

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE SUBJECT IN AUSTEN, KEATS, AND BYRON

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the sense of time and subjectivity in Jane Austen, John Keats, and Lord Byron. Revising new historicist accounts of Romantic writers' repressions of history, this study develops a historicist method for examining the Romantic sense of the present as the most recent historical age, that is, the Romantic imagining of the present as a future memory. When the present begins to appear elusive, in that its significance rests on an unknown future, sensation and affect become crucial literary resources for registering its movement at the level of the subject. This approach thus enables us to understand these writers' responses to history and to prevailing ideas about history in new ways. In de-centering representations of subjectivity and in deferrals, digressions, and dilations of the moment, these writers challenge enlightenment notions of historical progress. Their representations of subjectivity self-consciously incorporate the language of history; Keats's "Ode to Psyche," for instance, not only reflects an intimate sense of the poet's own career, but also registers the moment in European intellectual history when Romantic writers become troubled by the enlightenment's neglect of any discourse of the soul.

Similar incorporations of history occur in Austen and Byron. With its anticipations of retrospection, Austen's *Persuasion* displays a self-consciousness about the historical specificity of this kind of representation, imagining a subjectivity open toward the future and attuned to forces of historical contingency. Byron's poetics present the advent of the modern subject as a consequence of larger temporal dislocations: "'The time is out of joint,' and so am I," he writes in *Don Juan*. Unlike the idea of progress—which, by way of its teleological constructions of time, closes off the future's potential to disrupt expectations—these writers' representations open the present up to an unknown future and to multiple possibilities. This is the first book-length study to bring these three authors together based on philosophical, historiographical, and aesthetic sympathies. To illustrate these sympathies, I refer to theories of narrative, history, and psychoanalysis in the course of analyzing the temporalities of the literary subject.