William H. Galperin brings such a sensibility to his new study of Romantic writing, and he finds it enacted intermittently, but repeatedly and intensely, throughout major works by Austen, Wordsworth, and Byron. What is aberrant and resistant to emplotment and probability springs forth in their texts insistently, offering a kind of promise of redemption that is, however, always in the past and available only in retrospect, as what Galperin calls a missed opportunity. Drawing on Blanchot’s definition of the everyday as “what we never see a first time, but only see again” (std. 6), Galperin argues that Wordsworth, Austen, and Byron compose texts that surprisingly disclose the everyday. Despite the official plots to which they are also committed, their texts repeatedly present the everyday as a “thickened or distended present” that is “an interruption or pause” in relation to stultifying business as usual (11). Since, however, these presentations are interruptive and rendered in the past tense, they cannot in principle be integrated into any plot of redemption into continuously meaningful present activity and relationship. Uncanny, intermittent, and surprising experiences of the everyday, untethered to any continuing project, are the only bases of Romantic hope, and perhaps the only bases of hope meaningful present activity and relationship. Uncanny, intermittent, and surprising experiences of the everyday, untethered to any continuing project, are the only bases of Romantic hope, and perhaps the only bases of hope it is worthwhile for us moderns to take seriously. According to Galperin, the Romantics, or at any rate Austen, Wordsworth, and Byron, are historically the first discoverers of this form of experience and flickering hope.

In Austen Galperin finds a persistent opposition between, on the one hand, narrative, precedent, and the probable, and, on the other, detail, the singular, and the prosaic (14). The latter objects of attention, recovered by Austen from her archive of notebooks, are responsible for the verisimilitude of her texts, in revealing the “peculiar and prosaic eventfulness” (15) of the everyday in such things as the colors of ribbons or the arrangement of furniture for a ball. According to Galperin, readers are frequently absorbed by these details rather than by the developing plot, as they encounter in them “a sense of evanescence, or hope, that is neither intentional nor teleological” (18). Such details function for the reader as perhaps they functioned for Austen herself in working through her archive: as sites of emergence of a Benjaminian Jetztzeit or flashing up of evanescent intimations of (lost or missed) meaningful life (24).

More specifically, Galperin finds the marriage plot in Mansfield Park to be forced, in that Fanny undergoes no moral development (78). In contrast, the authorial lingering in Tom’s point of view, as Sir Thomas discovers the theatricals in the closet, evidences an absorption in present detail that introduces a potentially animating (but missed) irruption of the everyday into the too predictable motion of the plot. In general, attention to detail in Austen registers possibilities, subsequently foreclosed by the marriage plot, of female independence within the household and prior to and apart from marriage (81).

Wordsworth’s poetry moves dialectically into a “contact zone” wherein an everyday that is recoverable in recollection and that disrupts emplotment undoes plotted movement toward a telos of accomplished (but forced) identity. Objects of subintentional involvement, untethered to any quest, are of more interest, Galperin finds, than achieved ideals or movement toward them. Galperin concedes that his focus here is selective or involves “contortion with Wordsworth” (51). His own a priori commitment to Benjaminian modernism makes it impossible for him to trust any Wordsworthian arc of development toward maturity. Among the fugitive moments of present experience that are lost and grasped in retrospect, Galperin counts...
the crossing of Simplon Pass with its presentist "woods decaying, never to be decayed" (63), the spots of time in general, and the (counterfactual) "history of departed things" from the Prospectus to The Recluse. In such moments, according to Galperin, "a world ... emerges independently of a practical or conceptual sanction" (35).

Turning to Byron, and arguing initially from the extant correspondence between various relevant parties, Galperin takes the brief and unsuccessful marriage of Byron and Annabella Milbanke as another missed opportunity for animating present experience, grasped only in prospect and retrospect. Centering on conversation and friendship as they might someday take place rather than on the performance of typical social roles, the letters of Byron and Annabella are said to have "lurid ... genuinely queer possibilities" of relationship opposed to "the standard vocabularies of value and virtue" (105). In imaginative prospect and retrospect, though certainly not in fact, Byron sees "marriage as a practice in which difference and some kind of distance abide" (109). Galperin then reads along similar lines the excessive, singular passion of the Giaour for Leila, the relations between Conrad and Gulnare in The Corsair, and the digressive conversations between Don Juan and the female characters of Don Juan. In general, the positive watchwords of Galperin's overall argument are chiasmus, digression, interruption, caesura, and presently animated absorption in details, all against the grains of settled identity and business as usual.

Throughout his readings, Galperin's underlying conception of human life in time, nature, and society seems to involve an unsettled mixture of Heideggerian modernism (resistance to das Man and codified social plots) and new materialism à la Graham Harman (a standing sense of the weight and agency of things). There is a consistent, intricately baroque equivocation between the everyday as essentially an object of awareness and the everyday as a prior, really existing habitus within which human beings live and move. For example, Galperin writes of "the very mechanism by which the everyday becomes readable and, by turns, writable as a condition of its emergence in the first place" (31; see also 36, 45 for similar formulations). Does the everyday here exist first as a scene of things to be read and experienced? Or does it exist only as an object of awareness, only when it is somehow experienced? Perhaps the answer is supposed to be "both," insofar as Galperin is tracking the emergence of a form of experience of things. But his formulations risk losing all sense of where to find any agency in giving shape to forms of experience and life. (Is it in things? Social formations? Activities of laboring? Individual innovations?) Missing throughout in Galperin's emphasis on the sheer, unexplained emergence of the everyday-as-experienced, asserting itself interruptively and subintentionally in otherwise plotted literary works, is any sense of human agents becoming more fully conscious of their situations. Only the alert critic, armed with a Benjaminian understanding of the non-voluntary flashing up of a Jetztzeit, can see what is really important in a text.

Here it is surely correct that because Austen, Wordsworth, and Byron do not fully and consciously control the developments of their texts at every moment, unexpected things turn up in them. But Galperin also substantially underestimates how much these authors genuinely understand the problems they address and the plots they contrive.

As either cause or effect of this underestimation, Galperin's readings are often forced, as though determined by his prior Benjaminian convictions. Take for instance the lines Galperin quotes from what Wordsworth first called--in his Preface to The Excursion (1814)--his Prospectus to The Recluse:

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields--like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main--why should they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was? (ll. 47-51).

Wordsworth goes on to say that a mind passionately wedded to "this goodly universe" will find places such as these "a simple produce of the common day" (line 55). Yet according to Galperin, Wordsworth imagines Paradise as a place "composed largely of 'departed things'" (45, emphasis added), which contradicts what the passage says. Or consider what Austen's Edmund Bertram says to Fanny about the vanished prospect of her married life: he worries that she might be pained by a "retrospect of what might have been----but what can never be now," is Edmund thus "lament[ing]," as Galperin says, "something whose foreclosure the narrative is unambiguous in celebrating" (76)? Or at the end of Pride and Prejudice, are the prospects open to Kitty Bennett as a not yet married woman actually greater and more interesting in the historical circumstances, as Galperin suggests, than those of Elizabeth upon marrying Darcy? Or is the abortive marriage of Lord and Lady Byron a more plausible model of what a marriage might be than the marriage of Emma Woodhouse and George Knightley? Did Wordsworth and Austen, overcome by their needs for plots and resolutions, really fail to understand relevant possibilities of comparative human achievement?

Larger questions arise about the value of interruptive moments. If interruptive, potentially redemptive moments of intense absorption in things that occur subintentionally are doomed to fail, or to be available only intermittently and retrospectively, are they the only or the most plausible grounds of meaningful life? Are there no continuing happy marriages and no possibilities of recompense that is abundant enough? It is surely right to suspect that detailed objective teleologies cannot adequately shape a human life, and so, too, that neither literary characters nor actual human beings can successfully plot their lives in detail. Galperin rightly finds this suspicion confirmed by the texts of Austen, Wordsworth, and Byron, as their attentions intermittently settle in moments of intense absorption in things. His findings help us to see these authors and their characters as complex, self-interrogating, and self-critical figures. But moments of good enough settlement and more or less settled meanings-within-ongoing-relationships remain of interest, too.

Contra Galperin, Wordsworth and Austen show some formal and technical awareness of and responsiveness to the problem of reconciling opposites: fusing interest in humanly plausible and achievable ideals with awareness of the dangers of hubris and the force of sheer contingencies. Wordsworth swerves between moments of composure and moments of disruptive excitement by the sublime. When he attempts to formulate stable metaphysical conclusions on the basis of his experience, he frequently reverts to the optative mood ("Nor perchance ... wilt thou...") as though to register a lingering uncertainty. Similarly, Austen's freeze-frame marriage endings subtly remind us that not everything is quite perfect or free from necessities of tricky further management ("Lydia was Lydia still; untamed, unabashed, wild, noisy, and fearless"). So while Galperin's exclusive emphasis on disruptive, materially induced moments of regret ("missed opportunities") fruitfully challenges simplistic understandings of Romantic heroic idealism, it also occludes awareness of the rich, formally complex mixtures of hope, anxiety, ambivalence, and artful self-consciousness that Romantics bring to their experiences of and in history.

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