

The Transbellum and Traumatic History



The unresolved issue that underpins Cody Marris's *Nineteenth-Century Literature and the Long Civil War* is how best to mourn. Or, to phrase this with greater particularity, and using the terms of the book itself, how can acts of periodization produce historical frameworks commensurate to the vast trauma and shock of the Civil War? To answer this question is also to put forward an ethics of historicism in which the critic has both a responsibility for acknowledging the rupturing violence of the past while also aiming to tend to its more damaging effects.

Vital to this task of ethical historicism is Marris's formulation of the "transbellum," with particular emphasis on the various permutations of the prefix *trans*. For him, the Civil War functions neither as a beginning nor an end, but rather as a bridge that pulls a variety of different chronologies, temporalities, and periods, including our own unresolved present, into its own. The transbellum formulates the Civil War as a shaping historical force that refuses to remain placed in a single, settled slice of time. As scholars and, indeed, citizens, we find ourselves perpetually returning to it, caught in a vortex that threatens to pull everything into its midst.

For those familiar with the work of psychoanalyst and philosopher of history Dominick LaCapra, the transbellum might sound an eerily familiar note, as, in

his 2000 book *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra casts trauma in similar terms. In his work, trauma can “collapse all distinctions, including that between present and past” meaning that “one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of the traumatic scene” in a way that “invalidates any form of conceptual or narrative closure.” For Marris, the legacies of the Civil War would appear to operate in a similar way, as they travel backward and forward from the moments of tragic loss that occurred in the unbounded, violent, ordinary years between 1861 and 1865.

Marris attends to issues of unresolvable mourning particularly in his chapter on Emily Dickinson, which argues that her engagement with the war involved meditating on the dilated and elongated effects of emotional pain. He finds in her “affective focus” a “large part of the reason why...the war outstrips history. Grief is the most unruly of affects: its non-linear durations, lapses, and returns bear little resemblance to the tidy chronologies of newspapers, governments, and creeds.” Similarly, when I read Marris’s account of Whitman’s poems “temporarily suspend[ing] the very conflict whose devastation not only fills the volume but also limns these brief stunning scenes...[with] pauses before and after loss, moments that either precede or follow death,” I could not help but hear overlaps with the poet and philosopher Denise Riley’s prose poem *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*. Following the death of her child, Riley tells of how she experienced “suddenly arrested time: that acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow,” meaning that she shared, in effect, the time of the dead with her lost son. Accordingly, we can read the transbellum as a way in which authors of the nineteenth century sought to occupy the same traumatic time of those killed in the Civil War. In essence, their work rendered them co-present with the dead, or, perhaps, vice versa.

Yet my interest is less in how traumatic time explicitly permeates Marris’s work (although this is interesting) than in the way in which this same temporality shapes the historical framework of the transbellum itself. We might read Marris’s act of reperiodization as a means of critically mourning the Civil War properly. To use LaCapra’s terminology, dividing the nineteenth century into the discrete divisions of antebellum and postbellum risks collapsing the distinctions between absence and loss. The erosion of this distinction, for LaCapra, leads to the creation of salvific, progressive narratives that falsely close off the traumatic past by promising “total renewal, salvation, or redemption.” This closing cannot truly occur if we are to retain a historically responsible ethics, one that is attuned to the rupturing, brutal violence of the past.

Instead, LaCapra argues, we must look toward “other, nonredemptive options in personal, social, and political life” that allow for the proper historical specificity of trauma and narratives that can work through trauma in an ethical way. For Marris, the false periodization that has so shaped the field would appear to operate like an incorrect and unsatisfying response to trauma, because it closes off the war through a gradual narrative of national overcoming. In this framework, the deep traumatic wound of the Civil War heals

with emancipation and the development of a finally unified and inclusive nation-state.

Marrs's notion of the transbellum offers a vitally important corrective to this narrative. It reveals that the way in which critics have mourned thus far invokes a hollow and triumphalist periodization that has not allowed us to think through the actual rupturing violence of the event fully. However, the transbellum perhaps comes with still darker connotations. If the previous framework of the antebellum and postbellum was essentially a means of sealing off the trauma of the past from the present, might the transbellum essentially be reopening the wound, exposing us, once more, to the shrapnel and collateral damage of unprocessed historical trauma? Marrs's conclusion suggests that this would be the case. Marrs writes of how the accounts covered in the book "instead of marching through the nation's sequenced history, radically reimagine it. And by doing so, they provide us, the latter day heirs of this struggle, with temporalities that cut across our most entrenched periodic ideas, categories, and a priori assumptions, which all too often blind us to the war's myriad times and durations" (157). Vital here are the words "latter day heirs" and "cut across," as they make clear that the transbellum means, first, that the work of critically traversing the Civil War is incomplete, that we are descendants of that awful conflict, and shaped by it. Secondly, the transbellum means that acknowledging this lineage requires a figurative re-opening of a closed historical wound, creating a new cut.

In demonstrating the ways in which earlier periodizing practices have diminished the force of real historical violence, Marrs's book starts the work of creating new historical frameworks that might be more ethically and socio-politically responsible. However, in reopening the traumatic wound of history, the book challenges future critics to find other ways of processing these wounds. My instinct is that this endeavor will involve less an alternative periodization as such, which is to say, an alternative set of dates and terms for thinking through the Civil War's place in nineteenth-century history, than a *reshaping* of history.

The antebellum and postbellum denominations implicitly invoke a graphic, evolutionary and progressivist form of history, in which one gradates and divides that past under the aegis of forward-moving time. I wonder if a more ameliorative model might be a circular one. To think of history as a circle is to acknowledge that we still share the same historical space as the Civil War, with it functioning as the centering but always moving axis of our thoughts. But it also allows for movement within that space. A circular history does not involve recursion, nor even brutally crushing cycles of pain, but rather a speculative attitude in which the critic thinks through what it means to still breathe in the same atmosphere as an unspent historical trauma. It is demonstrably true that the Civil War is not yet over, that, perhaps it never can end, but, within a circular mode, this fact does not mean that we have to ceaselessly return to the past and re-experience its violence. Instead, rather like Whitman tending the wounds of a dying soldier, cradling his slowly

weakening head, we can return to the traumatic past of the U.S. with a view, eventually, of one day healing it.

This article originally appeared in issue 17.1 (Fall, 2016).

Edward Sugden is a lecturer (assistant professor) of American literature 1770-1900 at King's College London.