

Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time

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SPINOZA: “EVERY DEFINITION IS A negation.”¹ In this sense negation is 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 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. They 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 transconceptual or transmethodological. 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—rather than escaping it, they constitute it as a system. (To anticipate a bit, and to locate us within the ambit of this issue: they contextualize it.) 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. The profession has 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 form significant transconceptual categories that would call attention to the boundaries periodization creates within the historical field of literature. (This 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 ostensibly permanent epochal boundaries, as a frame for the kinds of questions we wish to ask.²)

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 what 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. We may be tempted to see the curriculum

as the root of this necessary evil—it is the need, after all, for someone to be teaching the early modern survey, or to substantiate a graduate program's strengths in the Golden Age, that drives much discussion of who and how to hire. But the curriculum is us, and the felt necessities of coverage (or strength) a product of our own organization of the matter of literature into periodizing categories. (Never mind that individual *classes* may themselves disrupt or even ignore the notion of the period; they do so from within an institutional frame that makes period that which needs first to be explained, then, for whatever good reasons, disrupted or ignored.) The system the curriculum so visibly codifies is thus 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 continue to 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.

Such a system is, I suggest (with an eye on our theme), the most basic *context* for the production of literary criticism today. It is, moreover, an institutionalization *of* context, insofar as what it institutionalizes is the simplest notion of context with which most literary scholars work, namely *historical* context, which the system I describe thematizes, formalizes, and puts into a wide variety of practices. Any discussion of the meaning of context for literary history ought therefore to begin with the minimal recognition of the institutional context in which those questions may begin to appear, and an understanding that that context, which in lived and experiential time precedes any person's decision to, say, take a literature class or earn a PhD, exerts a determining effect on the ways we think and the ways we work. What follows traces the shape of periodization in the contemporary academy, offers some critiques and alternatives, and closes with some thoughts on yet another form of institutional contextualization—the academic quarter or semester—which, I argue, does just as much as periodization to determine the historical (and therefore contextual) norms through which literature is studied today.

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Conceptual challenges to the currently institutionalized forms of periodization have been around since the early days of theory.³ What is

remarkable is that these challenges 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 the norms of 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 regarding the contexts of its initial emergence, and hence a loss of urgency, specificity, and deep engagement with the basic questions and challenges it initially posed (to deconstruction, for instance). Almost everyone now thinks “new historically,” but no one is really a New Historicist anymore. Such thinking is enough, since it has inculcated a strong unstated theory of *era* as the final goal and subtending force of the intimacies of literary criticism, fixing at the ideological level a powerful theory of periods as social formations. This dominant, new-ish historicism 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 more than one period as a self-contained whole that cannot be easily acquired.⁴ This in turn may explain the gradual fore-shortening 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 Virginia Woolf, and the U.S. scholar Columbus to *Goodbye, Columbus*, the kinds of historical knowledge now required to work inside periods make that kind of long historical view difficult to obtain.⁵

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 about 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 concepts, including transperiodizing 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 nonperiodizing 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 subgenre (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, 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 nonperiodizing 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.⁶ 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 do so. 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 not only has codified period-based literary study as a method, but has also given us a canonical set of periods. 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 it would from that of an imaginary scholar of the 1850–1950 period; if one scholar of each type were in a department, the relationship of those books and poems to historicity itself would probably depend on whose class one was taking. But we don't know what such a department would look like, because British literature 1850–1950 is not an MLA job category—even if some of our graduate students, straining at the leash, make that kind of category part of their comprehensive exams. 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. Here 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, 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. 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 noncanonical 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 noncanonical 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.”⁷ This remark by Fredric Jameson 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.⁸ 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, perhaps, 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 narrative 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. 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.⁹
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 Wilson¹⁰); 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.¹¹ It is more likely that these units of time, which all appear under the name of “period,” name units of a “different species.”¹² This leads inexorably to the least flattering possibility:

that the decreasing size of periods is an effect of chronological narcissism, in which the receding and foreshortened past plays Kansas to our Manhattans.¹³ What should we do, if the entire literary profession results from a self-regarding love for our historical present? I don't know, and you don't know either, since no one asks the question.¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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 professional by passing through a series of concentric, periodizing circles: from world history to modern history, from modern history to U.S. history, U.S. 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, on hearing me propose that senior seminars on the literature of 1863 be replaced occasionally by senior seminars on the literature of modernity, a friend 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 graduate 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 end result is that the system reproduces itself, which is of course what all systems do, but it does so too neatly. The institutionalization of periods need not include the institutionalization of periodization.

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.¹⁶ Here then are four ways to create new periods, which would not require us to abandon periods entirely:

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 nonnational 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, and so on.¹⁷
4. Imagine periods as they might look from some moment other than the present (thereby at least attempting to mitigate chronocentrism). What scholars in the United States and United Kingdom call modernism will surely not exist as a period of literary specialization in the Robot University 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 conjoined by such a concept?
5. 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.¹⁸

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. Objects formerly located on different slices might turn out to be contiguous (for example, in a square located at the exact center of the pie), while formerly proximate ones might belong instead to opposing sections. 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 pie charts, if not for pies) third dimension. Such new juxtapositions, separations, and proximities could provide useful contrasts, by providing us with other models of literary history and literary likeness, to our current pie-cutting methods. The goal is finally not to have one approach, but many.

For proposals like these, 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).¹⁹ But it is equally desirable to think of the institutional forms that would be appropriate to literary histories that did not use periodization as their basic model. Conceptually, again, we have a number of options, including the *longue durée* model developed by 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*, all of which give us theories of historical development that do not require the one-thing-after-another, and-then-the-period-changes model that governs the current institutionalization of periods.²⁰

(Here Benjamin's remark that the "concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, 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 air of history" that is the dialectic.²¹)

Creating competing institutional structures—or structures that would allow for a variety of approaches to history—means changing how faculty and students teach, learn, and write. We would have to develop new measures of competence 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 *institutionalized* these differences in its curricula, its graduate exams, or its hiring practices?

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Here, in the meeting of imagination and practice, the critique of periodization intersects with institutional time: not simply the time the institution codifies in its research, but also the time around which it organizes its teaching, its training, its own rhythm and relation to historical

development. The critique of the institutionalization of periodization prompts a renewed awareness of the ways that that institutionalization is sustained by the temporalities of the university system itself. These include class meeting times, the length of academic terms, expected time to graduation, and all the other small unities and cycles that determine the daily operations of teaching and learning. Together they serve as a second-order context for literary study, and as a praxis of the relation between history, institutionalization, and scholarship.

We might therefore recognize that the constraints imposed by the fifteen-week semester (or the three-hour graduate seminar) have little or nothing to do with the best way to teach our subjects—though we usually limit our institutional frameworks for literary investigation to those temporal boundaries. In Fall 2010 I taught a graduate course called “Prose Fiction,” which started with *Tale of Genji* and finished with Machado de Assis’s *Bras Cubas*. Most weeks involved over 600 pages of reading; in several weeks the full work was over 1,000 pages long. I told students to read what they could, and assigned someone each week to finish the book and tell everyone how it ended. Obviously this kept us from doing the usual sort of class discussion, since most weeks most students (and I, on occasion) had simply not read the entire work. Making virtue of necessity, over the course of the semester the class developed a series of new ways of talking about the texts, many of which required us to ask substantially *simpler* questions about narrative action (what makes plot happen? what creates protagonism?) or diegetic worldedness than we were accustomed to asking in the usual kind of graduate class. The answers tended to be revelatory in their own ways—not as substitutes for the ones that might have been produced in the usual close readings, but as supplements and amendments to the kinds of things we would have normally learned.

That supplementation extended beyond the single text to the collection of them, since the juxtapositions created by our headlong rush through prose fiction allowed us to compare works that would normally never have been discussed together. In an ordinary semester we would have been limited to about four books; in such a course students who would probably never have read any of *The Maqamat of Badi’ al-Zaman al-Hamadhani*, *Don Quixote*, *Wilhelm Meister*, *Genji*, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, or Marcel Proust’s *Recherche*, would then have read one or two of them. The longer, comparative view instead allowed students to begin to grapple with major questions involving the history of prose, a grappling that we abetted by reading secondary sources on the novel, on narrative, and on the conceptualization of world literature. Holding the semester in place as a constraint, while altering the syllabus, allowed us to ask differ-

ent kinds of questions, and learn different kinds of things, from usual.

The example makes clear that the semester always forces a choice: follow professional norms requiring the teaching of whole works, and bend your methods to the calendar, or don't, in which case, of course, the students don't learn how to read in the usual ways (and learn, not for nothing, about the relation between academic calendars and the history of their own education). My argument, as always, is not that everyone should teach such courses, but that students might learn things (as I did) if *some of us* taught such courses *some of the time*. Departments in which such courses are never taught (almost all departments) essentially institutionalize (through the combination of an arbitrary time frame for learning and a preference for finishing novels) a series of scholarly norms that never receive any serious attention or discussion. If we do not give our graduate students opportunities to think in this way, if every semester of their graduate education is most fundamentally structured by the interplay between institutional time and professional norms—with no thought given to the former's molding of the latter, or vice versa—then we will of course produce generations of scholars whose work and teaching is essentially constrained by the periodizing and coverage models already institutionalized in our curriculum.

Especially at the graduate level, the forms of intellectual life imposed by the necessities of a farming-based institutional time (as is the case in the U.S. academy, where school breaks were originally structured around harvest needs) make little to no sense. Why should everything be taught in semester-long chunks? What if you begin with the idea that you have five to ten years to help someone become a scholar, and ask yourself, what's the best use of that time? Since things are obviously done in other ways elsewhere, we have some pretty clear examples of how we might alter our practices. If we restrict the field of investigation to the U.S. system, however, we may well once again become depressed by our collective lack of imagination: another function of the ideologies of the institution.

Three years ago at Penn State we began to ask questions of our own graduate program, and revised our curriculum in ways that allowed us—only *minimally*—to think beyond the semester as the basic unit of graduate-level knowledge. As a result graduate students in Comparative Literature now all take a two-year sequence of five-week-long courses. These twelve courses are organized into two year-long structures, which we run alternately in odd and even years, so that students matriculating in an odd year will take, alongside their second-year classmates, the yearlong sequence on the discipline, and will, in their second year, take the yearlong sequence in theory and criticism (alongside their new first-year classmates).

Odd Years	Close Reading	Idea of World Literature	Research Methods	History of Comparative Literature	Teaching World Literature	Academic Prose
Even Years	Foundations of Classical Theory	Topics in Classical Theory	(Blank) Today ²²	Foundations of Modern Theory	Topics in Modern Theory	Global Theory Networks

As much as is possible the courses are taught by different faculty members. This is one way we have managed to keep all our faculty in touch with graduate students, despite the fact that our growth in tenure-line faculty (and reductions in the size of our graduate program) have made it impossible for every faculty member to teach a graduate course each year. But the program has other positive effects: it gives students the chance to get to know a broad cross-section of the department, and, by keeping students who might otherwise not share many courses together (given their different interests in the Americas, Asia, Europe, Africa), it lets them acquire a deeper sense of the range of intellectual possibilities across the discipline. At the same time, the breaking up of the usual semester- or year-long theory course has allowed us to de-emphasize the notion that the institutional unit is the unit of official mastery—the theory year makes no claim to canonical comprehensiveness, but indicates, rather, through its institutional structure, the idea that knowing theory happens best from multiple, sometimes contradictory, perspectives.²³

For first- and second-year graduate students in Comparative Literature, then, the structure we adopted generates modes of learning that are *longer* than the traditional semester—two years, when all is said and done. But for some students this structure creates shorter units. That's because each course on the list is also offered as a one-credit module; as a result Comp Lit students who wish in later years to take one of the modules (most likely with the two "topics" courses and "_____ Today," which change each time), or graduate students in other programs interested in any of the particular subjects ("Close Reading" is popular), simply enroll in that smaller course.

I don't think this is the greatest idea ever for remaking or rethinking the forms of institutional time. I only claim that it is one idea, that there are more of them out there, and that we would be doing a better job if we thought of, talked about, and institutionalized them.²⁴ In the long run the dominance of periodization, and its imbrications with institutional time, derives not from our incapacity to develop alternatives, but our incapacity (or unwillingness) to institutionalize those alternatives in ways that would affect the way we think and teach, publish and hire—and

indeed our inability to institutionalize forms of suspicion, transformation, and change that would continuously mitigate the necessary negations of our most cherished and useful definitions. I have here aimed to make visible our embrace of the self-created structures of our self-organization and, indeed, subordination, in the hope that this minimal act of recognition will inspire more ambitious engagements with the forms of our institutional reproducibility.

With that in mind, it seems that those of us in a position to write and do professionally more or less what we would like, and who are sympathetic to the project of denaturalizing the literary institution's preferred contextualizations, have some minimal institutional duties to that sympathy. They are, first, to *produce work that creates models* for the kinds of literary historical work we hope to institutionalize at the graduate level, especially in the writing of dissertations (all very well for me to write a book on Georges Perec and James Baldwin; but professionally difficult for a job-seeking graduate student to do so, unless s/he can point to existing examples of its kind); 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.

All this is easier than it sounds. Let's get to work.

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1 Spinoza, Letter 50 to Jelles, in *Letters*, trans. Samuel Shirley (Indianapolis, IN: 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.

2 The tendency to lengthen periods is stronger when the periods articulate concepts. This might lead us to believe that numerically neutral periods (the nineteenth century, and so on) 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 nineteenth century"—about which we all agree, roughly, what it means, as long as we agree on the geographic frame to which the phrase applies.

3 Hence the name of (one of) the inaugural U.S. theory journal(s), *New Literary History* (founded 1969), whose title indicated the ambition to hold on to literary history while abandoning existing models focused on periodization, influence, and so on. I am thinking more broadly of the various challenges posed by the Russian Formalists, the structuralists, the poststructuralists (on the death of the author, for instance), the psychoanalytic critics, and others, some of whom I refer to below.

4 I consider the relative loss in prominence *in literary studies* of the number of small, cultural-studies-focused Ph.D. programs built in the 1970s and 1980s—Stanford's Modern

Thought & Literature, UC-Santa Cruz's History of Consciousness, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee's Modern Studies—to be one effect of the strong return to periodization in the last decade, and thus to more traditional models of literary training (as against structuralist and poststructuralist theory).

5 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.

6 See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005); Wai Chee Dimock, "Planetary Time and Global Transition: 'Context' in Literary Studies," *Common Knowledge* 9, no. 3 (2003): 488–507, and the books *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), and *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007).

7 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 28.

8 Both the bed and the type of wholeness are contexts, the one in some sense outside or above the other in a hierarchy of frames that determine how we naturalize the categories within which we work.

9 Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1974). I make this argument at greater length in *On Literary Worlds: An Essay* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, forthcoming), from which this essay is drawn.

10 Wilson is the co-founder of the Los Angeles *Museum of Jurassic Technology*, a *Kunstkammer* whose history is told in Lawrence Weschler's *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet Of Wonder: Pronged Ants, Horned Humans, Mice on Toast, and Other Marvels of Jurassic Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1996).

11 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.

12 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 3rd 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 even 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* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966], 260).

13 As in the Saul Steinberg cartoon on the cover of the *New Yorker* on March 29, 1976. (The image is a hemispheric vision looking West from the city's Ninth Avenue. The distance from Ninth to the Hudson River takes up the bottom half of the image, from the Hudson to the Pacific the next fifth or so, the Pacific another eighth, East Asia a twentieth, and the open sky the rest. The perspective thus illustrates, not without self-critique, the

inherent narcissism of moral, political, and cultural interest—a subject at the heart, too, of Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and indeed the entire sympathetic revolution of the eighteenth century.)

14 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.

15 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.

16 It is because they are both “modernists,” arguably, that we can easily discuss Ernest Hemingway and Virginia 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 Two recent models from comparative East Asian studies, in which “court” and “empire” serve as *tertia* and organizing chronotopes, respectively: David R. Knechtges and Eugene Vance, eds., *Rhetoric and the Discourses of Power in Court Culture: China, Europe, and Japan* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 2005), and Fritz-Heiner Mutschler and Achim Mittag, eds., *Conceiving the Empire: China and Rome Compared* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009). Tellingly, both books are collections of essays, with the comparisons coming, as a result, mostly between essays rather than inside them.

18 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.

19 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 (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2002).

20 None of these is without its problems; for a critique of the Annales approach, see Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994). But a diversity of concepts inoculates the institution against the limits of any single approach. On hauntology, see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994); on the event, see Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2007).

21 Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1969), 261.

22 This course replaces the blank with a new object each time, and aims to make connections between classical and modern forms of philosophy and theory: Allegory Today, Plato Today, and so on.

23 Because people often ask: teaching credit is handled by treating each five-week unit as one-third of a usual course; a faculty member who has taught three units thus earns a course release from a normal three-credit course.

24 We might, for instance, reconsider whether the seminar paper—whose limitations as a piece of research and as a written document are essentially those of the institutional

time governing its composition—should continue to be the most common way to manage student work in graduate courses. One of the seminar paper's limitations, for instance, is that the time constraints under which it is written mean that it will never have the sourcing, citational density, or footnoting of the kinds of articles that appear in our journals; the effect is that for two or three years of graduate school we teach our students to write in a format that is missing some of the basic features (and background labor) of most of the writing in the discipline, and then afterwards expect them to write a dissertation that includes them. Lately I have been asking my students to submit work, accordingly, with the correct degree of citational density, but encouraging them to invent quotations as necessary, in order to get them to practice writing in a format that will one day prove useful. When one of them gets accused of plagiarism and blames me, this will all come crashing down around my head, of course.

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