Periods and Resistances

Marshall Brown

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Susan Bassnett provides the plank from which this collection of essays jumps off. In her handbook *Translation Studies* Bassnett writes of "one great pitfall: periodization, or compartmentalization of literary history." She then comments as follows:

> It is virtually impossible to divide periods according to dates for, as [Jurij] Lotman points out, human culture is a dynamic system. Attempts to locate stages of cultural development within strict temporal boundaries contradict that dynamism. A splendid example of the kind of difficulties that arise from the 'periodization approach' emerge [*sic*] when we consider the problem of defining the temporal limits of the Renaissance.[1]

Periods are entities we love to hate. Yet we cannot do without them. For whatever the vitalist continuities of Bassnett's principles, her practice cannot escape a truism formulated by Michel Foucault, who writes, "Knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting."[2] And cut she does. The table of contents for "History of Translation Theory," the section of Bassnett's book from which my quotation comes, begins with "Problems of 'Period Study'" and continues with "The Romans," "Bible Translation," "Education and the Vernacular," "Early Theorists," "The Renaissance," "The Seventeenth Century," "The Eighteenth Cen-

[1] Bassnett, *Translation Studies* (London: Routledge, 1988), 41.

[2] Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 154. See also the discussions of periodization and discontinuity scattered throughout Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

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MLQ 62.4 01 Intro 10/29/01 11:34 AM Page 310

tury," "Romanticism," "Post-Romanticism," "The Victorians," "Archaizing," and, finally, "The Twentieth Century." If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. Let that be today's motto.

Periods are the chapters of history. No one is required to write history. But whatever you write must have its parts. When was the last time you read an academic book without chapters? Chapters can be pure irritants, the extreme case being Joel Fineman's great study *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, whose chapters are called "Chapter One," "Chapter Two," and so forth. Or chapters can be markers of impotence, as in Patricia Spacks's learned and informative early book *The Insistence of Horror*; after an introduction, her chapters are "Supernatural Horror in Poetry, 1700–1740," "Supernatural Horror, 1741–1780," "Supernatural Horror, 1781–1800," "Personification, 1700–1750," and, finally, "Personification, 1751–1800."[3] A collection such as ours is designed to confront the arrogance of the one critic and the timidity of the other, to help us think about why we need chapters of time, how we can make use of them, and how we can resist their seductions better than Fineman or Spacks.

Labels make many people uncomfortable. Anne K. Mellor and Robert J. Griffin write here about some of their discomforts: the distorting spectacles that identify a span of years with an individual or a group. They may provoke a reader to think back to René Wellek and Austin Warren's *Theory of Literature* (1942), once the gold standard for literary studies. Wellek's notorious obsession with period definitions leads him to claim that "the concept of period is certainly one of the main instruments of historical knowledge."[4] His periodizing essays "The Concept of Baroque in Literary Scholarship" and "The Concept of Romanticism in Literary History" are by far the longest chapters in his collection *Concepts of Criticism*, and few of us return to them for either enjoyment or profit. But not even Wellek was complacent about

[3] Fineman, *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye: The Invention of Poetic Subjectivity in the Sonnets* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Spacks, *The Insistence of Horror: Aspects of the Supernatural in Eighteenth-Century Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962).

[4] Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1956), 268. The preface credits the literary history chapter, in which this quotation appears, primarily to Wellek.

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MLQ 62.4 01 Intro 10/29/01 11:34 AM Page 311

his periodizations. Periodization is the very last topic in the definitive version of *Theory of Literature* (once the original concluding chapter about graduate education was dropped), and its location in the book marks it as both the crown of Wellek's ambitions and the biggest thorn in his side. Every statement he made about periods was both defensive and provisional. Not even the greatest advocate of this kind of literary history was much at ease with it.

The purpose of the essays in this collection is to turn our discomfort to use. David Perkins has written perhaps the most sensibly on this matter. Periods, he observes, are "necessary fictions . . . because one cannot write history or literary history without periodizing. Moreover, we require the concept of a unified period in order to deny it, and thus make apparent the particularity, local difference, heterogeneity, fluctuation, discontinuity, and strife that are now our preferred categories for understanding any moment of the past."[5] More ambitious remarks to much the same effect appear throughout Fredric Jameson's writings, most systematically in the essay "Periodizing the 60s." Here, invoking Althusser's dialectic of answers that provoke questions, Jameson writes, "The 'period' in question is understood not as some omnipresent and uniform shared style or way of thinking and acting, but rather as the sharing of an objective situation, to which a whole range of varied responses and creative innovations is then possible, but always within that situation's structural limits."[6] Period labels threaten understanding when they claim definitive status. Though Wellek was capable of aspiring to grasp the "essence and nature" of Romanticism and "to study the total process of literature," even he recognized that the unity of a period "can be only relative." For "if the unity of any one period were absolute, the periods would lie next to each other like blocks of stone."[7] From Wellek to Jameson is not so far as one might anticipate. Jameson presents *Postmodernism* as "a periodizing hypothesis," and the conclusion of his book defends periodizing as an enter-

[5] Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 64.

[6] Jameson, "Periodizing the 60s," in *The Syntax of History*, vol. 2 of *Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971–1986* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 179.

[7] Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, ed. Stephen G. Nichols Jr. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), 221, 197–98; Wellek and Warren, 265–66.

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MLQ 62.4 01 Intro 10/29/01 11:34 AM Page 312

prise in totalization: "The question of totalizing thought" should entail "interrogating it not for its truth content or validity but rather for its historical conditions of possibility."[8] We cannot rest statically in periods, but we cannot rest at all without them. I will conclude my minisurvey of famous periodizers with Benedetto Croce, who in *History* writes: "To *think* history is certainly *to divide it into periods*, because thought is organism, dialectic, drama, and as such has its periods, its beginning, its middle, and its end, and all the other ideal pauses that a drama implies and demands. But those pauses are ideal and therefore inseparable from thought, with which they are one as the shadow is one with the body, silence with sound."[9]

Without categories—such as periods—there can be no thought and no transcendence beyond mere fact toward understanding. Periods trouble our quiet so as to bring history to life. At this moment, when the Renaissance, as a period, seems to be in its death throes—despite caveats from Margreta de Grazia, among others—it is worth noting Lucien Febvre's account of the birth of this "beautiful name," of its rich parentage and complex accomplishments, at the hands of the great Jules Michelet. Febvre was no periodizer himself, yet there is no more eloquent appreciation than this essay of the creative power of a period concept.[10]

As context for the essays that follow, I suggest three kinds of issues that arise around the gestures of periodizing: names, reach, and demarcations.

We name periods in various ways. The merely chronological appears the most neutral. Febvre's book about Rabelais identifies its terrain as the sixteenth century—though its bibliography names it "L'époque de Rabelais"—and I have already instanced Spacks's magic decades. Sometimes coincidence lends a hand, sometimes not. Comparative Romanticists regard it in the light of a divine gift that Goethe and Scott

[8] Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 3, 402.

[9] Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), 112.

[10] Febvre, "How Jules Michelet Invented the Renaissance," in *A New Kind of History and Other Essays*, ed. Peter Burke, trans. K. Folca (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 266.

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MLQ 62.4 01 Intro 10/29/01 11:34 AM Page 313

died in the year of the Reform Bill; conversely, it is a vexation that Handel outlived Bach by a decade and Pope by a decade and a half and did his most enduring work after they had died. But of course mere numbers are proxies. There is the danger of fetishizing the beginnings and endings of centuries; Edward Said has written recently of how Foucault succumbed to that allure.[11] Chronology is also a psychology, yielding a historical narrative inevitably modeled on some kind of punctuated equilibrium. Or, as Srinivas Aravamudan reminds us, dates can be shorthand for determining events. Beginning the eighteenth century in 1660 represents an assertion and an evaluation. Recognizing the implicit bias given by spans of years, we have even seen a recent spate of works on individual years. Here the desire to create knowledge by cutting and the illusion of purity appear in their most extreme form. Its most striking exemplar is Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Thousand Plateaus*, where a "technonarcissism" dreams of a radiating, radiant liberation from causal constraint.[12] Michael North's contribution to our collection dissects the utopianism of such enterprises. The calendar, in short, will not save us from ourselves. Dates are occult names, no more and no less.

Otherwise, we use at least three kinds of names for periods. Some names are relational: *Middle* Ages, *Re*naissance, *neo*classicism, *post*-modernism. These names postulate the understanding of a chapter of the past in terms of other chapters proximate to it or remote from it. A second group of names is expressive. The clearest examples are the periods named for individuals that are Griffin's subject. Mellor reminds us that even a relational name like Romanticism can covertly represent an expressive evaluation, by foregrounding certain groups as dominant fractions.[13] Other expressive names relate accomplishments in one

[11] Said, "Deconstructing the System," review of *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 3, *New York Times Book Review*, 17 December 2000, 16–17.

[12] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). The word *technonarcissism* appears as a scornful epithet in a one-word sentence on p. 22, but I think that it is an envious negation. In his introduction Massumi uses the analogy of (record) cuts to characterize the plateaus (xiii–xiv).

[13] The negative side of Mellor's case—the bias inherent in the label Romanticism—is anticipated in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "'But Oh! That Deep Romantic Chasm': The Engendering of Periodization," *Kenyon Review* 13 (1991): 74–81. Mellor tells us how to think differently about the epoch.

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MLQ 62.4 01 Intro 10/29/01 11:34 AM Page 314

domain, such as literature, to events or circumstances in others. The industrial revolution, the capitalist era, and the postwar decades are all examples of cultural periods determined by economic or political conditions. Finally, names often derive from ideas or concepts: Enlightenment, realism, the baroque. Of course, many names participate in more than one kind of designation at once: Romanticism is simultaneously relational (an evocation of the Romantic past or of Romance cultures), ideological, and, insofar as it reflects the position of a certain coterie or affinity group, expressive. Wellek thought that names like *baroque* were the purest and most self-contained, but even his examples involve, necessarily, relating one figure and one kind of creation to another. For a consideration of naming types makes the obvious point that all names are relational. As Jameson rightly says in the opening chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, any such designation points outside itself: "Individual period formulations always secretly imply or project narratives or 'stories'—narrative representations—of the historical sequence in which such individual periods take their place and from which they derive their significance."[14] While significance is not always projected in terms of chronological sequence, nothing is understood strictly in terms of its own self-identity; except for the delusional numerical identifiers, all names acknowledge as much.

All designations point beyond themselves. All periods have limits. A period is always a period of something, never a period of everything. Romanticism is not a relevant concept—and hence not a problem—for geology, just as, conversely, the KT boundary does not trouble us much in the English department. The totality of conceptual purity has nothing to do with universality. Much vexation could be avoided if we recognized that every period is also a terrain, in more or less proximate relationship to other terrains. Exclusions can be external: the history of literature is different from the history of music and even more different from the history of mathematics. Or they can fruitfully form part of an internal dialectic, such as the residual, dominant, and emergent positions analyzed by Raymond Williams, or Pierre Bour-

[14] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), 28, echoed and reaffirmed in *Postmodernism*, 3.

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MLQ 62.4 01 Intro 10/29/01 11:34 AM Page 315

dieu's relations of domination and evasive sublimation. Uneven developments do not invalidate periods but help define or even motivate them.

Consequently, the uses to which we put periods depend crucially on how we delimit them. Boundaries can be synchronic or diachronic, rough or smooth, externally or internally motivated. The art lies in the cutting. From thence derive the kinds of stories we tell about our periods. At the most abrupt, periods are purely descriptive: there was neoclassicism, then Romanticism, then realism; there was Romanticism in Jena and classicism in Weimar. Disconnection is conducive to simplicity. Conversely, at their most dialectical and rough-edged, periods promote intensive analysis of similarities and differences, both fractious and fractal. Finally, conceived as flows and currents, periods tend to promote explanatory rhetoric.[15] Our most notorious periodizer, post-Wellek, is perhaps Foucault, and he teeters on the brink among the descriptive, analytic, and explanatory modes of history. Several of his books begin with spectacular images fixed on the borders between realms: the ship of fools in the madness book, the doorway to the royal chamber in the Velázquez painting in *The Order of Things*, the execution scene in *Discipline and Punish*. The purity of the naive glance, the intensity of the dissecting gaze, and the fullness of the understanding regard are equal if competing dimensions of his accomplishment, and they make him central for most considerations of periodization today.

In all aspects, periods interrogate us even as we look at them. Febvre called anachronism "the sin of sins—the most unforgivable sin of all."[16] But Russell A. Berman shows us how inert is the ideal of fixing the past. The past lives on, in a duration not to be characterized simply as long, neither entire unto itself nor merely a part of us. It keeps us on edge, critically. De Grazia's "noncontemporaneities" collide and, at the "same" time, collude with Aravamudan's anachronisms to form the dynamic of periodization that we repose neither within nor without.

[15] For a suggestive démontage of spaces of time into flows see Donald Wesling, "Michel Serres, Bruno Latour, and the Edges of Historical Periods," *Clio* 26 (1997): 189–204.

[16] Febvre, *Le problème de l'incroyance au 16e siècle: La religion de Rabelais* (Paris: Michel, 1975), 15; my translation. "The whole book is directed," the conclusion tells us, "against this illusion and these anachronisms" (419).

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MLQ 62.4 01 Intro 10/29/01 11:34 AM Page 316

Timothy J. Reiss's perioddity skews the axes, zigging through time as it zags across space, complicating the crosscutting so as to put it to better use.

The moral of these intricate reflections on the pieces of the past lies in what Berman's conclusion calls "the complex temporality inherent in the successful work of art" (though perhaps not only in that). In one of the few essays actually on periodization in an earlier collection of essays supposedly on the topic, Helen Vendler perceptively writes that the use of periods is not to show similarities but to help define differences; they show not what things are but what they are not.[17] Rather than convey positive information, then, the burden linking my reflections is that periods exist for and in relation to us. Too often earlier discussions have concerned the truth or falsity, reality or fictionality, of period names and designations, the correctness or incorrectness of their boundary determinations, the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of their coverage. All such questions presume that periodization concerns knowledge. But it doesn't; it concerns thought, which is the other of knowledge. Periods are a challenge and an opportunity, a resource and a corrective.

[17] Vendler, "Periodizing Modern American Poetry," in *The Challenge of Periodization: Old Paradigms and New Perspectives*, ed. Lawrence Besserman (New York: Garland, 1996), 233–44.

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