New Literary History: What’s New?

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I

New Literary History is a humanities quarterly that has been published since 1976 by the Johns Hopkins University Press. Widely regarded as one of the leading journals of literary theory in the world, it has won seven awards from the Council of Editors of Learned Journals. The various journal-ranking schemes that have proliferated in recent years inspire ambivalence in most of us; but, for what they may be worth, New Literary History usually gets from them a rank of A if not A+.

NLH was founded in 1969 as part of the celebration of the 150-year history of the University of Virginia. The founding editor was Ralph Cohen, a scholar of eighteenth-century literary criticism and the theory that implicitly supported it. Cohen’s goal was to create a new kind of academic journal. At the time, the prevailing framework in Anglo-American literary studies was New Criticism, which focused on detailed readings of individual literary works and deliberately avoided larger historical or theoretical arguments. By contrast, NLH was interested from the very start in the big picture. Its mission was to frame questions about the nature of literature, about the procedures of literary criticism, and about the goals of literary study. In other words, its mission was inherently theoretical. At the same time, it was Cohen’s great inaugural wager that literary history poses a perennially vitalizing challenge to literary theory, by holding the latter’s often abstracting ambition to the accountancy of historical change—and, conversely, by seeing that literary historians do not forget how deeply theoretical assumptions underlie the stories they tell about the cultural past and present. This dialectic between history and theory has served NLH well over the decades, not least by preserving it from allegiance to any one critical method or single ideology. Rather, the journal seeks to articulate and examine assumptions within literary studies and the humanities more generally. The ideal NLH essay is one that makes a novel and substantial contribution to literary theory or method, and that changes the way we think about an important
problem. Such an essay may well be rooted in close explication of a
given work or genre or period, but it flowers as a piece for *NLH* when
interpretive explication discloses something fresh about theory or inter-
pretation as such—and those words “theory and interpretation” are in our
subtitle.

*NLH* was the first-ever journal of this kind? Something that Ralph
Cohen in our fifteen years’ work with him never tired of pointing out?
and it helped to inspire a whole range of theory-oriented journals that fol-
lowed, among them *Critical Inquiry, Cultural Critique, Diacritics,* and
*American Literary History.* Over the last four decades, we have pub-
lished the work of countless theorists, among them Roland Barthes,
Hélène Cixous, Jacques Derrida, Hayden White, Stanley Fish, Jürgen
Habermas, Wolfgang Iser, Fredric Jameson, Martha Nussbaum, Richard
Rorty, Gayatri Spivak, Bruno Latour. And the essays we publish are read
not just by scholars of literature but also by art historians, anthropolo-
gists, philosophers, historians of ideas, and others.

II

We are also a journal that relies heavily on the special issue—another
device pioneered by Ralph Cohen, and one that allows us to take a proac-
tive stance in defining new areas for intellectual inquiry. In other words,
we don’t just wait to see what authors send us, but we formulate particu-
lar topics and then invite authors to address them; our goal remains that
of intervening in current debates and actively shaping them. Some of the
most influential special issues of *NLH* include one on Literature and
Moral Philosophy, in 1985, which is still widely cited in discussions of
ethics and literature; an issue on postmodernism, which came out (we’re
both amazed and proud to say) all the way back in 1971; and an issue on
Ecocriticism, or the linkage between environmental and literary studies,
as that new field was just emerging in 1999. Two of our most recent spe-
cial topics, Context and Mood, will give you some idea both of the range
we try to cover, and of the apparent (i.e., deceptive) simplicity of the
thematic and methodological assumptions we aim to raise for apprecia-
tion and critique. Some of our special issues are subsequently published
in book form after the addition of supplementary essays: two recent
examples are *Rethinking Tragedy* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2008) and
*Comparison: Theories, Approaches, Uses* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2013).