

Book Reviews

Emily Rohrbach. *Modernity's Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. Pp. 182. \$85.

What does it mean to conceive of history as shaped less by the elusiveness of the past than by the elusiveness of the future? And what exactly does the future's elusiveness imply about the present and the very presentness of the present in which one's own history unfolds? In *Modernity's Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation*, Emily Rohrbach argues for a Romantic historiographic imagination profoundly informed by these questions. In the wake of work such as James Chandler's *England in 1819*, *Modernity's Mist* revisits Romantic historicism by considering Romantic writers' relation to historiography—to the theoretical and formal problems posed by the writing of history—as it is informed both by their changing understanding of temporal experience and by the events of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. The book shows how shifts in historical understanding already underway in the eighteenth century come to the fore in the wake of Waterloo in freshly poetic and inventive modes. Rohrbach's argument articulates both historical/intellectual contexts and existential/temporal horizons in a distinctive series of readings that underline the role of aesthetic form in responding to and reshaping Romanticism's historical present along with its attendant ethical and political possibilities.

Drawing on the historiographical investigations of Koselleck and, to a lesser extent, Habermas, *Modernity's Mist* situates its argument in relation to what has been considered a sea-change in European writers' relation to futurity during the Romantic period. The French Revolution, along with the rise and defeat of Napoleon, seemed to crystallize an increasing sense of history spinning out of control—with the future revealed as fundamentally unpredictable and the present correspondingly inchoate. For the literary figures that Rohrbach considers, the realization that the future was potentially discontinuous with the present or, at any rate, continuous in ways that remained obscure to them, meant not only that the past ceased to offer clear models or exempla for ethical and political action, but that the present itself had to be thought of as an array of multiple possibilities whose meaning and implications remained subject to revision at every moment. These are writers for whom the meaning and history of the present can never be

fixed. To give one example: Rohrbach specifically takes issue with readers of Austen's *Persuasion* who argue that the novel's happy ending is inscribed as a "foregone conclusion" (122) from its beginning; she shows how, on the contrary, Austen's text repeatedly signals its awareness (and its heroine's awareness) of other stories that might just have easily unfolded from that same beginning. One lives in the shadow of what will have been, but what will have been is, in turn, an endlessly revisable category. Therefore, the stakes are not so much claims concerning the future, which may or may not be realized, as how those claims have the capacity to disturb and transform the lived present.

As the example of Austen suggests, when Rohrbach invokes futurity, she is not concerned with the prophetic, eschatological, visionary Romanticism associated with Blake and Shelley, but with the earthly, grounded, quasi-realist Romanticism associated not only with Austen but at times with poets such as Byron and Keats—the point being that even these writers find themselves unmoored from temporal norms that once served as an historical anchor. Literary and poetic agency in the texts Rohrbach considers hinges on a realization of radical incompleteness in one's ordinary, everyday life and, thus, too, on a realization of the multiplicity of alternatives raised by every "present" experience. A non-linear temporality comes to inform all experience, even the most banal; or, if one prefers, non-linear modes of narrative become necessary to capture the history of the present that these writers explore.

It seems straightforward enough to say that the future is unpredictable, but the issue is not that one might happen to be wrong about this or that action or interpretation, but that no right horizon of action or interpretation exists. Rohrbach shrewdly brings this insight to bear on Romantic scholarship itself: what literary historians often (mis)construe as the context of a literary work is itself fragmentary, incomplete, and subject to revision and reinterpretation. Thus, in each of her chapters (and especially in her two chapters on Keats which have a delicate polemical edge), Rohrbach offers nuanced and attentive readings that are at once sensitive to historical contexts and wary of criticism that reduces literary works to those contexts as if "text" and "context" were stable and fixed entities neatly fitted one inside the other. Precisely the insight of Romantic writers cued to futurity in the way she describes is that contexts cannot be stabilized in that fashion. In her own words: "Is literature to be understood by our measuring it against its historical 'contexts,' or can it function as a distinct kind of context itself, giving us access to historical perspectives and aesthetic experiences that texts themselves made possible, aspects of history made unavailable in other kinds of writing?" (108).

In developing its argument, *Modernity's Mist* nonetheless follows schol-

arly threads that greatly enrich the discussion and make it something more than an intelligent theoretical polemic. It considers how the writers discussed are actively responding not only to their post-Waterloo moment, but also to the tradition of Scottish Enlightenment historical writing. Rohrbach is too careful a reader to allow the Scottish Enlightenment to serve as a mere straw man to her Romantic "poetics of anticipation," and her opening chapter shows how new demands were being placed on the writing of history decades before the French Revolution—demands to be more capacious and inclusive in the very definition of what counted as history. These demands forced historians to come up with new forms of writing. They had to find ways to explore and explain history as something uncontainable by linear or mechanical causalities and thus not always subject to clearly plotted narratives. Yet at the same time, they still attempted to delimit the very problem that an expansive understanding of history-writing poses, fusing non-linear narrative forms with stabilizing overarching structures and interpretive horizons that enabled them to gather up, so to speak, the forces that they had let loose. Throughout *Modernity's Mist*, the argument touches on Romantic writers who analogously attempt to contain their sense of history accelerating beyond control into an unknown and unknowable future—including Helena Maria Williams in her writing on the French Revolution and Walter Scott in his *Waverley* novels.

But what characterizes the Romantic writers to whom the book gives its most detailed attention—Austen, Byron, and Keats (all of whom were readers of the Scottish Enlightenment figures discussed) is that they have given up the project of containment and, therefore, too, the project of a certain kind of history. They understand and, in a paradoxical sense, accept futurity as something entirely lost to their grasp. For that very reason, their understanding of the *present* is inflected by a new kind of uncertainty figured or performed in their writings in multiple ways: images of darkness as in the "mist" of the title, shifts of interpretive perspective, unexpectedly shaped stanzas, peculiar verbal tenses, pointless digressions, elongated caesuras, ellipses, dashes, and the like. When linear temporalities that imply a continuous and ultimately predictable pattern of experience (whether progress or decline) lose their critical purchase, the forms of Romantic writing make their own kind of critical intervention. Therefore, the historiographic argument of *Modernity's Mist* necessarily hinges on the formal analysis of texts. Whether reading prose or poetry, Rohrbach draws attention to large narrative structures that inform—or deform—temporal relations within a given work even as she also draws attention to minutiae of sentences, figures of speech, and puns as well as rhythmic pauses and punctuation marks. She explores how all of these elements capture an increasingly dilating sense of present time that does not so much move forward

into the future as express the expanding possibilities of the present in view of the future's obscurity. The Keats chapters are particularly deft in treating his deployment of verse forms, offering, for example, very fine analyses of how he draws on a variety of sonnet forms within the stanzas of his odes—playing with and against literary tradition and, thus, with and against expectations—to transform the reader's experience of time. The larger point is that Keats's formal, aesthetic sensibility is precisely what opens up his poetry to the problems posed by history and politics because the temporal horizon of his poetry is what enables a new kind of ethical and political agency.

Though the argument convincingly aligns Keats, Austen, and Byron, it is also highly attentive to differences between them. The melancholy future anterior of *Persuasion* is decidedly different from the buoyant present-tense digressions of *Don Juan* though both, in different ways, exemplify a newly felt uncertainty in relation to what the future may bring and, therefore, a newly felt uncertainty concerning the forms and meanings of the present. But uncertainty need not imply crisis or disarray. Rohrbach reads these writers as committed to the idea of a present shot through with multiple possibilities and hence peculiarly freeing and open to the agencies of literary form. The introduction offers a brief but highly suggestive reading of Hazlitt's *The Spirit of the Age* that emphasizes his attention to the multiplicity of that eponymous "spirit," his refusal to let it mean or do any one thing. The final chapter returns to *The Spirit of the Age* and its seemingly backhanded tribute to Byron, which is, as Rohrbach shows, not so backhanded after all. Rather, it speaks to Hazlitt and Byron's shared interest in writing that reflects the opacity and heterogeneity of a present moment in which an unexpected death—in Hazlitt's case that of Byron himself—may at any moment break in on the act of writing. Rohrbach might have given some additional attention to Hazlitt's explicitly philosophical writings on futurity, especially given their importance to Keats, but the theoretical interest she finds in *The Spirit of the Age* and its polemical, biographical sketches is compelling on its own terms.

Altogether, the configuration of Keats, Austen, and Byron—with a look back to Scottish Enlightenment historians and an especially notable nod to Hazlitt—is at once fresh and effective. At the same time, Percy Bysshe Shelley is so ensconced in Romantic studies as the poet of Romantic futurity that Rohrbach seems to have felt obligated to clarify at greater length (I think unnecessarily) why he does not fit into her argument concerning the "poetics of anticipation." The chapter on Keats's sonnets concludes with a brief reading of "England in 1819" and "A Defence of Poetry" that positions Shelley as a poet committed to "social and political comprehensiveness" (75) in a way that Keats eschews. While Shelley certainly treats

the problems of history and futurity differently from Keats, one may still be forgiven for finding this account surprisingly reductive in a reader as typically attentive as Rohrbach. The "Defence" in particular sets its argument to work via a range of disturbed temporalities, and the "shadows of futurity" it summons at the end may not be as altogether different from Keats's "mists" and "mysteries" (5) as she claims. The latter argument concerning Keats (and Austen and Byron) remains powerful and persuasive. *Modernity's Mist* is an impressive work that both offers new perspectives on Romantic historicism and shows the historical stakes—which is to say, too, the ethical and political stakes—of Romanticism's formal complexities.

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Maurizio Ascari, and Stephen Knight, eds. *From the Sublime to City Crime*. Monaco: LiberFaber, 2015. Pp. 297. 20€.

From the Sublime to City Crime comprises twelve essays—not including the editors' co-authored introduction—covering a period in the development of British, American, and European crime fiction that snugly overlaps what we conventionally style the period of international Romanticism. Several of these were originally published in a thematic issue of the Italian journal *La Questione Romantica*, co-edited by Maurizio Ascari and Stephen Knight under the title *Crime and the Sublime*. Among British writers, the volume ranges from William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft through Thomas De Quincey and James Hogg to G. M. W. Reynolds, author of the sprawling serialized novel *The Mysteries of London*, whose first weekly number appeared in October 1844. Their American cohort is represented by Charles Brockden Brown and Edgar Allan Poe, while Honoré de Balzac, Eugène Sue, and a handful of pioneering Scandinavians draw our attention to continental developments. The editorial intention ostensibly embracing all of these essays, aside from their shared generic and historical focus, is to reveal the gradual precipitation of what came to be called "detective fiction," a subgenre of crime fiction epitomized by the "whodunnit" and traditionally distinguished by its foregrounding of the investigator's (inevitably successful) problem-solving abilities, out of a vigorous but more heterogeneous category of popular fiction founded on the compelling—i.e., "sublime"—power of the sheer mystery and terror of crime itself.

The ideological underpinnings of this literary-historical understanding are not, in themselves, new, and can be traced back to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and its critical progeny, like D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the*

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