

A Long Eighteenth Century? *What* Eighteenth Century?

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WHEN I AGREED TO CONTRIBUTE TO THIS ISSUE, I WANTED TO FOCUS A DEBATE ABOUT PERIODIZATION FOR ONCE SOLELY ON FOREIGN LANGUAGES and not, as is usually the case, on a single foreign language in comparison with English. To do this, I intended to take a new look at one of the most successful examples of the new periodization: the long eighteenth century. The concept first came to the fore and gained wide critical currency in English studies and in history. In these fields, a number of differently long eighteenth centuries have been proposed and practiced—an eighteenth century that begins as early as 1660, for example, and one that ends as late as 1832. Among the many consequences of the various choices of chronological limits for the long eighteenth century, probably the most significant is the way in which the Enlightenment's role is heightened or diminished in each version of the period. Since in intellectual and literary terms the Enlightenment's impact was felt all over western Europe in the 1700s, I decided that this should be one issue of periodization whose presence would be by now visible in most if not all modern foreign languages. As it turned out, I could not have been more wrong. And what I learned on the way to that realization caused me to shift course radically.

I contacted colleagues in French, German, Italian, and Spanish departments at institutions ranging from small liberal arts colleges to large universities both public and private. My survey was neither comprehensive nor systematic, and I did not, nor did I expect to, find absolute agreement across the board. Enough of a trend emerged, however, for me to feel that it was time to sound an alarm. Unless the tide turns, we could soon find that as far as modern foreign languages are concerned, periodization is a moot point. We won't be concerned with the implications of a long or a short eighteenth century, because the eighteenth century and every other premodern period will have all but ceased to exist at many of our institutions of higher education.

Among these four languages, Italian presents the most stable profile. Everyone I talked to was sure of this: the holy trinity—Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio—is simply not going to disappear from the cur-

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riculum. Italian seems the field best poised to hold its own during an age of cutbacks, because Italian departments have rarely, if ever, tried for truly comprehensive coverage of Italian literature. The eighteenth century, for example, is never taught.

In recent decades, at many institutions German was reconceived as German studies, a move that often entailed the elimination of early periods. Goethe, always seen as the one untouchable figure, then became the exclusive marker for periodization. In these reconfigured departments, the span of German studies has thus become the Goethe Age, or the late eighteenth century, to the present. Today some in German studies express cautious optimism and feel that earlier fields may be coming back. That revival, however, comes at a price. Those departments in which the span of German literature was reduced to the late eighteenth century to the present generally began to teach most of their undergraduate courses in English. Thus, if early fields return to the curriculum, this time the material will undoubtedly no longer be read in German.

As everyone knows, Spanish is unique among modern foreign languages in that it has come through recent decades with healthy and often even increased enrollments. During and because of this period of relative good health, the field has been dramatically redefined—perhaps more so than any other language. There has been a large-scale turning away from so-called Peninsular literature—that is, literature produced in Spain—in favor of literature in Spanish produced outside Spain. At the same time, Hispanic studies as a field has become increasingly focused on the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries. Even the bedrock of Spanish departments past, the so-called Golden Age, with its iconic figures such as Cervantes, Calderón, and Lope de Vega, while it has certainly not disappeared, is thus nonetheless increasingly sidelined in favor of a growing emphasis on Latin American literature, Andean studies, Caribbean stud-

ies, and so forth. When early material finds a place in this new landscape, it is usually material from colonial Latin America. Even the modest recent revival of interest in the Middle Ages and the Golden Age in Peninsular studies may largely be explained in this light: Peninsular literature is being revisited through the lens of Hispano-Arabism or Jewish and Morisco studies and thus de-Westernized.

I've saved French for last because it presents in many ways the trickiest case of all. On the surface, French might seem to share Italian's stability. Indeed, it is overall almost certainly the field that has most strenuously resisted the redefinition other modern languages have undergone and sometimes actively undertaken in recent decades. Few French departments have shifted most of their teaching to English, and there has been no concerted move in French studies, like the one that took place in German studies, to truncate the coverage of the full span of French literature. The field instead has been broadened to include francophone literature—literature in French produced outside France. In almost all departments, however, that broadening of the canon concerns only twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and has redefined the contours of earlier periods only minimally, if at all. Yet at this moment of economic crisis French may be becoming a field stretched too thin.

One phenomenon came up in conversations with colleagues in all four languages: a seemingly inexorable drift toward presentism. All languages have seen diminished undergraduate interest in early fields. As a result, when students begin graduate studies, many do not have the background—in literature or history—that would allow them to conceive of specializing in medieval or early modern fields. Indeed, it is not rare these days to encounter incoming foreign language graduate students who have never read a single work written before 1800.

Perhaps this is just as well. Should we go on training students in periods in which jobs

are scarce and may become scarcer? There may still be administrators who, when faced with budget cuts and the need to eliminate faculty lines, will support a department's desire to maintain what it sees as its cultural mission to teach authors—Dante, Kant, or Molière—considered by its faculty essential not only to a major in their field but also to a well-rounded general education, authors whose place its faculty feel is in a foreign language curriculum and not in that of a comparative literature or an English department. There may still be such administrators; at a time when enrollments have most often become the only bottom line, however, not many seem to be making their support known in the ways that count.

Over and over again, colleagues I spoke with echoed remarks made by the chair of a large foreign language department in a large public university. For years after the only medievalist in the department retired, it made the hire of a new medievalist its top priority, but the line was never granted. By now the department has been without a medievalist for nearly a decade. Two years ago its only specialist in another early field also retired, and finding a replacement in that field became the top priority, while the medieval position moved down the list. Since this chair knows how little traditional hiring plans mean in most institutions today, he realizes that in all likelihood his department will now have to get by without a specialist in a second premodern field. He wonders how long the undergraduate and graduate programs can remain intellectually credible in the face of such shrinkage. Like others in foreign language departments of all sizes and in different kinds of institutions, this chair described the situation in these terms: he and his colleagues are doing their best to maintain basic overall coverage in programs that increasingly train almost exclusively modernists.

Now, these are bad times for most departments in most institutions of higher education all over the country, but the situation I

have described is particularly critical for foreign language departments. They are always smaller than the English department in any given institution, usually dramatically so. Even so, most foreign language departments have more than one modernist; larger ones typically have several specialists in various aspects of twentieth- and twenty-first-century studies. These days even the largest foreign language faculties, however, rarely have more than one specialist in any early field. Thus, if a modernist retires and is not quickly replaced, staffing becomes more difficult, but coverage continues without interruption. In a foreign language department, every retirement of a medievalist, a Renaissance specialist, and so forth creates a very different situation: this field disappears at least temporarily. And if the current situation continues for some time, as seems likely, such temporary disappearances just might become permanent.

The pressure to focus on the modern and the recent past has been eroding early fields for some time, but the recent economic climate has accelerated the trend. At some point in the not-so-distant future, the idea of covering a range of periods, the curricular basis for scholarly debate about the concept of periodization, will no longer be a possibility in many foreign language departments.

At present, the notion of periodization continues as a subject for academic criticism as though the reality on the ground had not changed. I feel lucky to have been an early modernist at a moment when the discussion of concepts such as the long eighteenth century mattered not only for my scholarship but also in the classroom, for the training of graduate students. Increasingly, I am concerned for the next generation of early modernists: will they ever know such a time? In the present situation, I wonder whether scholarly debate on periodization might not be a luxury, one in which I and all those whose fields of specialization are under the gun can ill afford to indulge.

On the surface, English and comparative literature might appear the winners in the drift to presentism. Medieval and early modern specialists in those departments could, after all, teach in translation works from earlier periods no longer part of foreign language curricula. This occurs more and more frequently, even on the graduate level. But as I see it, no one comes out ahead this way.

Those graduate students training to become early modernists in English who read Boccaccio or Lafayette or Zayas only in translation may be hard-pressed to understand the influence these writers exerted on early modern English authors, who generally read their foreign precursors and contemporaries in the original language. In addition, graduate students who read these works in the often woefully inaccurate early modern translations that are readily available online, as many do, have really not read them at all. As for the foreign language graduate students who pursue doctorates in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature and receive only limited exposure to medieval and early modern authors in their own field, they will be equally hard-pressed to comprehend the references to Cervantes, Goethe, and Montaigne that are all over the pages of the

authors on whom they will write their dissertations—almost all of whom saw themselves as part of an entire literary tradition in which they hoped their own works would one day find a place.

We are all intellectually poorer because of this drift to presentism: the historian of the novel who teaches at an institution where Cervantes is no longer taught in Spanish, the poetry specialist at an institution where Petrarch is no longer assigned in Italian, the Enlightenment scholar at a college or university where Diderot, Rousseau, and Voltaire circulate only in translation. What does it matter if the eighteenth century is long or short if the figures who set the agenda for the Enlightenment are no longer present in the language in which they wrote and in which their works were assimilated and admired by their original readers all over Europe?

NOTE

I would like to thank the many colleagues who responded to my requests for information. I have tried to be faithful to their nuanced arguments; any mistakes and simplifications are my own. I name no names so that none of them can be held responsible for my remarks.