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Q: Literary history, be it national, local, or regional, is perhaps the most conservative form of literary study, with many claiming that the method is outmoded. What can literary histories do to overcome both the risk of obsolescence and their inherent conservatism?

A: Near the start of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Cora, the runaway slave, is almost captured by some opportunistic pig hunters. An untidy scuffle ensues:

> She was taken unawares but the moment he laid hands on her person, her blood quickened. The boy yanked Cora to the ground. She rolled over and bashed her head against a stump. He scrambled to her, pinning her. Her blood was hot. (60)

Whitehead plays this scene, as he does much of the novel, for its traditional dramatic and affective potential—the reader is ushered into a close and protective identification with Cora—but its narrative momentum conceals the subtlety of his art. That the escaped slave is defined by her blood while her movements are controlled by her assailant (she is *taken*, *yanked*, *pinned*) in a passage that climaxes with a wound inflicted by a tree, is layered in multiple meanings. Cora's physical struggle is, in this moment, curtailed by the brutal bash against a tree, just as the fact that she's in this situation at all has been dictated by the bloodlines of her family tree: the genealogical arbitrariness across multiple generations, over which the individual has no control, and that saw her born in the American South. Just as the felled tree terminates in a stump, so, for a short while, it seems Cora's branch of the family tree will come to an abrupt end in this struggle.

On one level, this *is* literally literary history: the representation of the accumulation of past moments as realized in a present rendered through literary means: narrative design, artful indirection, the clever condensation of Whitehead's figurative language. It is both a national history—consider the loaded resonance of the verb *yank*ed in this description of Cora's journey toward a mythical "north"—and a transnational account, sensitive to the global

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flow of European power on the American institution of slavery. But while it is obviously not the kind of record keeping that critics normally have in mind when they apply the label, I begin with it, here, to highlight the often unexamined peculiarity of the term *literary history* that persists through the various critiques of its practice. If *literary history* is not the literary representation of the past, and is presumably also not the representations of professional historians' activity in literature (to stick with recent American novels we might have the fictional historians Harold Silver, from A.M. Homes's *May We Be Forgiven* [2012], and Ruben Blum, from Joshua Cohen's *The Netanyahus* [2021], in this category), then our conventional understanding of the label has the terms the wrong way round: not *literary history* but the *history of the literary*, a reversal whose grammatical construction is more honest about the passivity of the literary object under investigation. From this perspective, the literary text is like Cora: stunned into submission by the heft of the tree that produced her; the kinds of questions that might be asked of her constrained by the limits of the frame that pins her in a fixed place and time.

This is not an encouraging image, and it is surely the rigid, predictable, genealogical constraints to which critics of conventional literary history object. Where a literary text about history might surprise, take imaginative leaps, or wriggle free of linearity, histories of the literary, these arguments run, reinforce established structures and follow the same familiar steps from past to present. But if Whitehead is telling us something about historical determinism in Cora's pig hunter scuffle, then it's worth noting that he immediately follows this scene with a passage that extends but also complicates the tree metaphor. As Cora reflects on her position, Whitehead writes:

> From the trunk of their scheme, choices and decisions sprouted like branches and shoots. If they had turned the girl back at the swamp. If they had taken a deeper route around the farms. If Cora had taken the rear and been the one grabbed by two men (60-61).

Viewed graphically, the family tree's deterministic history is a triangle, with earliest ancestors at the apex, and the individual—who suffers the consequences of accumulated history—at its base. But this passage flips the diagram, and the trunk and branches it maps now reflect the sequence of conditional statements that outline a decision tree. The graphic is inverted, and the individual is now at the head of the branching offshoots—the triangle's apex—as speculative alternative histories proliferate, depending on minor contingencies, to provide its base. In the context of the novel, Whitehead's pairing of the family tree and the decision tree reflects the two divergent subgenres that are synthesized in *The Underground Railroad*'s hybrid form: the neo-slave narrative that fills out a relatively fixed history, and the speculative novel that imagines alternative pathways through time's multifarious corridors. In the larger context

of the literary history this hybrid creates, we might read the overlapping triangle shapes as suggesting the interrelationship between the two modes of conceptualizing time: that is, the apparently deterministic, linear path from a deeper past to the present is itself contingent on a sequence of individual choices; and yet, once choices are made, the breadth of available options narrow. Depending on the genealogist, then, a conventional tree-like history of the literary reveals certain things even as it obscures others: it might abstract lines of influence, follow the evolution of narrative devices, trace the "weak" structure of writer networks, or highlight the institutional engines of literary production.

Some critiques of such histories' traditional scope emphasise their supposedly outmoded reliance on linearity, drawing from Einsteinian physics to argue that linear time is misleading because it is an arbitrary human construct. This objection strikes me as less problematic than it may at first seem, since literary texts—unlike, say, the workings of the cosmos—are, of course, also human constructs, but also because linearity means different things depending on the scale of magnification. Just as the Coastline Measurement Problem dictates that radically different measurements will be produced depending on the scale adopted in measuring a coastline, so what linear succession (or temporal proximity, or cause and effect) means in a diagram varies according to scale. At a relatively close level of magnification, then, a mapping of literature's institutional history—say, Mark McGurl's *The Program Era* (2009)—might make its microfocus the classroom interactions between individual teacher or textbook and apprentice writer. Zooming out much more dramatically, Franco Moretti's abstract models for following the evolution of narrative devices and genres in *Graphs Maps Trees* (2005) can eliminate the individuality of the single text or author in its quantitative account of time's longer passage. Neither would be my preferred model for tracing a history of the literary (my preference, for what it's worth, would draw from neither a genealogical tree nor Einsteinian relativity, but from Huttonian geology), but their diversity, and imaginative approach, belie charges of conservatism. These kinds of maps can be productive not just for what their level of magnification reveals, but also for the target they present to other scholars to productively rail against their limitations and omissions. To return to Whitehead's metaphor, what ultimately matters is not the shape of the tree or how its pruned, but the density and diversity of life in the forest: how many different trees are available for cross comparison.

Q: For literary histories, literary periods are, first and foremost, instruments of contrast and vehicles of legitimization. Oftentimes, periodization speaks more of literary historiography's status anxiety and disciplinary autonomy than of their function in describing and investigating literary histories. Does periodization still matter beyond preserving the authority of periodization itself?

A: As someone who works primarily on contemporary fiction, I wouldn't want to broach this topic without acknowledging Theodore Martin's lucid account of why "the contemporary is not a period" (2), or Giorgio Agamben's gnomic pronouncements on the slipperiness of who is or is not a contemporary. But, in larger terms, the key influences on my thinking about the limitations of periods are Wai Chee Dimock's *Through Other Continents* (2006), and Eric Hayot's "Against Periodization" (2011). If Dimock's text is important for its concrete demonstration of how literary criticism can work without the safety net of national literary periods (to extend the metaphor of the family tree from my first answer, this is to draw the tree and then fold the paper to produce unusual juxtapositions), Hayot's significance lies in abstraction: his overarching exploration of the problems that stem from the fact that periods are "untheorized" (744), and the grim truth of his more throwaway observation that period logics (the unvarying narrative of emergence, peak, decline, etc.) are simply "not very interesting" (745). But I think there are two additional qualifications, or problems of periodization that intersect with the contemporary field, that I would add to Hayot's position.

First, Hayot suggests that as we get closer to the present, "periods get shorter," and he attributes this temporal condensation to "chronological narcissism," floating the possibility that "the entire literary profession results from a self-regarding love for our historical present" (746). Looking back at the last 50 years, my sense is that this is too linear an account of what happens to the period as it approaches the horizon of contemporaneity, and that what we see is less a series of shortening periods and more a massive proliferation of overlapping movements. Thomas Carlyle may have worried in 1841 that "ists and isms are rather a growing weariness," but he surely wasn't ready for the onslaught of neo-, new-, post-, digi-, meta-, sur-, and alt- labels that have joined the steady supply of new -ists and -isms in recent decades. In part, this terminological excess accurately reflects the density and diversity of literary production around the millennium, a time when, as Ben Lerner writes in *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011), "the air was alive less with the excitement of a period than with the excitement of periodization" (140). The scope of literary production at such a time threatens to exceed the explanatory power or elastic reach of current period labels. But it also reflects the feedback loops that institutional periodization has created at time when the university is the site where aspiring writers learn their literary history whilst they learn to write literature: periodization, then, becomes the way that emerging writers understand and marshal the logic of their own careers (there is probably no clearer example than David Foster Wallace's self-canonization through essays such as "Fictional Futures" [1988] and "E Unibus Pluram" [1993]), and, in more self-reflexive fictions, becomes a topic of literature itself (John Barth's "The End: An Introduction" [1996] strikes me as an equally powerful meditation on literature and institutional time as you'll find in any

extant scholarship). Problematic as it is, the periodization of literature begins to matter, then, because the institution is the site of literary production as much as it is of literary history's production.

Closely related to this, is my second observation about periodization and contemporary literature, which is that much of the slipperiness of periodization stems from the elision of moments and movements. The former are the concrete temporal anchors that provide the building blocks of periods; the latter are dominated by an artistic personality, or an aesthetic. The proliferation of labels over the last fifty years is a catalogue of movements that aspire to be moments, but by their sheer plenitude these labels become self-cancelling; we might understand the literary works that fall under each umbrella with reference to the way a movement absorbs the logic of the period, but the incompatibility of so many divergent energies (minimalist, maximalist, metamodern) means that these sub-labels threaten to be unperiodizable.

Zooming out from the contemporary makes this contrast clearer. The Victorian period in British literature, even as it raises thorny questions about national and imperial assumptions, seems to me to be erected on sufficiently concrete moments that it merits the classification of period on purely temporal grounds. Modernism, by contrast, has been the focus of so much definitional debate because it reflects a movement—really a spectrum of positions, depending on who defines the term's boundaries, and which figures are drawn into the foreground. From its early canonization around the Eliot-Joyce-Pound axis, its membership, focus, and geographical boundaries have been drawn back to the mid-nineteenth century, and forward to consume all of twentieth-century literature and beyond in various appeals to neomodernism, or under the almost definitionally empty label "long modernism." The muddy waters surrounding modernism's period status thus over spill, polluting the periods that surround it.