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*Modernity's Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation*  
by Emily Rohrbach (review)

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*Lara's* sexual transgression not in Byron's incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta (as Benita Eisler has argued), but in his gay experiences at the court of Ali Pasha during his travels in Albania in 1810–11, which then fed into the passion between Lara and Kaled. Lara's unrevealed secret is an example of what Warren calls the 'Spectral Orient', Byron's knowing critique of the futility of trying to get to the truth. Like Lara himself, the spectral East does not easily yield up its mysteries and remains what Derrida calls *à venir* ('to come'). Thus by deconstructive methods Warren suggests that Byron, Shelley and Keats (the subject of a strong final chapter) all come to make a tragic (in Shelley's case) or pragmatic (in Byron and Keats's cases) surrender to the realisation of our ontological, epistemological and ethical limits. All find that Orientalism leads to 'failures of imagination'. Byron, alone of his contemporaries, revelled in the fun to be had from such failure and Warren rightly quotes Byron's words to Francis Hodgson that 'the end of all scribblement is to amuse'.

I found Warren's argument difficult to grasp with both hands, but both books raise intriguing questions about Byronic Orientalism and wider questions about method. In essence, both ascribe to their authors a deep intentionality and both insist that the real East somewhere out there was never the primary point of Orientalism. Where Cohen-Vrignaud sees highly specified references to political economy encoded within the texts, his commentary can drain the life from them: for example, he approaches *Sardanapalus* 'as a microeconomic fable by reading the play's imperial thematic as an allegory for the tensions in the liberal conception of man as a self-owning subject'; although Cohen-Vrignaud does manage a decent pun on Byron's 'liberal husbandry'. But in their different ways Cohen-Vrignaud and Warren manage to keep our eyes close to the texts without re-inscribing the representational politics that gave rise to postcolonial critique of Romanticism in the first place. That is quite a difficult manoeuvre to execute, especially given that both authors interpret Orientalism as ultimately self-regarding. But they deserve credit for creating space for literary analysis and insisting that Orientalism, product of a colonial age as it was, could function in more abundant and interesting ways than postcolonialism on its own can tell us.

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MODERNITY'S MIST: BRITISH ROMANTICISM AND THE POETICS OF ANTICIPATION. By Emily Rohrbach. New York: Fordham University Press, 2016. Pp. 185. ISBN 9780823267972. £22.99.

The problems of history, historicism, historiography and their relation to British Romanticism go way back. A common critique—voiced by contemporary reviewers, Victorian critics, Modernists including T. S. Eliot, and, more recently, the New Historicist interventions of the 1980s—has been that Romantic poets are guilty of a turning away from the present, from the political and even from the 'real'. Poststructuralist theorists, such as Paul de Man, went further to suggest that even attempts to evade the vicissitudes of the present—the Romantic *raison d'être*—were frequently unsuccessful, succumbing to numerous lacunae and aporia. There has, however, been much revisionary scholarship which has sought to resuscitate the Romantic poets' historical and political credentials, and it is to this field that Emily Rohrbach's *Modernity's Mist* makes its contribution.

*Modernity's Mist* looks in detail at a hitherto under-explored Romantic engagement with

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the particular problems, circa 1800, of understanding the present in relation to the past and the future. One response to this dilemma, according to Rohrbach, involved the fictional, poetic or epistolary staging of a subject position that imagines ‘what might will have been [*sic*]’, which is described here as a state of anxious anticipation about the present and its possible futures that bears resemblance to the psychoanalytic formulation of ‘future anteriority’. Acknowledging that this trepidation is a human as much as a Romantic tendency, Rohrbach nonetheless finds biographical and literary evidence for its centrality to the works of John Keats, Jane Austen and Lord Byron. The concept of anticipating reflection upon the uncertainty of the present from imagined futures seems a part of that familiar Romantic yearning after what is ever more about to be, but the complications of multiplied simultaneity are a welcome challenge to thinking about Romantic desire and dread.

The introduction and opening chapter delineate the new historiographies of the eighteenth century, and the conflicts between teleological and contingent narratives which they generated. Hume, Godwin, Hazlitt and less well known figures such as William Robertson and Robert Henry are discussed in terms of their responses to the new challenges to historiography that the Enlightenment and rapidly changing socio-economic conditions and political events raised. Rohrbach describes a divide between Scottish Enlightenment philosophers, who saw the present and the future as arising out of and predictable in terms of historical precedents, and those, such as Rousseau and Godwin, who saw the possibilities for as yet unknown ways of being that could arise out of as yet unquantified human capacities. Chapter 1 closes with a fascinating comparison of Hazlitt’s series of individual portraits in *The Spirit of the Age*, and the ‘little histories’ of Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*. For Rohrbach, these little histories do not add up to a complete story and are often private or semi-private, remembered by few even of the people they concern, and such historiographical strategies can be seen to resist totalising representation and grand narratives. The spirit of the age is manifested in multifarious ways and, rather than offering a clear prediction of the future, instead dramatises a present and possible futures that are in flux, in the process of becoming.

Chapter 2 looks into Keats’s correspondence with J. H. Reynolds, including the famous ‘negative capability’ and ‘unsmokeable’ formulations of Shakespearian non-identity, before discussing in detail the sonnets ‘On first looking into Chapman’s Homer’ and ‘On sitting down to read *King Lear* once again’. Disorientation and dizziness are seen to be key to an aesthetics of surprise in Keats, which aims to register the ‘goings on’ of history—something which the predominant historical and political discourse of the early nineteenth century was failing to do. This argument for an appreciation of Keats’s anticipatory aesthetic runs counter to the tendency to associate Romanticism with an attempt to reconcile the past to the present, and Rohrbach’s discussion of the works in this book puts the individual subject at the centre of this uncertainty, experiencing the radical plurality of possibilities in the present moment. Rather than what New Historicists have called a turn away from history, Keats’s disorientation emerges here as a confrontation of history on new terms—that of a decentred subject. Trying to rescue Keats from historical blindness in the Chapman sonnet, Rohrbach seems to suggest that the effect of discovery on Cortez’s imagination surpasses all accounts which the speaker has read, and such was the experience for the speaker in first reading Chapman’s Homer. The chapter ends with a comparison of Keats’s two sonnets to Percy Shelley’s ‘England in 1819’, and the place of prophecy in Shelley’s version of the future anterior imagination. The third chapter contextualises Keats’s odes in terms of ‘the politics of his concepts of time’ in order to argue that they facilitate alternative conceptions of time and ways of being in modernity.

Focusing on ‘Ode to Psyche’ and ‘To Autumn’, Rohrbach draws out the historical awareness and intervention of the poems with reference to Keats’s letters to Reynolds and to his family. Here the reading of Keats’s delayed action in recognising and imagining Psyche is compared to the process of processing or accommodating historical surprise or rupture. Far from refusing or turning away from the historical moment, the odes are read as dilations of the present which are required in order to process the intervention of the new in historical consciousness—a moment in which potential and unknown resultant futures are imaginatively in play.

Chapter 4 offers an assessment of Jane Austen’s historiography in *Persuasion*, and contrasts it with the backward-only looking *Waverley* novels of Sir Walter Scott. Anne Elliot’s consolatory attempts to imagine future selves looking back on her present moments are related to the false sense of peace that the characters in the novel experience in the wake of Napoleon’s abdication and the apparent end of hostilities in 1814. Here Rohrbach opens up an ironic distance between the characters and a readership who will have experienced the unexpected shattering of that peace (albeit only briefly) upon Napoleon’s dramatic return. Allied to this is a ‘double “time of reading”’, whereby the aesthetic effect of the prose alters the ostensible meaning of the story’s events, creating a radical instability in the present moment. The discussion of the formal properties of Austen’s novel, including ‘the rhythmic pauses of the sentences’, is where the analysis really starts to bite, and where Austen’s use of poetic devices in her fiction are brought convincingly into the ‘cluster of responses to the intellectual problems of modernity’. The fifth and final chapter argues that there is a more radical response to the historiographical problems of modernity to be found in Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*. The unfinished epic, for Rohrbach, through the maintenance of multiple possibilities, resists the ‘narrative of the victors’—the foreclosure of history—and enables both alternate pasts and futures to be imagined. Again, the linking of the formal properties of the stanzas to an attitude towards historiography is compelling, and it is only a shame that this is one of the shorter chapters, given the wealth of examples that Byron’s sixteen-canto poem might have offered.

*Modernity’s Mist* is a valuable way into thinking through the historical engagement of Romantic aesthetics. I wonder if, given the careful attention that is paid to poetic and novelistic form, more could have been done to consider the form of letter writing; Rohrbach sometimes relies upon excerpts of the letters of Keats and Byron as supporting evidence for aesthetic theory, rather than considering them as historiographically engaged works in their own right. However, the sense of something that is activated in the reading and re-reading of these works—especially in the case of *Don Juan*—has exciting implications for the exploration of other Romantic-era historiographical interventions, and for our understanding of the engagement of later movements and eras with the legacies of Romanticism.

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Some of the most important questions present to literary studies concern the nature of literary studies itself. What is it for and how is it to proceed? One way to start asking such questions is to consider the distinctness of literary studies from its closest disciplines: history