

Wordsworthian Chance Andrew Burkett (2009)

Wake Forest University

Abstract

First-generation Romantic poets generally hold a deeply rooted faith in the notion of the limitless nature of possibility, and in reaction to Enlightenment determinism, several of these poets strive for an understanding and representation of nature that is divorced from Enlightenment notions of causality. This essay specifically explores William Wordsworth's poetic denunciation of such deterministic accounts of causality through an investigation of *The Prelude's* (1799, 1805, 1850) complication of the assumption that the natural effect can be traced backward towards a single identifiable cause. I argue that in place of this principle of sufficient reason, Wordsworth embraces the notion of "chance" as possessing the inexhaustible powers of difference. In accordance with his fascination with the potentialities of the novel infinite, the idea of "chance" allows Wordsworth to challenge the notion of "necessity," or the philosophic claim that steadfast and orderly laws determine all events in space and time. While Wordsworth certainly does not argue with the notion that cause-effect chains can be traced temporally back in time, such a genealogical record, he suggests, can only ever be deduced and constructed *a posteriori*. Only after the fact of its historical instantiation can the genealogical record of causal relations be deciphered and inscribed, he indicates. Such a genealogy, then, in no way undermines a faith in chance. Rather, according to Wordsworth, the record only makes the idea of chance all the more manifest. Such *a posteriori* inscriptions provide a distillation of the concept of chance. In this causal record Wordsworth locates the phantom outlines left in chance's conceptual wake, or perhaps better stated, through the specters of the idea of chance.

Chance is the providence of adventurers.

— Napoléon Bonaparte (150)

Le hasard s'appelle nuage.

[The name of chance is cloud.]

— Michel Serres (66)

1

As a number of historians and theorists of probability and statistics have suggested, the Enlightenment gives rise to a formation of "chance" radically different from any valence that the notion previously embodies or otherwise represents.^[1] Following the transformative work of a number of late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century probability theorists – including Abraham de Moivre, Pierre Rémond de Montmort, Jakob Bernoulli, and perhaps most important, Pierre-Simon de Laplace – the idea of "chance"

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mutates into the notion of permutation sometime during the Enlightenment period. The work of these and other mathematicians and theorists transforms the idea of chance from something hazy, spectral, and hauntingly unidentifiable into the stable reality of the gamut of classifiable possibilities. It is this historical phenomenon that Ian Hacking refers to as “the taming of chance” – the alteration of possibility from purgatorial superstition to disciplined potentiality (10). This epistemological paradigm change occurs sometime during the late-eighteenth century and results in a view of causality still certainly marked by a characteristic classical determinism, but one in which possibility is itself finite even though the potential permutations of reality may be extraordinarily variant and shockingly numerous.

2

With this Enlightenment conception of reality comes the scientific faith in the powers of the computing subject wielding the all-powerful formula. Laplace stands in awe before the omniscient powers of such a calculating agent possessing the capacities to look through the patterns of necessity to witness history as it unfolds both analeptically and proleptically as one vast causal chain:

Given for one instant an intelligence which could comprehend all the forces by which nature is animated and the respective situation of the beings who compose it – an intelligence sufficiently vast to submit these data to analysis – it would embrace in the same formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the lightest atom; for it, nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to the eyes.

A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities 4

According to the logic of Laplace’s thought experiment, once the subject comes to harness fully the powers of the formula, it becomes freed from the burdensome weight of the mysterious unknown – and once thought unknowable – permutations of reality.[2] Such a consciousness understands “reality” as simply the gamut of the possible, and – as Thomas Kavanagh has shown – although “the world was still deterministic” under this conception of causality, “the world had become determined but meaningless” (25). Kavanagh suggests that this underlying determinism was based in the order that arises out of the still classifiable nature of the gamut of permutations and the fact that, although the world may be quite

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difficult to pin down in all of its possible forms, its variations are undoubtedly numbered and, therefore, certainly identifiable even if their first cause has become devoid of any all-encompassing meaning.

3

It is the fixed and determined nature of the possibilities arising out of this Laplacean version of the idea of “chance” with which a number of first-generation British Romantics take greatest issue. These poets certainly take conceptual refuge in the idea of the potentialities of chance but push Enlightenment notions of the possibilities of permutation into the sublime abyss of the infinite. First-generation Romantic poets generally hold a deeply rooted faith in the notion of the limitless nature of possibility, and in reaction to Laplacean conceptualizations of the formulaic nature of deterministic reason, several of these poets strive for an understanding of nature that is divorced from Enlightenment notions of causality.^[3] William Wordsworth, for example, rejects the assumption that the natural effect can be traced backward towards a single identifiable cause whose source is based in an uninterrupted positivistic causal chain that is mathematically deducible. In place of this principle of sufficient reason, Wordsworth embraces the notion of “chance” as possessing the inexhaustible powers of difference. In accordance with his fascination with the potentialities of the novel infinite, the idea of “chance” allows Wordsworth to challenge the notion of “necessity,” or the philosophic claim that steadfast and orderly laws determine all events in space and time. While Wordsworth certainly does not argue with the notion that cause-effect chains can be traced temporally back in time, such a genealogical record, he suggests, can only ever be deduced and constructed *a posteriori*. Only after the fact of its historical instantiation can the genealogical record of causal relations be deciphered and inscribed, he indicates. Such a genealogy, then, in no way undermines a faith in chance. Rather, the record only makes the idea of chance all the more manifest. Such *a posteriori* inscriptions provide a distillation of the concept of chance. In this causal record Wordsworth locates the phantom outlines left in chance’s conceptual wake, or perhaps better stated, through the specters of the idea of chance. Wordsworth reviews and analyzes such narratives to come to a better understanding of the deeply complex operations of the notion of chance even if no underlying causal mechanism can be attributed to the aleatory. These manifestations

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provide as rich a description of the idea of chance as is possible to realize, Wordsworth suggests.

4

Critics and theorists have largely overlooked Wordsworth's reliance upon the concept of "chance" as fundamental to the origin and design of his poetic project. The Yale-and-Cornell critics in particular have vastly marginalized and even positively suppressed any potential readings or interpretations of the nature and function of the idea of chance in Wordsworth's oeuvre because of their naturalization of the concepts of prophecy, design, and providence which are, as a number of these critics propose, apparently self-evidently operative in Wordsworth's poetry. M. H. Abrams inaugurates this critical tradition with his *Natural Supernaturalism* (1971) by arguing that Wordsworth considers himself, first and foremost, as a poet-prophet who has been handed a providential tale and thus acts as a messenger for some divine and guiding agency. Of course, this designing agency is, for Abrams, no longer John Milton's *supernatural* divinity but, instead, a *natural* agent for whom Wordsworth serves as appointed herald. In effect Wordsworth, along with a number of his contemporary Romantics, constitutes a "displaced and reconstituted theology, or else a secularized form of devotional experience," Abrams suggests (65). According to Abrams, any moments in Wordsworth's verse that ostensibly prioritize or celebrate the ideas of chance, contingency, or the otherwise unexpected always only end up being affirmations of design and providence. Abrams proposes that

the major alterations and dislocations of the events of Wordsworth's life are imposed deliberately, in order that the design inherent in that life, which has become apparent only to his mature awareness, may stand revealed as a principle which was invisibly operative from the beginning. A supervising idea, in other words, controls Wordsworth's account and shapes it into a structure in which the protagonist is put forward as one who has been elected to play a special role in a providential plot.

***Natural Supernaturalism* 76**

For Abrams, that which appears to be chance in Wordsworth's poetry is represented by the poetry itself as preordained. In this context, Abrams' reading of Wordsworth's verse is something very much like Laplace's vision of the universe as structured and controlled by discrete guiding laws that,

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though perhaps unseen or unrecognized in the present, nevertheless fully control and determine the unfolding of all events in space and time.

5

However, far too much of Wordsworth's verse is concerned with the concepts of unverifiability, causal opacity, and with charting the chance obliquities of the everyday for the poet to have resigned himself fully to the idea that his tale is absolutely preordained or otherwise prefigured. Abrams himself concedes to the fact that an important element of Wordsworth's narrative is its emphasis on the disordered and the contingent. "The spaciousness of his chosen form allows Wordsworth to introduce some of the clutter and contingency of ordinary experience," Abrams notes, "In accordance with his controlling idea, however, he selects for extended treatment only those of his actions and experiences which are significant for his evolution toward an inherent end" (*Natural Supernaturalism* 77). For Abrams, any such references to the quotidian or the aleatory in Wordsworth's poetry are, then, always marginalized if not fully incorporated or otherwise accounted for by an omniscient and designing, though potentially invisible, natural agency.

6

Geoffrey Hartman complicates Abrams' conception and representation of Wordsworth as a transparent poet-prophet through his argument that secular understandings of the nature of human consciousness come to supplant religious assumptions concerning poetic inspiration. However, Hartman nevertheless restores Wordsworth as a bard elect in due course. A major goal of Hartman's project is to define and differentiate the concepts of "poet" and "prophet," and in doing so, to reconfigure what it means when these two concepts become conjoined through and within Wordsworth's work. "A prophet is to us, and perhaps to himself," writes Hartman, "mainly a *voice* – as God himself seems to him primarily a voice. Even when he does God in many voices, they are not felt to stand in an equivocal relation to each other: each voice is absolute, and vacillation produces vibrancy rather than ambiguity" (*Unremarkable Wordsworth* 164). In a series of deconstructive twists and turns, Hartman brings to light the complexities of Wordsworth's self-conception as poet, prophet, and poet-prophet, only ultimately to propose that Wordsworth most always relies upon his poetry to draw attention to the "claim that he has a prophetic gift" (*Unremarkable Wordsworth* 164).

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While it has been several decades since Abrams produced his naturalization of prophecy and providence in Wordsworth's verse, his reading of the poet as *bard elect* survives in much contemporary Romanticist criticism. To note in addition to Hartman one other prominent figure here, John Woolford argues that Wordsworth continuously returns to the "parochial episodes" of his childhood in order to recuperate the vocation ostensibly couched in his "election" and, in so doing, works to secure the production of his future poetry (35). A number of contemporary critics have, however, recognized Wordsworth's focus on the idea of the "aleatory" but have most often underestimated the conceptual centrality of chance in his verse as merely a poetic concern with the notion of "accident" or with other concepts only tangentially related to the more comprehensive idea of chance.^[4] While Wordsworth was undoubtedly preoccupied with the concept of "accident," he only ever understood and represented this notion as an instantiation of the more conceptually rigorous and totalizing idea of "chance." Operating as an umbrella concept for the poet, the idea of chance exists as the disruption of otherwise coherent narratives of cause and effect. Wordsworth understands that while history can be recounted through causal sequences – through narratives of cause and effect – these stories are also always already narratologically unreliable because they can in no way adequately theorize beforehand the unidentified operations underlying their production. That is, because such histories fail to recognize their foundations in unpredictability, they are inherently incomplete. For Wordsworth and a number of his contemporaries, Enlightenment stories about the world may provide beautifully simple explanations of nature's causal record, but such narratives hardly exhaust the complex potentialities of the idea of chance.

8

Through means and ends that are, perhaps, clearer and more developed than any of those of the other British Romantic poets, Wordsworth *untames* chance in his utter rejection of Enlightenment-era probability theories espoused by the likes of Laplace and his coterie. As the authors of *The Empire of Chance* (1989) note, along with probabilist Jakob Bernoulli, Laplace is one of the "two towering figures in the history of mathematical probability" whose "manifestoes" circulate widely among late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century intellectual circles and resultantly

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percolate the “most lapidary statements of determinism” to an extensive audience, and although it is unclear whether Wordsworth read Laplace’s work firsthand, he would have certainly been acquainted with the general theoretical framework proposed by the influential mathematician (11, xv).^[5] In opposition to the scientific and sociocultural milieu of philosophic and material determinism cemented and circulated with Laplace’s vision of the universe, Wordsworth implicitly advocates a conception and representation of the cosmos as anything but entirely probable even if it may be mathematically described as such. In so doing, Wordsworth’s work becomes, as Thomas Pfau suggests, “an attempt to simulate poetic answers to questions lingering in the national unconscious, questions ultimately too vast and threatening in their scope to bear conscious asking” (14). Indeed, Wordsworth’s poetry makes the philosophically and conceptually aggressive suggestion that causal chains will always be marked by nonsensical interruptions. This is because Wordsworth understands the idea of chance emergence as that which is discontinuous and unpredictable. The discontinuity arising out of such interruption exposes to the poet a vast lacuna in the older Laplacean model of causality. Laplace’s model fundamentally cannot account for such disruption and incoherence because, as noted before, it is based upon the assumption that all emergent events are rational or are, at the very least, rooted in a determinate causality that may not always be apparent at the present time. Wordsworth’s verse implicitly reveals the contradictions in such a classical model and, in so doing, hastens the breakdown of its logic. In the breakdown of this Laplacean order, Wordsworth’s verse intimates the possibility of the synthesis of a new model of causality that will be able to account both for sensical causal sequences and the interruptive discontinuities that unpredictably disrupt them with nonsense.

9

In what follows, I turn to Wordsworth’s poetry – and specifically to his landmark work *The Prelude* (1799, 1805, 1850) – to explore the poet’s complex conception and representation of the idea of chance as untamed from the Enlightenment necessity espoused by the likes of Laplace and his cohort. In all of its compositional forms, *The Prelude* provides us with Wordsworth’s most developed investigation of the nature and function of the idea of chance emergence and its relationship to both narratives of the development of the self and of history more broadly. It is well known that

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Wordsworth slowly and carefully constructed *The Prelude* and considered the poem to be the key unlocking the entrance to his much larger *The Recluse*. As Wordsworth crafted this work, his understanding and depiction of the idea of chance became increasingly complex. From the development of what would become his “spots of time” as conceptualized at Goslar in Germany in 1798 to his final revisions of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth’s work reveals that he was fascinated with the role of the concept of chance in both the development of his poetic project and the ideas embedded within it.

I. *The Prelude* (1799, 1805) and the Idea of Chance

10

As Wordsworth wandered from passage to passage and from topic to topic in what has been referred to as his “irregular progression” and at his “fancy” while he composed the various fragments that would become several of the major episodes of *The Prelude*, he reproduced this formal aleatory style in the content of his verse (*The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850* 485). This formal integration suggests the great conceptual importance of the idea of chance in nearly all of the early fragments drafted in Germany. For example, “The Boy of Winander” (“There was a Boy”) – perhaps Wordsworth’s most famous piece drafted during this period – represents some of the poet’s most involved and thoughtful deliberations on the nature and function of chance emergence. In its 1805 version – as incorporated into Book V of *The Prelude* – the heart of the poem hinges on the boy of Winander’s experience of a shocking moment of chance “silence” in which the “shout[ing]” owls unexpectedly fail to return the boy’s “hootings”:

[The owls] would shout
Across the wat’ry vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud,
Redoubled and redoubled – concourse wild
Of mirth and jocund din. *And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,*
Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,

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Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake.

II. 399-413, emphasis mine

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, when “chance” is used as a verb with the chance event as its subject, expressed either by a noun preceding the verb or by a clause following it – as in Wordsworth’s usage above in which the verb is preceded by “it” (“it chanced / That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill”) – the usage of “chance” implies a parallel to the German “Zufall,” or the notion of an event’s “falling out” without any apparent design or traceable causality.^[6] Wordsworth usage of “chance” thus implies that the event – here the incidental silence of the owls – occurs unpredictably and haplessly. Until this moment of chance silence, the boy has been communicating uninterruptedly with the “screaming” owls through his “mimic hootings.” The unexpected silence, however, marks a jarring disruption in the boy’s communication with these creatures.

11

Wordsworth makes it explicitly clear that this moment of chance interruption in the owls’ pealing significantly unsettles the boy, dislodging him psychologically. This moment of disruption inaugurates a shift in the boy’s thought processes from the presemantic language used in his communication with the hooting owls to the conceptual/theoretical vocabulary of both the aural and visual images impressed upon him by the natural scene that envelopes him. As Wordsworth notes, the “gentle shock of mild surprize” initiated by the chance silence “carr[ies] far into [the boy’s] heart the voice / Of mountain torrents” as the “visible scene / . . . enter[s] unawares into his mind / With all its solemn imagery” (1805, Book V, II. 407-411). The idea of chance in this poem thus provides the impetus for the switch to an advanced formation of communication and perception – from the natural and the presemantic to the symbolic and the theoretical. In doing so, the chance event also underscores the poem’s representation of the disjointed and interrupted nature of not only language and communication but also – and more important – of causality itself. Wordsworth formalizes and emphasizes this disjointedness through enjambment:

[W]hile [the boy] hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
Has carried far into his heart the voice [of nature]

1805, Book V, II. 406-408

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This enjambment of “hung” highlights the shocking “surprise” experienced by the boy’s encounter with this chance silence as the poetic device hangs the reader in suspense as well. This “shock” is rooted in a realization that causality is, at its heart, always marred by disruption and incoherence. Wordsworth’s verse suggests that causality – like language – is, for this reason, riddled with aporia. As the chance silence interrupts the boy’s encounter with the owls and resultantly undermines his understanding of and relationship to the logic of communication, the chance event also disrupts the flow of the poem’s own logic, as the text pivots at this moment of enjambment from the presemantic syntax of the onomatopoeic “halloos” and “hootings” to the conceptual/theoretical vocabulary of the aural and visual image. In effect, the silence inaugurates a deep rupture in the text both formally and conceptually.

12

It is precisely because Wordsworth recognizes a breakdown in classical conceptualizations of causality in this way that he concludes this stanza with reference to that “uncertain heaven” because, as his poetry reveals, there is no such thing as an absolute necessity behind causes and their effects – whether they be divine or otherwise.[7] “There Was a Boy” suggests that the only constant to causality is, rather, its certain *uncertainty*. Chance events – like the silence of the owls – may occur, Wordsworth tells us, but only because they “fall out” and not because they are willed by the machinations of an unseen intelligence. Wordsworth’s poem concludes with the proposition that causality is, in effect, always also marked by the irrational discontinuities that arise by chance.

II. The “Natural Aleatory”: Chance and the Early Books of *The Prelude* (1805)

13

According to Abrams, one needs only to look to the first stanza of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* in order to see the poet’s self-discovery as “chosen to be a poet-prophet for his age” (*Natural Supernaturalism* 21). Abrams goes on to cite Wordsworth’s reference to himself as “a chosen Son” and as an elected bard (22).[8] However, such a reading fails to take account of the great importance of the idea of the aleatory in Wordsworth’s verse and especially of the conceptual and representational role of chance in “The Boy of Winander” passage as well as in other early moments of *The Prelude*. As noted at the start of this essay, for Abrams, there is no such thing as chance

in Wordsworth's work. Instead there is only providential design that may go unrecognized for a period of time but that becomes ultimately understood and appreciated by the "poet-prophet" Wordsworth. According to Abrams, *The Prelude* is, from start to finish, a text concerning natural providence unveiled or otherwise revealed for this reason.

14

But from its very first lines, the 1805 *Prelude* is concerned with subjects, objects, processes, and phenomena that are anything but solid, determined, or apparently designed. The text opens with the Wordsworthian narrator's meditations on matters as uncertain and unpredictable as the very clouds and breezes overhead:

Oh there is a blessing in this gentle breeze,
That blows from the green fields and from the clouds
And from the sky; it beats against my cheek,
And seems half conscious of the joy it gives.
O welcome messenger! O welcome friend!

Book I, ll. 1-5

Wordsworth's clouds and breezes here are the same aleatory atmospheric phenomena that greet Wordsworth's narrator of "Daffodils" – that is, as Wordsworth understands them, they are unpredictable processes and phenomena. Moreover, what is of central importance in these introductory lines is Wordsworth's equation of the chance phenomena of the clouds and breezes with the concept of "blessing." It is because of this "blessing" that Abrams misunderstands Wordsworth's poetic project as one that is inherently concerned with providential design and inspiration. In Abrams' classic reading of the breeze in the opening stanzas of *The Prelude*, wind becomes equated "with the inspiration of the prophets when touched by the Holy Spirit" ("Correspondent Breeze" 28). However, it is not that Wordsworth understands nature's breeze as omniscient or guiding in any divinely providential sense here but, rather, that Wordsworth believes the aleatory to be a blessing of the wind in and of itself. The idea of chance is the blessing in these lines, and Wordsworth recognizes and runs with this concept for not only the remainder of this stanza but also, and more important, for the rest of *The Prelude* itself. The wilds of the winds and of the sky greet the Wordsworthian narrator, and in what he recognizes as their playful aleatory style, these chance phenomena set him free to wander unpredictably just as they do:

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A captive greets thee, coming from a house
Of bondage, from yon city's walls set free,
A prison where he hath been long immured.
Now I am free, enfranchised and at large,
May fix my habitation where I will.
What dwelling shall receive me, in what vale
Shall be my harbour, underneath what grove
Shall I take up my home, and what sweet stream
Shall with its murmur lull me to my rest?

Book I, II. 6-14

The series of interrogatives that concludes this section of verse formally reproduces the uncertain and unpredictable nature of the chance phenomena that the Wordsworthian narrator takes as his guide. Which way will the changeful skies direct him? Where will he ultimately find his home by following these wandering clouds and breezes? The turbulent sounds of what stream will send him to sleep? These questions are left purposely unanswered here, of course, because the narrator does not (and can not) predict what is to come, where he is to go, or what he is to find on his wandering journey. However, he does know that by continuously following these unpredictable processes, beings, and things, he will always be on the proper path:

The earth is all before me – with a heart
Joyous, nor scared at its own liberty,
I look about, and should the guide I chuse
Be nothing better than a wandering cloud
I cannot miss my way.

Book I, II. 15-19

The “wandering cloud” will never wrongly lead the wandering Wordsworthian narrator astray. In this sense, there is, in Wordsworth’s world, “nothing better than a wandering cloud” to choose as one’s guide because there is apparently no better example of unpredictability in nature. To follow the wandering and changeful cloud body is to be always on the correct path precisely because that path is an unpredicted and entirely unpredictable one. With the cloud body, Wordsworth’s narrator is thus guided by the dynamics of the concept of chance, not providence, because he takes as his guide what he understands to be what I am referring to as

the “natural aleatory,” or the Romantic understanding and representation of chance in nature *and* the nature of chance.

15

Furthermore, this narrator’s wandering is an entirely *non-teleological* activity.^[9] This is wandering for its own sake and certainly not movement produced in search of the certainties of some desired or prefigured end:

Whither shall I turn,
By road or pathway, or through open field,
Or shall a twig or any floating thing
Upon the river point me out my course?

Book I, II. 29-32

These forces of nature will not lead the Wordsworthian narrator wrongly, but they also never lead him in any anticipated direction or towards any particular goal. This reading of Wordsworthian “wandering” thus stands in stark contradistinction to Alan Liu’s notion of the Wordsworthian “tour.” According to Liu, the Wordsworthian “tour” always imparts an implicit sense of purpose and direction because the “tour is motivated by desire for some special *significance* (whether conceived as meaning or feeling) missing at home: a sense of eventfulness whose site is inherently ‘out there,’ other, or elsewhere . . .” (7-8). However, Wordsworth doesn’t structure movement in the direction of some significant telos but instead takes as his guide that which he understands to be the unforeseen and spontaneous processes and phenomena that greet him in the natural world unfolding around him, and his poetry emerges spontaneously as a result of this wandering:

To the open fields I told
A prophesy; poetic numbers came
Spontaneously, and clothed in priestly robe
My spirit, thus singled out, as it might seem,
For holy services. Great hopes were mine:
My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind’s
Internal echo of the imperfect sound –
To both I listened, drawing from them both
A cheerful confidence in things to come.

Book I, II. 59-67

For Abrams, Wordsworth signifies in passages like this one his belief in a “natural supernaturalism” as the poet reveals his confidence in having been

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“singled out” by some omniscient natural agency – a transposed and transfigured supernatural providence (*Natural Supernaturalism* 76). However, although Wordsworth does indeed believe that he has been singled out by some natural force to herald his great tale, these dynamic forces of nature that guide Wordsworth and the production of his “spontaneous” lyric in response are, as he understands them, strictly unpredictable powers and not preordained, necessary, or deterministic ones. As David Collings notes in a reading of these opening stanzas of *The Prelude*, “Wordsworth’s conviction of his uniqueness depends upon his sense that nature is an unpredictable accident-prone guardian of youth” (229). Indeed “unique” in his ability to recognize and appreciate these “unpredictable” forces, Wordsworth recognizes the powers of the natural aleatory as materially embodied (as far as they can be) in the changeful and turbulent clouds, streams, breezes, and currents that he recognizes as present in the winds and waters of his natural world. Wordsworth’s “prophecy” is, then, a paradoxical one in that it is a tale of absolute certainty that arrives only through meditation on and mimetic representation of natural events, processes, beings, things, and phenomena that are – as far as he understands them – entirely uncertain and unpredictable. Collings notes that the shift in attribution of “prophecy” from the providentially supernatural to the accidentally natural brings with it a concomitant shift in implications concerning Wordsworth’s vocation:

[T]o naturalize vocation is to transform it entirely: the strange utterances of wind, sky, or mountain may have given Wordsworth a conviction of his special status, but they do not explain what this status might mean for others. The suspension of the vocational question is already implicit in the poet’s appeal not to the voice of an angel but to the ceaseless music of the river Derwent. [...] Wordsworth will remain on the threshold of prophecy, possessing only an empty vocation and a meaningless privilege.

223

Although Wordsworth may indeed “remain on the threshold of prophecy,” his vocation is full of purpose and meaning. Having recognized the natural as aleatory, Wordsworth takes as his poetic vocation the task of revealing to humankind the ways and means by which nature functions by and through chance events.

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Furthermore, while the idea of the aleatory may create a dark aporia within the Wordsworthian text both conceptually and formally, this concept does not operate in Wordsworth's verse as what Tilottama Rajan refers to as one of those "dark elements" of the Romantic text. For Rajan, "[t]he darker elements in Romantic works are not a part of their organic unity, but rather threaten to collapse this unity" (19). But according to Wordsworth, the chance event is indeed an organic aspect of both nature and the work of art. Moreover, it is primarily because of the poet's understanding of chance as organic that he suggests that there is nothing to be afraid of in his tale of uncertainty. For Wordsworth, the idea of chance is liberating. As the poet depicts it, the notion of chance provides the Wordsworthian narrator a freedom not only from the bonds of his restrictive urban landscape but also from the determined bonds of his/the past – that is, from the physical, religious, and literary confines, conventions, and other restrictions invoked by the notions of tradition, providence, necessity, omniscience, and design. The idea of chance is thus for Wordsworth, as it was for Epicurus before him, a liberating concept, and it is Wordsworth's vocation to represent, and in so doing, explain this idea to his and future generations. According to Wordsworth, the notion of the aleatory provides an alternative conception of causality that imparts with it the possibility of an escape from the stultifying effects of a life supposedly ruled by rigid necessity or determinism. In these first stanzas from the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth reveals that he thus finds in the concept of chance a reconceptualization of cause-effect relations. Once embraced as not only a philosophical model of (a)causality but also – and much more important – as a means of making sense of one's own place in the world, the idea of chance, Wordsworth notes, opens up one's life and work to unforeseen, liberating potentialities.

17

By following nature's meandering course and prioritizing what he understands to be the unpredictability of its winding currents, Wordsworth quickly recognizes his great debt to the wandering flows of yet another natural "stream" – his cherished River Derwent. Wordsworth pays homage to this current and its murmuring voice in the *Prelude*:

Was it for this
That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved
To blend his murmurs with my nurse's song,
And, from his alder shades and rocky falls,

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And from his fords and shallows, sent a voice
That flowed along my dreams? For this, didst thou,
O Derwent! winding among grassy holms
Where I was looking on, a babe in arms,
Make ceaseless music that composed my thoughts
To more than infant softness, giving me
Amid the fretful dwellings of mankind
A foretaste, a dim earnest, of the calm
That Nature breathes among the hills and groves.

Book I, ll. 269-281

As Wordsworth reveals in these lines from the 1850 version of the poem, it is the murmuring and meandering flows of the Derwent that partially provide him with the inspiration for his project. The poet carefully notes here that the “winding” river and the hums of its natural movements “blend[ed]” early with his being, only later aiding him in the composition of his “thoughts” and, ultimately, his poetic song. Again, Wordsworth reveals that there is nothing to be afraid of or disturbed by in the turbulence of this natural flow. Instead, the chance sounds and movements of the current only reassure Wordsworth of the “calm[s]” of the natural world. This calmness that Wordsworth finds here in the ultimate tranquility of the natural flow tempers the poet’s concerns about the otherwise “fretful dwellings” of humankind.

18

The poet both literally and figuratively follows in the unpredictable motions and sounds of his beloved Derwent as he embarks on his own wandering poetic journey. As the autobiographical narrator sets out upon this itinerant voyage, he reveals that he departs on his meandering path with whatever “chance equipment of that hour” he presently carries, and he recognizes that even the belongings that he totes with him have been chosen by chance (1805, Book I, l. 99). As the narrator “journ[neys] towards the vale which [he] had chosen” – a destination also selected by chance – he immediately hears the aleatory sounds of an Eolian harp, as the invisible breezes blowing across the open fields produce a chance hymn as they play unpredictably upon the harp strings, and in their “Eolian visitations” create a “banded host / Of harmony dispersed in straggling sounds, / And lastly utter silence” (1805, Book I, l. 100, 104, ll. 105-107). The chance sounds of this wind harp, produced by the everyday movements of

atmospheric warpings, inspire Wordsworth to muse further upon the quotidian:

I spare to speak, my friend, of what ensued—
The admiration and the love, the life
In common things, the endless store of things
Rare, or at least so seeming, every day
Found all about me in one neighbourhood,
The self-congratulation, the complete
Composure, and the happiness entire.

1805, Book I, ll. 116-122

Wordsworth's environmental universe expands around him as a single, immense sphere – “one neighbourhood” – and becomes a repository of an ordinary earthly and material culture. By following the unpredictable workings of the universe, Wordsworth's tale becomes, in this way, a lyric concerned with a cataloguing of the everyday – what Wordsworth here calls “the life / In common things” and what William Blake, in a related context, would refer to as the “minute particulars” of nature (l. 60). Wordsworth finds a sense of happiness and ease in these ordinary details of nature, and his poetry becomes, in effect, a cataloguing of these quotidian beings, processes, and things that he collects through his meanderings through the natural world. More importantly, it is specifically through this poetic cataloguing of the details of nature in all of its aleatory forms that the poet explains he is able to come to a deeper and more “philosophic” comprehension and account of the products and phenomena of his beloved nature:

I yearn towards some philosophic song
Of truth that cherishes our daily life,
With meditations passionate from deep
Recesses in man's heart, immortal verse
Thoughtfully fitted to the Orphean lyre.

1805, Book I, ll. 230-234

William K. Wimsatt told us long ago that the “common feat” of the Romantic nature poets is to summon meaning “out of the very surface of nature itself,” and the everyday chance details of the worlds through which Wordsworth's narrator moves do indeed provide him with the groundwork for an overarching and grandly meaningful theory of nature (83). According to the

poet, a better understanding of life and its relationship to environment arrives only by the thoughtful collection, analysis, and contextualization of these details.

19

Paradoxically, though, Wordsworth grasps these ordinary chance details as profound and meaningful because he does not see them entirely as singularities. Instead, Wordsworth prioritizes the chance details of nature because he recognizes each detail's deep-seated connections with antecedent and concurrent forms (ideational, organismal, temporal, generic, etc.). For Wordsworth, each happenstance detail of nature is, while deeply unpredictable, also connected to myriad other uncertain events, processes, beings, things, and phenomena both synchronically and diachronically. According to Wordsworth, the synchronic connections between these details do not reveal, however, any entirely "happy" understanding of nature. In fact, the Wordsworthian ballad and lyric often see details as symptoms or manifestations of an agonistic mode of being circumscribed by diverse yet highly particular environments – what Wordsworth refers to in the 1799 text's opening stanza as the "fretful dwellings of mankind" (1799, Part I, l. 13). The fretfulness of these Romantic "dwellings" and the human organism's place therein becomes most apparent in the early books of *The Prelude* and especially in the childhood plundering scenes – including the scene of the "fell destroyer," the "egg-stealing scene," the "skiff-stealing" scene, and the scene of the "hunted hare" – all of which are crucially important moments to what becomes Wordsworth's developmental "spots of time" which we shall investigate shortly.

20

These plundering scenes mark an abrupt disruption of the opening sequence of this text and its preoccupations with the quotidian. And while the plundering scenes are concerned most directly with interruption and distortion, they are certainly still concerned, however, with the representation and treatment of chance. In fact, these scenes significantly link the concepts of chance and interruption. Take, for example, the first of these vignettes – the scene of the "fell destroyer":

'twas my joy
To wander half the night among the cliffs
And the smooth hollows where the woodcocks ran
Along the open turf. In thought and wish

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That time, my shoulder all with springes hung,
I was a fell destroyer. On the heights
Scudding away from snare to snare, I plied
My anxious visitation, hurrying on,
Still hurrying, hurrying onward.

1805, Book I, ll. 312-321

Wordsworth's turn here to this scene of the late-night hunt and the "anxious visitation" it evokes marks a dramatic shift in the text's thematic focus from discussion of the quotidian to treatment of the out-of-the-ordinary, if not the gothic and even the nightmarish. The gothic elements of the vignette become a literary/aesthetic strategy or framework for working through the epistemological shift wrought by the breakdown of determinate causality and the entry of the idea of chance into the modern world-picture. As opposed to the poem's opening stanzas which provide a rather fluid and easy development in their treatment of the commonalities of the everyday, the first of the childhood plundering scenes brings with it troublesome disturbance in its depiction and treatment of the peculiar and thus interrupts the text's initial movements. This disturbance becomes amplified and more elaborate in the second of these vignettes – the "egg-stealing scene":

Oh, when I have hung
Above the raven's nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill sustained, and almost, as it seemed,
Suspended by the blast which blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag, oh, at that time
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears; the sky seemed not a sky
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!

1805, Book I, ll. 341-350

Charting a series of hauntingly uncharacteristic and troublesome moments from early childhood, these plundering scenes have almost nothing to do with "the life / In common things." Instead, these vignettes appear to be most concerned with the representation of agonistic interactions. The Wordsworthian narrator here finds himself "alone" located within diverse yet highly particular and *extraordinary* environments.^[10] However, these

individuated environments and the “minute particulars” of their details are actually still very much interconnected not only in the sense that they arrive in a diachronic sequence of disruptions but also in their reiteration of the text’s overall preoccupation with wandering and the natural aleatory. In the first vignette, Wordsworth is careful to note that his narrator still “wander[s]” along in his movements – even if this is an undoubtedly hurried wandering, and the “egg-stealing scene” culminates in a preoccupation with the changeful and turbulent dynamics of the overhead sky and its clouds. This series of vignettes climaxes in the Wordsworthian narrator’s chance “discovery” of the skiff on Patterdale Lake and the almost catastrophic disruption that subsequently ensues following this “act of stealth / And troubled pleasure” (1805, Book I, ll. 388-389):

One evening – surely I was led by her [Nature] –
I went alone into a shepherd’s boat,
A skiff that to a willow-tree was tied
Within a rocky cove, its usual home.
‘Twas by the shores of Patterdale, a vale
Wherein I was a stranger, thither come
A schoolboy traveler at the holidays.
Forth rambled from the village inn alone,
No sooner had I sight of this small skiff,
Discovered thus by unexpected chance,
Than I unloosed her tether and embarked.

1805, Book I, ll. 372-382, emphasis mine

Having “unexpected[ly]” stumbled upon the skiff by “chance,” the narrator becomes uncannily drawn to the boat with an almost necessary compulsion. The idea of chance here paradoxically invokes and even initiates its other – the concept of necessity. The narrator feels strangely compelled to untie the vessel from “its usual home” and sail it into the uncertainties of the dark lake. Wordsworth concludes this plundering scene with the troubling silence that arrives as a result of the disturbance experienced by the narrator in this fretful and haunting scene:

[F]rom behind that craggy steep, till then
The bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
As if with voluntary power instinct,
Upreared its head. I struck, and struck again,

And, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
Rose up between me and the stars, and still
With measured motion, like a living thing
Strode after me. With trembling hands I turned
And through the silent water stole my way
Back to the cavern of the willow-tree.
There, in her mooring-place, I left my bark
And through the meadows homeward went with grave
And serious thoughts; and after I had seen
That spectacle, for many days my brain
Worked with a dim and undetermined sense
Of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
There was a darkness – call it solitude
Or blank desertion – no familiar shapes
Of hourly objects, images of trees,
Of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
But huge and mighty forms that do not live
Like living men moved slowly through my mind
By day, and were the trouble of my dreams.

1805, Book I, ll. 405-426

As in the scene of the “Boy of Winander,” the moments of silence that follow the aleatory emergences of the plundering scenes usher into the poem a certain absence – as in the “darkness” and “blank desertion” that follows the “chance discovery” and subsequent stealing of the skiff in the previous scene. The indeterminate chance event leads to the apparently compulsory stealing of the craft and then ultimately to the “undetermined” and “unknown” cognitive state of the narrator in the scene’s conclusion. In the Wordsworthian text, then, the concept of chance again becomes reproduced in the seismic aporia that comes to mark the poem and its unfolding.

21

In their interruptive and disruptive effects, the plundering scenes continue the text’s preoccupation with the idea of chance – albeit in a much more abstract and theoretical dimension. Wordsworth, however, brings the text’s concerns with the idea of the aleatory back to the more concrete in the vignettes immediately following these childhood plundering scenes. Turning away from narration of the singly “alone” first-person, Wordsworth moves in

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the stanzas following the plundering scenes to discussion of the boy's playfully social interactions with his childhood mates. In one such scene, the Wordsworthian narrator recounts the games of chance that he and his boyhood friends would enjoy with their card playing during the cold winter evenings:

Oh, with what echoes on the board they [the playing cards] fell!
Ironic diamonds—clubs, hearts, diamonds, spades,
A congregation piteously akin.
Cheap matter did they give to boyish wit,
Those sooty knaves, precipitated down
With scoffs and taunts like Vulcan out of heaven;
The paramount ace, a moon in her eclipse;
Queens, gleaming through their splendour's last decay;
And monarchs, surly at the wrongs sustained
By royal visages. Meanwhile abroad
The heavy rain was falling . . .

1805, Book I, 553-563

Here Wordsworth and his friends play “Loo,” a gambling game and widely popular domestic pastime in England from roughly the late-seventeenth to early-nineteenth centuries.^[11] Wordsworth underscores the chance nature of this game not only through Loo's obviously literal evocation of the ideas of gambling and risk but also through his invoking the concept of “the fall.” The poet is careful to emphasize the way in which the cards “precipitated down” hitting the playing table as if dropping “out of heaven.” In so doing, Wordsworth's use of “falling” in these lines evokes the Latin *cadere* (“to fall”). “Chance” is etymologically rooted in *cadere* and thus in this idea of “the fall” – that which “falls out.” As Wordsworth's poetry suggests, when the chance event occurs, it comes unexpectedly from above in its fall. With the *falling* of each card cast from the hands of the players here, chance events tumble from above. Wordsworth doubly emphasizes the linkage of “chance” to the concept of “the fall” in this scene through his poetic equation of the falling of the cards to the natural precipitation “meanwhile” raining down upon the cottage in which the boys play their games of chance and risk (“The heavy rain was falling”). This analogy further reveals that Wordsworth recognizes and understands the processes and phenomena of nature as representative of unpredictability. Like the hand of cards dealt to

each player in the game and the ways in which each card reveals itself in its “fall,” nature too is ruled by unpredictability and by the fall, Wordsworth indicates.

22

The poet moves quickly from games of chance and natural precipitation to further discussion of the dynamic and aleatory processes of nature more generally as he advances to conclude this first book of the 1805 *Prelude*:

Yes, I remember when the changeful earth
And twice five seasons on my mind had stamped
The faces of the moving year, even then,
A child, I held unconscious intercourse.

II. 586-589

As Wordsworth here reveals, he has long understood nature as actively “changeful.” The earth’s “moving” year further evidences these changeful dimensions of the natural world. The dynamics of nature have, moreover, taught Wordsworth to understand the idea of the aleatory further. This is because a “changeful” nature educated Wordsworth specifically through the ministry of chance events:

The earth
And common face of Nature spake to me
Rememberable things; sometimes, 'tis true,
By chance collisions and quaint accidents –

1805, Book I, II. 614-617

Nature communicates with Wordsworth through the aleatory, and the lessons that he learns in this way are not to be forgotten. As the poet notes, these “chance” events, processes, and phenomena “haply” peopled his mind with incidental but durable “objects and appearances”:

[I]f haply they impressed
Collateral objects and appearances,
Albeit lifeless then, and doomed to sleep
Until maturer seasons called them forth
To impregnate and to elevate the mind.

1805, Book I, II. 620-624

Wordsworth explains that he did not immediately understand or appreciate the role of the idea of chance in his education or development. However, as an adult, he is able to reflect upon the ways in which the notion of the aleatory “impregnate[d]” his mind with what would eventually become

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“elevate[d]” thoughts, and the idea of chance thus allows him to comprehend better his beloved nature and his place therein. It is not that the idea of chance becomes transfigured or transformed into an initially unforeseen providence, as Abrams would suggest, but rather, that the concept of chance itself, as Wordsworth understands it, saturates experience and enlightens consciousness. This is because Wordsworth recognizes the *origin* of invaluable childhood impressions to be derived out of and linked intimately to chance emergence:[12]

I might advert
To numerous accidents in flood or field,
Quarry or moor, or 'mid the winter snows,
Distresses and disasters, tragic facts
Of rural history, that impressed my mind
With images to which in following years
Far other feelings were attached – with forms
That yet exist with independent life,
And, like their archetypes, know no decay.

1799, Part I, ll. 279-287

Chance events – or “numerous accidents” as Wordsworth refers to them here – lead directly to those seminal visual images that people his mind and to which subsequent emotions and thoughts become permanently attached while simultaneously existing “with independent life.” Chance emergence, Wordsworth suggests in this unique passage, is thus the origin of what the poet refers to as the “spot of time.” The poet makes the linkage of chance emergence to the archetypal “spots of time” doubly manifest in the above passage through its invocation of and allusion to one of William Shakespeare’s clearest references to the notion of chance, as he directly evokes and echoes the following lines from the first act of *Othello*: “Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances: / Of moving accidents by flood or field” (ll. 134-135). Shakespeare’s use of “chance” here is, according to its closest grammatical referent in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a reference to the absence of design or causality behind events which “appear to happen without the intervention of law, ordinary causation, or providence” and thus become the equivalent of “accidents.”[13] Like Shakespeare before him, Wordsworth understands the “numerous accidents” of “flood and field” as fundamentally aleatory – to have fallen out by chance. Unlike his poetic forebear however, Wordsworth understands these chance

occurrences to be inherent to nature – they are simply the incidental “tragic facts / Of rural history.” Moreover, while these chance emergences may appear as “disasters,” these aleatory events from Wordsworth’s early childhood ultimately provide the spark igniting the poet’s imaginative powers and are therefore absolutely crucial to the origination and development of his oeuvre as he understands it. Immediately following the above passage focusing on the nature and function of chance emergence and its invocation of Shakespeare, Wordsworth turns to his first meditation on those seminal “spots of time” that, he contends, have arrived by chance:

There are in our existence spots of time
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A fructifying virtue, whence, depressed
By trivial occupations and the round
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds –
Especially the imaginative power –
Are nourished and invisibly repaired.

1799, Part I, ll. 288-294

The foundational “spots of time” passage suggests, then, that the imagination is directly derived only from “numerous accidents.” Imaginative powers arrive only by a certain formation of the idea of chance, Wordsworth tells us. The “spots of time” are themselves, for this reason, only the recollection of childhood events that have no absolutely discernable causal history. These moments of chance event make no fundamental sense, yet they are those very moments that guide the poet to his most developed and nuanced representations and understandings of what it means to be human. Wordsworth continually returns to these “spots of time” – these memories of chance emergence – for the remainder of his poetic career because he locates in them an apparently inexhaustible source of renewal and inspiration – both personally and professionally.

23

A great deal of critical attention has been paid to Wordsworth’s “spots of time.” Not surprisingly, the Yale-and-Cornell critics read these moments as driving the prophetic nature of Wordsworth’s text. In his seminal reading of *The Prelude*, Hartman, for example, suggests that these “spots of time” amplify the Wordsworthian narrator’s “very *awareness* of his individuality” precisely because the time-spots provide “a prophetic or anticipatory awareness” that has been granted from some providential power or agency

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(*Wordsworth's Poetry* 214-215). Hartman later proposes that, for Wordsworth, these “spots of time” are thus “what motivates prophecy” itself (*Unremarkable Wordsworth* 169). Abrams explicitly naturalizes the function of prophecy and providence in the Wordsworthian “spots of time” as well. According to Abrams the “spots of time” operate specifically as providential “revelations” and thus direct “Wordsworth’s discovery of precisely what he was born to be and to do” (*Natural Supernaturalism* 77). “The narrative [of *The Prelude*] is punctuated with recurrent illuminations, or ‘spots of time,’ and is climaxed by two major revelations,” writes Abrams (*Natural Supernaturalism* 77). However, once we recognize that Wordsworth’s *spots of time* are actually *spots of chance* and specifically not *spots of revelation*, a number of entirely novel interpretations of *The Prelude* become possible. First and foremost, it becomes clear that Wordsworth recognizes that the foundational building blocks of the entire poetic system of not only his *Prelude* (1799, 1805, 1850) but also *The Excursion* (1814) and all of the unfinished *The Recluse* are based upon events that have emerged unexplainably and unpredictably. These critical early moments from childhood to which Wordsworth attributes his poetic powers of imagination and to which he will return time and again in the construction and elaboration of his large-scale poetic project are – as he personally understands them – essentially incidental moments of chance occurrence. This suggests that the poet in no way attributes these moments to preordained, necessary, or determined causal forces or mechanisms but rather believes these emergent events to be generated without intention or design. The basis of Wordsworth’s poetic system is, in this way, fundamentally rooted in the idea of chance. These early spots – or nodes – of chance in the text are so important to Wordsworth because they are the moments to which he repeatedly returns throughout all of his adult life in search of some form of benchmark by which he can gauge developmental stages occurring after these aleatory events.

24

Wordsworth’s poetry valorizes the individual subject’s experience of the chance event. Moreover, Wordsworth suggests that although a comprehensive account of the idea of chance is constitutionally outside the realm of human understanding, one *must* turn to subjective encounters with and experiences of the aleatory in order to understand the limits of causality as an explanatory model of history, nature, and reality. His poetry tells us

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that, while still a child, he was educated by nature's "chance collisions" and "quaint accidents," and that, as an adult, he has resultantly come to understand causality as sometimes marred by distortion and incoherence. The often turbulent disruptions of the natural world and its movements are not, however, processes or things to be dismayed by or to fear, Wordsworth's verse tells us. Instead, these chance operations are proposed by nature itself. *The Prelude* indicates from its very commencement that unpredictability is an inherent and, even, a *natural* aspect of the universe. Furthermore, Wordsworth explains that these operations of chance in nature cannot be explained or rationalized away as the machinations of some divine spirit, power, or agency. The idea of chance stands outside of and opposed to the concepts of providence and design. It is for this reason that Wordsworth gives us a vision of the skies and seas as inherently changeful and dynamic. As Wordsworth understands them, the atmosphere's clouds and the breezes and currents that sweep across the dramatic sky overhead are unpredictable in their very essences. According to the poet, the earth's rivers and streams are similarly structured by a natural ministry of chance as well. Wordsworth's beloved River Derwent began to convey to him this tale of mutability and unpredictability during his earliest days as a result of its turbulent yet ultimately calming "murmurs." Following and yet going beyond Jean-Jacques Rousseau's claim that "[e]verything is in constant flux on this earth," all of nature is stamped by and awash with chance events, Wordsworth's verse indicates (88). Through the natural aleatory, Wordsworth asserts that all of nature is flux, change, dynamism, and chance, and, as such, his poetry teaches us that we are always limited in our comprehension of these chance phenomena. Wordsworth thus holds a deeply rooted faith in the notion of the boundless nature of chance and of possibility, and in reaction to Laplacean conceptualizations of the formulaic nature of deterministic reason, the poet strives for an understanding and representation of nature that is divorced from Enlightenment notions of causality and potentiality. *The Prelude* tells us that once we accept chance events as fundamental to the nature and function of the natural world and its winds and waters, processes and phenomena, we may learn to see heaven as a quite "uncertain" place and the notion of providence as a rather impoverished idea, and in so doing, we will finally have the *chance* to embrace the aleatory as our natural reality of this "changeful earth."

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Biographical Notice

Andrew Burkett is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Wake Forest University. In 2008, he received his doctoral degree in English at Duke University where he wrote his dissertation under the supervision of Thomas Pfau. Burkett's general research interests center on the intersections of literature, science, and technology in the nineteenth century. He has articles published in journals ranging from *Nineteenth Century Studies* to *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*. His current book project derives from his doctoral thesis and is entitled *Romantic Uncertainty: The Idea of Chance in British Literature, Art, and Science, 1789-1859*.

Notes

[1]

See: Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*; Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability and the Enlightenment*; Gerd Gigerenzer et al., *The Empire of Chance*.

[2]

This work was first delivered as a lecture in 1794 and first published in 1812 as *Théorie Analytique des Probabilités*. The above citation is taken from the first English edition of *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities* (1814).

[3]

It has often been noted that the British Romantic poets were deeply unreceptive of and skeptical about Enlightenment conceptions of the universe and the human's place therein. As Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine have shown, the Romantics were particularly "hostile to the mechanical natural philosophy and descriptive natural history that they inherited from the Enlightenment." See: *Romanticism and the Sciences*. Eds. Andrew Cunningham and Nicholas Jardine. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990: 3.

[4]

In her reading of *The Prelude*, Cynthia Chase, for example, argues that "[t]he book of 'Books' is the book of accidents. Book V of Wordsworth's *Prelude* begins with a lament for the fragility of its titular topic, for an utter vulnerability to damaging accidents" (547). According to Chase, a better understanding of Wordsworth's conception and depiction of "accident" in this book of *The Prelude* allows for a more comprehensive appreciation of Wordsworth's representation of the ostensible distinctions between literal and figurative language throughout the poem. See: Cynthia Chase, "The Accidents of Disfiguration: Limits to Literal and Rhetorical Reading in Book V of *The Prelude*." *Studies in Romanticism*. Vol. 18, No. 4 (Winter, 1979): 547-565. For a more recent oversimplification of the concept of "chance" in Wordsworth's verse as simply "accident," see: Ross Hamilton's *Accident: A Philosophical and Literary History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Hamilton collapses the various independent valences of "chance" into the single notion of "accident" in his

reading of the “spots of time” in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*. “Each of the ‘spots of time’ involves the interpretation of an accidental sign,” Hamilton argues (207-216).

[5]

Wordsworth would have most likely known of Laplacean determinism not only through the general intellectual currents of the early nineteenth century but also specifically through his friendship with the Irish mathematician and poet Sir William Rowan Hamilton. As Thomas Hankins has shown, Hamilton was engrossed with Laplace’s work while at Trinity College, Dublin, and Hamilton’s mathematical treatises were fundamentally altered by his studies of Laplacean probability theory. (See: Thomas Hankins, *Sir William Rowan Hamilton*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980: 24.) Hamilton visited Wordsworth in 1827 while touring England, and established a deep and lasting friendship with the poet. Wordsworth was immediately affected by Hamilton, and Wordsworth and Hamilton corresponded often after their introduction. In his first letter to the mathematician, Wordsworth writes: “Seldom have I parted – never I was going to say with one whom after so short an acquaintance, I lost sight of with more regret.” (See: *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, 1821-1828*. Vol. 3. 2nd ed. Ed. Alan G. Hill. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978: 546-547.)

[6]

“chance,” v. 1. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Online). <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50036546>> 10 August, 2006.

[7]

Aside from a few basic changes in punctuation, verb tense, and grammar; the body of the 1798/1800 version of the poem remains unchanged in its incorporation into Book V of the 1805 *Prelude*. The only major textual change in this incorporation occurs in lines 16 to 17 of the original. In the 1805 version of the poem, Wordsworth specifically alters these lines to make the role of chance much more explicitly central to the poem’s ideational content.

[8]

Abrams here makes reference to Book III, l. 82 of *The Prelude* (1805).

[9]

While Aristotle, for one, might have argued that an entirely non-teleological activity is a contradiction in terms, its modern *locus classicus* comes, of course, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Reveries* (1782) and especially in his “Fifth Walk.” See: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. Trans. Peter France. London: Penguin, 1979: 81-92.

[10]

All of *The Prelude*’s plundering scenes stress this “aloneness” of the Wordsworthian narrator. The scene of the “hunted hare,” however, perhaps characterizes this best: “Not seldom from the uproar I retired / Into a silent

bay, or sportively / Glanced sideway, leaving the tumultuous throng . . .” (1805, Book I, ll. 474-476).

[11]

“Loo” is a trick-taking game for five or more players and often referred to several related games varying only in the number of cards (usually three or five to each player) dealt from the fifty-two card deck. Once players have seen the hand they have been dealt, they can choose either to remove themselves from the game or they can remain as players and attempt to win proportions of the gambling pool by trumping their competitors and thus taking “tricks.” When a player fails to win at least one trick, he or she is “looted” and is required to add a denomination to the existing pool, thus increasing the pool’s size. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Loo was played in both “limited” and “unlimited” manners. In its “limited” form, the additional denomination that the “looted” player was required to add to the existing pool was fixed at a relatively low figure and thus “limited.” However, Loo in its “unlimited” form becomes a card game of high risk in that the “looted” player was required to add as his or her denomination an amount equal to the current value of the pool, and the value of the pot could thus increase in value very rapidly, sometimes only in a matter of minutes. Unlimited Loo was, for this reason, almost always a game of both impressive wins and catastrophic losses. For further explanation of the rules of “Loo” in its various forms, see: *The New Complete Hoyle: An Encyclopedia of Rules, Procedures, Manners and Strategy of Games Played with Cards, Dice, Counters, Boards, Words and Numbers*. Ed. Richard L. Frey. Philadelphia, PA: David McKay Company, 1947: 232, 262.

[12]

Wordsworth’s focus on the nature of the visual impression and the Hartleyian associationist theories that such a meditation invokes have often been noted by a number of editors and critics of this text. See: M.H. Abrams, Stephen Gill, and Jonathan Wordsworth’s edition of this text for examples of this reference. These editors of *The Prelude* (1799) note that Wordsworth’s text suggests that “[v]isual impressions are stored in the memory, and assume new significance with the passage of time. There is an independent life of the imagination, and within the mind they attain the permanence of the natural scenes from which they derive (their “archetypes”)” (*The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850* 8).

[13]

"chance, n. 6" *Oxford English Dictionary* (Online). <<http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50036545>> 25 September, 2006.

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Attributed to: [Andrew Burkett]



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