



Review

***Literature Now: Key Terms and Methods for Literary History*, ed. by Sascha Bru, Ben de Bruyn, and Michel Delville (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).**

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The title of this new volume, *Literature now. Key Terms and Methods for Literary History*, sounds pleasantly, and intentionally, paradoxical: contemporary, yet historical. The editors, Sascha Bru, Ben de Bruyn and Michel Delville, want to provide a toolbox for literary scholarship in an age in which the contemporary and the historical collide. Contemporary developments, they suggest, are altering our conceptions of literature so drastically, that '[t]oday, we are all literary historians' (1), and that historicizing literature now is like observing theory in the making. In an ambiguous rhetorical gesture they claim that 'literary history now functions in analogous ways to theory' (3), implying that this new set of terms replaces concepts primarily deriving from the age of theory (i.e. post-1968 or poststructuralist theory), with concepts entrenched in history and therefore allowing a more firmly historical approach. The examples 'medium' instead of 'discourse' and 'book' instead of 'text' speak volumes in this regard.

This might have been a trailblazing experiment, had its project been made explicit and had it been consistently and openly pursued. Since neither really is the case, the result is a rather odd mixture of two projects, both of which are valuable in their own right. Part of this volume reads as a timely update of currently available textbooks such as *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin), incorporating recent methodological innovations such as digital humanities (the chapters on 'Translation' and 'Popular', both of which refer to Franco Moretti's work on distant reading, are good examples). Part of *Literature now* is something completely different: an ambitious rethinking of the conceptual deadlocks of twentieth century (and more specifically post-1968) literary and cultural criticism – this intricate and auto-deconstructivist patchwork of Marxist, Freudian, feminist and postcolonial concepts. This thrilling dark side of *Literature now* is signalled through the screaming void in its texture: the absent concept of ideology. Part this, part that – the whole, however, is neither, and leaves me with a vague sense of boyish muffled polemics.

Skimming through the table of contents and the index of *Literature now*, after having read the chapters in a more or less random order, I cannot help feeling weirdly out of place. The disregard for gender, to make the most obvious point, is so glaring as to appear deliberate, if not deliberately provocative. Out of nineteen contributions only three are written by women. The index lists a meagre two mentions of gender in the book, one of which is a two-page paragraph on gender in a chapter devoted to 'Subjects', the other a brief note in the introduction explaining the former: 'The terms in this book are also situated at a certain level of

abstraction: (...) “subject” rather than “class”, “race” or “gender” (3). When did gender – and class and race for that matter – get demoted to a subcategory of ‘subject’? A certain level of abstraction – at the price of emptying social relations of everything that makes them material and political. If you are to dismiss feminism, Marxism and postcolonialism as frameworks for literary studies in the twenty-first century, could you please come up with an argument that doesn’t sound like it’s made up in a university men’s room? If this is a trap, I’m glad to fall into it.

Although Marx and Fredric Jameson are mentioned a few times, you would be hard-pressed to find any concepts in the index referring to socio-economic or materialist reading practices (say, economy, post-Fordism, ideology). Admittedly, there are some scattered remarks on class audiences in the chapters on ‘Period’ and ‘Popular’. Overall, though, *Literature now* seems to present a revisionist and, perhaps unwittingly so, depoliticized approach to literary studies, which seems bizarre given the volume’s explicit focus on history and temporalities. The editors seem to acknowledge this point in their introduction, taking issue with Jameson’s Marxist injunction to ‘always historicize’: ‘In the 1980s and 1990s, literary critics interpreted his injunction to mean rubbing texts up against their most immediate “contexts” – understood in ideological, social or cultural terms. In recent years, new approaches have called this procedure into question’ (2). These “contexts” – including spatial contexts such as ‘nation’ – are not explicitly addressed, nor is the case for this choice convincingly made.

Significantly, the chapter on ‘Politics’ by David Ayers brilliantly sketches the ideological context that might help explain this ‘calling into question’ as a symptom of recent history. Ayers unravels a deep ambiguity in the politicized readings of post-1968 criticism: in both deconstructing the Hegelian (and Marxist) grand narrative of progress and implicitly relying on it in its radical politics of difference, it has cunningly tried to have its cake and eat it too. And the appeal of ethically progressive reading still lingers: ‘the politics of much cultural commentary today implicitly embraces a Hegelian vision, even though Hegel has become the principle object of the critique of “Western” thought’ (133). This is a bleak diagnosis of a – specifically Western – ideological impasse, which seems to present the editors with an argument for moving beyond politicized reading altogether, rather than working through this impasse.

This working through would, of course, imply a critical (historicizing, politicizing) reassessment of post-1968 literary theory and studies. This in turn would require disentangling the knot which has kept politicized reading and (apolitical) close reading in a mutual hold. Ben de Bruyn, in an illuminating discussion of the concept of ‘Period’, hints at this knot when listing the objections literary scholars have voiced against periodization. These objections, it seems, derive from politicized (gender/postcolonial) reading as well as from close reading practices. ‘Because of its strong investment in individual authors and close reading, literary history cannot avoid troubling and unworking the periods it creates.’ (193) Convincing as these arguments against periodization may be, contemporary literary theory has developed alternative concepts for periodization, which De Bruyn somewhat mischievously groups under the label ‘the period of the planet’ (199). The way out of the impasse of historicizing seems to be a ‘planetary narratology’ or ‘geological rhetoric’ (201) allowing us to ‘scale up our imagination as periodisers’ (202). It’s not entirely clear whether De Bruyn is voicing his own views on periodization here or merely channelling those of others; either way, to me this has a slight ring

of deceit: magnifying the timescale as a way of avoiding rather than tackling the problem of historicizing.

Equally symptomatic of the crisis of history is the concept of ‘Event’. As Scott McCracken explains in his contribution, the event is ‘unique and cannot be explained by models of history’ (166). It is a typically post-1968 concept expressing leftist despair in the face of the breakdown of the Marxist grand narrative. McCracken’s essay, however, quite clearly demonstrates the conceptual limitations of *Literature now*: in McCracken’s brief case studies applying the concept of ‘event’ to a literary text, all major theoretical questions regarding literature and historical context slip in through the backdoor – untheoretized, that is. His conclusion, therefore, is somewhat trivial, as it tries to find the age-old middle-ground between the two well-known evils that have haunted literary theory from day one: the ‘reductive’ attempt ‘to identify a clear causality between the event and a particular work’ and the equally reductive strategy ‘to ignore the vital correspondences between new literary formations and new social formations’ (176).

The most promising concept in the section on Temporalities, in my view, is that of ‘Generation’. Ironically, Julian Hanna paraphrases a sociological theory developed by Karl Mannheim almost a century ago, a theory that apparently predates the crisis of historicity as it presents a genuinely historical link between text and (political, socio-economic, media-technological) context. It is the only concept in this section which – in conjunction with the concepts ‘Medium’ and ‘Politics’ (and, of course, gender, class, identity and nation) – would allow me to understand, say, contemporary Dutch fiction.

My focus in this review so far has been on issues of politics and history, since I consider these to be crucial for anyone trying to grasp ‘literature now’ and I believe that the editors of this volume have justifiably put these concerns at the centre of their project. There are, nevertheless, a number of contributions that discuss fairly traditional concepts in fairly traditional ways – and all the better for it. Thomas G. Pavel, for instance, provides a general historical survey of the concept of ‘mimesis’, from Plato to Girard, which would be an excellent addition to any textbook for students of literature. The same goes for Jed Rasula’s essay on ‘Invention’: although hardly tackling the issue from a specifically twenty-first century perspective, it outlines basic classicist, romantic and modernist notions of creativity, inspiration and originality. Rasula’s concluding remarks on Michel de Certeau’s *The practice of everyday life* bring to mind new historicism’s concept of negotiation – a welcome reminder of the almost-absence in *Literature now* of Stephen Greenblatt, a prime theorist of literature’s entanglement with history and politics.

The contributions of Sidney J. Shepp and Sarah Posman, on ‘Book’ and ‘Style’ respectively, seem to adhere more closely to *Literature now*’s ‘update’ project, in that both writers provide historical reflections firmly rooted in a contemporary questioning of the concepts at hand. Shepp’s rather technical elaboration on book history is filtered through the twenty-first century perspective of digital humanities. Posman retraces canonical modern debates on style – modernism’s gradual retreat into an secluded aesthetic realm, a ‘dismantling of the idea that art can affirmatively relate to society’ (235), as Posman paraphrases Adorno – in order to open up a deep engagement with recent literary experiments, such as Kenneth Goldsmith’s project of ‘uncreative writing’.

Literature now includes further contributions on ‘Objects’ (although for some reason Bruno Latour’s ‘interest in non-human things’ (195) figures more prominently in the chapter on

'Periods'), 'Beauty', 'Time', 'Genre' and 'Senses' (which all but ignores the emergent field of affect theory). Some contributors – like David Ayers – discuss the work of others to make a specific point, others (like Carrie Rohman on 'Animals') sketch the main developments and research agendas in their area of expertise. With a few exceptions, all contributions offer valuable insights and perspectives – some more useful in education than others – but a second, revised edition of this volume might present that pioneering case regarding literature today that this first edition promises but does not yet fully deliver: a project for literary studies that consistently revises and moves beyond the theoretical heritage of the age of poststructuralist theory.