theories and methodologies

In the Grid: Period and Experience

KATIE TRUMPENER

What is past is not dead. It is not even past. We cut ourselves off from it; we pretend to be strangers.

Das Vergangene ist nicht tot; es ist nicht einmal vergangen. Wir trennen es von uns ab, und stellen uns fremd.

—Christa Wolf, *A Model Childhood* (3); *Kindheitsmuster* (9)

Since they are modern characters, living in an age of transition more urgently hysterical at any rate than the age which preceded it, I have drawn my people as split and vacillating, a mixture of the old and new. . . . My souls (or characters) are agglomerations of past and present cultures, scraps from books and newspapers, fragments of humanity, torn shreds of once-fine clothing that has become rags, in just the way that a human soul is patched together.

—August Strindberg, "Preface to *Miss Julie*" (103)

WHEN WE READ (ANALYTICALLY OR IN SEARCH OF PLEASURE), WE READ IN THE PRESENT TENSE. INDEED, THE TEXT SEEMS NOT ONLY PRESent to us but electrically charged. It can seem to envelop us or to be ingested and internalized by us; it can get under our skin, startle us, make us cry, inhibit sleep (Miller, ch. 5 [146–91]). In memory the text may retain much of this experienced vividness and presence, even if our circumstances of reading can only be reconstructed laboriously. The context generally remains secondary to the felt memory of reading as visceral experience.

Our objects of study, then, seem alive to us, reaching us across time and space, taking up residence within us. And yet when we think about literary history, that live sense of text gives way to more abstract categorization, as we mentally docket texts with others of their kind. Period, for us, seldom possesses the same rawness, volatility, and vital force as the texts it ostensibly produced and now, retrospectively, groups.

Traditional literary history and newer historicisms alike rely implicitly on period as a meaningful, self-evident, stable unit of time. Yet our notion of period is also underwritten by our sense that

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temporal parameters shift, that zeitgeist and material conditions are mutable. Periods not only succeed one another but are implicitly defined against one another; hence, they apparently do not resemble one another. Moreover, they are not eternal; something can happen to or within them, threatening them, overwhelming them, or making them collapse and give way to some other dispensation (Trumpener, "On Living"). At the same time, each apparently manifests internal coherence and some kind of homogeneity and predictability as soon as it has locked into place and from then on as long as it lasts.

Scholars are asking exciting new questions about scales of analysis, scales of time, as about how literature shapes itself in relation to probability and contingency (Dimock; Hollister; Campe; Lupton). Yet much of our institutional practice—our hiring, field self-identification, book marketing, and, above all, pedagogy—remains dependent on unreconstructed period categories. What is keeping us from more fluid and nuanced methods of timekeeping?

If literary history often treats periods as solid blocks of time, this essay seeks to unblock period. If we see time not as an inert, empty placeholder but as the agglomeration of individuals' subjective clocks, then period comes to seem a problematic concept. This essay asks how the poetics of time articulated in psychoanalytic and Marxist theory, as in the experimental texts of poets, filmmakers, novelists, and memoirists, might help us lead less fettered and blinkered professional lives, teach on a less predictable clock.

Time in the Inner World

Among its other virtues, psychoanalysis has given us a new scale for measuring time. A taste of a madeleine, a particular sight or smell or turn of phrase, unexpectedly summons us back into an earlier moment of emotional life. Layers of time, indeed, prove connected by memory, sensation, external stimuli, and, above all, feeling.

Yet psychoanalysis as a therapeutic practice has always struggled to reconcile its urgent sense of subjective psychic time—emotional time—with the prompts (and more regularized calendar) of the external world. Melanie Klein's 1961 *Narrative of a Child Analysis*, for instance, meticulously reconstructs her 1941 treatment of Richard, a British ten-year-old whose family, like Klein, sought refuge from wartime bombings in a small village. Everything about his and her lives is makeshift—even the analytic space, improvised in a much-trafficked village hall. Klein's case study details the complex consequences of this provisional existence (from the psychic distress occasioned by evidence that other groups share their treatment space to the way the patient's fraught relationships with mother, nanny, and analyst become transferentially associated with the conductresses of the county bus connecting analysis and home).

Meanwhile, a war is going on—and it too shapes Richard's fantasy life, as he obsessively draws submarines and bomber planes, comments on the latest war news, repeatedly draws Europe's shifting map, sings national anthems of countries newly under German occupation, execrates Hitler, and worries that his émigré analyst might be a spy. Klein's case study thus offers a fascinating glimpse of the war's psychic processing by its youngest participants or witnesses. Yet she is resolutely uninterested in this manifest content, save for the ways it helps the patient metaphorize his most crippling, intimate, and domestically anchored fears—particularly of his father's "Hitler-penis," threatening his mother with penetration and domination. Klein's insistent reading of the patient's material is at once intensely reductive and highly persuasive, affirmed by the patient's responses, reactions, dreams, play, and drawings.

For Klein the psychic world is built outward, from domestic life to the external world.

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The primal scene, the early fear, the crippling inhibition, the obsessive worry about where babies come from: all this comes first and retains primacy. Only later, and far less consequentially, does the outer world manifest itself. Even saturation bombing and the threat of fascist invasion hold terror only in the context—indeed, as external manifestations—of previously felt psychic dilemmas. And the analytic space and relationship—however makeshift and historically contingent—create their own bulwark against historical time, an enclave out of time enabling personal regression, reenactment, and the baring of psychic truths even as the bombardments of history rage outside.

From the vantage point of the individual psyche and its idiosyncratic, highly specific timekeeping, period appears a distant, abstract, and artificial construct. August Strindberg's manifesto-like 1888 preface to *Miss Julie* (*Fröken Julie*) places his characters sociologically, psychologically, and historically in an age made hysterical by transition yet insists nonetheless (or therefore?) that they inhabit time unevenly; although affected, even infected, by the hysterias of their period, they are, person by person, ragged, patched-together miscellanies in which past and present influences jostle one another.

If people do not simply imbibe or embody the spirit of their age but live in a complex, only partial relation to it (or live both in their own moment and with many layers of earlier influences), then a period might not finally mean all that much or cohere all that well from the perspective of those putatively inhabiting it. Yet lyric poetry models one way of living simultaneously in the self and in one's period, as it juxtaposes quotidian activities and perceptions with moments of intense insight or records moments in which external landmark events break in to fix or transfix the habitual as historical.

Frank O'Hara's 1964 "The Day Lady Died" thus marks Billie Holiday's death by measuring the ineffable memory of hearing Holiday sing against more objective ways of measuring time (12:20, a Friday, three days after Bastille Day, 1959, the internal digestive clock that processes and anticipates meals, suburban train schedules, the literary publishing season, the daily newspaper). At the 5 Spot jazz bar, the whisper of Holiday's song once made her audience stop breathing; now she herself has stopped breathing. The news of her death at once stops time in its tracks and marks this particular day for all time; the shock of her death fixes in memory the day's local interests and quotidian rhythms much as her song once stopped breath and suspended time. In 1789 the Bastille's liberation and demolition marked the beginning of the French Revolution—and the modern political era. Now three days—and 170 years—after Bastille Day, at another moment of aesthetic ferment, New York City and O'Hara's "I do this I do that" poems become a mixing point for world aesthetics: O'Hara records productions by the Irish playwright Brendan Behan and the French playwright *maudit* Jean Genet, new poetry from the fledgling country of Ghana purchased and discussed alongside Hesiod and nineteenth-century French bohemian poetry. The stopping of time first by the artist's whisper, then by the shock of the artist's death simultaneously captures an aesthetic zeitgeist, the flavor of a period.

Peter Handke's 1969 collection *The Innerworld of the Outerworld of the Innerworld* (*Die Innenwelt der Außenwelt der Innenwelt*) establishes a different kind of time capsule, measuring the pressures of the outer world—and history—on a lyric I, tracking how routine experiences (as trivial as feeding a parking meter) can unleash unexpected trains of thought, and chronicling the explosive reactions sometimes triggered by ordinary uses of historically or psychically fraught words. Some trigger words are only personally associative (but for a few people nonetheless freighted with overwhelming meaning); other words, such as

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those associated with historical traumas, catalyze bursts of strong feeling in entire language communities; despite their tiny compass, they encapsulate the whole frightening sensorium or ethical impasses of a turbulent historical epoch.

The Time of the Outer World

We think of Marxism as struggling to anchor its theories in external, objective reality. Yet it also believes that temporal experience has a secret or subjective life of its own; indeed, Marxism's grounding in Hegelian phenomenology makes its proponents unusually eloquent about the rhythm, the flux, the shifting and unfolding of time.

In Karl Marx's 1852 *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, time loops. And this spatialization of time is memorably metaphorized in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet's 1981 theory film *Too Early, Too Late* (*Zu früh, zu spat*), which opens with a reading, in stops and starts, of a passage from *The Eighteenth Brumaire* about the repetitions of history, a soundtrack overlaid by panoramic footage shot from a car circling the traffic circle at Paris's Place de la Bastille, that now empty space where the Bastille long stood until its 1789 demolition. This film—and Marxist theory more generally—waxes lyrical about uneven development, as about that trembling moment on the lip of a revolution or other upheaval when time changes its pace and the laws of what is possible in the universe suddenly seem to shift. In 1955, in Milan, Giorgio Strehler's Piccolo Theater staged a neo-Brechtian production of Carlo Bertolazzi's 1893 miserabilist, Milanese dialect play *Milan Night* (*El nost Milan*). In *For Marx* Louis Althusser uses this production to meditate on the rhythms of history: long stretches of slow, dead time, in which nothing happens, are belatedly, unexpectedly punctuated by lightning flashes of melodramatic action and momentum.

This poetics of historical change is at least implicitly a poetics of period itself, as duration in which time (having initially leaped forward) stands still before leaping again. Yet Marxist impatience with historical eddies or repetitions and celebrations of historical acceleration and ruptures were counteracted by more elegiac accounts of history as loss. From the early nineteenth century onward, as Georg Lukács stressed in his 1937 treatise *The Historical Novel*, key European narrative forms (including the epigrammatic short story, historical novel, historical drama, realist and then magic realist novel, and epic film) dramatized the way protagonists or whole cultural milieus enter into world history. Far from a straightforward liberation, the process of being buffeted or penetrated by world-historical events leads to a partial or complete loss of their earlier self-understanding, anchored as it was in a different, more culturally self-enclosed sense of time and place.

Johann Peter Hebel's 1811 "Unexpected Reunion" ("Unverhoftes Wiedersehen"), as Walter Benjamin's masterly essay "The Storyteller" underscores, and Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1950s story "The Little Shoemakers" ("Di kleyne shusterlekh") establish chronotopes of pastoral or community continuity only to measure them against world-historical events. Hebel's protagonist plans to marry on Saint Lucia's Day yet dies in a mining accident before the wedding. For fifty years his body is preserved intact in a remote Swedish mine shaft even as Europe is convulsed by the Lisbon earthquake, the Seven Years' War, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars. When his body is unexpectedly retrieved, his bride, now an elderly woman, is on hand to mourn—and to die herself, her love having proved constant across many ostensibly epochal breaks. Legend thus vanquishes history, a human measurement of time superseding more abstract notions of period, human faithfulness transcending historical ruptures.

Singer's tale, similarly, plunges the reader into a traditional Polish Jewish community anchored by biblical law, recurrent religious

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holidays, artisanal pride, and a family linked for many generations to the town of Frampol. Yet one of the family, a Frampol cobbler, finds his life upended in middle and old age. For in the early twentieth century his sons begin emigrating to America. And in 1939 the Luftwaffe bombing of Frampol destroys the physical world of his ancestors and forces his own flight to New Jersey. There he rejoins his children but finds them virtual strangers and himself traumatized. Like Dr. Manette in Charles Dickens's 1859 *Tale of Two Cities*, addled by years of imprisonment in the Bastille, he can regain a sense of the world's sanity and continuity only when he once again begins fashioning shoes. With the shoemaker's familiar artisanal rhythms, other certainties gradually return: remembered songs of his decimated homeland, the renewed transmission of Hebrew prayers and biblically enjoined rituals to a new generation. Hebel's and Singer's tales—and this is their poignance—are told largely from within the chronotope of the pastoral (Bakhtin). Thus, when history strikes, the narrative mode itself comes under threat—and sides implicitly with timelessness, against the trauma of event.

Scaling Time

The ancient genre of the annal foregrounds the arbitrary marking unit of the year, yet only in order to trace huge, slow or subterranean sea changes (Momigliano; White). Tacitus's *Annals*, the genre's earliest masterpiece, focuses on the dissolution of the Roman republic and the institutionalization of imperial rule. The apparently trivial surface of daily political life—and the *Annals*' apparently mechanical organization and affectless narration—conceals a vast political tragedy, a political coup effected by sleight of hand.

In the seventeenth century, too, Madame de Lafayette plotted her pioneering historical fiction against a detailed historical time line, establishing an annalistic framework, a chronological grid, against which to develop her fictional stories. In her 1678 *Princesse de Clèves*, firm period placement and a narrative stance of all-knowing, anticipatory retrospect paradoxically enable not only the creation of a verisimilar semifictional world mingling famous and fictional characters but also an overwhelming historical foreboding. Historical characters first glimpsed in full bloom are already doomed, and the fictional narrative (of a pure soul navigating the amorous temptations and betrayals of court culture) steers toward world-historical events—a king's sudden death; the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots; the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre—that informed readers sense must inevitably arrive (Maxwell).

From the nineteenth century onward, the historical novel was increasingly structured around temporal contrasts (Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism* and "Peripheral Rise"). In the 1970s, late modernist texts used such temporal scaffolding with particular complexity, constructing coexisting time scales to measure the compass and traumatic force of World War II. Miron Białoszewski's *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* (*Pamiętnik z powstania Warszawskiego* [1970]) and Christa Wolf's *A Model Childhood* (*Kindheitsmuster* [1976]) foreground the process whereby present-day memoir writing filters and pincers still-toxic wartime memories. Uwe Johnson's *Anniversaries* (*Jahrestage. Aus dem Leben von Gesine Cresspahl* [1970–83]) uses the daily news coverage of the *New York Times* during the turbulant year 1968 as a steady aperture through which to glimpse the larger, even more chaotic sweep of twentieth-century German history, while Istvan Szabo's 1973 film *25, Fireman's Street* (*Tüzoltó utca 25*), literalizing the notion of a collective unconscious, chronicles the final night of dreams dreamed throughout a condemned Budapest apartment house to capture the looping, self-canceling history of twentieth-century Hungary.

And Theo Angelopoulos's epic film *The Traveling Players* (Ο θίασος [1975]), begun

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under Greece's military dictatorship and completed after the restoration of democracy, follows the touring circuit of an acting troupe as they endlessly perform the same pastoral drama across rural Greece, not only through time but back and forth across it. (Sometimes over the course of a single panoramic shot the action moves from the 1930s to the 1950s and back again.) Greek national history is created and maintained in a continuity of performance (audiences convoked, as in ancient Athens, to know themselves as a polis in the act of watching and cathartically experiencing art), in the continuing relevance of ancient mythic texts like Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (since contemporary Greek history too involves betrayals, internecine murder, apparently endless cycles of revenge), in the unbroken defiance of left-wing militants, struggling against successive occupiers and dictators. Yet if the film embodies some principles of Marxist historiography, it also, on the local level, deploys Freudian notions of time—and time slippage—in the service of political meditation. Greek history is simultaneously a struggle forward, an endlessly reinstantiated cultural repertoire, and an obsessive historical loop.

Compared with such works, most literary history looks surprisingly tame in its approach to time. As concepts, the long century and the annus mirabilis resonate with the Marxist sense of uneven temporality, a prolonged, largely static or coherent sense of period alternating with packed, dense, glittering moments. Yet the annus mirabilis also reflects early modern notions attributing magical properties or causes to historical movement, while the idea of the long century depends on the century as arbitrary, abstract counting unit—or, in some cases, as a succession of royal reigns—expanded only slightly by a gentle pushing back of boundaries.

The chronotope, the annal, the paradigm shift, the episteme seem more promising. Following Alexis de Tocqueville's still-galvanizing 1856 *Ancien Regime and the French Revolution*, Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* sees historical change as both gradual and sudden, as cumulative anomalies prepare for a belated shift in historical framework. Michel Foucault's institutional histories, finally, and their reimagination in Friedrich Kittler's *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* envision history punctually, exploring the inner logic of particular and deeply distinct moments while refusing to provide a clear genealogical explanation of how one dispensation led to the next.

The traditional notion of period may be bankrupt, depleted, a mere placeholder for a truth we know to be more complicated. Yet it is hard to see just how to reorganize curricula, job descriptions, or library cataloging systems using alternative templates. The academy could potentially become a kind of Babel, in which competing historical models simply jostled one another. Our current system provides us with convenient if crude sorting devices.

Yet our pedagogy, at least, can underscore temporal complexity, the unevenness on the edges—and even in the middle—of a period. Courses on the Victorian period often used to close with Edmund Gosse's 1907 *Father and Son*, because its central struggles—Gosse's father attempting to reconcile a new, scientifically mandated sense of geological formation with a divinely dictated biblical explanation of time—emblematized quintessential Victorian conflicts between religion and science.

My own course on everyday life during World War II focuses on a historical breaking point, a cataclysm at whose still center ordinary, cyclical life partially persevered. The syllabus sets up two temporal grids, two contrasting groups of texts. A cluster of vivid 1940s texts mobilize a range of familiar realist and modernist aesthetic strategies in their struggle to make sense (and art) of unfolding, overwhelming current events. And the 1970s World War II narratives of Białoszewski,

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Wolf, Szabo, and Angelopoulos ground postwar aesthetics (and their own attempts at analytic dispassion or abstraction, their elaborate tracing of historical pattern) in the unassimilability of wartime trauma that permanently disrupted, jangled, or pulverized participants' sense of time.

Like many period courses, this one examines its texts one by one, repeatedly trying to correlate visceral impact and aesthetic strategies, while building cumulatively toward the interrogation of period experience, residue, and back projection. It attempts to illuminate the paradoxical insight of Tacitus, Lafayette, and Johnson: that by gridding the past, we can capture something of the confused, even frightened, sense of contingency with which everyone experiences the present.

Note

Exchanges past and present with Rachel Bergeron, Russell Berman, Menahem Blondheim, Katerina Clark, Sabine MacCormack, Richard Maxwell, Barry McCrea, and the English Institute inspired this essay.

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