

On the Career



I have been known to sputter with rage at the narrative of salvific white masculinity institutionalized by our practice of dividing American literary history at 1865, the formal end of the Civil War. Erasing Reconstruction, as well as many of the writers who matured during the decades bracketing the war, the ideological implications of this divide-ante or post-can be hard to challenge in both scholarship and teaching, as can the honor it confers to militarized white heroism. So it would be hard to overstate my enthusiasm for Cody Marrs's *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War*, particularly as the book offers a satisfying alternative model in the idea of transbellum literature or "literature that stretches (as the etymology implies) across and beyond the war itself." Rather than forcing a choice between sides, the transbellum engages the Civil War in all its multiple, messy moments—its excruciating preamble, its shockingly bloody battles, and its sometimes exhilarating, sometimes demoralizing results.

That the lingering questions Marrs's book inspired for me are not related to the Civil War thus came as a big surprise. As important as the concept of the transbellum is, in other words, I find the book's implicit defense of disciplinarity to be one of its chief achievements. For not only does Marrs encourage his readers to think more flexibly about how literary periods work, he does so in a way that posits the importance of thinking about the contours

of our discipline—the study of literature—at a moment when interdisciplinarity has become a default feature of our critical practice. If Frederic Jameson’s “Always historicize!” is, as Jennifer Fleissner notes, “the most sacred of critical commandments,” then recent exegetical practice interprets it as “Be interdisciplinary!” To fully understand a literary text, in other words, the scholar must circulate broadly, rejecting the narrow constraints of disciplinary boundaries in search of the farthest-reaching interpretation of the text’s meaning; the reading is always better on the other side of the disciplinary fence. “Context is not optional” in contemporary literary scholarship, Rita Felski quips.

As Marris and others underscore, interdisciplinarity assumes the stability of disciplines as its organizing principle, relying on their contours to fuel its prescribed transgressive maneuvers. By establishing the limits of American literature’s periods, Marris weakens the very stability of disciplinary structure that makes interdisciplinarity feasible. Yet rethinking literary periods is not the only way that he challenges the dominance of default interdisciplinarity. Rather than importing a paradigm from elsewhere, as does Rita Felski, for example, Marris offers a different solution: he revives the author, famously killed off by Roland Barthes. Of course, the author has never really been dead, nor has Marris resuscitated his person in the form of biographical criticism. Still, it bears stressing that Marris’s interest in author-centered criticism returns to fundamental features of our discipline in a way that productively challenges the supremacy of interdisciplinarity.

Rather than the author’s person or biography, Marris suggests that it is the career that most usefully “bridge[s] the historical and the transhistorical, unfolding in ways that disclose the influence of particular events on given works and, at the same time, the broader imaginative connections with which those works are bound up.” For mid-century writers, whose careers are bifurcated by the Civil War, there are immediate benefits in reorienting our approach to the career as a whole; the career “enable[s] us to read multilinearly across eras and genres that are often kept quite separate from one another,” he explains. What emerges from thinking in terms of the career, and in defining it as “a hermeneutic category,” is thus renewed attention to how we understand the relationship between the part and the whole, the individual text and the lifelong career. For Marris, there are two immediate benefits to approaching mid-century writers via their transbellum careers. First, it provides a means of charting the evolving ways that time is represented in literature, which Marris notes is key to understanding both the author’s works and the “shape and impact of the war itself.” Marris further proposes that knowing what an author reads is central to exploring his or her career. Here, again, his commitment to literary study as a disciplinary practice emerges: rather than studying the “broad print networks or discursive formations” indexed by an author’s reading, Marris celebrates reading’s “volatility,” the multiple ways in which it “can yield new ideas, subvert old ones, and produce an almost infinite variety of pleasures, doubts, and surprises.” When we “take the idea of the authorial career seriously,” we are

able to appreciate this “infinite variety” more robustly.

Despite its importance, the discussion of the career in *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War* is tantalizingly brief. Still, I think we can read Marrs’s insights as contributing productively to the developing field of career criticism. Much of this work explores how the career as an idea shapes the evolution of poets (often, but not exclusively, preromantic poets) and their artistic production. Distilling an older notion of career as a course or progress through life from the professionalized concept that emerges in the twentieth century, scholars, like Jesse Zuba, who join Marrs in considering the value of the career as a key critical category explore how writers might self-consciously progress through a set of genres. What all these scholars note is that plots emerge across careers, tales of success and failure, of experimentation and capitulation. Such plots are complicated by changing conceptions of what it means to write, by professionalization variously understood, and by institutional or market forces; at the same time, however, they all agree that the career is as important to consider as genre or subject.

As Marrs makes clear, the career plot of transbellum authors reveals the many ways in which periodization has distorted what we could know about the works of writers stranded for too long on one side of the Civil War divide. His is a recuperative tale. But it is worth noting that career plots can introduce distortions of their own. As Barbara Johnson notes at the beginning of “Melville’s Fist,” for example, the tendency to read *Billy Budd* as the culmination of Melville’s career—as a kind of “last will and testament”—problematically “grant[s] it a privileged, determining position in the body of [Melville’s] work,” giving it “the metalinguistic authority to confer finality and intelligibility upon all that precedes it.” While Johnson’s reading of *Billy Budd* ignores the decades of poetry Melville wrote prior to his death, works Marrs rightly insists should be understood as important components of his career, her caution about how we correlate part and whole—the kind of authority we grant to any individual part to define the whole—is always charged, always challenging. That is to say, the danger that Johnson so elegantly underscores is the lure of teleology, the tendency to look for completion or culmination at the end of an author’s career. As she and Marrs make clear, however, careers are more complicated than our attempts to understand them to date have been. Only when we actually read the career for *its* plot, for what it can tell us about an author, the times in which she wrote, and how she wrote about those times, will we be able to appreciate fully the value of the career as a component of literary analysis.

The figure of the author’s work as a body points to another element of the career that is potentially generative—the difference between a career and a biography. Both shift focus away from moments or incidents to a conception of the whole, but where biography is primarily retrospective, a career always retains the contingency of a not-yet-completed trajectory. After all, career is, provocatively, also a verb on the move, bringing with it a sense of

momentum and the tantalizing possibility of change, of directions that might still be taken or explored.

A brief consideration of two authors—not precisely transbellum but almost—suggests the potential benefits of following Marrs and others in thinking more specifically about the career. Henry James (1843-1916) and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1844-1911) were exact contemporaries. Both were prolific authors, both published regularly in the prestigious periodicals of the day, both were invested in shaping their careers (and in making them pay). Where Phelps managed her career in ways that were popular in the nineteenth century, but that fell out of favor in the twentieth, James famously structured the terms of his own reception, a process that culminated in the New York Edition. I think it's fair to say that James grasped what it meant to cultivate a career, crafting its narrative in compelling ways. That Phelps could not do so, hampered both by the success of writers like James and by the ways that emergent notions of literary periods made her works old-fashioned before she wrote them, clarifies for me why she became a comparatively obscure writer. Juxtaposing the careers of Phelps and James—transrealism perhaps—changes both writers for me. I see Phelps as more ambivalent about positions that had seemed fixed, and James as more conventional than I sometimes acknowledge—allowing me to identify points of intersection and influence occluded by a more narrow focus on either individual works or specific literary movements. That their careers overlap, intersect, and conflict provides another example of what Marrs demonstrates across his excellent book: thinking in terms of the career can reshape both how we see the works of individual authors and the trajectory of American literature writ large.

Further Reading

Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!" *New Literary History* 42:4 (2011): 573-591.

Jennifer Fleissner, "Historicism Blues," *American Literary History* 25:4 (2013): 699-717.

Barbara Johnson, "Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*," *Studies in Romanticism* 18:4 (1979): 567-599.

Jesse Zuba, *The First Book: Twentieth-Century Poetic Careers in America* (Princeton, 2015).

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Elizabeth Stuart Phelps: Selected Tales, Essays, and Poems (2014). She is currently writing a book on Napoleon Bonaparte's American empire.