

Modernism and the Issue of Periodization

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Leonard Orr, "Modernism and the Issue of Periodization"
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Abstract: In his paper, "Modernism and the Issue of Periodization," Leonard Orr describes how literary theorists, historians, and anthology editors have put forward many conflicting models for literary periodization, while simultaneously expressing their doubts about the categories they have created. They are caught between intellectual despair and pragmatic necessity, scholarly journals and presses and academic departments imagine they are working at the cutting edge of thinking about their subjects but period concepts remain in place, even while every article focused on the subject expresses strong objections to the terms. Orr traces in his paper these problems and issues through the twentieth century, including the post-modern and post-structuralist responses to the question. Theorists have attempted to narrow the issue by dealing solely with form, techniques and stylistic practices, mere temporal boundaries. In addition to these "splitters," there are "lumpers," who would deny the many different boundary lines that have been made and deny the existence of "postmodernism" or "early modernism" and think of the master-narrative category of "modernism" for the twentieth century. While this essay is focused on modernism, it notes the way parallel questions exist for all of the other periods which are the basis for departments, journals, anthologies, and curricula.

Leonard ORR**Modernism and the Issue of Periodization**

There are at least four different models of literary history: there are process models such as rise and fall cycles and tri-partite divisions (birth-maturation-death, birth-death-rebirth); there are Romantic, optimistic organic models of national literatures that seek a dominant mode of literature based on particular qualities, such as Realism and Naturalism; there are models that attempt to avoid period concepts by using the arbitrary timelines of centuries and decades that have nothing to do with the qualities of literature; and there are models that follow the historical period divisions based on factual events or political leaders, such as wars to mark the beginning or end points of literary periods, or the regime in the Elizabethan, Restoration, or Victorian periods. A period is longer in duration, covering more years under one name, the further back in time. Periods are frequently subdivided following one or more of the general models. The same possibility of models exist in a wide variety of scholarly disciplines that work both diachronically and synchronically, where the division of information for practical purposes seems to call for period concepts: history, archaeology, art history, music history. Frequently, even within the same monograph or classroom anthology or department curriculum, more than one model, sometimes all four of the different models, are used without a sense of contradiction or dismay, used, in fact, to provide structure and coherence authoritatively to the discipline, despite its illogically arrayed taxonomies and leaky boundaries. Again and again, the question of periodization is raised and grappled with by the major theoreticians of the disciplines, they seem to have clarified the definitions and list of periods and sub-periods and the function of period-concepts (see, e.g., Bender and Wellbery; Bentley; Besserman; Boas; Brunkhorst; Patterson; Wellek; Wellek and Warren; see also Sucur <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol2/iss4/2/>>). It certainly seems a matter both clear and settled from the names of the divisions of the MLA: Modern Language Association of America, the titles of innumerable scholarly journals, course catalogues, and anthologies. Yet, as Mark Parker noted in 1991 in an article on Romantic periodization from Lovejoy and Wellek to the present, "words like paralysis, scandal, embarrassment, crisis, and detour are regularly employed in critical discussions of periodization. This range of terms suggests a kind of hysteria" (227).

Fredric Jameson is often cited for his statement of the "crisis" in periodization: "the larger issue is that of the representation History itself. There is in other words a synchronic version of the problem: that of the status of an individual 'period' in which everything becomes so seamlessly interrelated that we confront either a total system or an idealistic 'concept' of a period: and a diachronic one, in which history is seen in some 'linear' way as the succession of such periods, stages, or moments" and after considering many different models, prefers an Althusserian rejection of totalizing "master-narratives" (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 28). But at the same time, as Lawrence Besserman has pointed out, Jameson finds periodization pedagogically necessary and has a special class of works that are positive deployments of period concepts -- such as Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, as a work "that delineates the contours of a traditional paradigm of cultural periodization in ways that 'reinscribe' genre and periodization on the agenda in a welcome and productive fashion" (Jameson qtd. in Besserman 5; see also Besserman's discussion of Jameson's "conceptual confusion" concerning periodization). Asbjørn Aarseth is one of many who note problems with periodization but feel it is "inevitable as part of any account of a process in temporal unfolding. It is of course possible to imagine a complete and chronologically ordered account of literary works being produced without distinguishing between different sections of time, but such an account would amount to nothing more than annalistic information, a list of books and dates" (231). The reality of "sections of time" is existential here. He finds the hermeneutic function of period concepts is that they provide in the "dynamic sphere of the present, the changing picture of the past, and not in the past as bygone totality" (Aarseth 232; italics Aarseth's). This is an interesting concept of periodization as the acceptable shared delusionary vision of the past, a consensus kept for its use-value. Similarly, David Perkins argues that "At present, we tend to regard periods as necessary because... one

cannot write history or literary history without periodizing it. 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 preferred categories for understanding any moment of the past" (Perkins 65). Peter Childs, in his book on Modernism published in 2000, notes all the dissatisfaction with the term, the attacks upon it for omitting women, minorities, the avant-garde, non-U.S. and European writers and artists, and but then uses the term normatively throughout his survey.

Increasingly this frustration with a totalizing master-narrative or oversimplification as the basis of period-concepts, derived through whatever model, has led scholars to try to avoid the terms that designate periods altogether. In an article published in 2001, Isobel Armstrong questioned the use of "Victorian" as a period marker, noting that "it can be an insidiously homogenizing and deeply unhistorical term, encouraging the search for some quintessentially Victorian ethos" (280). She concludes that "the diversity and complexity of the period we call 'Victorian'... convinces me that we now need to jettison the term altogether. It is an irrelevant if not a misleading category. There were no typical Victorians. Nor were there 'other' Victorians asserting a mirror-image of the 'true' figures of the time, just as there was no counter-culture in opposition to the dominant; such formulations, for all their modifications, leave the conceptualization of a homogeneous period unchanged" (280). Susan Stanford Friedman considered recently the "problematic of modernism" and its "siblings, modern, modernity, and modernization," modernism with a lower-case or upper-case M, and its synonyms, antonyms, and uses in other disciplines. She asks, "what about the cousins of the siblings -- premodern, postmodern, postmodernity, postmodernism? How do pre- and post- inflect the root meanings? To what extent are these categories distinctly separate when they appear to merely qualify modern, modernity, and modernism? In what way is the entire family of terms dependent on their variously implied or invoked antonyms -- traditional, classical, ancient, feudal, agrarian, past?" (Friedman 498). She finds "three distinct configurations in the politics of definition: the binary, the circle, and the metonym. Recognizing all three helps to expose the flows of power in the institutionalization of knowledge" (506). By binary, Friedman means the definitional requirements of inclusion and exclusion. By circle, she refers to the common literary historical act through which the defining characteristics of modernism "are all based on a pool of tenets, people, and/or events whose selection depends upon preexisting notions of the period. Thus, Hugh Kenner declares that expatriate internationalism is a central defining characteristic of High Modernism and uses writers like Pound, Eliot, and Joyce to demonstrate his assertions. On this basis, he asserts that Williams, Faulkner, and Woolf are 'provincial' or 'regional' writers" (507). By metonym, there is the "identification of certain figures or qualities to stand for the whole.... To some, Locke or Rousseau are supreme embodiments of Enlightenment modernity; to others, Joyce is the defining icon of modernism" (508). Ironically, Armstrong's article against the period-concept of Victorian appeared in the journal *Victorian Studies* and Susan Friedman's essay exploding Modernism appeared in the journal *Modernism/Modernity*, and this points out the difficulty of examining and escaping from the cognitive scheme of period-concepts. On the one hand, the journals, departments, and scholarly presses imagine that they are working at the cutting edge of thinking about their subject, but on the other hand the period-concepts remains in place while every article focused on the subject expresses strong objections to the terms.

Robert Rehder and others noted that when the MLA published the boldly titled collection *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Studies*, where the editors, Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, announce on the first page that "Literary studies in English are in a period of rapid and disorienting change," the "changes are summarized in terms of the traditional periods. There are chapters on 'Medieval,' 'Renaissance/Early Modern,' 'Seventeenth Century,' 'Eighteenth-Century,' 'Romantic,' 'Victorian,' 'Modern,' and 'Postmodernist Studies,' and nine different kinds of criticism" (Rehder 117). To remove any sense of the "rapid and disorienting change" the guide represents, Rehder notes that these are almost the same divisions used in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* in its 1962 edition and could be found in the undergraduate textbooks and anthologies of any European country. Rehder is another in the camp of those so

dismayed by period-concepts that they would do away with them altogether, but his explanation for the tenacity of period-concepts is related to fear: "Period terms do our thinking for us. This ought to be in itself a sufficient reason for never using them again. What is most remarkable is that we continue to employ and defend a classification that that is without any intellectual justification and whose assumptions have never been examined. The strangeness of this should compel our attention. For any system so illogical, unreasonable and untrue -- perhaps it would be better to say imaginary -- to be maintained in spite of all effort of the last thirty years to re-examine the assumptions of criticism, it must satisfy a profound need. That need is, I believe, to defend ourselves against the fear of change and death" (Rehder 120-21).

It is difficult to find a solution to these issues by way of post-structuralist or post-modern theorists. Michel Foucault's cultural epistemes, three-part discursive regimes, and epochs of discourse, historical ruptures (*The Archaeology of Knowledge; The Order of Things; History of Sexuality*) are all in keeping with the traditional models of literary history. Marshall Brown has called Foucault "our most-notorious periodizer, post-Wellek" and "he teeters on the brink among the descriptive, analytic, and explanatory modes of history" (Brown 314). We see this as well with Jean Baudrillard's three-part scheme, his three orders of simulation since the Renaissance: "(1) The counterfeit is the dominant scheme of the 'classical' epoch, from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution; (2) Production is the dominant scheme of the industrial revolution; (3) Simulation is the dominant scheme of the present phase of history, governed by the code" (Baudrillard 135). Baudrillard manages to be traditional and un-historical simultaneously. Alastair Fowler makes an extended general argument that period definitions and descriptions are dependent upon a network of concomitant interart analogies and cultural transitions or they are meaningless and cannot be sustained. The period-concept is constructed through a series of stylistic or technical features to separate the particular period feature under consideration (i.e., impressionism) from the normative. The most successful of these re-definitions of period-concepts, such as Ernst Curtius's distinction between the Baroque and the Mannerist, are based on dichotomies, with the term not held in favor by the describer caricatured and stretched beyond recognition (Mannerism, in the case of Curtius; see Fowler). In this light, it is interesting to see that in the other arts, there is either the same oversimplified and uncomplicated totalizing definition, or else it is avoided altogether, even in books devoted to defining the period and its characteristics. For example, in the authoritative *Grove Dictionary of Art* volume titled *From Expressionism to Post-Modernism: Styles and Movements in 20th-Century Western Art*, edited by Jane Turner and published in 2000, there is no article on "modernism" or "modernist"; both "modern movement" and "postmodernism" are treated only as terms from architecture (see Turner).

To take the case to modernism, we see, for a familiar example, David Lodge who offered a number of such techniques, characteristic of modernism: "external 'objective' events essential to traditional narrative art is diminished in scope and scale... or is almost completely dissolved in order to make room for introspection, analysis, reflection, and reverie. A modernist novel has no real 'beginning,' since it plunges us into a flowing stream of experience... and its ending is usually 'open' or ambiguous, leaving the reader in doubt as to the final destiny of the characters... Modernist fiction eschews the straight chronological ordering of its material, and the use of a reliable, omniscient, and intrusive narrator" (Lodge 45-46). And in 1991, Marianne DeKoven considers "'modernist form' a shorthand term used to designate that cluster of stylistic practices" of aesthetic self-consciousness, simultaneity, juxtaposition, fragmentation, paradox, ambiguity, uncertainty and "the demise of the unified subject," the "violation of expected continuities" (6). It appears, those who concentrate on one genre tend to make the case for the category of modernism not in terms of period but in terms of technique. When H.M. Daleski wonders about those whose lives inconveniently "straddle" the historical dividing line between Victorian and Modernist periods, such as Thomas Hardy, he is able to classify Hardy as Modernist by examining the techniques in his novels and finding affinities between them and the temporally undoubted modernists such as Joyce, Conrad, and D.H. Lawrence. Then we have some authors, such as Joyce, who, in terms of techniques and stylistic practices, who span different periods not only in

their careers but within individual works. *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist* are published in the twentieth century but are Victorian except for certain passages and pages in *Portrait* pre-figure modernist techniques; *Ulysses* is primarily modernist, although some individual chapters might be treated as postmodern; and *Finnegans Wake* is entirely postmodern (see, e.g., McHale). Recently, Brian Richardson has studied most cogently and comprehensively this issue of attempts to situate Joyce's individual works, and even individual passages or pages, at different points in the Victorian / Modernism / Postmodernism timeline (see also Butler).

But Richardson does not dispute the period-concepts. He writes, "Not unexpectedly, the cases for a postmodern 'Eumaeus' and 'Ithaca' are easiest to make: they are after all the chapters that the more resolutely modernist readers enjoy the least," and he would argue for a substantially postmodern *Ulysses* (1042): "Cyclops," "Oxen of the Sun," "Eumaeus," "Circe," and "Ithaca" are postmodern because their "violation of primal boundaries is sufficiently insistent to preclude the text's recuperation by the poetics of high modernism," while "Sirens" is a quintessential example of "high or ultra modernism" (1043). Ultimately, Richardson wants to deny modernism and postmodernism as period-concepts in the sense of any chronological division, and "view both movements, high modernism and postmodernism, as competing strategies that, instead of existing sequentially, extend throughout the duration of the twentieth century," and that "high modernism stretches from the later Henry James forward to include the latest neomodernist work of figures like Graham Swift, Nadine Gordimer, Anita Brookner, Edna O'Brien, Anita Desai, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Eva Figs" (1045). Besides removing sequence from modernism-postmodernism, Richardson adds high modernist, neomodernist, avant-postmodern, and suggesting other categories, noting correctly that "more detailed and refined analysis of particularly rich periods can be expected to turn up still more unruly profusions," and that the "more streamlined the historical narrative, the more inaccurate it should be assumed to be" (Richardson 1046). Of course, to have an ever-increasing list of simultaneously existing stylistic characteristics and techniques, defined partly by the proclivities and interests of different readers (modernist readers, postmodernist readers) is to remove all of these period terms from being used as literary historical categories or function as the normative period-concepts. To raise the issue of postmodern (or the postmodern, or postmodernism, or postmodernity) brings the question of the existence of modernism as a stable period-concept to the fore, unlike Victorian or Decadent or fin-de-siècle. Ann Douglas has written recently on her suspicions of all the ways post- and neo- are used in recent periodization and relates this act of taxonomizing to imperial and capitalistic expansion; she focuses on the literary critical notions of the necessity of using the terms but endorses the historians' attacks on the use of postcolonialism and postmodernism (see, especially, notes 4 and 7). Noel Carroll has made a lucid case on the lack of difference between modernism and postmodernism, and this has been observed by many commentators on postmodernism, including the latest version of Ihab Hassan's thinking on the subject, and Bruno Latour has made the case that we have never become postmodern because, as the title of his book -- *We Have Never Been Modern* -- states so succinctly, "we have never been modern" (on this, see also Wesling).

Marjorie Perloff argues in her book *21st-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* that modernism never disappeared, that the aesthetics developed in early and high modernism, as well as the avant-garde thought to be ignored in most totalizing narratives of modernism, that is to say the aesthetics of Eliot, Pound, Stein, Khlebnikov, Cubism, and Dadaism, have been continuous throughout the twentieth century. She breathes a sigh of relief that the twentieth century is finally over, because now it will be clear postmodernism never did exist, after all. After quoting an avant-garde genealogy by poet Joshua Clover, she notes approvingly that he "pays no lip-service to the tired dichotomy that has governed our discussion of twentieth-century poetics for much too long: that between modernism and postmodernism. Indeed, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the latter term seems to have largely lost its momentum. How long, after all, can a discourse -- in this case, poetry -- continue to be considered post-, with its implications of belatedness, diminution, and entropy?" (Perloff 1-2).

I propose that while we could deal with the problem of the periodization of modernism by denying it in terms of sequence or chronology, or think of all of that were once period-concepts as

always continuously present even prior to their articulation by their advocates or enemies, we have not solved many practical issues of use. Do we conceive either of a proliferation of finer and finer divisions of the material available based on techniques and stylistic family-resemblance, or of a modernism that includes the traditionally omitted works and practitioners of the avant-garde, the women and minority authors such as those of the Harlem Renaissance, the non-Western and Latin American authors, without any time boundaries? How can we see this not only in courses, departments, journals, and other period-based institutions, but even in our own discourse about authors and texts? We could treat modernism (and all other period-concepts) heuristically, to be built up and defended or else exposed as false each time we enter into the arena of study, but permanent contest is unlikely to remove the fear of crisis and disarray and certainly will not solve the science envy experienced by many when deconstruction first entered the picture.

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