

Introduction

Historical Contrast and the Prestige of Literary Culture

HISTORIES OF LITERARY STUDY tend to emphasize theoretical controversy. The subtitle of Gerald Graff's influential *Professing Literature* may be *An Institutional History*, but even Graff's book is in practice organized around methodological debate—notably the long debate between scholars and critics.¹ Institutional structures occupy a smaller place in our model of the discipline, although some of those structures have turned out to be more durable than any theory. One of the most durable is periodization—an organizing principle that has shaped literary study for a century and a half. At most colleges and universities, courses that explore the literature of a single period (ranging in length from a decade to a century or more) remain the mainstay of the upper-division undergraduate curriculum. These “period surveys” can be traced back to the 1840s, and as this book will strive to show, they embody a cultivating mission that decisively shaped vernacular literary history shortly after its emergence, predating Matthew Arnold's better-known intervention in the discipline. In the early twentieth century, periodization began to organize professional development and research as well as teaching. Graduate students were trained to specialize in a period, and hired to teach courses in that period. By the middle of the twentieth century, scholars were attending period conferences and publishing in period journals. To see that other modes of professional organization are conceivable, one has only to glance at the discipline of history itself, where the looser concept of “area” occupies the institutional role that periods occupy in literary studies. Areas often cover a longer span of time than a literary period would: a his-

torian of science, or East Asia, for instance, may regularly teach courses that cover several centuries. But more importantly, even when historians' areas of specialization cover a relatively brief span of time, the temporal period tends to be secondary to a topic or problem that defines it. A historian might identify as a scholar of "British imperialism," for instance, where literary scholars identify as "Victorianists" or "modernists."

The contrast between literary studies and history may suggest that periodization is a by-product of professional specialization. It is true that present-day literature departments tend to have more faculty covering certain parts of the world than departments of history do. But the imperatives of professional specialization cannot explain the nineteenth-century emergence of a periodized curriculum. Period surveys preceded professional specialization by almost fifty years. They emerged in the 1840s, in literature departments that contained only one or two professors, who usually had to abandon the goal of synoptic coverage in order to make room for courses tightly focused on individual periods. Moreover, invoking specialization would not explain why periodization has so long remained the dominant mode of specialization in literary studies, instead of giving way to some other mode of specialization organized around a more properly literary category, like genre.

Periodization has endured in a discipline where almost nothing else does, and has endured not just in broad outline but in detail. One can open course catalogs from the late nineteenth century and find courses on "English Romanticism" and "Elizabethan Drama" that have been offered with essentially the same titles for a hundred and twenty years, while philology, the history of ideas, New Criticism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, and New Historicism came and went.² Of course, the content of these courses was transformed whenever one methodology gave way to another. Different theoretical schools have defined the purpose of literary study in fundamentally different ways. But this is just what seems remarkable: the persistence of an organizing grid that is able to survive repeated, sweeping transformation of its content. Since professors have apparently felt free to change everything about their courses except the periodizing title, one begins to suspect that the value of literary study, in the eyes of students and of society at large, has been durably bound up with its ability to define cultural moments and contrast them against each other.

That is the suspicion this book explores: I will argue that an organizing

principle of historical contrast has been central to the prestige of Anglo-American literary culture since the early nineteenth century, although its authority is now in decline. Two phrases in that sentence may need to be unpacked. “The prestige of literary culture” encompasses claims about literature’s cultivating influence on readers both inside and outside the academy. Historical contrast was already becoming central to models of literary culture in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, before vernacular literary history had become a university subject. The phrase “historical contrast” is deliberately chosen for a similar breadth of reference. “Periodization” tends to evoke an academic and almost scholastic debate about boundaries—*are they real or only nominal?*—which may not have great significance. It is true that time is a continuum, and also true that it can be useful to divide a continuum. And perhaps literary periodization is now becoming nothing more than that sort of mathematical abstraction.

But periodization did not acquire institutional power in literary studies for reasons of mathematical convenience. What matters more than boundary-drawing is the broader premise that literature’s power to cultivate readers depends on vividly particularizing and differentiating vanished eras, contrasting them implicitly against the present as well as against each other. It’s a premise bound up with broader assumptions about literature’s power to mediate historical change and transmute it into community—or in other words, with a model of literary culture. This book investigates the emergence of that model, and then asks what might replace it if (as I would argue) the authority of historical contrast has in recent decades been declining.

Most studies of this topic have been preoccupied with the significance of specific period concepts, rather than the significance of contrast as such. Much has been written, for instance, about the construction of “Gothic” alterity, or about the logic of “uneven development” that coordinates timelines in different parts of the world. I hope to preserve the central insights of those studies. For instance, it is important that European historicism has been shaped both by a peculiar relationship to classical antiquity, and by a colonialist impulse to map other regions of the world onto a European past.³ But on the whole, I will be less interested in particular period concepts or even systems of periodization than in the changing cultural functions of contrast itself.

The first few chapters of this study focus on eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Britain. Similar developments could be traced in other

national contexts, but I have focused on British literature both because I know it well, and because the historical novels of Walter Scott played a central role in popularizing a model of literary culture organized by historical contrast. (Scott's influence on the European novel is well known, but he also had an influence on universities: the professors who designed the first period survey courses, for instance, were seeking to recreate Scott's model of historical imagination in the classroom.) The later chapters of this study expand beyond Britain to consider the role historical contrast played in the nineteenth-century European novel, and in twentieth-century Anglo-American literary education, as well as fiction and film. This expansion of scope is not, of course, meant to suggest that other nations simply adopted a British model of historical cultivation. Although Scott's influence was international, other nations were in fact already developing their own ways of valuing historical contrast, inflected by their own histories, class structures, and definitions of national identity. In a single volume, it is not possible to survey the full complexity of that story even within Europe. I can only pause occasionally to mark points of divergence. For instance, Chapter 2 considers why the concept of historical "perspective" took a different shape in the United States than it did in the United Kingdom. But even after acknowledging those differences, many points of similarity remain, and it is possible to trace a broadly shared trajectory in English-language literary culture on both sides of the Atlantic.

The Prestige of Historical Contrast, 1740–1860

Awareness of historical discontinuity was not a specifically literary invention. The larger eighteenth-century insight we call "historicism" entailed a recognition that different ages were separated by profoundly different, perhaps mutually incomprehensible, modes of life and thought. The contribution that poets, novelists, and eventually critics made was to propose that literature had a unique ability to render discontinuity imaginable and meaningful. It achieved this not by reducing different eras to some common standard, but by dramatizing the vertiginous gulfs between eras, and then claiming vertigo itself as a source of meaning. This paradox has become so familiar that modern readers may take it for granted, but looked at squarely, the strategy is an odd one. John Keats hinted, for instance, that his encounter with Homer became all the more sublime because ignorance of Greek forced him to snatch glimpses through a veil of translation, allowing only a "wild surmise" about the Homeric

world beyond.⁴ William Wordsworth suggested that London's power over his heart depended not on any particular memorial or "distinct remembrance," but on his own inability to master a bewildering "weight of ages" made up of "shapes, and forms, and tendencies to shape / That shift and vanish, change and interchange / Like spectres—ferment quiet and sublime."⁵

I mention these passages from Keats and Wordsworth because they are vivid, brief, and may be familiar to some readers. But romantic-era poets were not the only writers who sought to grasp history's authority in the negative form of bewildering discontinuity. This strategy emerged along with historicism itself in the eighteenth century, and became as important to novelists as it was to poets. In the realist historical novel, historical bewilderment famously takes the form of a protagonist's blindness to his or her own involvement in historical change. But this ironic depiction of historical blindness was often bound up with an imaginative undercurrent hinting that the understanding denied to consciousness might return in dizzying glimpses of historical contrast, represented in the narrative (more or less playfully) as *déjà vu* or ancestral memory. These undercurrents are well known in the so-called idealist novels of George Sand, but they can also be traced in writers celebrated for realism, like Walter Scott and Leo Tolstoy.⁶ As in the poetic examples from Keats and Wordsworth, the protagonists of these novels are denied a coherent, synoptic overview of history, but acquire instead—and paradoxically through their very ignorance—a sense of perspective that depends on contrast.

The model of historical cultivation that emphasized discontinuity and contrast was not limited to literature; it shaped historiography and historical education as well. Chapter 2 traces some of the consequences of that model for popular historical writing in the early nineteenth century, focusing especially on the way the principle of contrast was bound up with ideas about the acquisition of "historical perspective." The metaphor of perspective implicitly accepts that historical knowledge is limited, and proposes to orient readers by tracing selected differential relations instead of attempting exhaustive coverage. The limitation tacitly implied by that metaphor was literalized visually (as single-point perspective, shading, and foreshortening) in early nineteenth-century timelines.⁷

In universities, however, a strongly contrastive, periodized model of cultivation has shaped literary study even more deeply and enduringly than it shaped the discipline of history itself. Since this difference between literary and historical education has persisted for many years, there are several valid

ways of explaining it, with different degrees of relevance to different periods. For instance, it is fair to observe that political and social historians have spent more time than literary critics trying to untangle causal questions, which don't fit easily into a contrastive framework. Moreover, as Chapter 4 will show, twentieth-century literary critics embraced a contrastive, periodized model of their discipline in part explicitly to differentiate themselves from historians. But in the early nineteenth century, the study of literary history acquired its contrastive orientation most immediately from literature itself. Poets and novelists had for several decades been representing literary cultivation specifically as the acquisition of a historical sense that enriched the present through brief glimpses of an alien past. The best-selling author of the era—Walter Scott—was celebrated specifically for his power to recreate particularized historical moments in intimate social detail, and the English professors who introduced period survey courses to universities in the 1840s modeled their new courses implicitly on Scott's accomplishment. Chapter 3 traces this connection, focusing particularly on Frederick Denison Maurice, who has a number of well-known achievements (helping to found Queen's College, for instance, and Christian Socialism), but has so far received little or no credit for his most decisive contribution to literary study. Maurice designed the first period survey courses at King's College, London. The purpose of the new courses was to give present-day students an empathic connection to some particular moment of the national past—or as he put it, to “bring the townsman of one age to feel himself connected with the townsman of another.”⁸

“Townsmen,” here, is the English equivalent of “bourgeois,” and Maurice's plan for periodized literary education was specifically addressed to the English middle classes. He argued that studying discrete moments of the national past would give the middle classes a sense of national pride equivalent to aristocratic inheritance. This plan would be fascinating on intellectual grounds alone. Since it actually led to the creation of a curricular institution that continues to organize present-day departments of English, it is an understatement to say that it deserves to be more widely discussed. Even the few words I've said about Maurice above make clear, I hope, that periodization is bound up in his thought with a complex set of ideas about class and nationality. But the story has several further twists. Maurice was an Anglican theologian as well as a literary historian, and there was a clear parallel between the educational value he attributed to discrete historical periods and an unconventional theory of immortality he advanced that made eternal life depend on the timelessness

of individual moments of experience. To cap the story off, this theory of immortality was branded a heresy by conservative Anglicans, and led to his dismissal from King's College.

In Chapter 3, I'll have more to say about the particular philological, religious, and political motives that converged in Maurice's work. Here I only want to pause to underline two aspects of his thought that typify the broader social significance of historical contrast in the early nineteenth century: his suggestion that periodized contrast might provide a middle-class alternative to aristocratic distinction, and his implicit analogy between periodization and immortality.

Emphasis on historical discontinuity has shaped the humanities so strongly that our accounts of this theme tend to be strongly normative, pitting the universalizing Enlightenment against romantic historicists who finally discover that different ages understand the world in different ways.⁹ Without denying the validity of historicist insights, I want to complicate normative accounts of this transition by emphasizing that the "discovery" of historical contrast was also socially motivated. Edmund Burke was by no means the first person to realize that the authority of the aristocracy was bound up with their claim to represent historical continuity. As Wolfram Schmidgen has argued, landed property conferred authority in part because the manorial estate was thought to embody collective continuity, and was in fact legally defined as a product of continuity over time.¹⁰ If different periods had incommensurable assumptions that made sense only for a given time, then the concept of continuity would be a mirage, and no title or moss-grown manor could claim to embody the collective past. In this sense, the periodized, contrastive model of history that emerged toward the end of the eighteenth century can be understood as a tacit attack on the logic of aristocratic distinction.

Just as importantly, historical contrast advanced an alternative model of distinction. Cultural prestige had been in the early eighteenth century imperfectly distinguished from other forms of social status: the cultural value of a literary work could often be judged by the same standards of correctness and polish that governed, say, elocution or manners. The late eighteenth-century attack on "classicism" addressed this, as Trevor Ross has observed, by attempting to define autonomous standards of specifically cultural value.¹¹ Moreover, to ensure that culture would remain autonomous, critics defined conformity to prevailing social standards as a positive flaw. The sources of social prestige were thus disqualified, at least in principle, from exercising a

monopoly over cultural prestige. For instance, Alexander Pope could never stand in the first rank of English writers, according to Joseph Warton, because he “stuck to describing *modern manners*; but those *manners* because they are *familiar, uniform, artificial, and polished* are, in their very nature, unfit for any lofty effort of the Muse.”¹² This remark may pose as an attack on the manners that happen to prevail at the time of composition—as if to say, “manners have become so *uniform* lately!” But an objection to the uniformity of contemporary topics is, in practice, an objection to contemporaneity as such. To describe varied, unfamiliar manners, poets would have to range across varied, unfamiliar eras. Warton affirms poetry’s autonomy from contemporary social standards, in other words, by insisting that the proper subject of poetry is historical difference.

This strategy is a recurring theme in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century literature, and I’ll argue that it was the primary reason why historical contrast became central to the period’s definition of culture. Disorienting visions of a remote past became paradigmatic instances of literary imagination because they illustrated, better than any other subject could, that literary prestige was distinct from the traditional sources of social prestige. Of course, Charlotte Smith’s visions on Beachy Head, or William Wordsworth’s on Salisbury Plain, could be said to invoke “tradition” inasmuch as they use fragmentary glimpses of the past to elicit reverential feelings toward history itself. But if this is a tradition, it is one that cannot be transmitted or inherited.¹³ In fact, the reverential feeling that gives it power is bound up with a disorienting failure of continuity—a trick that would eventually allow a lower-middle-class writer like Keats to appropriate Hellenic glory by insisting that he cannot read Greek and is made despairingly dizzy by the Elgin Marbles.¹⁴ Compared to a twenty-first-century model of cultural authority that emphasizes the up-to-date as such, this may appear conservative. But in an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century context, defining cultural authority around historical discontinuity advanced the interests of middle-class intellectuals. The authority of the collective past could now be appropriated in a negative way, by articulating your own distance from it.

The social implications of this gesture may be disguised by the spiritual imagery that surrounds it in nineteenth-century literature, where historical contrast is often dramatized as visionary disorientation, or *déjà vu*, or even as a troubling past-life memory. This is not the rhetoric one ordinarily associates with middle-class self-assertion. But the political character of this

spiritualism begins to make sense if we approach the concept of immortality from a Durkheimian perspective. For Emile Durkheim, religion was a way of grappling with the social dimension of human existence—a dimension that can never adequately be externalized as a “relationship” between individual and society, since collective feelings are always present within us, and are indeed among our first, most personal, and most powerful emotions. Thus people are led to imagine society “in the form of a moral power that, while immanent in us, also represents something in us that is other than ourselves.”¹⁵ The idea of the soul acknowledges this internalization of collective life; to claim an immortal soul, for Durkheim, is in effect to claim the perpetuity of collective life as a personal possession.

On this account, it becomes a little easier to understand why a struggle to redefine the authority of tradition might take the form of visionary speculation about new forms of immortality. I would argue that the nineteenth-century discourse of historical spiritualism was at once a struggle between social classes and a genuinely religious meditation. Historicism unsettled existing assumptions about the perpetuity of collective life, and thus challenged immortality at its very root. Of course, skeptical questions had always been posed both about heaven and about the earthly immortality of fame—but these forms of skepticism could never uproot the sentiment of immortality, since individual afterlives are merely ways of imagining, and personalizing, the deeper persistence of community itself. One could acknowledge that the “gilded monuments / Of princes” are “besmeared with sluttish time” without losing that deeper sense of continuity.¹⁶ Historicism posed a more fundamental challenge, by demonstrating that all communities eventually become unrecognizable to themselves. James Macpherson’s illiterate Celtic heroes are perfectly (and anachronistically) clear-eyed on this subject. “We shall pass away like a dream,” his king Fingal admits. “No sound will be in the fields of our battles. Our tombs will be lost in the heath. The hunter shall not know the place of our rest.”¹⁷ Fingal envisions the loss not of an individual monument but of the collective context that gave it meaning. But these pagan warriors somehow absorb enough of their author’s eighteenth-century historicism to look forward to haunting the future as ghostly otherness—as “the race that are no more” and “the song of other years” (114, 101). Implicit in this plan is an acknowledgment that the past lives on, not through continuous tradition, but through the social changes that transform it into something memorably dated.

This is to be sure an odd vision of immortality—one that locates collective permanence not in a church, in posterity, or in a vector of progress, but rather in moments of mutual incomprehension that would appear to undermine all permanence. It may be difficult to believe that a faith of this paradoxical kind could be felt deeply enough to deserve comparison to ordinary heavenly immortality. To address this doubt I'm inclined simply to quote Walter Pater's justifiably famous description of the Mona Lisa:

All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there . . . the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants, and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern philosophy has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.¹⁸

Lady Lisa seems to become immortal through aesthetic cultivation: her weary familiarity with different times and places somehow makes her one with the perpetuity of human civilization itself. But how does that happen? What does it mean to “sweep” together different modes of life or “sum” them up in oneself? We might suppose that it involves a dialectic, or progress, but that's a supposition without a great deal of support in Pater's imagery, or in the anaphoric structure of his long sentences, which emphasize instead sheer diversity of experience. Lady Lisa resembles the Paterian aesthete who seeks “to define beauty, not in the abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestation of it” (vii–viii). In other words, she seems to mine immortality somehow from the specific contrasts between Greece and Rome, between “the mysticism of the middle age” and “the sins of the Borgias.” In this respect, I would suggest, she is a typical instance of the way nineteenth-century writers, and professors of literature, turned

historical contrast itself into a substitute for older models of immortality (and community) that had been undermined by historicism.

This is not an argument about secularization. I would not argue that this new model of immortality, founded on contrast, was inherently either more or less religious than an older model of immortality expressed in terms of, say, fame or tradition. The change this book traces runs perpendicular to the religious/secular axis: it involves a shift from a model of collective time premised on continuity, to one that dramatized the collective dimension of time by dramatizing discontinuity and multiplicity. Since “discontinuity” sounds less reassuring than “continuity,” it might seem as though this shift would necessarily have demystifying, secularizing implications. But that would be a misguided assumption. In the nineteenth century, challenges to historical continuity led not only to the emergence of a periodized literary curriculum, but, for instance, to the emergence of dispensational fundamentalism—a religious movement that departed from older exegetical traditions by arguing that Scripture was radically heterogenous. Since God had made different promises to different periods, the millennial promises made to Israel could no longer be conflated (as Christian tradition had long assumed) with later promises to the Christian Church. As I have argued at length elsewhere, these fundamentalists advanced exegetical premises that have a fair claim to be called historicist.¹⁹ But in the case of dispensational fundamentalism, historicist emphasis on discontinuity did not lead to any kind of secularization. It led instead to deep suspicion of secular civil society, and to the modern doctrine of a pre-tribulational Rapture (which served in effect as an alternate Christian apocalypse once the earthly millennium had been returned to the Jews). This is a fascinating story in its own right, but I mention it here simply to illustrate that there is nothing about the idea of historical discontinuity that inherently disrupts orthodoxy. In the nineteenth century it did give middle-class intellectuals an alternative to the logic of collective inheritance that had supported aristocratic prestige, but that effect needs to be understood as a specific and narrowly targeted one.

The Prestige of Periodized Contrast, 1890–2012

The first three chapters of this book try to understand how the prestige of literary culture became increasingly dependent on historical contrast in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Through historical contrast, writers

defined a sense of collective permanence that could coexist with the radical transformations envisioned by historicism; at the same time, they advanced a model of cultural distinction that thrived on discontinuity and seemed independent of inherited status. In the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, this model of culture was institutionalized in education, as a periodized curriculum came to dominate vernacular literary study in colleges and universities. The final three chapters of this book ask why that model of literary culture endured so long, and why it may have finally begun to lose its authority.

In Chapter 4, I investigate the curious stability of the periodized curriculum. The range of works taught in universities certainly expanded in the twentieth century, but the organizing principles of nationality and period remained remarkably unshaken through a long series of controversies about the purpose of literary education. Stability of this kind hints at some underlying social function that endured while intellectual rationales changed around it. But the social pressures that shaped literary historicism in the nineteenth century—for instance, a tension between aristocratic and middle-class conceptions of tradition—can hardly also have sustained it through the twentieth.

To better understand the durability of the periodized curriculum, I explore one of the most effective challenges to periodization, all the more interesting since it is now largely forgotten—the ambitious project of comparative literature in America between 1890 and 1930. Today, the comparisons implied by “comparative” literature are usually synchronic and international. So we might expect this project to have challenged nationalism rather than periodization. But before 1930, comparative literature differed from traditional literary study not just in its international scope but in its very purpose. Instead of characterizing individual works or movements, comparatists sought to produce a general anthropological theory of literary development. This could have implied a fundamentally different approach to literary education, and the seeds of a new approach are evident in early-twentieth-century course catalogs, which began to reframe period surveys as studies of “development” and “transition.” But this challenge to periodization proved short-lived, and the reasons for its failure are illuminating.

In the 1920s and 30s, resistance to the new disciplinary model was expressed vaguely as a suspicion that fact-mongering comparative literary historians were neglecting literature’s cultivating power. The rationale for

this suspicion was later articulated more clearly by René Wellek, who argued that representing literary history as a causal, continuous process could undermine the cultural authority of literature by assimilating it to social history. Division into discrete periods ensured the autonomy of literary study because it prevented literature from becoming an object of merely causal investigation. Wellek was of course just one (influential) voice in a heterogenous discipline. There were other scholars who remained committed to interdisciplinary connections and to causal explanation. But the salient fact about twentieth-century curricular history is that a wide range of heterodoxies flourished intellectually without having much enduring effect on the structure of the curriculum. Wellek's disciplinary argument helps explain why. From the 1920s through the end of the century, period concepts seemed intellectually debatable but practically indispensable for the identity of the discipline. In situations of that kind, "practically indispensable" tends to carry the day.

Although periodization still organizes literature departments institutionally, it may no longer seem to have important intellectual consequences. Certainly, if we expect scholars to hold forth confidently about "the animating spirit of each age" or "the essential qualities which differentiate one period from another"—as Reuben P. Halleck did in 1900—we will be disappointed.²⁰ But the degree of change could be overstated. For one thing, the tone of pedagogy has changed less than the tone of scholarship: the introductions to anthologies are still devoted to articulating "the essential qualities which differentiate one period from another." Moreover, it is not necessary to prove that the boundaries and character of each period can be positively defined in order to affirm the importance of periodized contrast. It is only necessary to show that attempts to trace general laws or long developmental arcs are doomed to failure. That negative premise has remained an absolutely central theme of literary scholarship, shared by a range of different theoretical schools. One can discern it, for instance, in Michel Foucault's critique of "continuous history."²¹ It is not hard to understand why Foucault's attempt to replace the tracing of causes with a "genealogy" that thrives on rupture was received more eagerly in literary studies than in his home discipline. Foucault's critique of continuity dovetailed neatly with literary historians' long-established preference for contrast. The same preference can be traced in theories that seem remote from Foucault: for instance, in Harold Bloom's theory of influence, which similarly sidelined

sequence and causality in order to reimagine influence as a contrastive, agonistic structure.

In short, the authority of historical discontinuity has not declined notably inside literature departments. It remains important not only in the institutional form of periodization, but in the negative form of an assumption that theories premised on continuous change are somehow tame, conservative, or recuperative. Where the discipline of literary studies itself is concerned, this assumption neatly reverses the actual social logic of historicism. The prestige of the discipline has long depended on the ruptures that separate periods and movements; literary critics' collective habit of talking about "rupture" and "fragmentation" as if they still posed a thrilling challenge to literary culture is at this point (collectively) disingenuous. This failure of self-understanding has been particularly visible in critical conversation about postmodern historicity. When critics suggest that postmodernism is reducing history to "heaps of fragments," they rarely seem very genuinely troubled by the possibility.²²

In Chapter 5, I'll argue that the prestige of literary culture has been threatened in recent decades not by fragmentation, but by an assumption that prevailing modes of (liberal, capitalist) social organization represent an inevitable, more-or-less stable culmination of human history. That is not an assumption supported by any evidence, but it matters less as a factual claim than as a tacit premise of popular historical consciousness. Against that backdrop, literary discussions of fragmentation feel more wistful than anxious; they express nostalgia for an era when the contrasts between cultural movements and periods could still seem to dramatize real, competing social alternatives. This nostalgia surrounding discontinuity became particularly visible in the conceit of "parallel lives" that characterized plays, novels, and films of the late 1980s and 1990s (perhaps most famously, A. S. Byatt's *Possession*). In this subgenre, threats to humanistic culture turn into fantasies specifically about historical discontinuity, which is both threatened by and rescued by the eerie parallel between historically distinct layers of the narrative.

The analysis of recent literature, film, and cultural theory in Chapter 5 suggests that the waning prestige of historical contrast may be one important source of the crisis of confidence that has troubled literary studies for roughly a quarter-century. For literary scholars, the value of historical contrast is still a fundamental intellectual premise, as well as a primary mode of disciplinary

organization. But outside the academy, it is no longer clear that students need to be taught to recognize periods or differentiate artistic movements from each other.

This crisis is commonly interpreted as a consequence of the waning prestige of literature in an age of digital media—and there may be some truth to that interpretation. But writing has experienced radical shifts of form and medium before. When poetry seemed to be displaced by the novel, or Greek and Latin by vernacular literature, the shift prompted passionate debate about the course of literary history, making literary questions only more central to public life. If cultural history itself now seems to be losing value, it may be because the present crisis involves not merely a transformation of media, but a change in the structure of historical cultivation. Perhaps René Wellek was right to imagine that the boundary between cultural and social history depended on a distinctively cultural approach to the problem of change—a rhetoric of contrast that gave great works and artistic movements not only an explanatory function but a permanent exemplary value. That approach to cultural history has been undermined on several levels—in the academy by social materialism, and in popular consciousness by a confident presentism that reduces the past to retro style.

Nothing I have said above implies that literature departments will stop teaching period survey courses—or that they should. Although this book explores the institutional history behind literary historicism, it doesn't aim to reduce historicist ideas to mere symptoms. Ideas can be at once socially constructed and valid. In this case, it is after all true that human societies differ radically from each other. Period concepts may no longer convey the cultural authority they once did, but students still need to discover how thoroughly historical differences can reshape the experienced world. Given that pedagogical end, contrast is an appropriate means, and contrast probably implies some system of chronological boundaries. So I see no reason to assume that literary periods themselves will disappear.

On the other hand, any institution that persists for more than a hundred years necessarily produces a few blind spots. If the cultural authority of periodization is now waning, that poses a challenge for the humanities—but perhaps also an opportunity to take a fresh look at old questions. The final chapter of this volume argues that literary studies' long reliance on a rhetoric of contrast has in fact left the discipline with blind spots that scholars are now free to address. I focus on initiatives associated with the rubric of “digital

humanities.” The introduction of quantitative methods in literary history is controversial for a host of reasons, but I would argue that it matters above all because it opens up new ways of characterizing gradual change, and thereby makes it possible to write a literary history that is no longer bound to a differentiating taxonomy of authors, periods, and movements. Critics of quantitative methods might express this more negatively by saying that those methods threaten the differentiating, individualizing principle that makes literary scholarship humanistic. I don’t expect this book to resolve the debate. But I do want to propose that it should be interpreted as a debate about the historical dimension of literary cultivation. Distant reading is not troubling to literary scholars because we resist the numeric as such. After all, critics have long counted sales figures and numbers of editions. Graphing macroscopic trends is troubling, more fundamentally, because it challenges the principle of contrast that has long distinguished literary culture from the forms of learning purveyed by other disciplines.