. The entries in the table of contents hide a wealth of terms and discussions that show the connections between concepts, as well as their historical evolution. Indeed, we may join in the creative practice of employing critical terms by describing the book as an actor-network that traces the trajectory of selected key terms through space and time; the terms acquire new meanings and associate with other 'actors' (critical terms and discussions) along the way. Such a description is more than mere play, as *Literature Now* convincingly illustrates the agency of key concepts in a variety of contexts.

One could, of course, object that other potentially useful terms such as trauma, affect, and even agency are absent from the discussions. As the editors note in the introduction, these are often dealt with in other fields. Similarly, the focus is more on time than space, and the individual essays treat mostly Western literature. This is perhaps less 'now', as literary historians increasingly pay attention to transnationalism and globalization. Notwithstanding these remarks, *Literature Now* makes a valuable contribution to the field of literary studies in its wide-ranging discussion of nineteen key terms; its elucidation of new tendencies including the digital humanities, species criticism, deep time, and networks; and its discussion of future perspectives. The reader will find in this book a useful overview and up-to-the-moment account of key debates in literary history.

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