

Historicism in Literature and Science: A Roundtable – Introduction

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The five papers in this roundtable originated in a plenary session at the seventh annual conference of the British Society for Literature and Science in 2012 at the University of Oxford. Since the foundation of the BSLS, the papers presented at its conferences and the books reviewed on its website have been very largely historicist in their approach, following a tradition that goes back to the earlier work of critics such as George Rousseau on the eighteenth century, Gillian Beer and George Levine on the nineteenth century, and Ian F. A. Bell on modernism (each of whom has either spoken at or been honoured by the BSLS itself). Given the dominance of historicism in this field, especially in Britain, we felt that it was important to examine its conceptual possibilities and methodological demands. What, we wanted to ask, are the specific challenges for historicism in literature and science, as distinct from those facing historicism more generally? Why might historicism be both particularly crucial and particularly vexed in our field? What difference, ultimately, does it make that we are working on science, which is not only an immensely complex cultural phenomenon but an authoritative body of knowledge and a highly effective set of methods for generating understanding in its own right?

The panellists were invited to participate on account both of their own substantial contributions to the field and their different vantage points on it. We were keen to garner opinion from scholars working on a range of different periods, to avoid too narrow or parochial a perspective. For the same reason, we wanted to include at least one voice from North America, a range of literary preoccupations and genres, and a range of scientific areas of interest too. Finally, we were keen too to draw on the collective experience of the BSLS – the conferences, book reviews and book prize – in taking stock of the field. The final panel comprised: Leah Knight, Associate Professor at the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Brock University in Ontario, who contributed both expertise in the early modern period and a North American angle; Sally Shuttleworth, Professorial Fellow in English at St Anne's College, Oxford, best known for her work on Victorian fiction and periodicals; John Holmes, Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Reading, and a critic of Victorian and modern poetry; Michael Whitworth, Oxford University Lecturer in 20th Century Literature, Tutorial Fellow at Merton College, and an expert on modernism and science; and Peter Middleton, Professor of English at the University of Southampton, who has been working for a number of years on a book on science in post-war and contemporary American poetry. At the time of the panel itself, Michael Whitworth was the Chair of the BSLS, Peter Middleton was the Secretary, and John Holmes the Reviews Editor. All five contributors have been judges for the BSLS book prize at different times, while Leah Knight and Sally Shuttleworth have both won the prize themselves. Each panellist spoke at the conference, and each has written up their paper for publication here. In so doing, we turn a reflexive gaze onto historicism as both the dominant method and the primary preoccupation of literature and science scholarship, suggesting that, while it has an excellent track record in generating and enabling exciting and insightful research, it is neither uncomplicated nor necessarily unquestionable.