



The British Society for LITERATURE and SCIENCE

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CONFERENCE NOTES THIRTEENTH ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF THE BSLS 5-7 APRIL 2018 OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

The thirteenth annual BSLS conference included a focus on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a celebration of the two-hundredth anniversary of its publication. Some recurrent themes I noticed across all the panels I attended (either *Frankenstein*-related or otherwise) were: the uncanny, personhood/identity, and the function of memory. Repeatedly listening to variations on these themes led me to spend a significant amount of my free time at the conference pondering the nature of the future with regard to the ever-changing status of various oppressed groups of people and the rights granted to various non-humans.

I was struck by the depth and breadth of material covered by the papers at the BSLS conference, and by my own interest in absolutely everything on offer. Never had I been to a conference where I wanted to attend every single panel until this one. I was lucky enough to be presenting on one of the first panels, so I was able to give the rest of the conference my full attention. I was thrilled to be on a panel with Aline Ferreira whose research inspired my entire PhD project. Her insight into the current cultural reception of artificial gestation technologies will definitely influence my

own future research. It was amazing to go to a conference where I could interact with people working so closely on subjects related to my topic. By contrast, it was also fantastic to listen to Johanna Grabow's paper in the same panel on a topic so unfamiliar to me. Her paper on fiction concerning Antarctic sciences was very intriguing and I felt like I was able to learn a great deal in a short space of time.

At the end of the first day of the conference, I attended a panel about contemporary science fiction that I felt exemplified the themes of the conference. Claudine Bollinger and Sean Seeger approached the idea of AI technologies from very different perspectives and both offered thought-provoking assessments of the literature they discussed. Catherine Charwood's paper on memory and ageing supplemented the AI discussion by examining in human characters what it is exactly that constitutes personhood and identity, and all of these themes lead to a very stimulating question time.

The second day of the conference was a full day of panels and presentations and I was absorbed by every single one. One of my favourite panels was on interstices between science and fiction, largely because of Jess Robert's paper on Jeff VanDerMeer's *Annihilation*, a book which I had only just finished reading the week before the conference and was very keen to discuss. Jess's analysis was incredibly insightful and helped me to comprehend some of the stranger parts of the narrative. I also learned of the existence of the disturbing fungi known as *Cordyceps*, which led to a very amusing conversation at the conference dinner about parasitic organisms with the ability to control the minds and bodies of other organisms. Sonia Front's paper during this same panel was equally fascinating as I have never seen the show *Fringe*, and I have often vaguely won-

The BSLS promotes
interdisciplinary research into
the relationships between
science and literature in all
periods.

Spring 2018 Newsletter

dered about the science behind shows like *Stargate* and *Star Trek*, and whilst this highlighted a very different phenomenon (temporal shifting between alternate universes), it also explored the very prominent theme of what it means to be a person and what it is exactly that makes a person who they are, tying back to my observations about the themes of the conference.

Another of my favourite conference panels was the discussion of non-human and inhuman narratives. Spot-lighting the question of what makes a person a person, the three panellists (Sthira Bhattacharya, Saskia McCracken, and Kanta Dihal) covered a huge amount of information and literature. Between slavery, dictatorship, and transhuman beings, the discussion was complex and political and personal and overall an absolute delight to listen to and participate in during question time.

This panel led into Professor Alex Goody's plenary lecture on "Dr Frankenstein and the Sex Robots." Following a similar line of theory about female personhood and artificial intelligence, Professor Goody's lecture examined the relationship between gender representation and mechanical slavery across various film and literary texts. I found it equal parts amusing and disturbing, particularly as it relates to the future of gender relations.

After the close of the official conference, I made my way to the Oxford University Museum of Natural History to attend the anniversary celebration of Gillian Beer's seminal text *Darwin's Plots*. I was very impressed by the site of the event, and I enjoyed having an excuse to walk through Oxford and admire all of the wonderful architecture. Then I got to listen to the eminent Dame Gillian Beer discuss her ground-breaking work on its 35th anniversary. I was floored by her passion and continued enthusiasm for her research and was thoroughly inspired by her ongoing dedication to the academic study of literature and science.

I have left with such a long list of books to read both for my own research and for personal interests—I ordered more than one online immediately after panels. Overall, this conference was absolutely wonderful and I am incredibly grateful both to the organisers—especially Carina Bartleet—and the BSLS committee, for granting me the opportunity to attend and present amongst such distinguished and fascinating academics.

Anna Campbell
University of St Andrews

The BSLS conference reflected upon the gamut of intersections that the nexus of science and literature entails. In the domain of the scientific, gaslighting and engineering advances in the 19th century, magnetic fields, genetics, quantum physics, centrosomes, nuclear power, artificial intelligence, and even dentistry were topics discussed. With regards literature, the areas adumbrated were as various as the discipline itself: in terms of genre, theatre, poetry, novels, film, memoirs, and diaries; in terms of periods, the Renaissance to contemporary literature. One meta-critical observation is the overwhelming focus on historicism, which is an indication of the general tendency of the discipline, I believe.

One of the major concerns in English studies, voiced recently by Jonathan Kramnick, Anahid Nersessian, and Simon During, has been that of disciplinary autonomy, and whether in seeking inter-disciplinarity for its own sake, essential aspects of humanistic inquiry are being eroded. Zoë Imfeld's relation of her experience talking literature to astrophysicists was illuminating to this debate, as her main concern was how literary scholarship could engage with hard science without capitulating to the standardisation of the empirical methodology across disciplines.

I thought it helpful, therefore, to attend Shankar Ram's talk on the fundamental negotiations that took place about the definitions of 'nature' between poetry, science and philosophy during the Renaissance, before authority on describing the physical world unequivocally fell into the domain of science. The obverse of Early Modern poetry, in a way, is modernist poetry, in its attempt to merge the two idioms and reclaim the lost ground; Charles Olson's poetry will serve as example here. Sarah Daw's paper on how the yield of early 20th century science—quantum entanglement, say, or uncertainty—and philosophy—A.N. Whitehead's *Process and Reality*—influenced Olson's productive poetry or projective verse displayed one way literature can stake firm ground upon a knowledge rendered insecure by that very era. Within the theme of destabilising sub-strata by action, another example is Michael Whitworth's discussion of W.H. Auden's poetic use of demonstratives as substantives. The later Auden's annexation of scientific terms for verse is perhaps exemplified by his meditation in "New Year Letter" on the marriage of Logos and Eros.

These grand ambitions of poetry, however, according to Rachel Crossland's readings of Rebecca Elson's poetry, have in recent times been curtailed to a pedagogical function. The elusive provenance of dark matter can in a sense be vividly seen "above a pond", where "an unseen filament / of spider's floss / suspends a slowly / spinning leaf." However, in the discussion that followed, a possibility emerged that the lines may be read instead as querying the attachment of physics to old theories—thus keeping alive a postulate of the conference, so to speak, of literature standing its ground: thoughts inexpressible in scientific terms made possible by the form of literature.

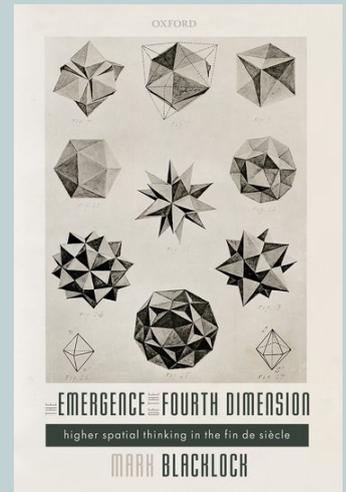
In the end, plaudits must be issued, above all, to BSLS and Carina Bartleet especially, for bringing together this eclectic convocation of scholars interested in taking stock of their discipline in an age of science.

Anirudh Sridhar

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

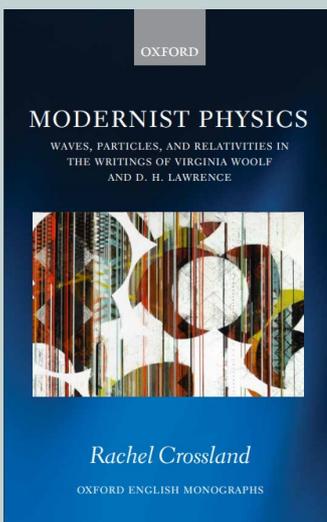
Mark Blacklock, *The Emergence of the Fourth Dimension* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 19th April 2018, 256 pages)

A study of the emergence of the idea of the fourth dimension in geometry in the late-19th century, *The Emergence of the Fourth Dimension* describes an active interplay between self-fashioning disciplines at a key moment in the popularisation of science. Tracking the development of the ideas of higher space in distinct social and cultural terrains, it offers new research into spiritualism and the Theosophical Society and reads a series of curious hybrid texts produced within these groupings. It moves in to identify a corpus of higher dimensional fictions by Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, H.G. Wells, Henry James, H. P. Lovecraft and others. It reads these closely to understand how fin de siècle and early twentieth century literature shaped and were in turn shaped by the reconfiguration of imaginative space occasioned by the n-dimensional turn.



Rachel Crossland, *Modernist Physics: Waves, Particles, and Relativities in the Writings of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Modernist Physics takes as its focus the ideas associated with three scientific papers published by Albert Einstein in 1905, considering the dissemination of those ideas both within and beyond the scientific field, and exploring the manifestation of similar ideas in the literary works of Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. Drawing on Gillian Beer's suggestion that literature and science 'share the moment's discourse', *Modernist Physics* seeks both to combine and to distinguish between the two standard approaches within the field of literature and science: direct influence and the zeitgeist.

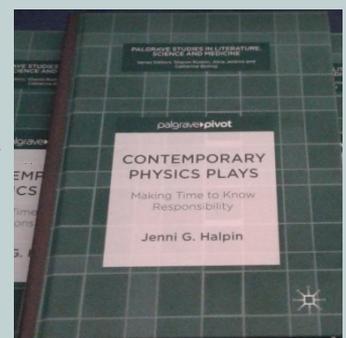


The book is divided into three parts, each of which focuses on the ideas associated with one of Einstein's papers. Part I considers Woolf in relation to Einstein's paper on light quanta, arguing that questions of duality and complementarity had a wider cultural significance in the early twentieth century than has yet been acknowledged, and suggesting that Woolf can usefully be considered a complementary, rather than a dualistic, writer. Part II looks at Lawrence's reading of at least one book on relativity in 1921, and his subsequent suggestion in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* that 'we are in sad need of a theory of human relativity', a theory which is shown to be relevant to Lawrence's writing of relationships both before and after 1921. Part III considers Woolf and Lawrence together alongside late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century discussions of molecular physics and crowd psychology, suggesting that Einstein's work on Brownian motion provides a useful model for thinking about individual literary characters.

Order online at www.oup.com with promotion code AAFLYG6 to save 30%!

Jenni G Halpin, *Contemporary Physics Plays: Making Time to Know Responsibility* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

In recent physics plays the enaction of concepts from the sciences discussed therein alters the nature of the decision made by the characters, changing the ethical judgments that might be cast on them. Such plays regularly alter the shape of space-time itself, drawing together disparate moments, reversing the flow of time, creating apparent contradictions, and iterating scenes for multiple branches of counterfactual history. With these changes both causality and responsibility shift, variously. The roles of iconic scientists, such as Albert Einstein and Werner Heisenberg, are interrogated for their dramatic value, placing history and dramatic license in tension. Cold War strategies and the limits of espionage highlight the emphatically personal involvement of ordinary individuals.



BSLS GRANTS REPORT

“OUT OF TIME”

31ST ANNUAL MEETING OF THE SOCIETY FOR LITERATURE, SCIENCE, AND THE ARTS ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, USA, NOVEMBER 9-12, 2017

The theme for the 31st Annual Meeting of the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts, which took place at Arizona State University in Tempe was “Out of Time”. Areas examined over the course of the four days from November 9-12 included nonhuman temporalities, species extinction, life after humans, time in relation to biopolitics, and time and capital.

On Friday, Sha Xin Wei gave the first keynote and examined what it means to consider temporality non-anthropocentrically and to let go of the conceit that we are the central and most important beings in the world. Xin Wei is the Director of the Synthesis Center, the physical space at ASU characterised by its focus on play and the creation of responsive and non-anthropocentric environments. His talk raised and sought to address questions concerning how we might refocus our attention via experiential and enactive practices, drawing inspiration from vegetal life and playing with time-based media, and he encouraged the audience to engage with workshops hosted by the Center over the course of the conference.

McKenzie Wark, the second keynote, who spoke on Saturday, based his presentation on the British scientists, science journalists, and science fiction writers who made up the Social Relations of Science Movement, including JD Bernal, JBS Haldane and Joseph Needham. I found the focus in Wark’s talk on drawing from women such as Charlotte Haldane and Naomi Mitchison, who connected reproductive technology and the changing fortunes of women, particularly interesting and left with numerous additions to my reading list.

These keynotes were enclosed by eclectic panels and discussions, many of which dealt explicitly with the relationships of science and literature and all of which, perhaps by virtue of my own selection process, were characterised in some way with the question of how to engage with the world more intelligently, many from an overtly ecological perspective. One particularly enjoyable panel was that of the Society for the Study of Biopolitical Futures, which comprised of excellent presentations that examined the preface of Hegel’s Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, in addition to Spinoza’s *Ethics* and the role of democracy within his thought.

The conference was a fantastic opportunity for me to meet again with members of the Post-HumanNetwork (PHuN), whose first conference “Experiencing the Posthuman” I attended and presented work at in March several months before SLSA, and I was fortunate enough to be able to gain feedback on the work that I had devel-

oped in response to their earlier contributions. PHuN organised a series of panels at SLSA titled “posthuman ecologies”, which engaged with Guattari’s “Three Ecologies”, and played host to fruitful discussions and opportunities for feedback following papers. Overall, the conference was an invaluable experience that left me enthusiastic to refocus on my research, fuelled by a host of new ideas, suggestions, and standpoints.

The scientific engagement of the conference ultimately extended beyond the event itself, since we were invited to attend a tour of the incredible School of Earth and Space Exploration where a replica of NASA’s Curiosity rover is proudly displayed. We learned here that, since stickers with branding that may become detached from the vehicle and float off into space are prohibited on the rover, the team in the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in California, where the rover was designed and built, got around this barrier for publicity by leaving their mark in the form of track marks imprinted by the tyres which lay down Morse code for JPL:

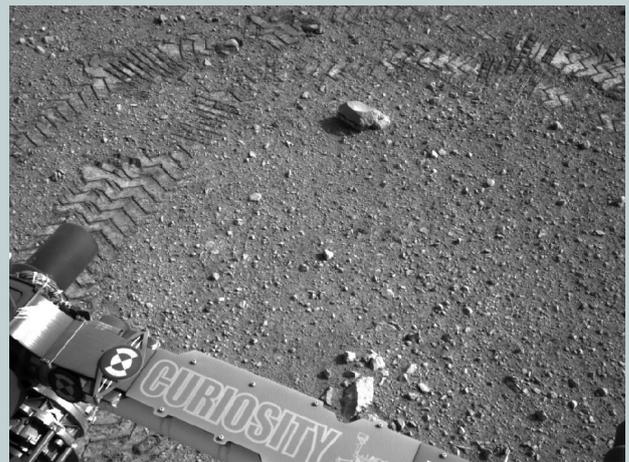


Image credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech

This close to the conference reminded me of the importance of extending our imagination beyond the earth’s surface and the challenge such reflexes pose to habitual anthropocentrism, bringing me back to the comparison of Kant and Leopardi’s that my work began with. The ecological emphasis of many of the discussions over the course of the four days prompted me to pay more attention to the role of Leopardi’s so called “cosmic pessimism”, in which I now believe a large proportion of his contemporary significance lies. All in all, the experience of attending SLSA 2017 was incredible, and couldn’t have been located in a more apt environment, in which a refreshingly varied group of academics shared, critiqued, and built upon each other’s ideas. I have submitted an abstract to the SLSA’s next conference, taking place in Toronto, where I hope to continue building a community amongst the scholars I met and learned from in the desert.

Alice Gibson

TRANSITIONS: BRIDGING THE VICTORIAN-MODERNIST DIVIDE

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM
9-10 APRIL 2018

“Transitions: Bridging the Victorian-Modernist Divide”, the most recent conference organised by the Midlands Modernist Network, brought together a range of academics working across this divide for two exciting days of interdisciplinary dialogue. The primary focus of the conference was literature, but a range of related topics such as science and technology were also covered, including memorable presentations on *Dracula* and typewriters (Jessica Gray), and Joyce and science-fiction (Boyarkina Iren). The conference showcased a range of cutting-edge research on topics including Djuna Barnes and Victorian bisexuality (Hannah Roche), Joyce’s obscene confessionals (Katharine Mullin), and colonialism in Olive Schreiner’s early feminist writing (Rachel Hollander). Several other papers dealt with scientific themes, including the keynote address by John Holmes, author of *Darwin’s Bards*. Holmes teased out some of the evolutionary and teleological content of several modernist and late modernist epics, emphasising the extensive impact that Victorian scientists had on poets such as Ezra Pound.

I come from a Woolf studies background, and it was wonderful to see the Woolf-pack out in force, with great papers on Woolf and Protestantism (Jane de Gay), Margaret Oliphant (Anne Reus), William Wordsworth (Matthew Holliday), Leslie Stephen (Tom Breckin), George Eliot (Charlotte Fiehn), and beastly flânerie (David Barnes). Then of course, there was Sarah Parker’s fantastic keynote on the overlooked writer and suffragist Alice Meynell, whom Woolf snidely referred to as a ‘poetess’. Parker shed light on Meynell’s life and works, and offered a more flattering portrait of her than Woolf does in her diary, where she writes that Meynell ‘had 7 children & wrote about 5 paragraphs a day for society papers & so on—all the time looking like a crucified saint’.

The organisers (Séan Richardson, Rachel Eames, Hannah Comer, Elizabeth O’Connor, and Rhiannon Cogbill) created a friendly welcoming atmosphere—the Victorianist vs Modernist battle in the car park was cancelled as everyone got on so well—which included dinner in the eccentric and ornately decorated restaurant Bacchus, in the heart of Birmingham. The standard conference format was shaken up by poetry readings from Rebecca Cullen, who told us about life amongst the peacocks as poet in (Lord Byron’s!) residence, at Newstead Abbey.

Thanks to the BSLS Postgraduate Conference Fund, I was able to present my paper ‘The Darwinian Politics of Virginia Woolf’s “creature Dictator”’ at Transitions. This paper investigates the politics of Woolf’s ‘worm [...] creature Dictator’ in her anti-fascist feminist polemic *Three Guineas* (1938), and her related worm imagery, through the lens of Darwin’s writing on worms, and the social Darwinist discourse of the silk production industry in 1930s Germany. Critics including Gillian Beer have demonstrated Woolf’s extensive engagement with Darwin’s writings and analogies; building on this work, I aimed to unearth the

politics of their worm analogies, offering a reading of both writers that engages with the current animal turn in literary criticism.

This conference highlighted a range of exciting connections between writers who lived in the nineteenth and/or twentieth centuries, and I gained valuable insight into Victorian studies scholarship, helping me to contextualise my research on Darwin’s work in relation to Modernist writing. This insight, in turn, has informed my research on Woolf and Darwin’s portrayal of material and metaphorical animals. I was delighted to contribute to this collective discussion, in alignment with the wider objectives of the BSLS: to promote interdisciplinary research into the relationships of science and literature in all periods. Transitions was an interdisciplinary success and a thoroughly enjoyable two days of all things Victorian and Modernist, and everything in between.

Saskia McCracken
University of Glasgow

BSLS BOOK PRIZE

2017

MELISSA BAILES
QUESTIONING NATURE:
BRITISH WOMEN’S
SCIENTIFIC WRITING
AND LITERARY
ORIGINALITY, 1750-
1830

Questioning Nature is an elegant exposition of how important the sciences were to a number of female authors at the end of the eighteenth century, especially in allowing them to think through their own creativity and position in society and the marketplace, and in guiding their innovations in literary form, mode and genre. The book is wide-ranging in its coverage of authors (from Anna Laetitia Barbauld to Felicia Hemans), sciences (from botany to volcanology) and places (from Warrington to the West Indies), and to all of these topics brings fascinating biographical and historical insights and careful close readings. Bailes provides a compelling account of the connections between Enlightenment sciences and questions of gender, and makes an important contribution to the critical reframing of Romantic-era literature and science.

UPCOMING EVENTS

SCIENCE, MEDICINE AND CULTURE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY SEMINARS IN TRINITY TERM 2018

Monday 7 May 2018 (Week 3)

Professor Harriet Ritvo, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (<https://history.mit.edu/people/harriet-ritvo>)

Gone but not Forgotten: Coming to Grips with Extinction

5.30—7.00, Seminar Room 3, St Anne's College, Oxford

Extinction is a timely and controversial topic now, as it has been for centuries. That is not, of course, to say that the focus of contention has remained constant. At first the main question, couched at least as much in theological as in scientific terms (that is, in terms resonant with later debates about evolution), was whether it could happen. Localized anthropogenic extinctions, most famously that of the dodo, were noticed by European travelers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (the intentional extermination of undesirable animals like wolves at home did not figure in such debates). The dwindling and disappearance of more populous and widespread species, including the passenger pigeon, the quagga, and (nearly) the American bison, in the nineteenth century sparked a different kind of concern among the overlapping communities of hunters, naturalists, and conservationists, which helped to inspire the earliest national parks and wildlife reserves.

Tuesday 22 May 2018 (Week 5)

Dr Carolyn Burdett, Birkbeck, University of London (<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/english/our-staff/full-time-academic-staff/burdett>)

Sympathy limits in Daniel Deronda

5.30—7.00, Seminar Room 3, St Anne's College, Oxford

From the 1860s sympathy emerged as a key term in naturalistic dispute about mechanisms of evolution and the relation of human to animal life. This paper argues that we need to look closely at these debates in order to have a fuller account of the role sympathy played in the ethical and artistic changes of the 'end' of Victorianism. Sympathy's part in its own vanishing conditions during the final three decades of the nineteenth century has not yet been fully explained. As literary historians invariably turn to George Eliot to help grasp the scope and power of secular modern sympathy, I go to her final novel, *Daniel Deronda*, to find insight about its waning. While sympathy is explicitly referenced on more occasions in *Daniel Deronda* than in any other of Eliot's fictions, many readers have noted profound changes that propel the narrative simultaneously beyond both sympathy and realism. Might sympathy, paradoxically, be a key to grasping why Eliot's last novel is full of terror and dread, magic and divination, Gothicism and melodrama? I conclude by briefly suggesting that sympathy in the final decades of the nineteenth century is part of the same nexus of concepts that produce a new term, empathy, seen by some in the twenty-first century to have largely replaced sympathy in referencing affective and ethical capacity.

Tuesday 5 June 2018 (Week 7)

Dr Manon Mathias, University of Glasgow (<https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/mlc/staff/manonmathias/>)

'What is health? It is chocolate!': Chocolate, medicine, and writing in nineteenth-century France

5.30—7.00, Seminar Room 3, St Anne's College, Oxford

Although France's role in the development of chocolate from an Early Modern luxury to a popular product has been noted, nowhere has the French engagement with chocolate as medicine been examined in any depth. Moreover, the numerous literary engagements with this product in nineteenth-century novels remain unexplored. Taking up the call issued by the Chocolate History Project (UC Davis) for more research on chocolate in literature and in cookbooks, this paper will examine references to chocolate in scientific and medical texts from the period but also in gastronomic texts and novels to see to what extent principles regarding chocolate reached beyond the medical field, and also to reveal the rich and complex relations between chocolate and language.

Drinks will be served after each seminar. All welcome, no booking required.

THE CONTAGION CABARET

24 May 2018, 7 p.m.
The British Academy, London

<https://conscicom.files.wordpress.com/2018/03/contagion-cabaret-e-flyer-british-academy.pdf>

SCENES FROM A PROJECTED WORLD

12 June 2018, 6 p.m.
Museum of the History of Science, Oxford

http://www.mhs.ox.ac.uk/events/?event_id1=20181

MIND-READING: THE ROLE OF NARRATIVE IN MENTAL HEALTH (CONFERENCE)

18-19 June 2018
University of Birmingham

<https://shop.bham.ac.uk/conferences-and-events/college-of-arts-law/school-of-english-drama-american-canadian-studies/mind-reading-literature-and-mental-health-conference>

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

The digital scholarly resource *The Literary Encyclopedia* (www.litencyc.com) is commissioning articles of 2,000–5,000 words on utopian and dystopian literature.

The Literary Encyclopedia was founded in 1998 to provide literary scholars and students in humanities with an authoritative, reliable, and comprehensive reference work on all writing of value that has been produced around the world. It has since published more than 15 million words contributed by more than 3000 colleagues, and it grows by around 1 million words each year.

In addition to publishing articles on canonical and much-taught literary works, the *Encyclopedia* is particularly interested in making available information about important writers and works that are often neglected, and in publishing articles about discrete historical events which are relevant to literary understanding. It also seeks to broaden its scope to include more research-oriented articles with a pedagogic function, such as ‘Critical issues in *title X*’ or ‘Critical readings of *author/ title X*’. Its ultimate aim is to facilitate and inspire further research in the broad context of literary and cultural production.

The Literary Encyclopedia is published by The Literary Dictionary Company on behalf of its contributors and editors who own the publication collectively. In essence, each contribution is rewarded with shares in the Company which operates on a not-for-profit basis, either reinvesting its earnings in the publication or returning them to its writers and editors as royalties. The publication is supported mainly by institutional subscriptions and has recently been able to pay very modest royalties to its authors. We trust that these will rise considerably as the publication becomes an essential institutional subscription.

More detailed information on the *Encyclopedia* – including its publishing model, editorial policies, specific information for authors, etc. – can be found on its homepage at www.litencyc.com, under the ABOUT tab.

Anyone interested in submitting an entry on utopian or dystopian literature should email Dr Sean Seeger (University of Essex) at saseeg@essex.ac.uk. Our usual timeframe for the submission of an article is 4–6 months, but we are happy to fit our deadlines to the needs of our contributors.

I hope that you will endorse our scholarly purposes, ambition, and ethics and be able to accept this invitation.

Sean Seeger, Editor