

**Emily Rohrbach, *Modernity's Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. Pp. 185. \$85. ISBN 9780823267965.**

Focusing on 'changing and competing forms of historiography' (10) in the Romantic period, *Modernity's Mist* proposes not only that 'Romantic literary concepts of time constitute a historical engagement' (15), but also that several Romantic writers represent the temporality of their historical moment as persistently elusive. This sensitivity to, in some cases, indeterminacy (Keats) and, in other cases, overdetermination (Byron) of the present stands in stark contrast to Enlightenment historiography, where history conforms to predictable stages (33). While acknowledging 'uneven development' across the globe, such thinking, for Rohrbach's Romantics, is stifling: an obsessive attempt to relate to history in the grammar of the '*future anterior*' or to figure history as 'what *will have been*' (2). Odd as living one's present as if it were a memory sounds, as Peter Brooks notes, narrative itself takes an analogous tack: 'Perhaps we would do best to think of the *anticipation of retrospection* as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic' (qtd. in Rohrbach, 111). Such formulations of time seem necessary for the generation of coherence, which may be precisely why they fall short of an accurate representation of the Romantic experience of time. Focusing on 'Keats, Austen, and Byron [precisely] for their nonprophetic qualities' (160), Rohrbach identifies a style of historiography that 'courts a sense of its own incompleteness and imaginatively offers multiple, simultaneously available points of contact with the spirit of the age' (55). This is writing that attempts to embody the pervasive experience of history's constant shifting. Reading Keats's shorter lyrics, Austen's *Persuasion*, and Byron's *Don Juan*, Rohrbach illustrates how these texts engage history not as an object known but as 'mist' – obscuring, foggy, and also 'missed', evasive (5) – that registers indirectly in 'conspicuously arrested narration' (116), 'exceptional disjunction' (117), palpable 'dizziness' and 'disorientation' (25), and, in Byron's case, 'the lateral movement of digression' (151).

Rohrbach's first chapter reads Helen Maria Williams's 'less progressive than revisionary' representation of the Revolutionary decade beside William Hazlitt's 'full-fledged lateral sense of time' and sets both against a background of Scottish Enlightenment historiography represented by Robert Henry, William Robertson, and Hugh Blair (29). Inventive as the latter thinkers were in their efforts to marry comprehensiveness with narrative clarity, Rohrbach argues that they shared Hume's confidence – and therefore error – that isolating the 'underlying "springs" and "causes"' of history by 'plumbing the depths of "human nature"' [was] a necessary and realizable goal' (42). Invoking William Godwin's brief but potent essay 'Of History and Romance', Rohrbach isolates a strain of Romantic historiographical thinking sceptical of Enlightenment assumptions concerning history's directionality (43-48).

Chapters 2 and 3 focus largely on Keats. Resisting critics who would subordinate Keats's imagination to political history, Rohrbach argues that Keats cultivates an orientation to history akin to negative capability: Keats is not uninterested in history so much as attentive to moments (consider the turn in 'On first looking into Chapman's Homer') when his speaker is suddenly exposed to something beyond historical precedent. Keats's great contribution to Romantic historiography is thus the 'capacity for historical surprise' (78), or in the words of Jürgen Habermas, the ability to recharge "the future as a *source* of disruption" in spite of its near complete depotentialization by the narrative of progress (qtd. in Rohrbach, 66). In chapter 4, Rohrbach focuses on moments in *Persuasion* where characters anticipate retrospection. Such

instances, we discover, do not stabilise so much as fracture the present. In contrast to the historiography of Scott's *Waverly*, *Persuasion* reminds us of the hypothetical quality of the future and the multiplicity of trajectories cohabiting within the present, a point driven home by Austen's decision to end the text just before Napoleon's escape from Elba: 'Austen situates the entire novel within a (pre-Waterloo, 1814 to 1815) time of peace that she knows will turn out, in retrospect, to have been a false sense of peace' (121). Finally, 'through its temporality of presentness' (146), *Don Juan* embraces a digressive narrative form, one wherein 'the poem's logic of what happens next comes [...] from the nonsemantic materiality of language in a tight rhyme scheme' (139). As his participation in world-historical events indicates, Juan is an historical figure. However, his movement through history is idiosyncratic, wayward, errant – a movement made possible, strangely, by the fact that his experiences do *not* mark him and so cannot become either lenses for anticipation or objects of retrospection.

Three quibbles: first, the treatment of Lacan seems somewhat perfunctory; second, the chapters on Keats and Byron would benefit from an engagement with Angela Esterhammer's *Romanticism and Improvisation, 1750-1850*; finally, *Modernity's Mist* hews quite closely to Chandler's *England in 1819*, not only in subject matter but in many of the texts singled out for analysis – but it is hard to complain about this.

Chris Bundock  
University of Regina