Part III
Ideologies of the Institution

§ 10 Against Periodization

If by some radical epistemic *bouleversement*, we were able to drop periodizing altogether, that would in itself signal that we had left the modern behind—as long as it were not for still another period, for… that would be a sure sign that we were still thinking under the auspices of the modern.

*Margreta de Grazia*

Spinoza: “every definition is a negation.” Negation is thus the life of thought: without it the totality cannot become parts; without parts there can be no relation.

The tendency of definitions to become second nature, however, means that they are also the enemy of clear thinking, its most habitual stopping-place. Though it is thus no news, and no crime, that definitions are negations in general, the particular forms of negation that organize our relations to one another and to the world merit continued, pessimistic vigilance.

Vigilance has, conveniently enough, some useful rules of thumb: strategies for managing and mitigating the partiality of our common negations. One involves authorizing, within a given field, a diversity of concepts or methods, in the hopes that the differences among them will have a policing effect. Placed alongside other concepts, differently powerful and differently limited, a concept’s limitations and powers spring into light. A field that includes scholars using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, or formalist and historicist ones, for instance, contains within itself an open (and sometimes hostile) dialogue on the viabilities of its major methodological choices. Within such a field the master concept governing any single work of scholarship (a particular idea of society, of

---


2 Spinoza, Letter 50 to Jelles, in *Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Hackett, 1995), 260; the phrase *omnis determination est negatio* is translated by Shirley as “determination is negation,” but is more often seen in the form I use above.
the literary, of the performative) becomes a visible choice, which must be justified against unchosen alternatives. Congeries of concepts thus highlight a concept’s perimeters, and rely on the awareness of differences among concepts to police the limitations of any single one of them.

A second major strategy for mitigating the partiality of concepts involves making room for the trans-conceptual or trans-methodological. In the humanities and social sciences, two major watchwords of that strategy—interdisciplinarity and transnationalism—adumbrate the primary limiting definitions of the study of human culture and human life, namely the disciplinary and the national, which constitute the major organizing principles of colleges of the humanities and the liberal arts. Such transconcepts disrupt the negations that constitute the core modes of institutional and intellectual life and, in so doing, belong intimately to the negations they disrupt. (The nation lies, after all, at the heart of the transnational, just as the prominence of disciplines gives interdisciplinarity its meaning and power. The transconcept is the bird cleaning the concept’s mouth.) So conceived, transconcepts illustrate a given definition’s immanent boundaries. They do not escape it; they constitute it as a system. By revealing the strictures imposed by the conceptual division of infinite space into units, they impose a marginal but sustained awareness of determination and negation within a given epistemological sphere. Together with the strategy of multiplicity (which highlights the external exclusions imposed by a given definition), the strategy of transconcepts (which highlights the internal ones) keeps scholars aware of the ways in which the evidentiary and definitional structures that make knowledge possible do so by making other forms of knowledge (or evidence) harder to see.

All this is obvious enough. But that obviousness makes it difficult to explain the near-total dominance of the concept of periodization in literary studies, a dominance that amounts to a collective failure of imagination and will on the part of the literary profession. We have failed, first,
to institutionalize a reasonable range of competing concepts that would mitigate some of the obvious limitations of periodization as a method, and, second, to formalize in institutional ways trans-conceptual categories that would call our attentions to the boundaries periodization creates within the historical field of literature. Our collective desire to remain institutionally inside periods may be illustrated by the tendency to extend rather than cross periods—the long eighteenth century, now longer than ever; the early modern, reaching ever backwards into the old medieval; or modernism, straining nearly entirely into the present—as a way of coping with the repeated recognition of the inadequacy of period, and to ostensibly permanent epochal boundaries, as a frame for the kinds of questions we wish to ask. The tendency to lengthen periods is stronger when the periods articulate concepts, which might lead us to believe that numerically neutral periods (not post-1865 US, then, but, say, the raw name of a century) are somehow less conceptual than named ones. But all periods are concepts, even when they merely exclude other times, since the periodizing gesture only makes sense as a loose amalgamation of culture and historical similarity, a similarity reinforced every time someone says something like “the twentieth century”—about which we all agree, roughly, what it means.  

That we have failed to create alternatives to periodization can be confirmed by a simple look at the MLA job list, which reveals, as it has every year for the past fifteen years and more, that the vast majority of job opportunities in literature, no matter the national field, are defined in periodizing terms. As the job list suggests, our failure expresses itself most clearly not in the heady conceptual arena, but in the institutionalization of the period as the fundamental mode of literary study at every level of the profession, from the job market to the undergraduate curriculum, the journals to the professional societies, the conferences to the comprehensive exams. And though we may be

---

3 As long as we agree on the geographic region to which the phrase applies. “The twentieth century” means something awfully different in Europe than it does in, say, Latin America (and differently within those regions).
tempted to see the undergraduate curriculum as the root of this necessary evil, to do so requires forgetting that the faculty have made the curriculum. The curriculum is us. The system that it so visibly codifies is the same one that governs the training of graduate students and the production of dissertations, and on their basis the near-entirety of the early career labor of most professors in literature. No one should be surprised that, once tenured, those professors reproduce the norms under which they have thrived (or at least been trained) in a variety of institutional forms. Those forms precede them at every level of the institution.

In short our entire system of literary education, from the first-year undergraduate survey to the forms of judgment governing publication, promotion, and tenure, reifies the period as its central historical concept.

Conceptual challenges to the currently institutionalized forms of periodization have been around since the early days of theory. What is remarkable is that they have had so little institutional effect, especially on the job market, where periodizing norms have become, in my experience, more rather than less prominent in the last decade or so. To some extent this reflects the ways that New Historicist approaches to literary criticism have become fully ideological and substructural, rather than being, as they were throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, subjects of intense critical debate. This victory of New Historicism is, like the victory of Theory itself, a tragic one: the measure of its triumph rests on the paradoxical disappearance of its force as a trajectory or a school, the loss of institutional memory and of the contexts of its initial emergence. Because almost everyone now thinks “new historically,” no one is really a New Historicist anymore. The thinking is enough: it has inculcated a strong unstated theory of era as the final goal and subtending force of the intimacies of

---

4 As one reader for the manuscript pointed out, the inaugural theory journal was called New Literary History (founded 1969), whose title indicates the ambition to hold on to literary history while abandoning existing historical models—a program replicated, to some extent, in this book.
literary criticism, which reifies at ideological level a powerful theory of periods as social wholes. This theory requires a vast expansion of the material necessary to master a single period, and, correspondingly, an increase in the force of institutional and intellectual barriers between periods, since crossing them now requires a level of understanding of the period as a self-contained whole that cannot be easily acquired: “the triumph of the specialist resulted in the much-remarked explosion of research in the subdisciplinary fields that made the old goal of coverage no longer tenable.” This in turn may explain the gradual foreshortening of the required historical “perspective” for PhDs in English: while twenty years ago the average new scholar of British literature could be expected to teach Beowulf to Woolf, and the US scholar Columbus to Goodbye, Columbus, the kinds of historical knowledge now required to work inside periods make such long views increasingly difficult to achieve.

None of this militates against the concept of the period in any specific way, or prevents one from recognizing all the great work done under its aegis (and under the rubric of New Historicism more specifically). It does, however, open the door to asking about the impact of periodization’s dominance of scholarship in the humanities, which reflects badly on our collective awareness of the ideas governing our institutional and scholarly behavior. This failure of self-consciousness, the lack of debate over the value of the period as concept (especially now, after the acceptance of many postulates of literary theory), is what makes periodization ideological. Our response to the ideologization of periods ought to be to develop and to seek to institutionalize a variety of competing

---


6 This change is also, to be sure, an effect of decanonization, or recanonization, which has increased the sheer quantity of work for which one must be responsible in any given historical unit. The point is not to return to an earlier model of canonicity or periodization, but to carry the gains we have made over the last decades into new realms of literary historical institutionalization and thought.
concepts, including trans-periodizing ones, for the study of literary history. This would ensure that the concepts themselves could become explicit (and contestable) subjects of scholarly work. The contests among them would then generate at a higher “level” transconceptual approaches, which would in turn prevent new concepts from easily producing new ideological calcifications.

We already have a few institutionally viable non-periodizing concepts. The MLA list includes every year a small number of jobs that do not make period fundamental. Some focus on genre (drama, novel, poetry, new media) or sub-genre (science fiction, children’s literature), some define theoretical or social fields (the postcolonial, theory, women’s studies, ethnic studies). These categories can of course be modified by period, but even when a scholar’s research focus operates within a relatively restricted historical field, the professional expectation requires an awareness of a far longer history and broader geography than most periods, especially later periods, require. Scholars of twentieth-century poetry must, generally speaking, know something about the ancient Greeks (if not yet the ancient Indians or Chinese), just as those who work on contemporary ethnic studies must have a sense of the historical development of their analytic categories, so that a scholar of black cultural expression in the 1990s United States, for instance, must possess a great deal of knowledge that extends back, transnationally, across several centuries: knowledge about the slave trades, the plantation economy, the Civil War, the migrations that followed it, and so forth.

To these existing non-periodizing alternatives we may add those recently proposed by Franco Moretti and Wai Chee Dimock, both of whom have directed scholarly attention to historicizable features of the aesthetic that are either smaller or larger than the particular work of art. For Moretti, these include such figures as free indirect discourse or the clue. Without straining we could expand this list to include the soliloquy, various aspects of narration, including forms of characterization or point of view, rhetorical microgenres (the joke, the anecdote), poetic features like rhyme, figures like
apostrophe or hendiadys, or other newly described or invented features of rhetoric, narrative, or form. Dimock meanwhile has focused on a few far larger conceptual units (kinship, planetary time, the epic) that make visible, subtended by close reading, novel connections across the spaces and times of the history of the human imagination. Rewritten in general form, as the transhistorical analysis of small literary units, or the history of large ones, these concepts could certainly justify non period-based categories for the academic job list (and thus in turn for the training of graduate students, for the undergraduate curriculum, and so on).

They will (alas!) almost certainly not. The near-total dominance of period at all levels of the literary profession despite the available alternatives suggests how deeply the institution has imposed it—however unconscious that imposition may have been. Period is the untheorized ground of the possibility of literary scholarship. And so we live with its limitations and blind spots.

Let us consider some of these at greater length:

1. Periodization as it is currently institutionalized has codified not only period-based literary study as a method, but has also given us a canonical set of actual periods to use. One can easily enough imagine another group of periods, which would inculcate a radically different historical order. What we call Victorian literature might look quite different from the perspective of a Victorianist than from that of an imaginary scholar of the 1850-1950 period; if one scholar of each type were in a department, the way the literature of the Victorian period were taught (and oriented toward history) might be quite different, depending on whose class one was in. But we don’t know what such a department would look like, because British 1850-1950 is not an MLA job category. Victorian literature is thus read almost

---

exclusively within the framework of its period-concept (1830-1900), or within the history of that period-concept as captured in the history of its scholarship. The point is not that periodization is in and of itself limiting (though it is), but also that the current configuration of periods constitutes on the inside of the concept a canon of appropriate use.

2. Periods as we use them, even as they theorize the logic of a chronological whole, presume geographic limits. These are almost always national. Again, “Victorian” comes to our aid: why should French or Spanish literature contain a “Victorian” period? The question is absurd; but comparing the content and connotations of, say, the “Mid-Victorian” and “Second Empire” periods evokes much more difference than identity. To be against periodization is thus also to be against the dominance of national concepts in the study of literature (and therefore the institutionalization of that dominance in national-language departments). Here again the point is not that geographic limits are in and of themselves bad—for instance, the period discussed in Part II, modernity, though not a period-based job category in literature, has geographic limits too—but that the actual dominance of periodization in the literary academy today carries in its wake, and justifies, a strong bias toward national limits, and national limits only.

3. Periods instantiate more or less untheorized and inherited notions of totality. Insofar as periods are definitions, they conceptualize themselves as the product of a set of central characteristics and deviations from them. In general, no matter how extensive the deviations are, the central concept or inner essence governing the period remains firmly in place. The ongoing dominance of a core version of modernism, relentlessly unmodified by the arrival of previously non-canonical authors from a variety of national and social locations, offers us a fairly clear example of how that process works in practice—even when most scholars agree
that these new non-canonical authors should alter the core meaning of modernism! But more generally we need to be suspicious of how periods do not just “secretly imply or project narratives or ‘stories,’” but do so in relation to a larger “historical sequence in which such individual periods take their place and from which they derive their significance.” This remark of Jameson’s directs us to the ways any single period theorizes an entire apparatus or background against which its own essence emerges, and thus allows us to grasp the dually totalizing nature of periodization, which operates both as an inward-directed theory or typology of wholeness or essentiality, and as an outward-directed presumption about the historical bed that hosts or incubates, at regular intervals, those types of wholeness. It is perhaps because the latter aspect of this dialectic operates in some respects “outside” the realm of the period as such that it does not have much impact on most contemporary scholarship that operates under its aegis. For the limited impact of the former, which ought if nothing else to inculcate a serious and ongoing suspicion of the nature of the concept at the heart of period-based work, we have fewer excuses.

4. Insofar as periods instantiate logics of totality, they instantiate fairly unsophisticated ones. That is, period logics are not only largely untheorized as units of historical significance, they’re not very interesting when you do theorize them. Most periods rely on a theory of origins (the mode or tone of the period is grasped, darkly), development (it is carried forward; a spirit emerges), peaks (it achieves one or more high points), declines (it appears in a late, “high” version, beginning of the end), supersessions (it struggles to maintain energy, achieves a decadent version of itself), and ghostly returns (its spirit emerges, a generation or two later, in an ironic, revolutionary, or nostalgic mode). In so doing they place at their

---

center the concepts of originality, development, and belatedness that lie at the center of the “modern” world view. As I suggested in the preface, the dominance of this view for concepts of period tends to narrate the history of the aesthetic in European time, emplotting beginnings, middles, and ends in a manner that is not, as Hayden White suggested four decades ago, merely neutral.  

5. Periods (as instituted) codify an unstated theory of how periodization works in historical time. Periods get shorter as we get closer to the present; they expand as we move backwards. Why? Is this compression a pragmatic response to historical increases in density of information? A scholar of Jurassic literature has less to read than a scholar of the eighteenth century (pace David Hildebrand Wilson); the latter period must be shorter, so that people have time to get to know the canon. It would be strange to have organized our entire discipline around a limitation governed by how much time we have to read, but if that’s what we’ve done, we ought to say so. If that’s not it, what else? Do periods get shorter because something changes in the nature of historical time? Do we believe that increases in information density or rates of technological change produce more frequent alterations in the nature of historical totalities, so that the era-concepts periods name replace one another more quickly as we approach the present? Maybe we do, though I doubt it, since no one seems to feel the need to make the case. It is more likely that these units of time, which all

---


10 Someone says: the shortening of periods is an effect of something in the world, namely the increased production of relevant information, and not an arbitrary imposition on humanist grounds. Reply: but the imposition is arbitrary (historically speaking) insofar as it is an effect generated by a pre-existing theory of how much information can be consumed in the appropriate institutional timeframe, which determines the very nature of the period-concept. It is emphatically not the result of a coherent theory of the historical relation between periodicity (as a concept, or as a fact of history—someone would have to make the case either way) and information density. If you say something like “new periods have to be shorter, because there’s so much information that no one can master them,” what you mean is that “no one can master them as a period”—which begs the question.
appear under the name of “period,” name units of a “different species.”

This leads inexorably to the least flattering possibility: that the decreasing size of periods is an effect of chronological narcissism, of our self-regard for the moment of our historical present, in which the receding and foreshortened past plays Kansas to our Manhattans. What should we do, if entire literary profession is built on that? I don’t know, and you don’t know either, since no one asks the question.

6. Periodizing scholarship promotes historical microscopism, in which the place of original scholarship (and hence advanced work) appears only at the highest levels of historical magnification. Nowhere is this clearer than the undergraduate curriculum in the humanities, which moves almost invariably from the large survey of a vast swath of literary or historical space and time—often taught, in large universities, by adjuncts or graduate students—to the narrowly focused senior seminar, in which advanced students, having earned the right to specialize in the craft production of barns in nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, learn under the guidance of a tenure-line faculty member. The entire curriculum thus suggests that large periods and regions—world history, the British survey, introduction to the literature of the Americas—are to be studied by novices, who must earn the right to approach the

---

11 The phrase is from Claude Lévi-Strauss, who writes, “It is thus not only fallacious but contradictory to conceive of the historical process as a continuous development, beginning with prehistory coded in tens or hundreds of millennia, then adopting the scale of millennia when it gets to the 4th or 5th millennium, and continuing as history in centuries interlarded, at the pleasure of each author, with slices of annual history within the century, day to day history within the year or eve hourly history within a day…. Each code refers to a system of meaning which is, at least in theory, applicable to the virtual totality of human history” (The Savage Mind [U of Chicago P, 1966], 260).

12 As in the Saul Steinberg cartoon on the cover of the New Yorker on March 29, 1976.

13 One of the major effects of this habit on the existing system is, however, that earlier periods, which tend to cover far longer swaths of time, tend to be less nationally and linguistically singular than later ones—see medieval studies, or classics. Presumably the scholar of Jurassic literature would likewise be responsible for the literature of more than one species of dinosaur.

14 That the craft production of barns in nineteenth-century Pennsylvania will turn out, in the seminar, to be the nexus of a wide variety of historical effects, and thus become a convex mirror of its age, almost goes without saying. The theory of history that makes such a revelation possible resembles the theory of meaning that undergirds the writing of a major genre of popular history ("the spice/fireplace instrument/sneeze/equation that changed the world"), as well as the epistemology of close reading.
professional by passing through a series of concentric, periodizing circles: from world history to modern history, from modern history to US history, US history to the history of the Civil War, and from the Civil War to a senior seminar featuring a field trip to Gettysburg. Only in the last two of these smaller circles do the categories governing the professional job lists (in history departments as in literature), or the active scholarship of the faculty, begin to appear. Among the things that get lost in such a system is the actual historical power of a category like “modernity,” which disappears almost entirely by the time you get to the study of 1863. The degree to which such a disappearance seems natural, and subtends a completely unconscious theory of historical relevance, was made especially clear to me a few years ago when, hearing me propose that senior seminars on the literature of 1863 be replaced occasionally by senior seminars on the literature of modernity, a friend of mine asked, “But what about historical context?” Hal, I replied, modernity is a historical context. That it doesn’t feel like one is the result of the way we think about periods.

The problem with microscopism, as with indeed all of the limitations period imposes, is not that it inherently produces bad scholarship. The problem is that the structural relationship between the particular and the general produced by these limitations encourages certain kinds of questions and certain kinds of answers, and discourages or makes impossible others. Because we do not train students to ask questions about large historical periods, for instance, we produce students who in general do not ask such questions. In literature and history, this creates an odd effect on the trajectory of scholarly careers, in which it takes most scholars until their third book to approach large historical or transperiodizing categories. But this means that such categories will tend to get addressed only by people who write three or more books—a tiny minority of the profession. The
The end result is that the system reproduces itself, which is of course what systems do, but: too neatly. The institutionalization of periods does not need to include the institutionalization of periodization.

The students know this. According to Jennifer Summit, a 2008-09 exercise to revise the English major at Stanford University produced complaints from students that though their individual courses were plenty interesting, students lacked “a big picture that would supply connections between and across their classes: they confirmed what many of us have long perceived and lamented, that they lack a basic grid of historical knowledge that could give broader perspective and unity to their individual classes. Repeatedly, they told us that they felt the absence of an arc in which their classes could fit together....” This is the result of the fracturing of knowledge into forms of historical specialization that act as alibis for ignorance; the process reifies a sense that the only context that ever matters is the most local or historically immediate one. But who is to say that what happened on June 27, 1914 has more to do with the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand than the history of capitalism? And who is to say that the historicity of that assassination is best collected or gathered—in a philosophical sense—in the precise moment of its occurrence, as though any given instant were a bottomless well of gathered significance, including all possible frames of its analysis? (What theory of the instant grounds that latter claim?) The “basic grid of historical knowledge” that would contextualize such an event for a lay audience needs also to be the subject of our most scholarly analyses. Instead it is an encyclopedia article we pass through, and “beyond,” in our production of publishable professional knowledge.

---

15 Summit, 143.
§ 11 Institutional Problems Require Institutional Solutions

What to do? Alternatives to the structure we have now can be minimally imagined by simply reversing or altering the forms of constraint (and possibility) that govern the periods (and theory of periods) we have. These alternative periods would each constitute, as our periods do now, a tertium quid, the “third thing” which, held stable, justifies the act of description and comparison. Here then are four ways to create new periods, none of which requires abandoning the basic premises of period-based history, no matter how limiting those are:

1. Conceive periods organized around times (either arbitrary, like 1850-1950; or conceptual, like the Enlightenment) that cross or combine our existing ones.

2. Develop periods specifically designed to cross national boundaries. These would borrow for their logic some non-national principle of social or cultural coherence, generating concepts like systems literature, literature of various economic formations (capitalism, feudalism, industrialism), literature of the city-state period, literature of Golden Ages, all of which would join medieval literature in this category.

3. Imagine periods as they might look from some moment other than the present (thereby at least attempting to mitigate chronocentrism). What scholars in the US and UK call modernism will surely not exist as a period of literary specialization in the Robot University.

16 It is because they are both “modernists,” arguably, that we can easily discuss Hemingway and Woolf together; the word “modernist,” which is in effect held still in the act of comparison, allows for differences to become meaningful against a background of artificial and contingent similarity. Hemingway and Dante would require a different tertium.

17 Here Walter Benjamin’s remark that the “concept of progress of the human race in history is not to be separated from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous and empty time,” invites us to consider how the putative temporal rupture created by the period boundary operates within a common-sense framework of historical movement. That is why periodization cannot recognize what Benjamin calls the “leap into the open sky of history” that is the dialectic—and why the theory of the between-period rupture must be understood as part of, and not an exception to, the notion of the period (Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” section XIV).

18 Two recent models from comparative East Asian studies, in which “court” and “empire” serve as tertia and organizing chronotopes, respectively: Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture: China, Europe, and Japan, ed. David R. Knechtges and Eugene Vance (U of Washington, 2005), and Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared, ed. Fritz-Heiner Mutschler and Achim Mittag (Oxford UP, 2009). Tellingly, both books are collections of essays, with the comparisons coming, as a result, mostly between essays rather than inside them.
of the Future™, from which it will be as historically distant as we are from the early modern.

What happens if we conceive of modernism as lying at the historical midpoint of a longer period that includes it? Or as lying at the beginning, or end, of a longer period that begins or ends with it? What would such a period be called? What kinds of work would find themselves umbrellaed by such a concept?

4. Support periods using telescopic models that lead from the small to the large, rather than the reverse. In such a curriculum students might begin with a large first-semester lecture course on a single year before earning, in the senior year, the right to ask the really big important questions, like ones about the culture of the second millennium. How would such students learn to think? What sorts of pedagogical and critical mechanisms would train and develop those kinds of thought, or integrate them into what we already know? What if departments included scholars trained in both sorts of approaches, who would be forced to be at least partially responsible to the evidentiary and argumentative norms of their colleagues?

The projects emerging from these new periods are easy enough to imagine. What we need most are examples of how to do them, which means that we need to become more open to experimental forms of scholarship, perhaps especially when such scholarship comes from graduate students and junior faculty, who tend, by virtue of the pressures of the job market, to be the site for the (frequently reluctant) articulation of the profession’s most conformist institutionalizations.\(^\text{19}\)

This book, needless to say, aims to provide one example of what experimentation in literary history would look like. The variables and the modes operate at the intersection of a number of different concerns and relations to the study of literature. The notion of aesthetic worldedness, as

\(^{19}\) Urging people to play it safe, usually for their own good, produces a profession full of people trained out of their most experimental impulses. Fear of the conservatism of imaginary others (in hiring, publishing, or tenure decisions) thus becomes the primary value governing professional development: don’t do X, even though I think it’s a good idea, because I’m worried that some conservative people (who may or may not exist) will punish you for doing X.
well as the variables that govern it, both developed in Part I, are essentially trans- or even a-historical analytic categories designed to draw attention to a feature of the artwork (its “world”) and some ways that we can track its alterations. The system of modes that appears in Part II tracks the system or structure governing the actual shapes of aesthetic worldedness in a single social mode (which overlaps, obviously, with the historical period that bears its name). Insofar as the analysis is of modernity, it owes something to the logic of historical periods or eras that undergirds the periodization model. Because it describes the history of the modern work of art as the effect of a set of structural relationships, however, the analysis avoids the progressive and developmental habits that operate normatively inside current periodization theory. As I suggest in the final appendix, the choice of any given period as a frame for a discussion of Realism, Romanticism, and Modernism is essentially arbitrary. Smaller or larger periods would generate their own histories of relations among the modes. The logic of Realism, Romanticism, and Modernism thus does not belong to the modern period proper (though the names given those relationships do). “Modernity” is just one of many possible scales of analysis. What matters is how history is handled inside the period concept; or rather, what function the period concept serves in an overarching methodological structure oriented around the synchronic or the systematic (because the period, despite its appeal to diachronism across period boundaries, operates inside them as a static, epochal principle).

Among the effects on the literary institution of an imaginary, wholesale adoption of the terms in the first two parts of this book would be the development of some new kinds of scholarship. One can imagine, for instance, scholars focused largely on one or another configuration of the variables

---

20 Like everything else the variables should be historicized, but whatever in them remained recognizable over the course of historical change—whatever allowed one to recognize dynamism in historical situation A as substantially the same as dynamism in historical situation B—would be the tertium quid, just as in the history of the novel the thing called “novel” is held steadily enough to allow for the consideration of its historical variations within a single frame.

21 These remarks echo comments made by Roman Jakobson and Jurij Tynjanov in “Problems in the Study of Literature and Language” (1928), in Readings in Russian Poetics, ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (Dalkey Archive, 2002).
or modes: someone interested in shifts from Romantic to Realist dominance in justifications of the
impulse to creation; someone who mainly studies the modes in relation to diegetic geographies;
someone who applies the modes or variables to non-fictional genres (documentaries, criticism);
someone who parses the different between British and American literary modernism by contrasting
the modal location of the Modernist impulse to cacography (denotative in the former; often
connotative in the latter); someone who thinks through the history of residual forms across major
shifts in world-view, and thus studies the history of lyric in the modern.

Each of these practices could be pursued across a variety of geographic, historical, and aesthetic
fields. Their effects would be, among other things, to cut the pie of literary history in new and
hopefully interesting ways. On such a pie, objects formerly located on different slices might turn out
to be contiguous (in a square located at the exact center of the pie, e.g.), while formerly proximate
ones might belong instead to opposing categories. A fully reimagined pie might end up with pieces
resembling gerrymandered Congressional districts, or, if one allowed the carving knife to move on
the horizontal axis, open itself up to a mystical (for pies, anyway) third dimension. Such new
juxtapositions, separations, and proximities could usefully contrast, by providing us with other
models of literary history and literary likeness, the habits of our current pie-cutting methods. The
goal is finally not to have one way to cut the pie, but many.

Here in this book, then, the lesson is that certain theories of history may allow us to alter
periodizing models from the inside, as it were, not by challenging their boundaries but by changing
the kinds of historical thought that operate them. My chosen methods have been the flexible
structuralism governing the relationships between the modes and the typology of the analysis of
literary worlds. These take their place among a number of other actually existing models for
considering historical action outside the teleology of periods. Such other ways of thinking include
the *longue durée* approach of the Annales school (finding its purchase in literary studies now in the sudden, occasionally alarming popularity of world-systems theory), the Marxist dialectic, or, more speculatively, concepts like Derrida's *hauntology* (which is, in some respects, the application of the logic of individual memory developed by Freud to the historical sphere), or Badiou's *event*.22

The obvious intellectual attractions of these models (and others) at the level of individual scholarship and thought contrasts depressingly, however, with their collective institutional impotence, their incapacity to alter the system within which these works are read and taught. But of course this is not surprising: institutional problems require *institutional* solutions. The challenge is not to describe or challenge commonsense theories of historicity; it is to develop structures that encode our resistance to them. Meeting such a challenge will require new curricula and new measures of competence or intellectual legitimacy at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Things like the traditional comprehensive exam, organized so often around the period-based job field, would not be appropriate measures for students attempting dissertations on the history of the epic imagination. Training students to think well about highly transnational and transperiodizing concepts like the modern, or (psst!) the dramatic aside, or teaching them to develop structuralist or *longue durée* models of analysis, would require letting go of our current sense that in-depth knowledge can come only through the mastery of a restricted, period-oriented canon of works. We would instead have to develop ways to teach students how to produce new knowledge about such concepts within the framework of existing curricular structures; or, more likely, we would have to modify our curricula to suit those new methods. What would it take to train a graduate student (in the usual five to ten years) to do original scholarship informed by any of these proposed periods or methods?

---

(Enlightenment literature, the history of the literary syllogism)? What kinds of goals would we set ourselves when teaching undergraduates; what kind—or rather, what kinds—of thinkers would we be aiming to help create? What would happen to the life of a literary studies department, should there be any left at the Robot University, should some of its students and faculty be trained in new periods or transperiodizing concepts, and others in the traditional period-based models? What would it be like to work in a university that had codified such differences in its curricula, its graduate exams, or its hiring practices?

I don’t know, and I would like to know. If you are, like me, in a position to write and do professionally more or less what you would like, and if you, like me, would like to know, I recommend some minimal first steps. They are, first, to produce work that creates models for the kinds of literary historical work we hope to institutionalize in the curriculum and especially in the training of graduate students (all very well for me to write a book on literary lists from Sei Shonagon to Georges Perec by way of the venerable Bede; but professionally difficult for job-seekers to do so, without existing examples of that kind to justify the project); second, to stop advertising and hiring exclusively in period-based job categories; and third, to reshape the undergraduate and graduate curricula in ways that undermine the assumption that our current model of periodization is the only natural model for literary study. These three changes, each simple enough in its own way (and listed here in increasing order of institutional difficulty), would go some distance toward bringing to light the theories of history that we have allowed unconsciously and materially to dominate the work we do.

*   *  *

Why bother?

Not only, though I confess to a certain personal curiosity regarding the effects of looking at the world from new angles, because these institutional changes give us new things to think about and

Ideologies of the Institution / 19
new work to do. But because the way things are now damages the world in two ways. First, it eliminates certain kinds of thinking from professional consideration, thereby interfering with the twin projects of Enlightenment thought—still worth believing in!—to speak well and truthfully about the world, and to consider in as serious a way as possible the role one’s own truth-procedures play in that speaking. Second, the institutionalization of periodization reinforces a presentist and dissociative form of historical thinking that makes the world a less good, more stupid place to live in. The claim that periodization is presentist might seem on its face paradoxical, for one of the claims made for conventional period studies is that it allows for deep specialization in a bounded historical (and by implication geographical) field. But the consequence of such specialization as it is often practiced is to cut off the past from the present, to privilege a way of imagining the past that imagines itself completely in the past, without interest in—or even knowledge of—that past’s future, which is our present. The position that the past is irrelevant to the present, which offers its holder the substantial advantage of not needing to think or read about anything before five minutes ago, belongs both to the belligerent anti-scientism and fantasies of strict constructionism motivating the worst demons of contemporary US political life. It also owes something to a more general sense that the present as a period owes its historical specialness to its capacity to continually shrug off even its most recent past, in the form of another concluded and irrelevant period. Such thinking grants the present a kind of protected historical and epistemological status, in which only evidence from the era immediately before one’s eyes—which is to say the first set of things one thinks or feels, developed with no sense of their relation to any other thinking or feeling done elsewhere or elsewhen—counts as relevant for making judgments that, in turn, will five minutes from now belong to the tenebrating crepuscule of the distant past. The strange shrinkage of periodization as it extends towards the present, reinforced now in the recent academic interest in the “contemporary” as a critical category,
must therefore be understood in part as a reaction to (and dismissal of) the increasing evidence we have that our present births itself from forms of historical causality borne of far longer, even inhuman periodizations—among them capitalism and modernity, to be sure, but also the literally geological implications of climate change and the destiny of the planet.23

That periods shorten as they approach us thus affects not only the present but also the future, where it has the effect of making it impossible to imagine any kind of long-term change in the social, political, or environmental conditions of everyday life—as though the everyday or the quotidian, once believed to be a refuge from the grand-narrative politics of the structures of power, had become instead a nightmare vision of the type articulated in *Groundhog Day* or *The Truman Show*, an endless series of repetitions in which no substantive action (except, the movies tell us, love!) can remake the basic social situation in which we live. No wonder, then, that the justificatory claims that “history can tell us about the present,” used routinely to substantiate an interest in the dim and distant, ring so emptily these days, even if they are all we have. The words are premised on a sense that history matters by virtue of its allegorical capacity to resemble, with varying opacity, some significant feature of contemporary life—George W. Bush as Louis-Napoléon, the American empire as Rome, and so on. But in such comparisons the game has already been lost, since their kelson is not that we are *still in* the history of the French nineteenth century, but that we are beyond it, and that what we learn from it will only appear to us as an imperfect analogue and treacherous guide.

The truth is that the history is shared, temporally and geographically, as far as we allow it to be, and that individual lives can impact its geological forces only when they are taught to recognize that such

23 The tendency to periodize, with its capacity to release the present from the past, remains one of modernity’s great gifts to itself; in this respect it is, as Margreta de Grazia has written, only “when the present sees itself as discrete from what preceded it—when it in effect periodizes itself” that “modernity has arrived” (“The Modern Divide: From Either Side,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37.3 [2007], 456). It is in this sense that, as Jameson has written, “we cannot not periodize,” though as he goes on to say, such a recognition opens the door for a “thoroughgoing relativization of historical narratives,” one that allows us to treat modernity as a trope or story (*Singular Modernity*, 29-30).
a potential has at many other moments been an achieved historical fact. Against such a recognition, the institutionalization of periodization keeps us safe from history, and keeps history, in turn, safe from us.