

Book Reviews

William H. Galperin. *The History of Missed Opportunities: British Romanticism and the Emergence of the Everyday*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. Pp. 181. \$55.

The demand for a theoretical articulation of our relationship to “the everyday” has always been fraught with genuinely interesting difficulties. Insofar as the category captures a sense of what is pervasive in experience (Blanchot, as William Galperin notes in this study, describes the everyday as “what we are first of all, and most often”), we might ask what kinds of theoretical perspectives allow us to touch this idea of life as it is actually lived. Many of the philosophers, social theorists, and literary critics in the long history of interest in the everyday—the shapes of daily lives, the invisibility of mundane events, the look of objects of apparent insignificance, the feelings that attend repetition, the emergence of unreflective attitudes, the habits of ordinary speech—surrender the ambition to define the category, and they often turn, instead, to reflecting on our orientation or attitude toward this dimension of experience. Accordingly, it has been said that the everyday harbors real critical and creative potential as often as it has been asserted that it is the realm of deadening predictability and inauthenticity.

In *The History of Missed Opportunities: British Romanticism and the Emergence of the Everyday*, William Galperin registers the contemporary interest in the everyday with some skepticism. In contrast to the picture of the everyday as what is familiar, the everyday in Galperin’s study of Romanticism surfaces as a form of relation with the past and not with present-tense experience. In the sequence of wide-ranging and insightful readings he offers across Romantic-era visual arts (the panorama), lyric and narrative poetry (Wordsworth and Byron), novels (Austen), and epistolary correspondence (the Byron controversy), Galperin argues that the everyday is not open—paradoxically—to observation and that it becomes perceptible, instead, through forms of recollection or retrospection. Galperin derives his theoretical framework from a cluster of figures whose convergence is approximately familiar but whose collective relation to the idea of the everyday might be less apparent: Maurice Blanchot, Martin Heidegger, Henri Lefebvre, Stanley Cavell, and Paul de Man. In the opening chapter Galperin writes thus:

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The everyday's emergence and early conceptualization as a history of what was missed, as something appreciable in retrospect but not in real time, is more than just analogous to what a Marxist like Lefebvre also finds missing and lacking; it is at cross-purposes—and significantly so—with the very developments of which romantic-period discourse, in its subscriptions to interiority and individualism, remains a signal manifestation. (33)

What we might think of as the everyday's historiographic deep structure turns out over the course of Galperin's readings to contend with the import of presentness in Romanticism's understanding of selfhood.

The important contribution of Galperin's study thus lies in the way he conceptualizes the elusiveness of the everyday in temporal rather than perceptual terms: Romantic writers' sense that the everyday often escapes or appears hidden stems from their recognition that it can only be encountered after it has passed and projected a "counter-actual history" (6) and not from the everyday's permeating present-tense invisibility that renders it too ubiquitous to manifest or impress itself. The Romantic texts at the center of Galperin's chapters exhibit a structure of retrospection whereby "the missed, the unappreciated, [and] the overlooked" come into consciousness with sudden and unexpected proximity (27). These recovered moments, what Galperin throughout calls "a history of missed opportunities," are a revelation of things as they are re-seen and come into view through backward glances cast in the "prevailing afterwordness" (18) or aftermath of experience.

The chapter that engages the double-takes of Wordsworth's poetry across moments in *The Prelude*, *Lyrical Ballads*, and the "Immortality Ode," accordingly, concentrates on the conflict between the poet's retrospective connection with nature and the Wordsworthian faith in the imagination as an agency working in the present. Wordsworth for Galperin instantiates an order of experience already "mandated for review" and imperceptible without the internal act that reconsiders it (8). What both Wordsworth and Heidegger call the "world" turns out to be constituted by "on-site retrospection" (63) that precisely *fails* to grasp what is near and close by—as in, classically, the episode in *The Prelude* 6 of Wordsworth's crossing of the Alps. A moment like this anti-climax, or like the poet's encounter with a beggar in *The Prelude* 7, for Galperin, importantly registers "something lived and real" that is "acutely palpable" (51) because it remains faithful to the sense and feeling that attends the recognition of the poet's failure-to-have-seen.

Galperin argues in Chapter 3 that Austen's novels, like Wordsworth's poetry, work to resuscitate "a present lost to time" (75). This original and

resonant interpretation of Austen's long-remarked allegiance to the everyday reveals how the abundance and proliferation of details in her novels stands in for and in effect rescues a past, as though a novel like *Mansfield Park* were bent on capturing the ordinary actuality of a missed moment in all of its minute completeness. Austen's "detailism" (20) for Galperin, as he argues in his compressed reading of *Emma*, does not align her with the project of realism at all but instead instantiates a form of narrative in which plot becomes essentially subordinate to the rendering in prose of the ordinary dimensions of real life.

Because the missed opportunities in Byron's short unhappy marriage are concrete, Galperin's discussion of the "epistolary novel" (104) surrounding the Byron controversy is perhaps the most rewarding and incisive of his case studies. Galperin's reading of the letters that passed between Byron, Annabella Milbanke, and others in conjunction with his reading of the poems Byron wrote during this period gives his theoretical claim that marriage for Byron remains "already a matter of history" (105) a wonderful traction that is both fascinating and instructive to follow. When Galperin writes that the marriage between Byron and Milbanke was "a missed opportunity in advance of eventually becoming one" (104), the logic whereby Byron appears to be in quest of an ordinary that is in fact extraordinary—a truly "speculative" (105) rather than actual or possible domestic life—becomes brightly animated. Galperin's point is not that Byron understands day-to-day domestic relations as a challenge to his inconstancy but that marriage represents a possibility for the poet that is best expressed not as a hope—a hope, say, for feasible domestication or for the stability of a quotidian life—but actually a "retrospect" (108), a hope that never materializes in the prospects the real-time present holds out and lives instead in the record of what once subsequently might have been.

It is worth highlighting that Galperin's understanding of the everyday as a hypothetical or nearly subjunctive form of experience rather than an actualized one runs against the long history of interest in the concept. In the vivid contemporary resurgence of interest in the everyday, for example, criticism often struggles and grates *against* forms of theorizing that define our relation to ordinary life as out of reach, indeterminate, or slippery. In Galperin's readings, Wordsworth, Austen, and Byron are consigned to insights that must run through a receding past, one that becomes accessible in the distinct forms of historiographical consciousness that Galperin so compellingly pursues. But because he anchors his explorations of retrospection around the concept of the everyday, Galperin delineates his own topic in a way that intrinsically calls for a more earnest encounter with strains in literary criticism, social and cultural theory, and the field of literature and philosophy that take "the everyday" as a defining and persistent concern—

and, at times, even a stake. Galperin's commitment to a way of reading inspired by a cluster of recognized voices in phenomenology and literary theory, an expected assembly that centers around Blanchot and Heidegger, means that his theoretical touchstones feel less canonical than they do habitual, since the intellectual context of interest at issue here historically has called for recourse to different sets of landmarks. This may disappoint readers interested in the specific conceptual force and more varying intellectual investments that often motivate literary criticism explicitly inspired by the concepts of the everyday and the ordinary. At a few moments in this study Galperin's unwillingness to engage directly contemporary scholarship on the everyday has the effect of writing scholars out of their own concepts. While Cavell, for example, appears in Galperin's discussions of remarriage, few figures in literary studies and adjacent fields who labor explicitly in the terrain opened up by an engagement with the everyday are invoked. This includes scholars who pursue the everyday as a central conceptual interest (Charles Altieri, Richard Eldridge, Rita Felski, Michael Fried, Andrew Miller, Toril Moi, among others) and criticism that aligns such an interest with Romantic-era writing (Edward Duffy, Eric Lindstrom, Laura Quinney, Joshua Wilner, Nancy Yousef, to name a few).

This evasion on Galperin's part serves as evidence of his direct opposition to a particular understanding of the everyday, and the counter-argumentative strain of his study surfaces clearly in his discussions of Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal* and Austen's letters. *The History of Missed Opportunities* thus exemplifies an impulse to cast a serious interest in the everyday too hastily as symptomatic (rather than properly "critical" or legitimately exploratory), that is, to see the very topic as a form of nostalgia for the concrete and the particular that bespeaks a desire for a return to "reality" (after decades of tracing the "reality effect"). The implicit charge is often of wistfulness for a pre-critical connection with experience, one whose allure—traditionally speaking—it has been the work of Theory to critique and dispel. As Galperin watches Dorothy and Austen (in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively) catalog the continuum of important nothings that comprise daily and weekly domestic life, his lack of curiosity about an everyday stamped by everydayness is evident and explicit. Both Dorothy in her journal and Austen in her letters succumb to a relentless recordkeeping of prosaic happenings, so that, for example, the diurnal course of Dorothy's cooking, baking, gardening, weeding, and watching the comings and goings of others is a "stubbornly undifferentiated" (70) continuum of sameness. Similarly, in her letters Austen becomes the Ms. Bates of *Emma* as her gossip-like concern with daily affairs registers "a starkly probable world" (97) where mere dailiness takes hold. These observations may strike some readers as off key since the discussion is unattuned to lines of thinking that

considers the distinctive relationship of women's lives to everyday mundane activities and dispiriting forms of repetitive time. Yet there is a further stake here. Both Dorothy and Austen for Galperin register commonplace encounters and tasks with an unreflective eye and an intellectual horizon marked by a lack of distance, too fully absorbed and immersed in the details of the local world. Dorothy is said to be "struck by actuality" (70), thus unreceptive to its deeper truths, so that she cannot "stand back . . . and truly see" (98), while her brother sees even in the wake of missing (68). Nature in Dorothy's journals is "just one more thing that keeps her busy" (69), clearly and undeniably, but Galperin's harsh reflections on these artifacts of now-time recordkeeping seem misplaced in a book about the forms of contact Romantic texts forge with the everyday. In fact, the concept of the everyday as it is used by critics invested in its potential critical force frequently seeks to unsettle such arguments about the necessary naivité of our ordinary and non-negotiable relationships to the world, a perceived insufficiency that reflectiveness (or often Theory) then seeks to overcome.

The critical yield of *The History of Missed Opportunities* is the dramatic and rewarding reorientation it presents in historical thinking within the study of Romanticism. Like recent work by Mary Favret or Emily Rohrbach, Galperin's study challenges us to reconsider an image of history that would move us through a past, present, and then a future, and it illuminates literature's role in assimilating and reencountering forms of experience that history itself may miss.

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John Keats in Context. Michael O'Neill, ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. 373. £75.

John Keats in Context is the latest in the *Literature in Context* series from Cambridge University Press, volumes designed to provide comprehensive accounts of the historical, literary, and personal circumstances that inform a writer's work, as well as evaluations of the lasting effects the work has had. As Michael O'Neill's concise introduction makes clear, this particular addition to the *in Context* list takes on the considerable task of reaching both academic and non-academic readers of Keats, even as it recognizes "that he possesses the inexhaustibility of those few writers who are necessary" (2). The volume's six sections move with readable speed through the poet's personal history, the development of his intellectual interests and poetic projects, his responses to wider cultural and historical events, his literary