



## ASSESSING NEW BOOKS ON ENGLISH AND AMERICAN LITERATURE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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### MODERNITY'S MIST: BRITISH ROMANTICISM AND THE POETICS OF ANTICIPATION

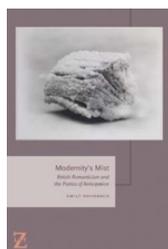
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By **Emily Rohrbach**  
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*Reviewed by Kevis Goodman on 2016-12-10.*

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Raymond Williams once observed with regret that if historical analysis describes the social in terms of "known relationships, institutions, formations, positions," then "all that is present and moving, all that escapes or seems to escape from the fixed and the explicit and the known, is grasped and defined as the personal: this, here, now, alive, 'subjective'" (*Marxism and Literature* [1977] 128). This misrecognition, he argued, results from the difficulty of describing the present as history from within its unfolding movement, or (since Williams favored a chemical metaphor) the challenge of accounting for "social experiences in solution, as distinct from those social semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available" as such (*ML* 133-4). In recent years, the problem of how literature registers and renders the historical present has inspired a number of different projects in later eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary criticism. Considering how aspects of contemporaneity that have not yet "precipitated" in the form of ideas or narrative may nonetheless be palpable as sensation, affect, or feeling, these studies have included my treatment of the unsettled elements of history "in solution" in *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (2004), Thomas Pfau's *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy* (2005), and Mary A. Favret's *War at a Distance: Romanticism and the Making of Modern Wartime* (2009).

In her subtle and carefully argued new book, Emily Rohrbach draws on this work as well as on earlier important studies of Romantic historiography such as James Chandler's *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (1998) and Mark Salber Phillips's *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing: 1740-1820* (2000). But her argument adds an important new angle. For Rohrbach, the uncertainty of the present derives less from the gap between the local, phenomenological experience of the individual and the *structural* complexity of the ensemble of conditions in which he or she is situated than from a particular *temporal* complexity and shared historiographical dilemma facing early nineteenth-century writers. Unsettled by the revolutionary ruptures in America and France, traditional eighteenth-century philosophical assumptions about linear progress, as well as the older formula that made past history the great teacher of life (*historia magistra vitae*), no longer provided a reliable compass. As the patterns of the past failed to supply a model for how the present would unfold into the future, that present became unpredictable, difficult to characterize, and impossible to totalize -- not only because it was unprecedented but also because, as Rohrbach argues, drawing on accounts of modernity by Reinhart Koselleck, Jürgen Habermas, and Fredric Jameson, it was shadowed by an unknown futurity that was inevitably part of its attempts at self-conception.

Rohrbach's figure for this epistemological uncertainty of modernity is atmospheric rather than (as in Williams) chemical: it is a "mist." Her mist comes specifically from John Keats, the author who receives the most thorough scrutiny in her book and who famously compared "human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments" in a letter to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds (3 May 1818). Insofar as

that letter refers to a "general and gregarious advance of intellect" over time, Keats seems to invite a model of progress for both the individual human life and the life of the species. But his letter instead stages an impasse, for the poet can describe only two chambers and proceed no further; all doors lead only to "dark passages," leaving him -- "in a Mist" -- to bear the "burden of the mystery" of what the future might bring. For Rohrbach this burden of anticipation involves the peculiar temporality that she, following Jacques Lacan and Samuel Weber, calls the "future anterior," in which the present is the time of "what will have been" or (more accurately if less mellifluously) "what *might will have been*" (2). She aptly distinguishes this futurity, which renders the present a site of negative capability, from *the* future, because futurity remains as multiple and chameleonic as Keats's poet, and she thereby also differentiates her own topic from prophecy and prediction, the subject of other studies in Romanticism, such as Ian Balfour's *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* (2002). By contrast, and very much in sympathy with Anne-Lise François's work on Jane Austen (*Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* [2007]), Rohrbach seeks to display what she calls the "rhetoric of non-prophecy" (19).

For Rohrbach, the authors that constitute the core of her study -- Keats (Chapters 2 and 3), Austen (Chapter 4), and Lord Byron (Chapter 5) -- are "non-vatic," interested neither in transcendence nor in apocalypse, but in the world of sensation, affect, and immanent experience. Moreover, she is unwilling to describe the halted progress in Keats's letter as an impasse, because for these three writers, as well as for William Hazlitt (treated in Chapter 1 and then again, briefly but wonderfully, in the coda to her final chapter [159-161]), modernity's mist is anything but disabling. The unavailability of the future opens up to their imaginations, she argues, a present moment "teeming" -- Rohrbach likes the word and uses it often -- with multiple possibilities and alternative outcomes. The spirit of *this* age is not a single "Spirit" but, as Hazlitt's full title acknowledges, *The Spirit of the Age: Or, Contemporary Portraits*. When the past is no longer considered to foreshadow the future, then the present moment is replete with lateral side-shadowing. "Negative capability" is, after all, a genuine capability.

Not least of the virtues of this argument is its skillful constellation of Keats with Austen and Byron. This is a trio that, as Rohrbach dryly remarks (for she knows this is an understatement), "do not routinely sit still together for a critical portrait" (17). Once they do, however, they lend admirable generic diversity to *Modernity's Mist* -- especially appropriate to its insistence on the multiplicity of the historical moment as it crosses from short lyric forms (Keats's sonnets and odes) to the novel (*Persuasion*) and to comic epic verse (*Don Juan*). In addition, she forges important links between this second generation of Romantic authors and a large body of eighteenth-century historiography -- also not routinely part of the same portrait -- including samples of the voluminous output of the Scottish Enlightenment (Robert Henry, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, Hugh Blair, David Hume, and others). With their celebration of progress and faith in intelligible patterns of causation, the conjectural and stadial histories favored by the Enlightenment, as Rohrbach notes in Chapter 1, failed to accommodate modernity's unpredictable futurity and "close[d] off the potential for futurity to disrupt patterns of the past" (43). Yet Rohrbach resists the temptation to oversimplify Enlightenment historiography: even at its most optimistic, she acknowledges, eighteenth-century history writing, often in spite of itself, displayed the tension between its abstract commitments to systematic regularity and linear progress, on the one hand, and, on the other, the centrifugal, formal challenges of expanding the domain of "what constitutes history" (32). This tension, she suggests, rose to the surface by 1790s and marked the historical writings and eyewitness reports of William Godwin, Helen Maria Williams, and, later on, Hazlitt. It was then embraced by Keats, Austen, and Byron, whose creative projects each, if in different ways, resisted the unifying and totalizing impulses of the grand historical narratives that were a staple of their early reading.

Another crucial aspect and insight of *Modernity's Mist* is its strategy of identifying, in these three authors, a kind of "historical thinking" (35, 70) that occurs at the level of poetic form or in non-linear narrative structures, and especially in the experience and "time of reading" (19, 26, etc.) that form and narrative create. The historicity of these literary works, or more precisely the *historicizing work* that they carry out, Rohrbach argues forcefully, resides *not*, or at least not only, in their relationship to some context outside the text, whether they are said to repress it (the argument of the Romantic New Historicism), or to realize and record it indirectly, as in more recent work. She is consistently critical of contextual analysis because, she contends, it can render a text merely reactive and because literature gives "us access to historical perspectives and aesthetic experiences that texts themselves made possible, aspects of history unavailable to other kinds of writing" (108). Keats,

Austen, and Byron are "both historical . . . and historicizing" (107) because the peculiar non-progressive temporalities they enact place their readers in a mist of anticipation that captures something quite real about historical existence in their moment. Or, as she puts it, the respective reading experiences that they instigate, which are variously dizzying and surprising (in Keats's sonnets and odes), anticipatory and contingent (in Austen's novel), or wildly digressive (in the "radical presentness" of Byron's poetic narrative), constitute an important "historiographical aesthetic" (61, 85) in their own right. Although Rohrbach does not herself make this connection, I would suggest that this historiographical aesthetic might productively be regarded as both the counterpart and antithesis to Fredric Jameson's well-known "aesthetic of cognitive mapping" (*Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* [1991] 51, 54). It is a counterpart because Rohrbach very much shares Jameson's interest in the difficulty of "think[ing] our present time in History" (*Postmodernism* 46), as well as his conviction that modernity's new attitude toward the present, its "consciousness of history and of being historical," incorporates an imagined "gaze from the future" (Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* [2002] 25-26). But this historiographical aesthetic is also, of course, antithetical to Jameson's "cognitive mapping" because neither Rohrbach nor her authors aim to map the structural coordinates of the historical present or aspire to grasp its totality. For Rohrbach, perhaps, the aesthetic and the cognitive may pull too much in different directions -- or at least she prefers describing the mist to assembling the map.

Perhaps one of the boldest -- if quietly polemical -- interventions of this book is its recuperation of the Romantic subject, the seemingly private self that has largely been in disrepute since Jerome McGann declared it a product of "Romantic ideology" over thirty years ago (*The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* [1983]). Taking up William Godwin's surprising claim that the private lives of great men, rather than their public characters, can point to a social future distinct from "the dull repetition of what has defined British culture (customs, shared history)" (46), Rohrbach suggests that the "individual literary subject takes the pulse(s) of the historical age and makes them, at least partly, audible" (59-60). She can make that argument precisely because the self she identifies is not the unified and transcendent one that McGann and others disposed of, for the future anterior perspective on the present necessarily prevents such self-identity and resolution. Thus the disorientation and alterings of the self that Keats calls "soul-making," the unrealized or thwarted anticipations of Anne Elliot in Austen's *Persuasion*, and the wayward and proudly directionless narrating "I" of Byron's *Don Juan* each represent, in a way that writings focused on public context may not, qualities of historical experience in the modern world. To understand that these unsettled subjectivities represent a special literary mode of historiography, as Rohrbach does, is also to suggest that what so much historicist criticism has regarded as "a turn away from history--a repression of history that enabled, in its place, a representation of the self in nature--might instead be seen as a turn toward history on these new terms" (60). There is some precedent for this argument in earlier work (besides the studies I mentioned in my first paragraph, Rohrbach acknowledges Deborah Elise White's *Romantic Returns: Superstition, Imagination, History* [2000]), but her argument remains brave and important to attend to.

To set off her central examples of the poetics of anticipation and rhetoric of non-prophecy, Rohrbach occasionally introduces, for contrast, brief passages or examples from William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley, and Sir Walter Scott. While these counterpoints can be locally or heuristically effective, they may invite the suspicion that these three writers are being used as foils for the complexity of Keats, Austen, and Byron -- and thereby denied their own complexity. While this objection would be fair enough, it would also miss an important point. Rohrbach is not attempting a comprehensive study -- she shares with her authors a resistance to totality -- but a way of reading texts for their historical thinking: their "turn toward history on . . . new terms" (60). As I suggested above, she is outlining is a *kind* of realism, although certainly not realism or referentiality as we usually understand these terms, because the formal repertoires that interest her do not involve verisimilitude or mimetic reflection, let alone objectivity or contextual reference. Rather, what Rohrbach calls "the time of reading" -- a text's creation of an undetermined present or an open future during the process of reading -- captures something both significant and true to historical existence in the middle of the temporal motion of modernity, an existence full of "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts," yet "without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (John to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 [?] December, 1817). It is a strategy that scholars will be able to bring to different texts, including those that Rohrbach herself sets to the side. *Modernity's Mist* is well positioned for this purpose, too: it is one of the inaugural volumes of Fordham University Press's new series, Lit Z, edited by Sara Guyer and Brian McGrath, which understands "romanticism" not in

period terms but "as a way of thinking that compels another relation to the present" (ii). This is Emily Rohrbach's topic, of course, but also part of her critical method.

**Kevis Goodman** is Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley.

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